

Contestations over National Identity and Diversity

An analysis of French and British media debates in the autumn 2014

How and when is national identity and nationhood debated, and what does this reveal about the boundaries of national identity? Drawing on analyses of opinion pieces from French and British newspapers, this Policy Brief examines how national identity is debated, contested and challenged in light of national and international news events during the autumn of 2014. The Policy Brief is a publication from the research project 'Negotiating the nation: Implications of ethnic and religious diversity for national identity' (NATION).

Brief Points

- National identity is an embedded theme in public debates, spurred by events and societal change, but also often abstract and removed from everyday life.
- Three areas of debate with conflicts over the boundaries of national identity emerge: Immigration and ethnic diversity; terrorism and religious diversity; state independence and union.
- In discussions on immigration and ethnic diversity, opinions are often justified through expressions of and references to 'national' values.
- Religious diversity is contested in relation to 'Muslim' terrorism and radicalisation, but also to notions of 'Christian' values in the secular state.

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Mediations of national identity

Recent acts of terrorism have fuelled long-standing French and British debates on nationhood: who is French or British, and who is not. Events that induce fear, such as terrorism, crises and other disruptive events, often provoke public debate, change public opinion and alter traditional categories. In this Policy Brief we examine when questions about national identity appear in public debates and how national identity is contested. By analysing French and British media debates from the autumn of 2014, this study provides a snapshot of ongoing debates on national identity in France and the United Kingdom.

Debating the boundaries of the nation is not a recent phenomenon, and an analysis of national identity debates therefore needs to acknowledge the relevant historical contexts. The analysis in this Policy Brief builds on a three-month window on these long-winding and ongoing debates. Our analysis underscores that national identity is not only a topic of discussion on its own, but that the issue steadily reoccurs as part of and in relation to a number of other debates. We find that the boundaries of national identity are contested in debates on three issues: immigration and ethnic diversity; terrorism and religious diversity; and state independence versus unions. Furthermore, particular events, national and international, also spur or feed into contestations over the boundaries of national identity.

National identity post 2000

In both France and the UK, the debate on national identity has been particularly present in the media during the last 15 years. The acts of terrorism in the early 2000s changed the dynamics of the debates on multiculturalism on both sides of the Atlantic. As debates on cultural and religious diversity evolved, questions about national identity were brought to the forefront in many European countries.

In France, the debate on 'l'identité nationale' accumulated when a new law was introduced in 2004, banning religious symbols from all public arenas. Following a series of riots in the suburbs of Paris in 2005, critical voices argued that the French model of integration had failed. Two years later, the government initiated an officially administered debate about French identity, and thousands of peo-

ple took part in what became a nationwide debate on nationhood. The discussion was never officially concluded, and 'le débat' frequently reoccurs in the media. The relation between Islam and 'laïcité' has crystallised the debate on state schools and public spaces, and this has become a significant dimension of approaching questions of religion and diversity in the French context.

In Britain, contestations of nationhood have historical traits but the topic gained prominence in the media during the 2000s. The alleged 'failure of state multiculturalism', a hot topic in the early 2000s, has been reflected in a public debate about whether or not culturally distinct groups threaten a united view of British nationhood. These debates were also present in the British press during the autumn of 2014, exemplified by this comment by Aditya Chakraborty in *The Guardian*: "You have a Gujarati Hindu from Leicester; a Bangladeshi Muslim from Whitechapel; a Nigerian Christian from Lewisham. And so endlessly on, until you end up with a sprawl of cultural enclaves and contrasting nationalism". In this op-ed, cultural diversity was highlighted as entrenched in the British society, underlining that people can hold on to their ethnic and religious origins, while at the same time being British.

Media debates autumn 2014: Contestations of national identity

Drawing on analysis of 376 opinion pieces from French and British newspapers (see Figure 1 for a description of methods and data), this Policy Brief presents an outline of the major media debates during the autumn of 2014. The main international news events that were debated include the 'Islamic State's' (IS) self-proclamation as a Worldwide Cali-

phate, the ensuing rise in security levels in Europe, concern for radicalisation among European youth, and 'foreign fighters' participating in conflicts, in particular as part of the IS. A different set of debates related to the high number of people displaced due to the Syrian Civil War, and the increase in migration and migrant fatalities in crossings of the Mediterranean.

Domestic affairs constituted a significant proportion of the newspaper debates. In the British context, the Scottish independence referendum on 18 September was particularly significant for how national identity was debated, and the publication of a report on the Rotherham child sexual exploitation scandal, involving perpetrators of Pakistani heritage, caused heated debates. In France, questions such as the position of France within the EU, as well as the future of the republic, were debated. Discussions about ethnic and religious diversity in both France and the UK often focused on fears of the levels of immigration or questions about the secular state. In debates on diversity, national identity was sometimes referred to, other times not. In some instances contestations over national identity were explicit, while other times these were implicit, as in a letter to the *Guardian* merely stating: "European migrants are part of the fabric of British society".

