A consensus that impedes contestation: Debating migration-related diversity in post-terror Norway

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Abstract

This article draws on the post-terror setting of Norway to investigate interactions between consensus, contestation, and conflict in public debates about diversity. A consensus-oriented unity prevailed in immediate responses to the 2011 terror attacks that killed 77 people in Norway. Analysis of 40 semi-structured interviews identifies lingering perceptions that the following conditions limited the space for contestation after the attacks: the intensity of the initial unity expressions; the perpetrator's identity as a Norwegian, self-proclaimed Christian crusader; and broader patterns of limited space for nuanced contestation in diversity debates. Drawing on influential political theories on liberal democratic debate, this is an empirical inquiry into when and how contestation about migration-related diversity is impeded, and with what implications. The Norwegian case illustrates that too much consensus-orientation and inadequate space for nuance can further underline conflict and thereby impede citizens' engagement with debates about migration-related diversity.

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Introduction

Polarisation dominates public debate about migration-related diversity in liberal democracies both in the Global North and South (Abdel-Fattah, 2020; Dryzek & Kanra, 2014; Silverman & Thomas, 2012). Such polarisation reflects deep-seated conflicts over the question of who belongs in which nations (Antonsich & Matejskova, 2015; Ewart et al., 2022). In this article I investigate how citizens in a liberal democracy with increasing migration-related diversity perceive and engage with public debates about diversity. I draw on influential political theory about consensus and conflict in public spheres (Fraser, 1990; Habermas, 1995; Mouffe, 1999, 2009; Taylor, 1994) and connect these theories with insights from research on migration-related diversity.

I apply this theoretical framework to the post-terror conjunction as an arena where unity and conflict meet. Terror attacks accentuate the potential of conflict linked to diversity. And yet, in the immediate aftermath of terrorism, leaders, the media, and the public stress the need for consensus and unity (Ezzati 2021b; Monin, 2020; Thorbjørnsrud & Figenschou, 2018). Such a conflict-induced unity is time-limited, but while it lasts it is salient and powerful (Collins, 2004). After this temporarily induced unity, the media coverage of, and political responses to, terrorist attacks continue to affect public debates (Cinalli & Giugni, 2013; Połońska-Kimunguyi & Marie, 2016; Thorbjørnsrud & Figenschou, 2018) and public opinion (Ahmad, 2006; Brouard et al., 2018; Sobolewska & Ali, 2015).

This article seeks to understand how people perceive what happens in public debates after a period of strong consensus-orientation, drawing on 40 semi-structured interviews conducted in Norway four years after 22 July 2011 (hereafter 22 July). Motivated by anti-immigration, anti-Islam, and anti-establishment sentiments, the perpetrator killed 77 people. He detonated a self-made car bomb in the central government area in Oslo before he carried out a mass shooting on the island of Utøya, where members of the Norwegian Labour Party's Youth Organisation had gathered for an annual camp. The perpetrator has later claimed that he targeted this organisation to stop immigration and future recruitment to the Norwegian Labour Party, which he blamed for increasing immigration since the 1960s.

The immediate aftermath of 22 July saw many calls for consensus-orientation, as leaders, the media, and the public emphasised unity (Ezzati, 2021b; Rafoss 2019; Thorbjørnsrud & Figenschou, 2018). However, with the passing of time, questions remain about whether the attacks have led to too few consequences in Norwegian society, and if so why (Bangstad, 2014; Ezzati & Erdal, 2018; Falkheimer & Olsson, 2014; Kolås, 2017; Solheim & Jupskås, 2021).

For this article, I interviewed lay people from diverse backgrounds, and with no specific connection to 22 July. From each their viewpoint, the interviewees saw Norwegian diversity debates that were limited in scope and nuance. What conditions narrowed the space for contestation about 22 July, and what were the implications of this narrowed space for debates about migration-related diversity? By answering these questions from the interviewees' perspective, I discuss how modes of debate can affect individual engagement with public debates about diversity.

These questions speak to the evolving nature of public debates. Since I conducted these interviews, there have been additional terror attacks in Norway and in other countries. In

August 2019, a white, 22-year-old Norwegian man attacked and attempted to shoot people in a mosque outside of Oslo, after having committed a racially motivated murder of his stepsister, who was adopted from China. He cited both 22 July and the March 2019 Christchurch, New Zealand terrorist as his inspirations. The Christchurch terrorist was a self-proclaimed white supremacist and fascist, who also cited 22 July as inspiration. These examples illustrate that such violence is not a thing of the past, nor confined to Norway. Meanwhile, those people who do not condone violence, and who constitute a majority in the population, must relate to extremism in public debates and everyday life.

