Liberal Cosmopolitanism, Illiberal Nationalism, and the Backlash Against the European Union in Post-Communist Europe

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The collapse of communism in East-Central Europe and the Soviet Union was, among other things, a victory of liberal nationalism. Leaders and publics demanded both the restoration or establishment of national sovereignty but also, for the most part, committed themselves to democratic reforms. Fukuyama (1989) famously declared these developments the “end of history,” with an assumption that liberalism had defeated its main ideological challengers and that the universal completion of the liberal project would temper the more corrosive elements of nationalism.

This bold assessment now looks quite premature. New treatises decry the failure of liberalism or contemplate authoritarian resurgence (Deneen 2017; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Norris and Inglehart 2019). Liberal democracy is under assault—not only in formerly semi-democratic states such as Russia and Turkey—but in the West itself, challenged mostly by populist forces which embrace some majoritarian components of democracy but eschew many of the norms of contemporary liberalism, including rule of law and respect for minority rights. At the same time, nationalism—with a few exceptions (perhaps Scotland and Catalonia) that may prove a larger rule—has been commandeered by these illiberal populist forces, who rail against globalization, the European Union (EU), immigrants, and minority groups. This has become a pan-European (and American) phenomenon.

While Brexit may be their largest victory to date in Western Europe, nationalist-populists have found even greater electoral success in post-communist states, where, in particular, leaders in Poland and Hungary openly challenge both the EU and liberal democratic principles. The refugee crisis of 2015-2016, perhaps more than any other single development, also exposed a real cultural divide between a more post-national, universalist-oriented West (although one must note there was significant anti-migrant backlash in many parts of Western Europe) and a post-communist East that had not experienced the liberalism of the 1960s, had little immigrant experience, and still viewed nation-building as more attractive than cosmopolitanism (Krastev 2017). The once ballyhooed triumph of democracy in post-communist Europe—in states that are now members of the EU—is at risk of reversal. Indeed, one observer suggested that the April 2018 electoral victory in Hungary of Viktor Orbán and his FIDESZ (Alliance of Young Democrats) party constitutes a watershed, the demise of a once seemingly secure liberal democracy into ‘a dictatorship with a thin electoral veneer’. (Mounk 2018a)

With respect to the theme of this special section, this paper reconstructs, in a way, the old West-East, liberal/illiberal dichotomy with respect to competing nationalisms. Rather than resurrecting the more clichéd, deterministic version of these categories, it suggests that recent developments now pose a significant challenge to what once seemed the victory of liberalism. This is, at present, manifesting itself most clearly in part of post-communist Europe, where liberalism and liberal nationalism have shallower roots. Nonetheless, it suggests that the problems of liberalism are more universal, and may prove wanting in meeting political challenges in a more globalized world.

How did all of this come to pass? This is, certainly, an essential and timely question, one that can be answered in a number of ways. One approach, adopted in this paper, is to focus on the failure/disappearance of liberal nationalism as a viable competitor to its more exclusionary, illiberal variants. Liberal nationalism is at risk of becoming, in practice, an oxymoron, as liberalism has embraced globalism, cosmopolitanism, free markets, and multiculturalism. Indeed, notwithstanding some recent calls for its revival (Mounk 2018b), liberal nationalism seems more a chimera than a viable political project, especially in post-communist Europe. In simple terms, liberalism has divorced itself from nationalism.

This paper is composed of three additional sections. First, in a more reflective manner, it will suggest how liberalism has been decoupled from nationalism, as the former is increasingly more comfortable with associations of cosmopolitanism, which de-emphasizes the importance of national borders and citizenship while celebrating diversity in pursuit of universal human rights. Institutionally, this is manifested most clearly in the EU. This has, however, engendered a nationalist backlash, whose manifestations in post-communist states, in particular in Hungary and Poland, is recounted and analysed at both the elite and mass level in the second section of the paper. It concludes with a brief discussion of the implications of the essential arguments of this paper for nationalism, liberalism, and the broader European project.

**The End of Liberal Nationalism?**

To begin, one should note that liberal nationalism is a venerable concept and certainly has its advocates, past and present. Both historical (Renan 1996 [1882]; Mill 1971 [1861]) and more contemporary political theorists (Gellner 1983; Tamir 1993; Kymlicka 1995) have endorsed it, both for pragmatic ends of governance and for advancing human freedom. Tamir (1993: 83) traces its roots to the Enlightenment and defines it as ‘pluralistic and open, see[ing] national groups as not only a product of history, but also of human will, and broadly follow[ing] humanistic tradition’. Although it is easily contrasted with ‘cultural’ or ‘ethnic’ nationalism, it recognizes the attraction and power of cultural claims on the individual, and, indeed, the necessity of an individual to identify him/herself and pursue lifegoals as part of a wider community. However, liberal nationalism recognizes contingency and the power of choice, insofar as individuals can adopt or abandon affiliations; is inherently pluralistic, requiring respect for tolerance and diversity; and is polycentric, recognizing the nationalist claims of others. Historically liberalism and nationalism have found common cause in the liberation of subject peoples, with liberals suggesting that individuals’ freedom will be best served in a community that is representative of their own culture and identity. Arguably, we see such emancipatory nationalism today in the case of Catalonia and Scotland, and, as noted above, such a perspective animated movements against communist rule.

Liberal nationalism has not been without its critics and dilemmas. Some liberals, such as Popper [1962: 49], decry the irrationality of any nationalist creed, which appeals ‘to our tribal instincts, to passion and to prejudice’. Kymlicka (2001: 56), while recognizing the dangers of some forms of nationalism, seeks to address this criticism by suggesting that liberal nationalism should be based on a ‘thin’, ‘societal culture’, centred on a shared language.[[1]](#endnote-1) In contrast to ‘thicker’ forms of nationalism that would seek greater homogeneity, this ‘thin’ nationalism would make room for different religions, political ideologies, and lifestyle choices and would treat the nation not as the highest end, but as a means to achieve various individual priorities.

