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Is national identity in crisis? An assessment of national imaginations in the early 2020s

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Abstract

The current context of a worldwide pandemic has once again sparked debate about the bleak future of nationalism. For those who support this view, the fact that long-lasting national identities are being decisively contested represents a major symptom of the crisis of nationalism, which the challenges associated with the coronavirus outbreak can only accentuate. In this paper, it is my objective to prove this belief incorrect and to demonstrate that nationalism remains almost hegemonic as a form of political and communal identification. My method for achieving this goal comprises two interlinked endeavours: first, a theoretical analysis of the concepts of crisis and national identity; second, an overview of current global conflicts and political debates to determine the extent to which they fit with a nationalist worldview. The results of this research suggest that national perspectives – from which national identities arise – are not experiencing any meaningful challenge in contemporary societies. Even in those cases where deep-seated national discourses are threatened, such opposition remains constrained by the assumptions of the nationalist worldview. Consequently, and albeit the COVID-19 pandemic may ultimately result in the triumph of globalism, it is more likely that international cooperation will develop in a world constructed of national imaginations rather than one from which these have disappeared.

INTRODUCTION

In recent months, insecurity and instability have become central concepts for defining the state of global affairs. The sudden and extensive impact of the COVID-19 global pandemic has altered social behaviour, limited the possibilities for economic exchange, and exposed the shortcomings and vulnerabilities of the political and institutional frameworks within which societies live across the world.

It is hardly surprising, then, that in such a context of convulsion and uncertainty, scholarly debate has been directed at determining whether this pandemic represents the turning point towards a new cycle in historical time; a new age, so to speak. In the field of political imagination, the discussion has been concerned with the impact of current circumstances on nationalist policies and identities at the global scale (Bieber, 2020; Malešević, 2020: 9; Woods et al., 2020), which has been prompted by the worldwide nature of the phenomena faced by communities, as well as the large-scale responses that have had to be developed to tackle them (Johansson, 2020). To many, this seems to be yet another manifestation of the puzzling relationship between processes of globalization and nationalism, which have been hotly debated in recent decades (Ariely, 2012: 2; Guillén, 2001).

This general 'crisis of belonging' (Alexander, 2019; Nicol, 2020) offers an attractive approach to understanding current political and social trends. Indeed, a quick review of the research evidences the extent to which many political debates around the world hinge on the perceived deterioration of established national identities, be it in the Balkans (Kajosevic, 2020), the United States (Murrey, 2020), Western Europe (Denney, 2020; Diab, 2020), Pakistan (Naqvi, 2020), or Southeast Asia (International Crisis Group, 2020). At first glance, these events would seem to support the views of those who defend the idea that national identities are indeed facing a global challenge (Woods et al., 2020: 12), and that societies have started to develop new types of communal self-awareness that challenge the previously prevalent discourses and narratives of these nation-states (Beck, 2000).

My objective in this paper is to prove that this interpretation is mistaken and that – as other authors have already argued (Bieber, 2020; Billig, 1995; Malešević, 2019, 2020; Skey, 2011; Woods et al., 2020) – nationalism remains almost hegemonic as a form of political and communal identification, even in the current context of a worldwide pandemic. However, I will also explain why the current sense of crisis with regard to particular aspects of national identity is not completely irrelevant, where this impression emanates from, and how it can shed some light on the way national identity is established and reproduced.

To this end, the meaning of the concepts of crisis and national identity will be analysed, in order to showcase how the general and uncritical usage of the two terms is fundamentally to blame for the portrayal of nationalism as a phenomenon in decline. Once these two concepts have been defined, a brief overview of some major conflicts and circumstances around the world – unfolding on stages as varied as Yemen, Ethiopia, China, Russia, Britain, and the United States – and of the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak will be provided. The aim of this examination is to determine whether national imaginations play a major role in the framing and experiencing of these situations, and if these phenomena can be taken as symptoms of the crisis of national identification. These questions will be explored in more detail in the concluding section.

