

## Bad guy or good guy? The framing of an imam

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### Abstract

In this paper, we investigate framing in the case of an imam in Switzerland. We conducted a qualitative content analysis of 175 articles from Swiss newspapers and public broadcasting websites in German and French to examine how Bekim Alimi, an imam in Wil, Switzerland, was portrayed in the news media from 2015–2019. Powerful and / or prominent actors who made an effort, journalists, as well as the object of the debate, Bekim Alimi, contribute to frame building. We identify two key events (the inauguration of the Gotthard Base Tunnel and Alimi's naturalization process) as highly crucial for the framing of the debate because they stimulate some frame sponsors to become active. When they speak out, the debates become more intense and broader. In this way, key events hold the possibility to discuss a situation in depth, to create orientation, to offer solutions (prognostic framing), or to motivate people (motivational framing) to become active.

### Keywords

framing, frame building, public debates, key events, imam, Switzerland

## 1 Introduction

So far, little research has been done on how imams are framed in the media. We examine the portrayal of the imam who has probably received the most coverage in Swiss media: Bekim Alimi, Wil, Switzerland. One of the reasons for the widespread coverage is that his community's construction of a new mosque was one of the triggers for the 2009 Swiss minaret referendum (Schneuwly Purdie & Tunger-Zanetti, 2017). We look at his portrayal from 2015–2019 because media coverage of him is both positive and negative, and we can observe the framing process with more than one key event.

We want to find out which frames are present in the news media (RQ1), whether key events change the framing (RQ2) and who is framing how (RQ3). This study is relevant because it adds details on the role of key events by identifying them as catalysts for framing in public debates and by showing how changes come about. Furthermore, it is relevant because it describes the framing of an imam:

Imams are a key topic of current social debate and media coverage on Islam in various European countries. Imam training, “imported imams”, their language skills and radicalisation are some of the recurring issues raised in this context. Imams are thus seen both as causes of problems and as possible solutions to them, based on the underlying assumption that Muslims and their communities can be steered by imams, who may serve as legitimate interpreters of Islam. (Schmid, 2020, pp. 64–65)

Switzerland is an interesting case regarding public debates on Islam. A share of 5.5 % of the population is Muslim. It is the largest non-Christian religious community in Switzerland. Due to direct democracy, there is also a public and controversial discussion (e.g., via votes on minarets, ban on veiling; Arlt, 2021). It is important to understand the construction of a public debate because it can lead to more or less social cohesion, or to different policy measures.

In this study, we learn more about frame building in non-institutionalized



debates. We identify a pattern and see that key events play an important role by giving certain persons (politicians in our case) the possibility to act as frame sponsors. It seems to motivate politicians with a negative frame in particular whereas it is the moderate Muslim actors or spokespersons of Muslims who bring in positive frames. We can also observe different reporting patterns. Journalists from those cross-regional newspapers that are free or tabloid newspapers (*20 Minutes* and *Blick*) use frames that provoke attention (*radical imam* frame in our example) whereas the regional newspaper with a local connection to the place of the event (*St. Galler Tagblatt*) frames also independent of the frames of politicians (and more in line with authorities or concerned people). This study is an example for the importance of local news (Künzler & Studer, 2013, p. 179). It was local news in a regional newspaper that made regional-oriented media workers of the same organization aware that something important is going on. In contrast to coverage of key events as those analyzed here, one probably has to be more concerned that local journalists can less fulfill the “chronicler duty” such as regular reporting about ordinary municipal meetings (Leonarz, 2012, p. 74).

## 2 Frames and frame building

In the following theoretical part, we define our understanding of frames and describe the process of frame building in public debates. We also note how we expect key events to influence frame building.

### 2.1 Definition of frames

We draw on Benford and Snow’s (2000), Snow and Benford’s (1988), and Entman’s (1993) understanding of frames. They rely, among others, on Goffman’s (1974, p. 21) definition of frames as “schemata of interpretation” that allow “its user to locate, perceive, identify, and label [...] occurrences.” Therefore, frames “help to render events or occurrences meaningful and thereby function to organize experience and guide action” (Benford & Snow, 2000,

p. 614). To describe the framing process, Snow and Benford (1988) distinguish three core framing tasks: *Diagnostic framing* identifies a problem and attributes blame or causality, *prognostic framing* proposes solutions, and *motivational framing* provides incentives for action and justifications for measures. In a similar vein, Entman (1993) points out the function of frames in defining problems, diagnosing causes, making moral judgments, and suggesting remedies. Thus, the diagnostic framing of Snow and Benford (1988) can consist of problem definition, causal interpretation, and moral evaluation (Entman, 1993).

Of course, there are different definitions of frames in communication. Matthes (2009) summarizes them by distinguishing formal-stylistic frames from content-related frames. For formal-stylistic frames, it matters *how the story is presented* (e.g., Chong & Druckman, 2007; Iyengar, 1991). By contrast, content-related frames look at *what the story is about*. Content-related frames can be categorized into issue-specific and generic (de Vreese, 2005; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). Or, one speaks of emphasis framing if one discusses different aspects of a policy (Chong & Druckman, 2007). This is actually what we use here, too.

