

Polish Journal of Political Science

Volume 6 Issue 2 (2020)



Wydanie bieżącego numeru PJPS – zadanie realizowane w ramach umowy 874/P-DUN/2019 ze środków Ministra Nauki i Szkolnictwa Wyższego przeznaczonych na działalność upowszechniającą naukę.



**Ministry of Science
and Higher Education**

Republic of Poland

Polish Journal of Political Science

Volume 6 Issue 2

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eISSN 2391-3991

Original version: e-book

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Defining threats linked to the influx of immigrants and refugees to France based to the report «Attitudes Towards Refugees, Immigrants, and Identity in France»

Abstract

This paper explores the threats to France's security linked to the influx of immigrants and refugees. As the number of immigrants and refugees entering the country grows, security policies are jeopardised. The opinions French citizens on the safety of local politics, communities, identity, culture, language, and religion are surveyed in the 2017 report *Attitudes Towards Refugees, Immigrants, and Identity in France*. The analysis of data included in the report shows negative attitudes toward Islam and generally doubts towards newcomers. The results of the analysis present an important knowledge for security policies because it is a reflection of a nation's wariness. That having been said, more studies need to be conducted in order to have a better perspective on the identified issues.

Key words: French security policy, cultural identity, immigration, refugees

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Introduction

The goal of this study is to present the attitudes of French citizens regarding security policy in France. Security policy is an important matter because its efficiency can impact citizens' political choices and later influence the future of the country. Today people's views and opinions on security are, amongst others, factors determined by oncoming waves of immigrants and refugees. With their arrival the security of the country can become jeopardised. Not only the country's territorial security, but also cultural, identity, economic, political and religious security could be at risk. The analyzed report *Attitudes Towards Refugees, Immigrants, and Identity in France*¹ reveals those possible threats to France. That having been said, it should be noted that a growing number of immigrants and refugees is a concern for every European country. The way France is dealing with security issues linked to the influx of immigrants and refugees can serve as a signpost for the European Union.

The report was prepared for More in Common by IFOP in 2017. The IFOP is the French Institute of Public Opinion and is an international polling and market research firm, their main slogan being 'Connection creates value'. The More in Common association requested the report to be prepared because their goal is to deepen the understanding of the attitudes toward identity, immigration, and refugees. The report allowed to identify common points and differences of opinion concerning the threats that are real issues for France today. Besides being a social analysis the report is a conversation starter in order to fathom the consequences of the country

¹ Fourquet et al. (2017).

being open and inclusive. People's identity has much to do with how they view the world and the presented issues. Keeping that in mind is important when trying to answer the question: What kind of threats were identified in this report?

I. General context of the report

The report touches on issues such as identity, opinions and views of French citizens towards immigrants and refugees. It does not, however, completely exhaust the subjects linked to immigrants and refugees. Similar issues were identified in another report written by Laurent Delbos in 2019 entitled *Country Report: France*.² His research represents an in-depth analysis of the country's situation. Other important researches include that of Thomas Soehl, who explored social issues connected with the matter in *Social Reproduction of Religiosity in the Immigrant Context: The Role of Family Transmission and Family Formation — Evidence from France*.³ With respect to education experiences of migrants Maïtena Armagnague and Isabelle Rigoni worked on *Editorial: School Experiences of Migrant Minors*,⁴ where they discussed issues linked to schooling and migration in France. In regard to the future of France, Béatrice Giblin wrote in *Éditorial. La France demain...*⁵ about issues concerning security and political changes in the France of tomorrow.

That having been said, the basis of this analysis is the report *Attitudes Towards Refugees, Immigrants, and Identity in France*. This report was created in two steps. The first

² Delbos (2019).

³ Soehl (2018).

⁴ Armagnague, Rigoni (2019).

⁵ Giblin (2018).

step took place in 2016 and its goal was to ask questions online. 2002 representatives of the French people aged 18 and older responded to questions concerning their sexes, education, origin, culture, religion, as well as their opinions towards consumerism, media, political views and of course experiences with immigration issues. During the survey questions concerning immigration and personal experience with the matter were the most important ones in order to understand their point of view. The subject of immigration, but also the definition of it are one of the central elements of the report. The second step of creating the report were face-to-face interviews that took place in December 2016. The goal of the second part of the survey was to analyze and deepen the understanding of the responses that had been given. The interview process was long and detailed. The authors of the report state many times that it is important to keep in mind that people's opinions and points of view change with time and as a result of additional information. That is why the authors of the report presented answers as indicators of general feelings the public has towards the issues related to refugees and immigration. They tried to take into consideration all the various aspects of one's opinions in order to perform an analysis of the data.