Against this backdrop, the article draws on the post-terror setting of Norway to investigate interactions between consensus, contestation, and conflict in public debates about diversity – from the perspective of the non-extreme population. Analysis of the interviewees' reflections on debating migration-related diversity post 22 July untangles the complexity that exists in how people, regardless of whether they have an immigrant background or not, engage with diversity debates. To investigate these perspectives, I work with literature on migration-related diversity combined with selected theories about consensus and contestation in liberal democracies.

Public debates about migration-related diversity

Studies on migration-related diversity have found that anti-immigration sentiments and Islamophobia have become increasingly mainstream in European debates (Bangstad, 2014; Mondon & Winter, 2017; Moosavi, 2015). On the one hand, negative media and political depictions affect immigrants' participation in, and with, public spheres (Midtbøen, 2018; Sanders et al., 2014). On the other hand, rhetoric in public spheres affects political behaviour among non-immigrants (Mondon & Winter, 2019; Stockemer et al., 2020). Brubaker (2017) argues that there is a link between the rise of populism in European public spheres and a sense of rejection and disregard of mainstream politics and media. He further argues that this link reflects polarisation between so-called elites and 'the people', on the one hand, and between immigrants and non-immigrants on the other (Brubaker, 2017). Such polarisation reinforces the emergence of echo chambers, in which people with similar views reinforce each other's perceptions of the world (Colleoni et al., 2014).

Despite sensationalist media portrayals and widespread perceptions of deep differences between Muslims and non-Muslims, opinions about Islamic radicalism and Islamophobia are varied and multifaceted, and held by both Muslims and non-Muslims (Dryzek & Kanra, 2014, p. 1251). Arguably, such nuance and variety is obscured by the fact that a substantial body of research investigates either Muslims or non-Muslims (Dryzek & Kanra, 2014). In the relatively rare studies that do examine citizens' engagement with public debates regardless of their religious background, findings suggest that there is more shared experience of everyday engagement than is currently visible in mediatised public debate (Horst et al., 2020; Sanders et al., 2014).

Within a polarised atmosphere, dichotomies seem to prevail over expressions of nuance and a variety of opinions. Unity is often portrayed as the opposite of diversity and diversity as 'something "carried" solely by immigrants and something that the "native" society has to cope with' (Antonsich & Matejskova, 2015, p. 496). However, as Kymlicka (2015, p. 3) explains:

it's the first premise of all democratic theory that people diverge in their preferences. People differ in their interests, their identities, their religious beliefs, and we need democracy precisely to reach decisions in the face of these 'facts of pluralism'.

The term 'communities of disagreement' has been suggested to signal the need for both a sense of community and space for contestation (Iversen, 2019). This point implies that it is not only diversity that matters, but also *how* diversity is debated in the public sphere.

In his notable theory about the public sphere, Habermas (1995) argues for a deliberative democracy where citizens, as free and equal members of a shared political community, reach agreement on the best collective results through an open, rational, and argumentative public deliberation free of citizens' private interests.

Critique of Habermas's conceptualisation has primarily revolved around the downplaying of conflict and of differences. In his seminal work on multiculturalism, Taylor (1994) objects to Habermas's conceptualisation, arguing that because people are different, politics ought to explicitly recognise and adjust to those differences rather than attempting to tone them down. In a similar vein, Fraser (1990) argues for explicitly acknowledging existing differences and inequalities rather than 'bracketing' them, since the hegemonic public sphere is, and always has been, constituted by conflict.

Similarly, Mouffe (1999) criticises Habermas for attempting to downplay the ever-present conflictual dimension of politics: 'Politics aims at the creation of unity in a context of conflict and diversity; it is always concerned with the creation of an "us" by the determination of a "them"' (Mouffe, 1999, p. 755). The conflictual dimension of politics can take either the form of a struggle between adversaries ('agonism') or realise its potential to turn into a struggle between enemies ('antagonism'), where others come to be perceived as 'threatening our existence' (Mouffe, 2009, p. 550). Thus, Mouffe (2009, p. 551) suggests, it is essential to channel disagreements, which are both legitimate and necessary in a pluralist democracy, as too much emphasis on consensus, along with avoidance of contestation, can lead citizens to disengage from 'political participation'.

