

The New Romantic Nationalism

Jim Kelly

Federalist Society European Judicial Network

Vienna, Austria

September 8, 2017

Thank you for sharing news of law and policy developments in Central and Eastern Europe, especially those relating to freedom of expression, which, in the United States, has been the subject of recent intense debate.

As we all know, populist and nationalist movements in the United States and Europe significantly challenge national and regional governing institutions and practices. These movements and challenges will continue, as technological advances will eliminate millions of jobs, produce efficiencies that result in greater income inequalities, and facilitate the virtual organization of frustrated or disaffected citizens.

If, at least for the next few decades, nationalism is here to stay, then, perhaps, it will be helpful to consider the positive aspects of European *romantic nationalism*, which many of your countries experienced.

Romanticism was the artistic, literary, musical, and intellectual movement that originated in Europe toward the end of the 18th century and, in most areas, was at its peak from between 1800 to 1850. It was partly a reaction to the Industrial Revolution, the aristocratic social and political norms of the Age of Enlightenment, and the scientific rationalization of nature—all components of modernity.

Romanticism emphasized:

- imagination and emotion rather than rationalism and scientism;
- nature and the supernatural;
- fundamental freedoms and democratic values;
- sensuousness and pictorial qualities;
- revolutionary zeal and urgency for social change; and
- subjective, intuitive, and imaginative approaches.

Romanticism had a significant and complex effect on politics, and, while for much of the Romantic period, it was associated with liberalism and radicalism, it had a significant long-term effect on the growth of nationalism.

If present-day nationalism is a similar reaction to the forces of modernity, then we can learn from the Central and Eastern European poets, authors, and political theorists who inspired the Romantic Nationalism that challenged a pan-European Neoclassicism.

Of course, Adam Mickiewicz, Poland's greatest poet, dramatist, and essayist, played a seminal role in the development of Romantic Nationalism. In 1824, due to his political activities as a member of the Philomath Society at the University of Vilnius, the Russian government exiled Mickiewicz, whereupon he traveled to Crimea. His Crimean Sonnets, published in 1826, tell of his personal journey and self-discovery through exploring a foreign culture and longing for home.

In Sonnet 10, titled Baidary, Mickiewicz uses a violent horse ride through southern Crimea and body surfing in the Black Sea to describe his rejection of reason and embrace of romanticism:

The earth sleeps, I can not. I leap into the sea.

A black and swelling wave roars, arches toward the shore.

I bend my brow, I stretch my arms out eagerly.

The waves fall on my head, around me chaos' roar.

I wonder if my *reason*, [over]whelmed by whirlwinds' glee,

Will sink into oblivion soon, to rise no more.

Romanticism calls for all intensity

To rush into the heart that wants to live-- *to live!* –

To offer all a moment possibly may give

The rising of desire-- a finite mind would flee . . .

Though expressing excitement about the creative liberation offered by romanticism, in Sonnet 10, Mickiewicz cautioned that “the danger may arise that chaos and oblivious and reckless running, racing willfully, no matter where” will tempt a contemplative soul. There is a danger that an impulsive romanticism rooted solely in popular sovereignty—the absolute will of the majority-- could result in an authoritarian state that does not recognize the equal dignity and rights of minorities.

A simple Romanian fable, “The Big Dog and the Mongrel,” written in 1838 by Grigore Alexandrescu, points out how, even those who profess a humble attachment to equality for all, must guard against excluding those they consider to be lesser beings. In the fable, Samson, a big dog, explains to his old friend, the bull, how Samson resents high-minded animals of lucky noble origin and welcomes the social equality of all creatures. Upon hearing this conversation, a nearby stray pup complements the big dog Samson, exclaiming, “Your thinking is great and I am of the same opinion, my brothers.”

“We, your brothers?” Samson replied, full of anger.

We, your brothers, you mongrel?

I will give you a good thrashing

You’ll remember it for the rest of your life!

Do you know who we are, you shameless mutt?”

“I was trying to say . . .,” the little dog cries,

“What do I care what you want to say or understood?” Samson barks

“This is what I meant: I hate vanity and pride, and I hate the lions

I’m all for equality between animals, but not for mutts like you.”

It was this lesson, evidenced by the violent excesses of the French Revolution, which the great Hungarian political theorist, Joseph Eotvos, considered in his seminal 1851 treatise, *The Influence of the Ruling Ideas of the Nineteenth Century on the State*.