DEFINING CRISIS

To find out whether national identity is currently facing a crisis, it is first necessary to try to define the meaning of this term. It is common in contemporary media reports to find references to economic, financial, international, or social crises, and to discover that the concept is used

interchangeably with others such as 'unrest', 'conflict', or 'revolution' (Koselleck & Richter, 2006: 399). However, this uncritical conflation tends to occlude the most representative characteristics of the state of crisis, with the result that, when the term is later brought into the work of researchers on social phenomena, there is a lack of clarity and precision. For this reason, I will try to delineate certain fundamental aspects of the concept of crisis so as to firmly ground my claim that these aspects are not present in the context of national identity.

Probably the most common idea associated with the notion of crisis is that of transformation. Usually, this is equated with a moment of transition from a prior condition to a new one (Bauman & Bordoni, 2016: 13); or rather, with 'an upset in a steady state' (Rapoport, 1962: 212). Approaches which portray the construction of identity as the result of a narrative process also agree that crisis can be identified as 'a turning point in life, where the individual faces a problem that he or she cannot solve' (Ganzevoort, 1994: 22). Other definitions, for their part, have pointed to the abnormality of the circumstances that are associated with a state of crisis (Shaluf et al., 2003: 29), or the perceived surprising and sudden nature of said crisis (Hermann, 1969: 411).

However, we must be careful not to assume that a crisis takes place whenever an object undergoes change, be it more or less sudden or extensive (Svensson, 1986: 134). In addition, even if some definitions take care not to portray crises as necessarily adverse phenomena (Bauman & Bordoni, 2016: 13), the association of the concept with negative outcomes remains the most extensive and prevalent one (Brecher & Wilkenfeld, 1997: 3; Shaluf et al., 2003: 29; Walby, 2015: 15).

A second feature of crisis situations is the lack of proportionality that exists between the causes that create them and the consequences that they subsequently produce. Even if the reasons behind the eruption of a crisis are often difficult to determine, these circumstances are generally conceived as 'threatening' (Brecher & Wilkenfeld, 1997: 3), 'momentous' (Koselleck & Richter, 2006: 372), 'decisive' (Bauman & Bordoni, 2016: 13), and highly risky unless carefully managed (Shaluf et al., 2003: 29), or at least, that they have the potential to produce 'large detrimental change' (Walby, 2015: 15). After all, most crises are not the result of the alteration of a single parameter, but rather, are produced by seemingly minor changes in a series of interconnected events which ultimately yield significant and unforeseen consequences.

The perceived momentousness of states of crisis is also heightened by their temporal limitation (Rapoport, 1962: 213). Hence, crises need to be clearly identified with short periods of time in which sudden and abrupt transformations occur or have the potential of occurring. In contrast, a crisis which encompasses a larger period of time (i.e. several decades or centuries) can hardly be considered a crisis at all, and ought instead to be regarded as a new – albeit unstable or precarious – system of balance.

It is for these two reasons – the lack of proportionality between the causes and consequences of a crisis and its temporal limitation – that a crisis situation calls for urgent and decisive action. The main problem in this regard, however, is that, by definition, a crisis situation is one in which 'the habitual problem-solving activities are not adequate' (Rapoport, 1962: 212–3), and this in turn results in a situation in which 'the personal narrative or frame of interpretation cannot adequately give meaning to new facts in the course of life', and yet 'the facts are interpreted as too important to neglect' (Ganzevoort, 1994: 23). Under these circumstances, the individual finds it difficult to find appropriate cognitive schemas through which to think about, evaluate, and formulate solutions and possible outcomes to the crisis (Rapoport, 1962: 215). This uncertainty, when combined with the sense of urgency, may even further complicate the chances of finding a fitting response through which to attain the desired outcome/cessation of the crisis (Bauman & Bordoni, 2016: 18).

