Discourse in the United Kingdom on EU immigration: Analysis of Prime Minister David Cameron's political language on EU immigrants between 2010 and 2015

Réka Ágopcsa[1]

Abstract

This article explores how immigration into the United Kingdom from the European Union became a negatively perceived "issue" in British public discourse and how the politicisation of EU immigration unfolded under the first Cameron (coalition) government, with special attention to the rhetoric of Prime Minister (PM) David Cameron. The paper assesses the role the PM's political language and decisions played in constructing a negative image of EU immigrants in the above mentioned period. It does so by examining his speeches through Critical Discourse Analysis and defining the extent to which he politicised the phenomenon, as set out by the Copenhagen School's theory of Securitisation. The paper consequently finds that between 2010 and 2015 Cameron's political language adapted to the political pressures felt both within and outside his party, which as a result steered his rhetoric on EU immigration towards a growingly hostile and alienating direction. This was expressed through a political language that used overwhelmingly one-sided arguments, put more emphasis on the negative side of EU immigration, and often clearly differentiated between the "good" in-group (British citizens) and the "bad" out-group (EU immigrants). However, while the PM's rhetoric largely contributed to the politicisation of the issue, it had no clearly identifiable securitising intent.

Keywords: immigration, discourse analysis, David Cameron, politicisation, securitisation

[1] Réka Ágopcsa holds a Bachelor of Arts in International Relations from Corvinus University, and is currently an International Relations Masters student at the University of Nottingham. Her research interests include UK-EU relations, Euroscepticism, political discourse, voter behaviour, securitisation and theoretical approaches to security.

Introduction

In the United Kingdom immigration is among the most frequently voiced concerns of the public, and fears of the negative effects of immigration for the country have been steadily increasing since the early 2000s. In June 2015, 45% of the British public thought that immigration was the most burning issue facing Britain. (Ipsos MORI, 2015)

Due to the 2004 and 2007 European Union (EU) enlargements – welcoming a total of twelve, mainly Eastern European, countries – the main source of immigration into the UK has shifted from the Commonwealth to the EU. By 2015 annual net migration – the difference between the number of people leaving from and arriving into Britain in that year for reasons of residence or employment – reached an all-time high of 336,000, with immigrants from the EU accounting for almost half of this "surplus" (Office for National Statistics, 2016). This number gave the press and the media grounds to accuse Prime Minister (PM) David Cameron of failing to deliver on his 2010 election pledge to reduce the ever-growing rate of immigration to "tens of thousands a year" (Conservative Manifesto, 2010: 21), as net migration stood at 222,000 at the time. As Euroscepticism[2] and immigration-related concerns increased in the UK under the first Cameron government, the PM began a risky manoeuvre from 2013 onwards in the form of politicising the "issue of EU immigration" to secure him support both within the ranks of his own growingly Eurosceptic party[3] and outside of it. Consequently, he contributed to the construction of a dominant perception of EU immigrants and thus affected public discourse on the topic.

Discourse and securitisation

Discourse refers to the prevalent ways in which we think and talk about issues. It is different from one person's language ("rhetoric"), as it captures wider public opinion and the common understanding of a matter. Baker-Beall (2016: 31) describes it as "systems of thought composed of ideas, beliefs and practices (…) that structure how we think about a particular subject, topic or issue." Binary labels for groups within society ("us" versus "them," "good" vs. "bad") are constantly created and recreated in discourse, making

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[2] Euroscepticism is understood as opposition to further EU integration in certain policy areas ("soft"), or a support for withdrawal ("hard"), as in Szczerbiak and Taggart, 2008: 2. Projected this distinction onto the British population: whereas in 2008, 55% of Britons were sceptical of the EU, this number rose to 65% by 2015 (Curtice, 2016: 6).

[3] Between 2010 and 2015 around 32% of the 304 Tory MPs could be considered hard Eurosceptics, and a further 49% soft Eurosceptics. By 2015 the party turned more Eurosceptic overall (Moore, 2015).

possible changes in perceptions. According to the concept of "sectors" by Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde (1998: 22-23) – who identify the five sectors of security as the political, military, economic, societal and environmental – perceived threats to a group's identity can be understood within the "societal" sector of security, thus enabling it to be the subject of securitisation. Securitisation, as outlined by Buzan *et al.* (1998) is the product of politicians' deliberate choice of words ("speech acts"[4]), by which an issue is lifted into the realm of security and is consequently accepted by the audience as a security concern.

