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National Identity Crises Threaten World Order

By Maria Snegovaya

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Entropy is on the rise in the geopolitical world. Major countries and regions are now experiencing a "global crisis of national identity" according to Charles Hill, a former adviser to U.S. secretaries of state George Shultz and Henry Kissinger.

"I think that the Russians are searching around for who they are in the post-Communist, post-Cold War, in the new 21st-century era," Hill said in a recent interview with The Moscow Times. "And what I see in the massive media blitz being put out from Moscow is an attempt by the Russian government to try to tell the Russian people who they are."

"You can see the Chinese trying to do something similar with one major media domestic propaganda campaign after another. And in the United States, President Barack Obama is trying to convince the American people that they really have an identity that is starkly different from what the Americans thought their identity was for the last 75 years or more. Europe is probably the worst of all. It's like an adolescent phase when you are trying to find out who you are when you are 15 years old, and we are seeing this play out all around

the world," he said.

What is national identity? It is the collective understanding of a group of people who feel they are a single nation with common values and a myth of common descent. An identity crisis occurs when members of that community become divided over what constitutes their core values.

In 1993, political scientist Samuel Huntington became one of the first to write about identity crises. In his article "The Clash of Civilizations?" Huntington argues that with the collapse of major world ideologies, conflicts in the emerging world will stem primarily not from ideology or economics.

"Nation-states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations ... " he writes. "The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future." The Ukraine conflict, unfolding at what Huntington would describe as the border between Western and Orthodox civilizations, has already confirmed that theory.

In his 2004 book "Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity," Huntington wrote that the main problem in the United States is associated with a new type of immigration from South America. Unlike diverse waves of immigration in the past, since 1965 about half of all immigrants to the U.S. came from South America, and one-fourth of those came from Mexico alone.

Due to the openness of the modern world, the new immigrants do a worse job of assimilating in the United States and have difficulty learning key elements of U.S. culture. As a result, the U.S. is changing from its traditional role as a "melting pot" into a "salad" in which different cultures no longer merge into a single people, but remain as separate elements.

In his book "Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community," Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam shows that the most recent generation of Americans has become much less active in civic affairs. They are less involved in the affairs of local communities, clubs and organizations, and increasingly less interested in politics. Contrary to Huntington, Putnam blames everything not on immigration, but on the worsening economic situation and growing inequality in the U.S.

Economic factors might explain the identity crisis in Europe. Economically unsuccessful southern European countries are experiencing great difficulty integrating into the larger European Union. The primary obstacle is that, historically, Europe was never a unified community. With the exception of the horrendous memory of the Holocaust, these countries have yet to find a common "myth" concerning their past or a set of values that they all share.

Europe also lacks certain elements that typically characterize political life at the national level — popular political figures, media and even humor. For example, there are jokes about the French, British and Montenegrins, but none about "Europeans."

In contrast to the EU and the U.S., communist countries interpreted the collapse of the Soviet Union as a sign of the fallacy of their previous political path and saw the need to redefine their identity. As Suisheng Zhao argued in the paper "China's pragmatic nationalism: Is it

manageable?" (The Washington Quarterly, 2005), Chinese leaders felt increasingly alone and vulnerable in the world when other communist regimes collapsed after the end of the Cold War.

China has struggled with a sort of inferiority complex with regard to the West that finds expression in the constant attempt to "digest" Western ideas such as Marxism and capitalism in their own, unique way in order to develop an authentic version of nationalism. That struggle is most vividly illustrated by the dispute between Chinese "universalists" — supporters of Western ways and the gradual democratization of China — and supporters of "Chinese exceptionalism" who want the country to pursue a special path and to preserve its authoritarian system.

The Chinese Communist Party faces challenges to its legitimacy in an increasingly open society. It is a double challenge consisting of external forces from the West and the liberal-nationalist movement at home. The country's continued economic growth is keeping that trend on the sidelines for now, but the issue threatens to break out into open.

Russia is having similar problems with national identity. The situation is aggravated by the fact that the "communist project" was born here. For Russia, the disintegration of the Soviet Union was especially painful. It represented yet another, far larger political defeat that amounted to a national trauma.

In his book "Building States and Markets After Communism: The Perils of Polarized Democracy," Timothy Frye of Columbia University shows that, following the Soviet collapse, political polarization was significantly higher among "founding" communist states than in those where communism had been imposed by external conquest.

They were polarized because, unlike "conquered states," they could not unite around common national ideas, the struggle against their communist past and so on.

The main challenge before the modern world is not the mercurial nature of national identities, but the fact that national identity is often formed when a country rallies together against an external enemy. For most of the 20th century, the Soviet Union played the role of such an enemy for Europe, which explains why the EU suffered an identity crisis following the Soviet collapse and the disappearance of its primary external threat.

However, during a crisis of national identity, leaders attempting to retain power often create imaginary enemies. Russian leaders have been actively doing exactly that lately, using the image of the West as their "bogeyman."

It has led to record-high negative attitudes toward the U.S. and the EU. Such policies cannot continue indefinitely: that negative energy must eventually find expression in action.

Russian aggression against Ukraine has already led to unprecedented turbulence in the world and the destruction of international law. We can only imagine what horrors await the world if China's leaders embark on a similar course.

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