Despite the different ideological underpinnings of the newspapers in the analysis, contestations over national identity appeared as part of the debates in all five newspapers. In particular, people's understandings and opinions regarding national identity were expressed as part of discussions on particular topics. Across the French and British contexts, we identified three distinct, but mutually overlapping and intersecting sets of debates

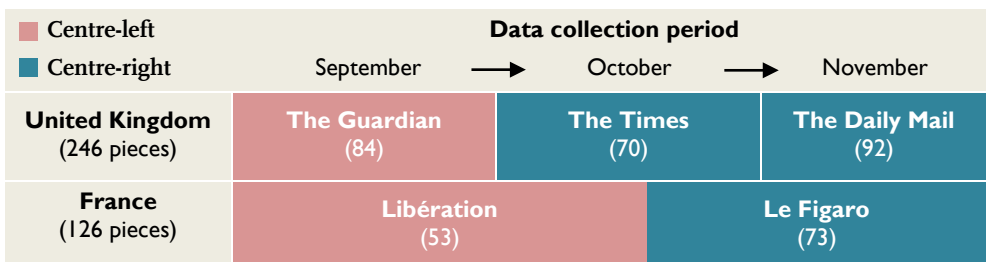


Figure 1: The analysis is based on a content analysis of opinion pieces in two French and three British nationwide newspapers. Op-eds, letters to the editor, columns, and editorials were collected from 01.09.2014 to 30.11.2014. All pieces were read daily, and the sections to be analysed were selected by skimming and choosing those with relevant keywords in the titles, subheadings, illustrations or as part of the text. In total 372 pieces are included in the data material.

which revealed clear contestations over boundaries of national identity: Immigration and ethnic diversity, terrorism and religious diversity, and state independence versus unions.

Immigration and ethnic diversity

“The recent denigration of immigrants is shameful. Where are the brave, idealistic politicians appealing to our values of tolerance and decency?” - Letter by Kathryn Dobson to the Editor of The Times.

During recent decades, immigration concerns have received much media attention and inspired debates in Europe. Voices representing diverging political affiliations and views are present, and different perceptions and assessments of positive and negative consequences of immigration are discussed in the media. In our data, debates about immigration and its implications were often connected to notions of belonging and different conceptions of ‘national values’. While the immigration debate is more present in the British than the French press, participants in debates drew on notions of values to support their claims regarding immigration in both contexts.

British values, described by one contributor as “generosity and kindness”, were called upon in relation to how immigration and diversity should or should not be discussed. Others expressed that traditional, in particular, ‘Christian’, values should be upheld. The idea that immigration could “threaten social cohesion” was also present. The debates reflect not only conflicting opinions on immigration, but also conflicting views of what constitutes national identity and national values. Voices representing minority communities in particular, highlighted how different ethnic and religious values were compatible with British values, as Vivian Wineman and Shuja Shafi wrote in the Guardian:

“For the majority of Jews and Muslims in the country, our historical coexistence and religious heritages underpin our commitment to British values.”

Partly due to different media landscapes, the French opinion pieces did not express negative opinions about immigration and its impact on nationhood as explicitly as in the UK. Rather, the discussions focused on the lack of any debate on immigration. A common view

was that absence of a debate could result in increased support for the extreme right – the only political strand that spoke freely about questions on immigration. Linkages between the specific French debating culture and increased cultural insecurity were also highlighted, as was clearly stated in an op-ed by Malika Sorel-Sutter in Le Figaro:

*“Si les Français se tournent vers le parti de l’extrême droite, c’est principalement en raison de son positionnement sur le sujet de l’immigration-intégration. À l’expression d’une insécurité culturelle grandissante, les hommes et femmes politiques persistent malheureusement dans leur aveuglement et répondent par de bannissement du sujet de l’identité nationale”.*¹

Terrorism and religious diversity

Contestations over national identity were more explicit in relation to religious than to ethnic diversity. These mostly centred on discussions about Muslims and terrorism. In the British press, Islamic culture was more frequently mentioned than other cultures, and national identity was discussed in relation to Christian versus Muslim faith, with contestations over the role of Christianity as the fundament of the nation’s values and identity. Simultaneously, other contributors praised religious diversity, including Islam and Judaism, seeing these as being at the core of multicultural Britain.

The intensive media attention on radicalisation of youth raised questions in debates about loyalty to the nation and about national identity. Possible reasons for radicalisation were discussed, as was the states’ treatment of returning foreign fighters, with French and British values being drawn upon to justify personal opinions. In France, some participants in debates argued that the lack of a unified national identity was one of the main reasons why young Muslims were radicalised. It is also noteworthy that in the French press, the vast majority of opinion pieces on French Muslims also mentioned terrorism.²

In the UK, a statement made by the Home Secretary arguing that British values would prevail in the battle against extremism became a focal point of debate. Concern was expressed that the removal of citizens’ passports was not in line with what was perceived as British values and equality. Whereas counter-terrorism legislation was debated in both

France and the UK, the discussion of legal amendments was more explicitly linked to national values in Britain than in France.

