

Dear Friends, Fellow nationalists,

What is a nation?

The nation is a product of the enlightened principles of the sovereignty of the people and the state. The highest political power remains with the people – or the nation – who through elections transfer this power to the state that represents it. These two notions, nation and state, were always in a reciprocal relationship. Thanks to the nation, the state received a democratic legitimation, and thanks to the state it was possible to operationalize the nation. In Europe, the process of creating a sovereign nation state evolved along two different lines. The first one being a state without a nation, the second one being a nation without a state.

Let us consider the first case, a state without a nation, of which France is a prime example. Until the 17th century, France was divided in a multitude of duchies, counties, shires and so on. The French nobility paid tribute to the king of France, but considered themselves autonomous. The French King spent most of his time balancing local interests and tackling rebellions. Until cardinal Richelieu got fed up, organized a royal army and broke down the French nobility. He crushed their feudal armies and burned down their castles. The homeless nobility was transferred to Paris, and later stationed in the palace of Versailles, which was built for this purpose. Richelieu established a bureaucracy over the entire French territory and centralized all power in the hands of the now absolute monarch.

From then onwards, France was a state. But it was not a nation. The French regarded themselves as Bretons, as Picardians, as Basques, as Flemings. In the Ancien Régime, this presented no problem. The nation did not legitimize the state, divine prerogative legitimized the absolute monarch, who was the state. L'État, c'est moi, as Louis the 14th put it. But after the French revolution, when state power had to be based on popular sovereignty, the French had to define what or who was the nation.

That's why the question that Ernest Renan asked himself in his famous speech was: 'What is a nation?'. The French needed to define a nation, to identify something all Frenchmen had in common. At the time of the French revolution, only one in three Frenchmen spoke French. France was neither a cultural nor a linguistic unity. But France had a state, a constitution and the principles of the French Revolution that underpinned it. That was something all Frenchmen shared. And here France found grounds to create a national identity. One belongs to the nation, if one adheres to the constitutional principles. Culture, language and traditions are all irrelevant to the nation. Constitutional nationalism was born.

On the other hand, you have the case of a nation without a state. The classical example here is Germany. Since the 17th century, the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation had disintegrated into a few hundred different kingdoms, some hardly the size of a village. Napoleon had no difficulty in crushing their resistance and within a matter of years, Berlin was under French control. This confronted the Germans with the overwhelming potential of state power. A state that could raise Napoleons Grande Armée, that could impose the code Napoleon, that could abolish the Ancien Régime and replace it with new administrative institutions.

The Germans had no problem in determining the German nation: it was everyone who spoke German. But what was the German state then? There were German-speaking people as far as Russia, and some even considered Dutch and Flemish as German dialects. So if you created a German state, who was subjected to it? In short, German nationalists had to define who was German in order to create a state, and therefore had to define German culture. The French emphasized constitutional principles to create a nation, the Germans emphasized culture to create a state.

So what is a nation? Is it a political ideal or a cultural entity? Cultural and constitutional nationalism are frequently juxtaposed, with the German cultural approach as the bad guy and the French constitutional one as the good guy. The German approach is an exclusive and ethnic nationalism that ultimately leads to the gas-chambers of Auschwitz. The French approach on the other hand, is an inclusive and accessible nationalism, open to anyone – as long as he or she accepts the constitutional principles of the nation.

I find this to be nonsense. There is no clear cut distinction between cultural and constitutional nationalism. Even French constitutional nationalism, the denial of the importance of culture, needed a cultural base. Eugene Webers book 'From peasants into Frenchmen' gives an astonishing account of how the French revolutionaries enforced their ideology of 'one state, one nation, one language' on the nations that made up France, killing hundreds of thousands, maybe even millions, innocent civilians. They imposed the French language on the minorities, banishing regional languages. French constitutional nationalism didn't dispose of culture, it replaced cultural diversity with a cultural monopoly.

Every nationalism is always a mixture of constitutional principles and cultural imaginary. The nation is a community that throughout history has regenerated itself constantly in a process of re-interpretation en renegotiation of cultural values and traditions. Hugh Trevor-Roper may persist that the Scots invented their Highland heritage, but I fundamentally disagree. The Scottish didn't invent the kilts and tartans, they re-interpreted old traditions and gave them a new meaning that symbolized the entire Scottish nation, the High- and the Lowlands. 'Toe proef mai sool is skot ai mong biegin wih wots stil diemd skots' as Hugh Macdiarmid so brilliantly put it , is a perfect illustration of this cultural process– and I excuse myself for my awful Scottish.

The moment this cultural negotiating process stops, the community dies. This is especially important for a community such as Scotland, that has been defined by migration, inwards as well as outwards. A person of Scottish descent in Australia can still consider himself a Scot because of this cultural definition of Scottishness. And through the same process, a person of Pakistani descent can find a new and warm home in the Scottish identity and heritage. The mental map of our communities knows no boundaries.

