
National landscape with Lenin in the background

Imagined national communities in the former Eastern Bloc

Xawery Stańczyk

Abstract: The paper is a critical review of two recently published monographs on the subject of the everyday and banal forms of nationalism in the post-socialist countries of Europe and Asia. The authors of the monographs, drawing on the theories of national identity and nationhood by Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner, Eric Hobsbawm, Michael Billig, Michael Skey, Tim Edensor and others, showed their deep understanding of the processes of nation-building, while their ethnographic approach allowed them to gather original and non-obvious data on everyday practices and discourses by which citizens of the post-socialist countries reproduce and reconstruct their identities. However, both volumes display some shortcomings resulting from their renditions of the historical background, including the ethnic policies of the socialist states, as well as from constraints of the Western liberal perspective as applied to the social reality of the former Eastern Bloc.

Keywords: nation; nationalism; identity; everyday life; socialism; community

In his *Forest of symbols*, Victor Turner presented the subject of rites of passage using the metaphor of a “passenger” who, either alone or accompanied by other, similar “passengers”, traverses a territory which separates him, on the one hand, from a certain status which he no longer holds and, on the other, from the status he has not yet acquired (Turner, 1967, p. 94). The anthropologist stressed the transformative nature of such rituals in which the social invisibility of “liminal *personae*” [“They are at once no longer classified and not yet classified” (Turner, 1967, p. 96)] frequently demands that they be physically invisible, and that they be placed in a “seclusion site” or “another place”, where they cannot be seen by other community members (Turner, 1967, p. 98). Turner elaborated his reflections on the internal change “passengers” experience as they move across space and time in his book *Dramas, fields, and metaphors. Symbolic action in human societies*, in particular in the passages dedicated to pilgrimages as liminal phenomena; he contrasted the processual nature of pilgrimages with the localized nature of social groups and structural positions, the very dichotomy which corresponds to the peripherality of pilgrimage centers in relation to centers of political, economic and religious power (Turner, 1974, p. 197). Not only does pilgrimage transform pilgrims by transferring them from the structure of roles and statuses to the universalist and fraternal *communitas*, but it also attributes meaning to this transformation, makes it possible to interpret and understand it due to the intensity of the symbols that pilgrims experience on their way.

Benedict Anderson, in his *Imagined communities*, invoked this very model of pilgrimage when he referred to Turner’s considerations in the two above-mentioned books

while discussing the meaning-creating experience of a “journey” through time and space (Anderson, 2006, p. 53). *Imagined communities* is a classical study in nationalism, and the chapter *Creole pioneers*, which features this reference to Turner, is considered the most important by the author himself, as it overcame the Eurocentrism of earlier editions (Anderson, 2006, p. XIII). However, this is neither the only nor the main reason why I refer to it at the beginning. What is important is how Anderson used Turner’s findings in order to solve the “riddle” he himself posed:

why was it precisely *creole* communities that developed so early conceptions of their nation-ness – *well before most of Europe*? Why did such colonial provinces, usually containing large, oppressed, non-Spanish-speaking populations, produce creoles who consciously re-defined these populations as fellow-nationals? And Spain, to whom they were, in so many ways, attached, as an enemy alien? Why did the Spanish-American Empire, which had existed calmly for almost three centuries, quite suddenly fragment into eighteen separate states? (Anderson, 2006, p. 50).

Anderson notes at the beginning that neither the language – the same in the colonies and the Old Continent – nor the emancipation of the lower classes were a factor here, since national liberation movements in the Americas were initiated by landowners and other well-off citizens (merchants, lawyers and officials). Anderson also rejects the hypothesis that the development of such movements was a mere response to the increased supervision and growing financial burdens borne by colonies, or the influence of European liberal and republican ideals. Instead, he stresses the fact that all of the new South American republics were former administrative units of the Spanish empire, additionally turned into separate economic zones due to the Madrid’s policy which banned trade between individual units (Anderson, 2006, pp. 52–53). Officials were forced to operate within the confines of political and economic territories determined and restricted in this manner, moving from one stage of their career path to another like pilgrims aiming for Rome or Mecca. In the same way as pilgrims, who made their ways from different countries and spoke different languages, could understand why – despite enormous differences between them – they practiced the same rituals with respect to the same symbols only by referring to the common denominator of their universalist religion, thereby allowing them to interpret shared experiences, the officials who climbed the ladder of the state apparatus came across other people moving up the ranks with whom they shared the ambition to get promoted in the bureaucratic structures and – despite all their differences – they began to develop a sense of community with these fellow travelers. The thing was that their path rarely took them to the top: the vast majority of the highest positions in the apparatus of both secular and church power were taken up by officials who had been born in Spain. From the point of view of the metropole, an official sent abroad was more dependent on the King, which probably made him also much more loyal, than a Creole (this was additionally exacerbated by racist prejudices against indigenous populations, extended to encompass all inhabitants of the Americas). From the perspective of Creole officials, who might have been of pure Spanish ancestry and

the most refined European manners but had the bad luck of having been born in Chile or Peru, this was blatantly unfair; their careers were restricted by the borders of a given administrative unit, which could not be overcome regardless of their talents and merits. There was only one element missing for Creole dignitaries who recognized their shared fate to imagine themselves as a nation separate from their empire, despite identifying with its language, religion and traditions: that element was print-capitalism.