Nonetheless, a crucial aspect of the concept of crisis is often misunderstood. For a sudden change to produce unforeseen and large consequences and to call for an urgent response from the actors involved, it must decisively challenge the essential aspects of the object concerned,

threatening to forcibly transform all of its identifying characteristics (Svensson, 1986: 135). These can comprise 'one or more [of its] basic values' (Brecher & Wilkenfeld, 1997: 3); its 'basic systemic variables' – i.e. those that need to be maintained if the stability of the whole is not to be critically endangered (Hermann, 1969: 411); or, in the case of identities, the personal narrative (Ganzevoort, 1994: 25). It follows from this, then, that the sudden transformation of any elements which do not form part of these identifying characteristics cannot of and by itself be considered a crisis, just as the alteration of a single note cannot make a melody unrecognizable.

On the other hand, it is unclear to what extent changes to some – but not all – of the identifying characteristics would result in an actual crisis or merely a transformation (Brecher & Wilkenfeld, 1997; 135: Svensson, 1986: 3). Continuing with the metaphor, the question comes down to whether a melody in which half of the notes have been changed remains the same melody with alternations, or whether it has become a completely new melody. In the case of communal identities, such as national identity, I argue that the differences in the basic premises of the various types of possible imagined communities are often so few, yet so decisive, that we ought to accept the threat of change to any one of these basic principles as being sufficient cause for the ensuing situation to be considered a crisis of the whole.

In summary, and for the purposes of this paper, I define a crisis as a sudden, negative, and temporally constrained change within a system which threatens to bring about a large and unforeseen transformation of a number of the identifying characteristics of that system and which urgently calls for new approaches and solutions.

EIGHT BASIC PREMISES OF THE NATIONALIST WORLDVIEW

Up until this point I have underscored the close intimacy between the concept of crisis and the essential features of the object it affects. In the case of national identity, however, a consensual position regarding these core elements is still far from being accepted. Broadly speaking, we can define national identity as the self-awareness of an individual as being a member of a particular imagined national community (Anderson, 2006: 6). And yet such a definition does not offer any distinct element through which to evaluate when national identity is in a state of crisis. At most, it allows us to conclude that national identity disappears once individuals no longer imagine that they are members of a national community. For this reason, we must instead focus on identifying which are the basic principles that establish and sustain these national communities and how it might be possible to determine whether any of these elements is currently being challenged in a way that merits its depiction as a state of crisis.

National identities, like other types of social identity, are the result of narrative processes through which we 'come to know, understand, and make sense of the social world' (Somers, 1994: 606). Self-understandings thus construed 'through the medium of language, through talking and writing' (Crossley, 2000: 10) then produce 'imagined communities' (Anderson, 2006: 6) whose main aim is to bridge the present with the past and offer the reassuring comfort of continuity in the face of endless change (Zerubavel, 2003: 4). It should not surprise us, then, that the ultimate source for all the powers and rights that these nations allot to themselves lies in a perceived common historical journey, in which the elements that compose the nation are portrayed as having come into being and merged together in a natural process (Duara, 1995: 4).

The narrative description of national identity has led to a growing interest in the study of the internal emplotment and structure of these accounts – a sort of 'master narrative' – as well as the fundamental role that they play in shaping the imagination of communal identities (Carretero & van Alphen, 2015). These analyses have shown that, because the narrative frameworks rarely change and are reiterated time and again, they constitute a fundamental element

for understanding the historical permanence of national interpretations of the past, the present, and the future (Duara, 1995: 27).

But how can we differentiate this nationalist worldview from other ways of conceiving the relationship between peoples, space, and time? The answer to this question rests in the particular set of principles and assumptions that combine to produce this picture of the social world. Several authors have already tried to provide a list of the determinant characteristics of nationalism as ideology (Breuilly, 1993: 2–3; Hobsbawm, 1992; Skey, 2011: 9–36), but they have tended to assume the empirical reality of nations as substantial groups, rather than their fluid and practical construction (Brubaker, 2004: 8–11), or they have taken a too narrow – i.e. political – approach to the phenomenon. Others, such as Carretero and van Alphen (2017), have attempted to determine certain principles that frame the historical imagination of the nation. However, although inspirational, I consider that their work falls short in offering an overview of the ways in which narrative assumptions effectively create national identities. For this reason, and following recent research on nationalism and narrativity, I argue that there are eight core ideas behind the nationalist worldview, and that these in turn decisively shape the ways in which individuals around the world imagine their own communal belonging.