State independence versus unions

A third boundary across which issues of Britishness and Frenchness were contested was state vs. union. Although very different cases, the matters of the Scottish referendum and the could-be dissolution of the UK, and both the UK and France’s memberships in the European Union, were discussed in terms of independence and of sovereignty as a ‘nation’, raising questions about national identity.

In France, the relationship between the state and the EU was criticised, and participants in the debate argued that the ‘real’ French had disappeared. This was linked with an argument that France’s position as a powerful state was weakened because of its membership in the EU. In relation to the ‘panique identitaire’ and France’s EU membership, debates centred on whether it was time to reaffirm the nation and its particular identity. Some suggested that creating a new French constitution could reinvigorate France, with a ‘Sixth Republic’ to replace the current Fifth Republic.

In the UK, the Scottish referendum spurred a major debate on the differences and power relationships between British and Scottish identity. Supporters of Scottish independence upheld that Scottish identity represented a national feeling, while British identity lacked feelings of belonging and was an expression of inclusion in a territorial state. Scotland was a “too proud nation to be a mere ‘English territory’”. The no-side of the campaign argued that what constituted the British was the equality and inclusion of all English, Scottish, Welsh, Irish and Cornish identities. Hence a loss of Scotland would “feel like an amputation”.

Boundaries of national identity

Through an analysis of opinion pieces published in selected French and British newspapers, we have explored how national identity is debated and contested in national media. Contestations of identity in these debates were not necessarily explicit, and participants in public debates rarely stated specifically how they believed national identity was challenged. While particular events such as terrorist at-

tacks, or societal change through increased immigration, can spur national identity contestations, these debates often remain rather abstract and removed from everyday interactions. While many opinions may be read as reactions to a feeling of being threatened, this is not always the case, such as in the assertive example of debates around the Scottish independence referendum.

We found that the boundaries of national identity were contested in debates that related to the three main topics we have identified. In different ways, these debates drew on perceptions and experiences of values, identity and senses of belonging, which contributors related to categories like 'nation', 'ethnicity' or 'religion' in particular contexts. While identity was debated in connection to several religions, the linkages between Islam and identity were most common, and were often assumed to be connected to international terrorism. This implies that while religious and ethnic diversity in general may affect feelings and understandings of nationhood, this understanding is also affected by specific events. Such events may induce fear in the society, exemplified by the rise of IS and the associated rise in security levels in Europe. Contestations of national identity in relation to religious diversity seem to be as stimulated by internationally mediated events and debates, as by nation-specific experiences.

In relation to ethnic diversity, national identity and values were often connected when debating increased immigration and the creation of ethnic minority 'enclaves'. These contestations seem more affected by local and national events, and less affected by international events or debates. There were, however, clear connotations between the debates on ethnic and religious diversity. In the British context, it is noteworthy that immigration is a topic which

is seen to contest national identity at several levels – the English as well as the British; and intra-European immigration as much as global. Thus disputes over immigration in the British context may be seen to contain some elements that could have a racial component, and others that do not.

Contestations of national identity as embedded in public debates

Whereas questions of national identity enter and leave the public debate on a recurring basis, this analysis demonstrates that contestations of national identity are ever-present in an underlying sense, entrenched in both the French and British newspaper debates. When events occur that are seen to interrelate, explicitly or implicitly, with questions of immigration and ethnic diversity, terrorism and religious diversity or state independence vs. union, discussions about national identity are brought to the surface. Contestations over national identity in the media are manifold and unpredictable, often spurred by fear inducing events and societal change. But such contestations often operate at an abstract level when they refer to national values. Therefore, the prominence of public debate for policy development is something that merits further attention, given the distance from ordinary people's everyday lives. ■

Notes

1. If the French look towards the extreme-right party, it is mainly due to its position regarding immigration-integration. As an expression of growing cultural insecurity, politicians unfortunately persist in their blindness and respond by banning the subject of national identity (Author's translation)
2. 28 of 36 opinion pieces on French Muslims also mentioned terrorism

Further reading

- Bleich E., Stonebraker, H., Nisar, H., Abdelhamid, R. (In press) Media Portrayals of Minorities: Muslims in British Newspaper Headlines 2001-2012, *Journal of Ethnic and Racial Studies*.
- Figenschou, T., Beyer, A. (2014) The Limits of the Debate: How the Oslo Terror Shook the Norwegian Immigration Debate, *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 19(4) 430-452.
- Fredette, J. (2014): *Constructing Muslims in France: discourse, public identity, and the politics of citizenship*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press.

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THE PROJECT

This Policy Brief is part of the project 'Negotiating the nation: Implications of ethnic and religious diversity for national identity' (NATION). The project explores the on-going negotiations of 'the nation' in contemporary European societies, based on the empirical cases of Norway, France, and the United Kingdom.

PRIO

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