Print did not spread in the Americas on a mass scale until the 18th century, Anderson notes, citing *The coming of the book* by Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin. They write that in the 18th century “printers discovered a new source of income – the newspaper” (Febvre & Martin, 1976, p. 211); this was how the essentially North American phenomenon of printer-journalist emerged (Febvre & Martin, 1976, p. 212), the likes of which spread to South America later on. The newspapers printed in every colony combined commercial news with coverage of the life of the elite: “what brought together, on the same page, *this* marriage with *that* ship, *this* price with *that* bishop, was the very structure of the colonial administration and market-system itself” (Anderson, 2006, p. 62). Another feature of such newspapers was their provinciality – they focused on the news from a given administrative unit – and at the same time, their similarity to one another. Hence the dual nature of Spanish-American nationalism, which was simultaneously pan-colonial and local (Anderson, 2006, p. 62). The result was that the underdeveloped capitalism of the Spanish provinces in the 18th century contained their nascent national independence movements within the existing administrative units, even though all Creoles considered themselves American, since they were not born in Spain (which was decisive for their fate). Individual local newspapers narrowed their perspectives to such units and it was their readers that formed new imagined communities.

The journeys of Creole officials and newspapers of Creole printers which facilitated the development of historical South American nationalisms are worth bearing in mind while reading contemporary studies on the banal, everyday nationalism of post-socialist countries. One reason is that the book by Anderson keeps recurring as a permanent point of reference in these studies. Scholars from Eastern Europe (or, if one prefers, Central Eastern Europe) make their journeys along routes which intersect in many places, most likely noticing the similarity of their fates despite different countries of origin, native tongues and beliefs. The role of international academic conferences, summer schools, intern- and scholarships at foreign universities can easily be appreciated, as well as the fact as that these paths take scholars to prestigious Western universities, representatives of the latter – professors, experts and lecturers – arrive at Central European and Eastern European centers. Whereas PhD candidates or doctors from the former Eastern Bloc find it quite difficult to gain a foothold in the universities of Berlin or Vienna, London or Paris

(in particular when they pursue something more than a scholarship of a year or so in length), Western professors are welcomed with open arms in the post-socialist countries. There is actually something disturbingly neocolonial about their research interest in the picturesque ruins of the Marxist project haunted by the demons of national chauvinism; in the exploration of artistic and cultural manifestations which have not yet been described (in the West), or in intellectual speculations enabled by the outside, distanced position of these scholars.

The shared experience of Eastern European scholars, which is so fundamentally different from that of their colleagues in the “Old” Europe (to which they aspire, gaining prestige once they land a position in one university or another there), leaves a clear mark on the style of their texts. One trait of this style is that they appear schoolish when compared to the lightness and finesse in the texts of Western authors. The difference is not only a result of the requirement to write in a foreign language, primarily English, but also stems from the desire to fulfill all formal requirements, apply the right template, demonstrate one’s command of the relevant theoretical and methodological approaches and evidence that the presented knowledge results from adequately conducted research. To put it briefly, the schoolish style of these texts serves the purpose of legitimizing them in the world of supra-national academia, especially in the case of authors whose names are barely recognized and whose academic affiliations point to remote universities somewhere in Eastern Europe. It is for the same reason, I believe, that such studies follow the *decorum* principle, which prohibits taking a clear stand, or expressing harsh assessments or striking emotional tones. Such behavior is clearly unbecoming of Eastern European scholars aspiring to join international academic circles. Therefore, before I move on to the issue of the everyday banal forms of nationalism in post-socialist countries, I intend to examine the ideological framework within which knowledge is produced in Eastern Europe and about Eastern Europe (which roughly corresponds to the area of the former “people’s democracies”). Without doubt, nationalism, both in its “hot” and “cold” form, is as burning an issue as it is intricate and ambiguous, and its examination, including in the Polish context, is an urgent task which can be fulfilled neither by journalistic articles nor by commentaries on current developments, which typically touch only the surface of the issue in the manner their authors find convenient and which conforms to their class and institutional *habitus*. I will not take this task upon myself here; instead, I want to examine the conditions in which the existing projects of this type operate and the limitations and distortions of the perspectives produced under these conditions.

