

Do values matter? An assessment of Ireland’s response to the “migration crisis”

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Abstract

The Republic of Ireland is not a signatory to the Schengen Agreements and therefore has no obligation to participate in the EU relocation schemes proposed in 2015. Accounting for less than one percent of the population of the European Union, Ireland could be expected to make use of the opt-out mechanism when dealing with the EU’s struggle over migration. Nonetheless, in September 2015 the country voluntarily committed itself to take in 4,000 asylum seekers from other EU countries and has reinforced the Irish Navy’s participation in search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean Sea. In this article, the relevant parliamentary debates of 2015 and 2016 are used to trace national identity frames in the “migration crisis” as the components that explain the country’s non-securitising behaviour.

Keywords: migration, Ireland, opt-in, securitisation, small states, national identity, humanitarianism

Introduction

On 10 September 2015, Ms Frances Fitzgerald, Ireland’s Minister for Justice and Equality, announced that her country would take part in the emergency relocation scheme set up to ease the migratory pressures in Greece, Italy and Hungary. The decision came after a special Cabinet meeting was convened to discuss the package of proposals produced the previous day by the European Commission, focused on tackling the refugee crisis in Europe (Department of Justice and Equality, 2015).

According to a plan proposed earlier that year, the total number of individuals to be relocated under the scheme had been put at 160,000. Based on a formula taking into

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consideration GDP, population, and the size of the receiving countries, Ireland has been assigned to relocate a total of 4,000 asylum seekers over the following years (European Commission, 2015). By virtue of Protocol no 21 of the Lisbon Treaty, Ireland would not be part of the arrangements related to the “Area of freedom, security and justice” and thus has no legal obligation to participate in the relocation scheme, yet joined on a voluntary basis (opt-in) (European Union, 2016). If family reunifications are accounted for, the original number of 4,000 may reach up to roughly 20,000 based on previous programmes of this kind (The Irish Times, 2015). Furthermore, over the course of 2015, the Irish Government decided to deploy three patrol vessels in the Central Mediterranean to perform search and rescue operations (The Irish Independent, 2015).

These two decisions do not reflect securitisation processes of migration taking place in Ireland. Attributing non-securitisation to the small number of migrants (voluntarily) being taken in, or to the fact that Ireland is geographically distant from the Southern and Eastern borders of the EU, the areas where most migrants enter EU territory, may, however, fall short of explaining the differences in response between Ireland and the neighbouring United Kingdom.

What then explains Ireland’s cooperative behaviour in facing the “migration crisis”? The present article aims to provide an explanation based on specific features of Ireland’s national identity, identifying its policies as inherently value-based rather than interest-based. Relevant parliamentary debates are used to verify the presence of distinctive features of a national identity in the political discourse.

The first part of the article explains the concept of national identity. A short overview of Ireland’s national identity then follows. In the third part, two parliamentary debates are used to identify the elements of national identity in the context of Ireland’s approach to the migration situation in 2015 and 2016.

Size and security

Buzan et al. (1993: 156-166) consider international migration to be a potential threat for the receiving country due to its direct effects on societal identity, thereby making it a threat to societal security. As such, one might argue that small states are more affected by migration, due to the more significant change in society per migrant population entering the country. Securitising responses may thus be more likely than in the case of bigger states. As noted above, such securitisation cannot at present be observed in Ireland. It is precisely in the notion of societal identity that an explanation for this may be found.

For the purpose of this article, defining the Republic of Ireland as a small state does not take extensive argumentation. In fact, with a population of less than 5 million, Ireland accounts for roughly one percent of the total population of the European Union. From a perceptual point of view, the title of Keown's book (2016) on the history of the Irish foreign policy, *First of the Small Nations*, is by itself telling, as are the recurrent uses of the term "small"² to define the country by the Deputies of the House of Representatives.

Identity as a variable?

