What are the boundaries of the Irish nation? The island? The 26 county state? Or is the question irrelevant in the new Europe? In a recent study of changing forms of national identity in the border counties, we found a very different popular form of Irish nationalism than we had expected. We conducted in-depth interviews with well over a hundred people, and hundreds of teenagers wrote essays about their experiences and ideas and completed a survey. Our results were surprising.

We had expected to find a progression in the Southern border counties from an irredentist nationalism, perhaps still held by some, through a state-centred 26 county nationalism to a new Europeanism which made the Irish border no different from other European borders. We found something quite different. There was none of the ‘26-county’ state-centred attitudes so prevalent in the Irish media and ‘revisionist’ scholarship over the last two decades. The Irish state, despite close to a century of institutionalisation and legitimation, has not embedded its territorial borders in the identity of its population. Yet neither did we find old-fashioned nationalist irredentism or a new European identity. What we found again and again was a set of paradoxes which we think throw light on the nature of Irish nationalism today.

Our respondents told us about living in Louth, Monaghan, Donegal, past and present. They explained to us patiently how they thought about the border and the North, what being Irish meant to them and to their parents, how far they saw this changing. They volunteered countless examples of the practical importance of the border in jobs, party system, everyday activity, smuggling, and they freely recounted experiences of danger. They also systematically denied that the border had any impact on their sense of identity and nationality. They even denied that it was close-by. In towns not 10 km from Northern Ireland, people said they didn’t live on the border. ‘Border, there is no border here’ was a common comment. They saw no symbolic significance to the border. One Catholic woman said it simply: ‘North and South – It’s all the same, we’re all the same.’ Yet these same respondents had told us that the border had been a source of trauma in the past, for their own parents and grandparents. They had given us examples of the differences of North and South. ‘The troubles changed everything, everything completely... so many people came from the North to live here, people were afraid, afraid to say what they thought, what they felt’; ‘They’d even take over the whole conversation. We were placid, quiet, but they were all gun blazing’.

What construction of identity and place-in-the-world makes sense of these seeming contradictions? Our respondents were not, for the most part, classic irredentist nationalists. Some but by no means all of our Catholic respondents held a strong sense of ethnic identity, most of our respondents, both Protestant and Catholic, had a territorial sense of the island, some did and some didn’t think Northern Protestants were nationally different from themselves. They were not particularly concerned to bring about a united Ireland. Nor was it primarily a religious or a cultural sense of national community, although some said that nationality had been so constituted for their own parents. Today, however, they prided themselves on being inclusive of religious and cultural difference. Nor were they moving towards a European identity for which borders are now practically and symbolically irrelevant: a farmer, who emphasized the huge impact of the EU, was typical of our respondents in seeing it as ‘purely economical’.
Rather, the very discourse that denied the significance of the border, did so through constructing national community as a moral phenomenon. It went together with an assertion of civility and openness. These people were – in their self-perceptions and in their interactions with us – open and peaceful, not closed and oppositional. As one young person wrote ‘we work with each other and are friends with each other’. This was a form of civility that was not limited by state boundaries. Their denial of the significance of the border allowed our respondents to engage in everyday civil interaction, across the border as well as within their own state. It meant that intense conflict was defined and distanced as morally alien, nothing to do with their nation or their attitudes to the border. It also meant that they would distance any ‘intrusions’ of conflict, as they did the Northern ‘refugees’.

The border was, in their perceptions, imposed upon them by force. Their sense of identity was not self-defined as divided by states or borders. They were willing to include all in their own civility, in their own Irishness. Yet our respondents’ denial of the national significance of the state border reconstituted a different sort of national boundary, one that is founded not merely in institutions but in values and sense of self. A sense of moral values and civility is felt to pervade (Southern) Irish society and in general to be upheld, but not constituted, by the Irish state and its institutions. A moral border divided our respondents from others, from those who denied their civility, who resisted their openness, who set boundaries, who shouted them down. This moral constitution of the nation has replaced a strong ethnic nationalism. It is more mundane than the ideologies of Gaelic, Catholic Ireland which many of our respondents treated with some irony. Yet it is as powerful, connecting the collective category of nationality with the moral sense of self. It defined another border, one which excluded those Northern Protestants who were threatened by their moral and civilisational expansiveness and those Northern Catholics who could not so civilly affirm their Irishness.

This suggests a different view of contemporary Southern attitudes to Irish unity. It is sometimes suggested that the Irish electorate is now accustomed to a 26 county state, society and even nation, and might reject Irish unity if it were put to referendum. Our research confirms a Southern distance from the North, but suggests that this is a moral rather than a cultural or ethnic or national sense of distance. Should their judgment of the civility of the North and Northerners change, so too would their attitudes. If the key issue is a moral one, then the merits or demerits of unification are open to discussion and to dialogue, and the result is not a fore-gone conclusion. This raises a new agenda for analysis of nationalism in Ireland, requiring analysis not simply of the South but of North-South contrasts, challenges and interrelations.