MSC 2020
International Scientific and Practical Conference «MAN. SOCIETY. COMMUNICATION»

MEDIA DISCUSSIONS ON THE TOPIC OF BREXIT IN CONTEXT OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

Polina Astashkina (a)*, Dmitry Astashkin (b)
*Corresponding author

(a) Yaroslav-the-Wise Novgorod State University, Veliky Novgorod, Russian Federation, polinap89@gmail.com
(b) Yaroslav-the-Wise Novgorod State University, Veliky Novgorod, Russian Federation, Saint Petersburg Institute of History of the Russian Academy of Science, Saint-Petersburg, Russian Federation, strider-DA@yandex.ru

Abstract

On the example of the comments of the addressees of Russian and German media, the attitudes of the Russians and Germans to the Brexit phenomenon in the context of national identity are examined. The main marker of national identity is the name of a country – a toponym, which indicates the important role of a nation-state in determining national identity. British, German, and Russian national identities manifest themselves in the comments. Great Britain is in the center of Russian and German commentators' attention, its national identity is viewed through the prism of relations with the European Union, the importance of the country's sovereignty is emphasized. Russian identity is reflected only in Russian comments and is expressed in criticism of Russian domestic policy by commentators, as well as through the opposition of Russia to the European Union, Ukraine, and America and the search for historical relations between Russia and Europe. German identity is evident in both Russian and German comments. While the Russians recognize Germany as one of the leading nations of the European Union, the Germans doubt the promise of the European Union, they are worried about the economic problems of the countries, as well as the position of ethnic groups in the UK, who strive for independence. It was revealed that the majority of commentators recognize the priority of the nation-state over the European Union, however, German commentators also particularly note the need for common European democratic values, a single currency, and the absence of borders between European countries.

Keywords: Brexit, European identity, national identity

1. Introduction

The withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union received considerable public attention, both in the EU countries and in Russia, and, as a result, became a popular subject of research for scientists from around the world. At the same time, the Brexit topic is considered in various scientific fields. The topic is of interest to sociologists (Danisi et al., 2019), political scientists (Clarke, 2020) as well as historians (Laczó, 2019), social archaeologists (Bonacchi et al., 2018), economists (Volkov et al., 2019).

Furthermore, many publications in Russian and foreign media are devoted to Brexit. Undoubtedly, this phenomenon served as a catalyst for discussions in media on the topic of changing relations between countries. The reasons for Brexit, its possible consequences are discussed, the issue of the future of the European Union is raised. At the same time, not only journalists but also media audience, in other words, authors of comments on the publications of journalists, became active participants in the discussions on Brexit.

Since this event affects European and, not least, national interests, national identity is often at the center of the discussion. National identity is understood as the self-identification of a person with a certain political (nation state) and cultural (national culture) community (Malakhov, 2001).

Undoubtedly, the discussion of Brexit draws the attention of researchers, first of all, to British media (Gheorghiu, 2019). This study is based on the analysis of comments on journalistic publications in Russia and Germany. In other words, we studied the reflection of the important world event not directly related to Russia and Germany in the texts of addressees of Russian and German media.

The empirical basis of the study was German and Russian media, which occupy the first five positions in the ratings of popularity on social networking platforms (according to the ratings of the Medialogiya and Statista sites). The official groups of these media on the social networks VKontakte and Facebook have over 500 thousand followers. The following media fit the above parameters: Welt, FOCUS Online, and RTL.de on the German part and Meduza, Lenta.ru, and RIA Novosti on the Russian part. By the keywords "брексит"/"брекзит"/ "Brexit", journalistic texts published in the above social media groups shortly before and after Brexit, on January 31 and February 1, 2020, were selected. Thus, a total of 1,090 German comments on nine journalistic publications and 390 Russian comments on six publications were considered.

2. Problem Statement

Germany's membership in the European Union makes it possible to raise the question of the existence of so-called European identity for the Germans. European identity is understood as mental awareness of belonging to Europe (the European Union) and an emotional connection with it. In addition, the importance of a tangible, practical component is emphasized: citizens of EU member states must either see benefits in their country's membership in the EU or express a willingness to support other EU member states (Nissen, 2004). In connection with the periods of crisis that the EU is going through, scholars turn to questions of this kind: what is the meaning of a political system like the EU, what constitutes European identity and what is its complexity (Fossum, 2001; Kaina, 2013). At the same time, while recognizing the importance of the European Union, scientists assign it only a limited role in the formation of human identity,

since they doubt that Europe, both rationally and emotionally, will be able to completely replace the place in human consciousness that the nation has occupied for centuries (Lammert, 2011). However, according to a 2019 survey, the vast majority of young Germans aged 16 to 26 (about 70%) consider their identity to be a hybrid – German and European at the same time. Only about 20% of those surveyed consider themselves only Germans and recognize only their national identity (Wie würden…, 2019). Perhaps this is due to Germany's difficult past and a sense of collective guilt for the crimes of Nazism.

