

Asynchronicity of National Movements

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Introduction

It is not difficult to prove the banal fact that European national movements did not proceed in a synchronous order. On the contrary, the opposite occurred. Moreover, the difference in timing concerns both the starting point of national agitation – i.e. their decisive Phase B – and the time the national agitation needed to become successful. While the Czech, Magyar, and Greek Phase B started at the end of the eighteenth century, the first steps in the Lithuanian, Catalan and Basque national agitation were taken eight or more decades later, and in the case of the Byelorussians or Macedonians, it was a century later.

Some national movements needed only a few decades to achieve the stage of mass movement, while in some other cases, Phase B required almost a full century in order to mobilize the masses. There is no correlation between the timing of the first steps of national agitation and the time it needs to be successful: see for example the relatively early start of the Welsh or Flemish cases, in which Phase B lasted about one hundred years, compared to the Estonian or Catalan movements, which started later and only needed several decades to become successful.

Usually, this phenomenon is considered to be so “natural” that almost nobody complains about it. Why is that the case? It depends on the perspective. If you believe that it was “nationalism” that created nations, you have no problem accepting the myth about a ghost of nationalism



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passing through Europe – sometimes slow, sometimes fast – awaking people (the quantity itself is irrelevant) to formulate the same or almost the same goals and to develop similar activities. In such a case, asynchrony does not pose a problem to this category of researchers such as Hans Kohn and many others before and after him. Nevertheless, this is not my case, and being convinced that the formation of nations was not only about “nationalism” and coincidence, but also about cultural and social transformations, I try to explain this asynchronicity via the process of nation formation and present a more or less convincing answer.

As an elementary explanation, the hypothesis of uneven economic development, which states that national movements started earlier in developed regions, could be tested. There are some indicators to substantiate this thesis: Bohemia belonged to one of the most developed regions in Central Europe, as did Greek case in the Balkans. But what about the Magyar and Serbian movements, which started at the same time? On the other side, among the latecomers – movements starting at the end of the nineteenth century – there is not only Lithuania (which was underdeveloped), but also Catalonia (which was highly developed). The degree of economic innovation, and above all social communication, sometimes played an important role during the already proceeding Phase B, but it does not constitute a general rule.

On the contrary, Czech national mobilization was situated in the agrarian parts of Bohemia and Moravia, and not in the industrialized area which were ethnically German. Analogically, the Flemish movement was situated in the non-industrialized northern part of Belgium, and the Welsh national movement in the northern agrarian part of Wales. Consequently, the hypothesis of economic development as an indicator of an early starting national mobilization is proven to be unsubstantiated, which subsequently

debunks the simplifying dichotomy between the 'West' as locale for early national movements and the 'East' as the zone of belated movements.

Another hypothesis prioritises the role of oppression. Was it the degree of persecution and of political control which decided a possibly belated mobilization? This factor however does not help us to resolve the difference as it only constitutes a small step towards a compelling explanation. Naturally, a repressive political system of a multi-ethnic empire, like Russia, made it difficult to develop any innovative cultural or political activity. This may partially explain the earlier success of national movements in the territory of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. It could be illustrated via the confrontation of two national movements which had a totally different timing, but ended up as one: the Ukrainian movement started considerably earlier in Austrian Galicia (Ruthens) than it did in Russia.

But how to explain the distinct asynchronicity of national movements inside one specific empire, as it was the case between the Finns and Lithuanians in Russia or between the Greeks and Bulgarians in the Balkans? Moreover, the most convincing argument against the hypothesis of oppression is the fact that national movements in liberal, constitutional states - i.e. without any oppression - did not belong to the cases that started early or were successful: the Flemish in liberal Belgium, Welsh in liberal England, and Bretons in liberal France.

This leads us to our point of departure for further reflections: let us accept it as an axiom that in the case of asynchronicity, there is no monocausal explanation possible. Another point of departure is the fact that we have to distinguish between three different instances of asynchronicity: firstly, there is the difference in the start of phase B (i.e. national agitation). Secondly, we have to consider the difference in duration between this starting point and the transition to phase C, and finally, there is the different timing of the emergence of the statehood (i.e. of a nation state). Further reflections follow these three cases of asynchronicity.

Different timing of the emergence of national agitation.

Considering the most appropriate methods, I above all intend to use a comparative approach, combined with some aspects of cultural transfer. This choice follows the specificity of these processes, which means that I understand them on one side as independent social and cultural processes, and on the other side I have to take into consideration that the formation of nations belonged to analogical, if not the same path of modernization. Consequently, this means that the latecomers could easily accept impulses and patterns from those processes which started earlier.