All of these democracy theories are founded on a belief that a well-functioning democracy requires a plurality of people to engage with each other's viewpoints through established public arenas. Furthermore, Taylor, Fraser, and Mouffe all highlight the need for institutionally facilitated public spheres that acknowledge differences and accommodate contestation. Contestation depends on how, and to what degree, a variety of people – with their ethnic, religious, political, and other differences – find their views to be recognised and accommodated in public spheres.

Post-terror Norway

In terms of migration-related diversity, Norway has experienced a relatively rapid change in population composition since the 1970s. Of the roughly 5.4 million people who currently live in Norway, about 800,000 are immigrants and 200,000 are children born to immigrant parents, and the largest immigrant groups are European (Population Statistics, 2022).

Within the Norwegian multi-party system, the Progress Party (*Fremskrittspartiet*) is often characterised as a populist party (Fangen & Vaage, 2018). The Progress Party stood out by taking an explicitly critical stand on immigration in the mid-1980s, and has been an agenda-setter on immigration issues since then (Fangen & Vaage, 2018). In 2013, the Progress Party had grown sufficiently large to form government in coalition with the Norwegian Conservative Party (*Høyre*). It should be noted, however, that other political parties, including the Labour Party, have increasingly moved in the direction of stricter immigration policies and more exclusionary rhetoric. Similar political developments have been observed elsewhere in Europe (Mondon & Winter, 2017; Moosavi, 2015). Another development that has been observed both in Norway and in other European countries is explicit policy insistence on shared national values as necessary for a shared sense of belonging (Ezzati 2021a; Iversen, 2019; Vincent, 2021).

The day after 22 July, news broke that the perpetrator had previously been a member of the Progress Party and its youth organisation. This news attracted considerable attention, but overall, the main story was that of the initial expressions of unity manifest in public events, such as the 'rose marches' for the slain victims (Ezzati, 2021b; Solheim & Jupskås, 2021). A sense of consensus for unity reigned among the media and across the political spectre in the weeks and months that followed (Thorbjørnsrud & Figenschou, 2018). Ensuing public debate largely circled around the lack of security that allowed the perpetrator to carry out his crimes (Kolås, 2017), his path to radicalisation in online forums, and, overlappingly, links between free speech, hate speech, and hate crimes (Bangstad, 2014; Eide et al., 2013). Although the consequences of the initial consensus-orientation post-22 July have been contested in recent years, to a large extent, a united people that responded peacefully to acts of terrorism remains the prevailing narrative about those initial responses (Ezzati, 2021a; Solheim & Jupskås, 2021; Steen-Johnsen et al., 2021).

Methods and data

The 40 individuals I interviewed lived in Norway on 22 July, but were not injured in the attacks, nor did they have next-of-kin who were injured or killed. All interviewees were in their late 30s or older and resided in one of three locations: a city district in east Oslo, a city district in west Oslo, or a town in southern Norway.

The location-based sampling was designed to achieve diversity in terms of ethnicity, political affiliations, and religiosity, for the purposes of collecting a variety of perspectives. The level of religiosity in Norway is generally low, but higher in southern Norway than in other regions of the country (Repstad & Henriksen, 2005). A substantial number of immigrants live in the southern town of this study. But the largest number of immigrants in Norway live in Oslo, and primarily in east Oslo, which has historical roots as the working-class part of the city. The city districts selected do not represent extreme points in east and west Oslo: the population composition in the selected west Oslo district is not as homogeneous as other districts in west Oslo, and the immigrant population in the selected district of east Oslo is not as dense as other districts in east Oslo.

I contacted potential interviewees through municipality civil services, faith organisations, and through my own and colleagues' extended networks, and continued

recruitment through snowballing. Out of the 40 interviewees, 22 were female, and 18 were male. Their educational levels ranged from high school diploma to PhD, although most interviewees had completed 3–5 years of higher education. Six interviewees were born in Asia or Africa, whereas six were born elsewhere in Europe and did not have a visible migrant background. The remaining 28 interviewees were born in Norway to parents born in Norway. Three were Muslim, others were non-religious, and the majority were Christian – ranging from highly active church members to rare churchgoers.

I used a semi-structured interview guide to elicit the interviewees' reflections on responses to 22 July and their perceptions of public debate about diversity. First, I asked each interviewee to recall any episodes or impressions from the initial days after 22 July that they remembered particularly well. After some questions about societal responses to 22 July, I posed questions about unity ('*fellesskap*' in the Norwegian language) and diversity ('*mangfold*') more broadly. These questions sought the interviewees' understandings of, and engagement with, diversity debates, including their perceptions of the role that media and political actors play in framing these debates.

