

Blood for Soil

The Fatal Temptations of Ethnic Politics

Lars-Erik Cederman

Since the French Revolution, nationalism—the idea that state borders should coincide with national communities—has constituted the core source of political legitimacy around the world. As nationalism spread from western Europe in the early nineteenth century, it became increasingly ethnic in nature. In places where the state and the nation did not match up, such as Germany, Italy, and most of eastern Europe, the nation tended to be defined in terms of ethnicity, which led to violent processes of unification or secession. At the beginning of the twentieth century, ethnic nationalism came to disrupt political borders even more, leading to the breakup of multi-ethnic empires, including the Habsburg, Ottoman, and Russian ones. By changing the size of Europe's political units, this undermined the balance of power and contributed to two world wars.

But then came the liberal norms and institutions established in the wake of World War II. Principles such as territorial integrity and universal human rights and bodies such as the United Nations managed to reduce ethnonationalist conflict in most parts of the world. Today, large interstate wars and violent land grabs are almost entirely a thing of

the past. The rate of ethnic civil war has fallen, too.

But now, ethnic nationalism is back with a vengeance. In 2016, British voters chose to leave the EU out of a belief that the postnational vision of that body undermined British sovereignty and threatened to overwhelm the United Kingdom with immigrants from Africa, the Middle East, and the less developed parts of Europe. Donald Trump won the White House that same year by tapping into fears that the United States was being invaded by Mexicans and Muslims. And in office, Trump has not only fanned the flames of ethnic nationalism; he has also denigrated and damaged the norms and institutions designed to save humankind from such forces.

Other leaders around the world have eagerly embraced their own versions of ethnic nationalism. Across Europe, right-wing populist parties that oppose the EU and immigration have gained greater electoral shares. In Austria, Hungary, Italy, Norway, and Poland, among others, they even hold executive power. The brunt of ethnic nationalism has targeted migrants and other foreigners, but ethnic minorities that have long existed in countries have been on the receiving end of this wave, too, as illustrated by the resurgence of anti-Semitism in Hungary and growing discrimination against the Roma in Italy. Brazil, India, Russia, and Turkey, once some of the most promising emerging democracies, have increasingly rejected liberal values. They are defining their governing ideology in narrowly ethnic terms and giving militants more room to attack those who do not belong to the dominant ethnic group. Ethnic nationalism

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now exerts more influence than it has at any point since World War II.

That fact has been bemoaned for all sorts of reasons, from the uptick in hate crimes against immigrants it has caused to the damage it has done to the post-World War II order. Yet the scariest thing about today's ethnic nationalism is that it could bring a return to the ills that accompanied its past ascendance: major violent upheavals both within and among countries. Should ethnic nationalism continue its march, it risks fueling destabilizing civil unrest in multiethnic states around the world—and even violent border disputes that could reverse the long decline of interstate war. Politicians need to resist the electoral temptations of exclusionary politics at home and reconfirm their commitment to the norms and institutions of cooperation abroad. Those who toy with ethnic nationalism are playing with fire.

IT'S BACK

At the end of the Cold War, there were warning signs that ethnic conflict might return. But at the time, any fear of that actually happening seemed unwarranted. As the scholar Ted Robert Gurr pointed out in this magazine in 2000, despite the violence in the former Yugoslavia and in Rwanda, the frequency of ethnic conflict had actually decreased since the mid-1990s. Pointing to inclusive policies and pragmatic compromises that had prevented and resolved ethnic conflicts, he argued that the trend toward peace would continue. Gurr's essay reflected the liberal optimism that characterized the decades after the Cold War. Globalization was transforming the world. Borders seemed to be withering away. The optimism was not simply fanciful,

and today, ethnic conflict is far less common than it was three decades ago.

A big reason is that governments are increasingly accommodating minorities. That's what the political scientists Kristian Gleditsch, Julian Wucherpfennig, and I concluded after analyzing a data set of ethnic relations that starts in 1993. We found that discrimination against ethnic groups and their exclusion from executive power—major drivers of conflict—are declining globally. Outside the exception of the Middle East, where minorities in Bahrain, Iraq, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Syria continue to struggle for influence, ethnic groups are increasingly being included in power-sharing deals. Since World War II, the percentage of the world's population that lives in countries engaging in some form of ethnic power sharing has grown from a quarter to roughly a half. Some groups have been granted autonomous rule—for example, the Acehnese in Indonesia and the indigenous Aymara and Quechua communities in Bolivia. The UN's globe-spanning peacekeeping operations, meanwhile, are helping prevent the outbreak of new hostilities between old belligerents, and efforts to promote democracy are making governments more responsive to minorities and thus convincing such groups to settle their scores at the ballot box rather than on the battlefield.