This explication is not without its own problems. For starters, one could ask if this ‘thin’ identity is enough to hold a polity together—despite sharing a language, many Scots would like to separate from the United Kingdom. In practice, of course, liberal nationalism rests on more than language. Arab and African immigrants and their descendants in France, a country generally recognized to have a more ‘liberal’ nationalist orientation, may speak fluent French, but are not recognized as fully ‘French’ by broad swathes of the public. Mounk (2018b) notes that liberal democracy—and, by extension, liberal nationalism—rested on an assumption of (relative) social homogeneity, in particular with respect to language, race, and religion. On this front, Barša (2001: 245-6), in response to Kymlicka, notes that liberal nationalism in countries with greater heterogeneity will inevitably have its own assimilationist pressures and thus has ‘no idea of how to deal with the problem of ethnic and cultural plurality’.[[2]](#endnote-2) He suggests that the idea of culturally impartial liberal state is a ‘delusion’, which is reflected in the fact that even ostensible liberals have their own cultural vision of the nation. As for the possible retort that pluralism or diversity or hopes for a common future might provide the glue to craft a revived liberal nationalism (see Mounk 2018b), these too make assimilationist demands[[3]](#endnote-3) and seem more like campaign-style bromides than winning arguments against those who have an engrained monocultural view of the nation and would deny the claims of some groups to participate in the national project.

This last point also suggests another problem relating to the ‘thinness’ of liberal nationalism: its affinity with cosmopolitanism (Kymlicka 2001: 57). This is not to say that the two are equivalent. Calhoun (2011) notes how cosmopolitanism give little weight to notions of cultural belonging. However, he concedes that due to cosmopolitanism’s focus on the equality of individuals (as ‘citizens of the world’) and stress on human rights and freedoms, it has emerged as an outgrowth of contemporary, globalzing liberalism, which is losing its traditional grounding in the nation-state Beck (2008) similarly sees cosmopolitanism as the next stage in development from the individualization of liberalism. Kymlicka (2001: 90) concedes that nationalism has lost its resonance in much of Western Europe, which is in what he calls a more passive ‘nation maintenance mode’. Some (with echoes of Fukuyama) go further, asserting that there is ‘no viable political-economic alternative [to cosmopolitanism] for the next millennium’ (Harvey 2000: 519). The projected final ‘victory’ of cosmopolitanism is also buttressed by a propensity (often on the political left) to see nations and nationalism as ‘imagined’ or ‘invented’ (Anderson 1983; Hobsbawm 1991), which suggests that they can be surpassed by an alternative. Even Tamir (1993: 164), an ardent advocate of liberal nationalism, nonetheless concedes that nationalism is increasingly seen as an obstacle to progress and seems poised to give way to a more cosmopolitan, consociational democracy that is more accommodating to cultural pluralism. One might also note that the rise of cosmopolitanism can also be seen as consistent with Fukuyama’s thesis, insofar as the logic of liberalism, whose focus is on the individual, champions the loosening of all sorts of social bonds (including the national) and anticipates the rise of global markets and governance (Deneen 2017: 30).

Cosmopolitanism has taken on its strongest institutional form in the EU, which is predicated on a post-national, supranational, federalist vision, one that, to its cheerleaders, would usher in a secular and progressive European *demos* and identity, not one tied to a particular *ethnos* or parochial nationalism, which EU members are expected to transcend. This is not the place for neither a full-blown analysis of the theory of cosmopolitanism nor how the EU does (or does not) fit into it (see Delanty 2005, Brock 2013). However, it is worth noting that cosmopolitanism, like the EU, can claim both a functional imperative (e.g. the inability of nation-states to solve problems or constitute the most compelling source of identity in a globalized world) as well as a moral vision (Held 1995). In substance, this liberal-cosmopolitanism is not just about the erosion or irrelevance of national borders. It is also about the emancipation of individuals from particular national/cultural/religious traditions, meaning it favours womens’ liberation, non-hetero sexual identity and non-binary gender identity, and rights for cultural minorities, migrants, and refugees. Traditional notions of citizenship become either irrelevant or supplanted by supranational forms (e.g. EU citizenship) rendering any pressures for cultural assimilation in nationalist projects (liberal or otherwise) irrelevant, if not inherently oppressive.

To be sure, this vision is not without critics, both on practical grounds (e.g. recalling Joseph de Maistre’s statement, one can identify Italians and Russians, but is there such a thing as [Wo]Man? (quoted in Tamir 1993: 13)), but also ideological ones, as cosmopolitanism, despite its pretence to universalism, is inherently more appealing to certain classes and, insofar as it is connected to liberal global capitalism, does little to address profound economic inequalities within and between nations.[[4]](#endnote-4) Some critics find it spiritually wanting, ‘cold and thin’ (Calhoun 2011: 118), precipitating the rise of a ‘shallow universal culture’ that is ‘more a nightmare than a utopian vision’ (Tamir 1993: 166-167). Perhaps the most evocative criticism is that of Jowitt, who compared the hyper-interconnected post-Cold War order to a singles bar, one that, in the end, is full of a series of rather meaningless relationships and disconnections (cited in Krastev 2017: 24). Interestingly, Fukuyama (1989) made a similar point concerning liberalism, conceding that it has an ‘emptiness at its core’, and this critique figures prominently in Deneen’s more recent indictment (*pace* Fukuyama) of liberalism as a failed ideology that atomizes the very individuals it purports to revere and gives one only ‘hedonic titillation, visceral crudeness, and distraction’ (Deneen 2017: 39).[[5]](#endnote-5)

