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The Transnationalization of Ethno-nationalism:
The Case of the Identitarian Movement

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Abstract

The Identitarian movement, a radical-right movement active in a number of European countries, desires to unite European nationalists in international action. Nevertheless, the theory claims that the latter ideology is based on nativism. This might create internal ideological conflict between nativism versus transnationalism. The article offers a qualitative analysis of how the movement solves the issue of identity framing on the transnational level. This is a question of how the ethno-nationalist message is transformed to the transnational level, and how national needs are translated into transnational ones. The findings show that the Identitarian movement constructs a two-fold identity – a national one and a European one; and operates with three types of identity framing, thereby building a complex picture of a common past, present, and future. All three frames always act to maintain a balance between both identities, and always work with the language of civilization. Such framing, then, might lead to the successful mobilization of international resources and turn ideas into action.

Keywords: Transnationalization, Identitarian movement, radical right, ethno-nationalism, identity politics

1 Introduction

Increasing internationalization raises attention to the transnational mobilization of the European radical right. We can see how radical-right political parties initiate international forms of cooperation in the European Parliament in the form of political factions (Identity, Tradition, Sovereignty in 2007; Europe of Nations and Freedom in the period 2015–2019; Identity and Democracy since 2019) and European political parties (European Alliance for Freedom, Identity and Democracy Party, and the Alliance for Peace and Freedom). Outside the institutional arena as well, the radical right is intensifying its connections and forms of cooperation. In recent decades, transnational radical-right networks have emerged. Political parties have organized themselves into coalitions such as the World

National-Conservative Movement and cooperative networks such as the Anti-Islam Congress (between 2008 and 2011). Political movements are not lagging behind, and also use international processes to intensify their reach and impact. Since 1987, the international neo-Nazi organization Blood and Honour, has expanded to many countries around the world. With the advent of the internet, the internationalization of radical right concepts has even intensified. The concept of autonomous nationalism has gained popularity all over Europe – even in Australia and New Zealand in the first decade of the new millennium. Later, this was followed by the emergence of the new concept of the Identitarian movement, with a return to the thinking of the French *Nouvelle Droite*. With intensified terrorist attacks in Europe and the European migration crisis of 2015, Europe witnessed attempts to transpose radical-right projects from one country to another, and to wake up radical-right powers already in place. The German Pegida movement was disseminated and branches were soon founded in Great Britain, Netherlands, Austria, Bulgaria, Sweden, and Canada. Vigilante movements such as the Soldiers of Odin inspired and were copy-pasted in a few European countries; the same goes for the neo-Nazi organization Nordic Resistance Movement, with local branches founded in all the Scandinavian countries.

The current research on the transnationalization of the radical right pays attention to aspects of the latter's online presence and questions how the internet contributes to transnationalization (Caiani et al., 2012; Caiani & Kröll, 2014); also, how social media empower the radical right and affect interactions inside the radical right online and offline (Froio & Ganesh, 2018); and how social media contributes to the formation of a shared identity and is turned into a weapon of the radical right (Guenther et al., 2020; Maly, 2019). In the offline context, research addresses the transnationalization of the radical right during electoral campaigns (Mudde, 2007), institutional cooperation (Vejvodová, 2012), and there is some focus on collective action (Mareš, 2012; Virchow, 2013; Vejvodová, 2014). Less attention is paid to the ideological level of radical-right transnationalization (Grumke, 2009; Caiani et al., 2012; Macklin, 2013). Nevertheless, the ideological level represents an interesting aspect of transnationalization and a challenge for the radical right because the radical right faces the conflict of nativism versus transnationalism. Even the radical right itself has discussed this issue theoretically, such as in the theoretical approaches of the French *Nouvelle Droite*, which currently serves as an ideological source of the Identitarian movement. Here arises the question how does the radical right solve the issue of identity on the transnational level practically? This involves how the ethno-nationalist message is transformed into the transnational, and how national needs are translated into transnational ones with the usage of global structures and opportunities.

The article responds to these questions by applying a qualitative single-case analysis of the Identitarian movement, which is active in a number of European countries and represents an attempt by the radical-right movement to join European nationalists in international action when mobilizing international resources. The Identitarian movement represents the transnational radical right; Maly (2019) talks about trans-local actors in the context of the Belgian Identitarians. Using the theory of social movement mobilization, the article analyzes identity framing (the interpretative frame), protest repertoire, and, in relation to those collective actions, framing.