Our data also show that the number of rebelling ethnic groups has increased only in the Middle East. Outside that region, the trend is moving in the opposite direction. In the mid-1990s, about three percent of the average country's population was composed of groups that rebelled against the government; today, the share has fallen to roughly half of



It'll end in tears: police confront migrants in Roszke, Hungary, September 2015

that. Moreover, based on a global comparison of the concessions made to various ethnic groups in terms of rights, autonomy, and power sharing, we found strong evidence that such moves have helped prevent new conflicts and end old ones. By and large, the post-Cold War efforts to stave off ethnic nationalism and prevent war appear to have worked relatively well.

Yet there have long been signs that it is too soon to declare victory over ethnic nationalism. Around the turn of the millennium, right-wing populist parties gained strength in Europe. In 2005, the treaty to establish an EU constitution was defeated by French and Dutch voters, suggesting that Europeans still cared greatly about national identity. In 2008, the financial crisis started to undermine confidence in globalization (and weakened the EU). The upheavals that rocked the Arab world beginning in

late 2010, rather than marking an expansion of democracy, brought instability and strife.

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, nationalism tended to appear in waves, and it is unlikely that the current one has finished washing over the world. Moreover, it comes at a time when the bulwarks against conflict appear to be giving way: democracies around the world are backsliding, and peacekeeping budgets are under renewed pressure. Ever since it first appeared, ethnic nationalism has had violent consequences. There is good reason to worry that the current surge will, too.

THE ROAD TO VIOLENCE

Rising ethnic nationalism leads to conflict in several different ways. The key variable, recent research has found, is access to power. When ethnic groups

lack it, they are especially likely to seek it through violence. Oftentimes in multi-ethnic states, elites of a particular group come to dominate the government and exclude other, weaker groups, even if the leaders' own group represents a minority of the country's population. Such is the case in Syria, where President Bashar al-Assad, a member of the Alawite minority, a Shiite sect that composes 12 percent of the population, nominally runs a country that is 74 percent Sunni. That disparity has fueled widespread grievances among other ethnic groups and led to a civil war that has so far caused at least 400,000 deaths and triggered a wave of migration that has destabilized Europe. Most of the time, however, the groups struggling for power are minorities, such as the Tutsis, who launched a civil war in Rwanda in 1990, or the Sunnis in Iraq, who are still fighting to win a seat at the table there.

It's not just a lack of political power that can motivate ethnic groups to take up arms under the banner of nationalism; economic, social, and cultural inequality can, too. Scholars have consistently found that inequality along ethnic lines increases the risk of rebellion. The economist Frances Stewart, for example, has shown that such inequality is much more likely to lead to violent conflict than inequality among individuals, because it is far easier to mobilize people along ethnic lines. Similarly, my own collaborative research has found that the risk of rebellion increases rapidly with economic inequality along ethnic lines; for example, the average Chechen is six times as poor as the average Russian, which translates into a tenfold increase in the propensity for rebellion.

These findings are not limited to ethnic groups caught in power struggles over the control of existing countries; they also apply to minorities seeking self-rule. States usually view such demands as anathema to their sovereignty, and so they often resist making even limited compromises with the groups issuing them. They are disinclined, for example, to grant them regional autonomy. This stubbornness, in turn, tends to radicalize the aggrieved minority, causing them to aim instead for full-fledged independence, often through violence. Look no further than the Catholics in Northern Ireland, the Basques in Spain, the Kurds in Iraq and Turkey, and several different ethnic groups in Myanmar.