Put somewhat differently, the key point is that the apparent lack of appeal of liberal nationalism is not that nationalism has been transcended, but that liberalism—and the cosmopolitanism that it has helped give rise to—have been rejected, even as this cosmopolitan vision remains a work in-progress. When it faltered—during the European debt crisis and during the later refugee crisis—one result was that the old Left/Right divide was replaced by one between internationalists and resurgent nativists (Krastev 2017: 73). The nationalist playing field has thus been ceded to illiberals and populists, who insist that multiculturalism is being imposed upon the masses by elites and unelected Eurocrats. They reject civic or inclusive visions of the nation and instead define only a fraction of ‘the people’ as the ‘true people’, excluding any and all who criticize them or do not look, pray, or act as ‘proper’ members of the nation should.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Finally, one might ask whether liberal nationalism requires a particular historical-cultural milieu for it to flourish. On this score, one can recall the binaries of Western/civic and Eastern/ethnic nationalism and point to the particular context of East-Central Europe, one in which liberal traditions, while not entirely absent,[[7]](#endnote-7) have been weak. Judt (2011: 57) notes that in this region, composed of smaller countries carved out of older empires, ‘provinciality’ has been repeatedly forced upon would-be state-builders, who reject cosmopolitanism for fear of losing their own identity. Pointing to this history as well as political and economic uncertainties in the post-communist landscape, Tismaneanu (1998: 6-7) suggests that this is ‘propitious soil for collective passions, fears, [and] illusions’, among them ‘mythologies of salvation’ that minimize individual rights in favour of an ‘organic, supraindividual ethos’. Cichocka (2016) labels such phenomena ‘collective narcissism’, which arises out of a loss of personal agency[[8]](#endnote-8) and perceives opponents and outsiders as traitors and threats. Put differently, an intolerant, exclusionary and anxiety-driven nationalism emerges as a refuge for those fearing both about their individual predicaments and that of the larger political community. On this score, it is easy to imagine that ‘thicker’ attachments—rooted not only in language but also religion, shared history, traditional norms, and feelings of *ethnie*—would have more emotive appeal and promises of loyalty and social solidarity and support, as well as providing scapegoats and simplistic answers to complex issues. As Krastev (2017: 57) remarks, being cosmopolitan and being a ‘good Czech’ or ‘good Bulgarian’ is ‘not in the cards.’ This is all easily moulded into a populist discourse, one that has, not surprisingly, found a wide reception in post-communist states (and, of course, elsewhere) (Müller 2016). These points are developed more in the following section with respect to Poland and Hungary.

**The Illiberal Nationalist Reaction in Post-Communist Europe**

In the wake of communism’s collapse, ‘Return to Europe’ became a popular mantra. The reasons are perfectly understandable: ‘Europe’ (or, more precisely, the EU) was seen as successful and a source for security and economic assistance as these states were embarking on what many recognized would be an arduous transformation. Wealthy, stable, peaceful, and democratic, ‘Europe’ was what in post-communist states wanted to become. The costs of actually *joining* Europe—the surrendering or (more, in preferred EU-speak, the ‘pooling’) of newly-won national sovereignty did not seem, initially, like a high price to pay. Support for EU membership was high.[[9]](#endnote-9) The pull and attraction of the EU, seemed, at the time, irresistible. Older notions of national self-determination and cultural uniformity could be abandoned in a wider, post-national Europe.

A funny thing happened, however, on the road to this inevitable, cosmopolitan future. Post-communist leaders and publics increasing found it less and less attractive. Support for EU membership began to decline[[10]](#endnote-10), and Euroskeptics, if not Euro-opponents, began to gain political traction. A crucial point to recognize is that the more cosmopolitan Europe developing in the 2000s was NOT the ‘symbolic’ one post-communist states signed up for in the initial post-communist years (Schöpflin 2001: 110, 123). At that point, the common market had not even been fully realized; in substance, Europe was more a pragmatic economic project, a source of aid, and a potent symbol, but the endpoint of what Europe truly meant was unclear. Talk of a common European citizenship or *demos*, for example, might have seemed non-threatening, as, after all, a more pluralistic or inclusive Europe meant it would find a place for post-communist states and citizens.

However, the actual road to EU membership was not entirely smooth. It featured rules on movement that clearly established post-communist publics as second class citizens; intrusive monitoring and insistence on the Copenhagen criteria; further encroachments on national sovereignty; and rhetoric and policies, grounded in universal claims of human rights, that seemed to favour ethnic, religious, or sexual minorities and immigrants, as opposed to titular nations. Grudzinska-Gross (2014) makes an important point that ‘Return to Europe’ also suggested an uncritical resurrection of these countries’ pre-1939, highly nationalist-oriented past (as well as erasure of World War II and the communist period)—after all, this was when they were last a part of ‘Europe’—but that this did not jive very well with the 21st century EU. Krastev (2017: 57-8) contends that governments in post-communist states (if not wider publics) exhibit similar attitudes toward the EU as second generation migrants in Western Europe do to their own host societies. If the first generation of post-communist leaders (e.g. Vaclav Havel of Czechoslovakia, Tadeusz Mazowiecki of Poland) were intent to make reforms to prove how ‘European’ former communist states could be, the newer generation has experienced the pressure to adopt EU norms and practices as a ‘humiliation’, and consequently ‘build their legitimacy around the idea of national identity in opposition to Brussels’. This process has, particularly among political elites, gone farthest in Hungary and Poland, both of which were judged in the mid-1990s as post-communist success stories.

One way to understand developments in Hungary is to trace the career of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, a one-time advocate of liberal reforms but now best known as an *enfant terrible*, vehemently opposed to the EU, a champion of ‘illiberal democracy’, and a self-proclaimed defender of the Hungarian nation as well as European Christian culture (Lendvai 2017). Orbán first gained prominence in the late 1980s as a young activist who pushed for political, economic, and social reforms. In the initial post-communist period, Orbán’s FIDESZ party classified itself as a pro-EU liberal party in opposition to the ruling center-right party, and was highly critical of mixing religion and politics (Lendvai 2017: 26-7).

What explains his apparent *volte-face*? While one might suggest that Orbán has instrumentally used nationalism as a means to advance his own power,[[11]](#endnote-11) careful observers of Hungary argue that one can identify more ideological motivations. Lendvai (2017: 37, 42) for example, notes that Orbán’s move to the national-conservative political right was in part opportunistic—this was the only real choice after 1994 for opponents to Hungary’s Socialist-led government—but also a reflection, in Orbán’s words, that the government, which was implicated in corruption scandals and had concluded conciliatory treaties with Hungary’s neighbours, was ‘alien’ and ‘not under national influence’. This had resonance, in large part because of a latent discourse of national betrayal and victimhood, dating from the 1920 Treaty of Trianon under which Hungary was forced to cede two-thirds of its territory. Korkut (2012) takes a similar perspective, noting that liberalization, particularly its economic component, created the primary cleavage in post-1989 Hungarian politics, but that this has not been reflected primarily in classic Left/Right, socioeconomic terms. Instead, he suggests, for Orbán and FIDESZ it took on a moral, cultural character, one that revealed a gap between the transnational-oriented elites and the wider, victimized Hungarian nation. Orbán’s own (re)discovery of religion is also an important part of this story (Lendvai 2017: 50-1). In the early 2000s, in opposition, FIDESZ leaders increasingly began to champion traditional values of work, family, order, and nation, values they suggested were absent in Hungary’s centre-left government. Corruption scandals and the 2008 economic crisis proved fatal for the left, vindicating some of the criticism and paving the way for Orbán’s victory in 2010.