### 2.2 Frame building in public debates

Frame building (Scheufele, 1999) uses media frames as a dependent variable and investigates the processes and factors that influence the frames in the news media (Hänggli, 2019, 2020). The power of the political actor, the effort of pushing a frame, the prominence of the speaker, and the cultural resonance of a frame are key factors in frame building (Geiß, Weber, & Quring, 2017; Hänggli, 2012, 2020). Usually, framing changes moderately and slowly (Scheufele, 2006). However, *key events* can change the framing of an issue. Key events are “reports about more or less unusual occurrences” (Kepplinger & Habermeier, 1995, p. 373) and push media coverage of an issue. They can be “seen as an expression of processes of social change that have already taken place” (Brosius & Eps, 1995,

Figure 1: Consequences of a key event in frame building

Key event → increases activity of frame sponsors who see an opportunity of gaining media attention → intensifies debate and broadens framing

p. 408) and are part of orientation phases (instead of routine phases). They can be an opportunity to socially (re-)define an issue (Snow, Soule, Kriesi, & McCammon, 2019). Thus, key events can “trigger, accelerate, and amplify changes in the framing” (Geiß et al., 2017, p. 474), can bring changes in the framing of the issue at hand (Brosius & Eps, 1995) or catalyze frame-building processes (Geiß et al., 2017; Kepplinger & Habermeier, 1995). This change happens because key events “stimulate activities of pressure groups who see an opportunity of gaining media attention, since their concerns fit in with the established topic” (Kepplinger & Habermeier, 1995, p. 375). Most of the time, a key event intensifies the frame contest between *established* frames (Geiß et al., 2017). Only in rare cases, we can observe a change in interpretative paradigms (Baumgartner, De Boef, & Boydston, 2008). Thus, we will look for key events as a starting point for a dataset for this study. Let us note the theoretical pattern with regard to key events in Figure 1.

Ettinger (2018) notes that Muslim actors are more frequently the object of reporting than the subject. If Muslims speak themselves, the setting is more likely to be polarized. Matthes et al. (2020) find that Muslim sources make more differentiated statements than non-Muslim sources or journalists. Accordingly, we also look at the framing of Muslim sources. Moreover, the object of a claim, scandal or discourse is often also a frame sponsor him- or herself. Thus, we also keep an eye on the frames sponsored by imam Alimi.

Both political and media actors can belong to the leading strategic actors in public debates (Hänggli, 2020). They pursue different goals. Political actors aim at a policy impact, at votes, and / or offices (Strom, 1990) and need media attention to achieve this. Thus, they compete for media attention, and strategically manage events

that offer the opportunity to promote a message (Hänggli, 2020). As Bernhard (2019, p. 236) points out: “When faced with an [...] event, political actors have first to decide whether to address it in public. [...] actors who react will politicize the issue at stake and thus contribute to the emergence of an intensive public debate.” Political actors react to media information only, when it fits their issue agenda (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2017). Media actors aim to report on relevant events, disclose relevant facts, sell their story, create social cohesion, or stimulate innovation (McQuail, 2013). Of course, structural or organizational factors influence and restrict the individual decisions of media actors (Shoemaker & Reese, 2013).

### 3 Reporting on Islam

If we now look at the reporting on Islam and Muslims in the West in general, it has been widely studied in the decade following the September 11 terrorist attacks (e.g., d’Haenens & Bink, 2006; Halm, 2013; Ibrahim, 2010; Poole, 2002; Poole & Richardson, 2006). Studies report predominantly negative portrayals of Muslims and Islam in traditional media (Ahmed & Matthes 2016; Bowe, Fahmy, & Wanta, 2013; Dixon & Williams, 2015), also for Switzerland (Dahinden, Koch, Wyss, & Keel, 2011). As far as Switzerland is concerned, there are some studies for the period before 2009 (e.g., Dolezal, Helbling, & Hutter, 2010), but they become sparse in the period after. One exception is Ettinger (2018), who analyzed the quality of reporting on Muslims between 2009 and 2017. Among other things, he finds an increase of articles that create distance toward Muslims, e.g., by problematizing Muslims in the media coverage. Part of this development can be explained by the increased focus on radi-

calization and terror threat. Accordingly, current studies on terrorism news coverage emphasize the importance of *differentiated* news coverage, i.e., highlighting the difference between Muslims and Islamist terrorists (Gerhards & Schäfer, 2014; Sides & Gross, 2013; von Sikorski et al., 2022). Sniderman, Petersen, Slothuus, and Stubager (2014) found, after the cartoon crisis in Denmark, that the majority of Danish citizens were tolerant toward moderate Muslims, but not toward Islamic fundamentalists. Thus, moderate Muslims are good and radical Muslims bad. This dichotomy between “good” and “bad” Muslims (Belt, 2009; Mamdani, 2004) can be explained by processes of securitization (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998), whereby “moderate Islam” is constructed as a reference object for security by Western states while “radical Islam” is framed as a threat (Bosco, 2014). This perspective is expected to be important in Switzerland too. In the news media, imams – the prayer leaders – are increasingly becoming a topic of discussion, as it is widely believed that they can exert an influence on their community (Müller, 2017; Tunger-Zanetti, Martens, & Endres, 2019). Corresponding to the differentiation between “good” and “bad” Muslims, a distinction is drawn between the “good” imam and the “bad” imam.

The good imam is now to embody civic virtues, interfaith tolerance, professional managerial and pastoral skills, [...] work as an agent of national integration (most importantly on behalf of his young unruly flock) and wage a jihad against extremism. By contrast, the bad imam has become an agent of divisive cultural and religious alterity to be deterred by multiplying bureaucratic hurdles, defamed, deported or imprisoned. (Birt, 2006, p. 687)

Such models of an ideal subject versus one to be rejected correspond to notions of normality that circulate in discourses (Keller, 2011). These positive and negative subject models are expected to be evident also in the framing studied here. Apart from this dichotomy of “good” and “bad”, however, the way imams are framed in the media has not yet been examined.