Both aforementioned traits, namely the propensity to meticulously fulfill all of the academic requirements and to avoid taking a firm position or making a stand on controversial issues, can be found in two twin monographs published in 2018: *Identity and nation building in everyday post-socialist life* (Polese, Morris, Pawłusz, & Seliverstova, 2018a) and *Informal nationalism after communism. The everyday construction of post-socialist identities*, both edited by Abel Polese, Jeremy Morris, Emilia Pawłusz and Oleksandra Seliver-

stova (Polese, Morris, Pawłusz, Seliverstova 2018b). Although released by two different publishers, they can be approached as two parts of a single research project, designed very clearly by one and the same editorial team, whereby the articles could be swung from one volume to another doing no great harm to the sequence of chapters. Therefore, I will treat both books as two parts of a single, coherent academic endeavor and focus either on its entirety or on the themes and issues handled in individual articles, regardless of whether they are found in the former or latter monograph.

The four-strong editorial team displays an interesting range of academic accomplishments and interests. Dr Jeremy Morris seems to be the most experienced editor in the team; he runs the blog *Postsocialism* (<https://postsocialism.org>) and is Professor in Global Studies at the Aarhus University in Denmark and former scholar at the University of Birmingham (2005–2016), where he co-chaired the Centre for Russian, European and Eurasian Studies. Morris's main interests include informal economy and the experience of everyday life at the time of the neoliberal transition in the countries of the former Soviet Union and European post-socialist countries. His research at the confluence of anthropology, sociology and cultural studies addresses the issues of negotiation of worker identity in post-Soviet Russia, alternative approaches to development in post-socialist countries, and social trust in post-socialist Europe and Denmark. In terms of academic merit, Abel Polese is on a par with Morris. In fact, the two scholars have already co-edited a joint publication, titled *Informal economies in post-socialist spaces. Practices, institutions and networks* (Morris & Polese, 2015). Dr Polese, at present employed by Tallinn University and Dublin City University, worked as an analyst for the European Commission from 2012 till 2013; he has been a Marie Curie Fellow at the University of Edinburgh (2008–2011) and University of Dresden (2006–2008), and a consultant to governments and NGOs in Europe, Asia and Latin America. His academic interests focus on national identities, sustainable development and informal governance mechanisms in Europe, the former USSR and South-East Asia. His ties with the third sector and governmental development agencies appear to be as important when it comes to this scholar as his academic career. Oleksandra Seliverstova and Emilia Pawłusz are likewise linked to Tallinn University. Dr Seliverstova also lectures at the Free University of Brussels (she was awarded a doctoral degree by both universities). She previously gained a Master's degree in Berlin and a Bachelor's degree in Kiev, while lecturing in Odessa. She is interested in interdependencies between nationalism and consumer culture, and was also involved in the activities of NGOs in Ukraine. Last but not least, Emilia Pawłusz is working on a doctoral dissertation on the formal and informal mechanisms of building national identity in Estonia. Having graduated from the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, she worked for the Museum of Modern Art in Kraków and in the Center for Baltic and Eastern European Studies at the Södertörn University in Sweden.

The team of authors features, on the one hand, Western scholars who are “exploring” Eastern Europe as visiting professors or researchers and, on the other, academics who took their first academic steps in local, Central and Eastern European universities and

obtained employment in Western universities through scholarships and grants, thereby “climbing up” the academic hierarchy (judging by the biographical notes, there is virtually no one who has not gained experience of shorter or longer stays in other parts of Europe). They share similar interests (academic as well as non-academic, in the case of those who are simultaneously active in NGOs): nationalism and ethnic conflicts, popular culture and everyday life, development and integration. This “joint” profile of the authors in both books seems to be self-explanatory: it is more than understandable that those pursuing international academic careers anxiously observe ethnic tensions arising in their countries of origin, and are concerned about and supportive of the processes of European integration, regional development, democratization and social inclusion. This in turn explains the shared ideological framework of both publications, namely Western liberalism, supplemented, to a greater or lesser extent, with local experience. This framework is essentially never overt but is adopted tacitly: neither questioned nor affirmed. Therefore, it is justified to ask what cannot be seen when looking at the East from the liberal democratic perspective. That in semi-peripheral territories the liberal framework is adopted for producing knowledge about the nationalist discourse and practices exercised there can be treated as a topic equivalent to that of nationalism itself, making it possible to examine these two forces as interrelated. In this way they shed light on one another to the extent that it is impossible to comprehend post-socialist nationalisms failing to take into account the Western liberal gaze, which reveals the most spectacular forms of these nationalisms and outside the reach of which they are common social practices.

What is significantly absent from the rhetoric of “banal” liberalism is communism. Despite featuring in the title of one volume, the term is never defined. The authors practically do not use it, describing the political system of the Eastern Bloc states as socialism, a choice that is justifiable as opting for a less burdened category which is easier to agree upon. The communism in the title seems to be a lure intended to attract the attention of readers. Whether the period preceding the political transition is labelled communism, socialism, or something else (some authors wrote about state capitalism, albeit not in the publications concerned), the majority of the articles collected in the two volumes fail to elaborate a historical perspective, and refer only to selected events and processes from the socialist past. Although understandable and justified, given the limited length of the papers and their focus on realities of everyday life at hand, this approach is somewhat dissatisfying nevertheless.