The Copenhagen School of Security Studies describes this as a three-stage process: first, the issue is non-politicised, "meaning the state does not deal with it and it is not in any other way made an issue of public debate and decision." In the second stage it becomes politicised, "meaning the issue is part of public policy, requiring government decision and resource allocations." Finally, in the third stage, securitising intent appears when "the issue is presented as an existential threat, requiring emergency measures and justifying actions outside the normal bounds of political procedure" (Buzan *et al.,* 1998: 23-24).

Adamides (2012: 75-76) notes that securitisation can also be a bottom-up (audience-driven) process, and can even be "involuntary" in case the social environment "creates securitization expectations, especially if what is perceived to be at threat is the audience's identity." This is especially important for this inquiry, as British public discourse was highly influenced by two "bottom-up forces:" the United Kingdom Independence Party (and its leader, Nigel Farage), and the Eurosceptic press (papers like the *Daily Mail* and *The Express*). As EU immigration gained growing recognition in public discourse, UKIP exploited concerns of immigration for its own anti-EU agenda and labelled immigrant groups as threats to economic and societal security, and the EU itself as a threat to the political security of Britain. Remarkably, Farage attracted significant support between 2010 and 2015 predominantly from the ranks of those who voted for the Conservatives in the 2010 General Election.[5] Duffy (2014) connects these phenomena by highlighting that immigration was often felt as an "issue" in areas of the UK least affected by immigration, and among right-wing media consumers.

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[4] Speech acts serve the aim to "convince a specific audience of the existential nature of the threat" (Collins, 2007: 113) and therefore use arguments of "priority and urgency" and a "necessity to break the rules" (Buzan *et al.*, 1998: 25).
[5] See Lynch and Whitaker (2012: 287) and Duffy (2014) for accounts of the voter defection.

To evaluate the Prime Minister's impact on public discourse and establish his role in the top-down securitisation of EU immigration, however, this paper looks at his rhetoric between May 2010 and May 2015 based on official government announcements, international and party conferences and interviews. Two main periods are identified: a non-politicised period and a politicised period. The former discusses processes that led to the PM's politicisation of the subject in March 2013, while the latter offers analysis of the PM's speeches which contributed to the construction of the predominant perception of EU immigrants. Although this section points out the presence of elements of securitisation, there was in fact no securitising intent from the PM, and a distinct "securitisation stage" thus cannot be established.

Non-politicised period (May 2010 to March 2013)

The Prime Minister dedicated much attention to both the issues of European integration and economic migration in his speeches leading up to 2013. However, he only ever referred to non-EU immigration, signalling a clear intent *not* to politicise EU immigration (Cameron, 2010; Queen's Speech, 2010). According to Partos and Bale (2015: 171) this strategy was a way of "decontaminating the toxic Conservative brand after two terms of populist rhetoric from previous leaders" concerning immigration. Nevertheless, due to bottom-up forces, EU immigration was a somewhat politicised topic even in this period. One has to look no further than the *Daily Mail*'s front pages from 2011 to find examples of headlines such as "One in a hundred Slovakians has come to live in Britain", "Poles are sending home £3bn a year…and we pay them £4.5m a week in benefits" and "Along with hard-working Polish plumbers we have countless criminals from former Iron Curtain countries" (Daily Mail, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c).

A speech from April 2011, dedicated solely to the topic of non-EU immigration, illustrates well that the PM deliberately downplayed the importance of EU immigration at this time (Cameron, 2011). His strategy was met by heavy criticism from Nigel Farage, who pointed out that "We cannot control migration into Britain if we're part of the European Union and that's a debate Mr Cameron does not want to have" (Farage, 2011). By the end of 2012, this sentiment seemed to have resonated with the wider population, as Eurosceptic pressures began resurfacing both within the Conservatives – with former LibDem leader Lord Ashdown stating "foreign policy has now been hijacked by the Eurosceptics in the Conservative Party" (Traynor *et al.*, 2011) – and outside of it. In fact, in the local elections of May 2012 UKIP averaged around 13% of the vote in the seats it

was contesting, making it their best ever performance and raising concerns in Tory MPs about the nature of the "UKIP protest vote" (Mason, 2013).

In January 2013, the PM's "Bloomberg speech" (Cameron, 2013a) – promising a referendum on EU membership if re-elected in 2015 – came amid growing Eurosceptic pressures and was aimed to appease Tory backbenchers as well as to regain "strategic" UKIP supporters.[6] On the contrary, however, it resulted in more protest from Eurosceptic Tory MPs (Rigby and Parker, 2014) and a surge in voting intention for UKIP [from 10% in January 2013 – when the Bloomberg speech was made – to 16% by June 2013] (UK Polling Report, 2016).

Having promised a referendum, yet still aiming to uphold positive public opinion on EU immigrants, Cameron was confronted with a limited room for manoeuvre in which his rhetoric gradually grew more hostile to immigration in general.

