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Can Multiculturalism Triumph in Europe?

Is it possible to achieve a triumph of multiculturalism and social cohesion in democratic societies?

As the popularity and influence of right-wing radicalism grow in Europe, a question has arisen as to whether democracy is actually able to ensure stability and multicultural development. Indeed, how efficient is the democratic struggle against radicalism? After all, democracy suggests availability of different points of view, freedom of speech and expression, providing room for dissent — something that contributes to social discord and allows the spread of radical ideas. On the other hand, totalitarian or absolute rule, or ethnocratic regimes for that matter, are quite successful in terms of control over society: They rarely afford public disturbances by suppressing any sign of dissent.

However, there is one catch: Universal states — according to Arnold Toynbee's terminology — do not live for long these days. They expend tremendous efforts to maintain control over society, which eventually undermines their stability and economic base. On top of that, there is a number of features specific to such states that make their workings difficult.

Firstly, universal states take on a primary position in relation to society. Hence, they do not depend upon the electorate's opinion and do not take it into account. This results in the fact that the leader (or leaders), rather than society itself, is fully responsible for actions of such a state despite an existing system of elected bodies — as the public has little or nothing to do with the formation of these institutions (because of corruption, vote rigging, etc.). As a result, society does not feel responsible for actions of such a state.

Secondly, owing to its precedence over society, a universal state engenders a plethora of internal enemies whose activity it initially controls and suppresses. What's more, with time, the enemies only grow in number, as people's dissatisfaction with the economy and totalitarian policies increases. This popular discontent becomes more and more difficult and expensive to control.

Lastly, a universal state is always aggressive toward its neighbors. According to Toynbee, this happens because, being a pillar of a weak civilization at the expense of its external aggressiveness, such a state succeeds for some time in supporting its own civilization by competition with other civilizations. Putting Toynbee aside, it is possible to define in a clearly empirical way that universal states always create fear among their democratic neighbors. As far as they remain enclosed within their borders, universal states play according to entirely different rules and they are associated, in their neighbors' imagination, with potential threats.

Defining a Nation

To ensure protection from such states, surrounding countries undertake preventive aggressive measures. As a result, apart from internal enemies, a universal state engenders external enemies, causing it economic and military problems. And, with a purpose of overcoming these problems, such a state also has to expend additional efforts. Countries like Russia, China and Burma, among others, are usually cited as the most vivid examples of universal states or those in the process of transition from a democratic to a universal state. In time, they will have to go through a complicated and tricky transformation.

As a consequence, all-out efforts directed at controlling society — including a repressive state and military apparatus, compounded by fighting both internal and external enemies — create levels of tension that the state can no longer support. There are two options left in this scenario: collapse or a transformation toward more democratic norms and openness. This has happened to all empires, including the Russian Empire. As time goes on, taking into account the fact that we live in the era of globalization and immediate information exchange, a rate of dissipation of universal states increases rapidly. Another issue is that social processes in the West always take place faster than in the East. Hence, a way of ensuring a social cohesion through a universal state is a dead end and, by historical standards, short lived.

But is it possible to achieve a triumph of multiculturalism and social cohesion in democratic societies? An answer to this question is not straightforward. Social stability and intercommunal harmony depend on the extent to which demographic structure of society is relevant to a nation's state type. It is evident that any state is a nation, as long as it protects the interests of the nation. The question is, What should the meaning of nation be?

There are several definitions of a nation. One, given some time ago by Professor Valery Tishkov, a member of the Russian Academy of Sciences, appeals to me the most: "A nation is first and foremost a form of collective self-awareness (identity) of people belonging to a certain community that is considered by them as a nation." Different states define these communities in different ways. Its characteristics depend on a number of factors, starting from historical traditions and ending with the impacts of power on society in terms of choosing these or other features. From this author's point of view, there are three popular characteristics of a nation existing in society.

National Communities

First of all, a nation is equivalent to an ethnic group, meaning that being a member of a certain ethnic group is the main criterion of belonging to a nation. All other attributes, such as common territory, common historical destinies, etc., are secondary or irrelevant. This is an ethnic nation state. There are practically no states like that left in the world. One can cite an example of Nazi Germany from historical experience. Any multiculturalism is clearly out of the question in such states.

Second, a nation is a community of people united by a long-term coexistence in a common territory as well as — and this is the main feature — by their affiliation with the culture and traditions of the ethnic majority. Traditions of the ethnic majority represent a key pillar uniting citizens into nation states of this type. A nation state of such type can be called ethnocultural. This is where the assimilation model of minority integration in modern Europe originates from. Ethnic affiliation of a citizen is absolutely irrelevant for nation states of this type. What matters is one's spiritual bond with the culture of a titular ethnic group, with its traditions, language, common perception of history, etc. This is the nature of France and Greece refusing to acknowledge availability of ethnic minorities in their state — this only divides society, after all!