While one can easily agree that, upon the collapse of socialist regimes, the nation-states of the “new Europe” were forced to reconstruct their own official identities, produce new narratives about themselves, and interpret old images and symbols anew or find fresh

ones, it should be borne in mind that all of these states did not emerge from a vacuum, and that the declared internationalism of the former people's republics was extremely ambivalent, as evidenced by their fierce fight against cosmopolitanism, among other things. The issue of the arbitrary and inconsistent nature of decisions made by Soviet leaders, acknowledging some actions and currents to be internationalist and progressive, and considering others as cosmopolitan and reactionary, was convincingly addressed in *Everything was forever, until it was no more* by Alexei Yurchak (Yurchak, 2006, pp. 158–206), to whom the authors of *Identity and nation building in everyday post-socialist life* repeatedly refer. Very often, under the guise of peaceful and neighborly co-existence, the ethnic policy of the USSR and other countries of the Eastern Bloc maintained numerous dependencies, hierarchies and resulting tensions, while ethnic identity was in practice more important for the authorities than state affiliation or citizenship, which in turn was stressed by the likewise frequently-quoted Rogers Brubaker in his book *Nationalism reframed. Nationhood and the national question in the New Europe* (Brubaker, 2009, pp. 23–54). The legacy of “institutionalized multi-ethnicity” in the current Russian schooling system and its manifestations in the identities as performed by students coming from national minorities in the schools of the Republic of Tatarstan was superbly grasped by Dilyara Suleymanova's fieldwork-based text “*I'm only half!*” *Schooling and strategies of belonging among adolescents from minority ethnic backgrounds in Russia*, published in the second of the discussed volumes (Suleymanova, 2018, pp. 23–27). By ignoring the nationalist legitimization of communist authorities, addressed for instance by Marcin Zaremba (Zaremba, 2005) in the case of the Polish People's Republic, the analysis of banal everyday nationalism in post-socialist countries on the one hand makes it possible to focus on the most current reconfiguration of national identities, but on the other hand inevitably narrows this perspective. Stressing the split with the communist past, which is implied in the examination of post-socialism as a separate epoch, makes it more difficult to grasp “*longue durée*” phenomena – historical continuities which exist at the very level of everyday banal social practices and are to a certain extent independent of political and economic transformation.

Whereas the word “communism” is hardly used, the term “communists” occasionally features in the collection of articles, to designate communist or post-communist groups and political parties. For instance, in the chapter *Why nations sell. The reproduction of everyday nationhood through advertising in Russia and Belarus*, Marharyta Fabrykant observes that in the first half of the 1990s, Russia was governed by liberal technocrats driven by economic results, who overlooked human emotions, which is why “the free market economy itself in Russia was not promoted. This technocratic approach amplified the secondary trauma of economic hardships during transition” (Fabrykant, 2018, p. 87). It is difficult to decide whether the author is of the opinion that the trauma would have been less acute had the technocrats promoted the free market more. She is clearly far from criticizing economic transition as such, since she states earlier that “shock therapy” introduced some elements of the free market but failed to explain the principles of the market economy to the public. Communication errors between the ruling elite and so-

ciety are the subject of criticism here, rather than capitalism as such (Fabrykant, 2018, p. 87). It is in this trauma, caused partly by economic hardship and partly by politicians' lack of concern for human emotions, that Marharyta Fabrykant identifies the sources of backlash that almost brought to power Gennady Ziuganov, leader of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (Fabrykant, 2018, p. 87). Is backlash, a notion known mainly from the language of critical feminism, truly an adequate means of describing mass protest (manifested in democratic election) against the unfettered, ruthless capitalism which dominated in Russia in the 1990s? One might be doubtful.

What is more significant is that communists are making a comeback where they should not, emerging in the post-socialist landscape of the 1990s and 2000s, even though they can no longer find a place there. Thus, their presence is interpreted as a symptom of some kind of failure, for instance of a failure to establish national identity. In the chapter *Borders of a borderland. Experiencing identity in Moldova today*, Ágnes Patakfalvi-Czirják and Csaba Zahorán address such a failure as experienced in Moldova. They explain that, after the separation of Transnistria, left-wing groups of socialists and communists in Moldova came to politically represent the multi-ethnic Russian-speaking community (comprising Russians, Ukrainians and members of other nationalities of the former Soviet Union). The authors conclude that "the aim of preserving the Russian language and Russian identity is connected to nostalgia for the Soviet times" (Patakfalvi-Czirják & Zahorán, 2018, p. 43). While there is some truth to this statement, it equates left-wing sentiments (including opposition to the political dominance of Romanian nationalism, which seeks to integrate Moldova into Romania on the basis of ethnic identity) with nostalgia for the irreversibly lost Soviet empire. Further on, these two authors write about the monument to Lenin being removed from the square in front of the parliament in Chişinău in 1991, and replaced in 2010 with an unfinished anti-communist monument devoted to what the authors describe as "the memory of the victims of the Soviet occupation and of the totalitarian communist regime" (Patakfalvi-Czirják & Zahorán, 2018, p. 44). It is difficult to determine whether the controversial words about the Soviet occupation and the totalitarian communist regime come from the authors, or whether this is free indirect speech, which expresses the world-view of the designers of the new monument.

