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The problematisation of Muslims in public communication in Switzerland

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Problem outline

In September 2007, the British daily The Independent described Switzerland as «Europe's new heart of darkness», depicting it as a fore-runner within a European-wide trend towards problematising the «other» – mostly Muslims – and towards radicalising the (proposed) measures of how to deal with the «other».

One of the main factors contributing to this image were the election campaigns of the populist rightwing Swiss People's Party (Schweizerische Volkspartei, SVP), Switzerland's most successful and (since the 2003 elections) largest party.[2] In these campaigns, the SVP evoked an image of Switzerland as increasingly threatened by a growing Muslim minority at home. The fears this triggered seem to appeal to a large number of voters, as evidenced by the 29% of the electorate who voted for SVP during the last elections in October 2007.

In Switzerland's 'direct democracy' political system, political campaigns do not only have an impact on elections but political campaigns can also influence the legislative process via referenda and initiatives. One such example was the government's proposal to liberalise naturalisation laws, which was rejected by popular vote in 2004 as a result of a campaign that had successfully stoked fears of Islam. Another, current, initiative proposing a ban on the building of minarets in Switzerland (minarets being regarded as symbols of militant Islam), has so far received the support of over 100,000 citizens (that is to say, about 2 per cent of the electorate, which is the necessary quorum for any initiative). If a majority of voters decided in favour of this initiative – this, however, remains an unlikely outcome in light of the broad alliance that has formed against the initiative – Swiss citizens would establish a law that would have a big and direct impact on the Muslim minority in Switzerland.

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1   Draft only. Please do not quote/ paraphrase without permission. All comments are welcome. For information please contact Patrik Ettinger (patrik.ettinger@foeg.uzh.ch)

2   The 'new' Swiss People's Party alongside the social movement organisation AUNS (Aktion für eine Unabhängige und Neutrale Schweiz; Action for an Independent and Neutral Switzerland) is gaining increasing importance since the 1990s, thus transforming the 'old' SVP from an agrarian, conservative party (which, albeit with limited success, had formed part of the government since 1929) into a highly competitive and successful populist rightwing actor in Switzerland (Skenderovic 2007a: 166f., see also Udris/Imhof 2008, in print).

The Muslim minority in Switzerland

In Switzerland, Muslims are a small minority, both in terms of their actual number and in terms of their influence. In 1970, the Muslim minority of some 16,000 people was smaller than, for example, the likewise small Jewish community. During the 1980s and 1990s, however, the number of Muslims in Switzerland increased significantly; in 2000, 4.3% of the population were Muslims (cf. Table 1). This increase was both a result of immigration (both through working immigrants and refugees) and of a higher birth rate within the community. Working immigrants came into Switzerland predominantly from Turkey or, at a later stage, former Yugoslavia, but also, in the French-speaking part, from North Africa. The largest number of refugees came from the war-affect regions of former Yugoslavia.

Table 1: Religious affiliation of the Swiss population

	1970	1980	1990	2000
Protestant	46.4%	43.9%	38.5%	33.0%
Roman Catholic	49.4%	47.6%	46.2%	41.8%
...				
Jewish	0.3%	0.3%	0.3%	0.3%
Islamic	0.3%	0.9%	2.2%	4.3%
No affiliation	1.1%	3.8%	7.4%	11.1%

These working immigrants and refugees saw themselves primarily as members of a specific ethnic group; accordingly, they organised their cultural lives within ethnic groups and organisations. These also formed the context in which the more religious members of these minorities began setting up places of worship – mostly in backyards and old factory halls – and requesting burial sites on previously Christian cemeteries. The terrorist attacks in New York 2001 and Madrid 2004 challenged this primarily ethnic self-conception, with Swiss «majority society» beginning to perceive and problematise an allegedly homogenous Muslim community as a whole (Behloul 2005), thereby disregarding their ethnic and religious diversity.

How could this minority – heterogeneous, without any powerful interest organisations or lobbyist groups, no involvement in any terrorist action and although growing fast, still small in absolute numbers – become the primary object and target of political campaigns that depicted them as a fundamental threat to Swiss identity and security?