To address policy issues within the frame of a concept such as identity is a challenging task. There are no better words than McSweeney's to describe the problems related to this: „[c]ollective identity is not 'out there', waiting to be discovered", rather „what is 'out there' is identity discourse on the part of political leaders, intellectuals and countless others [...] and even in times of crisis, this is never more than a provisional and fluid image of ourselves as we want to be, limited by the facts of history" (McSweeney, 1996: 90).

Nonetheless, a serious attempt to intervene on the „analytical looseness" and the „definitional anarchy" in the study of social identity has been made by Abdelal et al. (2006) in their work titled *Identity as a Variable*. In it, the content of an identity (the „meaning") is defined along four lines (of constitutive norms, social purpose, relational comparisons and cognitive models³); the authors term „contestation" the degree to which the content of an identity is shared among a group's members. This paper seeks to detect particularly statements of social purpose and statements which reveal particular cognitive models among the Deputies. Relying on Tonra's assumption that „national identity is constructed discursively" (2006: 5), discourse creates a narrative which „serves to narrow the range of available interpretations of facts and events" (Ibid: 10). Interpretations, in turn, guide our positioning on specific issues. There lies a possible link between the national identity formation of the political elites of the Republic of Ireland, the speeches of the deputies, and the policy outcome of both the opt-in to the relocation and

² In one case even "minuscule" [Dáil Éireann Debate (b)]

³ The first term refers to the rules which govern membership in a given group; the second to goals shared by the group; the third to the relations to other groups; the fourth to general worldviews common to the specific group [see Abdelal et al. (2006: 696)].

resettlement schemes proposed by the European Commission, and the increased naval presence in search-and-rescue operations in the Mediterranean.

Grasping Irish identity

The major theme that Tonra identifies around Ireland's national identity, which is similarly detected by Keown (2016), is that of the "global citizen" (2006: 33-50). Tonra writes extensively about the modes in which this specific narrative was formed and brought along in the history of Ireland, starting „well before the foundation of an Irish state" (Ibid.: 33). In particular, two of the main themes relevant for the narrative of global citizen stem from the high rate of emigration of Irish people abroad⁴ (with a missionary connotation, peaking in the Irish diaspora of the mid-nineteenth century), on the one hand, and the struggle for liberation from the United Kingdom on the other. Each of these would have implanted particular values among the Irish. As a result, „[m]any Irish policy makers and a significant portion of public opinion have traditionally seen Ireland as a relatively poor European state with its own history of anti-colonial struggle and a strong profile of missionary work in the developing world." As a result, Irish national identity „has been built upon a belief in solidarity with people suffering deprivation and hardship at the hands of local or distant oppressors" (Tonra, 2006: 9).

Also, in more concrete terms, the absence of Ireland's state-to-state relations with most of the developing world up until the 1960s was compensated through a vast network of unofficial ties, mainly the heritage of missionary activity carried out traditionally by the Irish Churches, which „firmly established a 'charitable imperative' with respect to the developing world" (Ibid.: 47). This 'charitable imperative' is manifestation of a social purpose in Ireland's dominant national identity. Keown (2016: 5) generally shares this view, identifying in the fight for independence the values which underpinned state-making in Ireland in the 1920s, thereby leaving for the Irish state-makers the „aspiration to a foreign policy based on values and beliefs rather than the pure pursuit of interests associated with the foreign policy of the existing powers."

Doyle brings up, in the same vein, the 1996 White Paper on Irish foreign policy which in the first paragraph affirms that „Ireland's foreign policy is about much more than self-interest. For many of us it is a statement of the kind of people we are. Irish people are committed to the principles of [...] international justice and morality" (2004:

⁴ The highest and most sustained per capita rates in Europe for more than one century, according to Mac Einri and White (2008; 153).

77). Furthermore, as a member of the United Nations Security Council, Doyle concludes that „Irish diplomats displayed a relatively consistent support for multilateralism, for the UN system and for a *humanitarian and human-rights based approach to international relations*” (2004: 99, emphasis added by the author). Wivel (2005: 395) even theoretically defines small states’ security identity as „a product of past behaviour [...] internalized over long periods of time by the political elite and population of a state”. With these premises in mind, it is possible to look more consistently at the political discourse regarding the „migration crisis”.

