



## EDITORIAL

# Nationalisms in Times of Change, Changes in Nationalism: Editorial Introduction

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The comeback of nationalism observed over the last several years apparently reached its pinnacle in 2020. Until the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the phenomenon termed the revival of nationalism mostly amounted to the growth in popularity of the political actors, whether parties or individuals, that are variously called extreme right wing, right-wing nationalist, or, perhaps the most frequently, national populists. The consolidation of power by Viktor Orban in Hungary, the rise of the AfD (*Alternative für Deutschland*) party in Germany, the growth in popularity of the Front National in France, the referendum on Brexit followed by Boris Johnson becoming the prime minister of the UK, Jair Bolsonaro becoming the president of Brazil, and, most tellingly, Donald Trump winning the 2016 presidential elections in the US – this series of events made it obvious that nationalism, far from being gradually made obsolete by globalization, was back. This triumphal comeback, however, could be reasonably argued to belong exclusively to the public political sphere and not necessarily express the mass attitudes affecting everyday life. The growing electoral support granted to national populists could represent a proxy for something not directly related to nationalism. A widespread argument suggested that granting support to national populist at least partly constituted a kind of protest voting – a way to send a painful and not-to-be-ignored signal to the allegedly cosmopolitan ruling

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elites who would not otherwise listen to what the protest voters might believe was “the voice of the people”. If this explanation were accurate and sufficient, the new comeback of nationalism could be well contained within the political sphere narrowly defined (as opposed to “everything is political”) and, having served its purpose as a proxy and a tactical tool, gradually dissolved.

The COVID-19 pandemic undermined these expectations by showing the ongoing revival of nationalism to represent much more than an easily available form for expressing a substantively more general set of opinions. With what came as a surprise to many experts and informed observers, governments in various countries reacted to the by definition biological rather than social problem of the pandemic by closing national borders and pursuing their own independent and more often than not uncoordinated and vastly diverse policies, even within the EU. This reliance of the older, more familiar structures of the nation-state, until recently deemed outdated, rather than more up-to-date institutions aimed at promoting international cooperation, goes far beyond the narrower definition of nationalism as a political ideology and instead resembles “banal nationalism”. This term coined in by Michael Billig in mid-1990s just as globalization was supposed to eradicate all things national, stands for the multiple ways the belief in nations and nationalities as objective and natural shapes the everyday perceptions, primarily via certain language structures and conventions of speech. “Banal nationalism”, unlike its more familiar political counterpart, is not usually recognized as representing a certain ideologically charged belief, and, moreover, not easily recognized as conveying any message at all. This omnipresence of nationalism in its covert form further manifested itself at the later stage of the pandemic as what quickly got known as the “vaccine nationalism” – the geopolitical considerations as well as internal demand for new grounds of national pride amidst uncertainty and collective self-doubt, affecting the Mertonian “republic of science” in its quest for the much needed solution of the universal problem.

Taken together, the events of the last years demonstrated the currently prevalent inclination to rely on habitual nationalism-inspired discursive and institutional structures in both all-too-settled times of the consolidated mainstream political elites and the “unsettled times” of the pandemic. Contrary to the expectations once prominent in nations and nationalism studies, nationalism not only did not become wholly obsolete due to globalization, as was suggested in the 1990s, but also was not transformed into more pluralist, individually creative, and transient hybrid identities compatible with cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism. What has made a comeback is clearly not any kind of “enlightened”, hybridized, or otherwise more sophisticated postnationalism, but an easily recognizable prototypical nationalism based on the uncritical belief in nations as natural driving forces of history. This belief is to some extent shared by some of the nationalism researchers in the academia, where until recently essentialist notions of the nation were espoused only by a small minority, mostly those belonging to the sociobiological or evolutionary psychological schools of thought in social sciences. This year, however, the *Nations and Nationalism* journal, one of the major trendsetters in nationalism studies, features a paper suggesting that opponents of nationalist populism would do well to embrace nationalism of their