As for Russia, the situation with the national identity of the Russians seems to be more precise since the Russian Federation is not a member of the European Union. However, in Russia, different attitudes towards the European Union and, consequently, towards European identity, can be seen.

In other words, the problem lies in the difficulty of defining the role of national and European identities: which one of them is of primary importance and how they interact.

3.   Research Questions

3.1. What markers of national identity are most common in Russian and German comments on Brexit, and what national identity do they express?

3.2. What are the main topics of Brexit discussions in the context of national identity?

3.3. What is the relationship between the understandings of European and national identities in Russian and German comments on Brexit?

4.   Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to identify ways of expressing national identity in the context of the discussion about Brexit.

It is necessary to specify which nationalities are in the focus of the attention of Russian and German commentators, as well as what topics are addressed in media discussions on the Brexit theme in connection with national identity. In addition, it is necessary to reveal which identity is in the priority from the point of view of the commentators – a national or European one.

5.   Research Methods

5.1. Discourse analysis in the aspect of studying the structural components of national identity and topics related to it (politics, sports, culture, etc.);

5.2. Content analysis that allows a calculation of the percentage of different ways of representing identity;

5.3. Methods of linguistic analysis (lexical and morphological ones), with the help of which markers of national identity are considered.

6.   Findings

Based on the classification of lexical and morphological identity markers made by the German linguist Bschleipfer (2010), it was revealed that national identity markers are contained in approximately

60% of the reviewed German and 50% of Russian comments. Since the number of German comments is significantly more than the number of Russian ones, it seemed to us reasonable to analyze only every third German comment. Thus, the empirical basis of this study was constituted of 180 Russian comments with markers of national identity and of 218 German ones.

During the analysis, it was established that the most common marker of national identity is a toponym; it is found in more than half of all comments. Most often, the toponym is related to Great Britain and is used in the context of relations with the EU: *Евросоюз осиротел без Великобритании, правда, кому от этого стало хуже, пока не понятно, время покажет (The European Union is orphaned without Great Britain, however, it is unknown yet who got worse from this, time will tell)* // GB hat erkannt, dass es mit dem Hippie Staat Schland und dem Brüsseler Politbüro keine Zukunft hat (*Great Britain realized that it had no future with the hippie country Germany and the Brussels Politbureau*).

The second most frequently used toponym (16-17% in both comment groups) is occupied by toponyms associated with the country of residence/origin of the commentators – with Russia and Germany, reflecting relations with other countries and the EU: *А чего делать России в МВФ и ВТО? Все равно в Россию сливают свои товары а из России тянут полезные ископаемые и лес (And what is Russia supposed to do in the IMF and WTO? Still, everybody drain off their goods into Russia and draw minerals and timber out of Russia)* // Ich würde auch feiern, wenn Deutschland endlich die EU verlassen würde. Wir sind nur die Zahlenden! (*I would celebrate too if Germany finally left the EU. We just pay money!*).

The third place in Russian comments is taken by the toponyms "Украина" ("Ukraine") (8%) and "Америка" ("America") (6%), in German comments – by the toponyms "England", "Schottland" and "Nordirland" (11%): *зло это америка глупый!* (Meduza-2) / *Украина это наш партнер и уже минимальная зарплата в Украине выше чем на РФке (evil is america silly! (Meduza-2) / Ukraine is our partner and the lowest salary in Ukraine is already higher than in RF)* // Schottland will selbständig werden und zurück in die EU, Nordirland strebt eine Wiedervereinigung mit Irland an <...> (*Scotland wants to become independent and return to the EU, Northern Ireland seeks to unite with Ireland <...>*). This highlights the interest of German commentators in the ethno-territorial division of Great Britain and in its domestic policy, and the importance of Ukraine and America for Russian foreign policy.

Various nationality names play a significant role in Russian comments (22%), not only "британцы" ("the British") but also "немцы" ("the Germans") are especially often encountered, which indicates the recognition of Germany as one of the leading countries of the European Union by Russian commentators: *В ес немцам теперь вообще близко равных нет/ Свершилось что ли? Британцы устали ждать, пока их власти исполнят наконец волеизъявление народа (Now, in the eu, there is no one better than the Germans at all / Did it finally happen or what? The British are tired of waiting for their authorities to finally fulfill the will of the people)*.