Politicised period (March 2013 to May 2015)

Cameron addressed EU immigration as an "issue" for the first time in a major speech in March 2013 (Cameron, 2013b), advocating for the need for reforms to make the welfare and housing systems "fit the immigration policy" and deter "unwanted" immigrants – with a sudden focus on EU immigrants.

In the speech, the emphasis was put on the potential abusers of the system, without significant acknowledgement of those who *did* come for the "right reasons:" those who came to "contribute", those who were "fair" ("You put into Britain, you don't just take out"[7]), or the "brightest and the best". In fact students (who made up almost a quarter of all EEA [European Economic Area] immigrants at the time of the speech) were not even mentioned. On the other hand, continuous references to "British taxpayers" created a harsh "us" (in-group) versus "them" (out-group) distinction, with the PM saying

> "Right now the message through the benefit system is all wrong. It says that if you can't find a job or you drop out of work early, the British taxpayer owes you a living for as long as you like (…). So, yes, of course [EEA migrants] can still come and stay here if they want to, but the British taxpayer will not go endlessly paying for them anymore."

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6 Ford et. al (2012) define "strategic" UKIP supporters as those who are prone to vote UKIP at European Parliament elections, but not necessarily at national elections – unlike "core" supporters.

7 On the contrary, Dustmann and Frattini (2014) found that EEA immigrants contributed more to the British economy in the form of taxes than they "took out" from the system in the form of benefits and social housing.

Binary oppositions were further highlighted by statements like "What we have is a free *national* health service, not a free international service" and "[We are going to make] entitlement to *our* key public services something migrants earn, not an automatic right." These statements reflect a "welfare-chauvinistic"[8] attitude, in which immigrants are deemed "undeserving" of welfare due to their perceived "economic and cultural threat" or "otherness" (Kymlicka, 2015). In the 26-minutes-long speech various forms of the word "control" were mentioned – a relatively high – 22 times.

A similar attitude was evident from the PM's speech at the annual Conservative Party Conference in October 2013, in which he said "I say this to the British people: you have every right to be angry about a system that is unfair and unjust (…) If we don't get our people back to work, we shouldn't be surprised if millions want to come here to work." (Cameron, 2013c) Directing his words solely to the in-group, exaggerating the number of newcomers and calling public anger "rightful," he established the perception of a threat to the societal sector of security – as Buzan et al. (1998: 121) note, migration can be securitised by suggesting that "X people are being overrun or diluted by influxes of Y people."

A month later, in November 2013 the PM wrote an opinion piece for the *Financial Times* titled "Free movement within Europe needs to be less free," in which he called for EU-wide reform that would let nation states cap immigration and make it a "qualified right." He contrasted the "generous" in-group with the "problematic" out-group, saying that all the latter did – apart from *wanting* to work – was "expect," "need," and "claim," while the former "paid" (Cameron, 2013d).

To put the rhetoric into action, "tough new rules" were introduced on 31 December 2013 (a day before transitional controls were lifted off Romanian and Bulgarian – "EU2" – immigration), to limit the access of EU immigrants applying for income-based benefits (Department for Work and Pensions, 2013). A poll from January 2014 found that around 65% agreed that due to EU2 immigration "ordinary British workers" would see their "wages depressed" (What UK Thinks: EU, 2014a), while another established that 24% thought that EU2 immigrants came overwhelmingly for benefits (NatCen Social Research, 2014). The UKIP leader also introduced a new securitisation element into the discourse when he referred to the problem posed by "Romanian criminals" in an interview with BBC's Andrew Marr (Farage, 2013).

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8 Welfare chauvinism holds that "social protection [is] for those who belong to the ethnically defined community and who have contributed to it" (Kitschelt and McGann, 1995: 22).

Contributing to this attitude, in the year leading up to January 2014, "Language used by tabloid newspapers to describe and discuss Romanians as a single group was often focused on crime and anti-social behavior (gang, criminal, beggar, thief, squatter)" (The Migration Observatory, 2014).

As immigration figures increased, Cameron's strategy shifted from wanting to deter only "benefit-seekers" to trying to "reduce the pull factor" for *all* EU job-seekers, as laid out in his interview with Andrew Marr (Cameron, 2014a). While his aim was to achieve this through EU reform, the EP elections of 2014 showed that the British public trusted UKIP more with talking to Europe than any other party (European Parliament, 2014).