The Identitarian movement was established in 2003 in France on the basis of the *Nouvelle Droite*. Since 2012, it has gradually spread across Europe. Nowadays, the movement

operates in Germany, Austria, Spain, Netherlands, Belgium, the Scandinavian countries, the United Kingdom, the Czech Republic, and even overseas in the US. In different countries they use (slightly) different names, but it is still the same entity, promoting the same politics and principles, and referring back to the same brand.

2 Radical-right identity and the challenge of transnational mobilization

Transnationalization is understood as interaction between national and foreign actors that is aimed at engaging in protest, making demands, and communicating a message. Thereby, a network of cross-border actors with common objectives of both an international and a national character comes into being. Such actors share an outlook on the world. Their common interests are visible both in word and action. Engaging in transnational collective activity signals the will of actors to establish links with like-minded formations across borders based on a common discourse built on shared interpretative frames (Froio & Ganesh, 2018). Thus, transnationalization means sharing and disseminating ideology, ideological elements, and behavioral patterns (Tarrow, 1998; Virchow, 2013). Frames capture the symbolic construction of external reality; they represent the worldview which impacts or governs the behavior of a social movement. Frames provide a definite identity, and help make sense of things and actions. Such common identity is closely tied to the framing of collective action. We can label such transnational frames master frames. Such master frames allow a common identity to be created throughout the movement. The latter define a common language and common ground, and even create space for keeping some regional or local specificities, but always in harmony with the wider frame. National and regional movements might derive their own identity from the master frame, or shape their identity to fit the transnational one (Vejvodová, 2014). The master frame connects disparate actors who are remote, and it mobilizes them by defining the key problem and its solution, identifying enemies and allies, and presenting shared values and symbols (Della Porta et al., 2006).

Even though the radical right is discussed in terms of transnationalization, as stated in the introduction, the transfer of radical-right identity to the transnational level is not easy due to the fact that the radical right's Identitarian politics stands on nativism and is closely connected to ethnicity. It is no surprise that the history of international cooperation within the radical right is full of failures and break ups caused by an inability to harmonize nationalistic demands.

As Betz states (2009: 195), 'the radical right has adopted a new form of cultural nativism, which, rather than promoting traditional right-wing notions of ethnic and ethnocultural superiority, aims at the protection of [...] indigenous culture, customs and way of life [and] has increasingly shifted its focus to questions of national and cultural identity, and as a result their politics has become identity politics.' The ideology of the radical right is no longer based on biological racism or white superiority, and it does not seek to install a non-democratic regime. Minkenberg (2000) talks about the concept of ethnopluralism, which is accompanied by authoritarian and populist notions. Rather than superiority, it is an incompatibility of cultures, ethnicities, and religions which is believed in; all as a reaction to a changing world, which is perceived by the radical right as endangering and destroying identity (Betz, 1990). The radical right believes in putting people into ethnonational cate-

gories along national, religious, cultural, and ethnic lines (Wodak & KhosraviNik, 2013). Even the silent counter-revolution conceptualized by Pierro Ignazi as a return to materialist values also refers to the need for the protection of traditional values and national and ethnic identity (Ignazi, 1992), which have been challenged by immigration, and has made demands on conservative parties to provide more social stability and security.

Authoritarianism and populism, the defining features of the contemporary radical right, are influenced and shaped by such identity politics as well. Authoritarianism involves the desire to set up a strictly ordered society, the latter which is currently seen as weakened by different ethnic and religious minorities, boosted by processes of change related to globalization and European integration. In the case of populism, we see the strict rejection of the elites allegedly responsible for mass migration, globalization, and multiculturalist approaches that 'destroy identities.' All in all, identity politics links all of the elements of radical-right ideology (based on Mudde's definition, 2007): nativism depicts non-natives as a cultural, security, and economic threat; authoritarianism stresses the decline of morality and of law and order; and populism identifies who should be blamed for changes that threaten national identity.