In German comments, nationality names make up a slightly smaller percentage (14%) and include almost only "the British": Die armen Briten werden nun genauso verarmen wie Norwegen, die Schweiz, Liechtenstein und Monaco! (The poor British will now go poor just like Switzerland, Liechtenstein and Monaco!). However German comments, unlike Russian comments, widely contain ethnonyms (12%), which again, as in the case of toponyms, is evidence of German commentators' attention to the ethnoses of

Great Britain: Lustig wird es sollten sich die Schotten vom GB trennen und der EU beitreten (It will be funny if the Scots separate from the UK and join the EU).

As for the morphological markers of national identity, they are approximately equally represented in both German and Russian comments. The first-person plural pronoun denoting belonging to an in-group occurs in about 10% of comments, the same applies to the third-person plural pronoun denoting an outgroup. However, no peculiarities were revealed here, therefore, it does not seem relevant to dwell on morphological markers in more detail.

Along with the toponym as a marker of national identity, the marker of European identity is also very widespread (the names "Евросоюз" ("the European Union"), "Европа" ("Europe"), "ЕС", "EU" are in about half of all comments): *Какая страна решит последовать примеру Британии и покинет ЕС? (Which country decides to follow Britain's example and leave the EU?) // Reisen ohne Grenzen, einheitliche Währung, einheitliche Standards, kein rechtes Denken (Travel without borders, a single currency, common standards, lack of legal thinking) / Europa auf der Karte ja! EU Zwangsmitgliedschaft – Nein! (Europe on the map – yes! Compulsory membership in the EU – no!).*

Based on the list of thematic areas of identification proposed by the team of the following linguists: E. V. Chepkina, O. I. Astashova, E. V. Bulatova, L. V. Yenina, we considered national identity as a discourse (Bulatova, 2017). At the same time, national identity is divided into different components: political, economic, legal, cultural and others.

In both Russian and German media, the discussion of Brexit in the context of national identity is primarily associated with the topic of foreign policy (50% of all Russian and German comments). The majority of Russian commentators oppose the European Union, doubting its viability, emphasize the priority of the national in general and the independence of Great Britain as a national state in particular: *А чего делать в ЕС, кроме как участвовать в их бесконечных разногласиях. Британия все поняла и на выход, ЕС уже не тот/ Бриты всегда обособленными в Европе были, логично (And what to do in the EU, except to participate in their endless disagreements. Britain saw it and headed out, the EU is not what it used to be / The Britons have always been isolated in Europe, it is logical)*. In addition, many commentators consider the impact of Brexit on Russia's position in the world and deny possible changes: *ничего не поменяется. Для России точно (nothing will change. In case of Russia – for sure)*. A significant share of comments demonstrates interest in the foreign policy of Ukraine and America. At the same time, the comments say about Ukraine's desire and impossibility to become a part of the EU and about America's significant influence on other countries: *Украинцы тоже скакали Украина це европа... Но где сейчас Европа и где украинский народ.../ Ну не знаю, сейчас слишком много стран под влиянием США (Ukrainians also bounced around like Europe... But do you know where Europe is today and where the Ukrainian people are... / Well, I don't know, today, there are too many countries under the influence of the United States)*.

Most German commentators support Brexit and, moreover, are in favor of Germany's exit from the European Union: Herzlichen Glückwunsch Großbritannien! Deutschland muss folgen! (Congratulations to the UK from the bottom of my heart! Germany should be next!). The need for co-financing, the lack of full sovereignty of the countries, their supposed futility are mentioned as the main reasons for rejection of the EU: Richtig so.... und mehrere Staaten werden folgen.... jedes Land sollte souverän bleiben und sich nichts

von der EU diktieren lassen z. B. (Klima und Migrationspakt) (That's right... Many countries will do the same... Each country should remain sovereign and not listen to how the EU dictates its rules, for example, regarding climate and migration policies). Also, examples of successful non-EU countries (e.g. Switzerland) are given: Ich wette im UK geht ohne EU die Zivilisation genauso wenig unter wie in Island, der Schweiz oder Norwegen (I bet the civilization is unlikely to collapse in the United Kingdom without the EU, as well as in Iceland, Switzerland or Norway).

However, a number of commentators are convinced that the European Union has more pluses than minuses: open borders, common currency and standards, rejection of radical right-wing beliefs, and see a growing threat of nationalism in the countries' exit from the EU: *Durch die Rückbesinnung auf den eigenen Staat wird den Nationalismus noch weiter stärken (Returning to one's own statehood and focusing on it will only strengthen nationalism)*. The view is expressed that Brexit is a mistake on the part of Great Britain: *Herzliches Beileid wünsche ich den Briten, alles falsch gemacht, die Geschichte wird es euch zeigen... (I really sympathize with the British, they did everything wrong, history will show you...)*.

