

# 'Small' and 'greater' nations: empires and nationalist movements in Ireland and the Balkans

Q1 Sinisa Malesevic

Q2 University College Dublin, Ireland

## ABSTRACT

This paper compares different strategies of legitimation deployed by the nationalist movements in the Balkans and Ireland in the 19th and early twentieth century. In contrast to the traditional accounts that posit nations and empires as mutually exclusive projects, I show how imperial and nationalist discourses can reinforce one another. The paper zooms in on the changing dynamics of imperial and national legacies by exploring how specific social movements strategically deploy concepts such as the 'small' or 'greater' nation to facilitate different nationalist projects. By contrasting the historical experiences of the Balkan states and Ireland I show how geopolitical and historical contexts shape the complex and contradictory relationships between imperial and the national projects.

empires; nat

**KEYWORDS** Nationalism; Ireland; Balkans;

## Introduction

In a series of recent publications Jennifer Todd emphasises the centrality of comparative *longue durée* analysis for understanding the continuity and change in social and political life of ethnic groups, nation-states and empires (Todd, 2018, 2015, 2003, and with Ruane & Todd, 2015). She argues that the conventional institutionalist accounts have 'to be constantly qualified by a sense of the wider meanings and deeper structures in which institutions are inserted. Change - which in many respects is radical in the contemporary period - must be situated in the *longue durée* if we are to understand its significance' (Todd, 2003, p. 245). In this paper I follow Todd's advice and offer a *longue durée* comparative historical analysis of nationalist movements situated on the margins of the European continent. More to the point the paper explores different strategies of legitimation deployed by nationalist movements in the Balkans and Ireland in the 19th and early twentieth century. The first part of the paper zooms in on the recent theoretical debates on empires and nation-states by emphasising

the elements of historical continuity within these organisational forms. The second part of the paper contrasts the Irish and Balkan experience of nation-formation with a spotlight on the ideological use of the concepts such as 'small' and 'greater' nation. The final section brings the theoretical and empirical discussion together by highlighting the relevance of Todd's perspective on understanding the historical dynamics of long-term change.

### **Rethinking the empire vs nation dichotomy**

Since the end of World War II and the decolonisation processes of the 1950s and 1960s, much of conventional historiography has been wedded to the idea that empires and nation-states are mutually exclusive political projects. In this traditional understanding imperial orders were associated with perpetual territorial conquest, wars, deep social inequalities, established hierarchies of rule, racism and the continuous pursuit of global domination. In contrast nation-states are conceptualised as the optimal models of social organisation rooted in the principles of popular sovereignty, social solidarity, a degree of cultural homogeneity and moral equality of its citizens. Furthermore, the conventional historiography tended to perceive empires as the profoundly illegitimate forms of rule destined to disappear, while also extolling nation-states as the only justified mode of territorial governance in the contemporary world. Hence in his highly influential book, *Theories of Imperialism*, a leading German historian Wolfgang Mommsen (1982, p. 113) declared that 'the age of imperialism is dead and buried'. This sentiment was shared by many commentators over the past sixty years: from the 1950s when the leading American diplomat and presidential advisor Sumner Welles proclaimed that 'the age of empires is dead' (Tved, 2004, p. 2000) to the more recent statements of leading historians such as Eric Hobsbawm who, in one of his last books, *On Empire: America, War, and Global Supremacy* (2008, p. 13), states that 'there is no prospect of the return to the imperial world of the past... the age of empires is dead'.

Nevertheless, this well-established dichotomy has recently been challenged by several scholars who argue that there is much more organisational and ideological continuity within these two models of polity than previously recognised. Hence Krishan Kumar (2017, p. 23) points out that: 'empires can be nations writ large; nations empires under another name'. Instead of perpetuating a teleological narrative whereby nation-states inevitably and naturally replace imperial orders, Kumar insists that 'empires and nation-states may in fact best be thought of as alternative political projects, both of which are available for elites to pursue depending on the circumstances of the moment' (Kumar, 2010, p. 119). In a similar vein, Julian Go (2017, 2011) has argued that the imperial practices underpin many actions of large nationstates. Comparing the US and UK polities over the last two centuries, he