Ethnic nationalism can cause conflict in another way, too: by leading to calls for territorial unity among a single ethnic group divided by international borders, which encourages rebels to rise up against their current states. After the breakup of Yugoslavia left ethnic Serbs stranded in several countries, their leader, Slobodan Milosevic, capitalized on the resulting resentment and advanced claims on territory in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Frequently, nostalgia is invoked. Characterizing the collapse of the Soviet Union as "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century," Russian President Vladimir Putin has annexed Crimea and invaded eastern Ukraine and justified these moves by talking of the unification of the Russian nation. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has drawn heavily on the past glory of the Ottoman Empire to extend his country's influence far beyond its current borders. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban

has similarly invoked the Habsburg empire, accepting Russian help to back Hungarian-minority militias inside Ukraine that advocate separatism.

Ethnic nationalism is most likely to lead to civil war, but it can also trigger interstate war by encouraging leaders to make the sorts of domestic appeals that can increase tensions with foreign countries. That dynamic has been at play in the disputes between Armenia and Azerbaijan, India and Pakistan, and Greece and Turkey. Researchers have found some evidence that political inequality along ethnic lines makes things worse: when ethnonationalist leaders believe that their kin communities in neighboring countries are being treated badly, they are more inclined to come to their rescue with military force.

What's more, those ethnonationalist leaders are typically hostile to international organizations that favor minority rights, multiethnic governance, and compromise. In their eyes, calls for power sharing contradict their ethnic group's rightful dominance. They view the protection of human rights and the rule of law, as well as humanitarian interventions, such as peacekeeping operations, as direct threats to their ethnonationalist agendas, and so they work to undermine them. Russia has explicitly sought to weaken international law and international institutions in order to create more room for its own project of occupation in Crimea. Israel has done the same thing in the service of its occupation of the West Bank. Trump, who has called for an end to U.S. sanctions on Russia and moved the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, has actively backed these ethnonationalist

impulses, further encouraging the erosion of the postwar consensus that put a cap on ethnic conflict.

If all of these are the risk factors for ethnic nationalism sliding into ethnic conflict, then where are they most prevalent today? Statistical analysis suggests that the ethnically diverse but still relatively peaceful countries most at risk of descending into violence are Ethiopia, Iran, Pakistan, and the Republic of the Congo. These are all developing countries with histories of conflict and where minorities face discrimination and exclusion from power.

The risk of conflict in the developed world is much lower, but even there, ethnic nationalism could well threaten peace. In Spain, the rise of the new right-wing populist party Vox has put pressure on two center-right parties, the People's Party and Citizens, to become even less willing to compromise with Catalan nationalists, setting the stage for an enduring standoff that could turn violent if Madrid resorts to even harsher repressive measures. In Northern Ireland, Brexit could lead to the reimposition of customs checks on the border with the Republic of Ireland, a development that could destroy the agreement that has kept the peace since 1998. In eastern Europe, the return of ethnic nationalism threatens to reawaken so-called frozen conflicts, interstate disputes that were stopped in place first by the Soviet Union and then by the EU. Beyond the outbreak of new wars, the weakening of liberal pressures to share power and respect minority rights will likely embolden ethnonationalists to perpetuate ongoing conflicts—particularly the long-standing ones in Israel, Myanmar, and Turkey. Across the globe, after seven decades of

steady progress toward peace, the trend could soon be reversed.

THE PATH TO PEACE

In order to head off such destructive consequences, it may be tempting to see ethnic nationalism as part of the solution rather than the problem. Instead of trying to resist such urges, the thinking goes, one should encourage them, since they are likely to bring political borders in line with national borders, thus eliminating the grievances at the root of the problem. Some scholars, such as Edward Luttwak, have even recommended that ethnic groups simply be allowed to fight it out, arguing that the short-term pain of war is worth the long-term benefit of the stability that comes when ethnic dominance replaces ethnic diversity. Yet as the case of Syria has shown, such harsh strategies tend to perpetuate resentment, not consolidate peace.

Others, such as the political scientist Chaim Kaufmann, contend that the best way to diffuse ethnic conflict is to partition a state along ethnic lines and then transfer populations among the new political entities so that each group has its own territory. After World War II, for example, Western policymakers supported population transfers in the hopes that they would lead to, in the words of the historian Tony Judt, “a Europe of nation states more ethnically homogenous than ever before.” The problem with this option, however, is that even with large-scale ethnic cleansing—which tends to be both bloody and morally dubious—there is no guarantee that separation will create sufficiently neat dividing lines. If Catalonia broke free from Spain, for example, a new minority problem would crop up within

Catalonia, since many non-Catalans would still live there.