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own and attempt to combine it with their own liberal views to make the latter more attractive to the majority of the population. This attitude towards nationalism is profoundly ambivalent. On the one hand, it implies an instrumental use of nationalism as a dressing for the advancement of a different ideology. Yet, on the other hand, the very need for making use of such an instrument rests on the assumption that nationalism is not merely something that people incidentally happen to want at the moment, and accordingly could be dissuaded from if necessary, but an important part of the current social reality that, at least in the foreseeable future, is here to stay. This view closely resembles the unambiguous and much more straightforward idea of the nation as a necessary precondition of any guided and predictable social change at the macrolevel. Along this line of reasoning, the coverage of the protests following the 2020 presidential elections in Belarus abounded in the literal, uncritical use of the apparently long deconstructed notions such as the “birth of the nation” and “national awakening” (echoing the view of the nation as a “sleeping beauty” exposed by Ernest Gellner). This profound shift in the academic stance on nationalism as a reaction to the newly revealed durability of nationalism itself marks a yet another unusual twist in the history of the year 2020. Whether it represents the optimal, let alone the only possible reaction to the unpredicted comeback of nationalism, is another matter.

The present special issue relies upon the belief that the range of replies posed by the new reality of nationalism to the nations and nationalism studies does not necessarily have to be confined to a binary choice between deconstruction vs. acceptance of all or some things national(ist). Its emphasis on changes in nationalism suggests viewing the comeback of the prototypical nationalism amidst the social conditions profoundly different from those where it was conceived as a yet another transformation, which reflects its protean flexibility and requires a corresponding plurality of research perspectives. The authors of the articles comprised in this special issue represent this rich plurality of approaches as applied to some of the most pertinent issues in the contemporary nations and nationalism studies.

The issue consists of four articles presenting research on various manifestations of nationalism and Elena Stepanova’s review of a recently published book on Russian nationalism by Marlene Laruelle. In addition to these materials dedicated to nationalism, the issue also contains two contributions focused on other representations of cultural identity – an article on the dynamics of the Soviet morality by Victor Martianov and Leonid Fishman, and Ekaterina Purgina’s review of two books covering the experience of their authors (Sarah Wheeler and Rachel Polonsky) getting acquainted with Russian history and culture.

### **National Populism: What We Need to Know and How We (Might) Get to Know It**

National populism, already mentioned here as one of the key topics in the ongoing discussions on the contemporary nationalism, is also one of the subject of one of the papers in the present special issue. The importance of returning to this already much debated phenomenon stems from the fact that, so far, the existing academic research as well as semi-academic expert analysis have not been instrumental in coming up

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with a single exhaustive answer. Instead, researchers have come up with a variety of versions that at present do not form a cohesive pattern.

Apart from the protest voting suggestion, several other explanations of the causes of national populism state it to be not a mere instrument of signaling and voicing general dissatisfaction, but a genuine expression of the attitudes shared by considerable sections of the population. Thus, Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris in their most recent book “Cultural Backlash and the Rise of Populism: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism” (2019), which, which has some of the national populist political leaders displayed on its cover, treat the revival of nationalism as a part of a more general traditionalist attitudinal, normative, and value set. According to this theory, the modernization of values, inevitable in the long run, does not necessarily run smoothly in a straightforward linear motion. Any society at any given time point in its history is heterogeneous, and relatively more rapid social transformations are likely to increase this heterogeneity by way of necessitating everybody’s positioning *vis-à-vis* the ongoing social change. This differentiation of positions, in turn, may lead to the consolidation of those not ready to accept so much change at such a fast pace. Moreover, traditionalists would arguably feel a greater need for collective mobilization due to their self-perception as caught by the tide of history not being in their favor, and therefore as underprivileged and underrepresented (hence the anti-mainstream appeal). National pride, as proved by the empirical data of the World Values Survey, constitutes an integral part of the traditional value set and for this reason features prominently in the more general cultural backlash.