This is the nature of Germany, Denmark and the Netherlands recognizing their own traditional small minorities such as Serbians, Frisians, German Romani and so on, having stated this in special provisions when signing the Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. Latvia and Estonia fall into this category, restricting the list of minorities to citizens of their countries and, following the collapse of the USSR, having deprived a significant part of the Russian speakers (30-40% of the population) of the right to automatically receive citizenship. Great Britain, which signed the Framework Convention without any reservations, de facto guarantees a complete observance of national minority rights for three groups only — Irish, Scottish and Welsh. In other words, a majority of European states belong to nation states of this type.

Is it possible for such state to ensure social cohesion under globalization, when recognized traditional native-born minorities account for an evident minority when compared to the so-called new minorities, like Turks and Arabs in Germany, or Pakistanis in Greece and Great Britain, for example? It is possible, but subject to one condition — if an overwhelming majority of migrants is open to voluntary assimilation. A 2017 study by the Bertelsmann Stiftung demonstrates that this has not been the case for a long time now, with an average of 30% of European Muslims choosing their own community instead of assimilation into the society of their country of residence.

This is a substantial amount. Moreover, the number refers to second and even third-generation migrants, rather than first-generation migrants. States like Germany, France, the UK and Austria can't ensure a success of multiculturalism because it conflicts with their goals of creating culturally homogeneous societies. This is the reason why a multiculturalism policy is failing in Europe.

Such a state does not support aspirations of those who are not open for assimilation models of integration. It is aloof when it comes to their needs. As a result, isolated from the larger society, many become susceptible to radical influences that fill the vacuum created by an absent state. As a response to this gulf between ethnic minorities and the majority population, which manifested itself in a wave of Islamic terrorism across Europe in recent years, right-wing radicalism has been on the rise on the continent.

In this context, to ensure a stable society, the governments of ethnocultural states sacrifice democratic values and civil liberties to security concerns. Thus, they gradually

drift toward universal states as, having chosen interests instead of values, they have to control a growing number of social spheres, and for that purpose they have to restrict civil liberties even more. Most of all, the ethnocratic regimes of the Baltic states and a number of other Eastern European countries such as Hungary, Poland and Ukraine have already advanced toward universal states. A process of the transformation of democratic states into universal ones will take a long time, but it has already started in Europe.

Above Ethnicity

The third characteristic of a nation treats the latter as a community of people being united not by a common territory and historical destinies alone, but by a common idea that goes beyond the ethnic one. This type of nation state can be called ideological or "over-ethnic." For instance, Switzerland is such a state, where neutrality serves as the unifying national idea. The Soviet Union used to be such state at the first stage of its development. This type of nation states exist today in the majority of countries with large founding immigrant communities, including the United States. It does not mean that there are no interethnic, interfaith or even intercivilizational contradictions in these states. They exist, but they are less pronounced, as such a state does not strive to build a monoethnic, single-faith society to ensure a cultural and linguistic uniformity.

Thus, a mottled ethnic and cultural structure of present-day societies under conditions of globalization corresponds to a greater extent to a third type of a nation state — a state protecting the nation's interests, created in the first place on the platform of a common ideology rather than on the basis of the ethnic majority's traditions and culture. These are the states that are able to ensure success of a multiculturalism policy. While it is incorrect to say that there is no radical threat in these countries, but it is largely connected to some external factors — a government's foreign policy rather than to unsolved problems of an internal ethnic approach.

Such states are powerful as long as the idea uniting the nation is strong. Once the significance of the national idea fades away, a country starts experiencing problems. The Soviet Union collapsed when its state ideology, which welded together the vast population of the former Russian Empire it broke up in 1917, became unpopular. The Soviet government attempted to save it from dissolution, having transformed it into a strict universal state; but such a state could not exist for a long time (by historical standards). However, if a unifying idea is powerful enough, with a country maintaining democratic principles, then such a nation state will be the most stable type under modern conditions.

States of other types are doomed to crisis that broke out in Europe a long time ago. Its characteristic features are aggravation of interethnic and interfaith contradictions, drifting toward ethnocracy and a gradual abandonment of democratic liberties in favor of interests ensuring stability. The secret services liven up, a police regime is formed, internal and external enemies are being uncovered, the government's control over democratic institutions is strengthened, values are sacrificed for the sake of interests — all this characterizes a start of transformation of a democratic state into a universal one. Taking into account the fact that nation states of the second type prevail in Europe, this crisis scale becomes evident.

There is one way out: transformation into nation states of the third type. In the 1990s, it seemed that Europe would wend that way — an "over-ethnic" European idea gained traction not only in the West, but also in the East, in the former countries of the Soviet Bloc. The European Union is a global project with a goal of mixing ethnic groups, races and languages, abolishing borders and a gradual creation of an "over-ethnic" European federation.

However, events of the last decade show that popularity of this idea winds down along with a growing number of those Europeans who want to go back to the "traditional Europe," with borders closed to migrants and with a traditional division according to ethnocultural criteria. The European Union gradually transforms into an amorphous structure of small states, whose unity is ensured by European funds enabling to plug budget holes rather than by a unifying idea. This means an existential danger for these very states, and there are no prospects for multicultural development here. Instead, radical ideas and radical politicians have wide prospects in front of them today.

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