

The Nordic and the Baltic States in Europe Today

By Hans Henningsen

Over the past 3 years major changes have taken place in Europe - particularly in Eastern Europe, but to a certain extent in the western parts of Europe, too. A wave of national revival is sweeping Europe. The term »people« is being used again, as was the case in Grundtvig's time. And various European peoples, who used to be suppressed or even forgotten, are striving for freedom and independence.

But the national and ethnic revival is assuming widely different shapes. What we are witnessing in the southern parts of the former Soviet Union and in Yugoslavia are ethnic conflicts. Ethnic groups are demanding to be independent and ethnically pure. In the Baltic Countries, however, the situation is different. Here the battle was not about ethnic purity but national independence. In all three countries there was and still is a fundamental wish to safeguard the rights of the minorities. Estonians emphasize the fact that between the two World Wars minorities were treated liberally. In the Baltic countries people are certainly keen on establishing societies built on mutual respect between themselves and their Russian neighbours.

In all three Baltic countries the population is mixed. 80% of the Lithuanians belong there ethnically. About 10 % are emigrants from Russia, White Russia or the Ukraine. Some other 10 % are Polish. About half of the population in Latvia are Russians, and more than two thirds of the citizens of the capital Riga are Russians. In Estonia the Russians make up 40 % of the total population.

Few of the Russians speak a Baltic language, and the Balts see them as rootless people, who should be clearly distinguished from the »genuine Russians« who are acutely conscious of their own culture. The »genuine Russians« always constituted a minority in the Baltic countries, even before 1940. Since 1940 the number of Russian emigrants has been steadily increasing.

The many Russian emigrants and soldiers have caused considerable difficulties. However, there have been relatively few

serious incidents. The Russians and Balts have refrained from fighting any ethnic battles. This makes good sense, as in fact many Russians living in the Baltic area have voted for complete independence for the Baltic countries.

Now, let us turn to Western Europe. Here it has long been customary to accentuate the term »people« at the expense of »nation« and »nation state«. It is claimed that the nation state has outlived itself. The New Europe should be a »Europe of Peoples«. The term »nation state« strikes an altogether negative chord while »people« has positive associations.

This is surprising in view of the fact that nation states - that is the national democracies - have been the stabilizing elements whereas most political crimes have been committed in the name of the people - in the thirties and even today.

The term »people« is a dangerous term. The scepticism of this term in post-war Germany is well-founded. In Denmark many people do not realize the demonic powers of this word, simply because it has been redefined and »demythologized«, thanks to Grundtvig.

When dealing with the »New Europe« it is important that one realizes that the ethnic, cultural and linguistic maps of Europe do not coincide and never will coincide with the political map. The peoples of Europe are intermixed and have all assimilated changing numbers of immigrants. It would be totally wrong to claim that each people has its own territory; this does not even apply to the Danish people. Even in this country there are immigrants who share with other Danes the right to be Danish and be part of Danish democracy.

No matter how small the entities may be, the regions of Europe will inevitably hold minorities - if not a Basque minority in France and Spain, then a French and Spanish minority in a prospective Basque state. This is how complex things are. A similar complexity is found for instance in Armenia or Aserbajdsjan - and in Northern Ireland, for that matter. Unless undemocratic coercive measures are resorted to, one will have to accept the fact that in those areas there will always be minorities, irrespective of their political status.

In Denmark people have been discussing »Danish identity« and how to preserve Danish identity and Danish culture in a European union. Research has been carried out in the universities to define these terms. There has been a renewed interest in the national history and literature. The political aspects and implications, however, seemed to be totally overlooked. Precisely that connection between culture and society, culture and politics that was taken for granted in the preceding century when our forefathers taught history in the first Folk High Schools is now ignored.

Well, the idea of preserving different national cultures and national languages within the framework of a union is not new at all. Basically the Soviets upheld it and it was precisely this idea the Balts revolted against. When Mr. Gorbachov and others were speaking about democracy, they didn't realize that consequently this would mean that every people should be allowed to have their own democracy. The separation of culture from politics is impossible to combine with freedom. According to the traditional communist way of thinking the union meant progress and civilisation. And when the popular fronts insisted on having a national flag, a national currency, a national citizenship, a national language etc., this evidently meant moving down the ladder of evolution. Inevitably, this is how Communists will argue. But it is probably true to say that many Eurocrats are thinking in basically the same way.

The idea, however, of establishing a supranational democracy that may assume responsibilities from national democracy is a formal and abstract conception which is certainly closer to a technocrat way of thinking than to democracy.

The Balts wanted their own democracy, not a nationalist but a national democracy. But even after the movements towards national independence had begun and the Soviet Union had started to collapse, there was precious little support of the Baltic struggle for liberty from the West and from the European Community. Only a few small countries, among them Denmark, rose to the occasion.