#### 4 The case of Bekim Alimi: A qualitative content analysis

We conducted a qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2015) of the coverage of imam Bekim Alimi in Swiss newspapers and public broadcasting websites from 2015–2019. Bekim Alimi is “an imam of national renown” (Tunger-Zanetti & Schneuwly Purdie, 2020, p. 615), in part because he was chosen for the inauguration ceremony of the Gotthard Base Tunnel (Schmid, 2020). The Gotthard Base Tunnel is a railway tunnel in Switzerland (and, at 57.1 km, the longest railway tunnel in the world). It was built over the course of 17 years and inaugurated on June 1, 2016 (Federal Department of the Environment, Transport, Energy and Communications, 2020). During the inauguration, the tunnel was blessed in a multifaith ceremony by five religious representatives. Bekim Alimi was chosen as the imam and Muslim representative for the ceremony. This decision was based in part on his Macedonian origin, given that some of the tunnel’s miners were Muslims from the Balkans (Wuthrich, 2016). This key event was nation-wide broadcasted and reported.

This event served as a starting point for the body of coverage. We therefore looked for the keyword “Bekim Alimi” in articles both forwards and backwards in time starting from this key event in 2016. In the process, we came across a second key event, the naturalization process of Alimi in 2018. Citizenship can be viewed as “one of the core institutions of modern societies that shaped people’s access to rights and membership” (Mackert & Turner, 2017, p. 1). Thus, citizenship – and hence naturalization – is always about boundaries as well as inclusion and exclusion (Mackert & Turner, 2017). In Switzerland, the naturalization procedure is regulated by cantonal law. In the canton of St. Gall, where Bekim Alimi lives, a local commission (Naturalization Council) examines applications regarding the formal and material requirements for naturalization. If all conditions are met, it will grant municipal and local citizenship. In naturalization cases in general, it carries out the procedure of public

disclosure and official announcement. After the granting of municipal citizenship, the Cantonal Office for Municipalities and Citizenship proceeds further, and the federal and cantonal naturalization permit is received. However, the law on citizenship offers the possibility for citizens with voting rights in the same municipality to object to the naturalization of a person, if the objection is sufficiently justified. The person requesting naturalization is given the opportunity to comment, and the application is then reassessed and voted on by the local parliament or by the voters in the municipality (Law on the Civil Rights of St. Gall of 2011, 2018, art. 24 to 33). This cantonal law therefore offers citizens a direct opportunity to seek exclusion. Thus, it is not surprising that the debate examined becomes intense in the aftermath of an appeal launched against Bekim Alimi's wish to be naturalized.

We therefore decided to extend the sampling to include media coverage one year before (2015) and one year after (2019) the two events. This allows us to see whether events intensify frame contest between established frames or change the framing. The two events structure the analysis in different phases (Table 1): The first period covers the reporting before the Tunnel inauguration in 2015, the second the inauguration in 2016, the third phase includes the period between the inauguration and naturalization and the fourth covers the naturalization process in 2018. Interestingly, there is hardly any reporting in 2019, after the naturalization. The act of naturalization therefore closes the discussion.

The sampling included 175 articles from 24 regional and cross-regional Swiss newspapers, news magazines, and 2 public broadcasting websites in German and French.<sup>1</sup> Using the database *swissdox*, all

articles for the keyword “Bekim Alimi” were included in the sampling, except for articles repeating the same text or articles in which the text has only minimal textual differences. Given that Bekim Alimi lives and works in the town of Wil in the German-speaking canton St. Gall, the newspaper *St. Galler Tagblatt* is most represented in the sampling. When it was necessary in order to understand the context, we consulted additional documents alongside the dataset, e.g., by the municipality of Wil.

In a first step we conducted a mixture of a structuring and summary content analysis (Mayring, 2015). The categories frame sponsor, framed object and framing task coded in MAXQDA were determined in advance based on the definition of frames. The first two criteria were then coded inductively from the material. A frame can usually be assigned to a person or an organization, which we coded as the *frame sponsor*. If no frame sponsor could be identified from the text by name or by direct or indirect speech, we attributed the passage to the journalist. The *framed object* is what is to be interpreted and rendered meaningful by a frame. Here, too, we have coded all the framed objects we found in the material, i.e., not only Bekim Alimi, but objects like Islam in general, his mosque and many more. For this study, we have only used those passages for the analysis in which Bekim Alimi is the framed object because we are interested in how he, as an imam, is framed. *Framing tasks* were adopted as deductive categories from Snow & Benford (1988) and coded accordingly: *diagnostic framing* identifies a problem and attributes blame or causality, *prognostic framing* proposes solutions, and *motivational framing* provides incentives for action and justifications for measures. Only if one of these

1 Included in the sampling are *20 Minuten*, *Aargauer Zeitung*, *Basellandschaftliche Zeitung*, *Basler Zeitung*, *Blick*, *Landbote*, *Luzerner Zeitung/Neue Luzerner Zeitung*, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, *Sonntagsblick*, *srf* (as online news site), *St. Galler Tagblatt*, *Tages-Anzeiger*, *Thurgauer Zeitung*, *Walliser Bote*, *watson*, *Weltwoche*, *Werdenberger & Obertoggenbur-*

*ger*, and *Zürichsee-Zeitung* for the German-language newspapers and online news sites and *24 heures*, *La Liberté*, *Le Matin*, *Le Temps*, *rts* (as online news site), and *Tribune de Genève* for the French-language newspapers and public broadcasting websites. The two public broadcasting websites were included in the sampling due to the broad audience of public service media in Switzerland.



tasks was present, i. e., framing occurred, was the passage included in the analysis.

In a subsequent step, we extracted all passages in which Bekim Alimi is the object of framing in order to describe frame sponsors and framing tasks and, in a further step, to analyze the framing. For this purpose, we subjected all passages coded as frames to inductive category formation (Mayring, 2015, p. 85) and in this sense, we conducted a summary content analysis for this main category. One text passage can contain multiple frames of Bekim Alimi.

