



Issue 2 (2026) | ISSN 3067-7300 (online) | DOI 10.5195/valeus.2026.3 | <https://valeus.pitt.edu/>

Right Wing Reactionary Populist Radicalism and Migration in Europe

Ayhan Kaya

Abstract

The main purpose of this essay is to assess the relationship between populism and immigration in the European Union. Based on an extensive literature review on the current state of populist movements in the EU as well as on the findings of two sets of comparative fieldwork conducted in various European countries in 2017 (Germany, France, Italy, Greece, and the Netherlands) and between 2020 and 2021 (Germany, France, Italy, and the Netherlands), the essay seeks to understand and explain the relevance of the debates on migration, refugees and Islam with the rise of radical right-wing populism as well as with the current state of the EU. The essay discusses the impact of the growing populist and anti-Muslim sentiments on migration and asylum policies in the EU.

Keywords: Migration, Asylum, Populism, Refugees, Islamophobia



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This journal is published by Pitt Open Library Publishing.

Introduction

Right-wing populist parties and movements constitute a rising force in several EU member states. At the heart of the story about the rise of right-wing populism lies a disconnection between the established political parties and their electorates. Right-wing populist parties in particular have gained greater public support in the last decade amidst two crises: the global financial crisis in 2008, and the so-called refugee crisis in 2015. The former created relative social-economic deprivation for some Europeans due to ongoing neo-liberal forms of governance, deindustrialisation, and internal migration, while the latter has caused a nostalgic deprivation stemming from the feeling that massive demographic changes have threatened established notions of identity, nation, culture, and tradition.

The populist spirit has either strengthened many of the former extreme-right-wing parties or created new ones. Some of these right-wing populist parties are the *Party for Freedom* in the Netherlands; *Danish People's Party* in Denmark; *Sweden's Democrats* in Sweden; the *Front National* (now *National Rally*) and *Bloc Identitaire* in France; *Vlaams Belang* in Belgium; *Finns Party* in Finland; the *Brothers of Italy*, *Lega*, *Casa Pound* and *Five Star Movement* in Italy; the *Freedom Party* in Austria; the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD), *Die Freiheit* in Germany; Victor Orban's *Fidesz* and *Jobbik Party* in Hungary; the *English Defence League* *British National Party*, and the *UKIP* (*UK Independence Party*) in the UK; and *Golden Dawn* in Greece. Recent research suggests that these parties and movements are now a durable force in Europe. For instance, in Austria, the right-wing populist *Freedom Party* is the most popular movement among 18-25-year-olds and support for the leader of the French *Front National*, Marine Le Pen, is found to be stronger among younger voters. This suggests that these parties and movements may have more potential to become influential political actors in the long term. Right-wing populist parties are no longer only in power in Eastern European countries such as Hungary and Poland, they are also becoming key players in governments in Western European countries. For instance, in 2022, the *Brothers of Italy* (*Fratelli d'Italia*, FdI) under Georgia Meloni's leadership won 26 per cent of the votes and had the mandate to establish the right-wing coalition government while Sweden's *Democrats* under Jimmie Akesson's leadership became the second party in general elections by winning 20, 5 per cent of the votes and had the opportunity to have a strong grip over the newly established right-wing coalition government as an external player.

The main purpose of this essay is to assess the relationship between populism and immigration in the European Union. Where much research focuses on the conditions in one country or electorate, the comparative perspective here is based on an extensive literature review on the current state of right-wing populist movements in the EU as well as on the findings of comparative fieldwork conducted in five European countries (France, Germany, Greece, Italy, and the Netherlands) in the first half of the year 2017. The essay seeks to understand and explain the relevance of the debates on migration, refugees and Islam on the rise of extreme right-wing populism.¹

Populist rhetoric has been mostly accepted by individuals who live in spatially remote places in Europe.² Populist rhetoric is an anti-systemic discourse that is used by such socio-economically, politically, spatially, and nostalgically deprived individuals with either precarious rural, or working-class backgrounds to fight back against the hegemonic strategies of globalism, neo-liberalism, EUropeanisation, supranational unity, and super-diversity. Hence, I assume that sympathizers of right-wing populist movements are mostly resorting to nativist, Islamophobic, anti-multiculturalism discourses, as they feel challenged by the current dominant streams of globalism that appear in the form of transnational companies, deindustrialisation, migration, tourism, borderless economy, mobility, and intensification and condensation of the physical world. Populist sentiments have their local constraints and sources of legitimation. Since I assume that all populisms are local in essence, this essay mostly focuses on the analysis of local drivers of right-wing populism emerging in various European cities selected for scientific inquiry: Athens, Dresden, Rome, Rotterdam, and Toulon.

