Management of Difference: Borders and Multiethnic Regions in Contemporary Central Europe

For over a century Central Europe’s nation-states have been created in accordance with ethnolinguistic nationalism, and in turn produced and deepened their respective ethnolinguistic homogeneities. In the first place, this as yet planned homogeneity constituted the widely accepted basis for founding a nation-state. Afterward, the nation-state in question strove to actualize such an ideal of “purity” with the means of population and language engineering, as well as by changing extant political frontiers. Early on this sought-for purity was predominantly defined and measured in the terms of religions and specific scripts associated with these religions’ “holy books.” At the turn of the twentieth century, the tide changed decisively in favor of languages written in the scripts of religions specific to this or that nation-state. Hence, to a varying degree, the ethnolinguistic nationalisms of today’s national polities in Central Europe are often underpinned by a religion, or its cultural or historical remembrance. The aforementioned processes of the construction of ethnolinguistic national statehood commenced in the early nineteenth century in the Balkans, accelerated after both world wars and the end of communism, and continue to this day, despite the rise of the non-national and non-ethnolinguistic polity-in-making of the European Union (EU), which was founded in 1993.

During the 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century, the hope was that the multiethnic, inclusive, liberal, and citizenship-based EU would dampen the political and social significance of ethnolinguistic nationalism in Central Europe’s national polities which successfully joined the EU in the successive waves of eastward enlargement in 1995, 2004, 2007, and 2013. However, beginning in the mid-2010s, many of the region’s liberal, democratic, and economically successful postcommunist states—led by Hungary and Poland—began embracing authoritarian (“illiberal”) versions of ethnolinguistic nationalism. In many ways, this populist wave brought about through the democratic means of the ballot box, is steeped in xenophobia, anti-Westernism, anti-Semitism, and anti-Tsiganism, which is eerily reminiscent of respective interwar authoritarian ideologies and regimes in Central Europe’s polities. Thanks to the late survival of Latin as an official language in Central Europe until the mid-nineteenth century, this region’s inhabitants are fond of citing Latin tags, like Cicero’s famous dictum *Historia magistra vitae est* (History is a teacher of life). Unfortunately, current events indicate that history is no teacher of anything, that the majority of Central Europeans prefer illusions of a glorious patriotic past that never was to sensible politics and good life here and now, or to stable and secure political and economic situations for their children in a near future.

Therefore, despite the year of 2009 being this atlas’s national cut-off date, I decided to add two maps on the “management of difference” during the 2010s (Maps 37 and 38). The goal is, first, with Map 37, to historicize the use of cultural differences for creation, legitimation, and maintenance of ethnolinguistic nation-states. On this basis, Map 38 shows how cyberspace may affect these processes. The question remains open whether cyberspace may curb Central Europe’s nationalisms, or if the region’s ethnolinguistic nation-states may decide to territorialize cyberspace, reproducing and enforcing separate ethnolinguistic homogeneities on the internet. Totalitarian China already selected the latter option, increasingly popular around the world, thanks to the country’s present-day economic, if not social, success. During the last decade the “Chinese model” has been time and again evoked by leaders of numerous countries around the world, including Central Europe. In 2017, the European Union began robustly criticizing the Polish government for endangering the rule of law in Poland. Brussels threatened that if Warsaw did not observe the terms of the Poland-EU accession treaty, the flow of structural funds from the EU’s budget to this country might be reduced or stopped entirely. In reply, in 2017, the defiant Polish Prime Minister announced that Poland would receive as much money from China, so it would not matter if Brussels followed up on this threat.

Map 37 shows when a given international border was created, which state frontiers overlap with ethnolinguistic boundaries between dialect continua, and which with territorial cleavages between religions. The stricter the overlap between a nation-state’s frontiers with this kind of religious and ethnolinguistic boundary typically results in a higher degree of ethnolinguistic homogeneity in the national polity in question, and the stricter ethno-cultural separation of it from neighboring polities. Conversely, when political frontiers intersect with ethnolinguistic and religious boundaries, a greater potential is observed for the preservation of multiethnicity and the cultivation of mutual comprehension with inhabitants in neighboring states. In some cases the state frontier overlaps with the ethnolinguistic boundary, though in a given state the presence of a population speaking a language from another dialect continuum is marked, as in the case of Hungarian-speakers in southern Slovakia, or Russian- and other Slavic-speakers in eastern Longos Tóth
This discrepancy is caused by the employment of the official (national) language of a nation-state for apportioning it to a given dialect continuum. In addition the phenomenon of atheism and irreligiosity is depicted in the countries where it is at its highest. This phenomenon appears to be strongly correlated with areas that have been highly industrialized and economically developed since the nineteenth century (for instance, today’s Czech Republic or Germany) or where the strict version of the communist system lasted for the longest (for example, in present-day Russia or Albania). The overlapping of both tendencies yields the highest degrees of atheism and irreligiosity, as in the present-day Czech Republic or Estonia.