For this reason, we start our comparative reflections by choosing these **early-starting** movements (Magyar, Czech, Greek, Norwegian, Serbian) and asking which features they had in common at the time when they existed as ethnic communities - We could also include in this category the Irish case, under the condition that we would regard the Rebellion of United Irishmen in 1798 as the first step towards national agitation. These features were represented by independent variables - i.e. not adopted through transfers from other ethnic communities. By asking which cultural and historical circumstances could be observed in all these early-starting national movements it is possible to discern six independent characteristics which were absent - at least in this combination - in those national movements, and which started their national agitation later:

1. All of these ethnic communities could find their medieval "roots" in earlier existing states, which could be adopted as "national" ones. Some among them (Czech, Magyar, Norwegian) were represented by still surviving relicts in the institutions (Diet, borders, laws), and some only existed virtually as a product of collective memory (Greeks, Serbs).

2. Members of these ethnic communities could repeatedly obtain – at least since the mid-eighteenth century – a higher education, without assimilation into ruling state elites, i.e. without losing their ethnic identity.
3. In all cases, except the Czechs, these communities were marked by a full or almost full social structure, i.e. this structure also included members of the ruling classes and educated elites, sharing their group identity.
4. Some important structural changes, reforms, occurred in the territory of the empire shortly before the national agitation commenced: these changes put in question the legitimacy of the political authorities and social ties, and of the old system of values. Consequently, this provoked a search for new identities, as a result of a crisis of the old ones (reforms of Joseph II in Austria, Danish enlightened reforms and the dissolution of the Danish Empire during the Napoleonic wars, the internal crisis in the Ottoman Empire due to Selim III's reforms).
5. As a result of this crisis, we observe an increasing tension between the centre and the local (provincial) elites in the territory inhabited by the ethnic community.
6. An older, pre-modern tradition existed among at least some members of these ethnic communities in sharing an unambiguous identity with their group, defined by political status, history or religion.

To find and describe common features in the case of early starting movements seems to be rather straightforward. It is more complicated however to find a convincing set of concrete analogies which could be used at the opposite end of the chronological chain: in the case of all very **late-starting** movements, like the Lithuanians, Byelorussians, (East-

Ukrainians, Macedonians, Catalans, Basques, and Scots. In this case, the different conditions in Eastern and Western Europe seem to be evident and we have to accept the East – West division as a first hypothesis and define the factors of their belated starts separately and accordingly. In the East, the late-starting movements have in common: the social structure was limited only to peasants, there was a low level of education and social communication, strong political repression, and full absence of any tradition of statehood. In the West, we have ethnic communities with almost full social structure, rather high levels of education, and a surviving tradition of political autonomy (statehood). In this case, the key factor of starting the search for a new identity seems to be in the changing relationship between the centre and the provincial elites.

Does this mean that we observe two totally different processes? This, of course, is not the case. If we analyse these belated movements at a more abstract level, we find some surprisingly convincing common features in the situation of these ethnic communities, both in the East and the West:

1. Loyalty of provincial (regional) elites towards the centre: there was only weak or no opposition against the centre of their empire: the reason in the West was that the centre could offer many advantages to the provincial elites (British colonial expansion to the Scots, an immense Spanish market to the Catalans, and local fueros given to the Basques by the old regime). In the East, there was for a long time not a chance to establish provincial elites with distinct interests.
2. Members of “belated” ethnic communities did not possess one dominating, unambiguous, unique collective identity, which was the basic precondition to starting development towards a specific

national identity: the Catalan identity concurred with the prevalent Spanish one, as did the Scottish identification with the overall British identity. Moreover, Ukrainians in Russia were regarded and understood themselves as (Small-)Russians, and the same was true about the Byelorussians. The Lithuanian ethnic identity played a secondary role until the second half of the nineteenth century, as it was dominated by the Polish political identity. Finally, Macedonians were usually identified as a regional population, or as Bulgarians.

3. Consequently, the crisis of identities, which constituted a distinctive factor in the case of the early-starting movements played a limited role. The dissolution of old ties and dependencies, and the weakening of old established legitimacies and value systems only proceeded slowly in Russia and Spain. In this case, the political and/or economic backwardness could be regarded as a decisive factor indeed. In Russia, modernization achieved a corresponding intensity (together with some degree of political liberalization) during the revolution 1905. Similarly, in Spain, it only occurred after 1873, when the revolution – after several defeats – succeeded and opened the way towards civic society.

All these empirical observations confirm the pronouncement that it is not viable to explain the uneven development of national movements by only one factor. I have tried to put together some kind of a catalogue of factors which could explain or help us to understand the differences in timing of national agitation – not only in the case of those earliest starting and those most belated national movements, but also in the case of all those movements which started between the earliest and latest ones.

