Euroscepticism,
UKIP and national identity

ELISE RIETVELD*

Eurosceptic parties across Europe made big gains in the last European elections. The European Parliament has never seen as many Eurosceptic MEP's who, paradoxically, sit in an institution that they don't approve of in one way or another. Recent polls find that all across Europe, people have started to doubt the European project of 'ever closer union' (European Commission 2013, pp. 5-10, 34). Trust in Europe has never been this low, even in countries like France where support for the EU could almost unquestioningly be assumed before. A recent European Council on Foreign Relations (2013) policy memo suggests that this change is explained by the Euro crisis that has left both creditor and debtor states feeling disempowered and rendered to the fancy of impersonal and distant European institutions. But Eurosceptic sentiment runs deeper and has been around for longer, and it cannot simply be understood as a uniform set of beliefs.   In this brief article, I focus on one form of Euroscepticism– as advocated by UKIP – that was particularly successful in the UK in the recent elections. I analyse party manifestos to show that its connection to immigration presupposes a questionable conception of national identity.

Szczerbiak and Taggart (2008, pp. 7-8) distinguish between 'hard' and 'soft' Euroscepticism. The former opposes the whole European project and parties advocating it support withdrawal from the EU. The latter, on the other hand, supports the existence of the EU but opposes specific policies or further integration and parties advocating it support EU reform. As Hartleb (2011, p. 15) further notes, although Euroscepticism is often coupled with extreme-right political orientations, it does not need to be. This makes sense once we consider the reasonable objections that can be raised against the EU's democratic deficit (e.g. Majone 1998). Clearly, we cannot simply take one Eurosceptic for another, and what follows only applies to a certain type of Eurosceptic: the 'hard' and right-wing type associated with parties such as UKIP.

The UK Independence Party has campaigned for a UK withdrawal from the EU since the Maastricht Treaty (1992) that fuelled the transformation of the EU from a strictly economic to a political union. Its support has steadily increased, culminating in its victory in the recent European elections. In the local elections, held on the same day, it took a record number of votes and secured 147 council seats (up by 139). Research has found that UKIP draws its core support from working

ΒΟΥΛΕΥΤΙΚΕΣ ΕΚΛΟΓΕΣ 2015: Η ΝΕΑ ΠΡΟΚΛΗΣΗ ΓΙΑ ΤΟ ΜΕΛΛΟΝ ΤΗΣ ΕΛΛΑΔΟΣ
GREEK POLITICS JOURNAL, INFO-COMMUNICATION RESEACH SOCIETY (ICRS), WWW.EKLOGESONLINE.COM

1

class men from a Conservative background who are financially insecure and read tabloid newspapers, but also appeals more widely particularly in European elections (Ford, Goodwin & Cutts 2012). UKIP's main issue remains the EU, closely followed by immigration, and its manifestos for the 2014 European and local elections show that these two topics are conceived to be tightly linked.

In its European elections manifesto, UKIP states that it opposes EU membership and advocates an exit to 'regain control' from a 'bureaucratic organisation writing our laws and costing us all £55 million per day in membership fees' (p. 4). Before you get to that page, however, the manifesto tries to draw in voters with the following quote from party leader Nigel Farage: 'We're the only party being honest about *immigration*, jobs and housing' (p.2, emphasis added) and of course, in public perception (and the tabloid press) the latter two are often thought to be placed under strain by the former. The manifesto suggests tight links between the EU and immigration, as the first policy area that the 'regaining control' theme is tied to is, indeed, border control. The EU's policy of free movement of persons means that any EU citizen can take up residence and work in the UK and, as UKIP emphasises, claim benefits too. This 'mass immigration' is linked to 'youth unemployment', 'stagnant wages' and pressure on schools, the NHS (further reinforced by 'health tourism') and green spaces that are being turned into housing for immigrants (p. 4). Once outside the EU, UKIP wants to start 'repairing the UK', and its first priority, again, is 'cutting and controlling immigration' as 'outside the EU, we can manage our borders and decide who we want to come and live and work in the UK. EU rules stop us from doing this' (p. 7).

The manifesto for the local elections pays more attention to other policies such as an increased use of referendums, cutting foreign aid and fighting crime (which includes 'deporting foreign criminals', p. 8), but makes the same links between EU immigration and the abuse of public services. Its slogan goes 'open-door immigration is crippling local services in the UK' (p. 1). The second page explains why 'public services' are 'under threat': immigration is out of control, and the number of EU immigrants living in Britain without a job, i.e. on benefits, has risen substantially; this proves an 'open door for crime' as Romanians are now allowed to settle in Britain too yet they are disproportionately involved in crime; meanwhile, all these new people will have to be housed and this places 'green spaces under attack' (p. 2).