identifies several common traits including the shared denial of imperial behaviour and the periodic shifts from nationalism towards imperialism which become more visible when the respective polity experiences a period of political weakness. In one of the more impressive recent historical surveys of world empires, Burbank and Cooper (2010, pp. 16-^17) show convincingly that empires and nation-states have a great deal in common, including their political organisation of territorial rule. Thus, despite the widely shared idea that nation states are rooted in a different form of sovereignty from empires, Burbank and Cooper (2010, p. 17) are adamant that one can identify many similarities as in both cases sovereignty is 'shared out, layered, overlapping'. Munkler (2007, p. 6) is also critical of the traditional views that see empires as relics of past eras and nation-states as the only viable organisational vehicles of modernity. Instead he posits these two forms of statehood as compatible and often interdependent: they are not alternative modes of rule but are in fact highly congruent social orders. In his view, in the contemporary world 'imperial structures are superimposed on the [nation-]state order... [and this] makes it difficult to identify an empire'.

This theoretical and conceptual paradigm shift has contributed substantially towards questioning the well-established historiographic narratives about empires and nation-states. These recent studies make clear that the conventional teleological and deterministic views that posit nation-states and empires as mutually exclusive political projects where nationhood ultimately trumps imperial structures is analytically problematic and historically inaccurate. Nevertheless, much of this research has focused only on the most powerful polities in world history while neglecting to explore how these state dynamics operate in the context of more marginal regions and less influential polities. Moreover, much of this recent scholarship tends to identify imperial recidivism within the nation-states that nominally downplay or deny their imperial past or present.

At the same time, this literature has almost nothing to say about the political projects where the past imperial heritage or the organisational practice inherited from the imperial past was the backbone of nation-state formation. Finally, this new research paradigm has not sufficiently problematised the strategic use of concepts such as empire and nation. There is abundance of research on how notions such as 'imperialism' and 'nationalism' have often been deployed to delegitimise particular political projects but there is less research on how concepts such as 'small nations' or 'greater nations' have been utilised for specific strategic reasons (Malesevic, 2019, pp. 111-134). This paper aims to broaden the debate by refocusing the attention towards these three issues. More specifically I argue that the re-conceptualisation of a nation-state vs. empire dichotomy is even more relevant for understanding the organisational and ideological transformations of the less

powerful, peripheral, states. In this context, one can observe when and how imperial legacies can boost rather than stifle national projects and how the ideas of small and greater nations can be deployed strategically to facilitate different nationalist projects. By comparing the historical experiences of the Balkan states and Ireland, I aim to show how specific social and historical contexts shape the complex and contradictory relationships between the imperial and the national projects. This type of analysis entails using the methodological tools of historical sociology and engaging in an in-depth comparative *longue durée* analysis as illuminated by the work of Jennifer Todd (2018, 2015).

### **Imperial legacies and nationalist projects**

The conventional historiography interprets the nineteenth century as an age of nationalism. In these influential accounts, unification of Italy and Germany together with the series of uprisings within the Ottoman, Habsburg, Romanov and British empires allegedly indicated that imperialism was giving way to nationalism as the dominant ideological creed. In this interpretation, Irish nationalism, as exemplified by the Fenian Uprising of 1867 and the Fenian Dynamite campaign (1867-1885), the Land War from 1879, Irish National Invincible assassinations in 1881-1883 and the 1916 Easter Rising, was understood as a typical example of a minority nationalism challenging the hegemony of a great imperial power - Irish small nation against the mighty British empire. The nineteenth century violent resistance of the Serbian, Greek, Romanian, Bulgarian and other Balkan movements for independence from Ottoman rule have been described in very similar terms. The 1804-1815 Serbian uprisings, 1821-1829 Greek War of Independence, 1859 Romanian unification and 1878 Berlin Congress recognising independence for Serbia, Romania, Montenegro, and later Bulgaria, all fit the same narrative of small Balkan nations challenging the imperial power of the Ottomans. The concept of a small nation standing against the powerful empire has been popularised throughout the 19th and twentieth century. In some respects, the very idea of nationhood was symbolically tied to the notion of being 'small'. If empires are huge and omnipotent behemoths, then nations are conceptualised as small and oppressed entities suffering in these 'prison houses of nations'. Hence, throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, most nationalist movements in Europe framed their political actions in these terms: the Irish, Czech, Norwegian, Finnish, Flemish, Estonian, Armenian, Croat, Montenegrin, Catalan and many other national movements defined themselves explicitly as small nations fighting for freedom against their more powerful imperial oppressors - the British, Habsburg, Ottoman, Swedish, Russian, and Spanish imperial states (Hroch, 2015, 1985).