Debates in Parliament

Ireland is a parliamentary republic with a bicameral system, of which only the lower house (the Dáil Éireann, with 158 seats) is directly elected by the people and chooses the Head of Government and the Deputy Head of Government.

Two parliamentary debates are examined below. The first debate was held on 1 October 2015 (Dáil Éireann, 2015), as the first debate after the Government’s opt-in decision. The other debate was held on 28 April 2016 (Dáil Éireann, 2016), as the first meeting addressing the „migration crisis” after the general elections of 2016⁵.

In 2015, eight parties were represented in the Dáil, along with a number of independent representatives who accounted for roughly 10% of the Chamber. Fine Gael (a Liberal-Conservative party) had a majority. After the general elections of February 2016, Fine Gael maintained its majority (thus continuing its presence in government), with a large drop of seats for the Labour Party (the second biggest party in 2015, and part of the coalition government), down to 7 seats from the previous 33. Furthermore, the left-wing Republican party Sinn Féin gained an extra nine seats, from 14 to 23 seats. The number of independents remained stable at 19. No far-right parties were represented (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2016).

During the session of 1 October 2015, five parties expressed their position on the migration situation the EU was facing: Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil⁶, Sinn Féin and Solidarity–People Before Profit, plus two Independents. During the debate of 28 April 2016,

⁵ For the purpose of a more fluid reading, the two debates, properly referenced at the end of this paper, will not be referenced after all the quotes which follow. All the statements attributed to MPs (of which the party of affiliation is always mentioned) are taken from either of the two debates.

⁶ Third party in 2015, second in 2016, positioned in the centre.

representatives of all the eight parties' expressed their views. The view of the Government was articulated by four of its members in the debate.

Since the general position of the parties with regards to the migration issue has not changed in the time between the two sessions, the article will identify main trends and themes of the two debates considered indistinctly. Above all, no dissenting or critical voice was raised against the decision of the government. Rather, almost all interventions began with a statement of appreciation for the policy adopted, from across the whole spectrum of parties. When criticisms were stated, these referred to the need to do more. Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin, the two main opposition parties, both found themselves in agreement with the government, and Fianna Fáil's Niall Collins praised the position of Ireland being „in the top three countries of the EU as a proportion of our population for receiving immigrants from the crisis”.

Expressed by the whole spectrum of parliamentary forces was the need for a humanitarian approach to the crisis. The political parties in Ireland were critical regarding the way in which other Member States were responding to the crisis; in their view Ireland „should confront them morally,” and „step up and do what is right” (Pádraig Mac Lochlainn/Sinn Féin) with „compassion” in „a timely and humanitarian fashion” (Niall Collins/Fianna Fáil). In relation to the EU and the other Member States, Deputy Mac Loughlainn (Sinn Féin) proposed that Ireland can be „a human rights defender and a honest broker”. For independent Deputy Clare Daly, Ireland it seemed that „can do and be something that has always put itself out there as being: a sort of world leader in welcoming”. Minister for Justice and Equality Fitzgerald (Fine Gael) recognized that „[a]t a time when anti-immigration and anti-refugee sentiment has, unfortunately, been part of mainstream rhetoric in the international political and media debate, it matters that Ireland and this House stand by our tradition of supporting refugees.” He went on to note „the unanimous support for the decisions of the Government,” and thanked the Deputies for their „principled support”. Niall Collins (Fianna Fáil) stated that „we must work collectively and humanely to tackle this awful crisis” because „our response will play a major part in defining whether we are true to our values”. In the words of Joan Burton (Labour Party), “the genuine feeling of people in Ireland in favour of being able to help people is probably the greatest strength of this country”.