The paper by Patakfalvi-Czirják and Zahorán is in fact symptomatic, as it consistently presents the lack of a Moldovan national identity that would be unified, socially agreed upon and rooted in tradition as a failure. The authors refer to a host of papers addressing the "identity crisis" in Moldova and the inability of this weak state to impose on the entire society a single national identity, based on the principle of either ethnicity or citizenship (Patakfalvi-Czirják & Zahorán, 2018, p. 36). This absence of national identity shared across the state is supposedly associated with the difficulties in relations between the state and its citizens:

The uncertain relations and social fault lines in Moldova have generated uncertainty concerning the real "identity" of the Republic of Moldova, even after gaining independence.

This means that a consensual relation between the state and its citizens has failed to arise, thus it is unclear whether this relation is based on citizenship (territorial) or on ethno-cultural (national) affiliation (Patakfalvi-Czirják & Zahorán, 2018, pp. 38–39).

Yet why should Moldova's inability to establish a nation-state like ones characteristic of Western Europe be presented as something negative – a failure, weakness or defeat? Does every republic really need to have a distinct national identity? The authors note that, in spite of political struggle and the pursuit to nationalize everyday life, “multinational and multi-ethnic contexts are normal, taken for granted and the cultural environment is still highly shaped by the former mechanisms and traditions of the Soviet Union. The general use of Russian is appropriate evidence for this hypothesis” (Patakfalvi-Czirják & Zahorán, 2018, p. 39). From the point of view of the developed nation-states of Western Europe, this failure can be blamed on the Soviet, or – more broadly – on the Eastern European legacy of a borderland country; but could this failure be viewed in terms other than that of nationalist ideology created in the West, that demands that ethnic differences be raised to the level of national distinctions and combined inseparably with a particular state regime? Isn't it the case that it is the attempts to adapt their identity to the imagined standards of the West that make one group of inhabitants define themselves as Romanians and demand that Moldova be united with Romania, while another group stresses the distinctiveness of Moldova and seeks the source of its identity there, and yet another group defends their right to use the Russian language in the public sphere and nourishes a conservative nostalgia for Soviet symbols? Why has the issue of national identity acquired such importance since the collapse of the USSR? It is precisely the liberal ideological framework which is manifested here, whereby Western countries of bourgeois democracy are seen as a model to which the Eastern European “anomaly” is compared. A reverse perspective could actually be adopted, and the ideological construct of the Western nation-state, along with its civil society and banal nationalism, could be viewed through the lens of the intricate identities and policies in Eastern Europe.

The Western-centric approach to Eastern European social phenomena is also visible in the text *Can nation building be “spontaneous”? A (belated) ethnography of the Orange Revolution*, in which Abel Polese meticulously records everyday events and sentiments that emerged in 2004 Kiev in their context of the construction of Ukrainian national identity. The author argues with the classic theoreticians of nationalism who, like Ernest Gellner, stressed the role played by the political elite and the modern state in nation-building that imposes nationalized and fabricated high culture on the masses. As Gellner put it in *Nations and nationalism*:

The basic deception and self-deception practised by nationalism is this: nationalism is, essentially, the general imposition of a high culture on society, where previously low cultures

had taken up the lives of the majority, and in some cases of the totality, of the population. It means that generalized diffusion of a school-mediated, academy-supervised idiom, codified for the requirements of reasonably precise bureaucratic and technological communication. It is the establishment of an anonymous, impersonal society, with mutually substitutable atomized individuals, held together above all by a shared culture of this kind, in place of a previous complex structure of local groups, sustained by folk cultures reproduced locally and idiosyncratically by the micro-groups themselves. That is what *really* happens (Gellner, 2006, p. 56).

Gellner's theory has been criticized on a number of occasions for its extremely one-sided approach, and both publications clearly join this criticism of a vision whereby nationalism is a top-down product of the elite, which the masses passively receive. Polese stressed that, alongside the elite, there are many other social actors active in the processes of the construction and reconstruction of national identities, performed by way of grassroots social practices and informal activities, as well as the formal acts of national institutions (Polese, 2018, p. 162). The so-called Orange Revolution (I state my reservations concerning this name, as the category of revolution had a performative rather than descriptive function, as noted by Polese himself) is an excellent exemplification of how a grassroots social involvement, which was initially not directly bound to the category of the nation, eventually resulted in a significant reshaping of national identity. It is of utmost importance that this "side effect" was noticed and examined, as a majority of scholars who have investigated the events in Kiev have tended to focus on the involvement of civil society in political activities aiming to democratize the public sphere (as liberal sociology would frame it).