The radical right claims that globalization, immigration, and multiculturalism represent a threat to national identities. Based on this, the radical right is motivated to protect such identities. It is often cultural changes that are recognized, and thus criticized, by the radical right. There is no doubt about the effect of the negative evaluation of immigration among supporters of the radical right (Coffé et al., 2007; Bowyer, 2008; van der Brug, 2003; Stockemer, 2015; Sørensen, 2016). The idea of ethnopluralism has intensified since 2015 with the start of the European migration crisis. This situation created fertile ground for radical politics that call for the preservation of national uniqueness. By using ethnopluralism, the radical right stresses the right to protect one's own nation and national identity. The radical right promotes a retreat from globalization and propagates policies and narratives against migration and cultural diversification (Handler, 2019).

Based on the theoretical part of the article, the following sections will analyze the radical right transnational Identitarian movement as a case of an attempt to translate and transfer ethno-nationalist messages and demands into transnational messages and demands. Using the theory of social movement mobilization, the analysis looks at identity framing (the interpretative frame), protest repertoire, and, in relation to these collective actions, framing. In the cases of protest repertoire and framing, the analysis works with international activity only. It is there that there is the greatest potential to capture and describe attempts to mobilize international resources and use international opportunities. Overall, the levels of ideology and action are analyzed.

3 Two-fold identity

The Identitarian movement (IM) promotes several types of identity – national, regional, and European. All identities are closely interconnected. One influences the other, and vice versa. Without one identity, the others would not make any sense, thus it is necessary to protect and work on all of them at the same time. According to the logic of the IM, not protecting one element would lead to destruction of the others. National and European identities are dominant.

On the national level, the IM represents the concept of ethnopluralism. The IM proclaims that it recognizes the freedom of every nation and the opportunity for the self-realization of every nation and culture, but never at the expense of another nation. It demands the differentiation of individual nations and hence rejects immigration. For the IM, ethnopluralism respects diversity and serves as an alternative to multiculturalism and globalization. Identitarians talk about the right to preserve the culture, customs, and traditions of every ethnic group (Identitäre Bewegung Deutschland, n.d. a). Identitarians use the following slogan: '0% racism 100% identity' as an expression to support their claim that their ideology is not racist. However, some scholars conclude that this appears to be true only at a cursory glance, and that the IM stands for a form of differentialist or cultural racism that leaves behind the superior attitude of classic racism, but nevertheless involves constructing collectives defined by specific characteristics that cannot be verified (Virchow, 2015). In harmony with the ideology of National Socialism, the nation is seen as an organic pre-modern community and homogeneity is defended by promoting difference and exclusivity. Cultures (representing nations) are understood to be exclusive and static groups of people in a specific place. Any mixing destroys their supposed purity and leads to degradation. (Garner, 2017). Identitarians perceive their roots in the context of country (soil), blood, and identity.

The IM defines national identity as characterized by direct ties to a people or a state, representing a comprehensive identification framework characterized by social, linguistic, and cultural rules. In such a context, regional identity is understood as a sub-level of national identity (direct attachment to one's own city, village, and region) shaped by dialect, customs, and regional history. The national and regional levels complement each other. Such aspects of identity, taken together, create a common framework which elements mutually build upon and complement one another (Identitäre Bewegung Deutschland, n.d. b; Generation Identity UK, 2018b). The regional identity also might be of greater importance when it is politically relevant – such as with the Flemish branch of the movement in Belgium.

The ideology of ethnopluralism stands on the belief that equality does not exist, or make any sense. The idea of egalitarianism is rejected. Universal human rights and freedoms and the universal values derived from them are simply abstract terms that are empty of content (Revolta.info, 2013a). Such an ideological position has its source in the French *Nouvelle Droite* (ref. Alain de Benoist or Guillaume Faye) and promotes the idea that a human being does not exist as a universal and abstract entity, and it is not possible to separate the existence of a human being from society and the social groups to which they belong. Instead of universalism, it is the laws of nature and the imperative of social organization which should be applied (Milza, 2002).

However, the idea of ethnopluralism preceded the *Nouvelle Droite*. For example, Carl Schmitt already promoted ethnopluralism as a part of the so-called identitarian democracy (*identitäre Demokratie*). Schmitt was opposed to a pluralism of interests and pluralistic democracy. Instead, he promoted democracy based on identity. Schmitt defined himself as an opponent of universal human rights, replacing this with ethnopluralism (Gessenharter, 2004). He saw homogeneity as a necessary element for promoting the interests of the state and nation, and saw homogeneity (internal homogeneity) as an element of democracy. Pluralism meant danger for the state and its sovereignty. From this comes the idea of

distinguishing between democracy and parliamentarianism: it is claimed that the former can exist without the latter (Pfahl-Traughber, 2004).