This design intentionally left some flexibility for the interviewees to bring in topics they saw as relevant. I conducted the interviews in April–November 2015, which included the aftermath of the Charlie Hebdo attacks in France and the peaking number of Syrian refugees arriving in Europe.[1] On their own initiative, the interviewees referenced these and other events to express their ideas and reflections. Because I sought the interviewees' perspectives on links between responses to 22 July and debates on diversity, I found that these reflections enriched the data by linking questions in my interview guide to ongoing events.

In accordance with each interviewee's preference, I took extensive notes during five interviews, and recorded the remaining 35. I coded the interviews with NVivo software for qualitative research and circled reflexively between theory and data.

Responses to 22 July and their implications

The interviews illustrate that there are many layers in individual reflections on migration-related diversity. I have opted for longer quotations from five interviewees to unpack some of the nuance that one and the same person might see when it comes to migration-related diversity and topics related to 22 July. In each section below, I begin by describing patterns in the 40 interviews overall and then turn to reflections from Anton, Cecilie, Fahid, Merete, and Tonje.[2] These interviewees illustrate typical examples in the data in terms of variety in political affiliation, religiosity, and place of residence, and in terms of different understandings of the causes and consequences of 22 July. They all expressed trust in the Norwegian political establishment and mainstream media, which is also in alignment with the typical pattern in the data overall. Only three out of the 40 interviewees diverged from this point, which I return to in the discussion.

A conditional unity: 'it made it a lot easier that he was Norwegian'

Almost all 40 interviewees explicitly appreciated the expressions of unity in the immediate aftermath of 22 July and characterised these expressions as indicative of 'who we are'. Most interviewees mentioned that they initially believed that Al-Qaida or related

extremist networks were responsible for the attacks and expressed relief to discover the perpetrator was Norwegian and Christian. However, looking back, as we were speaking four years after the attacks, most interviewees questioned whether the immediate unity had been contingent on the perpetrator's identity.

Merete was in her 50s, living in Oslo but born in another part of Norway. She affiliated with the left wing of Norwegian politics and did not believe in organised religion. She said she hoped that the unity expressed after 22 July would have been the same if the attacks had been carried out by 'other perpetrators', but that she strongly doubted that it would have. 'It made it a lot easier that it was a Norwegian', she said. Similarly, Tonje (in her 40s, centre politics, and an active church member living in southern Norway) observed: 'When it was, sort of, "one of us", it didn't become "you" and "us".' Merete and Tonje were not explicit about what made extremists 'one of us' or an 'Other'.

Other interviewees specifically spoke about the perpetrator's whiteness. Cecilie (in her 50s, living in southern Norway, centre politics, and an active church member) said: 'I think that we were really lucky as a people, for our self-image, that it was, yes, a white boy from west Oslo who did it.' Similarly, Anton (in his 70s, Oslo, left-wing politics, and critical of organised religion) said the situation quickly turned when 'there were reports that it was a Norwegian white person [*hviting*] who had done it'.

Fahid (in his 40s, Oslo, right-wing politics, and non-religious) was one of six non-white individuals I interviewed. Fahid recalled 'a very unclear situation' in the first few hours after the attacks. When news of the attacks emerged, he was outdoors in his neighbourhood and recalled feeling a 'pressured atmosphere everywhere'. Although he did not experience this atmosphere as threatening, he described having a sudden awareness about his darker complexion in his predominantly white neighbourhood. He recalled thinking: 'Wow, now there are probably some people who see me in light of what's happened'. Fahid's statement likely refers to the two to three hours after the bombing in Oslo during which most commentators and media outlets assumed that Islamists were responsible for the attacks. Fahid concluded: 'I was glad it wasn't [an immigrant] because that would have had some catastrophic consequences.'

The interviewees largely agreed on the causes of the unity responses–'who we are', but also 'who he was'–and viewed these aspects as important to the consensus-orientation that followed immediately after 22 July. In academic terms, the perpetrator was seen as an individual among 'us' and was scarcely subject to collective Othering. Although he did describe himself as a Christian crusader in the manifesto he launched online shortly before committing his crimes, the media coverage of the attacks were largely depoliticised and barely problematised his professed Christian belief (Ezzati, 2021b; Falkheimer & Olsson, 2014).

