Nationalism

Simple Explanations

Why Nationalists in Europe Grow Stronger

Wilhelm Hofmeister

Yielding resentments against the European Union as well as alleged threats: Nationalist parties gained increased electoral success throughout the last years in many member states of the European Union, while challenging their democratic underpinnings and developments. The underlying causes are manifold and vary regionally. How could a promising political response be shaped?

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Overview

Nationalism was the great evil of the 20th century in Europe. It arose as an emancipatory movement in the 19th century and inspired the first democratic processes in Europe, but quickly mutated into an ideology that justified competition among states in the age of imperialism and described the differences between nations in chauvinistic and racist terms. We all know how that ended. "Nationalism is the cause of most political conflicts since the 19th century and a necessary condition for the success of National Socialism since 1930,"[1] writes Rolf Ulrich Kunze, who emphasises that nationalism "tends to radicalism and escalation, and especially to combination with universal racism and anti-Semitism," while it "legitimises deep interference with human and civil rights, especially the rights of minorities and, under the name of a fictional autarchy within the free global economic system [...] Nationalism favours populistic deinstitutionalisation of political culture, and is a danger to the stability of constitutional organs, legitimised by representative democracy in the constitutional state and at the inter-governmental, supranational level." In reaction to the devastating consequences of the Second World War, the major post-war European political leaders, among them Konrad Adenauer, consciously pursued European integration as an instrument by which to overcome nationalism. In a 1946 speech, Adenauer characterised the romanticisation of the nation as a cause of the catastrophe,[2] and in 1953 he said, "If we were to insist in today's world that the traditional terms of nationalism should be maintained, it would mean abandoning Europe."[3]

Despite these warnings by the generation who had experienced the war, by the beginning of the new century nationalism had infiltrated Europe's party systems once again. In Austria, the nationalist Freedom Party (FPÖ) became a member of the governing coalition in 2000. Two years later, the chairman of France's Front National, Jean-Marie Le Pen, advanced to a runoff election for the presidency, and in 2004 he mobilised a majority to reject the EU's constitutional treaty. This made nationalism's anti-Europe position obvious. The stigmatisation and partial isolation of Austria by the other EU members after the centre-right People's Party (ÖVP) formed a coalition with the Freedom Party did not stop nationalism. Austria, France, and, gradually, other countries in Europe saw nationalist parties achieve increasingly sizeable electoral successes. But it was not until rightist, populistic, Eurosceptic parties won about one fifth of the seats in the European Parliament in 2014 that the broader European public became aware that nationalism had gained new adherents in almost all parts of the continent.

Besides the Front National, renamed as Rassemblement National in 2018, and the Freedom Party, this group includes the Sweden Democrats, the Finns Party, the Danish People's Party, the United Kingdom's UKIP, the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands, Italy's Lega (formerly known as Lega Nord), Hungary's Jobbik, and Greece's Golden Dawn. Similarly, Poland's Law and Justice, and Hungary's Fidesz parties, one originally conservative and the other originally liberal, have integrated nationalism as a very successful mobilisation factor. The Alternative

Fig. 1: Results for Nationalist Parties in Recent European Elections (in Per Cent)

Source: Own illustration based on figures of national electoral authorities, map: Natural Earth ⊖.

for Germany (AfD) party was initially shaped by several eurosceptic economics professors, but has since come under the sway of right-wing populists. But even at the beginning, the AfD was, at its core, a party that used nationalist sentiment to generate opposition to European unity.

At the very latest since the election of May 2014, if not before, the "monster" of nationalism was clearly perceived everywhere in Europe. That year deserves emphasis because the so-called migration crisis, which is frequently cited as a trigger for the rise of nationalist parties, did not develop until a year later. The crisis alone therefore does not explain rise of nationalist parties – which, of course, also means that restricting migration will by itself not effectively combat nationalism.

A second assumption must also be relativised: that nationalist parties grew stronger because of socioeconomic factors and social inequality. This is also a limited explanation because nationalist parties have gathered strength even in economically prosperous European countries with relatively good distribution indexes: the Nordic countries, the Netherlands, Austria, and Germany. So, these parties cannot be combatted with new distribution mechanisms alone, either.