The rise of ethnolinguistic nation-states in densely populated Europe brought about numerous wars and border changes, alongside frequent acts of ethnic cleansing and genocide (see Maps 11, 26–30). These solved nothing, because national politics have time and again continued to claim, on a national (ethnolinguistic and/or ethnoreligious) basis, further “unredeemed territories” in neighboring states. In order to insulate themselves against an expected attack, increasingly more nation-states began to construct border fortifications, walls, and barriers. In Central Europe, Switzerland commenced this process in the 1890s. France’s Maginot Line of border fortifications on this country’s frontier with Germany was illustrative of this phenomenon in interwar Western and Central Europe. In Eastern Europe and Northern Asia, it was the communist polity of the Soviet Union that led the way. In the mid-1930s the entire Soviet frontier was lined with a highly guarded militarized border fence, which was additionally strengthened with fortifications in Europe. It was and still is the world’s longest border fence. After World War Two, the Soviet-style system of border fences and fortifications was extended to the Soviet bloc’s outer boundary with the West, resulting in the extremely militarized and guarded Iron Curtain (partly electrified and with automatic armed response), as symbolized by the Berlin Wall, erected in 1961. The international image of the Soviet bloc was not to be marred by any “defectors” (refugees) from the “communist paradise.” What is too often forgotten is that the postwar Soviet Union was doubly separated from the West in this manner. In addition to the aforementioned militarized Iron Curtain, the Soviet Union continued to maintain the militarized and fortified border fence between itself and the rest of the Soviet bloc. In this respect the isolationism maverick of communist Albania was in a class of its own. The country was separated from the outer world with border fences, fortifications and hundreds of thousands of bunkers from all its neighboring states, including the Adriatic coast.

The end of communism was symbolized by the removal of the Iron Curtain border barrier between Austria and Hungary beginning in April 1990. In a widely televised symbolical gesture, the Austrian and Hungarian foreign ministers together cut through the border fence barbed wire on June 27, 1989. Finally, with the sudden collapse of the communist regime in East Germany, on November 9, 1989, the grassroots demolition of the Berlin Wall commenced. The long decades of physical separation between East and West were over. The political transition from totalitarianism to democracy and from a centrally planned to free market economy was marked by the demolition of the Iron Curtain border barriers, including Albania’s own Iron Curtain. This political change of heart in Europe directly rubbed off onto Switzerland’s decision to decommission the country’s frontier fortifications and barriers during the 1990s. Optimists lauded a new unprecedented era of peace, cooperation, and stability in Europe. Few took note of the fact that the border barrier between the former Soviet Union and the erstwhile Soviet bloc countries remained in place, complete with its double and triple fences, and the always freshly ploughed strip of no man’s land. The electrification of the fences was switched off as a slight concession to these momentous political changes, alongside the removal of watch towers with marksmen armed with machine guns.

This former Soviet Union-Soviet bloc border barrier largely remains in place between Poland on the one hand, and Russia, Lithuania, Belarus, and Ukraine on the other; between Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania on the one hand, and Ukraine and Moldova on the other. After the eastward enlargement of the European Union in 2004 and 2007, the Polish-Lithuanian fragment was dismantled in 2007 and the Romanian-Moldovan one in 2010. Meanwhile, also Bulgaria’s former share of the Iron Curtain-style border fences on the frontier with Greece, Yugoslavia (today’s Serbia and Macedonia), and Turkey were dismantled in 1998, 2003, and 2005, respectively. The 1998–1999 Serbian war on Kosovo’s Albanians, leading to the subsequent emergence of independent Kosovo in 2008, necessitated a border barrier between Kosovo and Serbia, erected already in 1999. Also, in the 1990s, Russia built a new border barrier on its frontier with post-Soviet Lithuania. As a result, Russia’s exclave of the Kaliningrad Region is encircled by the border fence that separates it from the European Union territory, in the midst of which this exclave is now placed. In 2018, Russia deployed ballistic rockets capable of carrying nuclear warheads in the region. After the end of the Cold War and communism, it was the first time that nuclear weapons reappeared on the territory of Central Europe.

The construction of the border barriers along the Russian-Lithuanian and Kosovo-Serbian frontiers seemed to be exceptions to the general postcommunist and post-Cold War trend of doing away with border fences and fortifications. However, after a quarter of a century of free Europe without frontier barriers, all of that changed overnight in 2014 when Russia annexed Ukraine’s Crimea and launched an ongoing attack on eastern Ukraine. As a result, the administrative border of Crimea with the rest of Ukraine was fortified, and the war front in eastern Ukraine morphed into a fortified frontier fence. The following year, in 2015, Ukraine replied with yet another border fence on the Ukrainian-Russian frontier, to be fully completed by the mid-2020s (with the exception of the Russian-occupied eastern Ukraine). Also in 2015, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—fearful that they might be the next target of Russia’s further attacks and annexations—began planning and constructing similar border fences on their respective frontiers with Russia and Belarus, both polities constituting a Union State of Russia and Belarus since 1999. Wary that its membership in NATO and the EU may not shield Estonia from a blitzkrieg-style
Russian take-over, in preparation for such a scenario, the country began considering e-embassies (data embassies) for ensuring the continued deritorialized functioning of the Estonian nation-state, if need be. In 2018 the first Estonian embassy of this type opened in Luxembourg.

