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## National Identity issues in the electoral materials from the 2014 and 2019 European Parliament Election Campaigns

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# National Identity issues in the electoral materials from the 2014 and 2019 European Parliament Election Campaigns

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## Θέματα εθνικής ταυτότητας στις αναλύσεις εκλογικών εκστρατειών για το Ευρωπαϊκό Κοινοβούλιο από το 2014 έως και το 2019 κατά το Σύνταγμα των Ελλήνων;

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### ABSTRACT

The mediatization of politics could challenge established political processes and has the power to transform the relation between political parties and candidates, on the one hand, and voters, on the other. Mass media effects on political processes have been for a long time the focus of interest for academics. This article analyses the content of electoral materials used during two European Parliament election campaigns (2014 and 2019) focusing in particular on the coverage of values related to national identity. Interestingly, the quantitative analysis showed that the importance placed on issues related to national identity depended largely on the time when a particular country became a member of the European Union and differed considerably between countries located in different parts of Europe.

**KEY WORDS:** European politics, National Identity, European Parliament Election Campaigns 2014-19, electoral materials.

### ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Η μηντιακή διαμεσολάβηση της πολιτικής είναι πρόκληση για τις καθιερωμένες πολιτικές διαδικασίες και έχει την δύναμη αφενός να αλλάξει την σχέση μεταξύ πολιτικών κομμάτων και υποψηφίων και αφετέρου των εκλογέων. Οι επιδράσεις των μαζικών μέσων στις πολιτικές διαδικασίες αποτέλεσαν για πολύ καιρό το κέντρο ενδιαφέροντος των ακαδημαϊκών. Το συγκεκριμένο άρθρο αναλύει το περιεχόμενο του εκλογικού υλικού που χρησιμοποιήθηκε σε δύο προεκλογικές εκστρατείες για το Ευρωπαϊκό Κοινοβούλιο (2014 και 2019) με επίκεντρο την κάλυψη αξιών που συνδέονται με την εθνική ταυτότητα. Η ποσοτική ανάλυση έδειξε ότι η σημασία που δινόταν σε θέματα εθνικής ταυτότητας εξαρτήθηκε πάρα πολύ από την χρονική περίοδο κατά την οποία μία χώρα έγινε μέλος της Ευρωπαϊκής Ένωσης και ήταν πολύ διαφορετική σε χώρες που βρίσκονταν σε διαφορετικές περιοχές της Ευρώπης.

**ΛΕΞΕΙΣ-ΚΛΕΙΔΙΑ:** Ευρωπαϊκή πολιτική, εθνική ταυτότητα, εκλογικές εκστρατείες, Ευρωπαϊκό Κοινοβούλιο, περίοδος 2014-2019.

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, the influence of mass media is increasing, touching all aspects of modern life (Lundby, 2009; Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999). When one reflects on 'the process of mediatization', one has to agree with Strömbäck and Esser (2014) that here we can speak about a 'long-term process through which the importance of the media and their spill-over effects on political processes, institutions, organizations and actors have increased' (Strömbäck and Esser 2014, 6). As the existing literature stresses (Kriesi, 2014), this mediatization of politics could challenge the established political process and has the power to transform the relation between political parties and candidates, on the one hand, and voters, on the other. On that basis mass media effects on political processes have been for a long time the focus of interest for academics in order to understand some political processes such as elections (Esser and Strömbäck, 2014).

The present article analyses the content of electoral materials used during two electoral campaigns for the European Parliament (2014 and 2019) from a specific perspective: the coverage of values related to national identity.

## 2. Theoretical background

Comparative data of the two European Parliament campaigns (2014 vs. 2019) showed that in terms of national cultural identity there were some differences at the level of European Unions citizens' aggregate public opinions (European Commission 2020). Thus, between March 2014 and June 2019 there was an 11.1% increase in the percentage of respondents who declare that for them the EU means 'cultural diversity'. At the same time, there was an increase of only 1.12% of respondents who stated that on a personal level the EU means 'loss of our cultural identity' (see Table 1).