The process tracing method (Mahoney, 2003) is applied for investigating the role of key events. In this method, the individual temporal and possibly causal sequences within a case are named. Yin (2003, p. 116) explains pattern matching as follows: “You match empirically observed events with theoretically predicted events.” This matching of patterns is particularly suitable for data analysis in case studies (Yin, 2003).

## 5 Results

Results are organized according to the research questions: First, we describe the frames we identified in the data (RQ1). Then, we answer whether key events change framing (RQ2) by mapping the course of the debates and the framing over time. Finally, we present who is framing how (RQ3).

### 5.1 Frames

In total, we find six different frames (Table 1). The *bridge-builder* frame describes Bekim Alimi as an interreligious mediator and promoter of integration who advocates tolerance and peaceful coexistence (e. g., Buechi, 2016; Rudnicki, 2015). One article portrays him as follows: He stands up for the coexistence of [...] people, regardless of their origin, nationality and religion (Haag, 2015). The *trust-builder* frame characterizes him as someone who dispels misconceptions about Islam and combats extremism and radicalization. This includes fighting for the recognition of Islam as a peaceful religion and for re-

spect toward Muslims in Switzerland (e. g., Keller, 2016; Riesen, 2017), as in the following example: In numerous interviews and hundreds of public appearances, he has underscored the peace-loving aspects of his religion and condemned jihadists as un-Islamic (Hehli, 2017). The *deceiver* frame accuses Muslims in general of deliberate deception and lying (e. g., Dudley, 2018; Suter, 2018c). Alimi is framed as being two-faced, pretending to be moderate, when in reality he is radical: Bekim Alimi is said to have attitudes [...] that contradict his answers to my questions. I have heard over and over again that he has two faces (Häusermann in Wey, 2018). The *radical imam* frame describes Alimi as a radical imam who is perceived as an internal threat to Switzerland (e. g., Dudley, 2016; Sommer, 2018b): Alimi belongs to the minority of Macedonian-Albanian Muslims who practice a radical Islam in the Wahhabi-Salafist tradition (Gut, 2016). The *influential imam* frame describes an imam as someone who exerts a great influence on his community members and therefore plays a key role in his Muslim community (Sommer, 2018c; Wey, 2018). For example, one article states that Alimi as an imam could shape the relationship to Swiss culture among a large part of the Muslim population and thus significantly influence their willingness to integrate (Suter, 2018a). The *responsible Swiss citizen* frame is introduced by Alimi himself as follows:

I have studied the laws and the school system of this country and I show a broad commitment to Switzerland. I have become a part of this society. It is also important for me to be able to participate at the polls for the future of this country, just as every citizen does. (Alimi in Zweili, 2018)

The frame describes him as a respectable, conscientious citizen, equipped with the necessary knowledge of Swiss society and aware of his duty as a citizen at the polls (Meyer, 2018).

**Table 1: Frames over time**

Date	Frames					
	Bridge-builder	Trust-builder	Deceiver	Radical imam	Influential imam	Responsible Swiss citizen
<b>Phase 1</b>						
Jan 26–Feb 02, 2015			X			
Feb 23–Mar 01, 2015	X	X				
Apr 06–Apr 12, 2015	X					
Dec 07–Dec 13, 2015		X				
Dec 14–Dec 20, 2015	X	X				
Dec 28, 2015–Jan 03, 2016	X					
<b>Phase 2: GBT</b>						
May 16–May 22, 2016	X	X	X	X		
May 23–May 29, 2016				X		
May 30–Jun 06, 2016	X	X	X	X		
<b>Phase 3</b>						
Jan 02–Jan 08, 2017	X	X	X			
Jan 16–Jan 22, 2017				X		
Mar 27–Apr 02, 2017	X					
Apr 24–Apr 30, 2017		X				
May 01–May 07, 2017				X		
May 08–May 14, 2017	X			X		
May 22–May 28, 2017	X					
Aug 14–Aug 20, 2017	X					
Sept 18–Sept 24, 2017	X					
<b>Phase 4: Naturalization</b>						
Feb 12–Feb 18, 2018	X	X		X		X
Feb 19–Feb 25, 2018				X		
Feb 26–Mar 04, 2018	X					
Mar 12–Mar 18, 2018			X		X	
Mar 19–Mar 25, 2018	X		X	X	X	
Mar 26–Apr 01, 2018	X	X	X	X	X	X
Apr 02–Apr 08, 2018	X	X	X	X	X	X
Apr 09–Apr 15, 2018	X		X	X	X	X
Apr 16–Apr 22, 2018				X		
Apr 23–Apr 29, 2018				X		
Apr 30–May 06, 2018				X		
Jun 18–Jun 24, 2018	X		X	X	X	
Jun 25–Jul 01, 2018				X		

Note: X=frames. Weeks without a frame are excluded from the table.

**5.2 Course of the debate**

If we look at the frames over time (Table 1), we see that the two key events influence the presence of frames. The debate in the first period revolves around diverse topics: the mosque that Bekim Alimi’s community wishes to build, a change in the cemetery regulations that would allow for a Muslim burial site, the election of Bekim Alimi as the president of the Muslim um-

brella organization of Eastern Switzerland (DIGO), and multifaith events he takes part in, just to name a few. In this first period, three frames are already present: the *bridge-builder* (e.g., Haag, 2015), the *trust-builder* (e.g., Rudnicki, 2015), and the *deceiver* (Klein, 2015).