After critiquing French revolutionary nationalism, Eotvos articulated five essential elements of a healthy nationalism:

- decentralized government;
- positive institutional guarantees for the protection of individual rights;
- the right of association;
- an independent supreme court to resolve constitutional disputes; and
- separation of church and state.

For Eotvos, faith, freedom, and justice are foundational pillars of a healthy nationalism. Similarly, the Slovenian poet, France Preseren, in his 1848 poem, “A Toast to Freedom,” highlighted these three pillars of Romanticism:

To whom with acclamation
And song shall we our first toast give?
God save our land and nation
And all Slovenians wherever they live,
Who own the same
Blood and name,
And who one glorious Mother claim.

Let thunder out of heaven
Strike down and smite our wanton foe!
Now, as it once had thriven,
May our dear realm in freedom grow.
Let fall the last
Chains of the past
Which bind us still and hold us fast!
Let peace, glad conciliation,
Come back to us throughout the land!

Preseren’s poem is now the National Anthem of Slovenia.

In addition to faith, freedom, and justice, nature is a pillar of Romantic Nationalism. This year, during my visits with some of you, I witnessed first hand, or enjoyed listening to you describe, the beauty of Georgia, Slovenia, Hungary, and Poland. Love for the natural beauty of your respective homelands appears to be in the DNA of the people and generates Romantic contemplative and creative impulses.

Here, I am reminded of the great Bulgarian and Macedonian poet Konstantin Miladinov, who, while studying in Moscow in the late 1850s, explained in his poem titled “Longing for the South:”

I cannot stay here, no;
I cannot look upon these frosts.
Give me wings and I will wear them;
I will fly to our own shores,
Come once more to our own places,
Come to Ohrid and to Struga,
There the sunrise warms the soul,
The sun sets bright in mountain woods;
Yonder gifts in great profusion
Richly spread by nature’s power.
See the clear lake stretching white—
Or bluely darkened by the wind;
Look you at the plains or mountains;
Beauty everywhere divine.
To pipe there to my heart’s content!
Ah! Let the sun set, let me die.

In 1862, Konstantin and his brother, Dimitar, a renowned patriot, died of typhus in an Istanbul prison, paying the ultimate sacrifice for spreading Romantic Nationalist ideas.

During the past several years, I have witnessed several of you suffer for the sacrifices you have made in service to liberty and country. Your respect for fundamental rights and the rule of law protect the civic space in which a new Romantic Nationalism may be realized.

Regardless of whether society notices or rewards your sacrifices, you can take quiet satisfaction in knowing that your work promotes the creative ideas and activities of others.

In this regard, the sentiments of self-sacrifice written in the early 1850s by the great Ukrainian poet Taras Shevchenko, who, after enduring serfdom, was imprisoned by the Russian government, are pertinent:

It makes no difference to me,
If I shall live or not in Ukraine
Or whether any one shall think
Of me [a]mid foreign snow and rain,
It makes no difference to me.

In slavery, I grew [a]mid strangers,
Unwept by any kin of mine;
In slavery, I now will die
And vanish without any sign.

I shall not leave the slightest trace
Upon our glorious Ukraine,
Our land, but not as ours known,
No father will remind his son
Or say to him, "Repeat one prayer,
One prayer for him; for our Ukraine
They tortured him in their foul lair."

It makes no difference to me,
If that son says a prayer or not.
It makes a *great* difference to me
That evil folk and wicked men
Attack our Ukraine, once so free,
And rob and plunder it at will.
That makes *great* difference to me.

Obviously, by entering into public service, you are romantics in your own right—believing that, by promoting freedom and the rule of law, you can facilitate creative expressions and associations that lawfully challenge injustices. Uncertain of the outcome, but hopeful, you have chosen to be active participants in building a better world. In this way, you are following the advice given by the Georgian poet Nikoloz Baratashvili in his poem, “Meditations by the River Mtkvari:”

Why this life of maddening strife, if all its visions fair
Are bubbles light, illusions bright, that burst and fade forever?
Our life is but a passing dream in a fleeting hectic world.
A never-filling boundless chaos, wherein our hopes are hurled [Nevertheless]

If mortals of this world we are and bear the form of man,
Our duty is to serve our land and walk the ways of man.
Unworthy is the one who's but a mass of worthless clay,
Who dares to shun all mortal cares, yet in this world does stay!

So, as we close today's discussion, let us soldier on by moving to our closing dinner and toasting the romantics!