From the Irish and Flemish in the West, to the Finnish, Estonian or Bulgarian in the East of Europe. The result is a catalogue of factors which we have to take into account when trying to interpret the timing of national movements:

1. The crisis of the multi-ethnic empires, as a result of internal factors like social and political modernization, or under influence of external forces, which would sooner or later initiate a dissolution of the old ties and a delegitimization of old values, subsequently resulting in a crisis of identities.
2. The strength and unambiguity of the collective identity under the conditions of a non-dominant ethnic group: it is evident that all early-starting movements commenced under the condition of a strong and unambiguous identity of their respective ethnic community (in the terms of Anthony Smith), while among the belated ones we find strong relicts of the ethnic category
3. The role of collective memory (historical thought) among members and above all among elites of the ethnic community, demonstrated in the form and strength of surviving old (medieval) identities which could be adopted by the national movement.
4. The possibility to use a continuity of printed language of the given ethnic community, as a basis for modern national language and as an instrument of social communication.
5. The social structure of the ethnic community, and the presence or absence of educated elites, bourgeoisie or landlords.
6. The level of education and the possibility to obtain higher education and corresponding social advancement in the case of members of the ethnic community,
7. The political conditions and the degree of oppression in the multi-ethnic empires.

These factors took different forms and intensity in specific cases of national movements. The absence or weak presence of some of these could cause a belated start of national mobilization. In other words: by combining the impact of these factors, we can explain the early or belated start of specific national movements.

The distance between the beginning and success of national agitation.

How to explain the generally known difference in the speed of national mobilization, i.e. in the chronological length of Phase B? The mass movement (Phase C) often started already after three or four decades of national agitation, but this does not constitute a general rule, as a successful transition to a mass movement sometimes needed a much longer time. In the case of the early-starting movements, the differences in duration seems to be irrelevant. All of them achieved their phase C after three or four decades. In the case of later-starting movements however, the differences were more significant: a short time of about four to five decades in the case of the Irish, Finns and Estonians, a longer time in the case of the Croatians, a very long time in the case of the Flemish and Slovaks, and finally a short time again in the case of the Lithuanians and Catalans.

In this case, we have to concentrate our focus on the internal conditions in a specific territory and in a particular movement. The cultural transfer seems to be of marginal relevance in these cases. Our knowledge about factors which decided the timing of the start of national agitation offers only a partial explanation.

By comparing the cultural and social contexts of Phase B in individual national movements, we can define basic “integrating” factors and conclude that national agitation proceeded more successfully when

1. A strong progressive form of social communication existed which was more or less free of political control.
2. A national movement could instrumentalize the results of the learned phase A: during this period the nation was defined, the language codified, and national history at least partially discovered (constructed).
3. A more developed system of elementary school education was established which was accompanied by higher alphabetization.
4. The members of the ethnic community possessed a clear-cut and unambiguous collective identity of their own group,
5. It had already been possible to use print language.
6. The national program held a central position in the struggle for political participation during the process of political modernization,
7. Intense and plenty of nationally relevant conflicts of interest existed between the ruling elites and members of the ethnic community,
8. Some sufficient opportunities were present for social advancement of members of the ethnic communities,
9. The community was not too numerous and its territory was not too large.

Naturally, these elements were not ubiquitous, nor was their intensity the same in all national movements. We could also formulate their effects in

the opposite direction, posing the question which of the circumstances could in effect slow down the process of national agitation and weaken the nation-formation. Consequently, we could construct a sample of disintegrating factors and demonstrate their impact on concrete national movements:

1. Low levels of social communication and weak market relations abated national agitation in some parts of the Balkans, in Byelorussia and Eastern Ukraine, but also in Ireland.
2. The absence of a tradition of printed language constituted an important factor in the tempering of many national movements – the Baltic nations, Slovenes, Bulgarians, Albanians etc.,
3. Political oppression, so far as it was addressed against national movements, hindered national agitation, not only in tsarist Russia, but also in Hungary after the Compromise of 1867 and in Spain under the twentieth-century dictatorships.
4. Ambiguous collective identities of ethnic communities complicated the search for a dominating national identity not only before the national agitation started, but also during Phase B in the Flemish, Welsh, Catalan, and Slovak movements.
5. Low levels of elementary education and limited access to higher education complicated the spread of national identity in some parts of the Balkans and above all in the Slavic-speaking parts of Russia.
6. If social interests and tensions could be expressed in political programmes, the importance of the national “translation” (nationalization) of these conflicts decreased which subsequently hindered the success of national agitation. This was above all apparent in those (Western) countries where the constitutional system was introduced before the national agitation had started.

7. The administrative (political) division of the territory inhabited by the ethnic community complicated the national mobilization of Slovenes (which was divided into seven administrative units), Croats (especially in Dalmatia), Czechs (in Moravia and Silesia), Romanians (in Transylvania) and achieved fatal consequences in the cases of the Ukrainians and Serbs that are still relevant in our own time.

Emerging national states.