The data presented in this essay originate from both the desk research and around one hundred semi-structured interviews conducted by native and novice researchers who worked under the supervision of the author of this essay. The semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with populist parties' supporters in five countries between 1 March and 30 May 2017. Twenty interviews were conducted in specific cities, selected by the popularity of such right-wing populist movements. The members of the research team selected their interlocutors using the snowball technique from among the supporters of the right-wing populist parties: the Front National (FN) in Toulon, France; the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) in Dresden, Germany; the Golden Dawn (GD) in Athens, Greece; the Five Star Movement (M5S) in Rome, Italy; and

the Party for Freedom (PVV) in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. The interlocutors were male and female aged between 18 and above, living in places with a strong populist party presence. The interviews and supporting evidence revealed that populism is not only a male phenomenon, but it has become popular among women and LGBTI+ groups taking an oppositional stance against the perceived place of women and LGBTI+ individuals in Islam. The growing popularity of populism among women and LGBTI individuals is also observable through their increasing roles in the leadership of populist parties such as the FN in France, and the AfD in Germany. The interviews were conducted in the native language of the interlocutors by local researchers with access to the neighborhoods and networks. The interviewers took notes during the interviews rather than using tape recorders or any electronic recording devices in order not to alienate their interlocutors, and they transcribed the interviews into English before conveying them to the principal investigator, the author of this essay. In addition to the use of these interviews, discursive analysis of the media and official documents of the populist political parties were also included in the material used for the essay.³ Finally, this work also benefits from the insights collected in two other research projects conducted by the author: Islam-ophob-ism, and PLEDGE.⁴

The essay starts with an attempt to briefly answer the question of what populism is by focussing on the Manichean understanding of the world polarising the public between “us” and “them”. Then, the content of the right-wing populist rhetoric is analysed further looking at the social-economic, political, and cultural drivers of right-wing populism in Europe. In doing so, the resentment against diversity, multiculturalism, Islam, immigration, and mobility is expanded with references to the testimonies of our interlocutors. The essay comes to an end with a summary of the root causes of right-wing populism in European cities, and the reactionary responses of populist individuals to such causes.

How to Define Populism?

There is no unique definition of the term “populism”. Drawing on the interventions of Edwards Shils⁵ in the aftermath of World War II, some scholars take it as *an ideology*.⁶ Some scholars read populism as *a strategy* embodied by various political parties to generate and sustain power using plebiscites, referenda, and public speeches.⁷ Other scholars are more content with defining it as *a discourse* based on the assumption that populism is a part-time phenomenon instrumentalized by

populist individuals whenever it is necessary to build up a stronger link with “the people”.⁸ Based on a Gramscian interpretation, some scholars, on the other hand, tend to see it as a *political logic*.⁹ In his seminal work, Peter Worsley has already stated that populism is not a phenomenon that is specific to a particular region, nor is it the unique bastion of any ideological side of politics.¹⁰ It is rather an aspect of a variety of political cultures and structures. Eventually, following the Marxist scholar Worsley¹¹, some others defined populism as a *political style*.¹²

The political communication strategy employed by populist parties splits society between the “pure people” and the “corrupt elite”, and posits that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people. The current academic debate identifies political populism along four general patterns of action and argumentation. Most populist parties in Europe reject today's institutional framework conditions for European integration. Populist parties are often considered by scholars as pragmatic, post-, or not ideological. However, the absence or the explicit rejection of a doctrine of reference does not imply the absence of a core of certain principles. The symbolic core of populism may consist of the following elements:¹³ a) recurrent use of the concept of ‘the people’ that is often referred to as an organic body, the ‘ordinary citizens’ stand as the exclusive source of political legitimacy, as opposed to an elitist portrayal of the political realm; b) anti-elitism, which stresses the rejection of the political class as a whole. Metaphorically conceived as a ‘caste’, all political as well as social institutions and their professionalized components including long-time politicians, bureaucrats, journalists, and also scholars are angrily confronted; and c) condemnation of the traditional institutions of representative democracy. Representative institutions, therefore, become a barrier to the realization of ‘true’ democracy ‘from below’, where sovereignty is truly in the hands of the ‘people’ and politicians are mere executors.