This individualisation of the perpetrator's motivation contrasts with what is often the case when self-proclaimed Islamists carry out terror attacks in Europe (Abdel-Fattah, 2020; Mondon & Winter, 2017; Vincent, 2021). The reported harassment of Muslims and immigrants in the first few hours after the Oslo bombing, before the 22 July perpetrator was detained at Utøya island (Haarr & Partapuoli, 2012), suggests that the immediate post-terror context may have been different in Norway too, had the perpetrator presented himself as an Islamist. However, this point does not preclude that unity

could have been mobilised in the longer term in such a scenario. In his study of Islamophobic hate crime in the US after September 11, Kaplan (2006) finds a surge of violent hate crime against Muslims, and Sikhs or others mistakenly perceived to be Muslims. However, this surge was limited to about nine weeks, which Kaplan (2006) links to the cumulative effect of several factors, including President Bush's initial attempt to unite the American people.

Implications of unity: 'it was so beautiful that you couldn't criticise'

None of the 40 interviewees noted major changes or consequences in Norwegian society linked to 22 July other than security measures. While some interviewees explicitly recognised the return to the status quo as a natural way to 'move on', others connected the immediate unity responses to the lack of consequences after 22 July.

Tonje continued to be 'impressed' by the initially widespread unity but, in hindsight, questioned whether this unity had impeded alternative reactions:

> You just couldn't bring forward criticism, because it [the unity] was so beautiful that it would take a lot to go against that…. In retrospect, I see that it almost wasn't allowed to be angry. The international media bragged about Norway: 'Look how well they are handling this.' But perhaps there was too little space to be angry or scared. (Tonje, female, 40s)

Similarly, Anton said the unity expressed at popular gatherings felt powerful to be part of, but that his feelings about those initial expressions had turned more 'cynical':

> I've been wondering if it burnt out the engagement that should have been there, like: 'All right, now we've been there, we held roses, we sang and different people said nice things … and so, we're done with it.' It was a great experience in itself, but because so little happened afterwards, there is that bit of a cynical reflection, really. (Anton, male, 70s)

Anton saw little effort from media and political actors to decipher what the attacks 'were really about'. 'The after-picture' of the causes of 22 July appeared 'unclear' to him: 'The political milieu, or at least parts of it, did not want to blame the Progress Party for this, even though he had shared some attitudes with the Progress Party.' In this quotation, Anton refers to the perpetrator's past membership in the Progress Party, which he found 'quick to distance itself from what had happened'. He believed that the Labour Party and the Labour Party's Youth Organisation had affirmed the Progress Party's act of distancing itself from the perpetrator because, having been the main victims of the attacks, 'they didn't want to play that card'.

According to Anton, these 'careful' steps had downplayed the political aspects of the perpetrator's thinking and the writings in his manifesto: 'He wrote about the big danger that–here, in the foreseeable future–Muslims would take over, with the help of parts of the political system, concretely, the social democratic system.' Anton concluded: 'It was the established power that he disagreed with. It is a clear political act, really.' But in the quest for unity, the causes of 22 July were never properly 'deciphered' nor 'addressed', which Anton believed had contributed to enabling increased legitimacy for Norway's far-right movements.

Merete appreciated that politicians did not 'try to gain politically' from what had happened. She said that trying to do so 'would probably have backfired against them' in the days after 22 July: 'But that's often how it is in this country, they [the politicians] can disagree furiously, but when it comes down to it, they agree on the major things.' At the same time, in Merete's view, 22 July reinforced existing political tendencies of 'nice words, but little action'.

Both Merete and Fahid saw a direct link between the immediate political responses to 22 July and the rise of the Progress Party as a mainstream political option. Fahid said:

> I thought it was appropriate to stand united in a situation like that. But at the same time, in retrospect–and I feel that I can only say this to friends who are Progress Party supporters–I think that the Progress Party got away too easily in that political context. (Fahid, male, 40s)

Although the perpetrator found the Progress Party not 'extreme enough', Fahid said, 'it was there that some of his thoughts were shaped'. He continued: 'The Progress Party is not extreme in any way, but it has much of those non-including attitudes', and since the Progress Party 'has not been properly put in its place, they have not cleaned up any more that type of mind-set. Because I still hear a lot of the same things from them, those undercurrents of thought.' Fahid's reflections point to the dynamics between established political currents and the evolvution of right-wing extremism.

Cecilie questioned whether 'the loving responses' that she found so 'beautiful' had limited, and continued to limit, public debate. However, in contrast to most interviewees, she found that such loving responses had limited the space for a discussion about 'what the perpetrator was reacting to', which she recognised as a fear of a threat to Norwegian society: 'Where we are scared for the future, that's where one can see his points. But I would never, ever support him.' Cecilie could see the perpetrator's points on the need for protecting Norwegian values from Islam and Muslims. 'But he is way off because you can't protect with those means', she said. Four years after the attacks, she found that when 22 July did come up as a topic of conversation in her everyday interactions, most people still discussed 'the loving responses' rather than the threat that the perpetrator was reacting to.