Above all, I intend to question the generally accepted assumption that the acquisition of statehood was the event which gave sense to the previous national movement and fulfilled its goals. Unsurprisingly, this conception finds support from those scholars who interpret the process of nation formation as a product of “nationalism”. If we define this nationalism with John Breuilly as seeking and exercising state power, only the stage of the nation state would be relevant to us, and, consequently, a national movement would be understood as a prelude to national statehood. Nevertheless, if we verify this model with empirical data, we find out that it needs important corrections.

Firstly, this model is based on the model of state nations which only the experience of national movements in the Ottoman Empire corresponds with. The majority of nineteenth-century European national movements did not focus their political demands towards statehood, but towards some kind of autonomy inside the given multi-ethnic empire – towards a “nation without state”.

Secondly, the asynchronicity of the emergence of nation states in Europe demonstrates that their timing only in some cases coincides with the timing of their Phase B and – above all – that these nation states were formed according to the interests of the European Great Powers. During the nineteenth century, small nation states were only acceptable on the Balkans (“balkanization”). The situation changed with the breakdown of the nineteenth-century Concert of Powers during and after World War One. The core of small European nation states was allowed to be born as a result of this great crisis in international relations. The second wave of nation states was established as a result of another crisis: after the fall of the Soviet Empire. Only two nation states emerged as a result of the authentic wishes of their nations and against the will of the Great Powers: Ireland and Norway.

Third, the Weberian ideal type of a “nation state” as a state inhabited by members of a nation who are fully aware of their national identity and can be defined as a fully formed nation, i.e. a society with a full social structure and highly developed national culture, does not correspond with the reality in all cases of these new-born nation states: we have examples in the Baltic and in the Balkans.

Consequently, the question of asynchronicity in the establishment of European nation states differs distinctively from the first two cases of asynchronicity. Studying it as a result of internal circumstances of the nation formation only makes sense to a limited degree. This point of view has to go hand in hand with an understanding and interpretation of the tension and the interrelationship between the needs of a newly-established modern state and the possibilities to fulfil these needs.

These possibilities were conditioned by the strength of the national identity among the masses, and consequently with a higher or lower degree of social and cultural integration at the given stage achieved by the national movement. Magyars, Czechs, Croats, Finns etc. achieved, as a result of their successful mass movement, this stage of fully-formed

nations already before the establishment of a nation state: “nations without state” existed already one hundred years ago. Nevertheless, in some other cases, like the Lithuanians, Macedonians, Albanians, Ukrainians etc., external factors resulted in their nation states being established during a time that their national movement was still developing, sometimes even before having achieved their Phase C, i.e. before the national identity was accepted by the masses and members of the ethnic community.

Concluding model

Maybe we could, based on all these partial observations, find out, or define the general integrating factors of nation-formation processes in Europe. Trying to explain their success and differences in timing, we encountered in the different variants three main circumstances which played an essential and unexchangeable role as factors of national integration. One of them as a cultural “heritage from the past” constituted an independent invariable (i.e. independent of subjects’ dreams and wishes), a second depended on modernization and social transformation, and only the third (i.e. cultural transfers) was based on conscious human activities. The process of nation formation only succeeded if all three factors were joined and interrelated, and the specific timing of this formation depended on the degree of their compatibility.

1. The heritage from the past: a population living as an ethnic community (or category), whose members – or at least their elites – are aware of a common past, of a common culture (including language or mutually understandable dialects), and possibly (not

necessarily) of a common state in the present or in the past. The stronger this awareness, the better chances for success. In many cases, this awareness of a common destiny was also expressed in semantics: the term “nation” was used by the ruling elites or by intellectuals, even though in different or even nebulous meanings. In the case of state nations, such a consciousness was self-evident.

2. As a result of a crisis of the old system, accompanied by the dissolution of old feudal ties and their legitimacy, an increasing number of educated people experienced a crisis of old identities and tried to replace them with a new identity, coinciding with the emerging (or already existing) society of equal citizens. This new community was not necessarily predestined to be called “nation”, but since this term already existed in most languages – although with different connotations – it was re-defined in the sense of civic society.
3. To introduce “nation” as a matter of pride and identification, a third change was necessary. It was the change in the traditional value system: during the last third of the eighteenth century, the new understanding of the term “nation” became an object of cultural transfer in Europe. This understanding declared nation as “Wert an sich”, as a collective unity whose members are proud of belonging to it and feel obliged to work in favour of its prosperity, culture and prestige. The identification with the nation was understood as a value and it was not decisive if the cultural transfer of this concept was more related to the Herderian philosophy of language, or to Romanticism or to the French revolutionary concept.

Naturally, this is a very short and therefore not very convincing conclusion and it opens – as does the rest of this article – the door to further discussion. Let us prove it by applying it to the concrete processes of nation formation.