Yet another kind of explanation presents national populism in connection with the gap between the expectations of the liberal democratic “end of history” and the less than perfect reality fraught with difficulties unevenly distributed across countries. The global North vs. South divide as well as the East vs. West controversies with the united Europe highlight the tensions unlikely to be significantly alleviated in the near future and reflect deep-settled institutional controversies and dead ends that are all too easily perceived via the us vs. them nationalist frame. Within this line of reasoning, national identities provide a readily available explanation and justification in multiple ways ranging from very straightforward to rather subtle. Taken together, these lay theories of nationality show that a comprehensive theory of nationalist populism is unlikely to emerge otherwise than by means of empirical research.

In this issue, Olga Novoselova’s article represents such an attempt of making an empirically grounded and at the same time theory driven generalization upon some of the most widely debated cases of the contemporary national populism. Her research is a comprehensive metaanalysis of a range of empirical studies on the online communication tools and techniques employed by national populist politicians and accounting for at least some of their popular appeal. In line with the theoretical frame of discussion outlined here, the majority of empirical research findings show the body of these online communications to go well beyond a mere expression of disapproval. Nor even do they merely pander to nationalist aspirations by legitimizing this discourse and bringing it back to the public political sphere. Instead, the messages transmitted to the public by the politicians in question gradually create

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a comprehensive vision of a nation with its ascribed values, defining features and criteria of belonging solidified as the rules of inclusion/exclusion. Many of the findings covered in the article echo the recent discussion whether nationalism and populism constitute a separate dimension that temporarily came together due to some contingent causes, or belong together for certain intrinsic reasons of their inner logic. Novoselova's conclusions apparently point towards the latter position by showing the repeating rhetorical tool of defining nation not as a country's whole population but as "we, the people" as opposed to the national elites reframed as "others" on a part with foreigners from beyond the country. Another dimension of Novoselova's article highlighting the importance of its contribution is the focus on online communication pertinent for the examination of the ways self-defined proponents of traditional values make effective use of modern technologies. Same as in the case of (post)nationalism, the initial optimistic aspirations regarding digital technologies have gradually given way first to the recognition of their ambivalence as a double-edged sword and then, to focusing on their danger of posing potential threats to individual freedoms and established social institutes. In both these research directions, Novoselova's article provides a set of valuable conclusions and prompts future research.

### **(Trans)Nationalism and Attitudes towards Migrants: Relevant or Interrelated?**

Another article in this special issue raises a set of issues that have shaped much of the public debate on nationalism for at least as long as national populism, and of late in close relation. Attitudes towards foreigners in general and towards migrants in particular, and especially negative attitudes such as xenophobia and migrantophobia, constitute a separate area of studies substantively different from nations and nationalism studies. The reasons for this differentiation are twofold. First, the ascribed others viewed and treated as foreigners are often defined along ethnic and racial lines rather than based on nationality proper. Second, although nationality is defined via establishing external borders of belonging, attitudes towards foreigners, especially towards foreigners within a country, often play a less prominent role than foreigners' attitudes ranging from international recognition to soft power affecting internal perceptions of a nation and displayed in the feelings of national pride, shame and national superiority. Accordingly, nationalism is not necessarily xenophobic, and xenophobia does not necessarily have anything to do with the substantive side of national identity.

Nevertheless, the two phenomena recently came to be treated as a whole. This is partly due to the powerful impact of migration in challenging the essentialist notion of nationality as immutable or at least subject to at best a slow, painful and potentially traumatic transformation. Successful integration of migrants into host societies contradicts the nationalist narrative of a search for national identity as a dramatic personal quest and an attempt at changing national self-identification, as an existential crisis. A curious twist in the nationalist worldview, strangely different from its more conventional versions yet internally coherent according to its own premises, is the so-called nativism based on the claim that each national culture is of equal worth in its own right – insofar as different cultures and their representatives do not mix. Thus,

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a nativist maintains a positive attitude towards foreigners, but only while they remain foreigners. Migrants pose the most obvious threat to this notion of the ideal world order as comprised of mutually detached nations. Interestingly, migrants who keep the culture of their countries of origin tend to be accused of cultural expansionism and erasing the national identity of their host countries, while migrants willing to leave their old lives behind frequently face the accusation of being unable and/or unwilling to grasp the uniqueness of their host country and instead treating it as a mere commodity with no regard to its deeper meaning. Thus, while not inherently interrelated, nationalism and attitudes towards migrants inevitably get intertwined when migration becomes a mass phenomenon redefining national identity.