The interviewees' reflections reveal a sense of the initial unity impeding the space for alternative emotional responses and discussions of the political motivations behind the attacks. These reflections align with research findings that the 22 July news coverage was largely depoliticised and consensus-oriented (Falkheimer & Olsson, 2014; Thorbjørnsrud & Figenschou, 2018) and had few political consequences (Bangstad, 2014; Kolås, 2017). The story of a united 'we' resonated with the public, and the (seeming) consensus was the result of an interaction between leaders, the media, and the public (Ezzati, 2021b; Steen-Johnsen et al., 2021). The media portrayal of terror attacks and the political context within which they occur play a vital role in defining the post-terror dynamics of consensus and trust, as found in a variety of post-terror contexts (Kaplan, 2006; Steen-Johnsen et al., 2021).

Post-22 July diversity debates: 'I had expected that we would dare more'

The interviewees linked the initial emphasis on consensus and the avoidance of discussing the perpetrator's beliefs to broader patterns in Norwegian debates about diversity. Among the 40 interviewees, there was a divide in perceptions of the consequences of 22 July. Where most interviewees noted a missed opportunity to discuss racism and right-wing extremism in Norwegian society, a few noted a missed opportunity to discuss the issues that the perpetrator was responding to, namely problems due to immigration.

As indicated in the previous section, Cecilie was among those who found the emphasis on unity to have impeded discussions about what she called 'the Muslim threat':

> I don't think that the discussion has been particularly sharpened…. I suppose I had expected that we would dare a bit more to talk about the Muslim threat. But one is hushed … voices are held down in the fear that it will explode. (Cecilie, female, 50s)

Cecilie's statement indicates her belief that those who perceive a 'Muslim threat' in Norway are effectively silenced from expressing such views. Her statement implies that, despite the actual explosion on 22 July, she believed there was more reason to be concerned about 'the Muslim threat'. Moreover, her statement implies that the limited space for expressing such fears pre-dated 22 July, that is, that the responses to the attacks fell into already-existing patterns in Norwegian diversity debates.

Tonje also noted a lack of space for expressing ideas similar to those of the perpetrator. In contrast to Cecilie, she specifically labelled such ideas as right-wing extremist:

> I think that perhaps we haven't opened for, well, that there are some views in society that we haven't accepted, that is, that some people think what he did. Right-wing extremists, we want in a way that they don't get to express themselves. We have been like: 'We are not to say that, we are to have an inclusive society, everyone's welcome.' We have not fully accepted that there are some people who don't think that way. (Tonje, female, 40s)

Tonje's view that there is a lack of acceptance of sentiments that break with predominant approaches in Norwegian society also applied to other topics. She generally found that there was 'too little openness for different views' in public debate, and a lack of space for discussing religious beliefs and immigration with appropriate nuance. She mentioned, for example, that the national media portrayed Christianity in southern Norway as 'something exotic and weird'.

Anton was not religious, but his views echo those of Tonje. He noted that the perpetrator's ideas about 'the Muslim threat' did not become an important topic for discussion after 22 July and he attributed this absence to a reluctance to discuss religion. He found that whereas the Progress Party used to be criticised for making connections between politics and Islam, making such connections had become increasingly and widely accepted in public debate. He found that he was left with two options when debating religion in public: either to affirm the one-sided and negative focus on Islam or to avoid problematising Islam's role in Norwegian society. Given these limited options, he found that he,

and others like him who were critical of religion, held back from debating the role of religion in Norwegian society because they did not 'want to step on Jewish or Muslim toes'.

Fahid found much of what the perpetrator stood for still present in Norwegian society, 'perhaps to an even greater extent' than in 2011:

> With all its cruelty, he managed to awaken–yes, certain resilience in major parts of the population–but at the same time, those who had not articulated an idea to gather around, they have started to go against anyone who is for inclusion and diversity. They have found an anchoring point. (Fahid, male, 40s)

Despite this common anchoring point, Fahid reflected, 'they will not be as extreme as he was in their actions', even if they do articulate similar thoughts.

Merete said she did not see–nor did she want to see–much change in consequence of 22 July because she did not 'want them to have that victory'. Presumably, by 'them' she was referring to the perpetrator and those who agreed with his actions. However, she did generally wish for changes to what she deemed polarised public debate on diversity, which the media and politicians contributed to creating. She found that, within this climate, people were placed as 'either for or against immigration'. As a result, she said, the debate 'becomes about the opposites'. The either–or opposition, she found, did not present room for someone like her, who affiliated with the left wing of Norwegian politics but could 'still see problems with immigration'. 'It's not either or. You can be both', she objected.

