

CHORAL

RESEARCH PROJECT *(max. 5 pages)*

APPLICATION FORM TO REQUEST FOR FUNDING FOR JOINTLY SUPERVISED DOCTORAL THESIS

TITLE OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

The Politicisation of Borders and the Shaping of Identity

SUPERVISORS

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5 main KEYWORDS

- Borders
- Identity
- Populism

- Migration

- Human Rights

ABSTRACT (250 words max.)

Thirty years ago, it seemed that national borders were breaking down, as the Cold War came to an end and the Maastricht Treaty introduced a borderless space within the European Union. Today, conversely, the notion of a borderless world appears ever-more elusive as borders are constantly reinforced and extended. The UK serves as a fascinating case -study of these trends where successive governments have sought to reinforce territorial boundaries, most recently by ending freedom of movement for EU migrants and introducing strict new migration controls that risk contravening international law.

EU and UK efforts to reinforce their borders have proved largely inefficient. The UK has seen a significant net increase of illegal migration since 2018. Yet, the strengthening of the border serves an important symbolic function in political terms, notably providing an illusion of security in an unstable world. The politicisation of the border also serves to demarcate national identities, as borders are presented by populist leaders as a means of protecting a supposedly homogeneous people from external threat. These processes in turn create significant threats to human rights and reinforce cultural and symbolic borders within national territories. This interdisciplinary project will draw on methodologies and critical tools from Politics, Sociology and Linguistics to examine how some political groupings within the UK are developing alternative ways of thinking about borders as dynamic, open and inclusive, thus allowing the construction of inclusive, positive identity narratives that promote human rights, tolerance and diversity – key elements of the intangible cultural heritage of European nations.

Research aims and methodology

This project seeks, firstly, to understand the dynamics of border politicisation in the UK in the context of the rise of right-wing populism and the intensification of so-called ‘culture wars’. Whilst the politicisation of the border is not new, the Conservative Party post-Brexit has adopted an increasingly tough approach to immigration in an attempt to appeal to voters who might be considered as ‘identity conservatives’, i.e. Brexit-supporting white school-leavers characterised by an ethnocentric outlook, suspicious of diversity and cosmopolitanism.¹ Defending the border has thus become an important element in an authoritarian populist strategy² which entails the use of discourses pitting ‘the people’ against a dangerous other situated both within and without Britain’s borders. Indeed, recent attempts by the Conservative government to strip British citizens of their nationality and to deport asylum-seekers to off-shore treatment sites in Rwanda has been justified as a democratic response to the desire of the British people ‘to take back control of our borders’.³ Migrants and those who are seen to support them – notably human rights lawyers – are framed as a threat to fundamental ‘British’ and ‘common-sense’ values.³ Such discourse contributes to the consolidation of boundaries between different groups, based on value divides, thus fuelling a negative identity politics defined by ethnocentric nationalism and authoritarianism.

The project aims to go beyond an exploration of the political dynamics at play in the politicisation of the border to examine attempts to redefine borders in a more progressive way.

¹ Sobolewska, M. and Ford, R. (2020) *Brexitland: Identity, Diversity and the Reshaping of British Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

² Hall, S. (1988) *The Hard Roads to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left*. London and New York: Verso. ³

Patel, P. (2021) 'Home Secretary Speech on Immigration', 24 May,

<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/homeseecretary-priti-patel-speech-on-immigration> (accessed 16 October

2023).³ Braverman, Suella (2022), Speech to the Conservative Party Conference, 4 October, 2022, <https://www.ukpol.co.uk/suellabraverman-2022-speech-to-conservative-party-conference/> (accessed 16 October 2023). The

project will focus on the political parties in the UK that have explicitly adopted a pro-immigration stance, namely the Scottish National Party, the Green Party and Plaid Cymru. It will seek to determine the contours of this position and explore how it might challenge authoritarian populist discourse on borders and nationalism. Following the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, the project recognises that narratives on migrants and migration have a significant impact on the framing of the border.¹ Negative narratives that provoke fear of the other can have harmful consequences on integration and human rights. Positive narratives that seek to humanise migrants by incorporating migrant voices and focussing on their positive contribution to society have the capacity to develop new identity narratives that can break down real and metaphorical borders. However, there is some evidence that positive narratives at a national level, for example in the case of Scotland, can serve to mask experiences of discrimination at the microlevel.² The project thus seeks to determine:

- The nature of pro-immigration discourse(s) advanced by political parties in the UK. What specific discursive/linguistic strategies are deployed? What common features and differences can be identified?
- What political ends might be served by advancing pro-immigration discourse?
- What is the impact of pro-immigration discourse? To what extent does it succeed in dislodging negative narratives about immigration and borders, protecting human rights and favouring successful integration? What potential does it have to foster positive narratives of local and/or national identity?