In the European Parliament elections of May 2019, the nationalists did not do as well as they had hoped. One reason was because more people went to the polls to reduce their influence. Even so, nationalists received about one quarter of parliamentary seats. This confirms that nationalist parties now mobilise a substantial proportion

of European voters. Even countries such as Germany and Spain, that had long felt immune to nationalism, saw the rise of new nationalist parties. Also in Portugal, a party using nationalist rhetoric, Chega! (Enough!), received a seat in the October 2019 parliamentary elections.

In view of these developments, questions arise in many parts of Europe: Why is nationalism mobilising such great numbers in Europe? And how can people be warned of, and protected against, the unavoidable, disastrous consequences of nationalism? The search for answers must begin with an examination of nationalism's seductive message.

Nationalism and Nation

All nationalism is based on a fiction, and that fiction is the nation. The nation does not exist as a social entity, but only as a concept. Nations are imagined associations created by nationalists, as Benedict Anderson established in his well-known 1983 book on the origins of nationalism.[4] And a few years later, the British historian Eric J. Hobsbawm added: "Nations do not make states and nationalisms but the other way round."[5]

Nationalism is a concept of differentiation, creating false identities and true bogeymen, since enemies are needed to highlight the in-group's idea of itself and to distinguish it from others. Back in 1882, when nationalism was enjoying its first peak, French author and philosopher Ernest Renan identified nationalism's reductionist worldview when he wrote, "There is no nation without falsifying one's own history."[6] This means that nationalist movements everywhere have written the history of their "nation" so as to construct some sort of commonality, a joint destiny, or a common purpose. In the nationalist movements of Catalonia and other regions today, this is still clearly evident.[7]

Of course it must be admitted that, despite their imaginary character as social units, nations do in fact exist – but only if the term is used to refer to a certain form of modern territorial state: the "nation state". Without including this territorial element, there is no sense in referring to a "nation" – or doing so is dangerous because it evokes a kind of community that does not represent social reality.

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The nation consists of all citizens of the state. But at the moment, nationalists in Germany and elsewhere are attempting to define the "nation" as those adhering to a particular identity. It is noticeably difficult for them to cite supposed elements that those in their "nation" share and that distinguish them from other nations. To simplify things, they fall back on old patterns, by trying to weed out those whose origin, language, skin colour, religion, etc. supposedly preclude them from belonging to the identity-based community. For example, the former co-chairman of Germany's AfD, Alexander Gauland, said in 2016 that the German national football team's Jérôme Boateng, whose father is from Ghana, is perceived as "foreign"; a year later he threatened to "get rid of" Aydan Özoğuz, a German politician of Turkish origin who serves as deputy chairwoman of Germany's Social Democratic Party, by sending her back to Anatolia. In the face of such attempts to exclude individuals, it is important to emphasise that a nation of course includes immigrants and descendants of immigrants. The German "nation" therefore encompasses all members of Germany's World-Cup-winning 2014 national football team, including Lukas Podolski and Miroslav Klose, who were both born in Poland; Jérôme Boateng from Berlin; and Mesut Özil, who was born in Gelsenkirchen to Turkish immigrants.

Nation and nationalism are indispensable elements of modern statehood, and particularly in the era of globalisation, the "nation", i.e., the

nation state, gains new importance, since the international order is based on the cooperation of nation states.[8] In this respect, we are not experiencing a "return" to nationalism, as is sometimes asserted. However, we are increasingly experiencing a return of those forms of nationalism that have led to the catastrophes of the past. This is especially true of identity-based nationalism, which is spreading across Europe in various forms and is particularly evident in the debate on migration. There is, moreover, another element that contributes greatly to the electoral successes of nationalist parties: their populism.

> **In searching for causes for the new nationalism, we must look more closely because the migration crisis does not by itself explain the phenomenon.**
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What nationalism and populism have in common is that they reduce complex social and political issues to a simple core: the creation, salvation, or promotion of the nation. In many European countries, they form an unholy alliance. "Populist nationalism" or "nationalist populism" constructs a distinction between "true" members of a national identity that it purports to defend against the establishment of the "corrupt elite" and "fake news" organisations.[9] Populists deny the heterogeneity and pluralism of society and claim a fictitious homogeneity and will of the people. The affinity of this method to the ideology of nationalism is obvious. While this method is also used by left-wing populist movements (such as Spain's Podemos and Greece's Syriza), the solution they offer is not the nation, but anti-capitalism. In essence, however, right-wing and left-wing populists use the same methods: they attempt to instrumentalise all grievances, enhance feelings of insecurity, identify scapegoats, propagate the idea of bogeymen, stir up resentment and hatred, and lower the inhibition threshold.