State of the art of research and project outline

In a large number of countries (e.g. Germany, the United States, Great Britain, France or the Netherlands), research into the way Muslims are perceived and discussed in public communi-

cation has increased considerably over the last ten years (see, for instance, Norris et al. 2003; Nacos et al. 2003; Nacos/Torres-Reyna 2007; Hafez 2002a, 2002b; Deltombe 2007; Poole 2000, 2002; d'Haenens/Bink 2006). In Switzerland, however, there is until now very little research on the perception and discussion of Muslims in public communication (for an exception see Bonfadelli 2007: Imhof/Ettinger 2007). Research relating to these issues tends to focus on the supply-side of political parties only (e.g. how the SVP exploits Muslims for political campaigns) (Skenderovic 2007) rather than on the demand-side of politics; it tends to concern itself with individual levels of «Islamophobia» (measured by surveys, cf. Cattacin et al. 2006), rather than on what gives rise to this perceived «problem» of Muslims in public communication; public communication being, after all, the very place where a society observes and regulates itself (Habermas 1992, Peters 1993, Imhof/Kamber 2006).

In an attempt to link public communication and the portrayal of Muslims, a number of studies on the «typification» of Muslim actors in leading Swiss media show that the perception of Muslims is more frequently shaped by generalisations than, by comparison, the perception of Jewish actors. As a result, negative stereotyping of Islamic fundamentalism («Islamismus») has affected the perception and typification of Islam in general (Udris/Eisenegger 2007). In another preliminary study, Imhof and Schranz (Imhof/Schranz 2003) showed the importance of 9/11 for the perception of Muslims in Switzerland. But beside such small and quite specific studies, much research remains to be done into explaining the rules and mechanisms behind the problematisation of Muslim actors in public communication and the effects this has on the legislative and political decision-making process as well as on the political culture of Switzerland.

In order to close this gap, we are currently conducting a research project funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation.[3] In this project, we systematically examine the discussion of Jewish and Muslim actors in Swiss public communication. In order to capture this public communication, we analyse the fifteen most important press outlets and television news broadcasts in Switzerland as well as parliamentary debates from 1998 until now.

So-called communication events form the empirical basis to the project. These communication events are established by means of a systematic reading of press outlets and television news broadcasts. The communication events are analysed by means of a reconstruction of the narrative structures through which journalists select, interpret and narrate to their readership what occurs in the world (cf. Imhof 1993; Eisenegger 2005). In a technical sense, then, these communication events consist of a series of articles or reports. By quantifying such communication events according to their extent and the reports related to them, it is possible to determine the agenda of a given medium as well as that of the totality of the media under consideration. In this way, we can determine the dominant communication events for each given period that structure public communication.

The analysis of such communication events allows us to answer the following research questions:

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3   For further informations see: http://www.nfp58.ch/e_projekte_religion.cfm?projekt=113.

1. At which point in time and due to which events do actors[4] identified as Muslims or Jews become a dominant theme in Swiss public communication? Which role do so-called key events, e.g. 9/11 play in this? (Brosius/Eps 1993) To what extent is the intensity with which Jewish or Muslim minorities are discussed in Switzerland influenced by the repercussions of international key-events?

So as to capture the dynamic of the problematisation of Muslim and Jewish actors within public communication, we further intend to investigate the following questions:

2. Which frames (Entman 1993; van Gorp 2007) are used to draw attention to Jews and Muslims and define them as a problem? What are the semantics of difference through which Muslims and Jews are defined as the «other» and how is this «other» separated from the «Us»-group (Switzerland, the West etc.)? How rigid are these semantics of difference, and how rigid, therefore, is the marginalisation of Jewish or Muslim minorities? How are Muslims and Jews, and how, by contrast, is the «Us»-group being typified? Who represents these frames, semantics of difference and stereotypes within public communication? Who are the actors in charge of these definitions? And do Muslims and Jews obtain a voice of their own within public debates or are they merely the objects of statements made about them? How is the problematisation of Jews and Muslims in public communication influenced by a media logic that is changing in the course of increasing commercialisation?