The first assumption is that of **unity**, which establishes that nations are homogeneous, natural communities which share a unique and distinct character. This connection between nationals can be imagined in terms of common descent, ethnicity, culture, or language, among many others, but it is always pictured as being stronger than the connection which individuals share with other supra-national or intra-national communities. This aspect has been widely acknowledged by historians and researchers on nationalism, who have described how a nation is 'thought to be a relatively homogeneous entity with shared characteristics which transcend internal divisions of class, status, and region' (Dikötter, 1996: 590). Although the conception of such a 'homogeneous population' (Comisso, 2006: 159) has been largely considered a myth rather than an observable phenomenon (Smith, 2009: 33), it is still difficult to deny its crucial impact in the development of public self-understandings (Carretero & van Alphen, 2017: 293; Hon, 2013: 9–10). Even contemporary scholars, when discussing political projects aimed at establishing multinational governments, have often tended to take the existence of easily identifiable groups called nations as a working assumption (Tully, 2001: 2–3).

A second principle of the nationalist worldview is that of **community**. This establishes that nations are large groups of people and that the most important and significant events and developments are those produced by – or which affect – these broad populations. This picture of the nation has often provided the basis for anti-elite and democratic movements aimed at eliminating unnatural barriers such as class, gender, or political affiliation between their members and making explicit the central role of the community as a whole.

The idea of **continuity**, for its part, connects these nations with their past and their future by characterizing them as capable of remaining unchanged in their fundamental characteristics despite the passage of time. Given that national identity is promoted, to a large extent, by 'evoking an apparently common past and a common culture' (Giles & Middleton, 1995: 22), it is this sense of unbroken permanence which allows nations to be conceived 'as communities, not just of the living, but of the living in continuity with the dead and the yet unborn' (Cubitt, 1998: 8). In more concrete terms, the assumption of continuity sustains the use of the first person plural to refer to the past and to foster a shared sense of belonging (Carretero & van Alphen, 2017: 294) – in statements such as 'back in ancient times, our country was great'. It also encourages the glossing over of differences between different populations separated by vast chronological expanses as long as they are thought to be variations of the same national group.

The fourth assumption of the framework is that of national **sovereignty**, which argues that nations possess inherent political rights and attributions, particularly the right to determine their political organization by themselves. The connection between the nation and political

power has been the focus of many influential interpretations of nationalism (Breuilly, 1993: 4; Gellner, 1983: 1), and it is undeniable that it constitutes a fundamental component of the phenomenon. Moreover, it can also be inferred from this notion that the national group is the source of any legitimate authority that affects it (Malešević, 2019: 30). Consequently, it is necessary to make common reference to the 'wishes' or 'will' of the people (nation) as crucial grounds for subsequent political action.

If the bond which unites the national group internally is thought to be the ultimate marker of its existence, it is not difficult to understand how important it is that this shared character should be protected and preserved. This is the ideological foundation of the fifth principle, national **purity**: that nations are autonomous communities that have to be kept from being affected, as far as possible, by external influence. Rather than being constrained to the field of politics, this assumption also affects cultural, economic, and social developments such as fashion, language, the arts, and even marriage and descent. In turn, the application of this principle can result in a wide array of different measures directed at emphasizing national homogeneity and sameness or, at times, advocating the segregation, expulsion, or elimination of groups deemed 'foreign' to the national body (Mavroudi, 2010: 219–20).

As already indicated, historical imagination plays a major role in the construction of national identity (Anderson, 2006; Carretero and van Alphen, 2015; Duara, 1995). This owes its importance in no small measure to another central element of the nationalist worldview, that is, the idea of the **historical subjecthood** of the nation. This contends: 1) that History must first and foremost provide an account of national development; 2) that the contents of such a narrative must be selected and evaluated in accordance with their significance for this process; and 3) that, ultimately, the historical journey of the nation tends towards a certain goal or conclusion. In Europe, the transformation of historical practice to satisfy the objectives and requirements of the nationalist worldview was already well-advanced by the 1880s (Berger, 2007: 33), and this became increasingly extended and accepted around the world throughout the first half of the twentieth century (Lin, 1999; Wang, 2001).