The article coauthored by Natalia Tregubova and Maxim Nee makes one step further in the research on attitudes towards migrants by focusing on the ways migrant themselves consider these attitudes in making sense of their positions in relation to various social groups and categories. Their study on migrants' identity construction in the social media shows that migrants are fully aware of the ways they are perceived by the non-migrant (or, more accurately, not recently migrant) parts of the population in the host country and have to consider these views among other external circumstances shaping the migrants' social situation. The research findings show that migrants themselves do not see these consideration solely as adaptation to the differences between the country of origins and the host country, nor simply to the migrant status as such, nor is the attitudes towards migrants are estimated by migrants themselves solely on the xenophobic vs. tolerant dimension. Instead, migrants navigate the space of the available options, tools, and restriction for their identity construction. The authors found the most frequent kind of migrants' self-identification to be that of "low-skilled migrants from Central Asia" – a hybrid formulation that is illuminating in two ways. First, this identification is a hybrid one but not in the postnationalist and multiculturalist way of mixing various nationalities and ethnicities. Instead, it put a regional identity on a part with education, professional qualifications, occupation, and, less directly, a position in the socioeconomic hierarchy, as well as the migrant status as such. Second, the underlying factor that holds these substantively different dimensions of identification together is the mirroring of the external gaze of the majority of the population in the host country. The notion of the Central Asia as an undifferentiated place of origins clearly reflect the position of an outsider to whom "all Central Asians look the same", while to the insiders, national and local differences within the region are known and matter. This mirrored self-identification is not, however, uncritically adopted by the migrants covered by the study, nor accepted as an immutable social fact, but are treated as a subject of discussion and a starting point for developing a variety of coping strategies. The focal point of this discussion, and arguably one of the most interesting findings of the study, is the issue of visibility. The public perception of migrants by the majority of the population is heavily yet far from obviously affected by the varying chances for different kinds of migrants of being recognized as such. Those comprised in the category of "low-skilled migrants from Central Asia" are more different due to their frequently poorer Russian language skills and disproportional representation in certain kinds of usually lowly paid and not prestigious jobs than

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better qualified migrants, who are often relatively easily able to share the same life style as the non-migrants and for this reason do not fall into a specific category and do not contribute to the cognitive prototype of what a typical migrant is like. Further research on the factors and implications of migrants' visibility are likely to lead to new discoveries on the varieties on migrants national identities.

### **(How) Can Nationalists Joke?**

Nationalism and humor seem unlikely to appear within the same analytical framework, let alone a specific empirical study. In the first place, the prototypical rhetoric of nationalism rests on pathos and thrives upon high emotional tension and strong moral stance. Nationalism is supposed to be all about soul-searching, rallying round the flag, and various degrees and modes of self-sacrifice for the sake of the nation. Whether mainstream or counter-mainstream, the language of nationalism seeks to establish a coherent master narrative and place its adherents within a comprehensive and allegedly self-evident vision of the world. Nationalists aspiring to enlist new recruits for their cause are more likely to use emotionally inflated and normatively charged speech, while maintenance of already firmly established national identities requires an unprepossessing sober style of unquestioning tacit agreement.

Humor contradicts each of these two options. It is difficult to find a place for jokes either in the pathos of the "hot", fighting nationalism or in the implicit ethos of its "cold", "banal" counterpart. Rather than a tool of mobilization or stabilization, humor acts as an instrument of subversion. A joke functions at the intersection of cognitive processes of information processing and emotional experience of releasing tension. This feeling of release and liberation appears due to a clash of previously disconnected although familiar notions that allows seeing them in a new and unexpected way. A punch line in a joke shows that the world is not as it seems, but not in a grim way of conspiracy theories. The unexpected, as uncovered by means of humor, reveals new opportunities and mutability of old restraints and thus crates a vision of individual freedom.