In order to address these issues, we are conducting a content analysis of articles and news reports. This analysis captures the frames, that is to say the particular problem-definitions these frames promote, their causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation.[5] Furthermore, the content analysis allows us to capture the semantics of difference and typecasting imposed on both Muslims and Jews (as the «other»), as well as on the Us-group. Finally, we are assessing which actors are voicing or contradicting these kinds of frames, semantics of difference and stereotypes within media reporting.

In order to analyse the effects the problematisation of Muslim actors may have, the study analyses the conflicts triggered by the use of certain frames and semantics of difference within the public debate. In addition to that, we are analysing the interaction between mass-media and parliamentary debate and the influence exerted by the mass-media problematisation of Muslims and Jews on political decisions relevant to these minorities.

3. Which of these frames and semantics of difference are met with fierce opposition and which have become «essentialised» and are, therefore, no longer being questioned? How do political decisions concerning Muslims or Jews come about and how are they legitimised?

The above mentioned research project provides a first set of empirical data as well as the conceptual framework for this paper.

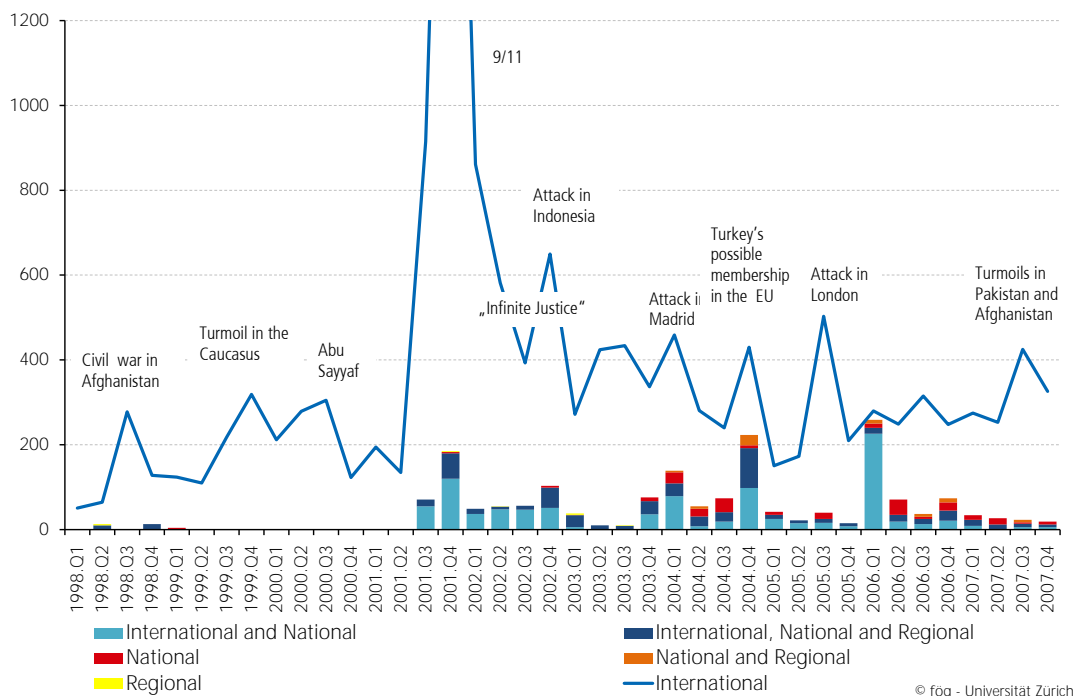4 The term 'actors' compromises both individuals as well as organisations or states.

5 Our concept of frames refers to Entmans famous definition: «To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described.» (Entman 1993:52)

Results

On the basis of «communication events», we have, in a first step, examined the frequency and intensity of the media coverage of Muslims in the leading Swiss media. We started out with the assumption that international «key communication events» such as 9/11 influence the media coverage both regarding the intensity with which Muslims are focused on as well as in the way in which Muslims are portrayed. More specifically, we were interested in finding out how such international «key communication events» influence the discussion of the Muslim minority in Switzerland.

To show the intensity of coverage and the importance of international key communication events (cf. Figure 1), we distinguished three types of communication events: a) communication events that focus on international processes and events without any relation to Switzerland (blue lines); b) communication events where international processes and events are discussed in relation to Switzerland (blue columns) and c) communication events where domestic (Swiss) processes and events are discussed without international relations (red columns).

