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The Road to a Security State: Estonia and the Problem of Undemocratic Nationalism in Interwar Europe

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Hent Kalmo

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In his essay 'The Miseries of East European Small States', written at the time of the Second World War, István Bibó, the Hungarian political scientist claimed that the preceding two decades had brought about 'the greatest monstrosity of modern European political development: anti-democratic nationalism'. Bibó's sombre account of the fate of democracy in East-Central Europe has remained remarkably influential. Its central tenet – that nationalism and democracy can enter into conflict – has sometimes been generalised into the more sweeping thesis that democracy is always compromised when the identity of some state is defined in reference to a single nation. It has been argued that, when adherents of ethnic or cultural nationalism achieve statehood, the state itself is rendered ethnic in orientation, the main ambition becoming that of promoting the 'state-owning' nation's language, culture, demographic position, economic welfare and political hegemony. This theory of 'nationalizing states' has been the dominant paradigm in interpreting the history of interwar East-Central Europe and in seeking to explain why democracy declined in the region. Contesting its exclusive application to East-Central Europe, some authors have noted that Western European states have also been engaged in 'nationalizing' or nation building, with similar adverse consequences to individual liberty. As a result, the nationalization paradigm has become even more comprehensive. The weakening of liberal democracy is ascribed to a specific ideology – 'nationalizing nationalism' – which was supposedly present in all of Europe.

Using Estonia as a case study, I shall argue that this whole line of interpretation is misguided since it wrongly assumes that liberal democracy was put under stress by the potency of a general ideal (a nation state with a homogenous culture), rather than the more circumstantial difficulties that emerged in the 1920s and 1930s. Being associated with a core nation, Estonia conforms to the pattern that is mainly envisaged in studies that underline the illiberal leanings of nation-statehood. Yet there was never any general policy of 'nationalizing' the state in interwar Estonia, nor were restrictions of political and civil rights motivated by some such overall ambition. While the category of 'the nation' was employed to articulate or justify different constitutional visions, attempts at reforming the political system did not grow out of an idea that the state should be made more national in character. Liberal democracy began to be questioned when security became an urgent concern after an attempted Communist coup (1924) and the perceived shortcomings of the parliamentary system produced an ever-deepening sense of state failure. Moreover, once a fully-fledged security state had been created by the mid-1930s, those seeking to justify the limitation of political rights could genuinely believe that they were compatible with democracy, given that 'democracy' was a deeply contested idea throughout the interwar period. Estonia thus illustrates a more general problem about the idea of 'anti-democratic nationalism'. What criterion do we use when describing some past regime as anti-democratic? Should we be speaking about democratic decline or about re-imagining democracy in the context of the 1930s? I shall argue that we gain a better understanding of both history and democracy if we consider the latter, not as a universal standard, but as an open-ended constitutional problem.