These reflections indicate that the interviewees viewed 22 July debates as an extension of diversity debates more broadly, in which the mode of debate itself impedes contestation by limiting space for nuanced ideas and a variety of perspectives. Considering the interviewees' reflections combined, the 22 July attacks had the potential, but failed, to create space for contestation about both migration-related diversity and right-wing extremism present in Norwegian society. In a similar vein, Andersson (2012, pp. 423–4) argues that 22 July strengthened the already-existing polarisation between those who criticised the normalisation of negative attitudes towards immigration and those who criticised policy for not taking seriously conflicts due to immigration. Such polarisation patterns in Norway have parallels to public debates about diversity elsewhere, particularly when it comes to the role of Islam and Muslims (Bleich et al., 2015; Cinalli & Giugni, 2013; Ewart et al., 2022).

Discussion: disengaging from diversity debates?

The reflections from the five interviewees I have concentrated on thus far point to some of the potential ramifications of an inadequate space for debating diversity. The other 35 interviewees expressed similar ideas about 22 July as 'a missed opportunity' for more open public debates about migration-related diversity. Despite the many demographic differences among the interviewees, and the differences in their views on the causes and consequences of 22 July, they all alluded to a lack of nuance in public debates. Their views also concurred in that they believed political and media actors played a

key role in this lack of nuance, either by highlighting conflict and downplaying consensus or by smoothing over conflict and attempting to give an impression of consensus.

In this section I discuss some of the implications of these impressions for the interviewees' individual engagement in debating diversity. Some interviewees deliberately avoided discussions about migration and diversity in certain arenas, such as in the workplace or online. In addition to various practical and individual reasons, avoiding uncomfortable encounters was a common reason for disengaging in these ways. Several interviewees pointed to a sense of 'either–or' oppositions as the dominant mode of debate. Merete–who said that although she was 'not against immigration in any way', she could still see problems that needed to be addressed–found that others expected her to be blind to any such problems because she identified with Norway's political left. That sense of dismissiveness discouraged her from debating diversity, despite having grown up in a household where she and her siblings had been actively encouraged to engage in political debates at home and in other arenas.

Cecilie–who felt that her own and others' fear of 'the Muslim threat' continued to be silenced–felt compelled to refrain from expressing those thoughts. She found that expressing fears about Muslims and Islam was discouraged. Additionally, she sensed a disconnect between these sentiments and her efforts to be inclusive and generous as encouraged by her Christian faith and beliefs. 'It makes me a smaller human being, I find', she said.

Tonje–who generally found 'too little openness for' expressing and accepting different views in public debates about both religion and migration–perceived that the discussion sites for online news particularly lacked in nuance: 'Perhaps I'm too coward. And I don't have very bombastic opinions. I feel that those people who comment are so bombastic. I think there's little nuance. So, whenever I do read the comments, I think: "I have nothing to do here".'

When asked, none of the 40 interviewees said that they participated in online discussions. The most common reasons were that they lacked time and that they found these sites to be too one-sided. These interviews concur with findings from other research from Norway, which indicate that people avoid engaging in diversity debates when they do not perceive their viewpoints to be recognised or represented in a polarised public sphere (Ezzati & Erdal, 2018; Midtbøen, 2018; Thorbjørnsrud, 2017). Moreover, the interviewees' reluctance to participate in debates online exemplifies one of the reasons why these sites serve as echo chambers (Colleoni et al., 2014; Eide et al., 2013).

To engage in multiple and overlapping spheres is important to a pluralist democracy (Fraser, 1990). All but three interviewees expressed trust in the political establishment and mainstream media. One of the three was a retired woman who did not follow Norwegian politics or media as sources of information, which I believe was partly due to a lack of skills in the Norwegian language (this was the only interview conducted with an interpreter). Furthermore, this interviewee did not provide much detail in her answers, which seemed to be due to insecurity about what the interview data would be used for. My impression was that this insecurity was linked to a general distrust in authorities derived from her background as a refugee from an authoritarian state who had arrived in Norway late in life.

The other two interviewees expressed distrust in the Norwegian political establishment and mainstream media specifically. These were a male and a female, both retired and

living in southern Norway. They were very critical of the Norwegian Labour Party, who, in their view, played a particular role in downplaying the threat of immigration and Islam. Moreover, they viewed the political and media establishment to be too consensus-oriented and had a project to 'de-Christianise Norway'. They found that their sentiments were not considered to be politically correct and consequently not permitted space in mainstream political and media spheres. As a result, both interviewees were engaging with alternative political ideas and sources of information, such as niche books by conservative Christian authors.