**Table 1. What does the EU mean to you personally?**

		Cultural diversity (%)	Loss of our cultural identity (%)
2014	March	19.95	11.68
	November	28.11	15.25
2019	June	31.05	12.80
	November	27.65	11.85

Source: European Commission 2021.

According to the literature (Esaïasson, 2011) the election campaign and elections have the potential to give legitimacy to the political system and, in addition, the fact that a voter supports certain candidates or certain political parties in the electoral competition will offer him or her a superior satisfaction at the end of the campaign irrespective of the result obtained by the political actor for whom he or she had voted. Much more, at the end of the electoral campaign, as a result of his or her vote, his or her relationship with 'democracy' as a value will be superior in comparison

with the feelings that were recorded at the beginning of the same campaign (Esaïsson, 2011). According to the study of Kostelka and Blais (2018) voting participation affects the satisfaction of citizens, more precisely the electoral elections increase the feeling of satisfaction with democracy among those who vote and especially in relation to parties and candidates that win the elections.

The importance of the relationship between the identity dimension of European Union support and the vote of citizens in the case of European election campaigns has become extremely important with the movements recorded in public opinion (Hobolt and De Vries 2016). In the existing literature it is considered that, on the one hand, there is a relationship of mutual dependence between national and European identity, more precisely, they support and strengthen each other (Citrin and Sides, 2004; Klandermans, 2014). However, a number of studies (Carey, 2002) believe that a strong sense of national belonging can weaken support for European integration, the latter being seen as a threat to nation states. Moreover, Hooghe and Marks (2005) and Krouwel and Abts (2007) went further and argue that the existence of a strong national identity can lead to a reduction in the importance and trust of citizens in the European project.

### 3. Methodology

The present article is based on a research project coordinated by Rome Tre University, Italy. Every five years, more than 100 scholars from all EU partner countries work together to analyse the European Union election campaign in each country. The aim of the project is to collect and analyse, comparatively, the electoral materials from twenty-eight countries involved in each European electoral campaign (European Elections Monitoring Center 2019).

The present study used material collected during the 2014 and 2019 European election campaigns. The sample used for analysis has a volume of 1446 materials (1023 electoral posters and 443 spots) in 2014 and 12556 documents in 2019 (1016 electoral posters, 457 spots and 11083 social media posts).

The methodology of collecting and analysing data used in this chapter was a quantitative one, namely quantitative content analysis. In all European countries, the instrument for collecting data was a quantitative grid of analysis that was used by all the researchers involved in the project (European Elections Monitoring Center, 2019). The grid was structured on several dimensions/axes, such as, for example, the typology of materials analysed, the verbal and non-verbal communication used in the electoral materials, the political symbols used, the balance between the use of national and European references, the use of humour or negative advertising, or the type of emotion triggered by each electoral material. We focus our analysis on the following main variables: national identity, nationalism, and national values. As independent variables we have the main European regions (e.g. Continental Europe, East Europe, South Europe and North Europe) and main group of countries from the European Parliament (Founding countries, the first enlargement of the European Union from 1973; the second and the third enlargements from 1981-1986; the fourth enlargement from 1995; the enlargements of the European Union starting with 2004 until now). Our analysis was guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What were the main national- related issues used in electoral materials during the 2019 European Parliament election campaign?; and

RQ2: What was the relevance of national identity in 2019 compared to the 2014 European Parliament election campaign for different regions of European Union?

## 4. Analysis of the results

As our analysis showed, there were variations in the focus on national elements in posters and commercials in the two years analyzed particularly in the case of countries from various regions of the European Union. Thus, we recorded increases in the use national-related issues in posters from Continental Europe (an increase of 6.8%), Eastern Europe (an increase of 11.1%) and Northern Europe (an increase of 12%) but also a decrease in the case of South Europe (28.6%) in the two electoral campaigns. In the case of commercials, the differences seem significant to us, our results indicating especially decreases in the use of this type of elements (with a maximum of 40.5% in the case of East Europe) (See Table 2).

