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Infectious Nationalism: The Virus Does Not Care About Borders



Krisztina Lajosi — Anna Menyhért · [Follow](#)

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The rapid spread of Covid-19 has triggered viral nationalistic responses across the globe. Underlying narratives surface from official communications. Some of these narratives are utilized consciously by the political elites to promote their agendas; in other cases they provide odd insights into approaches, motivations, and self-images that reflect and reinforce *everyday nationalism* in Western societies.

Nationalism and the sense of nationhood are not only constructed from *above* by the elites, but also from *below* by the general public. Though *state nationalism* is more obvious and easily recognizable, *everyday nationalism* is less noticeable: the everyday knowledge ordinary people have of their own nation and other nations, and the mundane practices they perform in everyday life that reproduce the cultural and social category of the nation. In normal times everyday nationalism reproduces the nation daily from below in speech and in practice. When normal life is disrupted, these everyday assumptions and practices can suddenly become salient and play a guiding role during a crisis. This latent nationalism can become active and galvanize intense political emotions. Even in liberal democracies, the communications about Covid-19 in media and press briefings of government officials are rife with nationalist undertones. The understanding of the pandemic has become a battlefield of images of national character just as much as a field of competition for openly nationalist governments.

Terms such as “the Chinese virus” or “Wuhan virus” have been circulating in the Western media and have received special emphasis in the public speeches of President Trump. It is not unusual to refer to epidemics by their putative points of

origin, like the flu pandemic of 1918–20 which became known as the *Spanish* flu, or *Ebola*, named after a river in the Congo. This time around, however, the World Health Organization (WHO) decided to call this recent pandemic Covid-19, not only to avoid taxonomic confusion — as “coronavirus” could refer to any number of infectious respiratory diseases — but also to avoid the stigmatizing effect that names with ethnic references inevitably trigger in public discourse. Despite the concerted efforts of the WHO to find a neutral term for the new virus, politicians across the globe have been exploiting the pandemics to boost their own national interests and ideological positions.

The weaponization of Covid-19 for nationalist purposes presents both a (geo)political threat and a danger to global public health. In the absence of international cooperation, China has taken the opportunity to expand its soft power by promoting a positive narrative about its successful containment of the virus, and by providing help to governments in Eastern Europe that are already critical of the EU and the West. Hungary, for example, has exploited this situation to justify its foreign policy of “opening to the East,” expanding economic and political relations with China, South Korea, and other Asian countries. The official Hungarian state news showed huge containers full of medical supplies ordered by the Hungarian government from China inscribed in both Chinese and Hungarian “Hajrá Magyarok!” (“Bring it on, Hungary!”) — a rallying cry used in sports, but also deployed by the soccer-loving Prime Minister Viktor Orbán to call for national unity at mass demonstrations. Orbán personally welcomed the Chinese delegation and posted the event on his Facebook page.

This battle of narratives hinders an efficient fight against the virus. President Trump continues to plead for the necessity of building a wall on the US border with Mexico — which is ironic given that the US is currently at the epicenter of the virus and Mexicans are now protesting the entry of American tourists and Mexican guest workers returning home.

Talking and thinking about the virus influences public behavior during the pandemic, and therefore the narratives put forward play a crucial role. The populist far-right president of Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro, called the pandemic a “media fantasy” and organized a protest for his political supporters to rouse the masses against Brazil’s democratic institutions, ignoring the medical advice concerning social distancing. Days later, he was ordered by his doctor to go into self-quarantine, which he also ignored.

The left-populist Mexican president Andrés Manuel López Obrador was also criticized after he tweeted a video of himself surrounded by his supporters, hugging and kissing them just as the authorities announced that schools would be closed. Though coming from opposite ends of the political spectrum, what both leaders have in common is their contempt for expert advice. Both have claimed that their citizens are immune to the virus and should therefore continue to lead normal lives.

The Spanish far-right Vox party secretary, Javier Ortega, and the party leader, Santiago Abascal, both tested positive after speaking at an anti-immigration mass rally. They blamed the government for not cancelling all mass events in the country. Here they have a point: the Spanish Health Ministry saw no reason to cancel public events, and the Women's March for gender equality on 8 March that attracted large crowds in Madrid also contributed to the current and rapid escalation of the virus infection in Spain.