But a strong nation is more than a cultural community. It is also a political entity, or it aspires to be one in some degree. And as a political community, a nation is inherently finite. It determines the boundaries in which democracy can be implemented. And we need those boundaries to organize solidarity, to enforce law and order, to determine who is subjected to those laws, and whose not. And therefore we need political principles. Nationalism in the 21st century remains a

positive and necessary force if based on the principles of democracy, the rule of law, solidarity and civil rights.

To enjoy this positive force, Flanders is hampered. Just as Scotland, Flanders is a stateless nation. However, the Scottish and Flemish cause stem from a different background. Scotland fell victim to English peripheral colonization. In Flanders, the situation was slightly different. The French constitutional nationalism meant that France was not only a territorial entity – and certainly not a cultural one – but an idea. The constitution of France, and the universal liberties it contained, was not to be confined to the territory of France. It engulfed the whole of Europe. As a result, the French armies annexed the Southern Netherlands – of which Flanders was a part – and imposed the French doctrine of ‘one state, one nation, one language’ on it.

After the French defeat at Waterloo, the futile reunion of the Netherlands and the subsequent Belgian revolution, this doctrine lay the foundation for the Belgian Kingdom. It was a centralized francophone nation, ruled by a francophone elite that dominated the majority of poor, illiterate and non-French speaking Flemings through censitary suffrage. This electoral system excluded most Flemings from the democratic process and sentenced them to a life in the social, economic and cultural margins of the state.

But the struggle for universal suffrage would become a critical juncture for this new nation-state, the point where the paths of the Flemings and the French speaking Belgians would start to part. Universal suffrage introduced the Flemish masse into the democracy and sparked the struggle for equal rights, for the abolishment of linguistic barriers and for social justice. The French speaking elite reluctantly accepted the Flemish demands for reform and tried to temper the effects in every way. Which caused Flemish public opinion to radicalize.

And so a pattern emerged that remains vibrant until this day. The French speaking minority fears becoming democratically out weighted by the Flemish majority. So they try to discourage every attempt to reform. Belgium has become a thoroughly complex country, where the democratic principle of majority rule has been replaced by a system of forced consensus. This frustrates the Flemish majority, and leads to more radicalization. The recent agreement on devolution in Belgium is a perfect example. It isn't really a reform, nothing will change fundamentally. It's an agreement to settle for the little the Francophone parties are willing to allow. Sooner or later, and I expect sooner, the limits of this agreement will be reached and Flemish public opinion will again demand reform. And the French speaking minority will again attempt to constitutionally smother these demands.

Belgium is no longer a democracy. Instead of creating one single Belgian democratic space, a political nation, the French speaking elite created a parallel democracy within the Belgian state, in an attempt to counter the Flemish majority. And in a reaction the Flemings formed a subnation that evolved into a counternation. Because of this process, Belgium nowadays is completely split into two parts, into two democracies. Each with its own media, institutions, political parties and social consensus. We have little to nothing in common. Belgium has become, as EU-commissioner Karel De Gucht once put it, a permanent diplomatic conference between two nations. A reality

that is reinforced by the fact that the Flemish and French speaking Belgians have profoundly deviant political views on how to cope with future challenges.

The future of Flanders lies in the construction of a nation-state, in which the Flemish can organize a proper democracy, without restrictions or undemocratic bolts. A constitutional entity in which we can organize a strong solidarity, inwards as well as outwards. A nation based on the principles of good governance, equality and justice. A warm homeland for all who accept the fundamental civil rights and respect our culture. Just like Scotland. And just like so many other European nations.

Because, my fellow nationalists, the European Union has profoundly changed the relation between nation and state. From the 17th century onwards, it was the state that provided the bureaucratic structure of the nation, it defended the nation through standing armies and boundaries, it secured access to bigger markets and gave financial security through a stronger currency. It were exactly these motives that persuaded the Scottish to accept the Act of Union in 1707. The same motives that led nations like the Basques or the Bretons to eventually accept the dominance of the French state. Or led the Flemish to settle in their role as subordinate cultural community in Belgium.

But the state no longer has a monopoly on the sovereignty of the people. In Flanders, our currency is European, not Belgian. The European Union guarantees access to bigger markets than ever before thanks to the free exchange of goods and services. More and more, the traditional role of the state is being taken over by the European Union. Maybe one day Europe will have its own foreign policy, and by consequence its own army. State power that once seemed unavoidable for smaller nations, now fades as numerous possibilities for nations to become independent or autonomous in the European Union open up.

I do not believe that the state as such will disappear, not in the near future anyway. It would be naïve to believe so. But I firmly believe our nations and Europe are the future. The European Union will alter the nature of the state. As the Union becomes ever closer, the old states will become ever more obsolete. The slogan of the SNP – together we can make Scotland better – applies to more than just these parts. And therefore I would like to conclude by adding another slogan to it:

Friends, together we can make Europe better.