We can then see that new frames are established with the occurrence of the two key events. During the first key event, the

inauguration of the Gotthard Base Tunnel, the new frame *radical imam* emerges. Initially, the choice of Bekim Alimi for the inauguration was presented with the already established bridge-builder or trust-builder frames. One headline, for example, calls him “Peace Preacher” and the article describes him as fighting for the recognition of Islam as a peaceful religion and respect for the approximately 430 000 Muslims living in Switzerland (Keller, 2016). A turning point in the debate comes when politician Fabio Schellmann of the Liberals (FDP) accuses Bekim Alimi of having contact with radical Islamic circles, thus adopting the radical imam frame. Schellmann states:

Alimi is by no means a representative of a moderate Islam. He maintains contacts with shady people from radical Salafī circles. For example, he appeared in a video next to the controversial Kosovar imam Shefqet Krasniqi, who was arrested a year and a half ago on suspicion of Islamic extremism. (Schellmann in *Blick online*, 2016)

To have contact is here equated with sharing views or even an ideology. Schellmann’s statement is repeatedly taken up by the media from this point onwards (e.g., Buechi, 2016; Dudle, 2016; Guggenbühl, 2016) and drives the debate in this second period.

In the third period, the debate again revolves around diverse topics, such as a Muslim burial site in Wil, the An’Nur-mosque of Winterthur suspected of radicalization, the cantonal ban on veiling discussed at the time and multifaith events that took place. A large part of the reporting in this period deals with the mosque of Alimi’s Muslim community. It was built during this time and inaugurated in May 2017. This event mainly fosters framing of the mosque or the Muslim community rather than the imam. Nevertheless, we come across a few frames about Alimi during this period, with all four of the previous frames applied: bridge-builder, trust-builder, deceiver, and radical imam.

The debate in the fourth period concerns Alimi’s naturalization. As already mentioned, the debate gets most intense

at this stage. On the occasion of this second key event, two new frames are established: the *influential imam* and the *responsible Swiss citizen*. All four previously found frames are used as well. The events unfold as follows: Alimi applies for naturalization for himself and his family on June 2, 2015. On the recommendation of the committee, the Naturalization Council grants the whole family municipal citizenship on May 20, 2016.<sup>2</sup> An appeal is lodged against Bekim Alimi’s naturalization on July 11, 2016 and is declared valid by the Council in September 2016. As a result, Bekim Alimi is asked for a statement on the allegations in the appeal and more information is gathered from the cantonal police, the State Secretariat for Migration and the Federal Intelligence Service. Although the statements obtained are clear and leave no doubt about Alimi’s eligibility for naturalization, the appellant does not withdraw his appeal. This leads to the town parliament having to decide on Alimi’s naturalization (Stadt Wil, 2018). At this point, the debate arena changes and it becomes a public debate. On February 14, 2018, the mediated debate starts with three newspapers reporting on Alimi’s naturalization wish and the appeal (Marjanovic, 2018; sda, 2018a; Waser, 2018). The appellant – later revealed to be local politician Mario Schmitt of the Swiss People’s Party (SVP) – frames Alimi as a radical imam (sda, 2018a).

The new frame responsible Swiss citizen is introduced by Alimi in an interview in February. He presents himself as a conscientious citizen, already part of the society, equipped with the necessary knowledge and aware of his duty as a citizen at the polls (Zweili, 2018). Citizenship therefore appears to be only a formality. The second new frame influential imam is introduced by politician Erika Häusermann of the Green Liberal Party (GLP). In March, the *St. Galler Tagblatt* publishes her open letter and questionnaire to Alimi, in which

<sup>2</sup> According to the Federal Constitution of the Swiss Confederation of 1999 (2021, art. 37), being a citizen of a commune and of the Canton to which the commune belongs means being a Swiss citizen.



the frame of the influential imam appears. According to her, Alimi as an imam plays a key role in shaping the relationship with Swiss culture for a large part of the Muslim population. Thus, he has a decisive influence on their willingness to integrate. She therefore considers it imperative that he answers her questions (Suter, 2018a), which he does a week later (Suter, 2018b). A day after his answers were published, Häusermann states in an interview that his answers are exemplary. Nevertheless, she finds it too early to decide on his naturalization, because his commitment to openness now obliges him to act accordingly (Wey, 2018). Häusermann, as soon as Alimi fulfills what she requires (namely, to answer her questions), immediately makes a new demand. This points to an assimilationist view of integration (Gianni, 2013), i. e., the immigrant must adapt to the host society unilaterally, and conditions can be changed constantly.

Both new frames, as well as the four previous ones, are repeatedly taken up in the debate and compete with each other until April 5, 2018, when the town parliament of Wil decides on the naturalization of Alimi. On April 6, 2018, several newspapers report that Alimi has been naturalized by 26 votes to 10 with 1 abstention (Büchel, 2018; sda, 2018b; Sommer, 2018a; Weik, 2018).

Up to the end of June, five more articles on Alimi’s naturalization appear in two different conservative right-wing newspapers (Gut, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c; Sommer, 2018b, 2018c). All of them primarily employ a series of the rather negatively characterized frames deceiver and radi-

cal imam. Even though the naturalization has already been voted on, politician Erika Häusermann (GLP) and politician Verena Gysling of the Green Party (GP) do not let go of the matter (Sommer, 2018c). It seems they continue to fight to block Alimi’s naturalization on the cantonal level. We find evidence of this interpretation in two official documents (Grünliberale, 2020; Stadt Wil, 2020). But *St. Galler Tagblatt* does not report on it anymore. It can be assumed that it was not perceived as relevant anymore. The requests were outsider opinions and had no chance. After the five articles mentioned, the discussion closes. Thereafter, we find a total of only six more articles on various topics in which Alimi is named. However, they no longer contain any framing of Alimi.

