

MIGRATION AND EUROPE

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FINDINGS

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- Migration remains one of the major issues in Europe. By now migration is not considered the most urgent issue in all European countries anymore. However, there are still more people concerned about it than before 2015, the year of the 'refugee crisis'.
- Opinions on migration in the east and the west of Europe differ significantly. In the post-communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, consequences of immigration are evaluated much more negatively. Immigrants face stronger rejection and the perception of 'strangers' as a threat is much more pronounced than in Western Europe.
- Perceptions of immigration in East and West Germany are unique compared to other parts of Europe. East Germans' attitudes towards immigrants are much more positive than in other formerly socialist regions, as they match typical levels in Western Europe. However, fears of immigration-related crime and reservations towards Muslims are much more pronounced in East Germany than in Western Europe. Importantly, attitudes towards immigrants in Western Germany are significantly more positive than in most other Western European countries.
- When people think about migration, they also think about Europe. For European citizens there is hardly any issue that is as intertwined with the EU as migration. Thus, migration underlines the significance of the European Union. However, along with this significance comes the obligation to find a solution to this issue.
- In Europe, nation-states prefer to remain sovereign in determining their own asylum and migration policies. This is a key reason for why EU members could only agree to measures on 'border protection' in recent years. There remains strong opposition to developing a mutual European asylum policy, and there has been hardly any progress in solving the issue of resettling refugees throughout Europe. Some progress may come with the establishment of a 'coalition of the willing', i. e. a coalition of countries that are willing to host refugees. This coalition was co-initiated by the German government in order to resettle refugees who were rescued from the Mediterranean.
- There has been an increase in migration-related disputes, including those involving refugee resettlement and sea rescues. This has led to an intensification of communication across borders in the EU. In this sense, the issue of migration has contributed to an Europeanisation of national public spheres.
- Since the 'refugee crisis,' migration has not only become a mobilisation tool for right-wing parties, but also paved their way to success. Where migration dominates the political discourse, right-wing populists gain followers.
- In places where migration was displaced by other issues, the politicisation of migration issues was actively encouraged by right-wing populist movements. Thus, in the European election campaign of 2019 as well as in national elections, they focussed particularly on strategies of polarisation and scandalisation.
- It is not only the salience of migration that allows right-wing populists to mobilize support. There is also a direct correlation between a sudden increase in migration numbers and the electoral support for right-wing populists. A surge in the proportion of non-European immigrants boosts the election outcome of the AfD - most notably in areas where there is little history of non-European immigration.
- The AfD is particularly successful in regions where the population is ethnically homogeneous. In regions where the share of ethnic minorities is higher, the AfD election outcomes are below average. Moreover, it is remarkable that in thinly populated municipalities with a high proportion of migrants, the AfD is much less successful than in densely populated cities with a comparable share.
- Within civil society, the conflict over migration reflects the importance of a cultural cleavage between liberal or cosmopolitan and ethno-nationalist views. Recently, far-right actors beyond party politics have increasingly gained public visibility. To some extent, also these actors identify positively with "Europe". However, their understanding of European unity is related to cultural and religious demarcation and an opposition to immigration by Muslims.



MIGRATION AND EUROPE

The 'refugee-crisis' peaked four years ago. By now, the number of refugees arriving in Europe has significantly declined. Moreover, in many European countries, public opinion towards immigration has once again become more positive. In some western European countries, migration is seen even more positively than before 2015 (Eurobarometer 2019). Nevertheless, the 'refugee-crisis' has left deep scars. The political conflict over migration has become increasingly heated and fierce. In addition, the political landscape is now more fragmented and polarised. Right-wing populist and extremist parties are both the driving forces and main beneficiaries of these divisions. They have figured out how to successfully exploit the issue of immigration for political mobilization. The high public interest in this subject played clearly into their hands (MIDEM 2018).