**Table 2. Focus on national issues in posters and commercials in different regions of the European Union– 2014 vs 2019**

	2014		2019	
	Poster (%)	Commercial (%)	Poster (%)	Commercial (%)
Continental Europe	11.1	14.6	17.9	9.2
East Europe	33.6	51.9	44.7	11.4
South Europe	39.3	47.4	10.7	30.6
North Europe	19.3	37.3	33.3	32.6

The moment when countries became members of the European Union also influenced the way in which elements aimed at national identity were used in posters and commercials in European electoral campaigns. Thus, for posters, the largest decrease in the use of national issues was registered in the countries that were part of the second and third enlargement (1981-1986) of the European Union (Greece, Spain and Portugal) with a decrease of 47.8% while Austria, Finland, and Sweden (the fourth enlargement of the European Union) recorded a 3.5% increase in the use of national issues in posters (see Table 3). Similarly, note that in the case of commercials there were significant variations, the use of national issues varying from a 22.6% decrease in the case of countries that joined the European Union after 2004 (Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Romania, Bulgaria and Croatia) to a 41.3% increase in the case of the countries of the first enlargement (Denmark, Ireland and the United Kingdom) (See Table 3).

**Table 3. Focus on national issues in posters and commercials in each group of the European Parliament – 2014 vs 2019**

	2014		2019	
	Poster (%)	Commercial (%)	Poster (%)	Commercial (%)
Founder 1957	14.1	18.9	11.4	12.5
1st enlargement 1973	9.1	14.3	5.4	55.6
2nd & 3rd enlargements 1981-1986	58.6	47.5	10.8	50
4th enlargement 1995	11.3	3.7	14.8	28.6
From 2004 until now	33	55.2	24.5	32.6

In the case of the analysis grid used in the analysis we also included a series of elements that were subsumed to the general idea of 'national identity' ('Peace', 'Honesty'; 'Justice', 'Solidarity', 'Traditions', 'Multiculturalism/cultural differences', 'National identity', 'Religion'). Our analysis indicated that when using these values we can speak of the existence of significant differences in the case of the electoral campaign for the European Union Parliament from 2014 versus the same electoral campaign that took place after five years in 2019.

Thus, in the case of posters, we registered higher uses of the variables 'Justice' and 'Solidarity' and 'Religion' while for 'Peace', 'Honesty' and 'Traditions' decreases were recorded at five years distance. For commercials, the situation was somewhat different, with increases in topics related to 'Peace', 'Justice' and 'Solidarity', and decreases in issues related to 'Honesty', 'Traditions' and 'Religion' (See Table 4).

In the case of the data from the 2019 election campaign, we also introduced the items 'Multiculturalism / cultural differences' and 'National identity', and our analysis indicated that 'National identity' was used in the case of 3% of posters and 2.4% of commercials (See Table 4).

**Table 4. Values found in posters and commercials – 2014 vs 2019**

	2014		2019	
	Poster (%)	Commercial (%)	Poster (%)	Commercial (%)
Peace	1.8	2.7	1.1	9.7
Honesty	2.5	2.5	0.7	1.7
Justice	1.8	1.4	3.6	2.7
Solidarity	1.8	2.3	6.2	6.8
Traditions	2.8	2.5	0.8	2
Multiculturalism/ cultural differences	-	-	0.3	1.7
National identity	-	-	3	2.4
Religion	1.4	2	6.8	0.7
Others value issues	10.9	7.9	2.8	3.1

Our data show some differences between the groups of member countries of the European Union as regards the use of the values subsumed to 'National identity' used in electoral posters. Thus, for the countries of Continental Europe the most significant increase was registered in the case of values related to 'Solidarity' (an increase of 14.9%) and 'Justice' (an increase of 5.3%) while for the countries of Northern Europe only 'Justice' as value increased in its use by 2.2% between 2014 and 2019. Southern European countries did not use 'Honesty' in their posters (a decrease of 7% compared to 2014), 'Peace' (a decrease of 0.9%) and/or 'Traditions' (a decrease of 1.4%). At the same time, they use other values more in 2019 as compared to 2014, such as: 'Justice' (an increase of 1.2% between the two election campaigns) and 'Solidarity' (an increase of 0.8% in 2019 compared to 2014). As regards Eastern European countries, our comparative analysis indicates that 'Peace' and 'Honesty' were the values that were most often used in the 2019 posters as compared to 2014, while 'Traditions', 'Justice' and 'Solidarity' were less used in 2019 than five years ago. The distinct value 'National identity' from the electoral campaign of 2019 was used more by the countries from Eastern Europe (8.1%) and Northern Europe (1.2%). 'Nationalism' as a specific ideology was an item identified in 2019 in all regions of the European Union, the variations between groups of different countries being minimal (See Table 5).