We observed that the frames competed with each other predominantly during the two key events. There was an ongoing struggle between positive frames (bridge-builder, trust-builder, responsible Swiss citizen) and negative frames (radical imam, deceiver), but no frames were suppressed. Instead, new frames were established during both key events, one during the inauguration of the Gotthard Base Tunnel (radical imam) and two during the debate over naturalization (influential imam and responsible Swiss citizen) by politicians and, for the responsible Swiss citizen frame, Alimi himself (as shown above). In order to review the pattern formulated in the theoretical part, let us look at the empirical pattern in Table 2. We can see that, in fact, the number of frame sponsors increases after both key events. As a result, we also see an increase in intensity as well

Table 2: Debate characteristics in each phase

Phase	Weeks	Different frame sponsors	Ratio 1 (Frame sponsors per week)	Articles with framing (intensity)	Ratio 2 (Articles per week)	Different Frames (breath)	Ratio 3 (Frames per week)
1	68	15	0.22	15	0.60	3	0.04
2 (key event 1)	7	13	1.57	11	2.14	4	0.57
3	36	11	0.33	12	1.33	4	0.11
4 (key event 2)	18	26	2.28	41	3.56	6	0.33
Total	129			79			

Note: Intensity is the number of articles with one or more frame in each phase.

**Table 3: Frames of political actors**

Actors	Frames					
	Bridge-builder	Trust-builder	Deceiver	Radical imam	Influential imam	Responsible Swiss citizen
<b>Muslim actors</b>						
Bekim Alimi (imam)	X	X				X
Pascal Gemperli (spokesperson of FIDS)	X					
Saïda Keller-Messahli (Forum Progr. Islam)			X	X		
“some Muslims”			X			
<b>Other religious actors</b>						
Franz Kreissl (Deacon)	X					
Martin Schmidt (Church Board)	X					
<b>Politicians</b>						
Jean-Luc Addor (SVP)				X		
Bruno Dudli (SVP)			X			
Ursula Egli (SVP)				X		
Mario Schmitt (SVP)				X	X	
Fabio Schellmann (FDP)				X		
Erika Häusermann (GLP)			X	X	X	
Fredy Fässler (SP)		X				
Kilian Meyer (SP, former)	X					X
Verena Gysling (GP)			X			
<b>Swiss authorities</b>						
Andreas Windlinger	X					

Note: X = frames.

as a broadening of the debate (also if we calculate the ratio and take the number of weeks into consideration). We can say that the empirical pattern matches the theoretical one.

**5.3 Frame sponsors and framing tasks**

The two key events influence the presence of frame sponsors which is why the framing becomes more intense, and broader over time. Let us now look at it in more detail. During the first period, the frame sponsors identified are journalists, religious actors (the president of the evangelical Church Council and a deacon of the canton of St. Gall), readers in letters to the editor and Bekim Alimi himself. The framing is only *diagnostic* at this point in the debate.

With the occurrence of the first key event (second period), politicians appear as frame sponsors. Many politicians were invited as guests to the inauguration of the Gotthard Base Tunnel. In addition, the

Muslim Saïda Keller-Messahli, president of the Forum for a Progressive Islam, and representatives of the federal authorities expressed their views.<sup>3</sup> In terms of framing tasks, we find *prognostic* framing in addition to *diagnostic* framing. Although politician Fabio Schellmann (FDP) does not voice the prognostic aspect of his radical imam frame, it is implicit: that Alimi should not participate in the inauguration (*Blick online*, 2016). Keller-Messahli, in contrast, explicitly expresses the prognostic aspect when she frames Alimi as a deceiver. In public, he presents himself as a moderate model imam, but away from

3 Keller-Messahli’s understanding of Islam is received by the media, but hardly adopted by other actors who often criticize her view (Hafner-Al Jabaji, 2021; Schulze, 2020). Therefore it can be considered as a minority position. She, however, presents her understanding of Islam as “the right understanding.” This leads to an increased polarization of the debates (Trucco, 2021, pp. 295–297).

the public eye he moves in very bad circles, she states, concluding therefore that he does not belong at the inauguration of the tunnel (Buechi, 2016). Since there is an option for a political measure (excluding or not), we also see a *prognostic* aspect of the frame here.

In the third period, we identify journalists, readers in letters to the editor, and Bekim Alimi himself as frame sponsors. Politicians, however, are absent. The framing is again only *diagnostic*.

The fourth period is triggered by an action of Bekim Alimi, who wants to become naturalized. This action brings a new dynamic to the debate. With the occurrence of this second key event, we again identify politicians as frame sponsors, but this time in a larger number and from a broader political spectrum. Other frame sponsors are journalists, readers in letters to the editor, Muslim representatives, and Bekim Alimi himself. We find *prognostic* framing in addition to *diagnostic* framing in the statements of politicians Mario Schmitt (SVP), Erika Häusermann (GLP) and Verena Gysling (GP). But we also find an instance of *motivational* framing: Kilian Meyer (former politician of the Social Democratic Party, SP) calls, in an open letter in the *St. Galler Tagblatt*, directly to the members of the town parliament to set an important example for the healthy living together of all people in the town of Wil by naturalizing Bekim Alimi (Meyer, 2018). The naturalization of Alimi is thus made a symbol of good coexistence. He is drawing on the bridge-builder and the responsible Swiss citizen frames when describing Alimi (Meyer, 2018).

