Nationalist Politics and Social Identities: Everyday Political Talk in Serbia and Bulgaria

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Research Outline

This comparative project will use surveys to interrogate the relationship between narratives of high politics and political identities rooted in everyday life. However, while much comparative work brackets contingent cultural factors in search of laws, the use of ethnographic fieldwork in this case should help us to bring such factors into the foreground of our analysis.

The study will be based on six months of fieldwork in each of Plovdiv (pop. 380,000) and Nis (pop. 255,000), which are respectively the second and third largest cities of Bulgaria and Serbia, of roughly equal financial significance to their countries, each with overwhelming titular ethnic majorities. Within these cities however, identities not codified as ethnic are also available. Both cities grew rapidly during the socialist period, meaning that a high proportion of residents have roots in the countryside.

Press and Literature

Western press reports on South-East European politics routinely assume a political sphere that is dominated by competition, on one level between ethnic nationalisms (by definition antagonistic) and on another level between extreme and moderate nationalists within those nationalisms. In its most banal and commonplace form, this analytical lens is operationalized through the coding of political actors as ‘nationalist’ or ‘moderate’. For example, a July 2008 article in the Guardian newspaper described the incoming Serbian PM Mirko Cvetkovic as ‘the moderate former finance minister’\footnote{Tisdall, Simon, ‘Is Europe Ready for Serbia?’, Guardian newspaper, 15\textsuperscript{th} July 2008.} in an article that gave the reader no clue as to how Mr. Cvetkovic’s economic decisions might have been influenced by his reputed moderate nationalism.

Such an analytical lens may also be employed to more hyperbolic effect. Last year, another article in the same newspaper painted the incoming Bulgarian PM Boiko Borissov as ‘a populist wrestler-cum-politician with anti-Turk and anti-gypsy
tendencies before ominously – and spuriously - telling readers that his party faced opposition from a ‘pro-Turkey party’. The underlying assumption here – that nationalism is the prevalent factor behind the votes of the electorate - is evident in the articles of other publications such as the Economist and the New York Times. This mode of thinking finds its corollary in serious scholarship, with Robert Hayden asserting that the people of Bosnia are ‘modernists’ as a result of their tendency to vote for nationalist parties (2007).

Fortunately, some scholarship has taken the effort to locate questions of nationalism in the context of the everyday lives of people. Nevertheless, the context of such work within the sub-field of Nationalism Studies serves to preserve nationalism’s place in the foreground of the analysis. Following Hobsbawm’s call for a focus on ‘nationalism from below’ (1993), Brubaker, Feischmidt, Fox, and Grancea (2006) conducted an impressive long-term empirical study in Cluj, Transylvania. While the authors noted that nationalist rhetoric was locally very prominent, as a result of ethnographic and conversation analysis they were able to note that most residents did not pay much attention to it. However, while Brubaker occasionally notes that his informants sometimes rhetorically place themselves as members of an urban intelligentsia or rail against the laziness of fellow Romanians in Wallachia, he does not seriously consider whether these or other non-ethnic political identities may actually deserve equal billing in his study. It is with such blind spots in mind that T. H. Eriksen wrote: ‘a concern with the non-ethnic dimensions of polyethnic societies can be a healthy corrective and supplement to analyses of ethnicity’ (1993: 93). The implication for students of nationalist politics is that we should not content ourselves with bringing attention to the limited causal power of nationalism, but should consider what replaces it.

Research Questions
By taking the views of insiders seriously, we may overcome the tendency to view every vote for a politician given to nationalist rhetoric as a vote for nationalism alone.

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1. Doran, Peter, ‘Bulgarian Election Raises Red Flags’, Guardian Newspaper, 18th July 2009
2. The Movement for Rights and Freedoms has been committed to the preservation of a unitary Bulgarian state at least since the publication of its mission statement in 1991.
4. In the preface of the book, Brubaker informed the reader that he alone was responsible for the textual analyses in spite of the fact that the research was based on a team effort.
To what extent are political identities in Bulgaria and Serbia informed by nationalism and to what extent by other narratives?

How do ordinary Bulgarians and Serbs discern which kind of political narratives and programmes relate to them when the residual narrative of nationalism unites mainstream parties across the political spectrum?

Folk-Cosmopolitan Divide? A Proposition

It is probably unnecessary for me to go over accounts of the Wars of Yugoslav succession except to note that after the initial popularity of the ‘ancient ethnic hatreds’ thesis, several accounts appeared that denied the notion of ‘ethnic war’. One narrative in particular would seem to retain socio-political significance in the countries of our study today.