Orbán’s conception of Europe and Hungary’s place in it also deserves mention. Korkut (2012) reveals that even in the 1990s Orbán’s view of ‘Europe’ was referenced to traditional culture and values. For him, Hungary’s Christian past was proof enough of the country’s European credentials. Furthermore, Orbán himself stated in 2007 that his earlier support for Hungary’s EU bid was rooted in a belief that only as part of the Western world could Hungary survive as an independent state, as the West was ‘the only place branded with national traditions and sovereignties, family, moral values, work, strong middle class, social cohesion, and Christian solidarity’ (quoted in Korkut 2012: 178). Being ‘European’ was congruent with being a ‘good Hungarian’, but only with a particular, very ‘old’ notion of Europe in mind, not the post-national, cosmopolitan vision of many of the EU’s supporters. Suffice to say that the latter was not the ‘Europe’ Orbán wished Hungary to join.

Orbán, of course, has spoken out on numerous occasions in favour of his conceptualization of Europe, one that sees himself (and, by obvious implication, Hungary itself) as a defender of traditional values. Lendvai (2017: 90) suggests that ‘promotion of the Christian-national unity of the Magyars [Hungarians] in order to serve and maintain power has been one of the decisive ideological and political successes of Viktor Orbán’. In foreign policy, this has been manifested most clearly in rejection of EU-imposed quotas for refugees and construction of a wall to keep migrants and refugees out and ‘Hungary for Hungarians’. Domestically, it is manifested in a new Constitution, adopted in 2011, that refers to ‘Christian Europe’ and the ‘role of Christianity in preserving nationhood’ (Preamble), ‘one Hungarian nation that belongs together’ and that Hungary ‘bears responsibility for the fate of Hungarians beyond its current borders’ (Article D), and defines marriage as a union of one man and one woman (Article L). Values such as faith, work, family, nation, and fidelity receive heavy emphasis. This document was criticized by the EU on numerous human rights and institutional grounds. More broadly, however, one can agree with Korkut (2012: 166) who suggests that it is a ‘comprehensive and antagonistic rejection of all that was associated with the liberalism of the previous order’.

Since the European refugee crisis, Orbán’s attacks on the EU, globalization, and liberalism and cosmopolitanism have grown even more vociferous. The Jewish Hungarian-American financier and philanthropist George Soros has become the top bogeyman for the government, as he (and his supporters within Hungary and in international organizations) are presented as an existential threat to the nation, seeking to flood the country with Muslim migrants and put it under the control of international capitalists.[[12]](#endnote-12) Orbán views this battle as a civilizational struggle, both, to be sure, an intellectual one between sinful, licentious forces of the ‘Soros empire’ which has forged an alliance with the EU, and those that would defend Christian Europe and traditional values, but also a pragmatic one over, in his view, the basic question of who will live in Europe, indigenous Christians or Muslims. Orbán does call for international ‘solidarity’, but this is not akin to cosmopolitanism (Orbán 2017). Rather, it is for (true) Europeans to unite together in defence of their culture. As for ‘liberal nationalism’, this would seem to be an oxymoron. In his own words,

The Hungarian nation is not a simple sum of individuals, but a community that needs to be organized, strengthened and developed, and in this sense, the new state that we are building is an illiberal state, a non-liberal state. It does not deny foundational values of liberalism, as freedom, etc. But it does not make this ideology a central element of state organization, but applies a specific, national, particular approach in its stead (Orbán 2014).

Orbán, of course, is not the only proponent of such an idea. In Hungary itself, the largest opposition party to FIDESZ after the 2018 elections is Jobbik, which is even more statist, nationalist and xenophobic. In the post-communist neighbourhood, Poland comes closest to adopting Orbán’s approach, with Jaroslaw Kacynski, leader of the ruling Law and Justice Party (PiS) declaring Hungary ‘the example’ and that he would ‘bring Budapest to Warsaw’.[[13]](#endnote-13)

Poland’s post-communist trajectory shares many similarities with Hungary’s. While Poland was initially upheld as a democratic and economic success story and illiberal nationalist forces were kept at bay—as in Hungary, for much of the 1990s the leading challengers to liberal post-communist reformers were the (reformed) ex-communists—disappointments with the economic results of the post-communist transition began to mount. PiS was formed in 2001 as a nationalist-conservative off-shoot of centre-right Solidarity Electoral Action coalition. Its founders were the twin brothers Jarosław and Lech Kaczynski, both leading figures in Solidarity movement. Lech served as President (2005-2010) until his death in a plane crash in Russia; Jarosław briefly served (2006-2007) as Prime Minister in a coalition government and is the chairman of PiS. Since 2005, the PiS has moved to the right, absorbing terrain formerly held by smaller xenophobic/nationalist parties. Although he has been only a member of parliament since PiS returned to power in 2015, Jarosław Kaczynski is generally recognized as the most important political figure in Poland.

PiS embraces a populist platform, attacking domestic elites as out of touch or unconcerned with most Poles while promising measure to support those who feel left behind from two decades of economic liberalization, lambasting alleged encroachments against Poland from the EU and global capitalism, and defending what it considers the traditional values—above all Catholicism—of the Polish nation. Its successful campaign in 2015 also featured calls against the ‘Islamization’ of Europe and claims that refugees would bring disease. The party embraces a majoritarian conception of democracy, one in which constraints, such as actions by the courts to uphold rule of law against the ‘will of the people’ constitute, in Kaczynski’s terms, ‘legal impossibilism’ (quoted in Davies 2018). Since gaining power, many of its actions, including purging the civil service of alleged communists, gaining more control over the media, and replacing judges and weakening courts, have attracted EU opprobrium, while others, such as advocating more restrictions on abortion, have generated domestic protests (Fomina and Kucharczyk 2016; Hinsey and Pankowski 2016). Ost (2016) notes that it justifies its policies by citing the need for a ‘strong’ state, not necessarily a ‘lawful’ one, elevating, as Orbán has done in Hungary, its mystical idea of the ‘nation’ above the law and using the party’s self-proclaimed fidelity to the Polish nation to squash its opponents who, by implication, are traitors. Kaczynski himself labelled critics of the PiS as bearers of that ‘terrible tradition of national betrayal residing in the genes of the worst sort of Poles’ (quoted in Ost 2016).