Difference between the definitions of an immigrant and a refugee

First of all, it is of great importance to note that an immigrant and a refugee does not mean the same thing. The report starts with a thorough explanation of those two terms. The two terms do not have the exact same meaning although they share some similarities. One of the general goals of the report is to differentiate between the two notions clearly by separating them

from the beginning. In other words, the threats linked to immigration are not the same, although similar, to the dangers linked to the growing number of refugees. That is to say that as the report states the most important difference between an immigrant and a refugee is that a refugee is a person who did not have the choice to leave their country of origin. This explanation throws more light onto the possible issues related to the subject. The motivation and situation of an individual who did not have a choice to leave their country of origin is different than that of someone who leaves voluntarily.

Political concerns in relation to the process of globalization

Another important point that is raised in the report is the perception of the process of globalization. Dynamic political changes in Europe, such as Brexit or the electoral success of the Nationalist Front in France, leave the authors of the report to wonder about the consequences of those changes. Recent events can also have a long term impact on public opinion. Relating to politicization of immigrants, Edgar Grande, Tobias Schwarzbözl and Matthias Fatke wrote *Politicizing immigration in Western Europe*,⁶ where they proved that radical right-wing populist parties play an important role in politicization of immigration. The authors of the report *Attitudes Towards Refugees, Immigrants, and Identity in France* also say that the influx of immigrants and refugees will probably shift the power dynamics in the political field of not only France, but also many other European countries. Their arrival can be seen as a threat to the country's security, because the growing number of refugees and immigrants will

⁶ Grande, Schwarzbözl, Fatke (2018): 1444–1463.

most likely affect the elections in one way or another. The authors of the paper *Immigration and electoral support for the far-left and the far-right* add

Although the outcome of the next presidential election most likely hangs on the economy, our results suggest that far-left and far-right candidates' electoral success is also going to depend on the size and composition of immigration in coming years.⁷

Refugees and immigrants are becoming an increasingly bigger part of society. As such, their opinions and votes have to be taken into account by politicians.

Just like changing political parties and government policies concerning the well-being of the countries they represent, the influx of immigrants can have a long lasting impact on industry. Industry is an important element of the country's functioning and its changes can greatly affect every citizen in the long run. No matter if it is a big city or a small town in the countryside, government's decisions can affect everyone. The same can be said about the tourist regions in both urban and rural areas. Those sectors are greatly affected by threats linked to the development of globalization as well as immigration.⁸ This situation makes 61% of the French citizens say that France should start protecting itself from foreign threats. There is overall pessimism and concerns as regards the rapid process of globalization.

Furthermore, when asked about the adjectives that first come to mind when thinking about the France of today,

⁷ Edo, Giesing, Öztunc, Poutvaara (2019): 35.

⁸ Fourquet et al. (2017): 33.

the people taking part in the survey chose two words: worry and anger.⁹ Worry and anger are adjectives with quite negative connotations, to say the least. Words have a powerful meaning and those chosen by the people in question are among some of the strongest words to express frustration. With all that having been said, the choice of words made by the people participating in the survey is quite bothering. 65% chose the adjective worry, and 50% – angry. Providing this information, the authors of the report claim that French citizens seem to become distrustful of their own country, but at the same time they are often very reluctant to share this conviction.

II. Economic Threats

Limited capacity of the country to welcome immigrants and refugees

The *goal of the report Attitudes Towards Refugees, Immigrants, and Identity in France* was not only to discuss the subject, but also to interview citizens who are not knowledgeable about economics. Their opinions show that the general climate is not too favorable to opening the French borders. A lot of debate is going around the country concerning the matter, and many citizens questioned in the survey are hesitant. It can be seen in the report that the capacity of France to welcome immigrants and refugees is limited by many factors. That said, a certain paradox can be seen when looking closely at the situation. Although the French have welcomed already a number of immigrants, public opinion claims that the French citizens are reluctant to the idea of the completely

⁹ Ibidem: 28.

open borders. The example set by Germany is not one that the French people want to follow. One of the authors of the report, Jérôme Fourquet, suggests that one of the reasons why the French are not as open as the Germans to immigrants is due to a different history of the two countries. All that has happened since the beginning of WWII have impacted the German perception of immigration in some way. To be more precise and provide an example, it can be said that their views of immigration have been shaped in a significant way by large masses of people filtering in and out of Germany due to post war movements. France have not lived through similar events, so the uneasy feelings associated with immigration issues are exaggerated, says Fourquet.¹⁰