Finally, there is civilizational identity, which for the IM is constituted in European identity. Through origin, history, and culture all Europeans share both a common heritage and a common destiny. The European identity serves to mobilize international structures and resources. At this level we can identify three frames that are being used by the IM to define identity.

The first frame refers to the past. It works with the symbolism of historical events, according to which the IM can depict Europe as homogenous civilization, while also different from others. It works with a story about a European civilization that has always had to defend itself against non-Europeans who wanted to conquer the continent. The IM calls for action that resembles the example of ancestors who fought for European civilization and protected European culture and identity. The historical heritage of Europeans is used to justify the exclusion of outsider groups (Fligstein et al., 2012). A demonstration that took place in Poitiers, France in 2012 was historically contextualized by the IM by making reference to Charles Martell who, in 732,¹ halted the expansion of Muslims into Europe at the battle of Poitiers (CBN, 2012). In a public space in Karlsruhe, the German IM displayed figures representing hoplites (soldiers of the ancient Greek infantry) labelled with the dates and names of battles of the *Reconquista* and the Ottoman Wars. This was done to commemorate the fact that more than once Europe succeeded in defending itself from invaders (Zúquete, 2018). The term *Reconquista* has become part of the Identitarian everyday vocabulary, and helps draw a parallel between the medieval period when Christians recaptured territory from the Muslims (who had occupied most of the Iberian Peninsula), and the current fight of the IM against Muslims: namely, the ‘demand for a Reconquista of Europe, the fight against our ethno-cultural downfall and against mass immigration’ (Identitäre Bewegung Deutschland, 2017). The same symbolic role is played by the Ottoman Wars dating from the late Middle Ages through to the early twentieth century. In 2017, the IM from Austria even created an award for outstanding achievements in Identitarian activism after Prince Eugene of Savoy – the Prince Eugene Prize. This personality was chosen due to his fame associated with military feats against the Ottoman Turks (Zúquete, 2018). Even the basic symbol of the IM has a connection with past. The Greek Lambda letter depicted in black and yellow is a symbolic reference to the Spartan warriors who fought against the Persians at Thermopylae. Their battle against the barbarians made them heroes, because they protected European civilization, as the IM does today. The Persians are considered a metaphor for present-day non-European immigrants.

The second frame of the transnational identity involves the current situation, and is built on a definition of common enemies endangering Europe as a civilization, thereby endangering national identities and order on the national level. This frame interacts with the first one (in evoking historical parallels). The IM believes that all these identified enemies are creating a situation in which European nations and Europe itself are gradually losing their identities, and Europeans are not far from losing theirs altogether. This situation is defined by Markus Willinger in his manifesto ‘Generation Identity: A Declaration of War Against the “68ers”’. Willinger explains that Europe is dying out and the current

¹ The number 732 became the symbol for the movement, and is used by the French chapter on promotional materials.

generation is the most important one because only it can save Europe from suicide. He points his finger at the 1968 generation as the one which gave rise to all of our current problems, because this generation rebelled against the order of the time. It stood against everything that created identity. According to Willinger, the 1968 generation adopted a mission of preventing future wars and eliminating inequality among people – i.e., eliminating differences. Multiculturalism was an experiment in how to achieve this. Thus the former took away everything that could give identity to the current generation. Willinger does not consider the Identitarian movement to be a movement, but claims it is the entire (current) generation. He states that a multicultural society does not function. As a result of multiculturalism, the current generation is lacking a European identity, and this must be revived. Multiculturalism leads to the destruction of European countries, and multicultural society is perceived as harsh, unstable, and lacking solidarity. The discrepancy that is articulated between the older generations and the present generation in terms of fighting for values represents an interesting element. Willinger claims that whether Europe will survive is a decision for the current young generation (Identitäre Bewegung Österreich, n.d. a; Revolta.info, 2013; Willinger, 2013).