The PiS’s conception of Polish nationalism is directed against several targets. It believes Germany should pay reparations for World War II. It harbors anti-Russian sentiment by embracing conspiracy theories that Russia (and perhaps even the previous Polish government) is responsible for the plane crash that killed Lech Kaczynski. This has become a matter of ideology for the party, a means of distinguishing ‘we”’(the victims) and ‘they’ (the traitors) (Krastev 2017: 79), but a strategy that studies have found also appeals more to those exhibiting the aforementioned ‘collective narcissism’ (Chichocka *et al* 2016). In 2017, Jaroslaw Kaczynski condemned ‘white rose’ protesters (PiS opponents who took their name from a Polish anti-Nazi resistance group) at one of the monthly rallies commemorating the plane crash as an example of ‘extreme stupidity and extreme hatred’, but that ‘there will be a great defeat of those who hate, who in fact hate Poland, but Poland will win’.[[14]](#endnote-14) Some of the PiS’s supporters, including the influential Catholic media group Radio Maryja, traffic in anti-Semitism.[[15]](#endnote-15) In November 2017, a large rally of xenophobic nationalists to mark Polish independence, which included banners of ‘Clean Blood’ and ‘White Europe’, was initially praised by PiS government officials as ‘a beautiful sight’ and a ‘great celebration of Poles’.[[16]](#endnote-16) In 2018 the government passed a new law to prohibit attributing Holocaust crimes to the ‘Polish nation or state’.[[17]](#endnote-17)

One of the primary targets of the PiS is the EU, not just for its infringements on national sovereignty or its plans for refugees[[18]](#endnote-18)—complaints one could hear across the continent—but for the liberal cosmopolitan culture that it represents. Witold Waszczykowski, Poland’s Foreign Minister, declared that EU-style liberalism embraces ‘a new mixture of cultures and races, a world made of cyclists and vegetarians, who only use renewable energy and who battle all sign of religion. What moves most Poles is tradition, historical awareness, love of country, faith in God and normal family life between men and women’ (quoted in Foy 2016).

The role of religion in the PiS’s discourse deserves special mention. Of course, Catholicism has long been wrapped up in ‘Polishness’, and the Church played an important role in leading civil society’s resistance to communism. However, as Grudzinska-Gross (2014) argues, since the 1990s, the Catholic Church has gained decisive influence over all aspects of public life in Poland, including a claimed monopoly on morality and guardian of tradition and the nation’s soul. It has been at the forefront on issues of abortion, *in vitro* fertilization, same-sex unions, and women’s rights, all of which have been enveloped in a conservative, even illiberal discourse on nationalism. Jaroslaw Kaczynski has presented himself and PiS as staunch defenders of the Church, suggesting that an attack on the Church should be considered an attack on Poland, a position that implies that non-believers or non-Catholics are not fully part of the Polish nation.

Thus far, the level of analysis has primarily been at the elite level. However, one might inquire about the extent of more traditional, anti-pluralist, and illiberal visions of the nation among wider publics. On these issues, can one identify an East/West divide? How do these beliefs relate to socio-economic variable or other attitudes? Responses to the European Social Survey (ESS) provide some answers. Data from the 2014 and 2016 ESS[[19]](#endnote-19) from Hungary and Poland, as well as France, Germany, the Netherlands, and the Czech Republic (for comparative purposes) are presented in Table 1. It includes questions on how extensively publics value cultural uniformity, whether they favor allowing immigrants of different races and ethnicities, on racism, on homosexual rights, whether they think EU integration has gone too far, and emotional attachment to Europe and their home country. All of these touch on elements of conceptions of nationalism, liberalism, and/or cosmopolitanism. On many of these measures, one does see a profound East/West divide.[[20]](#endnote-20) Respondents from post-communist countries are much more likely to value cultural uniformity. They are also much more likely to be anti-immigrant[[21]](#endnote-21) and admit to racist attitudes, although Poles appear to be far less racist than Hungarians and Czechs. Respondents from all of these countries are less supportive of homosexual rights than those from Western Europe, where gay rights have gained much support in the past two decades. As for the EU, there is not a profound difference with respect to thinking integration has gone too far—many Germans and French share this sentiment—a reflection of what Krastev (2017) calls the ‘Central European paradox’ (anti-EU politicians are elected by publics who are not marked anti-EU), perhaps because they realize their country is a beneficiary of EU largesse and that the ability to work and study in the EU is a valuable feature of European integration. On the question of emotional attachments, most respondents tend to be attached to their own country, although this is notably strongest in Poland and Hungary. As for attachment to Europe, surprisingly, perhaps, it is stronger in post-communist states, even though respondents there have less experience with European integration. Correlational analysis finds that attachment to Europe is not a pseudo-reactionary, ‘We are the true Europe’ response to the refugee crisis. Rather it correlates strongly (p < .01) with pro-immigration views (admittedly held by a minority) and the more widespread belief, even in 2016, that EU integration should go further.

