

EUROSICK: Europe, COVID Politics and the (Un)Expected Surge of Nationalistic Narratives

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Abstract : More than being turning points in history, crises are moments of acceleration of processes that are already in place. The current pandemic, as one such crisis, has triggered and exacerbated conversations about who belongs and who does not, within different European nation states, whose lives should be protected, to the detriment of whom and to what cost. In the face of the outbreak of the coronavirus, the unity of the European Union, at least at the beginning of the crisis, started to crumble. Nation-states reappeared as the main actors, and nationalistic responses spread in Europe. By closing their borders and introducing a travel ban for the Schengen Area, European countries have retreated into national fortresses. Additionally, government after government restored to war metaphors, in some cases even granting the military a visible role in the management and communication of the crisis. Mobility restrictions became a powerful tool for discrimination when their primary target was nationals of particular countries, regardless of their presence in the contaminated areas. These initial policies, measures and the recent vaccine-related management of the pandemic show the role nationalism plays in the context of public health responses to emergencies. While many scholars since last year started to document the impact of these measures on citizens', migrants', human rights and so on, almost no attention has been paid to examine and compare configurations of different European national identities that were generated in the course of the management of the pandemic, and to a sociohistorical perspective to investigate the possible links between those nationalistic and war-related discourse, on the one hand, and the exclusionary policies and practices that surged in Europe and beyond, on the other. EUROSICK's objective is to combine the sociology of migration and nationalism with research on historical disasters to fill this gap. Filling these gaps is urgent as it allows us to understand the reifications of nationalisms and the 'us' versus 'them' distinctions they produce, the ways in which they lead to regressive patterns of policy-making, and to stigmatization of entire communities and exclusionary policies even against European citizens. EUROSICK's objective will thus positively impact the capacity of Europe to tackle the future crises, such as that of climate, in a more collective and efficient way and to avoid falling back to these understudied but historically repetitive reactions in the face of emergencies. EUROSICK examines the media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic and the related policy documents in three European countries (Belgium, Italy, and Switzerland) at different points in time: before the outbreak in Europe, at the time of the outbreak, and the spring of 2021 following the discovery and implementation of vaccination programmes in Europe. The paper will analyse how the current pandemic crisis is reconfiguring pre-existing tensions and social divisions related to national identity within European debates. It will look at the ways in which this global threat got domesticated by comparing three different European nation states and investigates further what can be learnt from the effects of the pandemic in three different nationalist discourses and traditions. The analysis will be carried out thanks to my expertise in the analysis of discourse-practice nexus. This analytical strategy helps to better understand the development of policies to combat the pandemic, by focusing on the discursive conceptualizations of the crisis and the framing of the problems to be later addressed in practice.

Keywords : public health emergencies, nationalism, COVID politics, International solidarity

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