**Table 5. Main values used in posters in different regions of Europe - 2014 vs 2019 (%)**

	2014				2019			
	Conti- nental Europe	East Europe	South Europe	North Europe	Conti- nental Europe	East Europe	South Europe	North Europe
Peace	1.8	0.4	-	4.5	2.6	0.5	0.9	-
Honesty	0.9	2.6	7	0.8	0.9	1.4	-	-
Justice	0.6	3	3.3	0.8	1.8	5.9	4.5	3
Solidarity	1.8	1.3	1.9	2	16.7	-	2.7	0.6
Traditions	0.9	9.1	1.4	0.8	0.9	2.7	-	-
Multiculturalism/cul- tural differences	-	-	-	-	0.9	-	-	-
National identity	-	-	-	-	-	8.1	-	1.2
Religion	2.4	2.6	-	-	-	-	-	
Populism	-	-	-	-	0.4	-	-	0.6
Nationalism	-	-	-	-	0.4	0.5	0.9	0.6
Others value issues	7.2	14.7	13.6	9.8	2.6	0.9	5.4	4.1

The same variations between different groups of countries were registered in the case of the use of values subsumed to 'National identity' in commercials for the 2014 European electoral campaign compared to commercials used in the same electoral campaign five years later. Continental European countries discussed topics related to 'Justice' (an increase of 4.5%), 'Traditions' (an increase of 2.5%), 'Solidarity' (an increase of 9.1%) more. The same countries made

a smaller appeal to 'Religion' as a value (a decrease of 4.4% in 2019 compared to 2014) in the same timeframe. Moreover, in the same period, the countries of Northern Europe did not use 'Peace' (a decrease of 4.9%) in the 2019 campaign compared to the 2014 but they emphasized in their commercials other values, such as 'Solidarity' (an increase of 11.8%), 'Justice' (an increase of 4.1%) and 'Traditions' (an increase of 1.6%). For the Southern European countries, the most important increase was registered in the use of the values of 'Justice' and 'Solidarity' (each of them registered an increase of 1.5%) while the Eastern European countries appealed more to 'Solidarity' (an increase 2.2%) and 'Traditions' (an increase of 1%) in the commercials from 2019 as compared to those from 2014. The specific value of 'National identity' was used uniformly by the groups of countries included in the analysis in the electoral campaign for the European Parliament from 2019: 2.3% for Continental Europe; 2.3% for Eastern Europe; 2.4% for Southern Europe and 2.6% for Northern Europe. 'Nationalism' as a value was found only in some commercials presented in the 2019 electoral campaign. Much more, the appeal to 'Nationalism' values did not show significant differences among the groups of countries, the variation ranging from 2.3% in the case of Continental Europe to 1.2% in the case of Eastern Europe (See Table 6).

**Table 6. Main values used in commercials in different regions of Europe – 2014 vs. 2019**

	2014				2019			
	Conti- nental Europe	East Europe	South Europe	North Europe	Conti- nental Europe	East Europe	South Europe	North Europe
Peace	4.5	1.2	1.2	4.9	-	1.2	0.8	-
Honesty	2.2	3.7	3.5	-	2.3	3.5	0.8	-
Justice	-	2.5	1.8	1	4.5	-	3.3	5.1
Solidarity	4.5	2.5	1.8	1	13.6	4.7	3.3	12.8
Traditions	2.2	3.7	2.9	1	-	4.7	0.8	2.6
Multiculturalism/ cultural differences	-	-	-	-	-	2.3	0.8	5.1
National identity	-	-	-	-	2.3	2.3	2.4	2.6
Religion	5.6	3.7	0.6	-	-	1.2	0.8	-
Populism	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Nationalism	-	-	-	-	2.3	1.2	1.6	-
Others value issues	9	9.9	6.4	7.8	6.8	-	1.6	10.3