Polese distanced himself both from pro-Western and pro-Russian observers of these events, and noted that the 2004 protests on Maidan created a space where people could freely discuss politics and that this became part of their everyday lives. "In turn, this gave Ukrainians a place to perform, develop and reproduce their national identity through several channels" (Polese, 2018, p. 165). Regional, linguistic and social divisions that could be seen in the streets of Kiev filled with hundreds of thousands of people from all over Ukraine paradoxically united citizens, who had learned the practical lesson that one can be Ukrainian while speaking Ukrainian or Russian, cultivating different traditions, and holding diverse beliefs; the shared experience of taking part in the protest turned out to provide a common denominator powerful enough to embrace all of this cultural, political and social diversity, and the desire to communicate and understand one another was more important than linguistic differences. In a word, Polese drew a picture of an Andersonian imagined community, which recognized itself in shared activities as a national community, regardless of a number of larger or smaller differences. This is not to say that differences ceased to matter; on the contrary, the shared experience of mass protests made it easier to identify new criteria of "Ukrainianness." Thus, speaking Ukrainian became a kind of a political act, performed even by those who used to speak Russian. Secondly, political activism spread, and political discussions became

part of everyday life and popular culture. Thirdly, and most importantly, many Ukrainians no longer viewed Russia as part of a common socio-cultural space; it had become something external, alien and threatening, something that the new Ukrainian identity emerged in opposition to. Polese wrote:

Although it is not possible to claim that all Ukrainians would see Russia as the enemy, it is possible that Moscow's excessive attempts to influence domestic politics have pushed a growing number of Ukrainians, while acknowledging the common past or culture, to see Russian political elites as a potential threat and, in turn, to develop a different awareness of the self and the other (Polese, 2018, p. 171).

This is both a strength and a weakness of the text. The strength lies in the fact that the changed attitude to Russia did turn out to be a fundamental feature of the reconstruction of national identity that Polese wrote about. The weakness concerns the fact that Polese's discussion is relatively brief and not critical enough, since the change is presented as a self-explanatory response to the propaganda in the Russian mass media and threats on the part of Russian politicians (such as that of turning off the gas taps). Polese completely ignored the matter of the influence exerted on the protesters by Western European and North American propaganda, as well as the symbolic and tangible support of liberal EU and NATO states (including Poland), although it is hardly possible that they did not have any impact on the standpoints and decisions of the Orange Revolution's participants. This remark is not made to imply a symmetry between Russian policy on the one hand and American or West European policy on the other, which would be hardly defensible, but with the purpose of indicating the missing components of this identity puzzle, components that are significant and can explain, for instance, the disappointment of many Ukrainians with insufficient aid offered to their state by the West. The article by Tetiana Bulakh, *Made in Ukraine. Consumer citizenship during EuroMaidan transformations*, from the same volume, notes that ten years later, during EuroMaidan in 2014, the ideas of a "better Ukraine" as a fantasy of a "better" or "modern" state had a considerable impact on successive reconstructions of Ukrainian identity (Bulakh, 2018, p. 79). This illusion was conveyed by the media (Bulakh quoted statistics saying that 77% of Ukrainians had never gone abroad, and only 4% had visited West Europe) and through consumer goods, producing the image of Europe as a *bona fide* El Dorado, a land of welfare and social justice, that Ukraine might join in the future (Bulakh, 2018, pp. 79–80).

In this context, the article *How to pronounce "Belarusian"? Negotiating identity through naming* comes as a surprise. Its author, Anastasiya Astapova, argues with Michael Billig, another theoretician of nationalism and a frequent point of reference for the authors of the texts collected in both volumes. In his famous book *Banal nationalism*, Billig ob-

served that, as well as the “hot” nationalism of ethnic conflicts pictured in the media, there is also a “cold”, routine nationalism of developed nation-states, which is replicated by ordinary and everyday practices that nobody pays attention to. According to Billig, nationalism always seems to be located

on the periphery. Separatists are often to be found in the outer regions of states, the extremists lurk on the margins of political life in established democracies, usually shunned by the sensible politicians of the centre. The guerrilla figures, seeking to establish their new homelands, operate in conditions where existing structures of state have collapsed, typically at a distance from the established centres of the West. From the perspective of Paris, London or Washington, places such as Moldova, Bosnia and Ukraine are peripherally placed on the edge of Europe. All these factors combine to make nationalism not merely an exotic force, but a peripheral one. In consequence, those in established nations – at the centre of things – are led to see nationalism as the property of others, not of “us” (Billig, 2014, p. 5).