Nationalism and the Longing for Recognition

There is no clear answer to the question of why many people in Europe are turning to nationalist ideas and electing nationalist, anti-liberal, eurosceptic parties. A single valid explanation is therefore difficult, since nationalism has a variety of motives and forms of expression. In Spain, for instance, the nationalism of the new right-wing populist party "Vox" is primarily a reaction to regional nationalism and separatism in Catalonia and the Basque Country, and the inability of previously dominant parties, the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) and the People's Party (PP) to solve the political crisis separatism has caused. In Germany, the new nationalist movement began in 2010 with scepticism towards the joint European currency and fear of the costs of bailing out heavily indebted countries during the Eurozone crisis. But the so-called migration crisis of 2015 is what really got nationalist right-wing populism going. In France, high unemployment resulting from deindustrialisation in several regions, especially the north and east, caused previously left-leaning workers to feel that they were the losers of globalisation. The Front National, respectively Rassemblement National, had originally tended to represent the traditional right and supported a liberal economic programme; it began to present itself as a "workers' party" under Marine Le Pen. Growing social tensions that are noticeable from a certain geographical segregation, and a rural and suburban feeling of being left behind, gave the National Rally new voter groups. This is compounded by a feeling of insecurity following a number of terror attacks in France, which brought questions of immigration, integration, insecurity and Islam to the fore.[10] In the United Kingdom, on the other hand, high-profile politicians have for years stoked resentment towards the EU with the fiction of loss of control, culminating in the Brexiteers' victory in the June 2016 referendum. Since the 1990s, the Nordic countries have experienced limitations on the performance of their social welfare states as a result of the increased competitive pressure brought about by globalisation, so that increasing migration has become

An anti-European alliance: Nationalist parties are not only mobilising more and more citizens in Europe. They are also reaching out to each other. Source: © Francois Lenoir, Reuters.

the primary source of fodder for nationalist movements focused on fear of competition and loss. Similar reactions can be observed in Central European countries (Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary) which, albeit profiting greatly from integration into the European Union and the opening of borders and markets, have elected parties that promote national identity out of fear of excessive wealth redistribution in favour of immigrants – some parties gaining favour with a significant portion of the population. In many cases, the migration crisis has without a doubt played into the nationalists' hands because it gave them the basis of a new form of identity-based nationalism: us against the threatening newcomers. However, in searching for causes for the new nationalism, we will likely need to look

more closely, because the migration crisis does not by itself explain the phenomenon.

Francis Fukuyama cites the desire for recognition as an important motive governing the attitudes and voting behaviour of many. He describes resentment as the consequence of the feeling of neglect that some groups feel.[11] "In a wide variety of cases, a political leader has mobilised followers around the perception that the group's dignity had been affronted, disparaged, or otherwise disregarded [...] A humiliated group seeking restitution of its dignity carries far more emotional weight than people simply pursuing their economic advantage."[12] This is likely a very accurate description and explanation of the mood of many people in several European countries, such

as France's "lost" regions, or the parts of England that do not benefit from the City of London's boom, and parts of Germany's eastern federal states where the AfD enjoys great support. Fukuyama believes that current identity politics is driven by the desire for equal recognition on the part of social groups that feel marginalised, and such a feeling can quickly change to a demand for the recognition of the group's superiority. "This is a large part of the story of nationalism and national identity, as well as certain forms of extremist religious politics today."[13] That is why Fukuyama believes the issue of identity/recognition to be important to the understanding not only of modern nationalism, but also of extreme forms of modern Islamism. He believes that their roots lie in modernisation, which entails upheavals for traditional communities.

Economic disadvantages and increasing inequality have doubtlessly assisted the rise of nationalist movements in Europe.

