

OXFORD
congress/22

Nationalism, populism and identities:
contemporary challenges

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Jesus College, University of Oxford*

Opening Words

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Academic Council



OPENING WORDS

Context for the FIDE Congress

1. The scale of ambition reflected in the agenda for the Congress is remarkable. The International Academic Council of FIDE, under whose auspices this congress is held, initially decided on a globally important topic - Nationalism, populism and identities. It quickly became obvious that there were linkages to other topics of significant cross-border interest – climate change and misinformation in the digital age. Once the division of topics had been settled, the discussion groups and panels started their work.
2. The work continued through the pandemic. The papers produced for the Congress reflect strong collaborative effort . The challenge of working on “Teams” was considerable. Yet the teams have risen to that challenge. So has FIDE itself.
3. We will assume that you have already read the papers . That includes the scene setter which is my personal reflection on Nationalism and Populism (pages 7-11 of the bundle – link to the FIDE website here). I will not repeat what is already said there.
4. The purpose of circulating papers in advance to attendees was to ensure that they could familiarise themselves with the issues. The presentations to be made in Oxford will be stimulating . Attendees will enrich the debate by engaging with the arguments . By the end of May, we hope to have reached conclusions and recommendations which will be submitted to key decision-makers .

Interlinked issues.

1. In writing the scene setter , it was clear just how interlinked the chosen subject matter was (Nationalism/populism, climate change and mis-disinformation . The Ukraine crisis, when it happened, could not be ignored .
2. Here are two examples of interlinkages . First it was always obvious that, in the context of the pandemic, Covid nationalism was going to be a major topic for consideration . But the need for concerted action by the EU institutions and the EU Member States in responding to that crisis seemed to signal a new nascent approach to EU unity and in turn to enhancement of the EU’s credibility . A further interlinked question would be how misinformation and disinformation would lead to vaccine hesitancy and undermine the efforts of all governments .
3. A second example concerned Refugees and nationalism. The EU’s response to the refugee exodus from Syria as the Syrian Government, aided by Russia , bombed and destroyed many Syrian towns and cities, had been wrong in legal and humanitarian terms. The Syrian refugees were, to a significant extent, met with nationalist and populist hostility as politicians struggled to find common ground. Yet, as the Ukraine crisis unfolded, some of the same nations welcomed refugees. So what had happened in the interim? This time , will EU solidarity continue to hold its ground as costs and refugee numbers increase? What, as the economic impact of sanctions on Russia bite, will the impact be not only on oil stocks in the west but also , as nations race to fill the gap, on the carbon reduction targets entered into at COP 26 in Glasgow?

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4. We are going to try to understand the impacts of Nationalism; to draw out inter linking themes; to synthesise the arguments; to learn lessons; and to make recommendations .
5. Finally, nationalism and populism are about people. It is easy to adopt a theoretical approach to debate . But people matter, not least the “left behinds” in our societies, apparently neglected by the governing elites. One of the discussion groups, recognising the policy lacuna and the gulf between some citizens and the EU, is going to consider the future of the European Project. It is easy (and short sighted, as Brexit has shown) to forget that people matter .

A personal insight as nationalism affected a childhood

1. Finally a personal insight into how nationalism can have unforeseen consequences. On 1 April 2022, an emergency was declared in Sri Lanka. It transported me back to 1958 when, as a child of six, an emergency was declared in the same nation, Ceylon.
2. My purpose is not to undertake a political analysis . The continuing unrest and violence that followed the 1958 emergency over many decades showed that there was right and wrong on both sides . The Tamil terrorists were capable of dreadful violence. So was the Sri Lanka Army. There is now a chance for reconciliation and a better future.
3. My father was Army Commander at the time in 1958. He was a graduate of Jesus College. The Prime Minister, SWRD Bandaranaike, was a graduate of Christ Church, Oxford. He was assassinated in 1959. His wife, Sirimavo Bandaranaike, was subsequently the first female head of government in the modern world. She had been at school with my aunt (my father’s sister). We were a Tamil family ; her family was a distinguished Sinhalese family. It was a microcosm of Ceylon society. People grew up; families knew one another; there was peaceful co- existence. There still is . So what happened to disturb the status quo?
4. Mr Bandaranaike’s Government promoted a piece of legislation which had fateful consequences. As my father wrote in his memoirs: “Very early on in his term of office , the Prime Minister took action on a matter close to his heart. During the run-up to the election, he had repeatedly announced his intention to make Sinhalese the official language where, up to now, parity between the two languages [Sinhalese and Tamil] had been recognised. He now introduced the “Sinhala only” Bill in Parliament [which undoubtedly pleased those who had voted for him] but which would be correspondingly be resented by the Tamil people. The resentment soon manifested itself and clashes between Sinhalese and Tamil groups were reported.”
5. An emergency followed. Martial law was declared. The Army were given special powers. A night time curfew was established. My parents’ home was unsurprisingly placed under armed guard . I overheard my parents discussing the rules of engagement for patrolling soldiers. As my parents were driven to and from his brother’s home to the south of Colombo, a young soldier on duty at a checkpoint fired at the official car. It is not the happiest way to remember a childhood. Both sides reacted violently. There were 10,000-12,000 refugees who sought protection in the south of the country and were repatriated to the Tamil north. Plus ca change.
6. The Prime Minister was entitled to introduce the legislation which he had promised to those who had voted for him . But actions have consequences. Nationalism can be a positive force; nationalism derived from a strong sense of linguistic and racial identity which led to legislation which overnight disadvantaged the minority Tamil community had unintended and devastating consequences.

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7. It is for this Congress to show the way in which nations can do better, offering ideas for reform, never preaching but always respectfully seeking to persuade.
8. By way of postscript, there have been two significant developments since the Congress which appear to show how populist ideology continues to influence political thinking in western Europe. The success of Marine le Pen's party in the first round of the French presidential elections remains a threat to the established EU and NATO order if she were to succeed in the run off for the presidency. Moreover the latest policy announcement by the UK Prime Minister on refugee policy in the UK would imply that , in certain circumstances , refugees could be transferred to Rwanda for determination of their rights under the Refugee Convention. The United Nations Human Rights Commission has said that the arrangements, in the absence of sufficient safeguards and standards, constitute an evasion of " international obligations and are contrary to the letter and spirit of the Refugee Convention". As the Congress conclusions are developed, there would be merit in analysing whether these developments are further illustrations of the urgency of the populist challenge.

CPJ Muttukumaru CB DL LLD (hon)

Army Day Reception 1956 – the chair of the IAC, aged four, with Mr and Mrs Bandaranaike and Sir Oliver Goonetilleke, Governor General of Ceylon.

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RELEVANT LINKS

All the congress' information may be found in our website. Here you may access the Terms of Reference of each of our four working groups (and three sub-groups), as well as relevant information about Jesus College, access details from the main London Airports, a map of Oxford with suitable Hotels and Cafes, amenities and more.

[Visit our website for more information](#)

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