Meanwhile, nationalism continues to be sustained in Western democracies by means of apparently innocent traditions, practices and beliefs, thereby prolonging the existence of states as nation-states with their citizens as members of respective nations, which allows politicians to quickly resort to nationalist rhetoric whenever convenient. This very quiet, habitual reproduction of nationalist ideology – exemplified by a national flag fluttering every day in front of the post office (in contrast to a flag waved violently by a political extremist), traditional singing of the anthem by schoolchildren, or a daily weather forecast published for a nationally-defined territory, which appears so natural that nobody gives it a second thought – was what Billig termed banal nationalism (Billig, 2014, p. 6). Importantly, Billig is skeptical about the term “national identity” and its sociological and psychological conceptualizations; he stresses the ideology of nationalism instead, as well as linguistic measures which allow for its daily reproduction, giving even more emphasis to gaps in the language, whereby even critical observers tend to overlook these processes. Another insightful observation concerns the fact that even the most fervent analysts seeking to unmask nationalism are unable to position themselves outside of it, as it is a commonplace ideology which permeates linguistic structures in sports columns published by popular newspapers as much as in the philosophical reflection of Richard Rorty. For nations to exist, a “dialectic of remembering and forgetting” is necessary, whereby the daily practices of flagging nationhood continuously remind us of our national identity on the one hand and, on the other, due to the thoughtless, routine and mechanical nature of these practices, cause us to forget the very things they are supposed to remind us of (Billig, 2014, pp. 37–38). This is how nationalism is implemented in social traditions and customs, escaping reflection but remaining visible.

Although Billig’s observations are one of the foundations of the texts collected in the books I am discussing, a number of authors have expressed their reservations, stating that the daily practices of constructing nations do not have to be as mindless, habitual and routine as presented by the author of *Banal nationalism*. On the contrary, consumer practices and choices related to cuisine, music and language are frequently made con-

sciously and thoughtfully, while remaining far away from the “hot” forms of national involvement. Tamara Pavasović Trošt, in her text *Teaching the national through geography and nature. Banal nationalism in primary schools in Serbia and Croatia*, argues that geography and nature handbooks in these countries frequently contain explicit nationalist content and evoke specific emotions related to nationhood (Pavasović Trošt, 2018, p. 81). Alisa Datunashvili takes a similar approach in her article *The Georgian National Museum and the Museum of Soviet Occupation as loci of informal nation building*, in which she stresses the agency of people whose activity allows national identity to be reproduced (Datunashvili, 2018, p. 54). A frequently cited author is Michael Skey, who, unlike Billig, stressed the agency of people performing practices which build national communities. In *National belonging and everyday life*, Skey writes: “It is individuals, acting in conjunction with one another, who wave flags, fire guns, fill in forms, stamp passports, tell jokes, sing anthems and cry when ‘their’ nation loses to another in a sporting contest” (Skey, 2011, p. 150). Another theoretician of everyday nationalism, Tim Edensor interestingly combined Billig’s reflections on the habitual reproduction of nationalism with the theory of habitus by Pierre Bourdieu. In his book *National identity, popular culture and everyday life*, Edensor points to the “national forms of habitus” manifested in practices related to sports, drinking alcohol and home-making (Edensor, 2002, p. 89).

Astapova went beyond these developments and amendments, accusing Billig of elitist and colonial limitation of an otherwise useful theory. She argued that, in his criticism of Western projections of nationalism onto the social margins and global peripheries, Billig himself replicated the West-centric division of the world, finding banal nationalism only in the established developed states of Western Europe and North America; the case of Belarus would likely be overlooked by Billig as too peripheral and insufficiently established (Astapova, 2018, p. 140). This criticism is as ambivalent (after all, isn’t it based on the assumption that having their own forms of banal nationalism makes Eastern European countries somewhat more significant?) as it is pertinent because, indeed, Billig did not seem highly interested in the forms of banal nationalism in global peripheries, focusing instead on criticism of discourse and rhetoric produced in the center.

Meanwhile, the case of Belarus is fascinating, as it is an inversion of the model described by Gellner (among others): national forms of high culture are not produced by the state and its elite to be subsequently enforced on society; on the contrary, it is the groups opposing the government who are pushing nationalist language and symbols that are poorly incorporated into social awareness, whereas the official representation of the nation limits itself to highly eclectic and “cold” symbolism. Astapova notes that, contrary to political opposition formed by members of the well-educated minority and rooted in the ethnic concept of the nation, since the mid-1990s President Lukashenko has consistently shunned the dispute over national symbols. He maneuvers along the ethnic spectrum of Belarusian society depending on the political climate and economic circumstances (both of which essentially rely on relations with Russia), thereby creating a broad frame of a civic rather than an ethnic nation. “Lukashenko’s Belarus is a characteristic case of civic na-

tionalism, deriving its political legitimacy from the active participation of the citizenry, who re-create the system, representing the 'general will', built on the civil ideals appealing to the majority" (Astapova, 2018, p. 139). Many of Astapova's interlocutors also adjusted their performed and declared identities to the practice of daily life, demonstrating in this way that a liquid, non-stabilized identity may benefit social actors, who depending on the situation pose as ethnic Belarusians on some occasions, remember their Polish ancestry on others, sometimes take advantage of their command of the Russian language and their knowledge of Russian culture, or appreciate social solutions inherited from the Soviet system (Astapova, 2018, pp. 142–143).