Other nationalist European leaders, like the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, have followed President Trump in calling the virus “Chinese” despite the emphatic recommendation of the WHO to avoid such labels. In a speech addressed to the Parliament on 16 April Orbán kept referring to the virus as the “foreign” and “Chinese coronavirus,” not once using its official name. He also emphasized that the virus arrived in Hungary from abroad, from “Iran, Italy, and Israel.” He took this occasion to promote his anti-globalist agenda by declaring that countries need to take action individually, as there is “no vaccine and no global solution” to stop the virus. He compared the current situation to the financial and refugee crises when, according to him, countries were left alone and Hungary had to implement its own independent “national plan.” This unequivocal emphasis on “national action” in his speeches is consistent with his nationalist and anti-immigration agenda. When the first two Covid-19 cases were identified in Hungary, the government-controlled media emphasized that the two isolated cases were Iranian students, and the pandemic was immediately used to legitimate the strong anti-immigration policy that Hungary has been promoting since the refugee influx of 2015.

According to several online news platforms, fifteen Japanese tourists were collected by ambulance from their hotel in the center of Budapest because “they were coughing.” On 11 March the Hungarians declared a state of emergency. An article on the online portal Index.hu about specific measures and regulations contained three illustrations: the first showed a customs official and a health worker wearing masks at the border; the second showed a paramedic in protective clothing; and the third

showed a person disinfecting a rubbish bin in a deserted parking lot on one of the main roads in Hungary. Such images reinforce the message that foreigners are to blame for bringing the virus into Hungary.

In Poland the response to the pandemic often invokes the country's "glorious past" and the population's historical resilience. When he imposed a ban on foreign travelers to Poland, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki blamed the outside world for the virus. Like the Hungarian Prime Minister, Morawiecki implied that the clean and pure nation had been infected from outside. Next to official state nationalism, these underlying narratives act as catalyzers for everyday nationalism and can powerfully shape political emotions.

In Romania the discourse regarding Covid-19 did not immediately escalate into xenophobia. Instead, the hundreds of thousands of Romanians living in the diaspora, mainly in Italy and Spain, were stigmatized for bringing the virus back to their homeland. "If the diaspora returns, we should spray them with disinfectant" — was a typical attitude on social media. According to modelling done by the University of Bucharest, the Covid-19 virus indeed entered the country from abroad, but its first carriers were Romanian citizens living in Romania who had travelled abroad. More recently, harsh language has been used against the returning Romanians by certain media, calling them "thieves" and "beggars" who came home when there was nothing left to plunder elsewhere. Videos have been posted of Roma people arriving at the airport in Iași and being isolated on a bus surrounded by policemen to be taken to mandatory quarantine. Reports have been published about "lying" Romanian Roma living in Italy who fled to escape the coronavirus and denied at the border that they came from Italy in order to avoid quarantine. These images reinforce and perpetuate negative stereotypes of the Roma and promote the idea of the virus as an alien invader.

As in Romania, the returning diaspora was also vilified in the Serbian media. President Aleksandar Vucic criticized the EU and requested medical help from China, calling President Xi Jinping his "friend and brother." One interesting consequence of the crisis has been that governments who branded the virus "Chinese" are now appealing to China for personal protective equipment and medical supplies.

Racist attacks against Asians are on the rise in the UK. This xenophobia is encouraged by the nationalist discourse of experts like the British epidemiologist

Dr. Christian Jessen, who said on television that the virus was a bad flu that the Italians were taking as an “excuse for a siesta.”

