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Lorna  
HAHN

Washington, D.C., USA

NATIONAL AND  
REGIONAL IDENTITIES:  
THE NEEDED BALANCE



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It is common today to speak of “the global village”, and with good reason. Instant communications and rapid transportation quickly inform us of, or bring us to, everything that is happening anywhere and everywhere. Linked by the Internet, CNN and jets, people the world over share the latest information and technology. Clad in Mexican-made jeans, Macedonian-made shirts and Indonesian-made athletic shoes, munching Kentucky Fried Chicken as they groove to rock music on their Malaysian-made radios carried in Chinese-made handbags, people the world over also share fashions, food and entertainment.

But does the fact that we share knowledge or products mean that we are to meld together into one homogenous mass of humanity? Should we lose those qualities that mark someone as a Croat, a Frenchman, and a Hungarian? As we contemplate regional integration in the economic and political spheres, and as we strive to end old nationalistic antagonisms, does that also mean that we should shed national cultural qualities and identities? I think and I hope not.

Globalisation of information or goods should not mean the homogenisation of people. It should not lead to attempts to destroy or dilute the particular gifts or constellations of positive characteristics that make each human being and each nation special. To the contrary, if a regional grouping is to be truly beneficial to its member states and peoples; if it is to grow and flourish; it will be because each member nation is drawing upon its special national achievements, and contributing them to enrich the large grouping. Furthermore, larger political arrangements will not be able to function with any efficiency unless the member nations are governed by political arrangements that suit their particular circumstances. When discussing closer ties among nations, therefore, we should seek forms of cooperation that build upon basic values

and goals that are shared by all, but which take full account of the particular values and customs, the past and recent histories, of all participating nations.

As we consider the role of Croatia and neighbouring countries within a larger framework, we should bear in mind experiences of the European Union. Thanks to the vision of statesmen like Jean Monet, countries that were once mortal enemies not only work together today for common economic benefits, shedding trade barriers and now sharing a common currency: they also depend upon one another for their security. The fact that these nations are more consciously and more closely interdependent, however, does not mean that they are any the less nations, or that their national characters no longer exist.

The geography of a nation, for one basic example, does not change very much, and neither do many of the by-products of geography. Thus the soil, the sunshine and other factors, which make France produce superb red wines, and southern Germany, produce great white wines, remain. Let us hope they always do, and that there are no attempts to produce European wines which would lack the special qualities that make French reds and German whites so desired.

Geography is produced by nature, something we human beings can still do little to change. But let us now look at language, something which may be slightly influenced by nature, but which is essentially something we human beings have created ourselves. Each nation's language evolved over many millennia, and reflects the history, the struggles, the values, the aptitudes, the aspirations of the people who evolved it. Let us take, for one simple example, the way in which several western peoples, who share many cultural similarities, express "you are correct". We English speakers say "you are right", suggesting moral correctness - a major cultural value of ours. Germans say "Sie haben recht", implying legal correctness. And the French, who greatly cherish reason, say "Vous avez raison" - you have reason.

National languages, and the literatures they have produced, are thus national treasures, reflecting the very souls of their people, and the different nuances in the ways in which different people deal with the basic human condition. If these languages were to disappear, or be somehow blended into one pan-European language, we would lose valuable insights into the human condition - into other people whose somewhat different ways of dealing with the world could give us valuable lessons as to how we should act in our own environments.

One must also wonder whether Shakespeare, Moliere or Tolstoy, Descartes, Locke or Kierkegaard, could have produced their masterworks if their creativity did not spring from a particular culture. And one must remember that great works often lose something in even the best translation. This is why, for instance, Sigmund Freud learned Spanish so that he could read Don Quixote in the original, and why those seeking to truly appreciate Islam learn Arabic in order to read the original Koran.

Protecting one's national language against the invasion of foreign words and grammatical structures - particularly American English terms and slang - has been a concern of many European countries, particularly France. I think there is good cause to be concerned, but I do not think one should respond by trying to ban foreign terms. Instead, each country should strengthen the teaching and appreciation of its own language and literature, and then try to share it, intact, with others.