This project is interdisciplinary as it would draw on methodologies and critical tools from Politics, Sociology and Linguistics (primarily Critical Discourse Analysis). The corpus of texts which are going to be the focus of the analysis will consist of political speeches, policy documents and semi-structured interviews with key political actors. These texts will be analysed on the basis of the discourse strategies employed by their authors as well as their impact and significance in the current socio-political debate in the United Kingdom.

Relevance and added-value of the proposed research in relation to the current state of knowledge

The UK is considered to be an excellent case study of European and international trends whereby borders are no longer confined to delimiting the space around national territories, but are extended

¹ OHCHR (2023), "Reframing Narratives on Migration", <https://www.ohchr.org/en/migration/reframing-narratives-migration> (accessed 16 October 2023).

² Carlà, A., Nicolson, M. (2023) "Negotiated belonging in sub-state nationalist contexts: young adult migrant narratives in Scotland and South Tyrol", *Comparative Migration Studies* 11(2), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-023-00325-4>

far beyond nation states. The EU has outsourced border control to external countries such as Libya³, whilst individual EU nations are increasingly tempted by the offshoring of asylum processing.⁴ Territorial borders are also being reinforced around and within the EU.⁵ In the UK, the long trend towards border strengthening has of course been exacerbated in the context of Brexit and the discourse of ‘take back control’. Following the end of freedom of movement for EU migrants, the British government has continued to operate border controls outside British territory, in France, Belgium and the Netherlands, and recently secured a deal with the French government to fund efforts to stop migrants crossing the English Channel in small boats. The government has also sought to outsource asylum processing to third countries and introduced strict new migration controls that risk contravening international law. Whilst the Labour Party has been critical of some aspects of these policies, it has done little to change the overall narrative about the need to reinforce the border, suggesting that there exists a certain consensus between the two main parties. This project aims to shed light on why the Scottish National Party, the Green Party and Plaid Cymru stand out against this consensus. The case of Plaid Cymru and the Scottish National Party are of particular interest as nationalist parties that seek to advance an alternative view of nationalism than that advanced at the level of the British State. The project’s findings will be of relevance to countries throughout Europe where we can identify the simultaneous rise of authoritarian populist narratives on the border and migration (as in Hungary and Italy) and the emergence of more progressive narratives from micro-level nationalist parties (such as in Catalonia).

Whilst most research on border politicisation has tended to focus on right-wing populism and its discourse (Bernhard *et al.*, 2023; Demata 2022; Fitz *et al.*, 2018; Vickers, 2020⁶), this project seeks to focus on counter discourses on the border. Counter-narratives exist in the form of migrant stories, which are

³ Pacciardi, A. & Berndtsson, J. (2022) “EU border Externalisation and Security Outsourcing: Exploring the migration industry in Libya”, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 48:17, 4010-4028, DOI: [10.1080/1369183X.2022.2061930](https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2022.2061930)

⁴ Jacqué, P. (2023) “Outsourcing Asylum Gains Ground in the EU”, 10 March, *Le Monde*, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/european-union/article/2023/03/10/outsourcing-asylum-gains-ground-in-the-eu_6018816_156.html (accessed 16 October 2023).

⁵ Dumbrava, C. (2022) European Parliament, *Walls and Fences at EU Borders*, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733692/EPRS_BRI\(2022\)733692_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733692/EPRS_BRI(2022)733692_EN.pdf) (accessed 16 October 2023).