Nevertheless, this small-nation narrative cannot be taken at face value. Rather than being accepted as a statement of fact about the size of a specific collectivity, this concept is in fact ideologically loaded and strategically developed to advance a particular vision of social reality and as such it requires more analysis and deconstruction. The same applies to the concept of a 'greater nation' which was devised and deployed by some nationalist movements for a similar purpose. Just as the small nation idea was used to delegitimise the imperial dominance over particular populations and territories, the concept of 'greater nation' was created and employed to advance specific nationalist projects.

To carefully dissect the use of these concepts, it is crucial to recognise that many 19th and early twentieth century nationalist movements have drawn equally on the imperialist and nationalist tropes to legitimise their ambition of establishing independent and sovereign nation-states. In this context, the references to the small or greater nation were regularly entangled with specific imperial legacies. There are two principal ways how the imperial past contributed to the nationalist aspirations: symbolically and organisationally. In some instances, nationalist movements symbolically linked their calls for independence or national unification to a glorious imperial past. For example, several nationalist movements in Europe including Portugal, Armenia and Georgia have extensively relied on past imperial legacies to advance their nationalist goals. The images of 4th century BCE Kingdom of Greater Armenia, the 12<sup>th</sup> century golden age of Queen Tamar of the Georgian empire, and the 16<sup>th</sup> century Portuguese empire feature prominently in the narratives of the nineteenth century nationalist movements. This symbolic link with the glorious past was pivotal in justifying the idea of independent and sovereign nation-states. In other instances, the link with the imperial past is indirect and mostly associated with a degree of organisational continuity. Hence states such as Hungary, Poland, Lithuania, Denmark and Norway preserved much of their imperial heritage in the new nation-states that were created in the 19th and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Thus Hungarian nationalist movements invoked the organisational legacies of the Austro-Hungarian empire, Polish and Lithuanian nationalisms drew on the state heritage of the 16<sup>th</sup> and seventeenth century Polish Lithuanian commonwealth, and nationalist ideologues in Denmark and Norway tended to invoke the legacy of the Oldenburg Monarchy of the Dano-Norwegian Realm (1524-1814). Although the new nation-states that emerged later were very different political projects, the organisational legacies of the past empires played an important role in the formation of these novel polities.

These symbolic and organisational continuities with the imperial past have also played a crucial role in the rise of nationalism in the Balkans and in Ireland. However, in these two cases one could see how different historical and geopolitical contexts shaped the direction of Irish and Balkan

nationalisms with the former centring on the narrative of a small nation and the latter embracing the idea of a greater nation. Nevertheless, despite these differences the Balkan and Irish cases also share some important similarities. They both clearly demonstrate that nationalist movements tend to strategically utilise the concept of a nation's size as a potent political tool. In this process they also reveal the inherent ambiguity in 19th and early twentieth century political projects that regularly blended national with the imperial legacies.

### **The Balkans: miniature states as great empires**

The traditional historiography depicts the early nineteenth century uprisings and wars in the Balkans as 'nationalist revolutions' focused on the overthrow of the Ottoman imperial rule and the establishment of independent nationstates (Clark, 2012; Hall, 2000; Mackenzie, 1994). However, there was very little nationalism in the early nineteenth century Balkans and these wars and uprisings emerged through the contingent interplay between the geopolitical actions of Great Powers and the rising social discontent within the Ottoman empire (Malesevic, 2019, 2012). The overwhelming majority of the population in nineteenth century south-eastern Europe consisted of illiterate peasantry, most of whom identified more in terms of locality, religion and kinship rather than nationhood.

Furthermore, even the local political elites were not fervent nationalists. They did not possess a unified vision of what form of statehood would replace the Ottoman rule, with some advocating the resurrection of the Byzantine empire, others hoping for the expansion of the Russian imperial rule over the Balkans, some devising plans for the unification of all of southeast Europe into one polity, and only a minority pursuing clearly articulated nationalist programmes for independence (Kitromilides, 1994; Roudometof, 2001). In contrast to the conventional, mostly nationalist, interpretations, I argue that the early attempts at state formation in the Balkans drew more on the past imperial legacies than on the nationalist ideas. Once Serbia and Greece attained a substantial degree of independence from the Ottoman rule, their leaders continuously invoked past imperial glories and relied more on the imperial models rather than the concept of popular sovereignty (Malesevic, 2019, pp. 111-134). Hence after the rulers of Serbia, Greece, Romania, Montenegro and Bulgaria gained a degree of self-rule, they rarely appealed to the universal moral principles of popular sovereignty and continuously justified political independence through references to the pre-existing, imperial, state structures.<sup>1</sup>