The growing UKIP pressure manifested itself in both the "Eurosceptic" cabinet reshuffle (Dominiczak and Swinford, 2014), and the defections of two Conservative MPs, Douglass Carswell and Mark Reckless. Cameron's coalition partner, Nick Clegg noted that the party was "running after UKIP in a complete panic" (Osborn, 2014). This notion was reinforced in his speech at the Conservative Party Conference (Cameron, 2014b), in which the PM explained that immigration would be in the core of his EU membership renegotiations. This stood in stark contrast with his Bloomberg speech of 2013, in which he gave priority to economic reform and avoided the topic of EU immigration altogether. From November onwards (six months ahead of the 2015 General Elections), however, Cameron toned down his alienating rhetoric and began to look for European allies in order to secure support for his reform proposals.[9] He put the "British" problems into a wider European context and began talking about "discussions" with "our partners" and "our friends in Europe" (Cameron, 2014c) instead of sending "very clear messages" to "EEA migrants" (Cameron, 2013b). His speeches also reflected a more balanced approach, as he frequently accounted for the good intentions and positive contributions of EU immigrants (Cameron, 2014c). Nevertheless, the PM still managed to present EU immigration as the "necessary evil" – "bad" when abusive, and still „unwanted" when economic –, and confirmed EU immigrants' "second class" citizenship by adding "our welfare system is like a national club. It's made up of the contribution of hardworking British taxpayers. (…) It cannot be right that migrants can turn up and claim full rights to this club straightaway" (Cameron, 2014c).

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[9] His underlying proposal was to work on the education system so that the country could become "less dependent on immigration", and to work on the immigration system to "reduce the incentives for lower paid, lower skilled workers to come here" (Cameron, 2014c).

Thus, on one hand, Cameron portrayed himself ready to campaign to leave the EU if British concerns "fell on deaf ears" in the EU, while on the other hand he highlighted the benefits of free movement to Britain in order to increase negotiating potential. Although the PM did occasionally mention EU immigration in interviews and debates after November 2014, he refrained from further politicisation in order to divert public attention from his failed promise to reduce net migration "to the tens of thousands" and instead presented his achievements, such as creating jobs and helping small businesses. This strategy seemed successful, as his popularity increased in the following months, culminating in the highest voter approval rating (at 41%, in February 2015) that the PM had reached since entering office (Boffey, 2015).

In the run-up to the 2015 General Election party leaders were invited to various television debates and interviews, in which EU immigration was a recurring element. What was evident from his rhetoric during the debates on these occasions was that the PM did not want to politicise EU immigration any further. Instead, he deflected questions on immigration by answering them with reference to the potential success of his economic policies, and handled questions about immigrants' access to benefits by pointing to British people getting *off* those benefits (Cameron, 2015a). His efforts were most obvious when on 2 April 2015 in an *ITV* debate with leaders of the seven largest parties (including UKIP), Cameron exercised caution and did not react to Farage's comments on EU immigration in a way that would have sparked a debate (Cameron, 2015b). Furthermore, on 30 April in a *BBC Question Time Special*, he especially tried to avoid a securitising language, saying that "everyone who lives in our country" (not "British taxpayers") had the right for "economic security" if they "worked hard" and "did the right thing."

On 8 May 2015 the Conservatives won the General Election and Cameron formed a majority government, with the emphasis on the economy indeed proving to be one of the main reasons for this victory (Swinford, 2015). EU immigration was not further politicised after the election. It was not addressed in Cameron's victory speech (Cameron, 2015c), and the Queen's Speech (2015) did not mention "welfare reform" and "capping benefits" on the same page as "controlling immigration" either.

Conclusion

Having analysed Cameron's effect on the EU immigration discourse in the years of his first premiership it can be seen that by May 2015 the Prime Minister's rhetoric towards EU immigrants turned more hostile than it was in May 2010. Between May 2010 and

March 2013, EU immigration was part of the public debate, however, since the Prime Minister himself did not portray it as an "issue," it was not fully politicised. It was first addressed by the PM as a "problem" in March 2013, when Cameron said some EU immigrants were coming to Britain "for the wrong reasons." Security elements were increasingly present in his rhetoric after transitional controls on Romanian and Bulgarian free movement were lifted in January 2014. While Cameron referred increasingly to "abuse," "welfare tourism" and "pressure on our communities," these remarks were not phrased in a way that suggested a real intent to paint EU immigration as an existential threat, and therefore EU immigration was not securitised by the PM.

The findings of this study ultimately show that Eurosceptic forces influenced Cameron's rhetoric on EU immigrants to a large extent, as a result of which the PM politicised EU immigration and introduced legislation to curb EU immigrants' access to benefits. Although this seemed to have profited Cameron in the short term, the far-reaching consequences of his rhetoric impinged on the discourse on EU immigration in a harmful manner, fuelling Euroscepticism[10] and leading to negative perceptions of EU immigrants.

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[10] See the British Social Attitudes Survey 2015 by Curtice and Evans (2014).

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