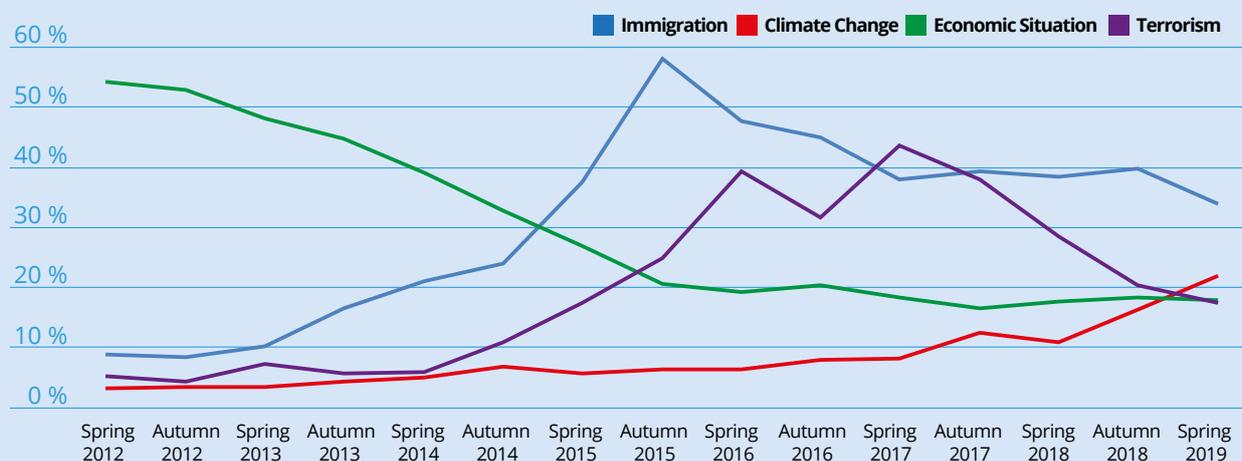
For many people, migration is closely linked to European politics and perceived as an inherently European issue. Surveys show that a majority of citizens in Europe view migration as the key challenge to the European Union (cf. ill. 1). While migration is not perceived as the most important issue in all European countries, more people are concerned about the issue now than before 2015 (Mudde 2019). In 2019, the percentage of Europeans who regard immigration as one of the two most important issues is at 21 percent – compared to only eleven percent in 2013. However, attitudes vary greatly by region: In Northern and Western Europe, the issue of immigration has already been important for many years. In Southern, Central and Eastern Europe, the trend is inconsistent and very much influenced by situational factors. On the one hand, immigration became highly relevant during the 'refugee crisis', also related to ongoing political quarrels over the distribution of refugees within the EU - similar to Western and Northern Europe. However, after some time other issues – mostly socio-economic ones - became more important again. Yet, the problem of immigration regained public relevance whenever right-wing populists made it a subject of political campaigns, especially in Italy and Hungary.

Therefore, one of the key findings of the 2019 European elections is that right-wing populists are successful when they manage to direct public interest to immigration, refugee and asylum policy (MIDEM 2019). This observation can be reduced to a simple formula: if the issue of immigration

MIGRATION: THE KEY EUROPEAN ISSUE

SUCCESS OF RIGHT-WING POPULISTS DEPENDS ON THE IMMIGRATION ISSUE

Ill. 1: Overview of key European issues over time



Source: European Commission/own graph

is salient, it evokes potential fears and reservations about cultural and religious diversity. As a consequence, right-wing populist parties gain support (see also Dennison/Geddes 2019). The rise of the Spanish Vox party is the latest example for such a process. Even though Vox initially profited from the escalating Catalan crisis and its harsh rejection of separatism, Vox also soon adopted a unique position on immigration (Mendes 2019a; 2019b). By focusing on anti-immigrant sentiments, they managed to address the concerns of a minority of Spanish voters, especially distrustful of Muslim immigrants. Strategically, this proved to be successful: In November 2019, Vox managed to increase its share of votes by almost five percent and became the third strongest party in the Spanish parliament.

MIGRATION REFLECTS DIVISIONS WITHIN EUROPE

By now, leaving the Brexit campaign aside, right-wing populist campaigns do not frequently target EU internal migration. This is not accidental, but caused by public opinion: In Europe, much more people hold negative views towards immigration from outside the EU than towards migration from within the EU. Still, views on immigration from outside the EU vary by region: While almost half of all North and West Europeans consider immigration as mainly positive, only slightly more than 40 percent of all South Europeans regard immigration from non-EU countries as positive. Citizens from Central and Eastern Europe are even more sceptical. Less than 30 percent consider immigration from non-EU countries as positive. This special position of Central and Eastern Europe on immigration is confirmed by insights from the European Values Study: Central and Eastern Europeans link migrants more strongly to rising crime rates, strained social security budgets and a deterioration of the labour market. The prevalence of such views can be traced back to two factors: on the one hand, ethno-nationalist attitudes are more deeply rooted in Central and Eastern European societies and, as a source of legitimation for their regained sovereignty, are usually interpreted more positively (MIDEM 2019). On the other hand, Central and Eastern Europeans have hardly any experience with immigrants from the Middle East or Africa. The population of many Eastern European countries is almost ethnically homogeneous – a context that can foster fears of the ‘foreign’ (Krastev 2017).