The Greek nationalist movement was inspired in part by the ancient Hellenic heritage, with the focus on the cultural and political achievements of ancient Greek philosophers, Athenian democracy, and the rich literature,

architecture and science of the Hellenic world. In addition, this ancient pagan tradition was further connected to the legacy of the Byzantine empire and its preservation of the Greek Orthodox Christian religion. The leading nineteenth century nationalist ideologues such as the historian Constantine Paparrigopoulos were focused on establishing a 'unbroken continuity' between the ancient, the Byzantine and the modern Greeks, and his multivolume study published between 1860 and 1877, *The History of the Greek Nation*, devoted a great deal of attention to the imperial origins of the contemporary Greek nation-state. This publication proved highly influential and was soon introduced as a compulsory reading for students in all higher educational institutions in Greece (Kitromilides, 1994).

The rulers of the newly independent kingdom of Greece drew on the Byzantine legacy to claim Constantinople/Istanbul as the true legitimate capital of what would be a substantially enlarged future Greek state. The Byzantine heritage was invoked in two principal ways - (1) to identify the Eastern Orthodox believers with the Greek nationhood, thus making a demographic claim whereby all members of the Greek Orthodox Church should live in a unified Greek national state; and (2) to claim that the historical borders of the Byzantine empire should be the natural borders of the future enlarged Greek state. This semi-imperial project, better known as the Megali Idéa, was formulated by the leading intellectual and later a prime minister of the kingdom of Greece, Ioannis Kolettis, who conceived of future Greece as a state spreading over 'two continents and five seas'. In 1844 Kolettis gave a speech in the Greek parliament where he was very clear about the ambitions of the new state: 'The Kingdom of Greece is not Greece. Greece constitutes only one part, the smallest and poorest. A Greek is not only a man who lives within this kingdom but also one who lives in any land associated with Greek history and Greek race. There are two main centres of Hellenism: Athens, the capital of the Greek Kingdom, and Constantinople, the dream and hope of all Greeks' (Brewer, 2012). Thus, the Greek state formation was rooted much more in the imperial legacy of past greatness than in the calls for popular sovereignty. Furthermore, rather than framing national independence in terms of a small and weak new polity challenging the might of a powerful Ottoman empire, the Greek state formation was articulated in terms of continuous territorial expansion with the unambiguous aspiration of establishing a Greater Greece.

Serbian and Bulgarian state building aspirations followed a similar pattern. Instead of focusing on the liberal tradition where nationhood is associated with *liberté, égalité, and fraternité*, the rulers of these new polities generated their claims to legitimacy through direct allusions to past imperial legacies. Hence both the Bulgarian and Serbian independence projects were linked to their respective medieval empires. The key reference point in the Bulgarian case was the Second Bulgarian empire under Simeon the Great (893-927).

This medieval kingdom encompassed much of the Balkan peninsula and under Simeon its armies defeated the powerful Byzantine empire. In this context, the rulers of nineteenth century Bulgaria aspired to recreate the medieval empire in its modern guise. Many politicians and intellectuals were explicit in their calls to go 'back to Simeon the Great' and establish a Greater and Unified Bulgaria 'on three seas' (Daskalov, 2005, p. 230). Once the Treaty of Berlin (1878) established a much smaller state than the one promised by the Russians at San Stefano, many Bulgarian politicians became obsessed with the unification of Moesia, Macedonia and Thrace into a single Greater Bulgaria. This semi-imperial project was further reinforced by the coronation of Ferdinand I as the prince and later tsar (emperor) of Bulgaria. During his rule, Ferdinand emulated Simeon I and aspired to recreate a new Bulgarian empire. Here again the emphasis was less on attaining the popular sovereignty of Bulgarian people and much more on reviving the imperial glories of the past.

The Serbian state builders tended to invoke the splendours of the Serbian medieval empire under Dušan the Mighty (1346-1355), who like Simeon the Great controlled much of the Balkan peninsula and was a serious rival to the Byzantines. This imperial legacy was later utilised extensively by both ruling dynasties of independent Serbia - the Karađorđevićs and the Obrenovićs. The two competing royal households devised and deployed royal pageantry with the flag and the coat of arms containing imperial symbols of Tsar Dušan: yellow flags with the red two-headed eagle. They also made dubious dynastic claims about their descent from the Nemanjić dynasty whose most prominent member was Dušan the Mighty but also the founder of the autocephalous Serbian Orthodox Church - Rastko Nemanjić, later canonised as Saint Sava. Similar to the Greek and Bulgarian cases, this imperial legacy was later invoked to establish the parameters of the future enlarged Serbian state.