When we analyzed the use of the same set of values subsumed to 'National identity' in posters collected from the two electoral campaigns we recorded variations between the countries that became members of the European Union in different 'waves' of integration. Thus, founder countries used more the values of 'Solidarity' (an increase of 18.8% in 2019 as compared to 2014), 'Peace' (an increase of 1.5%) and 'Justice' (an increase of 2.1%) while the countries from the first enlargement made a greater appeal to 'Justice' (an increase of 14.2%) to the detriment



of other values that were no longer used in their posters. In the case of the second and third enlargement countries, the values most often identified in the 2014 posters versus those used five years later also varied, with an increase in 'Peace', 'Justice' and 'Solidarity'-related issues and a decrease in the case of 'Traditions'. Posters used by countries from the fourth enlargement put a greater emphasis on 'Justice' and minimized the use of 'Peace' and 'Solidarity'-related values in the period of time analysed. In the case of the countries that became members of the European Union after 2004, the most important movements were registered in the case of the values of 'Justice' (an increase of 4% between the two electoral campaigns), 'Religion' (an increase of 1%), 'Honesty' (a decrease of 4.2%) and 'Traditions' (a decrease of 3.4% between the two election campaigns). The distinct value of 'National identity' was most frequently used in posters from Eastern Europe (8.3%), and it was not used in the posters from the countries of first, second and third enlargement (See Table 7).

**Table 7. Main values found in posters for each country group of the European Union - 2014 vs 2019 (%)**

	2014					2019				
	Founder 1957	1st enlargement 1973	2nd & 3rd enlargements 1981-1986	4th enlargement 1995	From 2004 until now	Founder 1957	1st enlargement 1973	2nd & 3rd enlargements 1981-1986	4th enlargement 1995	From 2004 until now
Peace	1.3	1.1	-	3.1	2.1	2.8	-	3.2	1.1	0.4
Honesty	1.3	-	-	0.6	5.5	1.1	-	-	-	1.3
Justice	0.7	1.1	5.7	-	2.6	2.8	14.3	9.7	1.1	6.6
Solidarity	2.3	-	2.3	1.3	1.8	21.1	-	3.2	1.1	0.9
Traditions	1.3	1.1	1.1	-	6	-	-	-	-	2.6
Multiculturalism/cultural differences	-	-	-	-	-	1.1	-	-	-	-
National identity	-	-	-	-	-	1.1	-	-	1.1	8.3
Religion	2.6	-	-	-	1.6	-	-	-	-	2.6
Populism	-	-	-	-	-	0.6	-	-	1.1	-
Nationalism	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	3.2	2.2	-
Others value issues	7.8	8	10.3	7.5	15.4	3.3	-	-	6.7	3.5

When the two electoral campaigns for the European Parliament were compared, our data indicated that these variations were registered also in the commercials used by countries grouped according the moment of their accession to the European Union. 'Peace', 'Traditions' and 'Religion' were the values that were less used by founder countries in 2019 electoral campaign as compared to 2014. At the same time 'Justice', 'Honesty' and 'Solidarity' (with a significant increase of 14.6 %) were the most commonly identified values in commercials of founder countries. In the case of the countries of the first enlargement 'Solidarity' was the value that recorded a