After the demonstration at Poitiers in 2012, there was a public declaration of war against multiculturalism (Brücken, 2013). A video of the declaration was recorded and uploaded to the internet and quickly spread to other European countries, thus significantly contributing to the dissemination of the concept across Europe. The video addresses the total deterioration of European culture and all that has ever been identified with it. It indicates there is one last chance to save the continent, thus war is openly declared on multiculturalism and a wish is expressed to revive traditions and return to national historical models and principles. Cohabitation between European and non-European nations is perceived as utterly impossible.

Another type of common enemy is more specific and more tangible – Islam and Muslims. The IM articulates the alleged threat of the Islamization of Europe. Identitarians work with the concept of the ‘Great Replacement’ of ‘indigenous Europeans’ by non-European migrants and stress that it is necessary to stop this and revive the old values. One of the biggest concerns is of becoming a minority in one’s own country; therefore, the IM calls for a ‘rebooting of European ethnocultural tradition’ (Handler, 2019) without any further specification. The IM talks about Europe facing a demographic crisis. Declining birth rates, mass immigration, and the increase in parallel Islamic societies endanger European societies and will lead to their complete destruction within a matter of decades if no counter-measures are taken (Generation Identity UK, 2018b; Identitäre Bewegung Österreich, n.d. b). Following the migration crisis of 2015, the perception of such trends and visions of the future intensified. The migration crisis fueled the IM’s fear of the replacement of European people in European countries. The Identitarians see Europe being conquered by Islam, and share a sense of the threat to their identity.

In this context it is interesting to mention that the IM developed a targeted campaign focusing specifically on women. The movement framed the threat with a very sensitive and emotional appeal in a campaign called ‘120 Decibels.’ German and Austrian women spoke up against abuse and violence perpetrated against European women by migrants and encouraged other women to share their experiences. The campaign was named after

the 120-decibel self-defense pocket alarms that some women carry (Identitäre Bewegung Deutschland, 2018).

The fear of being replaced is connected with criticisms of the European Union and globalization – two factors seen not only as engines of migration, but also as responsible for the eradication and loss of identity. The IM rejects both the European Union's bureaucracy and ideological setting, which promotes liberalism, capitalism, globalization, and universalism. The movement opposes the European Union as a source and active supporter of globalization, which is understood as the driver of multiculturalism and immigration. Due to this, the European Union is seen as a cause of the dissolution of nations and national identities. The European Union, by definition, is ruining the mission of nationalists, whose priority is to protect the nation against foreign influence. Hence, nationalist policies are against immigration, labor mobility, and cultural mobility (Halikiopoulou et al., 2012).

From the perspective of the IM, European civilization is currently being destroyed from inside by the multicultural model and from the outside by foreign (non-European) people, with a special focus on Muslims. The Identitarians disseminate an apocalyptic vision of ethnic and cultural deterioration in Europe. Willinger explains the alleged identity crisis as more serious than the partition of Europe by the Iron Curtain, or the devastation of Europe by the World Wars. According to him, the crisis originates at the spiritual level, because the European continent has lost its will to live. The problem is spelled out in biopolitical terms (Virchow, 2015) when Willinger mentions that 'the greatest threat to Europe results from a demographic catastrophe that is already underway' (Willinger, 2013). The IM talks about Europe endangering itself with self-destruction through a multicultural 'zeitgeist' (Generation Identity UK, 2018b). The IM expects ethnic, cultural, and religious conflict unless there is a change in political thinking that leads to the protection of the ethno-cultural traditions of the ancestors of the former (Generation Identity UK, 2018a).

Finally, the third frame used by the IM is the frame of the future. The IM talks about a unified Europe, but not a standardized Europe, as associated with the European Union. It calls for an alternative Europe composed of free European nations. The Identitarians call themselves 'Alter-Europeans' (Dělský Potápěč, 2013). The preferred vision of the world is one composed of ethnically homogenous communities and pan-European nationalism (Handler, 2019). The IM stresses the ethno-pluralistic vision of a unified Europe, and says that any unification of different cultures means destruction. Alan de Benoist draws a parallel between 'genocide' caused by racists and 'ethnocide' caused by so-called anti-racists (Weber, 2004). Not surprisingly, the argument of difference/incompatibility implicitly places Christian, white Europe on one side, and everything else, but Islam specifically, on the other (Garner, 2017). The old theme of civilizations and races failing due to mixing and the endangerment of purity, as known from de Gobineau's work, returns.