In the mid-nineteenth century a high-ranking military officer and later prime minister, Ilija Garašanin, devised a secret plan *Načertanije* (The Draft) which envisaged the continuous expansion of Serbia to include its medieval territories as well as those regions throughout south eastern Europe where Serb populations constitute local majorities. By the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century, many Serbian politicians were influenced by this idea and were explicit about their aim of creating a Greater Serbia. With the military victories in the two Balkan wars of 1912-1913, the territory of the Serbian state and the size of its population expanded substantially - the state doubled its territory by expanding into Vardar Macedonia and Kosovo and gained more than 1.2 million people (Hall, 2000). These military successes further emboldened the calls for the creation of a Greater Serbian state that would include Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and large parts of Croatia. Here again the imperial project trumped ideas of national self-determination.



The unification of the principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia in 1862 gave birth to the new Romanian state which nominally remained under the control of the Ottoman empire. However, the new polity soon attained most attributes of statehood and in 1881 it was recognised internationally as the kingdom of Romania. Similar to other Balkan states, Romanian rulers justified the creation of a new polity through reference to its imperial predecessors, including the mythical legacy of the Dacian empire that was unified under the king Burebista (61-44 BCE) who defeated and conquered neighbouring tribes and successfully resisted the armies of the Roman empire. In the mid-nineteenth century, Romanian nationalist and later prime minister Dumitru Brătianu developed the concept of Romania Mare ('Greater Romania'), envisaging incorporation of territories such as Transylvania, Bukovina and Bessarabia into a single state. By the end of the 19th and beginning of the twentieth century, politicians and intellectuals articulated this expansionist project further, often grounding it in the legacies of previous kingdoms, including common references to Michael the Brave (1558-1601), the prince of Wallachia and Moldavia and conqueror of Transylvania. The idea of Romania Mare was later invoked to justify the territorial expansion after World War I when Romania acquired Transylvania, Bessarabia and Bukovina. During WWI King Ferdinand was clear that his aim was to resurrect the imperial order created by Michael the Great: 'Today we are able to complete the task of our forefathers and to ^establish forever that which Michael the Great was only able to establish for a moment, namely, a Rumanian union on both slopes of the Carpathians' (Malesevic, 2019, p. 121).

Thus, the Greek, Serbian, Bulgarian and Romanian independence projects were not framed exclusively or even primarily in nationalist terms but were often couched in imperial and quasi-imperial discourses. In order to justify the moves towards independence the rulers and the ideologues of state formation tended, not to invoke the universal principles of popular sovereignty and the rights of self-determination, but built their legitimacy claims through direct reference to the imperial predecessors of their new states. The conventional historiographical overemphasis on 'the national revolutions' of small Balkan states cannot properly account for the centrality of imperial claims that clearly underpinned the projects of state building. However, by following Todd's (2003, p. 245) advice and exploring 'the wider meanings and deeper structures' involved in the *longue durée* comparative approach, one can reveal the complexities of these historical changes.

### **Ireland in comparative perspective: the ideology of smallness**

Irish nationalist movements embraced the rhetoric of small nation from the 1790s when the Society of the United Irishmen started advocating the establishment of an independent Irish republic. Inspired by the French and

American revolutions, they promoted religious equality and liberal reforms and, in this context, organised the unsuccessful rebellion in 1798. The violent crushing of the 1798 rebellion fostered the development of an idea that Ireland was a small nation unjustly occupied and oppressed by its large and powerful neighbour. Lord Byron expressed this idea in his criticism of the existing relationship between Ireland and England: 'Between a small nation and a great, between a conquered people and its conqueror, there can be but a sham union<sup>A</sup>- the union of a boa constrictor with its prey' (O'Brien, 1993, p. 167).