Intensity and rapidity of arrival of immigrants and refugees

The financial help that is provided to immigrants is seen as worrisome to every other French citizen. One out of two French citizens considers helping immigrants as a great sacrifice at the expense of the majority of the population. That is seen as unjust because in return immigrants do not show any willingness to adapt to the customs of the country they have settled in. The efforts of immigrants to integrate with the French society are practically nonexistent in the eyes of the people taking part in the survey. On the other hand, 56% also agree that immigrants work hard and generally accept the working conditions that the French refuse to take. That having been said, this affirmation should not be taken as a good sign, as it is causing the minimal wage to drop,

¹⁰ Fourquet et al. (2017): 32.

which is not necessarily a good thing.¹¹ In addition, a large influx of refugees and immigrants can lead to housing issues. Finding a job can be a difficult task for newcomers and unfortunately some of them might become homeless. As stated by Pascale Dietrich-Ragon, the author of the article *On the Sidelines of French Society Homelessness among Migrants and their Descendants*:

While the origin of homeless people is rarely mentioned in the media, this article shows that housing insecurity disproportionately affects migrants and their descendants.¹²

Economic destabilization?

A possible threat that is coming with immigrants and refugees is an economic one. It is impossible to deny that an influx of immigrants affects the economy. Presumably immigrants come to France with hopes and dreams of a better life. Some of them are entrepreneurs, Tesseltje de Lange wrote *Welcoming talent? A comparative study of immigrant entrepreneurs' entry policies in France, Germany and the Netherlands*,¹³ depicting highly skilled immigrant entrepreneurs. In order to help them function in a new environment the French government has set a system of financial aid. This decision has sparked conversation around the question who should benefit from it. In a perfect world, if one would wish to receive financial aid, it would also be imperative to contribute back to the society. The reality is that unfortunately many

¹¹ Ibidem: 43.

¹² Dietrich-Ragon (2017): 23.

¹³ de Lange (2018).

try to abuse the system. French citizens are aware of this issue. As it is shown in the report, the economic dimension should be taken seriously because it is an important issue for French citizens.¹⁴ When asked: Do you agree that immigrants demand aid and help of the public services without making any contribution in return?, 65% responded: Yes. Financial aid given to every immigrant is seen as a threat to the economic system. In addition, many interviewed people shared the feeling that immigrants have been given priority over French citizens. That is a problem because it shows that citizens do not feel prioritized by their own government. This could lead to distrust towards immigrants and resentment between French citizens and immigrants. Furthermore, abuse of help provided by the government can lead to economic destabilization. Instead of uniting immigrants and local citizens, financial aid can cause more divisions between them.

III. Social threats

Cultural differences and language barrier

When talking about immigrants and refugees it is important to note that another threat linked with their arrival concerns their different traditions and lifestyles. The French slogan of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity is not the only representative of the French culture and beliefs. The country has also an important heritage of Christianity among many other factors that make up the identity of French citizens. France has its own cultural background, and many citizens believe that traditions and lifestyle is an important part of their life. This

¹⁴ Fourquet et al. (2017): 43.

statement is reflected by the answers provided to the following question. When asked: Do you agree that refugees should be able to continue their traditions?, only 18% responded in the affirmative. It is clear that immigration leads to integration issues. As briefly mentioned before, the French are not considering immigrants as willing to integrate with the French society. The issue of immigrants not willing to adapt to their new country is an important issue. France has a strong position in political and economic areas, and up to 54% of respondents confirm that they are proud of being French.¹⁵ Identity is a mix of many elements. Cultural elements are a big part of the feeling connected with France and the French identity in general. There is a danger linked to the rapidity and intensity of the influx of immigrants to France because adapting to a new culture takes time and effort.

Although the French agree that the unique customs and culture are important in building a person's identity, they also believe that newcomers should make a great effort in order to acquire a new identity. A new identity that would be the basis for assimilation. The report shows that assimilation is seen as a must in order to become a part of the French society. That having been said, it is not an easy task to adapt to a new culture and its beliefs. Taking on a new identity in a foreign country is a big issue. One of the key elements of assimilation is learning the local language. The language barrier can be the biggest obstacle to assimilation. Refusing to learn the language can be a threat to the French language in general. If less and less people will be learning French, then it can have long term linguistic consequences. Those linguistic consequences have to be taken into consideration when analyzing

¹⁵ Fourquet et al. (2017): 36.

the report's data. When asked: Do you agree that refugees coming to live in France should learn the language?, 85% said: Yes.¹⁶ This answer shows that communication is most important in order to properly integrate into the society. Integration is first and foremost achieved through acquiring the command of the local language, and as the survey shows the vast majority of French citizens share the same belief.

Islam: Is it incompatible with France's beliefs?