The process of national development is then brought to fruition through selected individuals, groups, or institutions, which are portrayed as embodying fundamental aspects of the nation they represent. This idea of **representation** is essential to the nationalist worldview because it offers a way of imagining nations as decision-making actors within the historical narrative (Brubaker, 2004: 8; Fludernik, 2006: 79), while at the same time bolstering the legitimacy of any agent which comes to be accepted as a national representative. After all, and given that the nation is established as the ultimate locus of sovereignty, the relationship between a community and its rulers must recognize the theoretical supremacy of the former. This phenomenon is not just limited to the field of politics, however, as a similar connection can exist between the nation and other types of representatives, such as 'national' artists, poets, or writers (Cubitt, 1998: 15).

The last core principle that sustains a nationalist worldview is that of **international global spatiality**. This, briefly summarized, argues that nations can only exist in a world of formally equal nations, as none of them can imagine itself 'coterminous with mankind' and must be constrained to a limited geographical area (Anderson, 2006: 7). This produces a mental picture of the world as being made of 'uneven and different national territories and spaces' (Tang, 1996: 2), which in turn entails a process of territorialization and fragmentation of boundless space, without which the national imagination would not be possible (Smith, 2009: 27).

These eight elements shape the field of possibility within which a national identity can arise. The exact combination of these assumptions is what makes a nation a nation and differentiates it from other types of aggregation such as a religious community, an ethnicity, a class, or a family. For this reason, and assuming that national identity represents the self-awareness of individuals as belonging to a particular imagined national community, it follows that a national

identity can only be produced – and reproduced – if this complete set of core principles is present. In the absence of any one of them, therefore, talk of a national identity would simply be incorrect.

NATIONAL PRINCIPLES IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETIES

Having briefly presented the core elements which produce a national understanding of the world and frame an individual's national identity, it is time to address the question posited in the introduction to this paper. In order to determine whether national identity is currently undergoing a crisis, we need to conclude that one or more of its identifying characteristics is being decisively challenged or threatened (Svensson, 1986: 135). Because these key elements have been equated with the eight core principles of the nationalist worldview – unity, community, continuity, sovereignty, purity, historical subjecthood, representation, and international global spatiality – it is necessary to assess whether any of them are being challenged in our contemporary societies as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Contentious situations where the nationalist worldview remains strong

A quick analysis of contentious situations around the world illustrates that some of these notions are not currently being meaningfully challenged. A clear case would be the assumption of community, which if anything has been strengthened and emphasized during the COVID-19 pandemic, due to the collective nature of the virus transmission and actions needed in response. In this regard, the idea that 'cooperation is the antidote' (Johansson, 2020) represents a new instance of the principle which contends that only large communities can produce meaningful change on a global scale.

Similarly, and even though in recent decades some historiographical trends such as 'global history' have tried to contest the hegemonic role played by 'the nation' as a historical subject, these new ideas have not yet taken deep root in the general public's historical imagination. For example, a quick survey of the best-selling history books on sale via the major online retailers in the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Spain in December 2020 (e.g. Amazon, Waterstones, Fnac, and Casa del Libro) evidences the preponderance of nationally-framed topics being consumed. For instance, the biographies of major personalities of national politics, such as Barack Obama, François Mitterrand, or King Juan Carlos of Spain, monopolize the top positions of these rankings, while the Second World War and the Spanish Civil War – crucial symbols of national identity and current debates in these countries – also feature prominently. Likewise, in the United States it is noticeable that the relationship between race and nationality is a central topic of interest for American readers, no doubt fostered by the racially-framed disputes and conflicts that took place during 2020.

National history continues to play a fundamental role in the inner functioning of nation-states; particularly (though not surprisingly) within school curricula (Carretero & van Alphen, 2017: 286; Chau, 2020), but by no means exclusively so. In Russia, for instance, the consecration of the new Cathedral of the Armed Forces has served as the symbol of a particular interpretation of Russian history which emphasizes the connection that exists between the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and the Russian Federation as 'epochs' of a single state: 'Holy Rus' (Walker, 2020). Similarly, in a public speech in September 2019, the leader of the Chinese Communist Party, Xi Jinping, emphasized 'the communal consciousness of the Chinese [lit. *Zhonghua*] nation' as justification for the expansion of a policy of cultural nationalism over the country's non-Han ethnicities (Leibold, 2019).