A book that these two interviewees both talked approvingly about (and which none of the other interviewees mentioned) was *The 22 July Prophecy*. With a few thousand copies in publication at the time, the author of this book argued that the island of Utøya, where the 22 July perpetrator killed 69 people, was a training camp for Hamas. After its publication, the book caused controversy, not least when some local politicians for the Christian Party (*Partiet De Kristne*) publicly embraced it. Founded in 2011 under the motto 'freedom and security for all', this conservative Christian party had grown considerably by the time of the interviews in 2015, especially in the southern part of Norway. The female interviewee, who had voted for the Conservative Party all her life, had voted for the Norwegian Christian Party in the 2013 election. The male interviewee had come to reject the Norwegian Christian Party, stating that it had become too established within the system. He illustrated this by pointing to a recent development where the political management had distanced the party from *The 22 July Prophecy* after some pressure to provide an official statement on its content.

These two interviewees' reflections give an idea of what a more comprehensive disengagement from diversity debates due to a lack of trust in political authorities and mainstream media might look like. They also illustrate particularly well that disengagement from public debates about diversity falls into a continuum and may evolve over time.

In contrast to these individuals, however, most interviewees expressed more nuance on the issues of 22 July and of diversity. And yet they all found too little space to express nuance in debates about 22 July and migration-related diversity. These findings indicate a lack of nuance and space for contestation that cuts across ethnic, religious, and political differences. In Mouffe's (2009) terms, the channelling of legitimate contestation, where opponents can debate in an agonistic way, seems to be lacking and, instead, antagonistic modes of debate dominate. Such modes of debate hinder people's engagement, which has implications for the plurality of perspectives that nurture democratic public spheres. Moreover, what happens in public debate has implications in other spheres. Research on education sociology may offer some insights in this respect. Such insights include arguments for fostering a 'community of disagreement' (Iversen, 2019) and of 'mutual recognition' (Vincent, 2021), where encouraging citizens' belonging in a shared community figure strongly.

Conclusion

The case of post-terror Norway illustrates that although unity is commonly invoked, and perhaps necessary, in the immediate aftermath of terrorism, too much consensus-oriented unity over time can constrain healthy contestation. However, the same applies to conflict-focused public debates where dichotomies dominate. Reflections from the 40

interviewees in this study suggest there is little space for expressing nuance and a variety of perspectives in Norwegian public debates about migration-related diversity. Instead, they find that debating diversity centres around problematising 'Norwegians' versus 'immigrants', or 'being for or against immigration'.

Especially telling of a gap in modes of debate is the following: some interviewees found that the initial unity responses impeded debating the existence of racism and anti-immigrant undercurrents as a political cause for 22 July, through which anti-immigration sentiments gained legitimacy in post-terror Norway. By contrast, others found that the initial unity responses impeded debating the threat of immigration and Islam. Regardless of their perspective on this issue, the interviewees believed that 22 July had further narrowed the already limited space for contestation in diversity debates. The interviewees' perspectives pinpoint that more space for contestation from the non-extreme population in multiple public spheres is necessary to encourage democratic engagement.

The Norwegian post-terror setting is a case in point on how a lack of sufficient space for nuanced contestation can further underline conflict. Within this narrow space, the modes of debate can be experienced as antagonistic conflict, with little room for agonistic disagreements, which has consequences for people's willingness to engage with diversity debates.

Drawing on political theories about liberal democratic public debate to analyse the post-terror conjunction as an arena where unity and conflict meet, this analysis illustrates some of the ways in which modes of public debate have implications for how, where, and to what extent people engage or disengage from diversity debates.

The fact that terrorist attacks continue to take place speaks to the relevance of studying how non-extremist populations engage with, and why they disengage from, diversity debates, and do so across a variety of contexts. This calls for studying responses to terror attacks–among the non-extreme population–in an array of ways. As it is, much research that addresses terrorism is devoted to radicalisation and extremists, that is, those who constitute a minority in our societies. Putting responses to terrorism centre-stage, findings from this article serve as a reminder that unity and contestation do not constitute a zero-sum game. Rather, a healthy space for contestations can reinforce unity.

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Notes

1. Due to the refugee situation, the number of Syrians in Norway more than doubled from 2015 to 2016.
2. These are pseudonyms to ensure the interviewees' anonymity.

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