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As important as the feeling of neglect he points out is, Fukuyama has no answers to the question of how to defend and preserve liberal democracy. Because he views the search or passion for recognition more as a sociopsychological phenomenon as a result of the individual's self-image that has developed over centuries, he does not consider economic and social factors to be decisive in pushing people towards nationalist parties.[14] But there are economic disadvantages and increasing inequality, and there is little doubt that they have contributed to such developments as the rise of the Front National, respectively Rassemblement National, in France. On the other hand, as could recently be observed in Spain, members of the financially well-off middle and upper classes who cannot complain of insufficient recognition nevertheless vote for nationalist parties, so there must be other reasons for the rise of those parties.

It should be noted that the adherents of "national populists" are more heterogeneous than the stereotypical "angry white man" and that many nationalist voters are not anti-democratic, but merely reject certain developments of liberal democracy.[15] However, this reveals the long-observed problem of representation of democratic institutions, which has shown them to have "moved further and further away from the average citizen", as two British academics put it.[16] They maintain that the political elites either react inadequately to this problem, or not at all. While the nationalists want to discuss a number of legitimate democratic questions, the elites refuse such discussion because the questions are of no practical concern to them. An example of this is the erosion of the nation state in the age of globalisation, the capacity to absorb immigrants and the fast "ethnic shift" of several societies, inequality within Western countries, the social marginalisation of certain segments of the population, and the question of whether it would not be better for the nation to prioritise care for people who have paid into the tax and social systems for years. Some politicians find these questions unpleasant, but they are nevertheless of concern to many and are exacerbated by nationalists, while the "system parties" in many places fail to provide satisfactory answers. Wolfgang Merkel makes a similar argument when he says that right-wing parties are a direct consequence of the polarisation in many societies into so-called "cosmopolitans" and "communitarians" – that is, the winners and losers of globalisation.[17]

Altogether, there are roughly four social transformation processes that have caused concern to a growing number of people, and which, to a large extent, explain the rise of nationalist populism:

- increasing distrust of politicians and institutions;

- destruction of the historical identity and established way of life of a national group;

- a feeling of loss resulting from increasing income and wealth inequality and loss of faith in a better future;

- a decoupling or weakening of ties between the traditional mainstream parties and the people.

Wolfgang Schäuble, President of the German Bundestag, believes that the solution to the problem of representation, which is addressed by the last point, is a precondition to tackling democracies' current difficulties, and in particular the challenge posed by nationalist populism.[18] It is therefore necessary for parliaments and the political groups within them to better fulfil their functions.

There are other developments that help account for the rise of nationalist and populist ideas and parties in many European countries, which could have a significant impact on the continued existence of liberal democracies and on the flight of many people to the nationalists.

One is the weakening of the nation state in the context of globalisation. It is above all the critics of neoliberalism which use this argument when trying to explain the rise of populist nationalism.[19] While neoliberalism has long been criticised in Latin America because of a supposed limitation of national self-determination, this position has become more prominent in Europe as well. Curiously, this development is quite pronounced in the country in which neoliberalism has strong advocates, and which initially seemed to most clearly benefit from it: the United Kingdom. There, the European Union is the primary target of the feeling of loss of self-determination that mobilised nationalist eurosceptics and led to the Brexit vote. The protests against the free-trade negotiations between the EU on the one hand, and the US and Canada on the other, were also driven by fear of loss of control. This criticism came more from left-leaning groups and journalists, but was also grist for the nationalist parties' mill. And when the minister-president of a German federal state criticised the "loss of control of the state" during the so-called 2015 migration crisis, he fuelled fears that the nation state and its protective function was weakening. It is undisputed that the nation state's role has been reduced in the age of globalisation, at least insofar as it can no longer unilaterally control many processes or solve many problems. But for many, the nation state remains the central national reference. The nationalist promise that strengthening the nation state in itself will somehow relieve worries and solve problems is untrue, but that does not make it any less attractive.

The second point has to do with modern forms of communication, and not least the role of social media with their filter bubbles that destroy democratic dialogue and wither the ability to deal with criticism and other opinions.[20] One effect of this is that people in many European countries feel themselves constrained by "political correctness" and turn to right-wing populism because it seems to better articulate their concerns.[21] This was evidenced recently during the climate change debate. The problem here is not right-wing or nationalist stances. But people who believe the climate protection debate to be hysterical and worry about additional costs turn to right-wing parties, which attempt to attract supporters with their scepticism about climate change, as the AfD has recently done in Germany.