We may also recall that certain languages have predominated in certain fields, and been accepted worldwide as predominant in those fields, with no loss of national identities of honour in the process. Rather, there has been an addition of clarity in communication. Italian, for example, has for centuries been the universal language of classical music. Children learning "allegro" and "andante" with their piano lessons become no less well educated in their native tongues and cultures. Instead, they gain an introduction to, and appreciation of, Italian language and culture and the ways they can enrich their own lives. Similarly, French has long been the official language of diplomacy, and many a diplomat has been grateful for this elegant set of tools. Perhaps American English can be the language of international business and computers, or simply used in ways that do not appear threatening to the proper usage of other languages.

While cherishing their languages and literature, nations should also preserve other aspects of their culture, such as music and dance. Music is a universal language, but most of the greatest composers have reflected the cultures which nurtured them. Thus Verdi is primarily and recognizably an Italian composer, Dvorak a Czech and Liszt a Hungarian, all employing traditional folk songs or idioms as well as modern instruments. The late American composer Leonard Bernstein once observed that much contemporary music sounds alike, whether it is produced in America, France or Japan. Yes, atonal and serial music, composed by mathematical-like formulae, has no national characteristics. And usually, it also has no soul. Like math-

ematics, it speaks in an international tongue, but one that tells little or nothing about the speaker, and often conveys little to the heart of the listener. We should have this music; there is certainly a place for it. But it should not displace music that springs from the soul of a composer of the culture which shaped him or her.

The character and experiences of a people are fairly clearly reflected in its literature, music and arts. They are also reflected – or should be reflected – in a country's political system, if the majority of citizens are to accept it and participate in it and make it work.

Today, almost every political leader or government claims to be democratic. The concept that democracy is desirable has been fairly well globalised, and as an American and as a human being I am very proud and happy about this. But even if a leader or party is very sincere about wanting to build democracy where it has not existed in recent years, the form the democracy takes should depend upon the particular situation.

There is no one-size-fits-all form of democracy that will suit every people. Rather, the form should depend upon the history and recent experiences, the values, the resources, the needs and the hopes of the people concerned if genuinely workable democracy and stability are to take root. Developing such a responsive and responsible system of government is the major task of all the countries which have lived until recently under communist tyranny, and which have the added challenge of incorporating national minorities. The challenge is particularly great for the countries of ex-Yugoslavia, which are recuperating from the physical and emotional devastation of war.

Well meaning foreign observers, exhorting countries in this region to be multi-party, multi-ethnic democracies as they know them, often overlook or misunderstand some special factors here. And they sometimes forget that American and British and French democracies did not spring full grown from the brows of constitutional lawyers. Democracy is not a product, it is a process, and one which must actively involve the ordinary citizens, in their particular circumstances.

Thus observers should remember that what they sometimes criticize as fervent nationalism is also, particularly in this region, often mixed with a long-repressed, popular desire for freedom from oppression by people of another nationality. Leaders and parties which represent nationalism and freedom are thus apt to be particularly popular; and the fact that the party which led the fight for freedom dominates does not, therefore, necessarily mean

that the country is not building democracy. To see whether it is, look around at the people: do they feel free to criticize their leaders? Are they creating a healthy civil society? If I look at Croatia, for example, I see people openly voicing their opinions on all subjects, and forming all sorts of political, human rights and other organizations. This means democracy is growing from the ground up, as it should. And so long as new institutions include ethnic, religious and other minorities; so long as everyone shares the rights and duties of citizenship, and has equal protection under the law; so long as everyone works together to build a new democratic Croatia; you will have every reason for national pride.

As Croatia and other countries of this region become further integrated into western economic and political organizations, and as their people exchange ideas and learn lessons from older democracies about how their system function, democratic institutions here will expand. And they should be strengthened as cooperation with western liberal economies brings further investment and entrenches rule of law. These developments, in turn, should facilitate the integration of returning refugees and other minorities, and render past sources of conflict outdated as people - particularly young people - contemplate the possibilities of a better future. Given the resources - particularly the human resources - of this region, the future can be bright indeed.