This notion of national smallness was later articulated further by the members of the Young Ireland and the Irish Republican Brotherhood. The leading Young Irelander, Thomas Davis, was one of the first to frame the Irish struggle for independence in comparative terms, linking it to other European 'small nations'. Hence, in one of his poems written in the 1840s, he compares Ireland to Bohemia, Serbia, Hungary and Italy:

And Austria on Italy - the Roman eagle chained,

Bohemia, Servia, Hungary, within her clutches grasp;

And Ireland struggles gallantly in England's loosening grasp. (Kabdebo, 1993, p. 208) <sup>A</sup>

Nevertheless, the emphasis on the smallness of the nation became particularly pronounced at the end of nineteenth century and early twentieth century. In the wake of Italian and German unification, together with the rise of other nationalist movements throughout Europe, Irish political leaders and intellectuals relied on the idea of smallness to justify a degree of autonomy within the United Kingdom of Britain and Ireland. The leading idea in this period was the notion of Home Rule, advocating the political autonomy of Ireland with the devolution of powers to a Dublin based parliament. The Home Rulers, led by Charles Stewart Parnell, were eager to frame their calls for Home Rule in terms of the right of small nations to rule themselves. Hence Parnell was adamant to stress the difference between large England and small Ireland: 'Why should Ireland be treated as a geographical fragment of England . . . Ireland is not a geographical fragment, but a nation' (1875).

Nevertheless, the failure of the Home Rule movement together with the legacy of WWI led towards more radical responses. Initially many soldiers who fought within the British forces during the war were dissatisfied with its outcome for Ireland, where the 1916 uprising was violently crushed and where the Wilsonian idea of self-determination was not implemented at all. Some former combatants reflected on this after the war:

a Connaught Ranger observed that when he joined the army 1914 he had been told he was going to fight for the liberation of small nations but found upon his

return to Ireland that 'as far as one small nation was concerned, my own, these were just words'. (Kennedy, 2010, p. 163)

The Irish War of Independence was fought in part invoking this universalist principle of national self-determination of small nations. As Sinn Fein's election pamphlet from 1918 stated: 'The Spaniards, Bulgars, Swedes and Danes have claims less high than we, yet suffer they no foeman's chains, those nations can be free' (Laffan, 1999, p. 265).

With the establishment of an independent Irish state the notion of smallness was enhanced further as in the eyes of many Irish nationalists the new state was born incomplete and thus even smaller. However, its partitioned character contributed further to the notion of moral superiority defined by historical injustice and victimhood but also by its peace-oriented foreign policy. As De Valera stated in one of his speeches: 'even as a partitioned small nation, we shall go on and strive to play our part in the world, continuing unswervingly to work for the cause of true freedom and for peace and understanding between all nations'. The post-independence Ireland was articulated as 'the First of the Small Nations' which would inspire other small nations to seek freedom and independence (Keown, 2016). As the former Taoiseach John A Costello proclaimed in 1948: 'We are a small country ... Though we are a small nation, we wield an influence in the world far in excess of what our mere physical size and the smallness of population might warrant' (Keane, 2007, p. 124).

However, this overemphasis on smallness had less to do with the actual size of the nation and much more with the political strategy of legitimisation. Just as in the Balkan case, where past greatness was invoked to justify a contemporary political project, in the Irish case the idea of smallness was deployed for a similar reason. While the leaders and intellectuals in the Balkans utilised the quasi-imperial discourse of 'greater nation' to legitimise their respective nation-formation projects, Irish nationalists relied on the idea of smallness to highlight the existing injustice and domination of the large British empire.

These ideological tropes were used to downplay or even conceal actual social realities on the ground. Any careful historical analysis would reveal that neither the Balkan states nor Ireland fit well into these ideological categories: for much of the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and even early twentieth century Ireland was not a small nation even in a vague metaphorical sense, while most Balkan states were demographically and geographically almost the opposite of what their leaders claimed them to be - they were very small and in geopolitical terms mostly insignificant polities.

Despite the continuously invoked and reproduced image of a small nation, pre-Famine Ireland was characterised by, comparatively speaking, a large and highly dense population which by the mid-nineteenth century included more

the 8.5 million inhabitants (Boylan, 2016, p. 405). With such a large population Ireland was ahead of most European countries including Sweden and the Netherlands (3 million each), Belgium (4 million), Portugal (3.7 million), Norway, Denmark and Finland (1.5 million each) and many east European populations. In fact, in terms of its population Ireland was closer to the most populous countries in Europe - Austria (16.7), England (15.9) and Spain (14 million) (Rothenbacher, 2002).