The current situation created by the COVID-19 pandemic has also emphasized the extent to which the picture of the world as being comprised of a series of nation-states still frames our historical imaginations. In this international global space, national territories and communities remain the key categories for most projects aimed at dealing with the new state of affairs (Skey & Jiménez-Martínez, 2020), and comparison between them is both common and widespread, underscoring the alleged relationship that exists between national cultures, behaviours, and institutions and the varying degrees of success in combatting the virus (Tamir, 2020). This kind of discourse has similarly been espoused by governments, which have instrumentalized them to generate support for their policies (Gülseven, 2020; McTague, 2020; Yang & Chen, 2020).

Nor has the principle of national sovereignty suffered from any fundamental opposition in recent times. It is true that the pandemic has bolstered the right of national governments to establish their own measures for combatting the virus, often trampling over internal as well as external opposition. Nonetheless, other contemporary political developments have also tended to invoke the principle of national sovereignty as a legitimate motive for action. Thus, for many individuals in the United Kingdom, the Brexit vote of 2016 was about regaining for the nation certain attributes of sovereignty – such as legislative power and border control – from the European Union (Richards & Heath, 2019).

Similarly, in an altogether more violent and convulsive context, the various groups fighting each other in Yemen – the northern Houthis, still loyal to President Abdo Rabu Mansur Hadi, and the Southern Transitional Council – all base their claims to statehood on the alleged sovereign rights of their imagined national communities (Abdalá, 2020; Aljazeera, 2020; Glenn, 2018). The same can be said about the Tigrayan secessionist party, which recently challenged the central government of Ethiopia (Gebremedhin, 2020).

Contentious situations where the nationalist worldview is under threat

While the principles of community, historical subjecthood, international global spatiality, and sovereignty have remained fairly stable and unopposed, others have been the focus of many debates and transformative processes. Such is the case, for instance, with regard to the principle of unity, which has been utilized to mobilize the population and social agents in order to confront the pandemic and avoid disunion (Johansson, 2020; The Armenian Weekly, 2020), but which has also dominated many political arenas around the world, and has even served as justification for violent conflict.

The aforementioned Yemeni case offers an example of this trend, as the main combatants in this conflict offer various interpretations of the bond that links the nation together and which frames their territorial and political claims. For many northern Houthis, the branch of Islam they practise – Zaydism – defines their group in opposition to the Salafism of the central government (Glenn, 2018). For those who advocate establishing a Southern Yemen Republic, the experience of British colonialism in the lands around the port of Aden sustain their claim to having a different and distinct identity from that of the rest of the country (Aljazeera, 2020). Finally, and in opposition to these two secessionist groups, there are those who feel themselves to be Yemeni, who reject partition and are trying to reunite the country into a single state (Abdalá, 2020).

This same pattern is repeated in Ethiopia, where the foundation of the Prosperity Party (PP) – aimed at fostering a stronger sense of national identity throughout the ethnically-fractured country – has led to opposition by the leaders of the northern Tigray region (Gebremedhin, 2020; Gerth-Niculescu, 2020), for whom the maintenance of these ethnic differences is precisely what justifies the existence of the Ethiopian state in the first place. Likewise, 2020 has witnessed escalating unrest and confrontation between India and Pakistan over the region of Kashmir (Bukhari & Naqash, 2020). Tension over the ambiguous status of this

territory, which lies within India yet has a Muslim-majority population, has been heightened since the Indian government revoked the region's semi-autonomous status in August 2019 and lifted the ban on Indians (i.e. Hindus) settling and owning property in Kashmir (Aljazeera, 2019; BBC News, 2019). This seems to be part of a policy by the governing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to spread a more cohesive national identity over the whole of the country and eliminate the opposing claims of Pakistan to the region (BBC News, 2019).