EAST GERMANS ARE MORE ‘WESTERN’ THAN EASTERN EUROPEANS

Where is East Germany’s position in all of this? The political strength of the AfD may lead to the assumption that immigrants have to face particularly great scepticism, if not rejection, in East Germany. To some extent, the divisions within Germany may reflect the divide between Western and Central and Eastern Europe on immigration, just on a smaller scale. Accordingly, East Germans would have attitudes similar to Central and Eastern Europeans, and West Germans similar ones to Western Europeans. However, the annual report of MIDEM does not confirm this thesis. Data provided by the European Values Study proves that attitudes of East Germans towards immigrants are distinctly more positive than in other post-socialist countries. Still, the findings are somewhat different when it comes to Muslims. In East Germany, the rejection of Muslims is far higher than in Western Europe. Even more remarkably, opinions on immigration in West Germany are more positive than in most other Western European countries. From an empirical perspective, immigration scepticism in East Germany is as unique as the highly positive views of West Germans towards immigration.

SURGE IN IMMIGRATION BOOSTS AFD ELECTORAL SUCCESS

Scepticism towards immigration is not the only explanation for the rise and success of right-wing populist parties. The objective number of arriving refugees and immigrants can also affect the election results of these parties. However, the connection between both factors is far more complex than often presumed. The MIDEM annual report studies this relationship statistically: Our analysis shows that a higher share of ethnic minorities in an administrative district or independent town usually goes hand in hand with lower electoral support for the AfD. However, we find that it is also

necessary to take the rate at which new immigrants settle in a place into account. A sudden surge in non-EU immigration does indeed raise the election outcome for the AfD. The AfD has more electoral support in districts where a lot of immigrants from outside the EU settle within a short period of time. This relationship is particularly pronounced in areas where there is little history of non-European immigrants. This result seems to suggest that electoral behaviour, whether pro-immigration or anti-immigration, is influenced by the interaction between local context and new arrivals.

In addition to attitudes towards migration and the speed of the increase in immigration, politicisation strategies that aim at increasing the salience of migration is another crucial element that explains the success of right-wing populist parties. The strong focus on immigration is one of these strategies: The issue is far more relevant in election manifestos of right-wing populist parties than in those of other parties. Immigration and refugees serve as a focal point of targeted campaigns, which are also aimed against supposedly pro-immigration elites. Framing also matters strongly: immigration is portrayed as an area of social conflict and linked to unemployment, crime, and a crisis of the welfare state. With these frames, right-wing populists can influence how the issue of immigration is discussed in public debates and talk shows. Such opposition to immigration provokes a shift in discourse which changes the overall political climate at the expense of immigrants.

Polarisation is also part of the strategic repertoire of right-wing populists. In the context of migration this means that their proposals vary drastically from the manifestos of other parties. This is how immigration can serve as an identity marker for right-wing populist parties. As anti-immigration parties they can distinguish themselves from other parties to emphasise their idea of a homogeneous vision of society. The most effective way of doing so is formulating radical demands ranging from banning the headscarf to large-scale 'remigration'. However, it is also due to their nationalist point of view that right-wing populists manage to distinguish themselves from all other parties. A closer look at manifestos for the European elections in Germany shows that only the AfD regards asylum and immigration policy exclusively as a national problem.

Creating **scandals** over immigration is another increasingly effective strategy. Political actors intentionally fabricate political scandals by revealing alleged political mischief or misconduct of political opponents. Scandals are staged in order to keep immigration on the public agenda. The former Italian Home Secretary Matteo Salvini managed to do so during his term in office. Provocations and media-effective actions, such as prohibiting rescue ships from the Mediterranean to enter Italian ports, kept his name in the headlines (ill.2). By doing so, immigration remained visible in the media. This strategy has worked in favour of Salvini's Lega, a party that is consistently spearheading the Italian polls.