Moreover, rather than being an isolated, small and marginal country, Ireland was fully integrated into global economic, political and cultural networks. The Irish population was not just a victim of British domination, it also played a vital role in the expansion of British imperialism throughout the world. Irish settlers, administrators, priests, merchants, traders and soldiers were crucial to the colonial project. The soldiers from Ireland often outnumbered those from England: while the Irish accounted for 'some 32.2 percent of population of the United Kingdom [in the mid-nineteenth century], there were more Irishmen than Englishmen in the British Army' (Spiers, 1996, pp. 335^336). The Irish Catholic church was at the helm of the European 'civilising mission' in Asia and Africa with its clergy proselytising and converting millions of non-Europeans. Irish immigrants populated much of the 'new world' and as such became an important pressure group in many societies including the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

Although the countryside largely remained underdeveloped, the Irish cities expanded and prospered as hubs of manufacturing, trade, industry and shipping. Pre-Famine Dublin was the second largest city of the UK and sixth largest city in Europe. Together with Belfast and Cork it became a significant centre of commerce, banking and manufacturing. Ireland was also one of the first European countries to introduce an extensive railroad system that covered much of the country: it had '65 miles of track in 1845, 1,000 in 1857, 2,000 in 1872 and, with 3,500 by 1914' as such 'boasted one of the densest networks in the world' (Garvin, 2003, p. 88). In a nutshell Ireland was not a small or politically insignificant nation by any objective measure. Instead, Ireland was a geopolitically, economically and culturally important nation whose representatives were at the helm of contemporary world developments.

In direct contrast, most Balkan nations were objectively miniature in size. At the time when Ireland's population was over 8.5 million, most southeast European societies were comparatively tiny: Croatia had 1.5 million, Bulgaria 1 million, Serbia and Greece around 800,000, Albania and Montenegro only around 200,000 people (Malesevic, 2019, p. 126). Their territorial organisation was also miniscule: apart from Romania, all Balkan states possessed small territories. When Greece became independent in 1833 it encompassed only 47,516 km<sup>2</sup> while the expanded principality of Serbia in 1834 possessed territory of only 37,511 km<sup>2</sup>. Although most Balkan states would continue to

expand their land size throughout the 19th and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, they largely remained small entities. Furthermore, unlike Ireland, which was fully integrated into the world economy, the Southeast European nations were at the margins of European economic developments. As many of them were part of the gradually crumbling Ottoman empire their trade links with the western world and Russia were mostly weak. Once the new states achieved full independence, the tendency was to rely on expensive shortterm loans to build the civil service and the coercive apparatuses of the state. In order to expand their territories and population sizes, the new rulers were eager to build massive militaries and large police forces (Malese- vic, 2013b). Although some of the Balkan states also invested heavily in education, the main purpose of these programmes was to nationalise their largely peasant, and hence nationally ambiguous, populations. The new rulers of independent states inherited mostly an illiterate, impoverished and landless populace, so the focus was less on developing elaborate plans of economic integration with the wider world and more on the domestic policies and ad hoc measures of land reform and literacy campaigns (Malesevic, 2019, 2012) . In this context the quasi-imperial discourses of national greatness were deployed in part to hide the actual reality and in part they served as didactic tools to nationalise the illiterate masses and eventually transform peasants into nationally-conscious and loyal Greeks, Serbs, Bulgarians and others. Hence the comparative *longue durée* perspective, as developed by Todd (2018, 2015), helps us reveal the less visible historical dynamics at play in Ireland and the Balkans. Rather than treating all these cases as being simple instances of 'small nations' fighting for self-determination, it becomes clear that historical reality was much more complex and the emphasis on smallness and greatness had less to do with the actual size and much more with the specific political projects.

### **Nationalist projects between smallness and greatness**

The scholarship on nineteenth century nationalist movements in Europe tends to differentiate between the unification projects of large nations and the independence movements of small nations (Breuilly, 2013; Hroch, 2015). In this context the unification of Italy, Germany and Poland is often treated differently from the nationalist movements among the Czechs, Finns, Norwegians, Irish, Serbs, Bulgarians, Croatians and many other 'small nations'. Miroslav Hroch (2015, 1985), a scholar who inaugurated the comparative study of nation formation among the small European nations, insists that there is a qualitative difference between movements of the small and large nations. For Hroch (1985, p. 9) small nations are defined by their small size and also by their 'subjection to a ruling nation for such a long period that the relation of subjection took a structural character for

both parties'. In this context both the Irish and nationalist movements in the Balkans belong to the same category of the small nation being dominated and subjugated by the larger nation. However, I would argue that this overemphasis on the size and the asymmetrical relationships of the national collectivities is both simplistic and explanatorily inadequate to account for the complexity of nation-formation processes.

