

# Nationalism and the European "Migrant Crisis": A Comparative Analysis of Political Parties' Discourses on National Identity

**Dong TU**

Supervisors: prof. dr. Jian SHI (Sichuan University) and prof. dr. Bruno Coppieters (Vrije Universiteit Brussel)

**Abstract:** The unfolding of the European migrant crisis<sup>1</sup> gives rise to nationalism and sparks the debates on national identity around Europe. In the words of mainstream politicians, in the coverage of media and in the writings of scholars, nationalism is generally described as the villain of the piece, an obstacle to a joint solution to the crisis at European level and a mere resistance to further European integration in immigration policy making. The problem with this generalization is two-fold. Firstly, nationalism in Europe has a state and sub-state dimension which indicates various attitudes towards immigration and EU's counter measures in response to the crisis. Secondly, to link nationalism only with the radical right parties is too narrowly-focused, since these fringe parties aside, a number of mainstream left and right parties join the debates on national identity as well. Therefore, I propose that nationalism be viewed from a state and sub-state dimension on the one hand, and state nationalism & sub-state nationalism need a redefinition to be in accordance with the particularity of contemporary European context marked with more-than-half-a-century integration process on the other hand. I draw on Suszicky's definition of nationalism and Deschouwer's conceptualization of state & sub-state nationalism to formulate my own.

The renewed concept of nationalism at state and sub-state levels expands the narrow focus on radical right parties in nationalism research to a wider range of political parties whoever resort to the national identity rhetoric in political mobilization. Meanwhile, the fact that parties of sub-state nationalism also identify with a certain left or right ideological positioning raises the questions as to which of the two dimensions, left and right political cleavage, or state and sub-state nationalism, and how these two dimensions exert influence on the immigration politics and national identity discourses by political parties during the migrant crisis.

---

<sup>1</sup> Migrant crisis, the inflow of a huge number of migrants in a relatively short period of time, has taken place several times in Europe in post-WWII era. The latest one began in 2013 when rising numbers of people arrived in European Union from across the Mediterranean Sea or through the land routes in Southeast Europe. It reached a peak in 2015 when an estimated one million individuals arrived in Europe. The number of new arrivals has been on the decline since then. Different terms have been used to describe the migrant crisis in Europe, such as European migration crisis, European refugee crisis, European migration and refugee crisis, European migrant crisis. In this research, I adopt the term European migrant crisis since "migrant" is a broader word which includes both refugees and migrants. However, the above mentioned terms are basically used interchangeably. Moreover, given the fact that the concept of a Migrant Crisis is disputed and that it frames the whole approach to the question of how to grant asylum to refugees or to integrate migrants, therefore a quotation mark is used.

To answer the questions, I choose four political parties from three West European countries, the sub-state right N-VA from Belgium, sub-state left SNP from UK, state right LR and state left PS from France, to look into their national identity discourses and their attitudes to the crisis and to EU's countering measures through a qualitative analysis of the case parties' manifestos, speeches by parties' representatives in parliaments at regional, national and European levels, parties' documents and media release at their official websites as well as news reports by major news portals during the period from late 2014 to the end of 2017.<sup>2</sup>

Pellikaan's uniculturalism-multiculturalism antithesis framework is borrowed to offer a quantitative analysis of the four parties' immigration approach during the crisis. The qualitative case analysis and the quantitative coding results prove my two hypotheses that 1. parties of sub-state nationalism are more open to immigration than parties of state nationalism; 2. the left parties, at both state and sub-state levels, formulate a more inclusive narrative of national identity than their right counterparts. Furthermore, between the two dimensions of state/sub-state nationalism and left/right ideological division, the latter proves to be the leading determinant in parties' national identity discourses. In other words, political parties' immigration politics is mainly organized around the left-right spectrum, be they parties of state nationalism or parties of sub-state nationalism. This raises the question as how the center left and right parties at both state and sub-state levels will rise up to the challenge posed by the radical right parties who have been gaining by their anti-immigration card.

**Key words:** state/sub-state nationalism; left/right ideology; national identity discourses; political party; European migrant crisis

---

<sup>2</sup> The reason for focusing on this period is attributed to three reasons. Firstly, it is a fact that the years before 2014 have seen ebbs and flows of migration/refugee in the Mediterranean sea, however, the numbers of arriving migrants/refugees were comparatively small on the one hand and it did not receive much political and media attention on the other. Secondly, although the crisis did not unfold in a massive way until 2015, debates about this already began in the end of 2014 in member states' national parliaments and the 2014-2019 European Parliament. Thirdly, though the migrant crisis is far from being over even at this moment, it has been on a decline from the perspective of arriving numbers and the political and media attention it receives since the end of 2017.