significant increase (11.1%) while 'Justice' recorded a sharp decrease and actually ceased to be used in 2019 (as compared to 9.7% total mentions in commercials from those countries in 2014). 'Peace' (an increase of 1.6%), 'Honesty' (an increase of 1.6%), 'Justice' (increased 3.9%) and 'Solidarity' (a 0.3% increase) were the values that registered a greater use in the electoral campaign for European Parliament in the countries from the second and third enlargement group. In the case of the countries in the fourth enlargement, we registered a total disappearance of the elements included in the value of 'National identity' for the commercials used in 2019 as compares with the same type of media materials used by those countries during the 2014 campaign. For countries that have become members of the European Union starting with 2004, our analysis indicates an increase in using the 'Solidarity' (7.2%) and 'Traditions' (1.7%) as values and decreases in the use of values related to 'Peace' (0.8%), 'Honesty' (1.9%), 'Justice' (1%) and 'Religion' (0.5%). 'Nationalism' as a distinct value was registered in 2019 only in the case of founder countries (3%), the second and third enlargement (3%) and of the countries that became members of the European Union after 2004 (0.8%). 'National identity' was used in 3% of commercials of the founder countries, in 11.1% in the commercials of the countries from the first enlargement, in 4.9% of the commercials of the countries of the second and the third enlargement and only in the case of 1.7% of commercials of the countries that became members of the European Union after 2004 (See Table 8).

**Table 8. Main values found in commercials for each country group of the European Parliament - 2014 vs 2019 (%)**

	2014					2019				
	Founder 1957	1st enlargement 1973	2nd & 3rd enlargements 1981-1986	4th enlargement 1995	From 2004 until now	Founder 1957	1st enlargement 1973	2nd & 3rd enlargements 1981-1986	4th enlargement 1995	From 2004 until now
Peace	3.6	-	-	11.1	1.6	-	-	1.6	-	0.8
Honesty	1.8	-	-	-	4.4	3	-	1.6	-	2.5
Justice	-	9.5	1	-	2.7	9.1	-	4.9	-	1.7
Solidarity	3.6	-	3	3.7	1.1	18.2	11.1	3.3	-	8.3
Traditions	2.7	-	2	-	3.3	-	-	-	-	5
Multiculturalism/cultural differences	-	-	-	-	-	-	11.1	-	-	3.3
National identity	-	-	-	-	-	3	11.1	4.9	-	1.7
Religion	4.5	-	-	-	2.2	-	-	-	-	1.7
Populism	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
Nationalism	-	-	-	-	-	3	-	3.3	-	0.8
Others value issues	6.3	-	7.9	18.5	8.2	9.1	-	-	-	4.2

## 5. Conclusions

Our article shows how 'National identity' as a value and as a set of distinct elements ('Peace', 'Honesty'; 'Justice', 'Solidarity', 'Traditions', 'Multiculturalism/cultural differences', 'National identity', 'Religion') was used in different ways during the European Parliamentary elections from 2014 and 2019. Thus, our analysis indicated that the relevance of 'National identity' depended largely on the type of media in which it was used. Continental Europe, Eastern Europe and Northern Europe used this value more during the 2019 electoral campaign as compared with 2014, while Southern European countries resorted to it to a smaller extent in the same timeframe. At the same time, the moment when the countries became members of the European Union influenced the use of this value in posters and commercials both in 2014 and in 2019.

As regards the relevance of the elements subsumed to the value of 'National identity' for the posters and commercials used both in 2014 and 2019 European parliamentary campaigns, we can say that in this case our analysis indicated the dynamics towards centrality of some elements (the most important being the case of 'Solidarity') and the total disappearance of others (for example 'Traditions' and 'Religion') both for posters and commercials.

An important aspect identified in the analysis was the way in which various groups of countries used 'Nationalism' and 'National identity' in the case of 2019 electoral campaign. Our data showed that in this case the type of media did not matter so much (that is, if media materials were posters or commercials). A greater importance in this case had the time when a particular country became a member of the European Union (for example, if it was part of the second and third enlargement or the 'wave' of enlargement after 2004), on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the geographical location of the country in a specific region of the European Union (whether it is a country in Southern or Eastern Europe).

The present study has a number of limitations, the most important being the exclusive focus on a limited set of dependent variables included in the analysis (e.g. type of media, geographical position of the group of countries within the European Union, membership of the European Union). However, we believe that our analysis indicates a series of significant shifts of the place and relevance for 'National identity'-related issues as a core value in the European parliamentary campaigns for 2014 and 2019. Thus, our study can bring a deeper understanding of the dynamics of political communication at continental and not just national level.

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