A further issue will gain importance in the future: the consequences of the digital revolution, artificial intelligence, the increasing number of previously human functions that will be taken over by robots, and the changes to the labour market this will cause, which may ultimately result in restrictions to our individual and political freedoms.[22] Speculation and debate about the effects of digitalisation has only just begun in most European countries. However, when the alienations resulting from the digital revolution become more pronounced, additional flight is to be expected, and national populist parties will be one of the primary beneficiaries.

Finally, the fragmentation of the party systems in many countries in Europe and the difficulty of building a consensus and forming a government is taking its toll. Spain, Belgium, and the Nordic countries provide examples of this. This poses a great challenge to democracies. It is grist in the nationalist mill.

Political Approaches to Overcoming Nationalism

What can be done to stop the rise of nationalism? Even though the social sciences tend to deliver more problem analysis than recommendations for action, the analysis leads to an important conclusion: the centre parties must react even more clearly to the demands for recognition on the part of individuals, groups, and regions that feel neglected. Policies must be explained and communicated even more intensively, not only via

the new electronic media, but by conventional means involving direct contact with the people. That is a challenge for all politicians. A major factor in the Christian Democratic Union's electoral successes in Germany's provincial parliamentary elections in Saxony in October 2019 was apparently Minister-President Michael Kretschmer's willingness to spend practically an entire year attending daily town halls and meetings with concerned citizens to show that he was taking their concerns seriously. Political decisions were also made to demonstrate to the supposedly

On the way to Europe: The so-called migration crisis, which is frequently cited as a trigger for the rise of nationalist parties, does not explain the rise of nationalist parties alone.
Source: © Alessandro Bianchi, Reuters.

of using referenda to make policy decisions. Doing so causes many problems, as has been demonstrated in many such attempts, not least the Brexit referendum. More direct democracy involves that risk of damaging political institutions, especially parties, even more. Instead, forms of participation must be found for party members and sympathisers and for citizens in general that can arouse interest in political involvement and activity.

A readjustment of migration policy in Europe is also important, even though it is extremely difficult to reach a consensus within the EU on this sensitive issue. Although the migration crisis is not the primary cause of the rise of nationalism in Europe, there is no question that it contributed. This issue therefore requires new policy approaches that demonstrate that Europe is regaining control of migration without ruthlessly rejecting migrants. This is the only way to undercut xenophobic national populist agitation.

Digitalisation is a priority for the new EU Commission. The concern here must not merely be technical expansion and control of providers, but precautionary measures including training, education, and workplace changes that will counteract new fragmentation of European societies. Automation and artificial intelligence will change labour markets and cause uncertainty that could rock political systems for a long time to come. Nationalists welcome the losers of these developments with open arms.

The "moderate" nationalism or populism that some authors recommend should be avoided.[23] It is misleading. There is so far no empirical evidence that the approach promises success. In Germany and other European countries, there is no majority for such a movement, as the European Parliament and national election results show. The Christian Social Union in Bavaria

left-behind regions that they were not forgotten after all. This leads to the conclusion that politicians, from the local to the federal level, must spend more time establishing and cultivating contact with the people, both in person and using new technologies.

To combat mistrust of politicians and institutions, it is important to ensure that those who feel shut out of the political process have more opportunities to participate. But this must not mean "daring more democracy" in the sense

tried this strategy in 2018, suffered badly, and has since reconsidered. In Spain and France, the Partido Popular and Les Républicains, respectively, failed in their attempts to engage in a "right-leaning" discourse to prevent voters from deserting to nationalist parties. The European Parliament election in 2019 had a high voter turnout because a certain segment of the population was intent on thwarting the rise of nationalist parties. Populism and nationalism cannot be combatted with populism and nationalism. The coronavirus crisis shows that wherever states lived up to their obligations to protect their citizens, nationalists were weakened. But the reverse is also true.

There is no conclusive answer to the question of the right means for combatting nationalism. Each country must develop its own instruments. It remains important to describe the phenomenon and to constantly remember its sinister consequences. Only when our liberal democracies are conscious of these consequences will Europe's societies be strong enough to resist nationalism and its hostility.

–translated from German–

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Dr. Wilhelm Hofmeister is Head of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's Spain and Portugal office in Madrid.

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