The topic of domestic policy is touched upon in about a fifth of Russian and a quarter of German comments, which is comparable. As a rule, most of them concern the domestic policy of Great Britain: *Boris Johnson ist der moderne Winston Churchill und ein Glücksfall für das britische Volk (Boris Johnson is a modern Winston Churchill and a great chance for the British people)*. And Russian comments also illustrate the attitude towards Russian domestic policy, most often – negative: *А я считаю, что Бриты молодцы! Долго все обсуждали, потом вынесли на референдум, а теперь стали свободны и независимы! Они захотели и добились своего! Только мы тут сидим и стонем от решений правительства!* (Well, I think the Britons are great! They talked about everything for a long time, then put it to a referendum, and now they are free and independent! They wanted to do it and got their way! Only we are sitting here and whining about the government's decisions!).

Significant differences between German and Russian comments were found when turning to economic topics. The topic of economics is mentioned only in 11% of Russian comments, while in German comments its share exceeds 25%. In the comments on the economic topic, the economic situations in the UK and other EU countries are discussed: *Ну наконец-то случилось. Теперь страны Прибалтики затяните пояса, скоро все подорожает, а датаций станет меньше (Finally, it happened. Now, the Baltic countries, tighten your belts, soon everything will rise in price, and there will be less subsidies)* // *UK hat die 2-stärkste Wirtschaft der EU und die 5-stärkste Wirtschaft der Welt <...>(The United Kingdom has the second largest EU economy and the fifth in the world <...>)*. German commentators often express regret that Germany is an important financial donor to the EU: *Der Michel in Deutschland muss jetzt die 15% von GB auch mit zahlen für Pleite EU Staaten, den er wird jeden Tag von seinen Medien bearbeitet wie schön die EU ist....(Now, the German dummy have to pay 15% instead of the UK for the bankrupt EU states, because the media tells them every day how wonderful the EU is)*.

The historical component is present only in Russian comments and makes up a tenth of them. Most of the comments on historical topic are devoted to the history of the USSR, the Russian Empire, and its relationship with Europe: *а что в этом плохого? нести можно по-разному. Немцы из династии Романовых правили Россией много лет / Ну по идее все по делу, правильно делают что отсоединяются, Евросоюз, это блеклая версия Совка, с дикими леваками во главе (and what's wrong*

with that? you can convey it in different ways. The Germans from the Romanov dynasty ruled Russia for many years / Well in theory everything is to the point, they do the right thing by disconnecting, the European Union, this is a faded version of Sovok, with outrageous leftists at the head).

7. Conclusion

Thus, national identity often manifests itself in the media discussions on Brexit. The focus of Russian and German commentators' attention is on Great Britain, which seems logical in connection with the topic of the reviewed publications. Its national identity is viewed through the prism of relations with the EU, the importance of the country's sovereignty is emphasized. In German comments, Great Britain is also presented as a multi-ethnic state because German commentators are concerned about the situation of ethnic groups in Great Britain, who strive for independence.

Russian identity is reflected only in Russian comments and manifests itself in the search for common ground with the EU, Ukraine, and America, and most often in opposing themselves to them (primarily because of the sanctions against Russia). Also, the comments clearly illustrate the dissatisfaction among the Russians with the domestic policy of the country. German identity is paid attention not only in the comments of the Germans, but also of the Russians. It is considered in connection with the relationship between Germany and the EU. While Russian commentators recognize the Germans as one of the most economically efficient nations in Europe and one of the leaders of the EU, German comments question the promise of Germany's membership in the EU, but at the same time recognize the importance of European values: open borders, common standards, rejection of nationalism.

As for the markers of national identity, the most common of them is the toponym denoting the name of the country. This fact indicates the crucial role of the nation state in defining national identity. European identity is marked in the comments using the toponym "Европа" / "Europe", as well as the names "Евросоюз" ("the European Union"), "ЕС" / "EU".

In both Russian and German media, the discussion of Brexit in the context of national identity is primarily related to the topic of foreign policy. Notable differences between German and Russian comments were found when turning to economic and historical topics. While the Germans are much more likely than the Russians to take an interest in countries' financial problems, the Russians are actively looking for the historical relationship between Russia and Europe.