Next, we look at who is framing how (Tables 3 and 4). We can see that Bekim Alimi uses three positive frames: the bridge-builder, trust-builder, and responsible Swiss citizen. The bridge-builder and the trust-builder frames can be linked to the positive subject model of the “good” imam (Birt, 2006), while the responsible Swiss citizen frame can be linked to a positive subject model in Swiss integration discourses, the “good citizen.” Integration as a prerequisite for naturalization means meeting its definition: “The ‘good citizen’

lives in conformity with the written and unwritten social norms. He or she earns money in an orderly way, pays debts, does not rely on social benefits, respects law and order and does not commit crimes” (D’Amato & Carrel, 2017, pp. 73–74).

The spokesperson for the national Muslim umbrella organization FIDS, Pascal Gemperli, and other religious actors – with the exception of Keller-Messahli – all use the bridge-builder frame. Given that this frame describes Alimi as an interreligious mediator promoting a peaceful coexistence, this makes sense. This is the setting in which these actors meet and interact. Religious actors on the whole do not appear often in the debate. This has already been shown in previous studies (e.g., Ettinger, 2018).

Political actors use their power and clearly pursue a certain goal (e.g., policymaking, winning the next election) in frame building. All of them promote the deceiver and / or the radical imam frame, except for two politicians of the SP who paint a more favorable picture of Alimi. The deceiver and the radical imam frame are anchored in the negative subject model of the “bad” imam (Birt, 2006), with the radical imam as a security threat being directly linked to securitization. This is no surprise with regard to the SVP, which is known for its anti-Islam views (Skenderovic, 2007). It is more remarkable, however, with regard to Erika Häusermann (GLP) and Verena Gysling (GP). Both of them decided to react and to promote these frames. It fits their policy agenda (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2017). The positions of the two women are outsider positions within their parties (Amstutz, 2018; Elsen, 2020).

Politician Häusermann furthermore promotes the influential imam frame. Besides her, this frame is only used by politician Mario Schmitt (SVP). The influential imam frame cannot be linked to the positive or negative subject model of the “good” or the “bad” imam. The assumption of the influence of imams has already been pointed out in some studies but was not presented as a frame there (Müller, 2017; Tunger-Zanetti, Martens, & Endres, 2019). In Western Europe, the imam “is perhaps

incorrectly seen as a Muslim equivalent of a rabbi or priest. It is assumed that imams are leaders and representatives of their communities, and that states and governments can address them to fix social issues and grievances” (Hashas, de Ruiter, Vind-

ing, & Hajji, 2018, p. 24). This perspective can be contested, as mosques in Europe are mostly run by boards through which imams are hired, imams do not follow a formalized educational pathway sanc-

Table 4: Frames of journalists

Actors	Frames					
	Bridge-builder	Trust-builder	Deceiver	Radical imam	Influential imam	Responsible Swiss citizen
<b>Journalists</b>						
<b>Political orientation of paper: strong conservative-right</b>						
<i>Weltwoche</i> (news magazine)						
Philipp Gut			X	X		
<i>Basler Zeitung</i> (regional paper)						
Christian Keller		X				
David Klein, Andrea Sommer			X			
<b>Political orientation of paper: light conservative-right</b>						
<i>Neue Zürcher Zeitung</i> (cross-regional paper)						
Daniel Gerny, Simon Hehli	X	X				
<b>Political orientation of paper: light left</b>						
<i>Tages-Anzeiger</i> (cross-regional paper)						
Michael Meier	X			X		
<i>Tribune de Geneve</i> (regional paper)						
Gabriel Sassoon	X	X				
<b>Political orientation of paper: no specific</b>						
<i>St. Galler Tagblatt</i> (regional paper)						
Gianni Amstutz, Philipp Haag, René Jann, Julia Nehmiz, Jolanda Riedener, Nina Rudnicki	X					
Andrea Häusler, Thomas Riesen, Nina Rudnicki, Christoph Zweili		X				
Hans Suter					X	
<i>20 Minuten</i> (cross-regional paper)						
J. Buechi				X		
<i>Blick online</i> (cross-regional)						
Journalist not mentioned				X		
<i>Le Temps</i> (cross-regional paper)						
Bernard Wuthrich		X		X		
<i>rts</i> (public broadcasting website)						
Jean-Marc Heuberger	X					
<i>srf</i> (public broadcasting website)						
Michael Breu		X				
Journalist not mentioned	X					

Note: X=frames. Classification of the political orientation of newspapers according to Jandura & Udris (2019). *St. Galler Tagblatt* was not part of their study.

tioned by an official institution, and they do not hold an ordained office.

Keller-Messahli is not a politician, yet she frames very similarly to center-right politicians, using only the deceiver and radical imam frames. A key factor in her frame building is probably her media prominence as a so-called expert on Islam (Trucco, 2021).

The federal authorities as frame sponsors are in many articles not represented by individuals but cited as an authority. Those citations were largely quoted directly from the document of the town of Wil regarding Alimi's wish for naturalization, which contains feedback from authorities (Stadt Wil, 2018). Andreas Windlinger of the Federal Office for Transport is the only person from the federal authorities mentioned by name. He draws on the bridge-builder frame when describing Alimi (Buechi, 2016). The use of this frame by a government official is not unexpected, when we look at an answer of the Federal Council to a question in the Swiss national parliament regarding the Gotthard inauguration. The Federal Council draws on a wider bridge-building frame that refers both to the tunnel and to Switzerland:

The basic idea behind the blessing of the Gotthard Base Tunnel was to show the connecting element of the tunnel also in the blessing. For this reason, one representative of each of the major monotheistic religions [...] was to perform the blessing: a Christian, a Jew and a Muslim. The aim was to show that people of different origins and religious affiliations can live and work together peacefully in Switzerland. (Federal Council in von Siebenthal, 2016)

Here we find an emphasis on unifying elements and a peaceful coexistence in a pluralistic society. The Federal Council continues in the text that openness, religious freedom, and tolerance are thoroughly Swiss virtues. For that reason, different religions have their place in Switzerland, just as they do in the blessing of the Gotthard Base Tunnel, states the Federal Council (von Siebenthal, 2016). This framing therefore not only takes up the image of bridge

building, peaceful coexistence, and religious plurality, but even identifies openness, religious freedom, and tolerance as Swiss virtues. This statement by the Swiss government anchors the framing in Swiss self-perception. Accordingly, it is not surprising that the bridge-builder frame is used, including by Bekim Alimi himself, to counter frames linked to the "bad" imam, like the deceiver or radical imam frames. It is culturally congruent.