But if the homogeneous nature of national imagined communities is contested in conflict areas, the same is also true in more peaceful circumstances. In the United Kingdom, for example, the referendums on Scottish independence in 2014 and Brexit in 2016 brought to the surface various divides in the ways that individuals consider their own national identity – whether as British, English, Scottish, Welsh, Irish, or European – which inevitably produces political consequences (Gardner, 2017; Richards & Heath, 2019). In the United States, meanwhile, the Black Lives Matter movement has denounced an interpretation of American identity that starkly hierarchizes white and non-white populations, and has tried to replace it with a new sense of what being a citizen of the country should mean (Murrey, 2020). Similar debates about the specific content of national identity, or the treatment of particular population groups which allegedly should be part of the nation but are not treated accordingly, have developed recently in places as diverse as Montenegro, Belgium, China, Germany, and Australia (Chau, 2020; Davies, 2020; Denney, 2020; Diab, 2020; Kajosevic, 2020; Leibold, 2019).

Strongly connected with this perceived instability around notions of unity are questions about the importance of past communities as forebears of the present nation – as the principle of continuity underscores – and around these communities' representatives and symbols. In Russia, the government has tried to foster a continuous sense of shared identity from imperial to post-Soviet times, embodied in the armed forces and especially in the experiences of the Second World War (Walker, 2020). Likewise, in Yemen, both the Houthis and the Southern Yemenis have grounded their claims to a separate state in their alleged distinct historical experiences as heirs of the Zaydi Imamate (1597–1849) and the postcolonial circumstances around the port of Aden in order to debunk the idea of a united Yemen (Aljazeera, 2020; Glenn, 2018). And in Australia, the authorities have recently tried to push an interpretation of the nation's history which 'acknowledges [the country's] Indigenous history' and thus emphasizes the alleged continuity between these groups and present-day Australia in an effort to support the creation of a more ethnically diverse version of the country's national identity (Davies, 2020).

Of course, these historical re-interpretations are bound to produce disagreements regarding the role played by particular figures and institutions in terms of national representation, or the extent to which they can be conceived as advancing the cause of national unity. A perfect example of this phenomenon would be the toppling of allegedly racist symbols and monuments from the streets of the United States and some European countries following the Black Lives Matter protests as being unfit to serve as national symbols (Grovier, 2020). However, despite the spectacular nature of these events, considerations about the role of national representation have been equally central to banning the Francisco Franco foundation in Spain, amending the Australian national anthem so as to embrace the country's Indigenous populations (Davies, 2020), or the death of football and Argentinian idol Diego Armando Maradona (Orton, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic, with its attendant sense of stress and vulnerability, has created a fertile ground for the mobilization and creation of national symbols, notably the national healthcare services, which have received widespread institutional and public respect (Skey & Jiménez-Martínez, 2020; Tamir, 2020).

Finally, the principle of national purity has been instrumentalized in recent months to justify political or even violent action. After all, the secessionist intentions of both the Houthis and Southern Yemenis have been ideologically sanctioned by those on the 'right' of these respective populations in order to oppose the 'foreign' and centralizing efforts of the national government (Glenn, 2018; Aljazeera, 2020). Similarly, the Tigrayan leaders in Ethiopia have justified their

claim to independence as a defence against a power that 'is intending to suppress [their] hard-won right to self-determination and self-rule' and which has even been defined as an Ethiopian 'empire' (Gebremedhin, 2020).

The assumption that nations should be left alone and protected from the influence of foreign powers also lies at the heart of the struggles between India and Pakistan over Kashmir. Likewise (perhaps surprisingly, given the implications) it is what frames the Chinese government's attempt to ensure the loyalty of Uyghur Muslims on the grounds that they 'adopted Islam not of their own volition […] but had it forced upon them' (Jun, 2019). This seems to provide an ideological justification for including Uyghurs in programmes to extend over them a homogeneous and more 'Chinese' national identity (Leibold, 2019).