In general, the understandings of European and national identities in Russian and German comments on Brexit are related somewhat differently. What is common is the fact that most commentators support Brexit and recognize the priority of the nation state over the European Union. However, the opinion of the Russians and the position of the Germans have different grounds for this. Thus, German commentators look at the European Union "from the inside" and express dissatisfaction with the need for Germany to be a financial donor to the EU and with the lack of sovereignty of the EU countries, and also advocate for Germany's withdrawal from the European Union, emphasizing on the example of some successful states (Switzerland), that EU membership is not necessary for the country's welfare. Russian commentators as "outside observers" assess the European Union, first of all, from the point of view of its relation to Russia, denying the possibility of changes for the better. However, a significant number of German commentators also emphasize the positive aspects of the European Union, namely European democratic values.

References

Bonacchi, Ch., Altaweel, M., & Krzyzanska, M. (2018). The heritage of Brexit: Roles of the past in the construction of political identities through social media. *Journal of Social Archaeology*, *18*(6), 174-192. https://doi.org/10.1177/1469605318759713

Bschleipfer, A. (2010). *Der „caso Parmalat" in der Berichterstattung italienischer Print- und Rundfunkmedien. Eine Studie zur sprachlichen Markierung von Corporate Identity, lokaler und nationaler Identität* [The „caso Parmalat" in the reporting of Italian print and radio media. A study on linguistic marking of corporate identity, local and national identity]. Peter Lang.

Bulatova, E. V. (2017). *Napravleniya identifikatsii rossiyan v zhurnale "Russkiy reporter"* [Identification directions of Russians in the journal „Russian Reporter"]. In E. V. Chepkina (Ed.), *Problemy konstruirovaniya identichnosti rossiyan v diskurse SMI pod vliyaniyem kontsepta «informatsionnaya voyna»: kollektivnaya monografiya* [Problems of constructing the identity of Russians in the discourse of the media under the influence of the information war concept: a collective monograph] (pp. 164-179). Kabinetniy ucheniy.

Clarke, J. (2020). A Sovereign People? Political Fantasy and Governmental Time in the Pursuit of Brexit. In M. Guderjan, H. Mackay, & G. Stedman *Contested Britain: Brexit, Austerity and Agency* (pp. 117-130). Bristol University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvz938gw.14

Danisi, C., Dustin, M., & Ferreira, N. (2019). Queering Brexit: What's in Brexit for Sexual and Gender Minorities? In M. Dustin, N. Ferreira, & S. Millns (Eds.), *Gender and Queer Perspectives on Brexit. Gender and Politics Series* (pp. 239-272). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-03122-0_10

Fossum, J. E. (2001). Identity-politics in the European Union. *Journal of European Integration*, *23*(4), 373-406. https://doi.org/10.1080/07036330108429109

Gheorghiu, O. C. (2019). Brexit Framing in British Media. *Mcdsare, 3,* 321-325. https://doi.org/10.26520/mcdsare.2019.3.321-325

Kaina, V. (2013). Europäische Identität aus politikwissenschaftlicher Analyseperspektive – Forschungsstand und Desiderata [European Identity from a Political Science Analysis Perspective - State of Research and Desiderata]. In V. Hinnenkamp, & H. W. Platzer (Eds.), *Interkulturalität und europäische Integration* [Interculturality and European Integration] (pp. 97-125). ibidem-Verlag.

Laczó, F. (2019). New Versailles or a Velvet Revolution? Brexit and the Exits of Central and Eastern European History, 1916-2016. *Contemporary European History*, *28*(1), 57-60. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777318000814

Lammert, N. (2011). Nationale Identität in einer zusammenwachsenden Welt [National identity in a world that is growing together]. *Die Politische Meinung* [The Political Opinion], *496*, 55-60.

Malakhov, V. S. (2001). *Identichnost'. Novaya filosofskaya entsiklopediya* [Identity. New philosophical encyclopedia]. Mysl'.

Nissen, S. (2004, September 10). Europäische Identität und die Zukunft Europas [European Identity and the Future of Europe]. *bpb: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung* [Federal Agency for Civic Education].http://www.bpb.de/apuz/2и8109/europaeische-identitaet-und-die-zukunft-europas?p=all

Volkov, A., Baležentis, T., Morkūnas, M., & Streimikiene, D. (2019). Brexit and EU Common Agricultural Policy: The possible consequences for Lithuania. *Economics and Sociology*, *12*(2), 328-344. https://doi.org/10.14254/2071-789X.2019/12-2/20

Wie würden Sie sich selbst am ehesten beschreiben? [How would you best describe yourself?]. (2019, Mai 10).https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/709446/umfrage/umfrage-zum-vorhandensein-einer-europaeischen-identitaet