Finally, let us look at journalists' frames (Table 4). We find 13 journalists writing for *St. Galler Tagblatt* (four without ever using a frame, thus not present in Table 4). This high quantity is due to the geographical proximity. Indeed, as the topic and the person (Bekim Alimi) met with great interest from the readership, the story was moved from the local to the regional section. This entailed a change of journalists, as different journalists are responsible for each section. It is also in line with the finding that key events influence the regional and tabloids newspapers more than national quality newspapers (Kepplinger & Habermeier, 1995). Journalists of this newspaper draw mainly on the bridge-builder and trust-builder frames, though all six frames appear in the newspaper itself, found in the published articles in that newspaper through statements by political actors (presented in Table 3). One journalist of this newspaper (Hans Suter) also uses the influential imam frame. During phase 4 (naturalization), journalists of *St. Galler Tagblatt* focus on making all positions of political actors visible, researching them and pointing out contradictions. In that phase, they did almost not frame themselves. In phase 3, Bekim Alimi served as a contact person and was interviewed or referred to in the case of inter-religious events or topics that concern the Muslim community (mosque, presidential election, lectures). In these contexts, the journalists framed Bekim Alimi. They tend to do so positively. We do find journalists from other newspapers who use the radical imam or deceiver frames. These tend to write for right newspapers, but also for *20 Minuten*, *Blick online* and *Le Temps*. One journalist of the leftish newspaper

*Tages-Anzeiger* (Michael Meier) also used the radical imam frame, beside the bridge builder frame in articles about a new mosque in Wil or about Albanian imams (phase 3). Otherwise, Bekim Alimi was no topic in the *Tages-Anzeiger*.

The debate took mainly place in *St. Galler Tagblatt*. After that, *Weltwoche* and *Basler Zeitung* had by far fewer articles, followed by the other newspapers and public broadcasting websites. When we look at the overall coverage of the debate on Alimi (politicians and journalists as speakers), it becomes clear that the *St. Galler Tagblatt* reported broadly (Table 3 and 4 together): Different actors were given a chance to speak, and different frames were presented (Table 3). In the case of the *Weltwoche* this was different: The right-wing news magazine used only the deceiver and radical imam frames in its reporting. Thus, they also only reported about those politicians with these frames. The *Basler Zeitung* published broadly as well as pointed articles on Alimi.

## 6 Conclusion

We analyzed the shaping of the debate in the case of one imam. We were able to identify six different frames in the case of imam Bekim Alimi. Further studies could investigate whether these frames are also found in debates about other imams or whether other frames are used. Furthermore, we see that key events structure the framing of the debate and give certain frame sponsors the opportunity to promote their frames. Framing intensifies and broadens with the two key events; the opening of the Gotthard Base Tunnel establishes the radical imam frame, which subsequently appears from time to time in the third phase as well. Framing intensifies and broadens again with naturalization, where the influential imam and responsible Swiss citizen frames are established. We also see that the identified key factors (power, input activity, prominence) in frame building (Hänggli, 2012, 2020) are relevant factors: Those powerful or prominent actors who made an effort contributed to shaping the

debate. When they speak out, the debates become more intense. Clearly, to become active seems to be particularly attractive for those political actors supporting the radical and deceiver frames, a rather negative framing. Saïda Keller-Messahli is also part of this group. By contrast, religious actors, who garner little attention, frame Alimi exclusively as bridge-builder. This frame is about peaceful coexistence and interreligious dialogue, with which these actors have an experience. We can note that the object of the debate, Bekim Alimi, is additionally a frame sponsor himself. In contrast to direct-democratic debates, we see that the framing of strategic actors is focused on their own perspective (not dialogically). However, the debate in the news media does not escalate and is diverse. Thus, it does not become a scandalous type of debate (Hänggli & van der Wurff, 2019). What the factors are that explain why a debate escalates is something further research needs to show.

Mainly because of the *St. Galler Tagblatt*, we found a variety of frames in the newspapers. In phase 4 (naturalization) and in the later part of phase 2 (Gotthard Base Tunnel), journalists mainly refrained from framing the debate themselves. Various pro and con frames were made visible via political actors as speakers. A different pattern is found in *Basler Zeitung* and *Weltwoche* in which journalists framed also in these phases. Even though local journalism is under pressure because of media crises, we see that also at the local level, still many journalists of *St. Galler Zeitung* report on such key events. This might be different for ordinary events.

Most of the time, we see diagnostic framing. This framing conceives “consensus mobilization,” not “action mobilization” (Klandermans, 1984, pp. 586–587). Simply put, the former facilitates agreement whereas the latter fosters action, moving people from their living rooms to the streets. Thus, this debate is about imams and Islam and how a predominantly Western society wants to deal with it. Perhaps, as long as the common understanding is in the foreground, there is a struggle for the right approach, and the



discussion in the public sphere is important. It is only in the phases after the key events in which we also find prognostic (and once motivational) framing. Those are phases of orientation and broader discussion.

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### Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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