Welcoming refugees and immigrants is for many a threat to the security of the country. Being reluctant to welcome immigrants is largely due to terrorist threats that have been preoccupying the country for the last few years. The report shows that the three issues that concern French citizens most are terrorist threats – 53% selected it as the number one issue. Secondly, unemployment that was selected by 52% and, last but not least, the immigration problem that was chosen as a threat to the French society by 37% of citizens taking part in the survey.¹⁷ Those threats are part of everyday life of French citizens. They are major indicators of fears that preoccupy them. Important issues such as terrorism and unemployment exert a great impact on their opinions concerning refugees and immigration. That leads to the problem of open borders. Public opinion has expressed a desire to strengthen border controls. Following a series of terrorist attacks that started in 2016 public opinions shifted, and begun to demand more restrictions at the borders. The growing threat of terrorism is a result of the growing number of immigrants and refugees.

¹⁶ Ibidem: 56.

¹⁷ Fourquet et al. (2017): 25.

Furthermore, the report showed that 53% of the French agree that the threat of terrorism is constantly present.¹⁸

In addition to the issue of terrorism, there is a threat of a foreign religion – Islam. Islam is a big part of the identity of many refugees and immigrants from the Middle East. As the report shows, French citizens see a clear connection between Islam, terrorism and the increasing number of refugees entering the country. In total, only 33% of the French believe that Islam is a peaceful religion.¹⁹ The rest of the interviewed group sees this religion as very problematic and incompatible with the belief system of France. Another paper on a similar issue was written in 2018 by Marie-Pier Joly and Jeffrey G. Reitz. In their research paper *Emotional Stress and the Integration of Muslim Minorities in France and Canada*²⁰ they explore the challenges that the Muslims face regarding mental health while trying to integrate in France and Canada. Those are only a few among the issues that can become a growing problem. Also a comparison of the position of the woman in the Muslim and French society is different, and therefore debatable. Danièle Joly from the University of Warwick did research concerning the place of women in the Muslim society in *Women from Muslim Communities: Autonomy and Capacity of Action*.²¹ Her research concerns Muslim communities and emancipation of women. As stated in the report *Attitudes Towards Refugees, Immigrants, and Identity in France*, the French society differs from that of the Muslims. According to the respondents, the place of women is not favorable in Muslim societies. For many

¹⁸ Ibidem: 16.

¹⁹ Ibidem: 62.

²⁰ Joly, Reitz (2018): 1111–1129.

²¹ Joly (2017): 816–832.

French citizens it is a negative characteristic associated with Islam.²² This opinion is significant as it shows that the French see Islam as having pejorative qualities and a negative impact on their country in general.

Conclusion

Public opinion concerning the treats linked to the influx of immigrants in France covers a wide spectrum of views. Oftentimes people who participated in the survey placed themselves in the middle of the spectrum avoiding its extremities. Those situated on the extremes were in the minority in this specific report, which is an interesting observation because often times the media represents the public as having strong opinions on immigration issue. It is not the case in this report; many people were not sure how to respond. Because many people placed themselves in the middle, it is highly possible that they will be open to changing their minds. It is possible that in the future, when presented with convincing arguments, public opinion will sway more one way or the other. Those are of course only possibilities, but as shown by results of the report, it can certainly be seen that the issue is complex.

To conclude, basing on the information provided by the report it is evident that French citizens have a feeling of general discomfort towards the unknown. Their views are largely due to the negative image of Islam and Muslim culture. There is an ambivalence between the questioned groups on the subject of foreigners. The threats that were identified as the most dangerous ones concern mostly the process of globalization. French citizens have a negative approach to this evolving

²² Fourquet et al. (2017): 63.

matter. Other worrisome dangers linked to the influx of immigrants and refugees were identified as economic threats. People who were interviewed expressed concerns about the country's security. Another threat that can lead to destabilization of the country is a cultural one. The report does question its participants about the future of France. The information that refugees will continue their lifestyle, traditions and religion once living in France the overall causes that feelings are quite pessimistic. The French are also aware of the threats of terrorist attacks, that can lead to chaos and the feeling of insecurity in their own country. Those dangers and concerns are addressed and included in the report. It also shows that French citizens do not have a positive view of the current situation of immigrants and refugees in their country. The defined threats are linked to the economy, society, culture, terrorism, and religion. Those are the main factors identified by the authors, but surely not the only ones. This report can also be a start to many other reports and debates on this issue. As this matter concerns also other European countries and the EU at large, it can be a reason to do more research and comparative analyses in the future. More studies are needed in order to better our knowledge and understanding on immigrants and refugees. It would be helpful to conduct similar surveys and draw reports on the subject of attitudes towards refugees, immigrants, and identity in other countries. It could give a global picture of different attitudes of various nations, and in that way more efficient security policies could be productively implemented in each of the EU Member States. That way the EU security policy could become increasingly effective and proficient.

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