In 1999, Eric Gordy outlined his own ‘approach to everyday life in Serbia’. He argued that a difference ‘between an outlook broadly open to others and one that is closed – represents the greatest division among people in Serbia, with adherence to one of its poles expressed more commonly expressed than any ethnic hatred, “ancient” or newly-discovered’. By this account, the Milosevic Regime identified its core support as the former of these two social categories, whom the author described as generally older, less highly educated, with deeper roots in the countryside and identifying with a folk cultural style. Gordy’s ‘destruction of alternatives’ thesis was supported by his detailed description of the strategies the government employed to eliminate the political, information and even musical forms favoured by the more urban and educated sections of the population that opposed it.

This idea of society as divided between urban cosmopolitan and folk cultural styles is one that finds support in both contemporary sociological work on Serbia (particularly the surveys of Cveticanin et al 2007, 2010) and anthropological work on Bulgaria. For example, the cultural anthropologist Radost Ivanova has written extensively on the socially divisive folk musical form of chalga, noting that, for many of her colleagues ‘opinions came before analyses’ (2008). Indeed, evidence of such intra-ethnic antagonisms is very easy to spot as in the following slides depicting football fans from Plovdiv decrying their ‘village’ peers. This everyday antagonism has explicitly found
its way into political debates. For example, the present government minister, and television personality, Bozhidar Dimitrov, is routinely decried as a ‘chalga historian’ by hostile journalists, where the folk musical genre of *chalga* has a very general, derogatory meaning.

The challenge here is to connect the dots between everyday contention and political causation. In the spirit that Charles Tilly (1998) advocated then, we might offer, if not a hypothesis, then a wager or proposition to test the political salience of these socio-cultural divisions using surveys and interviews.

> That political preferences at both fieldsites will be better explained by variation along an axis of cultural styles\(^6\) than along an axis of nationalism/ethnic tolerance.

This emphasis on cultural consumption is consistent with Bourdieu’s idea of cultural practices as the key indicator of collective identity – in fact he argued that ‘class’ divisions were predicted by cultural tastes (Bourdieu 1984).

**Research Methods**

Surveys will be used to measure approval of politicians and political programmes against agreement with various statements indicating views on nationalism and other culturally available frames (see Gamson 1992, Fox 2004), as above. More detailed data can be collected through semi-structured interviews in order to compare how nationalist attitudes and ethnic tolerance and other identifiable narratives are linked to political preferences.

However, such formalised interview tools such as these serve to ‘prompt’ the subject to produce expected responses. As a result, extensive participant observation research is needed in which no attempt should be made to initiate or lead political talk. This ‘wait and see’ approach (Fox and Idriss 2008) is a corrective to over-deductive research that tends to ‘find what one is looking for’.

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\(^6\) This is consistent with some of the literature on Serbia to follow in my literature review. The proposed importance of cultural styles follows Pierre Bourdieu (1984) in conceiving of class solidarity as arising from cultural taste as the result of early socialisation rather than from economic indicators.
By definition, a comparative study design involves sacrificing some depth for breadth and generalizability. However, Laitin and Brubaker argue that a focus on ‘specific processes under differing conditions’ can help to ‘set limits to overgeneralized theory’ (1998). Furthermore, the cross-country design is not merely a compromise aimed at placating those for whom the value of research is measured by the ‘n’ of the study but is consistent with a branch of anthropological theory that denies the methodological recognition of national borders. For example, Ferguson and Gupta (1992) argue that ‘we need to account sociologically for the fact that the “distance” between the rich in London and the rich in Bombay is less than it is between different classes in the same city’. While the authors have global factors in mind, my project argues that we might equally use comparison to locate contingent factors at the regional level whose salience can cross national borders.

Implications/ Contribution

Empirical studies of nationalism in the region are usually focussed around atypical sites of multi-ethnic competition like Bosnia and Transylvania. In fact, most people in the region from Bucharest to Sofia (to Plovdiv and Nis) now live in cities where political power is monopolised by the representatives of a single ethnic category. This study may go some way to redressing the comparative neglect of such large population centres.

Certain authors (Hayden 2007) uncritically assume that votes for nationalist parties reflect ‘modernist’ nationalist electorates. This study will provide an ‘experience near’ empirical test to such theorising.

The analysis will go beyond ethnicity and nationalism to consider other narratives of the kind identified by Eriksen as ‘non-ethnic’. A putative folk-cosmopolitan divide is just one such possibility, while others may be identified during ethnographic research.

Finally, this is an attempt to explain political cleavages with reference to insider or ‘emic perspectives’ (Schatz 2009) that are more usually projected by imposing ‘ideal-typical’ categories from afar (ie. Kitschelt 1995).
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