These manifestos express a link between Euroscepticism and an antagonistic attitude to immigration: the EU is rejected as a form of outside control over legislation generally, and immigration policy specifically. This link makes sense once we probe below the surface of these manifestos and find that what is doing the work here is a concern for national identity that is left largely implicit. As Wellings (2010, pp. 488-493) points out, debates over EU membership saw the creation of a discursive link between national sovereignty, the independence of ancient British

ΒΟΥΛΕΥΤΙΚΕΣ ΕΚΛΟΓΕΣ 2015: Η ΝΕΑ ΠΡΟΚΛΗΣΗ ΓΙΑ ΤΟ ΜΕΛΛΟΝ ΤΗΣ ΕΛΛΑΔΟΣ
GREEK POLITICS JOURNAL, INFO-COMMUNICATION RESEACH SOCIETY (ICRS), WWW.EKLOGESONLINE.COM

2

institutions to make laws, and national identity, as founded upon those hard-won historical institutions and traditions. Hence, EU membership and the ceding of sovereignty over certain policy areas to Brussels that it entails can be understood as a threat to national identity.

Although immigration is often painted as a threat to national identity in the tabloid press, UKIP instead opposes it by portraying it as a strain on public services. While this might appear more rational than racist, it does paint EU immigrants as potential benefit scroungers which does not correspond to the fact that most EU immigrants work and pay taxes towards public services. Moreover, this claim depends on a clear distinction between immigrants (who abuse public services) and citizens (who are entitled to using them) that in reality is difficult to sustain. It may be difficult at first sight to distinguish between a worker whose Polish father moved here during the War and a Polish worker who moved here ten years ago. It's even more difficult to distinguish between this worker who has since obtained citizenship and his Polish girlfriend who has not, as she only moved over more recently. This inevitably leads us to question what it is that makes somebody entitled to use public services. After all, UKIP's manifestos imply that a native Brit who has never worked is more entitled to use schools and the NHS than any of these working Polish immigrants. It is national identity, then, that seems to be the main criterion for entitlement.

The national identity that is implied here, moreover, is not simply a civic one because we cannot distinguish the unemployed native Brit from the working Polish immigrants on this basis: the latter may have come to respect the cherished independent democratic institutions mentioned above. Instead, it seems to rely on notions of inheritance, intergenerational continuity and ancestry. History and blood, in other words: things that immigrants cannot easily come to share. And this is where it becomes problematic, for as we saw above, immigrants often do become citizens yet on this conception of national identity, may never be accepted as part of the nation, which – from what we can derive from UKIP's position – means they cannot legitimately access public services.

Following through the implications of the conception of national identity that seemingly underpins UKIP's opposition to the EU, we see that it naturally points to the exclusion of immigrants *and* citizens from immigrant backgrounds. That is, where it comes to immigration, UKIP's platform rests on a shoddily concealed hostility towards multiculturalism. I say shoddily because there has been no short supply of UKIP councillors uttering racist statements. While UKIP's conception of national identity may chime with that of a significant proportion of the electorate (Heath and Tilly 2005, pp. 119-132), it does not adequately address questions of equality between diverse citizens. In fact, it leaves us with a paradox: UKIP's manifestos suggest that EU membership poses a dual threat to national identity as it corrodes sovereignty and imposes mass immigration. Yet this threat pulls in two directions: the exclusionary attitude exhibited towards immigrants contradicts the civic

values of equality, inclusion, participation, justice and so on that are embodied in the sovereign institutions purportedly at the heart of national identity.

References:

➢ Ford, R., Goodwin, M. &Cutts, D. 2012. 'Strategic Eurosceptics and polite xenophobes: support for the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) in the 2009 European Parliament elections', in European Journal of Political Research 51(2): 204-234.

➢ European Commission 2013.*Standard Eurobarometer 80: Autumn 2013*. Available online at: http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb80/eb80_first_en.pdf, last accessed 04/07/2014.

➢ European Council on Foreign Relations 2013.*The continent-wide rise of Euroscepticism*. London: ECFR.

➢ Hartleb, F. 2011. *A thorn in the side of European elites: the new Euroscepticism*. Brussels: Centre for European Studies.

➢ Heath, A. & Tilley, J. 2005. 'British national identity and attitudes towards immigration', in *International Journal on Multicultural Societies*, 7(2): 119-132.

➢ Majone, G. 1998. 'Europe's 'Democratic Deficit': the question of standards', in *European Law Journal*, 4(1): 5-28.

➢ Szcerbiak, A. & Taggart, P. 2008. *Opposing Europe? The comparative party politics of Euroscepticism. Vol. 1: Case studies and country surveys*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

➢ United Kingdom Independence Party 2014.*Create an earthquake. UKIP manifesto 2014 (European elections)*. Available online at: www.ukip.org, last accessed on 04/07/2014.

➢ United Kingdom Independence Party 2014.*Manifesto 2014 (local elections)*. Available online at: www.ukip.org, last accessed on 04/07/2014.

➢ Wellings, B. 2010. 'Losing the peace: Euroscepticism and the foundations of contemporary English nationalism', in *Nations and Nationalism*, 16(3): 488-505.

* PhD in Politics and International Relations, Cardiff University

ΒΟΥΛΕΥΤΙΚΕΣ ΕΚΛΟΓΕΣ 2015: Η ΝΕΑ ΠΡΟΚΛΗΣΗ ΓΙΑ ΤΟ ΜΕΛΛΟΝ ΤΗΣ ΕΛΛΑΔΟΣ
GREEK POLITICS JOURNAL, INFO-COMMUNICATION RESEACH SOCIETY (ICRS), WWW.EKLOGESONLINE.COM

4