When and under what conditions would nationalists require a tool for unleashing individual freedom? The first and most obvious option appears to be that of presenting a positive role model of a typical representative of a nation, a "national hero" with an ability to joke in the face of danger as an essential part of its heroism. The characters of Till Eulenspiegel or the Good Soldier Schweik owe their ability to attract and elicit sympathy precisely due to their extensive and constant vision of virtually anything and everybody, beginning with themselves, in a humorous way. This kind of defiant humor works well in shaping a national identity based on a dream of a peaceful and independent future against the background of horror and oppression, such as the fate of a smaller nation caught in a world war. In retrospect, this kind of humor ranging from mild self-deprecation to borderline cruel practical jokes brings back the bittersweet memories of forging the nation and helps to appreciate the achievements of peace.

It is far less obvious whether nationalism can find its expression in more cerebral kinds of humor, such as sarcasm, satire and especially irony. Irony, as a particularly intellectualized kind of humor, undermines the seeming immutability not just of internal

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meanings and interconnections but of borders between the serious and the playful, the real and the imaginary, the grounds for decision-making and the inconsequential experimentation and exploration.

The article by Anastasia Mitrofanova in this issue provides a valuable empirical insight into the uses of irony by nationalists in various genres of communication. Her study shows that nationalists who use irony are neither the classical fighters for the correspondence between political and cultural borders as famously defined by Gellner, nor are they marginal nonentities able to transcend the rules of navigating the serious and the humorous simply because nobody really cares whether they abide by the rules or not. Instead, these ironic nationalists navigate the new, more complicated world of transient borders densely populated with marginalities of all sorts. The irony, the punch line effect of the unexpected here lies in the nationalists' ability of speaking the languages of the various alternative ideology. By making use of this ability, they demonstrate the artificiality of any language and any ideology, transitivity of their borders, and groundlessness of their pretensions at granting there adherents with the ultimate truth. The ironic nationalist reject the traditional way an ideology gains power – by showcasing its attractive traits that make it appear distinct and favorably different from its alternatives. By way of mastering and ironically twisting languages of other ideologies, rather than developing and promoting the language of their own, the protagonists of Mitrofanova's study assert their power over their competitors. The lack of the language of their own makes these nationalists not merely immune to a similar attack and simultaneously show their urbane, superior understanding of the world of ideas and the rules of their construction. Within this logic, the step beyond marks in the eyes of its proponents a step forward.

How and to what extent this perception helps to attract followers, is another question. The study clearly shows that its protagonists aim not so much as gaining popular support measured in numbers as at establishing themselves among the loosely defined intellectuals and being accepted as intellectual trendsetters. These aspirations display a curious – one is tempted to call it "ironic" – contrast with Miroslav Hroch's classical three stages of national identity formation moving beyond the narrow circle of its intellectual inventors into the broad anonymous majority of its followers, who for the most part may know next to nothing about the original creators. The use of intellectual irony brings nationalism back from the popular and homely notion back into the glittering realm where intellectual novelties are forged and appreciated by connoisseurs. Thus, the research on the quixotic tribe of ironic nationalists echoes the other articles of this special issue over the major topics of the internal logic and popular appeal of nationalism granting its mutability and endurance.

### **Nations, Empires, and Colonies: Coming Together Again**

The only theoretical article in this thematic special issue juxtaposes the nation with its closest historical counterparts. While at the individual level, nationality is most closely substantively related to race and ethnicity, nations at the macrolevel are usually defined via their comparison with empires and colonies. Nation-states are



