The European Union: A danger to the nation state and national identity?

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Negative sentiment against the European Union in Lithuania has led to comparisons between the EU and the former Soviet system. But are they justified? Andrius Bielskis looks at the motives behind these sentiments and explains how the European Union can reconcile an open-minded modern nationalism with the Union's supra-national structures.

There is widespread concern about a possible decline of the nation-state and national identity within the European Union in contemporary Lithuania. Despite the fact that the majority of the Lithuanian public approves of its country joining the EU, it is still often perceived as a danger to national culture, national identity and independence. This scepticism is partly related to the fact that any multinational political union still reminds the Lithuanians of the oppressive regime of the Soviet Union.

This essay argues firstly that the European Union, contrary to the former Soviet Union, is compatible with and is based on the modern open-ended nationalism and that secondly it would be misleading to see it as a threat to the national identities and cultures of its member states. We read in the Treaty of the European Union that one of its objectives is to “strengthen the protection of the rights and interests of the nationals of its Member States through the introduction of a citizenship of the Union” and that the European Union “shall respect the national identities of its Member States”. [1] This formula can be seen as a paradigmatically European conception of the open-ended modern nationalism.

There are at least two different traditions of interpreting nationalism. The first has its roots in German Romanticism and can be called the ethno-linguistic nationalism. To a considerable extent, the ethno-linguistic nationalism has been inherited by the most of East European countries such as Poland and Lithuania. To put it bluntly, it is based on the idea that nation is an authentic community which shares the same ethno-linguistic origins. To belong to one’s nation is defined not through citizenship and the active participation in its political life, but through a pre-rational belonging to its ethno-linguistic cultural traditions. According to such an interpretation, the Lithuanian nation for example consists only of Lithuanians. A good example of such ethno-linguistic conceptions of nation is the political rhetoric of Vytautas Lansbergis, the former
Chairman of the Lithuanian Parliament and the most prominent leader of the independence movement in Lithuania. In addressing the whole of society he uses the word “nation” in exclusively ethno-linguistic terms, thus unconsciously excluding such ethnic groups as Russians and Poles.

The second type of nationalism could be linked, as some scholars suggest, to French and Anglo-Saxon political culture. [2] Here the emphasis is not so much on nation as an organic ethno-linguistic entity but on citizenship. At its centre is the idea that a nation consists of all its citizens and thus the loyalty to one’s nation is realised not through sharing a common ethno-linguistic origin, but through the loyalty to civil society and its political institutions. “Nation” here becomes closely linked to the state and is thus defined primarily as a political community. The best example could be Rousseau’s understanding of patriotism as he defines it in The Social Contract as a civil religion.

The idea that the European Union and the common European citizenship are a threat to Lithuanian national identity is a result of the traditional ethno-linguistic nationalism that was predominant in Lithuania throughout the twentieth century. No doubt, looking at the European Union from the period of the inter-war European ethno-linguistic nationalism it would be impossible to understand how a common European citizenship could contribute in strengthening, say, Lithuanian cultural tradition and its national identity. An important point however, is that both the idea of the European Union and its structure of political institutions are based not on the inter-war nationalism which treats any political union as a potential threat to the “true independence” of nations, but on the open-ended modern nationalism. The old interwar nationalism has declined with the end of the Second World War when it was understood that in order to cherish one’s own cultural tradition and national identity it would be necessary to limit one’s claim for absolute autarchy through entering into cooperation with other nations.

That European cooperation and ability to form an “ever closer union” is compatible with an open-ended modern nationalism is clear not only from the EU objective to strengthen the national rights and interests. The idea of a common European citizenship introduced in the Maastricht Treaty is defined only through a national citizenship of a particular member state of the European Union. In this sense it would be misleading to talk about a contradiction between the national citizenship on the one hand and common European citizenship on the other. Accordingly, a local national citizenship and common European citizenship are complementary: in order to have a European citizenship one should first have a nationality of a member state.

We shall find even stronger evidence that the nation-state and strong national identities are essential to the European Union if we consider the basic institutional structure of the European Union. There are two types of institutions in the European Union. The first can be called the supra-national institutions, which are formed and function independently from the governments of the member states and which have power over the national governments. The European Parliament and the Commission are the most evident examples of supra-national institutions. They represent the Union as a whole and function as unifier and integrator for the EU – maintaining institutions. The second type of institutions is intergovernmental. They represent the national governments of the member states. The European Council, which consists of the heads of the national governments, the President of the Commission and the ministers of the foreign affairs of
the member states, is such an inter-governmental institution. Precisely the intergovernmental institutions, in particular the European Council, do not allow us to see the European Union as a unified super-state. The intergovernmental aspect of the Union's institutional structure illustrates that the nation-state is fundamental to the constitution of the European Union. This is evident from the importance of the European Council and its political weight in the decision making process. The European Council has the decisive influence whether a proposal, after having obtaining the assent of the European Parliament, is passed and accepted. Furthermore, each member state has a right to veto a decision which fundamentally opposes its national interests (e.g. Greece’s threats to veto all enlargement unless Cyprus joins the EU by 2004).

That is why as long as such an institutional structure as that of the European Union is going to exist, the political significance of the nation-state will be fundamental. Hence, the Lithuanian fear to lose its national identity within the European Union is unfounded.

Footnotes


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