**Table 1 East/West Divides on Nationalism, Liberalism, Cosmopolitanism**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Question | Poland | Hungary | Czech Republic | Germany | France | Netherlands |
| Better if everyone shares customs/traditions\* ( % Strongly Agree/Agree) | 56.4 | 56.8 | 70.4 | 28.1 | 39.9 | 33.0 |
| Allow only a few/none immigrants of different race/ethnicity (%) | 36.1 | 86.7 | 78.4 | 28.8 | 36.1 | 29.8 |
| Being white is an important qualification for immigrant\* (0-10, 10= extremely important, mean | 2.91 | 4.91 | 4.62 | .82 | 1.66 | 1.46 |
| Some races/ethnic groups born less intelligent\* (% Agree) | 11.3 | 34.5 | 41.2 | 9.1 | 11.8 | 6.7 |
| Gays/lesbians free to live as they wish (% Strongly Agree/Agree) | 60.3 | 37.0 | 61.7 | 87.4 | 88.1 | 95.4 |
| EU integration has gone too far (0-10, 10= unification should go further, mean) | 4.81 | 4.12 | 4.37 | 4.84 | 5.00 | 5.04 |
| Emotionally attached to country (0-10, 10=very attached, mean | 8.46 | 8.37 | 7.80 | 7.48 | 8.07 | 7.18 |
| Emotionally attached to Europe (0-10, 10= very attached, mean | 6.66 | 7.10 | 6.48 | 6.15 | 5.89 | 5.58 |

Source: ESS 2014 (questions with a \*) and 2016, on-line analysis

Table 2 delves into some of the data a bit further, looking at variables that may correlate with valuing customs and traditions, a belief on which there does appear to be a stark East/West divide.[[22]](#endnote-22) One finds strong correlations (p < .01) between the value on cultural uniformity and (not surprisingly) restrictive attitudes on immigration, racism, beliefs that immigrants make the country worse off, that gays and lesbians should not be free to live as they wish, and the belief that EU integration has gone too far. There is also a correlation with respondents’ self-placement on the political right, which is reflected in the broader political discourse. As one might expect, there is also a negative correlation with education, meaning those with more education are more likely to value pluralism and support immigration. Correlation with age (older respondents more likely to support cultural uniformity) is found in Poland, but not in Hungary. Gender does not appear to matter.[[23]](#endnote-23) In line with the earlier comment about ‘cultural narcissism’, those who do not feel confident in their ability to participate in politics are less supportive of liberal, pluralist views. In the case of Hungary, religiosity does not seem to matter. It does, however, in Poland, with the more religious favoring greater uniformity/less pluralism. Finally, on the question of whether support for cultural uniformity relates to economic insecurity, one sees no evidence of this in Hungary, either with respect to a sociotropic assessment of the national economy or assessment of one’s own financial situation. In the Polish case, there is a modest correlation, meaning those less sanguine about the economy are more likely to support cultural uniformity.[[24]](#endnote-24)

**Table 2 Correlates with Belief ‘It is Better for the Country if Almost Everyone Shares Same Culture and Traditions’**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Correlational Question/Variable | Hungary | Poland |
| Immigrants make country worse | .308\*\* | .263\*\* |
| Allow few/no immigrants of different race/ethnicity | .278\*\* | .281\*\* |
| Immigrants should be Christian | .284\*\* | .399\* |
| Immigrants should be white | .269\*\* | .304\*\* |
| Some races less intelligent | .122\*\* | .168\*\* |
| Gays and lesbians free to live as they want | -.146\*\* | -.200\*\* |
| EU integration has gone too far | .198\*\* | .088\*\* |
| Self-placement on political right | .094\*\* | .077\* |
| Education | -.094\*\* | -.193\*\* |
| Age | .057 | .098\*\* |
| Male | .052 | .048 |
| Unconfident in ability to participate in politics | .095\*\* | .085\*\* |
| Religosity | .029 | .142\*\* |
| Negative assessment of economy | .008 | .103\* |
| Negative feeling of one’s household income | .005 | .108\*\* |

Source: ESS 2014, on-line analysis \* p < 05; \*\* p < .01

Finally, we might reflect more on what might be associated with nationalism on different parts of the continent, taking the 2016 question on emotional attachment to country to serve as a basic indicator of ‘nationalist’ feeling. Again, most people in all countries tend to express high attachment (seven or above on the 0-10 scale) to their country. What can we say, however, about other feelings or beliefs that may be linked to national attachment, and do they vary across cases? Table 3 presents some data. Some variables are consistent across all of most countries. Older respondents and those who describe themselves as more religious are more apt to express high emotional attachment to their country (they are more ‘nationalist’). Income’s effect is less consistent, although we do see that in several countries there is a positive correlation between wealth and a ‘nationalist’ orientation, and that in most countries those that have a more positive assessment of the country’s economy are also more ‘nationalist’, perhaps a reflection that they think things are generally going well in their country. Education and gender, for the most part, do not seem to matter. There is some correlation with self-placement on the political right (Poland and the Czech Republic excepted), but an association with a negative assessment toward immigrants is only found in Hungary and the Czech Republic, where respondents as a whole tend to be more much anti-immigrant (see Table 1). Furthermore, one sees variation with respect to assessments about the EU. In Western Europe, ‘nationalists’ tend to be more likely to believe EU should go further. In contrast, in Hungary—where illiberalism has perhaps gone the farthest in the political system—‘nationalists’ are more prone to believe EU integration has gone too far. Moreover, in post-communist Europe, those who are less confident in their ability to participate in politics are more associated with ‘nationalist’ values, whereas the opposite relationship is found in Western Europe. These findings do tend to demonstrate evidence of an East/West divide on at least some factors that underlie national pride or attachment to one’s country.

**Table 3 Correlates with Strong Emotional Attachment to One’s Country**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Correlational Question/Variable | Poland | Hungary | Czech Republic | Germany | France | Netherlands |
| Age | .299\*\* | .217\*\* | .186\*\* | .262\*\* | .199\*\* | .199\*\* |
| Religiosity | .204\*\* | .184\*\* | =.028 | .181\*\* | .167\*\* | .162\*\* |
| Income | -.028 | .098\* | .004 | .064\*\* | .033 | .078\*\* |
| Negative assessment of economy | -.113\*\* | -.065 | -.155\*\* | -.249\*\* | -.088\*\* | -.186\*\* |
| Education | -.039 | .031 | -.014 | .075\*\* | -.012 | .039 |
| Male | -.034 | -.08\* | -.046 | -.01 | .039 | -.038 |
| Self-placement on political right | .064 | .096\* | .017 | .145\* | .104\*\* | .087\*\* |
| EU integration has gone too far | -.033 | .102\*\* | .019 | -.072\*\* | -.053\* | -.08\* |
| Immigrants undermine life of country | .01 | .135\*\* | .134\*\* | .026 | -.013 | -.049 |
| Unconfident in ability to participate in politics | .104\*\* | .091\* | .068\*\* | -.035 | -.104\*\* | -.027 |
| Authoritarian values | .269\*\* | .216\*\* | .316\*\* | .274\*\* | .193\*\* | .227\*\* |