*Figure 1: International vs. domestic communication events on Muslims, Swiss leading media
1998-2007*

The extremely intense coverage of Muslims in international contexts occurs largely in reaction to wars and terrorist attacks. This includes the civil war in Afghanistan, the turmoil in the Caucasus, the terrorist attacks on 9/11, drawing the largest amount of attention, the so-called

«War on Terror», the attacks in Indonesia, Madrid and London as well as the upheavals in Pakistan. Naturally, in all these communication events, the coverage and portrayal of Muslims is shaped by the context of violence, the only exception to these highly resonant war and terror communication events being the discussion of Turkey's possible membership in the European Union.

This international media coverage also draws the attention to Muslims living in Switzerland, thus mirroring the effect of «global» Islam in the coverage of «domestic» Islam (for a similar finding in the UK cf. Poole 2000). Until 9/11, Muslims in Switzerland were only marginally discussed, for instance in the discussion of burial sites on formerly Christian cemeteries. In the aftermath of 9/11, attention in Switzerland first focused on the role of the Swiss financial sector as a possible «safe haven» or transit for money stemming from or connected to terrorists. Still sensitized by a decade of intense and controversial debate about the role of the Swiss financial sector during World War II, the Swiss elite perceived this new discussion as an (international) attack on the financial sector and thus reacted defensively. In this first phase, Muslims are only discussed on the margins. But this changes fundamentally after the attacks in Madrid in March 2004. Increasingly, coverage focuses on the threat Islamic terrorism presents to Switzerland and on how to deal with terrorists. It is in this context that the Muslim minority in Switzerland is first made out to be a problem. Discussions are incensed by religious symbols (minarets, headscarf). Here, frames dominate which, on the one hand, problematise the limits of the rule of law and its tolerance towards Islam and, on the other hand, construe Islamic fundamentalism («Islamismus») as a threat to Swiss identity and security.
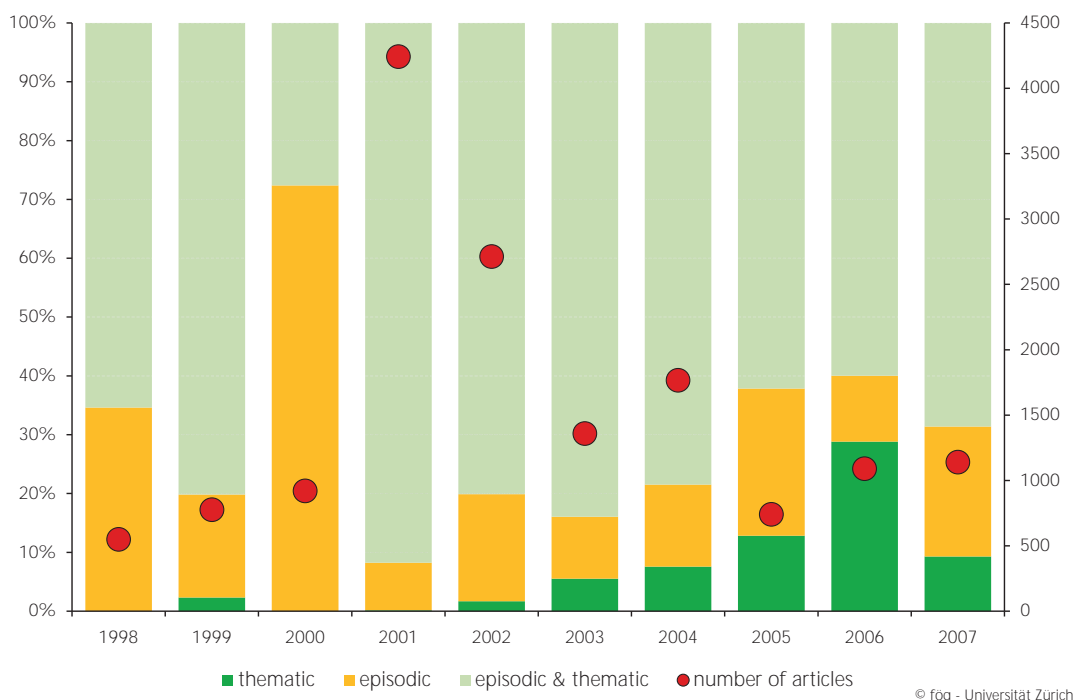
We can show this quite accurately by analysing such domestic communication events in light of their «core frames». When comparing the core frames over time, we can see that before 9/11 – and even more strikingly before Madrid – core frames depicting Muslims living in Switzerland as victims of inadequate integration (policies) and highlighting the question of integration are dominant. After Madrid, however, frames depicting Muslims as perpetrators and suggesting an increasing threat to Switzerland through Muslims unwilling or unable to integrate into Swiss society become dominant. In analogy to the threat perception during the Cold War, these frames construct the gloomy figure of the «Fifth Column». This triggers a broad discussion of the basis of the democratic rule of law. While members of the SVP in particular claim that the constitutional state is threatened by the Muslim minority, opponents of the SVP counter this claim by arguing that it is exactly this campaign-like problematisation of Muslims with its rigid definition of who belongs to Swiss society (politicization of ethnicity) which threatens the democratic postulate of equality.