Of course, where widespread violence and hatred have destroyed all potential for peaceful cohabitation, ethnic separation may well constitute the only viable solution. That's why, for example, the two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict still enjoys widespread support, at least outside Israel. Yet the problem remains that there are no clear criteria for just how violent and generally hopeless a situation needs to be to justify division. Without such a clear benchmark, secessionism could destabilize interstate borders around the world. Disgruntled groups and irredentist states the world over would have more cause to resort to arms to boost their influence.

Although there are good reasons to be skeptical of these radical solutions of ethnic separation, nationalism cannot be wished away. Despite the emergence of such organizations as the EU, supranational bodies are not going to replace nation-states anytime soon, because people still mostly identify with their nation, rather than with remote and unelected regional bodies. For the EU, for example, the problem is not the lack of stronger decision-making authority but the absence of pan-European solidarity of the type that would allow, say, Germans to see themselves as part of the same political community as Greeks. Thus, any hope of replacing the nation-state is bound to be futile in the near future.

CONTAINING NATIONALISM

Nationalism should therefore be contained, not abolished. And to truly contain ethnic nationalism, governments

will have to address its deeper causes, not just its immediate effects. Both supply and demand—that is, the willingness of governments to implement ethnonationalist policies and the appetite for such policies among populations—will have to be decreased.

On the supply side, political elites need to reinstate the informal taboo against explicitly discriminatory appeals and policies. Ultimately, there is no place for the tolerance of intolerance. What is required is courage on the part of centrist politicians to fight bigotry and defend the basic principles of human decency. Multiethnic democracies will also have to take more forceful steps to resist foreign attempts to stoke grievances among their ethnic groups and sow domestic divisions, such as Russia's interference campaign during the 2016 U.S. presidential election, when, for example, Kremlin-backed operatives masqueraded as Black Lives Matter activists on social media to stir up racial conflict.

Within international organizations, governments must defend core liberal values more strenuously. In the case of the EU, that means cutting the financial support for illiberal member states and perhaps even creating a new, truly liberal European organization with more stringent membership criteria. It also means doubling down on the promotion of inclusive practices such as power sharing. The UN and regional organizations, such as the EU and the African Union, have done much to encourage such solutions. A weakening of these organizations could also undermine the norms they are reinforcing. Inclusive practices tend to spread from state to state, but so do exclusive ones:

just as it did in 1930s Europe, the commitment to power sharing and group rights has now started to slip in eastern Europe and in other parts of the world, including sub-Saharan Africa.

As for the demand side, ethnic nationalism tends to attract the most support from those who have been disadvantaged by globalization and laissez-faire capitalism. Populist demagogues have an easy time exploiting growing socioeconomic inequalities, especially those between states' geographic centers and their peripheries, and they blame ethnically distinct immigrants or resident minorities. Part of the answer is to retool immigration policies so as to better integrate newcomers. Yet without policies that reduce inequality, populist appeals that depict out-groups as welfare sponges will only gain traction. So governments hoping to tamp down ethnic nationalism should set up programs that offer job training to the unemployed in depressed regions, and they should prevent the further hollowing out of welfare programs. Although the economic problems on which ethnic nationalism feeds are most acute in the United States and the United Kingdom, inequality has been increasing across western Europe, and many of the welfare states in the region have been hit hard by austerity policies.

Ultimately, however, the answer to ethnic nationalism goes beyond narrow economic fixes; political elites must argue explicitly for ethnic tolerance and supranational cooperation, portraying them as matters of basic human decency and security. In Europe, politicians have preferred to use the EU as a scapegoat for their own failings rather than point out its crucial contribution to peace.

Setting aside the question of whether and how the EU should be reformed, European political elites would do well to address their own homemade problems of socioeconomic inequality and regional underdevelopment. They should stop pretending that draconian cuts to immigration levels will do the trick when it comes to countering populism and ethnic nationalism.

As the violent first half of the twentieth century recedes into history, it becomes harder and harder to invoke the specter of ethnic conflict. It would be tragic if memories of that past were forgotten. For what they suggest is that the journey from ethnic nationalism to ethnic war may not be so long, after all. 🌐