Source: ESS 2016, on-line analysis \* p < 05; \*\* p < .01

However, what is perhaps most interesting from the perspective on this study is the strong relationship between emotional attachment to one’s country and to what Norris and Inglehart (2019) have dubbed ‘authoritarian values’.[[25]](#endnote-25) This holds across all six countries, suggesting that ‘liberal nationalism’ would be embraced by a minority of European publics on both sides of continent. To give some perspective on this relationship, consider that in Hungary 64 per cent of those on the ‘more authoritarian side’ (scoring below the mean on the 5-30 aggregate measure) rate emotional attachment to country as a nine or ten on the 0-10 scale, whereas only 43 per cent of those who are ‘less authoritarian’ do so. In Germany, the corresponding figures are 42.8 percent for the ‘more authoritarian’ and 26.5 per cent for the ‘less authoritarian’.

**Conclusion**

What we are witnessing in Hungary and Poland (and elsewhere in Europe, for that matter) is the abandonment of liberalism in the name of democracy and nation. Müller (2017: 56) notes that a division of labor has emerged, one in which the EU (with its well-known ‘democratic deficit’) has become as a repository for a more cosmopolitan liberalism and the nation-state becomes one for democracy and the defense of citizens’ rights and (in more conservative contexts) traditional morality. As to why the latter has captured the allegiance of many in post-communist Europe, Gradzinska-Gross (2014) makes the important point that the sense of liberal individualism and human rights philosophy of the EU, while meant to empower the individual, has largely failed, particularly given the economic results of liberalization and the ease in which discourses of persecution and victimhood can be mobilized. She argues that ‘political elites did not offer any other ideological concepts; only the nation would protect a beleaguered individual’. Ost (2016), focusing mostly on Poland, makes a similar claim, noting how parties of the liberal left initially had strong support, including from labour, but squandered their positon by backing marketization and privatization. Even though Poland has done well economically—it notably was the only major European not to experience a recession in 2008-2009—many Poles believe economic liberalization has not served their interests. He concludes that

Here we see the unfolding of what may be the new maxim of contemporary politics: that too much economic liberalism threatens political liberalism… when the parties pushing the market policies are the same ones pushing political liberalism and basic democratic rights (such as protecting the Constitutional Court), then those looking for alternatives are open to parties that attack political liberalism as the problem, and promise swift action by strong leaders to help their “nation.”

This insight bears directly on the topic of this special section, the present-day (im)possibility of liberal nationalism. While some aspects of democracy, in particularly ‘popular rule’, are still upheld (in rhetoric, if not in practice), this is often de-coupled from liberalism. Rule of law and minority rights are seen as impediments to progress. The ‘people’ or the ‘nation’ is more narrowly defined, with both those who look or pray differently and those who challenge the powers-than-be labelled outsiders, not ‘true’ Poles, Hungarians, or even traitors or enemies of the people. Economic liberalism is blamed for inequalities or for giving the advantage to foreign actors, and those elites who upheld liberal principles are seen as, at best, out of touch, if not complicit in actions that weaken national power and cultures. While liberal nationalism may still be invoked in cases of separatism within democratic states such as the United Kingdom and Spain, it struggles to gain traction elsewhere. While it may be easy, rhetorically, to suggest that people within a given country look to common principles and values that can unify them, this is proving to be difficult to do in increasingly multicultural environments subject to globalization, socio-cultural anxieties, and intense political polarization. For some, illiberal, more exclusionary or narrowly-defined nationalism holds appeal to defend the ‘true’ national culture. For those who hold to more cosmopolitan views, their support for diversity and multiculturalism, embrace of globalization, and advocacy for universal rights makes appeals to ‘nation’ outdated and parochial.

Poland and, in particular, Hungary, are in the vanguard of this illiberal reaction. Bolstered by his 2018 electoral victory, Orbán has declared that ‘the era of liberal democracy is over’ and that he is now ‘hunting for big game’ as he plans to take his battle to ‘build a 21st century Christian democracy’ to the European level.[[26]](#endnote-26) This suggests that the issue is not really one of being pro- or anti-EU. Orban is not looking, like voters in England, for the exit. He wants to re-make the EU, and at the same time re-fashion the traditional postwar understanding of ‘Christian democracy’ to give it a decidedly illiberal, nationalist edge. He has, to be sure, numerous supporters, across Europe as well as in North America.

Liberalism, if not liberal democracy, were both once ascendant, seemingly invincible, but now are on the defensive in many countries, while the nationalist playing field—with its more visceral appeal to borders, sovereignty, order, and national culture has been ceded to others. Liberals, if they wish to (re)claim the advantage, cannot rest on the laurels of their past victories and assume that the advantages of liberalism are plain for all to see. They should also recognize the potency of the illiberal nationalist challenge. The need, clearly, is to (re)imagine liberalism and nationalism so that they can have a more symbiotic relationship, in particular infusing liberalism with particular national content that has resonance for those distressed about globalization or perceived threats to their traditions and cultures. This will be, no doubt, a difficult task.