⁶ Bernhard, L., Biancalana, C., Lauener, L., Mazzoleni, O., Pilotti, A., Yerly, G. (eds.) (2023) *National Populism and Borders* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar); Demata, M. *Discourses of Borders and the Nation in the USA* (2022); Fitz, G., Mackert, J. and Turner, B. S. (eds.) (2018) *Populism and the Crisis of Democracy: Volume 3 Migration, Gender and Religion* (Abingdon: Routledge); Vickers, T.; (2020) *Borders, Migration and Class in an Age of Crisis: Producing Workers and Immigrants* (Bristol: Bristol University Press)

increasingly being brought to the fore (for example, the forthcoming *Migrant Narratives* edited collection³), but there has been very little focus on alternative political narratives at the level of parties

³ Bönisch-Brednich, B., Christou, A., Meyer, S., Karner, M.J., Escher, A.J. (eds) (2024)

Migrant Narratives:

Storytelling as

Agency, Belonging and Community

(Abingdon: Routledge).

(with some exceptions, e.g. Nicolson & Korkut, 2021⁴). This project seeks to contribute to filling that gap by focussing on pro-immigration political narratives advanced by three different political parties across Great Britain.

Interdisciplinary nature of the research together with the alignment with the CHORAL programme and complementarity expertise of the teams

The two research supervisors come from an interdisciplinary background. Emma Bell is Professor of Contemporary British Politics. She initially trained in law before undertaking post-graduate research in penal policy, drawing on political science, criminology and sociology to understand the political impetus behind punishment. Her current research on new forms of emancipatory democratic praxis is informed by political philosophy, political science and sociology. Massimiliano Demata is Professor of English Linguistics and Discourse Analysis. He specialises in the analysis of political language in the UK and the USA, with a particular focus on how discursive structures in political texts both reflect and shape certain social structures, especially those which induce the marginalisation and the 'othering' of certain groups. The perspectives of the two research supervisors are therefore complementary and would provide the project with a holistic approach which would bring very original insights to the subject.

As highlighted above, the proposed interdisciplinary research project combines political sociology and critical discourse analysis. It corresponds to the second research theme identified by the CHORAL project:

Intangible Cultural Heritage and Identity Narratives. It regards human rights and the values of tolerance and respect for diversity as part of the cultural heritage of European nations that is currently being undermined by the politicisation of the border by authoritarian populists.

Whilst the focus of the research is not on a romance language country, the UK can serve as a useful casestudy of where these different narratives clash, providing valuable insights for other European countries.

Output plan including publication and dissemination activities

The PhD student recruited will be expected to follow up on and develop existing UNITA projects, notably that on *Experiments in Democracy*. Launched in autumn 2021, this project brings together researchers from different disciplines across the UNITA alliance (Linguistics, Political Science, Sociology) working on

democratic experiments across Europe in order to draw out best practice and seek to contribute to the public debate on democracy's current failings and possibilities. Whilst the current rise of populist

⁴ Nicolson, M. and Korkut, U. (2021) 'The Making and Portrayal of Scottish Distinctiveness: How does the narrative create its audience?', *International Migration* 60(5): 151-164, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/imig.12944>

movements across the globe is often regarded as a threat to democracy, the project postulates that it should be interpreted as a demand for more democracy. Rather than dismiss the ‘populist moment’, it argues that it ought to be taken seriously and perhaps even be regarded as an opportunity to render democracy properly representative by empowering ordinary citizens. The aim of the project is to explore new forms of economic and political democracy – such as citizen’s assemblies, workplace democracy and new forms of public/community ownership – which go beyond existing Statist attempts at citizen empowerment. It seeks to compare and contrast a multitude of discourses about migrants as well as democratic experiments across different territories. It fits into the overall theme of cultural heritage by examining how the European tradition of liberal democracy might evolve and adapt to contemporary challenges.

A workshop organised as part of this project in 2022 has already given rise to an edited book with Bristol University Press (*Commons, Citizenship and Power: Reclaiming the Margins*, publication expected 2024) in the collection ‘Civil Society and Social Change’. The project ‘Experiments in Democracy: Refugee Policy and Innovation in Democratic Praxis and Discourse’ received funding from UNITO in 2023. A publication is also planned for 2024.

Estimated schedule

2024-25: field research

2025-26: year in Turin: writing up results and analysis

2026-27 : year in Chambéry – finalization and viva