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usually conceptualized as the universal form of a modern statehood as opposed on the one hand to the more archaic empires and, on the other hand, to the still largely hypothetical supranational and postnational forms of late modern statehood. Unlike a nation, an empire does not need a shared identity or a shared culture. For this reason, paradoxically, an empire, while demanding strict subordination in the overt, literal, institutionalized way, does not usually require cultural homogeneity and symbolic power characteristic of a modern nation, such as the one described in Eugene Weber's seminal work "Peasants Into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870–1914" (1976). An empire relies on military and bureaucratic rather than symbolic power and does not attempt cultural unification within its entire realm. On the contrary, the division of power within an empire presupposes a marked distinction between its center and peripheries (for example, Alexander Motyl in his book "Imperial Ends: The Decay, Collapse, and Revival of Empires" (2001) defines an empire as a state where peripheries are not allowed communicate with each other directly without the mediation and control of the center), and the visibility of this distinction is more easily ensured by preserving cultural differences. Empires rest on keeping intact a variety of local peculiarities much as they were first found during the original conquer. Nations reject this acceptance verging on indifference and replace it with a profound significance ascribed to cultural diversity as grounds for identities and justification for political sovereignty. Second, nations strive to normalize this diversity by means of preserving the differences between independent nation-states and simultaneously striving to eradicate diversity within national borders. Third, the modern world of nation-states is incompatible with the explicit imperial hierarchies of cultures and has the parity and equality of all nations as an essential principle of its makeup.

Despite these obvious differences, one has only to place the outline of the ideal type of the world of nation-states against the realities of the contemporary geopolitics to see the multiple covert survivals of the premodern imperial past. Many nation-states, despite the shared high culture omnipresent in the media and centrally transmitted via education still struggle with making sense of their internal cultural diversity an integrating it into the higher-order pan-national framework. The hierarchies of national cultures has become more covert and negotiable, yet this constant chance at renegotiation makes the exercise in nation-branding and soft power all the more tempting, and the quest for rising in national rankings, all the more pertinent. Moreover, the late modern increase in the mobility of people and information across national borders made the two imperial remnants intertwined by reproducing the overlapping contested places in the covert hierarchies of cross-national comparison both within and between nation-states.

The article by Maxim Khomyakov shed some new light on the similarities, differences and interrelations between nations and empires. His focus is not on establishing a new general pattern, but on historical varieties of imperial and postimperial trajectories and ways of coping with various relations to a nation's colonial past. The author builds upon the notion of internal colonization as applied to Russia to make a statement that Russian imperial and, accordingly, postimperial

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experience is in a number of important ways substantively different from the heir of the former Western European empires and, most tellingly, the U.S. For this reason, he argues, the majority of the Russian population does not share the contemporary Western discourse of racial justice and retribution of imperial grievances. The article demonstrates how the language of the Western debate on racial issues leaves Russia indifferent and how this indifference is represented using the language of liberty and pluralism.

Same as all the other articles of this special issue, Khomyakov's contribution explores the languages of the contemporary nationalism, counter-nationalism and the initially multivoiced debate on nationalism-related themes. The languages of nationalism might constitute an area of renewed importance, especially as, notwithstanding the abundance of specific case studies, there have not been major theoretical breakthroughs in this direction since Michael Billig's "Banal Nationalism", and so much has changed since then, particularly due to digitalization. Obviously, nationalism and digital technology constitutes another promising subtopic in nations and nationalism studies. The researchers in this domain, however, still need to clarify their research question. It goes without saying that nationalists are able, ready, and willing to make use of the many opportunities offered by digital technologies. What we still do not know is how exactly digital manifestations of nationalism are different from digital transmission of other ideologies and worldviews. Nor is it clear how the new medium of nationalism transforms the message itself and, in particular, to what extent and by way of which mechanisms digitalization contributes to nationalists' attempts to adapt to the new trends of social change or, alternatively, preserve and revive the prototypical forms of nationalism generated under considerably different conditions of the early modernity. Another recurrent motif in all the contributions to this special issue is the role of borders. Be they the borders between ideologies (Novoselova, life courses and resulting experiences (Tregubova and Nee), gravity and irony (Mitrofanova), or natural borders between societies demarcating varieties of historical paths (Khomyakov), the ability of nationalism to produce, reproduce, maintain and rearrange borders might be one of the secrets of its attraction and longevity. At any rate, now is the right time to study nations and nationalism, and more interesting insights are likely to come.