In the Netherlands, stereotypes and national auto-images have also pervaded public discourse about the virus, reinforcing a sense of “us” versus “them” — albeit not in a xenophobic sense, as in Hungary, but more as an oddly timed competitive approach, which was presumably supposed to reinforce self-confidence and trust in the government. The head of the Dutch public health service remarked in an interview on national television that the Netherlands is better prepared than Italy because the Dutch are more hygienic than the Italians. The Dutch confidently announced on 12 March that their relaxed approach to the pandemic was better than that of other countries — only to close the schools three days later. In a public address to the nation on 9 March, Prime Minister Mark Rutte asked his compatriots to stop shaking hands, but he declined to implement stricter “symbolic measures” on the grounds that the Dutch are a “sensible down-to-earth people”; and he celebrated Dutch expertise in the area of virology as “the best in the world.” Prof. Ira Helsloot, from the Crisis Lab of Radboud University, called the Dutch approach the “only correct one,” and dismissed tougher measures, such as the quarantining of provinces, as too extreme and damaging for the economy. He described Italy’s approach as “stupid.” In his view, the coronavirus will soon be gone, but the economy will be deeply affected given Italy’s intense measures to contain the outbreak.

A section of the Saturday edition of the Dutch national newspaper *De Volkskrant* dated 14-03-2020 was dedicated to “national character” (*volksaard*) in the time of the coronavirus. The article compared various national responses to the crisis and characterized them either as typical or as surprising departures from what one would expect in terms of stereotypes of national character. Political differences notwithstanding, such a simplifying approach echoes time-worn images of national character but has little to do with the complexity of real-life challenges. The idea of national character has a long shelf-life. It is a pervasive cultural ideology that has been used not only for entertainment in novels, films, and ethnic jokes, but also to stir up hatred against various ethnicities. Explaining the reactions of countries in terms of national stereotypes might seem an innocent pastime, but it also serves to reinforce the power of national stereotypes. Such an approach accentuates differences between the *foreigners* and *us*, reserving the positive attributes for *us*. The containment of Covid-19 requires not competition but a cooperation among nations.

The pandemic challenges some of the core concepts of Dutch national identity and self-image. Serenity, moderation, and normality are valued highly in Dutch culture, and are all threatened by the crisis. One of the most popular Dutch sayings — “Doe maar gewoon, dan doe je al gek genoeg” (Just act normally, that’s crazy enough) — sounds odd during such a crisis, and yet this was the guiding principle in the first reactions to the pandemic by Dutch politicians and experts. The Netherlands, like the UK and Sweden, was reluctant to introduce measures of social distancing and was very late with closing schools and universities, despite the recommendations of the WHO and the best practices set by East Asian countries. Encouragement to just act normally (the Dutch version of “Keep calm and carry on!”) is counterproductive in the extraordinary circumstances of a pandemic because it endangers public health; and yet recommending any special or unusual behavior sounds almost like a threat to national identity.

This pandemic has generated a profusion of nationalist discourses which posit *us* against *them* and seek to define the virus in terms of *other* nations; and this is true regardless of whether nationhood is defined chiefly in *ethnic* terms (as in Hungary) or in *civic* terms (as in the Netherlands).

In a television address to the nation, German Prime Minister Angela Merkel emphasized the importance of preserving open democracy. French President Emmanuel Macron has positioned himself as the spokesperson for a European approach, warning Europe against a “nationalist withdrawal” and arguing for a common European response to protect open borders within the European economy. After the EU finance ministers failed to agree on a Covid crisis rescue deal, the north-south divide became painfully obvious both in discourse and in practice, especially in the row between the Netherlands and Italy. The widespread use of national stereotypes by state actors enhances everyday nationalism.

The virus hit Europe at a time when nationalism was already on the rise. Deeply engrained national stereotypes and images of national character lie dormant in times of peace and stability, but in times of crisis they can be deployed in an antagonistic ways towards “the other,” and such latent nationalism can become hostile at any moment under certain circumstances. An imagological analysis of the various European narratives reveals that nationalism is also spreading like a virus, and in this sense Covid-19 has infected an already sick patient.

We have selected a number of countries across the globe and the political spectrum to illustrate that nationalist narratives and responses to the pandemic are not invoked exclusively by illiberal or nationalist governments, but also by governments that take national pride in their scientific objectivity and liberal traditions. Creating national unity should not turn into nationalist exceptionalism, nor should “social distancing” be reflected in the closing of borders and national isolation. The virus does not care about ethnicity or national borders.

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