**Notes**

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1. In this respect, Kymlicka (2011) also notes that liberal nationalism is not the same as civic nationalism, which would rest primarily on common citizenship. For Kymlicka, liberal nationalism requires some aspects of a common culture, echoing Gellner’s (1983) earlier claims for the functionality of at least linguistic uniformity for a modern state. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See also Tamir (1993: 163), who concedes that cultural minorities will face hardships under even the most liberal nationalist arrangements, a “tension which is endogenous to any liberal nationality entity and cannot be resolved.” [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. For example, pious individuals who believe in elements of traditional public morality (e.g. condemnation of homosexuality) are now expected to be tolerant and to treat religion as a private matter. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Nussbaum (1996), which includes essays by several prominent writers who are critical of aspects of cosmopolitanism, is a particularly accessible and useful source. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. One might also note that this theme of ‘self-directed xenophobia’ (Caldwell 2009: 105) has been explored in popular writing, most notably that of the Michel Houellebecq (*Submission*), Eric Zemmour (*France’s Suicide*) and the German writer Matthias Politycki (White Man, What Now?’). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Müller (2016) suggests that such antipluralist limiting of ‘the people’ is a hallmark of contemporary populism. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Some early manifestations of Polish nationalism, in particular, had liberal currents and might be dubbed ‘constitutional’ or ‘critical’ patriotism (Hinsey and Pankowski 2016), and anti-communist Czech dissidents found inspiration in the writings and actions of Tomáš Masaryk, the first president of Czechoslovakia. These discourses or conceptualizations, are far less pronounced today. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Here it may also be worth emphasizing how globalization, by eroding the power of states, also diminishes the power of citizens, and favors those with greater financial or cultural capital. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. For example, the Central and Eastern Eurobarometer 2 (1991) found 95.2 per cent of Poles, 96.3 per cent of Hungarians, and 95 per cent of Czechs strongly in favour/in favour of EU membership. On-line analysis at zacat.gesis.org. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. For example, a Candidate Countries Eurobarometer (2004) found that only 45 per cent of Hungarians, 40.7 per cent of Poles, and 44 per cent of Czechs thought EU membership would be a good thing. On-line analysis at zacat.gesis.org. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Accounts of Orbán’s rise document his appetite for power, and some suggest that his regime can best be understood as one of crony capitalism, a ‘mafia state’, or an authoritarian kleptocracy as opposed to a coherent ideological project. This perspective animates parts of Lendvai’s biography. See also Charlemagne, ‘Orban’s unwitting ally’, *The Economist*, 7 April 2018, p. 45. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Interestingly, in the late 1980s Orbán worked for Soros’ Open Society Foundation and received a Soros-funded scholarship for a research stay at Oxford University. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. ‘Poland’s New Government Finds a Model in Orban’s Hungary’, *Financial Times*, 6 January 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. See 11 May 2017 report from Inside-Poland.com, available at [**https://tinyurl.com/y898qyzt**](https://tinyurl.com/y898qyzt)**.**  [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. See, for example, report of the Anti-Defamation League, ‘Radio Maryja: 25 Years of Anti-Semitism,” at <https://www.adl.org/blog/radio-maryja-25-years-of-anti-semitism>. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. *Washington Post*, November 14, 2017. Jaroslaw Kaczynski later acknowledged ‘unfortunate incidents’, but the only ones arrested were counter-protesters, not member of nationalist groups. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Whether this will stifle discussions of the actions of individual Poles during the war is unclear, but scholarly examination of various incidents (e.g. Jan Gross’s work, *Neighbors*, on the massacres of Jews by Poles at Jewabne) has been met with vociferous criticism from numerous Poles. See discussion in Hinsey and Pankowski 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Unlike Hungary, Poland was not a transit country for refugees. Nonetheless, Jaroslaw Kaczynski railed against them, complaining they bring ‘diseases and parasites’, and Polish public opinion was very much against taking in refugees. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. The ESS is conducted every two years. Unfortunately, the battery of questions (as well as the countries that are surveyed) changes a bit with each iteration, making longitudinal analysis problematic. I have included some interesting questions from 2014 that were, alas, not included in the 2016 iteration. These surveys are conducted across numerous countries every other year and draw on nationally representative samples. More on the ESS, as well as tools allowing for on-line analysis, are available at <http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/>. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. One might add that more extensive public opinion research on similar issues, using the ESS, also finds that post-communist publics tend to exhibit more “authoritarian values” than those in Western Europe (Norris and Inglehart 2019). The divide, however, is not completely clear-cut, as Greece, Italy, and Cyprus also are high on the authoritarian scale, whereas Lithuania and Estonia more closely resemble Belgium or the United Kingdom. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. A 2016 Pew Global Attitudes Survey across Europe noted that respondents in Italy and Greece, in addition to Poland and Hungary, had the most ‘exclusionary’ views with respect to migrants and national identity, whereas Swedes, Germans and Dutch had the least ‘exclusionary’. Greece and Italy have both experienced economic problems and were deeply affected by the migrant/refugee crisis. See Pew Research Center, ‘Europeans Fear Wave of Refugees Will Mean More Terrorism, Fewer Jobs’, July 2016, available at <http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2016/07/14095942/Pew-Research-Center-EU-Refugees-and-National-Identity-Report-FINAL-July-11-2016.pdf>. Unfortunately, Italy is not in the 2014 ESS and Greece is in neither the 2014 or 2016 iteration. The larger point, similar to that in the preceding note, is that on some questions there may not be a clear, simple West/East divide and that public opinion in some ‘Western’ countries on some issues may be more akin to that in Hungary or Poland than in Sweden or Germany. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. One might suggest that this is an artefact of greater immigrant populations in the West, who may be less inclined to think everyone should share the same customs. However, a comparison of respondents born in Germany, France, and the Netherlands with those who were not finds no significant difference. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Indeed, gender does not correlate at a statistically significant level with any of the examined responses on immigration, belying notions that anti-immigrant attitudes are markedly more pervasive among men. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Norris and Inglehart (2019: 205) emphasize that authoritarian values are related much more to cultural concerns than economic ones, and that age/generation stands out as the most important predictor of authoritarian values. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. These are a battery of questions originally designed by Shalom Schwartz and placed under the “Human Values” section of the ESS. They are beliefs that it is 1) important to live in secure and safe surroundings; 2) important to do what is told and follow the rules; 3) important to behave properly; 4) important that government s strong and ensures safety; and 5) important to follow traditions and customs. In the ESS, each is measured on a six-point scale, and Norris and Inglehart aggregate responses to form a scale with values from 5 to 30, with 5 being the ‘most authoritarian’. The means from the ESS 2016 are 11.21 for Poland, 12.31 for Hungary, 12.57 for the Czech Republic, 13.5 for Germany, 14.69 for the Netherlands, and 15.1 for France. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. ‘Having Conquered Hungary, Orban Turns His Focus to Brussels’, *The New York Times*, 12 May 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)