For one thing, this understanding reifies group membership and as such assumes that an entire group is involved in the relationship of subjugation and domination. This hard form of groupism (Brubaker, 2004) leaves little or no room for identifying how social class and status shape inter- and intra-group dynamics. In other words, not all 'Greeks' and 'Irish' were subjugated by all 'Turks' and 'English'. The historical record indicates clearly that some social strata such as Phanariot Orthodox families were largely a privileged group within the Ottoman state while many ordinary Muslim peasants were members of tax paying rayah together with the Christians, Jews and other religious groups and as such experienced everyday hardship. Similarly, the ordinary English manual laborers had a much worse position within the British empire than many members of Irish Catholic clergy.

Secondly, this dichotomy of national subjugation employs a nation-centric view of history where imperial rule is simply reduced to the dominance of a majority nation. However, the key feature of an imperial order is the centrality of the lineage over any cultural markers. Although some empires did discriminate against individuals based on their religious affiliation, this cultural marker was not the defining feature of imperial orders and one could often convert in order to improve one's position within the empire. More significantly, imperial orders feared nationalism whether it emerged among the minority or majority groups, as nationalist principles of legitimacy promoted a degree of political and social equality that clashed with the deeply hierarchical imperial models of their rule (Kumar, 2017; Malesevic, 2013a; Roudometof, 2001).

Thirdly the sharp distinction between the small and large nations is problematic on several grounds. Minority ethnic collectivities can very successfully dominate majorities, as was the case throughout history, including the Manchu dominance over Han in China from 1644 to 1911, the Tutsi rule over Hutus in Rwanda, or Whites in apartheid South Africa. The size of the specific group can also change with some groups decreasing or increasing over the years while still retaining their dominant or subordinated position (i.e. Serbs in Kosovo or Albanians in Macedonia, etc.).

Finally, and most importantly for this paper, categorisations such as 'small', 'great' or 'greater' nation are context dependent and cannot be taken at face value, but require unpacking and sociological interpretation. Just as the rulers of the Balkan states harked back to 'the glorious imperial past' to project the

future expansion of their fledgling new states (i.e. 'greater Greece', or 'greater Bulgaria'), the Irish nationalist movements utilised the category of smallness to justify their own political ambitions. The Irish stress on 'national smallness' was ideologically equivalent to the Balkan emphasis on the (past) 'imperial greatness'.

565 In other words, the invocation of the size of the respective nation is rarely about the actual numbers of people or the extent of one's territory, but is primarily a strategic discourse of legitimisation that allows different national movements to pursue specific ideological vistas. The labels such as 'small' or 'greater' nation should not be taken at face value and understood as a factual description of a particular collectivity. Instead such categories require careful historical analysis and deconstruction: they are not purely descriptive and thus politically neutral categories, but ideologically highly charged concepts deployed to pursue particular nationalist ambitions. The inherent ambiguity of these categories, where the right for independent nationhood is also derived from past imperial glories, indicates further that the conventional dichotomies which sharply differentiate between imperial and national forms of polity require serious rethinking. The traditional teleological and present-centric views which reinforce the idea that nation-states are destined to replace empires provide no adequate analytical tools for understanding long-term historical changes. Such views tend to reproduce the contemporary, mostly nation-centric, views of the social world and as such cannot explain the shifting dynamics of collective representations. Jennifer Todd's work demonstrates why it is vital to embrace the comparative *longue durée* perspective in order to historically contextualise different ideological and organisational framings of nationhood. The long-term historical process of nation-formation is rooted in specific path-dependent trajectories which have and continue to shape the dynamics of groupness in the Balkans and Ireland (Todd, 2015). To fully explain the historical logic of continuity and change it is crucial to understand how entangled are 'the wider meanings' with the 'deeper structures in which institutions are inserted' (Todd, 2003, p. 245).

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## Note

1. Serbia gained a degree of self-rule in 1815 and became an autonomous principality in 1830, while Greece achieved independence after the war of 1821-1829. The Congress of Berlin 1878 granted full sovereignty to Greece, Serbia, Montenegro and Romania (in 1881), while Bulgaria became *de facto* independent after the St Stefano treaty between Russia and the Ottoman Empire in 1878 (although its *de jure* independence was confirmed only in 1908).

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