Because of this, Switzerland currently faces a fundamental conflict. Since the outcome of this conflict is not clear yet, it is important to look at the quality of this conflictive discussion and ask the question which actors acquire the power of definition.

As we are devoting our current research to this issue, this paper can only present a preliminary indicator at the level of communication event analysis.

We distinguish the communication events in which Muslims are discussed, by looking at whether episodic or thematic frames are dominant or whether they are present in equal measures. «Episodic frames depict public issues in terms of concrete instances or specific events […]. Thematic news frames, by contrast, place public issues in some general or abstract context.» (Iyengar / Simon 1994:171)

Figure 2: «Episodic» or «Thematic» framed Communication Events on Muslims, Swiss leading media 1998-2007

As shown in figure 2, most communication events exhibit a mixture of episodic and thematic frames. Prior to 9/11, coverage primarily concerned with concrete instances or specific events (episodic frames) is largely found within war- und conflict-reporting. The green columns show, however, that in the course of the debate around the «war on terror» from 2002 onwards and later on with the attacks in Europe as with the so-called Muhammad cartoons controversy, coverage is becoming increasingly reflexive. This provides at least one precondition for a more differentiated discussion of the question of both Muslim integration and the threat posed by Islamic terror. More thorough analyses are required, however, if we are to assess the differentiation of the problem analyses and the quality of the arguments and counter-arguments.

Conclusion

The media coverage of Muslims is defined by the high-resonance focus on international wars and conflicts as well as their corresponding frames («War on terror», «clash of civilizations»).

Key communication events such as 9/11 and, even more so, the attacks in Madrid which suggest a threat to Europe through Islamic terror, create windows of attention for the problematisation of Muslim minorities in Switzerland, for the discussion of a clash of values («Religion vs. Democracy», «Freedom of opinion vs. Respect for religious beliefs») and for the spread of threat scenarios («Threat of Islamic Terror»)

After the attacks in Madrid, frames in which Muslims in Switzerland are clearly perceived as a threat are being established within the public sphere that is informed by mass-media («threat through the spread of Islamic thought; gradual islamisation»). The semantics of difference are becoming much more rigid.

We can only outline the reasons for this development here. One important reason is certainly the fact that, with the Swiss People's Party, an established and influential political actor has chosen the problematisation of Muslims as a central tool for its political campaigns. The Swiss People's Party benefits from a logic of selection and interpretation within the media, that is changing in the course of the commercialisation of the media system. In the competition over circulation and viewing rates and under pressure from competitors, these commercialised media willingly offer a platform, even where the editorial department does not share the party's political ideas.

This only partially explains the political success of the problematisation of Muslims within Switzerland's political communication. A more thorough explanation would, in our view, have to take into account the growing loss of orientation within Swiss society. The end of the Cold War and its clearly defined fronts, the debate around accession to the EU dividing Swiss society, plus an increasing social disparity in the wake of neoliberal politics have plunged Swiss society into a veritable crisis of orientation. This creates a window of opportunity for those populist powers, which promise clear cut boundaries of belonging and simple solutions to its own people by means of a generalising problematisation of the «other» (here, in the guise of Muslims).

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