Last but not least, the notion of national purity has given rise during the last decade to anti-immigrant movements in the United States and Europe which claim that the reception of too many non-nationals threatens the unique character of their respective countries. Manifestations of this trend include the movement to Make America Great Again, that saw Donald J. Trump elevated to the White House; the UK's Brexit vote, given that one of the main components of the Leave strategy was to take back control of the country's borders and migration policy; and the debate about 'MENAs' (*menores extranjeros no acompañados* – unaccompanied foreign minors) in Spain (Esparza, 2019).

CONCLUSION: IS NATIONAL IDENTITY IN CRISIS?

This brief overview of some of the major conflicts and debates around the world has prompted some interesting reflections regarding the relationship between national identity and crisis.

First and foremost, it has evidenced that national perspectives – from which national identities ultimately stem – are not currently facing any meaningful challenge to their most central assumptions, which supports the conclusions of other scholars (Bieber, 2020; Billig, 1995; Malešević, 2020; Woods et al., 2020). There exist no significant alternatives to the ideas of community, sovereignty, international global spatiality or the nation's historical subjecthood, which continue to prevail in both social and political terms. With regard to those assumptions which are the object of contestation, such as national unity, representation, continuity, and purity, resistance has been shown to be framed in accordance with the assumptions of the national discourse. Thus, for instance, although a particular version of the nation's past might be under pressure, as is the case for a white interpretation of American nationalism, oppositional rhetoric has remained constrained by the possibilities of imagination permitted by the eight core assumptions of national discourse. For this reason, these challenges to particular national discourses should not be taken as challenges to the nationalist worldview as a whole.

And yet, the uncertainties and anxieties that prompted this discussion about a perceived crisis of nationalism cannot be dismissed as completely unfounded. It is undeniable that some long-lasting interpretations of national identity are indeed being decisively challenged, such as the European connection of the United Kingdom, the intra-British union of nationalities, the alleged equality of all American citizens, the Christian roots of European countries, or the multi-ethnic approach of the Chinese Communist Party towards ethnic minorities within the People's Republic of China.

It is not the objective of this paper to determine the causes behind these particular phenomena, which ultimately reflect the impact of migratory flows, new geopolitical equilibria, and ideological trends. However, it is necessary to understand that none of these conceptions and identifications are by any means totally hegemonic, and as such are always subject to contestation and resistance. Even if contexts of economic recession, demographic pressure, political instability, or general uncertainty may accentuate the perceived struggle between various interpretations within – or between – national imagined communities

(Malešević, 2020), these changes must nonetheless be understood as simply more acute phases within an on-going process of contention and transformation of national self-understandings. In summary, it is not national identification that is being disputed worldwide, but only some of its most enduring and successful manifestations, and it is this which fuels the perception of crisis.

In this regard, the consequences of the current COVID-19 pandemic for national imaginations around the world are still unclear. For one, calls for national unity and concord have been constant in recent months, from both official and private sources (Bresteché, 2020; The Armenian Weekly, 2020). Comparisons between the ways in which countries have managed the pandemic have also been continuous, and national character has been considered a fundamental factor for explaining dissimilar results (Tamir, 2020).

In which case, does the permanence of national paradigms – and the centrality of nation-states in responding to the coronavirus – imply the decline of the global and supranational (Morillas, 2020)? The tension between nationalism and globalism seems always to have been implicit in this process, whether in regard to the guidelines advanced by the World Health Organization and the ultimate decision-making power of national governments, or the transnational groups that work to develop vaccines that are later used as landmarks of triumphalist nationalist discourses (McTague, 2020). Of course, this contest is unsolvable as long as nations exist in accordance with the principle of international global spatiality, which frames the imagination of nations within a limited system of similar and formally equal communities (Tang, 1996: 2).

What can be said, however, is that nationalism continues to exert a powerful hold over people's communal self-understandings, which makes it difficult to imagine any trend towards globalization that is not driven by national ideas (Bieber, 2020; Woods et al., 2020). This means, in short, that any potential move towards globalism seems much more likely to stem from national paradigms, through collaboration and interaction between nation-states and national institutions, rather than from their complete disintegration in favour of a new kind of 'nation-blind' worldwide identity.

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