This vision of the future fits perfectly with the visions of the European radical-right scene that calls for a unified Europe on the basis of defending European civilization, European values, and European space, while internally respecting the diversity of nations and national states. This is basically the concept of 'fortress Europe' built on the fear of European nations dying out due to low birth rates, along with the presence of a very strong cultural dimension. Here, European culture is perceived as being incompatible with non-European cultures, and the idea that non-Europeans should stay out of Europe, or assimilate if they do come. The different habits, traditions, and religious acts of non-Europeans

conflict with the Christian roots of European civilization and degrade European civilization. The theme is one of civilizations failing due to mixing and a loss of purity.

4 The 'Defend Europe' campaign

That the IM has the capacity to mobilize international capital and resources and turn them into real action was proven in 2017, when the IM of Austria launched the 'Defend Europe' campaign, strongly mobilizing identity organizations across Europe, and at the same time intensifying the internationalization efforts of the movement. The aim of the campaign was to motivate sympathizers to act, to warn against threats related to the migration crisis, and to stimulate the defense of European nations and European civilization. The campaign was a logical consequence of all previous initiatives, such as 'The Threat of Islam' and 'Great Replacement,' the shared leitmotif of which was the defense of European nations and European identity.

With the help of a crowdfunding platform, Austrian Identitarians were able to collect sufficient funds for the Defend Europe project. These finances were used to buy a ship and to secure a crew that would sail the Mediterranean Sea and sink ships bringing migrants to the European coast. Identitarians promised to send migrants back to the Libyan Coast Guard, not to bring them to Europe. The campaign attracted support across the radical-right spectrum and beyond. Within a month, the Defend Europe campaign received more than \$178,000. Originally, the goal was to raise at least \$58,000. In the summer of 2017, the Austrian movement announced the purchase of a C-Star ship and the hiring of a 25-member crew. Oddly, the entire project was then abruptly called off (Bulman, 2017; Holthouse, 2017; Identitäre Bewegung Österreich, n.d. c).

In April 2018, the IM garnered attention again when it paid for a helicopter that landed on the French-Italian border in the Alps. About 100 activists from across Europe unfurled a banner at the border to tell migrants to go back to their countries of origin. In a statement, activists said they were blocking the path of illegal migrants and that teams of people were guarding the area to prevent attempts to cross the border illegally (Vávra, 2018). This action, entitled 'Alpine Mission,' cost about 60,000 euros.

5 Conclusion

The case of the Identitarian movement represents an example of how the radical right is able to overcome the conflict between ethno-nationalist identities and is making efforts to establish a transnational movement. Today's European radical right is highly motivated to cooperate internationally and use international resources and opportunities like any other political actor. However, the great challenge for the radical right is its own ideology, based on ethnic principles and nativism, which are obstacles to long-term and stable cooperation. The Identitarian movement tests the strategy of defining two identities that are closely connected and influence each other – national identity and European identity. The movement uses the argument of the necessity of the cooperation of European nations to protect European civilization (i.e. a European identity) against non-European influences, thereby protecting national identity. On the one side, there is an intense appeal for unification, but on the other, the movement mitigates worries about losing autonomy and

reiterates the principle of respect for the diversity of European nations. The movement uses a strong narrative of endangered Europe as a shared issue that unites all European nations with a common goal, while allowing enough space for individual national identities. It also depicts a type of enemy that cannot be defeated individually (European Union, multiculturalism, Islam, Muslims) – therefore it is necessary to unite. In this way, the Identitarians are active in the transnationalization of nationalist ideas that are framed and (at the same time) triggered by experiences with globalization and migration. Steiger (2014) calls this ‘open-source’ ideology. The framing of the main ideas and goals is so universal that it can be used in any context in any European country.

We can detect three frames. One shows the future of a unified Europe of ethnically and culturally homogenous entities, protected against non-European influences. The second frame is built on the definition of common enemies and an apocalyptic vision if nationalists do not join together and fight. The third one works by referring to a common history and historical events that are employed to define Europe as a homogenous civilization. Notions of European civilization/identity are used to mobilize international structures and resources. This claim is in line with the findings of Brubaker (2017), who talks about civilizationism in the context of national populism. He points out that by labelling Islam a civilizational threat, civilizationism can be understood as a new articulation of nationalism. The IM uses civilizationism as an extension of nationalism, defining self and others in civilizational terms.

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