

Languages English

The Swiss "Innocent" Nationalism

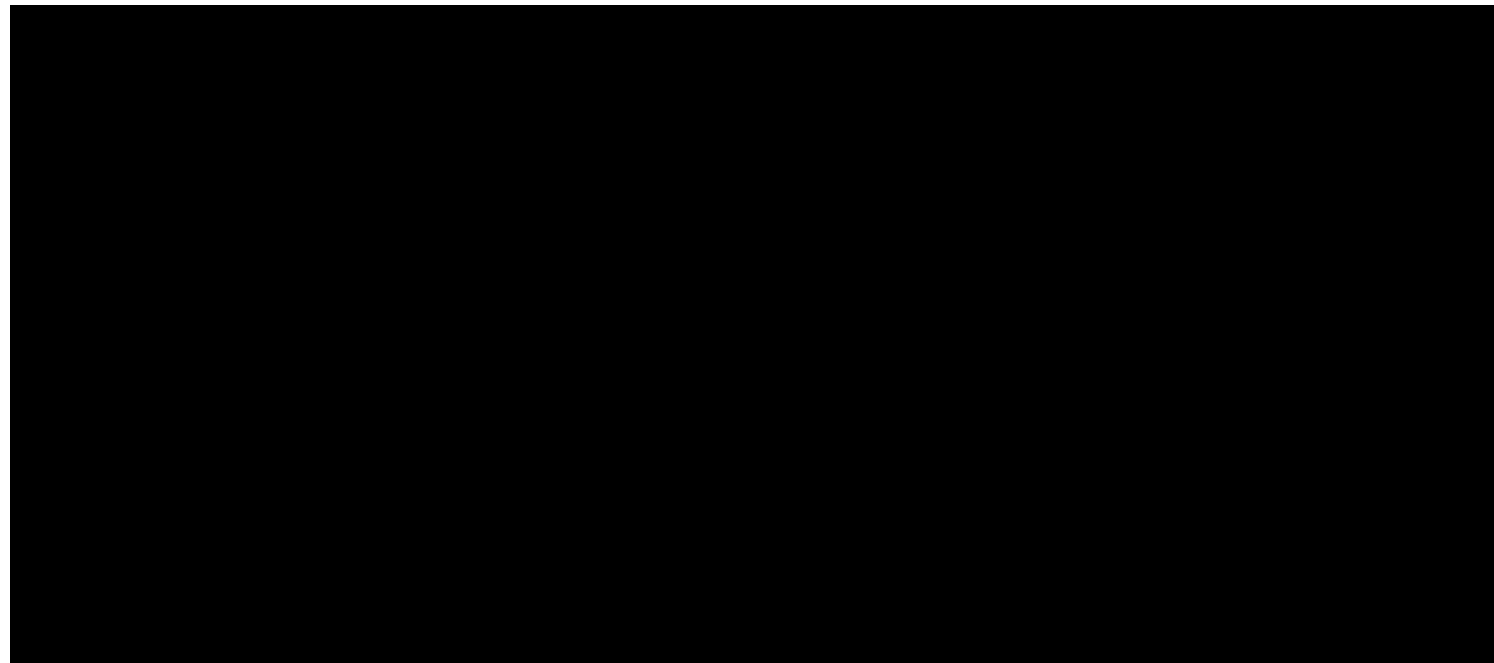
Denisa Tomkova



The refugees at the Serbian-Hungarian Border by the Slovak artist Tomáš Rafa (courtesy of the artist).

"By engaging with the audio-visual means on the background of protests, demonstrations and everyday life situations I define what racism, xenophobia and nationalism are." Tomáš Rafa

The video *Swiss National Day in Rütli* (2011) by the Slovak artist Tomáš Rafa is part of the exhibition *Enigmatic Majorities*. This video presents the "real" Swiss citizens (and no migrants) celebrating a relatively new national holiday, oblivious (or proud) of their "cleansed" ethnic monotony. Rafa explains that he 'started to deal with the issues of nationalism and xenophobia as a student of the Academy of Arts in Banská Bystrica in 2009 when the first segregation wall in Michalovce was built in the east of Slovakia. I was very interested and motivated to respond to the situation as an art student. It was a moment when I realized that this is how I imagine a role of a contemporary artist – to activate processes in the society highlighting the terminal issues and, if possible, to create a positive change.¹ Rafa has been interested in engaging with these topics for several years, which became materialized in his long-term project entitled *New Nationalism in the Heart of Europe*. However, when talking about extreme right-wing nationalism in Europe, the question of whether the Swiss National Day celebration should be considered in this discussion at all is offering itself.



Knut Åsdam argues that nationalist extremist groups share certain traits with the more mainstream "soft" nationalism. He looks at Norway as an example and claims that: "there is a widespread belief in an 'innocent', soft nationalism that celebrates the 'good' aspects of Norwegian society"², which can be seen in correlation with the *Swiss National Day*. It was created during Rafa's art residency in Switzerland in 2011. He spent three months recording events in Switzerland. The video itself is edited without the artist's commentary employing the *cinéma vérité* documentary form. One of the exhibition's curators, Ekaterina Degot, presented this video as the scariest one, because as she explains: "The nation presents itself as the most beautiful peaceful one, but this celebration is based on exclusion." The Swiss case has become studied by many scholars as the country seems to contradict some of the fundamental characteristics of a nation-state³. Switzerland has been by some considered a multi-national state, and 'is often presented as a country in which different nations or ethnic groups live peacefully together and thus as a successful model for other multi-national states and "multiculturalism" in general.⁴ However, Nenad Stojanović argues that: "Switzerland is far from being a 'paradise in the Alps'. It is presently struggling with some unpleasant memories from its not-so-old past (e.g. Nazi gold); it still has very restrictive naturalization laws based on 'ethnic' rather than 'civic' grounds; it has witnessed serious displays of xenophobia and anti-Semitism in the recent years; it remains rather conservative and closed towards the 'external World'⁵.

Rafa's documentary approach recording different celebrations, protests and demonstrations in Europe reveals a different forms and shades of nationalism and racism. Some appear to be very extreme and other might seem rather 'innocent' (like the Swiss celebration). However, they are all based on the same premise – the exclusion of the 'other' – and that makes them all similarly dangerous.



The still from the video *Swiss National Day in Rütli* (2011) by the Slovak artist Tomáš Ráfa (courtesy of the artist).

1 — Tomáš Ráfa, *E-mail interview by the author*, June 2017.

2 — *Nationalism: Persistence and Political Upkeep*, Knut Åsdam.

3 — [Marc Helbling](#) is one of the political sociologist working on the nationalism in Switzerland.

4 — *Switzerland: A Nation-State or a Multi-National State?*, WZB.

5 — MA Thesis "The Idea of a Swiss Nation. A Critique of Will Kymlicka's 'Account of Multination States'" presented at the McGill University, Montreal, 2000.

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