The political processing of immigration has created division and deep political and cultural cleavages. This also applies to civil society, where we find an increase of mobilization both in favour of and against welcoming refugees and immigration. Pro-immigration positions are based on liberal and cosmopolitan values, which particularly emphasize human rights and humanitarianism. Anti-immigration positions mainly reflect a nationalist world view that promotes narrow and homogenous cultural areas. Anti-immigration positions are particularly present in Central and Eastern European societies, where the reception of refugees from Syria or the Middle East was met with rejection by the public. This is another reason for why the governments of most Central and Eastern European countries are negative towards the distribution of refugees within the EU. Furthermore, efforts by the EU to mandate refugee quotas are often perceived as a threat to

IMMIGRATION IS THE DOMINANT ISSUE IN RIGHT-WING POPULISTS' ELECTION MANIFESTOS

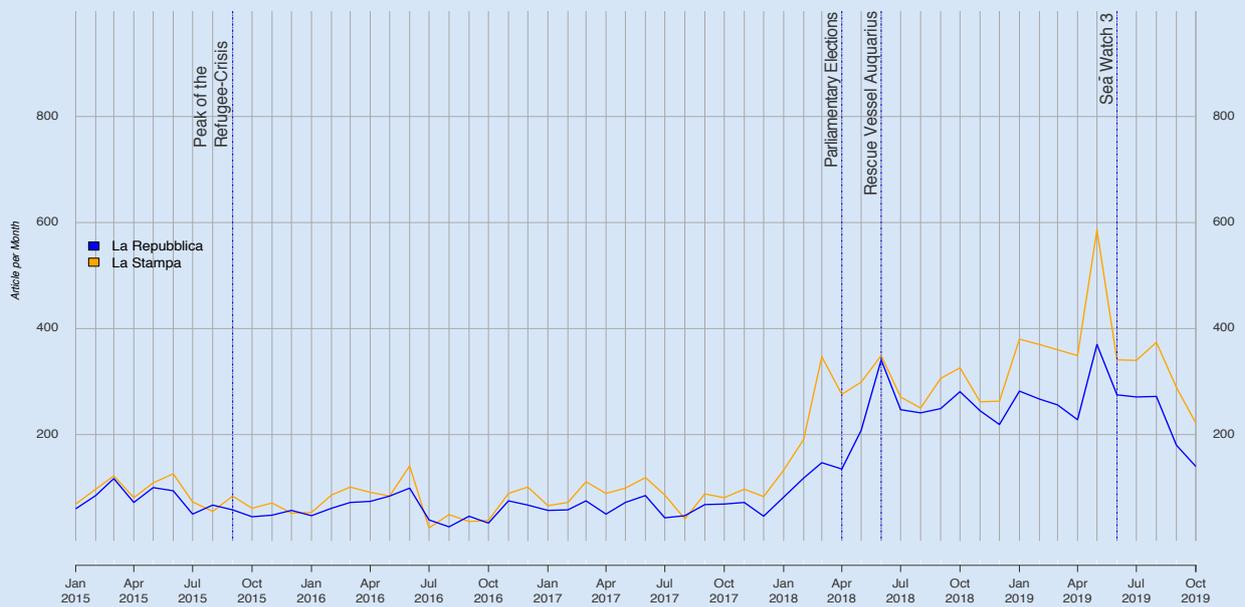
RADICAL IDEAS PAY OFF

SCANDALISATION AS A STRATEGY OF RIGHT-WING POPULISTS

national sovereignty. As a result, there has been no fundamental reform of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS). Measures are limited to “protecting” the EU external borders at the Balkans and in the Mediterranean. However, proceeding with the status quo is not an option – also because of the tense situation for refugees in Turkey, Greece, the Balkans and, first and foremost, in the Mediterranean.

Nevertheless, something positive can be drawn from the current situation: The political conflict over the distribution of refugees and sea rescues has contributed to increased transnational communication, and as a result, to the Europeanisation of national public spheres. Immigration has become a truly European issue.

III. 2: Media coverage of Matteo Salvini



Source: La Repubblica and La Stampa / own graph

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