Romanians from Ukraine and Serbia, whose contact with the country representing their nationhood was obstructed due to the European Union's restrictive border policies after Romania joined the EU in 2007, employed similar manners of adopting and playing on different identities, as described by Julien Danero Iglesias in his paper *Nuanced identities at the borders of the European Union. Romanians in Serbia and Ukraine*. Following Billig, Danero Iglesias decided to investigate what is hidden behind the declarations of Romanian identity made by the Romanian-speaking inhabitants of Voivodina, central Serbia and Bukovina, and discovered a wide spectrum of attitudes, ranging from internalized ethnic sentiments to the kind of pragmatic approach to one's origin which may translate into obtaining a passport of an EU member state (Danero Iglesias, 2018, p. 148). The case of Romanians who remained "on the wrong side" of the border when it suddenly tightened, which was accompanied by political and economic transformation (in the 2000s, Serbian Romanians could no longer look down on their economically "backwards" compatriots in Romania), is even more interesting than that of the Belarusians. It emphatically shows how the entering of politics into daily life demands self-determination and reinterpretation of old identities, depending on the situation. Additionally, it shows how regional identities emerge amongst the inhabitants of ethnic borderlands, who, faced with the condescending treatment from the metropole with which they identify – for instance, Serbian or Ukrainian Romanians in Bucharest – relativize their ethno-national understanding of Romanian identity by giving emphasis to everyday experiences they share with their neighbors: Serbs, Hungarians, and Ukrainians, and to the advantages of living in multicultural areas, such as tolerance and command of several languages (Danero Iglesias, 2018, pp. 154–155).

Probably the greatest merit of both books consists in their ability to grasp such changing, situational applications and performances of national identities, their liquidity and ongoing relativization. Both collections include numerous valuable observations and analyses which indeed break the stereotypical images of rigid national identities mechanically imposed by state elites on social masses, or the clichés of "hot" and irrational

outbreaks of nationalisms in the Balkans or Eastern Europe. The majority of the authors of the texts from the two volumes based their interpretations on fieldwork (interviews and participant observation) and did not limit themselves to analyzing press or television discourses. This has produced original case studies which are a far cry from journalistic simplifications. Although, on some occasions, addressing the daily and banal manifestations of nationalism appears to be an escape from facing the genuinely dangerous forms of nationalist ideology, the monographs concerned were primarily about nuancing, shading in and problematization. Therefore, if I have focused on shortcomings and “blind spots” caused by the ideological framework used by the authors, I did so not with the aim of belittling their efforts, but in order to attempt once again to pinpoint and expose the silent work of ideology, which never ceases, even when the ideology itself is being subjected to critical reflection. Eastern European nationalism, being a discursive construct observed and described by scholars forced to abide by neoliberal requirements in order to produce knowledge in semi-peripheral spaces, is partly the product of this very perspective.

Translated by Katarzyna Matschi

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Pejzaż narodowy z Leninem w tle. Narodowe wspólnoty wyobrażone w byłym Bloku Wschodnim

Abstrakt: Celem artykułu jest krytyczna recenzja dwóch opublikowanych ostatnio monografii na temat codziennych, banalnych form nacjonalizmu w krajach postsocjalistycznych Europy i Azji. Autorzy obu monografii, bazując na teoriach narodu i tożsamości narodowej Benedicta Andersona, Ernesta Gellnera, Erica Hobsbawma, Michaela Billiga, Michaela Skeya, Tima Edensora i innych badaczy, wykazali się głębokim zrozumieniem procesów konstruowania narodu, natomiast dzięki przeprowadzeniu badań etnograficznych zebrali oryginalny i nieoczywisty materiał dotyczący codziennych praktyk i dyskursów, poprzez które obywatele krajów postsocjalistycznych reprodukują i rekonstruują swoje tożsamości. Jednak oba tomy wykazują pewne mankamenty wynikające z ukazania zjawisk na skromnym tle historycznym, chociażby w kwestii polityk etnicznych państw socjalistycznych, jak również ograniczenia związane z nakładaniem liberalnej perspektywy zachodniej na realia społeczne byłego Bloku Wschodniego.

Wyrażenia kluczowe: naród; nacjonalizm; tożsamość; życie codzienne; socjalizm; wspólnota



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Publisher: Institute of Slavic Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw

Author: Xawery Stańczyk, Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw

Correspondence: xawery.stanczyk@gmail.com

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