As already pointed out, it may be difficult to define such terms as »people« and »national identity«. Let us look at another variant, a conception that is fairly widespread in Denmark.

In my opinion it is closely related to Grundtvig - and also, I think, to the result of the referendum on the 2nd of June last year.

According to this conception it makes no sense to distinguish between culture and politics. The two should be closely connected. And it is typical of what we refer to as Danish national character that it is largely based on this unity. The Danish national character rests on »society culture« rather than any other kind of culture. Actually the Folk High School movement, the cooperative movement and the working class movement in Denmark substituted a society culture for the folk culture. If you would disregard the political development and the political struggles of the past 150 years, you would disregard the essential parts of Danish culture, including such phenomena as Nordic Democracy and Nordic Welfare Policies. Danish culture is neither elitarian culture nor folk culture, but most of all society culture and political culture.

What applies to Denmark, applies in principle to any democratic society. In any democracy society culture and political culture are of the utmost importance. A refined democracy will make it increasingly difficult to distinguish between culture and politics. This has obvious implications when it comes to organising close cooperation between democratic countries.

It is possible, of course, to establish supranational institutions based on democratic rules, direct election etc., like the EC Parliament, but democracy will not cease to exist primarily as a national democracy, a British, a German or a Danish democracy, i. e. as part of a national culture. Something like a common European culture doesn't exist, at least not yet, and there is no indication that it is being created. It may well be that people in Western Europe since June 2nd 1992 are becoming increasingly aware of this problem.

In fact Western Europe is dealing with an embarrassing dilemma. It doesn't really matter whether power is transferred to the EC Parliament or the Council of Ministers, because in either case it will be transferred away from the only genuine democracy in Europe, national democracy uniting politics and culture.

When Grundtvig, especially about 1848, was trying to clarify the terms »folkelig« and »folk«, he tried out many possible

definitions, but he left behind him all nationalistic and ethnic conceptions and came closer and closer to the conclusion that the meaning of »folkelig« was not very far from what he described as »living interaction« in the society.

Grundtvig was not a nationalist thinker and historian. On the contrary. He always thought of history as the history of mankind. His perspective was universal. History was a process of interaction and enlightenment. But, Grundtvig urgently emphasized, there is no shortcut of harmonization leading to the universally human. His view equally deserves to be termed »folkelig« and »inter-folkelig« - or in Danish »mellefolkelig«.

Grundtvig's understanding of »folkelig« represents an alternative to the simplified view of Man and society that dominated the Age of Rationalism. To Rationalism historical and cultural differences become unessential and trivial incidental circumstances.

This abstract way of thinking also produced the idea of a totally secularized society as well as a number of ideas concerning the development of societies, the need for still bigger entities and the discontinuation of the nation state. Such fixed ideas are deeply rooted in European tradition in West and East. Grundtvig on the other hand accentuates the uniqueness of individuals and societies.

Grundtvig tried to avoid the choice between nationalism's narrow view and internationalism's abstract view of man. This was a false alternative, he thought. Just as it does not promote understanding and community between individuals if they try to eradicate their personality and needs for independence and self-development, so it does not benefit coexistence and cooperation among the peoples of the world if we seek to suppress differences and diversity through harmonization and assimilation. On the contrary. In freedom the peoples come closer to one another. Or as Grundtvig puts it: the more a people protects its freedom and independence, the more fruitful will be the conditions for human activity and interaction.

This thesis has played a definitive role in Danish politics - domestic and foreign - over the last 100 years. It has been the cornerstone of the principle of freedom that prevails in practically every aspect of our school, church and cultural legislation,

of our views on the rights of minorities and the idea of Nordic cooperation as a free collaboration among peoples - as opposed to the idea of a Nordic Union promoted by the Scandinavism movement in the last century. In the Nordic countries the idea of a union died more than 100 years ago.

Some people in Denmark feel that the referendum on the 2nd of June 1992 proved that the Danes are divided in two groups that are miles apart. This seems to be a superficial view, and it is probably more true to say that there exists an astonishing consensus on fundamental matters. Only a very small minority of Danes would like to see a European Community developing into a federal state, and few would accept the EC Parliament to become a »real« Parliament. These attitudes are explicable if viewed in the light of Danish and Nordic democratic culture.

Europe's situation after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War is unique. Europe is closer than ever to European unity. Almost all of the about 50 European countries support democracy and want to live in peace and cooperation with each other. Of course one should not just accept this situation as if it were a piece of good luck. Everything should be done to prevent any backlash. The question is, however, if a EC Union among 12 countries in Western Europe would be the right answer to this challenge. Would a Union that lacks popular support guarantee the democratic future of Europe?