Central and recurring, once again among all of the parties, is the invocation of one of the pillars of the foreign policy identity of Ireland detected by Tonra and mentioned above, as a driver of policy making: historical mass emigration, and Ireland as a land of

conflict (with reference to Northern Ireland). Catherine Murphy (Social Democrats) claims that „[i]n our DNA we understand that [the desperation of migrants because we have a history, be it in the mid-19th century or otherwise. We are the survivors of that history, which is part of the reason we understand this issue more than most [other countries]”. Minister of State Dara Murphy (Fine Gael) also brought up the past of the country when, at the end of the 2016 session, he concluded that the speeches „have reflected the unanimous support in this country for the humanitarian approach that has traditionally been taken by Ireland over many decades and have acknowledged that many people from this nation have been forced to leave these shores in the past because of poverty, war and conflict”. Fiona O’ Laughlin (Fianna Fáil) similarly welcomed the support for the decision by saying that “Ireland, more than most countries, knows the compassion other countries have shown to its citizens for many decades”. Independent Catherine Connolly attributed the same “trait-character” to Ireland when saying that „[b]ecause of our history most people in Ireland have an open heart about the acceptance of refugees”. For Independent Finian McGrath, Ireland has „learned from the sectarian aspect of our conflict in the North in the past 30 years. Sectarianism and racism are no-nos”. Minister of Justice and Equality, Frances Fitzgerald (Fine Gael), underlined that „[a]s a nation, we naturally empathise with people fleeing war”. Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn (Sinn Féin), after recalling how his own father and grandfather had emigrated in the past, affirmed that „[i]t is the history of our country. With that history in mind, surely we can do better on the issue of taking a reasonable and fair allocation of refugees and welcoming them to our country”.

On some occasions MPs referred to the issue of securitisation too. Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett (Solidarity-PBP) opined that „[w]e should not, for one minute, allow anybody to encourage the idea that these people represent a threat”; the contrary in his view „would dishonour our history”. Eamon Ryan (Green Party) was similarly explicit about this: „[w]e need [...] to ensure political responses opposed to welcoming refugees do not develop here”. Independent Finian McGrath pointed out how in Ireland „no extreme right-wing parties have arisen” and „if they have tried to take off, they have not developed”, the reason resting, according to him, with the past of civil war in the country. Unanimous is the commendation of the Irish Navy regarding the deployment of three vessels in the Central Mediterranean.

All in all, as Tonra’s (2006) and Keown’s (2016) work would predict, the long-standing pillars of Irish national identity were extensively manifest in the reasoning of

MPs across the whole spectrum of parties, especially regarding the connection between Ireland's history of emigration and the current immigration pressures. Regarding the conceptualization of identity by Abdelal et al. (2006), the parliamentary debates give a neat picture of a „social purpose” whereas all of the MPs perceive it as a duty to take in migrants, and stand for a human response to the crisis. These attitudes, in the discourse of the deputies, originate from a sense of shared identity which has been consolidated throughout history, and the policy outcome is therefore value-based.⁷ Contestation of this notion of social purpose as an element of identity, within the Parliament, is non-existent.

Conclusion

A direct connection between small stateness and the securitisation of migration cannot be established in the case of Ireland. The approach of other member states in the European Union is characterised by considerable diversity.

Far from offering an exhaustive explanation for such differences, this article has argued in favour of more diversified approaches to the matter at hand. In particular, the study of cultural values and self-representations may promise to provide useful insights for understanding related issues. While it might not offer explanations in other realms of international relations, it is possible that specifically the relationship between migration and securitisation may be better understood through this prism.

This article shows that in the case of Ireland policy-making rests on an internalised belief in humanitarianism when dealing with migration, and that nobody in the legislative body conceives otherwise. Furthermore, the way in which a country's history shapes its present is also an issue to be addressed. Using theories of path dependence as a conceptual framework might be a fruitful approach to take in this respect. In Ireland, the political élite itself claims there to be a strong connection.

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⁷ Even though not necessarily exclusively value-based. In that matter, further explanations could be brought up by further studies in a non mutually-exclusive fashion.

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