Also in 2015 the so-called "migration crisis" was observed in the European Union. Refugees crossed the Mediterranean and the Aegean from Libya and Syria, which had been destabilized by civil wars and Euro-American interventions, as well as from the Arabic-speaking Middle East and Maghreb where authoritarian regimes were reestablished in the wake of the largely failed Arab Spring (2010–2012), from sub-Saharan Africa suffering overpopulation and at the receiving end of the rapid global climate change, and further afield from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, destabilized by decades of warfare, including Soviet and American military interventions. In 2015, 1.8 million refugees arrived in the European Union and a further 1.6 million followed in 2016. Although the migrants amount to about 0.5 percent of the EU’s population, their arrival was used by populist parties of authoritarian leanings to gain visible presence in the legislatures across the EU, and even to win power in many Central European nation-states. These parties trumped up the rhetoric of xenophobia and racism to rally support for their divisive, authoritarian, and exclusionist programs, reminiscent of the authoritarian 1930s. It is as if everyone forgot that after 1945, Western Europe, devastated by World War Two, was able to cope with tens of millions of refugees and even base its 1950s "economic miracle" (Wirtschaftswunder) on this foundation. Unlike in the latter half of the 1940s, in the latter half of the 2010s, Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Hungary, and Slovenia replied with a new wave of border barriers to prevent the arrival of refugees by the "Balkan route." Likewise, Italy stopped NGOs from operating rescue ships in the Mediterranean, which had saved dinghies and boats with thousands of refugees in distress.

The member states of increasingly authoritarian and xenophobic leanings have managed to turn the EU into a “Fortress Europe.” It appears that the quarter of a century without border barriers did not produce a new norm of a better and more inclusive Europe, but was just a mere blip, especially in the history of Central Europe’s nation-states that consistently and actively opt for national egoism, authoritarianism, and xenophobia, rather than democracy, cooperation, and open society. The 2017 installation of the populist and pro-Russian president in the United States, and the 2019 Brexit have added another dimension of insecurity and destabilization to the already volatile political situation. Europe has arrived at the most difficult political juncture in its postwar history. The turn of the 2020s will show in which direction or directions the European Union and Central Europe may follow.

It is interesting to observe that in many ways Central European states erecting border barriers after 2015 emulate the example of Israel. In 1994 Israel erected a fortified fence on its border with the Gaza Strip, and between 2000 and 2014, a Berlin Wall-style separation barrier with the West Bank. At that time, the construction of these border barriers appalled the world’s public opinion. Nowadays, it is a new and increasingly more accepted norm in Europe and in the United States. Like many nation-states in Central Europe, Israel was founded through war and on the basis of an act of ethnic cleansing. Arab-speaking Muslims (today’s Palestinians) fled or were expelled and were barred from returning. They were replaced with Jewish Holocaust survivors and expellees, mainly from Central and Eastern Europe, where anti-Semitic campaigns occurred regularly across the postwar Soviet Union and in the Soviet bloc countries. Unlike Central Europe’s ethnolinguistic nation-states, Israel became a stable democratic polity, which withstood the temptation of ethnolinguistic (ethnoreligious) nationalism. Remaining Arab-speaking Muslims and Christians were granted Israeli citizenship, and their language is official in Israel, alongside Hebrew, while English and Russian are largely in de facto official use. To this day, Israel is the Middle East’s sole democracy, despite its numerous faults. In comparison to Central Europe, apart from Scandinavia, Israel has preserved the continuous tradition of democracy for the longest, namely, from its foundation in 1948 to at least 2021, for over 70 years. Germany’s continuous tradition of democracy is one year shorter, because West Germany was founded in 1949. Furthermore, this tradition was considerably weakened when West Germany absorbed the post-totalitarian East Germany in 1990 and a reunified Germany was founded. The current continuous tradition of democracy in Poland commenced in 1989 and seems to have come to an end in 2015, meaning it lasted for 26 years. The same indicator for Hungary is even shorter, at a mere two decades, between 1990 and 2010. In both cases, the starting points of the democratic period are the first free postcommunist parliamentary elections, while the end points indicate the assumption of power by these two countries’ current anti-democratic (“illiberal”) governments. However, Israel’s long period of democracy appears to wane after 2018, when the Knesset adopted an exclusivist law on Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people. Thus, the country decisively morphed into a typical Central European ethnolinguistic nation-state. The current Israeli administration assumed power in 2009 and has increasingly undermined the country’s democratic system in emulation of the populist United States (2017–2021) and Hungary.