The right-wing populist parties across Europe and beyond also draw on different political imaginaries and different traditions, construct different national identity narratives, and emphasize different issues in everyday life. As Ruth Wodak illustrated some populist parties in Europe gain support by linking themselves with fascist and Nazi past as in Austria, Hungary, Italy, Romania, and France.¹⁴ Some parties gain legitimacy through the perceived threat from Islam and migration as in the Netherlands, Denmark, Poland, Sweden, and Switzerland. Some others endorse Evangelical/Christian fundamentalist rhetoric as in the US. Some establish their

legitimacy through Euroscepticism as in Finland and Greece. And some parties build up their legitimacy through an Islamist ideology and a perceived threat originating from unidentified enemies outside and within such as the Justice and Development Party in Turkey.¹⁵ One could argue that populist parties in different national settings often follow a path-dependent lineage¹⁶ to choose their rhetoric and discourses to mobilize their constituents.

In this essay, I prefer to use an anthropological and spatial definition of right-wing populism, which I think, is a discourse of the disempowered individuals living in remote places to curb their political, social, economic, spatial, and nostalgic deprivation. Anthropological approaches mostly understand populism as “the moods and sensibilities of the disenfranchised who face the disjuncture between everyday lives that seem to become extremely anomic and uncontrollable and the wider public power projects that are out of their reach and suspected of serving their ongoing disenfranchisement”.¹⁷ On the other hand, Andrés Rodríguez-Pose, a geographer, defines populism as a political force that has taken hold in many of the so-called ‘spaces that do not matter’, or in other words, the remote places that are creating a systemic risk.¹⁸ Right-wing populist votes have been heavily concentrated in territories that have suffered long-term declines and reflect an increasing urban/rural divide. It is not a surprise then to see that right-wing populism has become a recurring phenomenon in remote places such as Dresden, Toulon, Lyon, Aalst, Rotterdam, or the Bible Belt cities in the Netherlands, as well as rural and mountainous places that do not matter anymore for the neo-liberal political parties in the center that are heavily engaged in the flows of globalization such as international trade, migration, foreign direct investment, and urbanization. The feelings of being left behind in those remote places that “no longer matter” in the eyes of the political center may sometimes lead to what one might call ‘spatial deprivation’. Such feelings of socio-economic, political, spatial, and nostalgic deprivation have been triggered even more after a series of crises such as the 2015 “refugee crisis”, the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and the ongoing energy crisis.

A Manichean Understanding: “Us” vs “Others”

Right-wing populist discourse is mostly built upon the antagonism between the constituted ‘pure people’ and the enemies such as ‘the Jews’, ‘the Muslims’, ‘ethnic minorities’, or ‘the corrupt elite’. In Europe, this purity of the people is largely defined in ethno-religious and civilizational terms, which rejects the principle of equality and advocates policies of exclusion mainly toward migrant and ethno-cultural minority groups. Despite national variations, these parties and movements can be characterized by their opposition to immigration, concern for the protection of national/European culture, adamant criticisms of globalization, the EU, representative democracy, and mainstream political parties. Populists argue that established political parties corrupt the link between leaders and supporters, create artificial divisions within the homogenous people, and put their interests above those of the people.¹⁹

The immigration issue is central to the discourse and programmes of all radical parties in Europe. According to a survey made in the second half of the 2000s, for instance, voters of such populist parties were significantly more likely to say their country should accept only a few immigrants or even none.²⁰ Regarding immigration in Europe, a more specific form of hostility towards settled Muslim communities can be observed particularly in the past decade. A large number of voters are anxious about increasing diversity and immigration, which provides the electoral potential for these parties. Anti-immigration sentiments often go together with anti-Muslim racism. For instance, in 1994, 35 per cent of the Danish People’s Party supporters endorsed the view that Muslims were threatening national security; by 2007 the figure had risen to 81 per cent (as opposed to 21 per cent of all voters).²¹ Anxiety is not solely rooted in economic grievances. The support for these parties and public hostility to immigration are mostly driven by fears of cultural threats.²² The discriminatory and racist rhetoric towards the ‘others’ poses a clear threat to democracy and social cohesion in Europe. The object of the fear is often materialized in the body of Muslims in Europe. One of the interlocutors we interviewed in Rome among the supporters of the 5 Star Movement very explicitly vocalizes such fears:

“In a few years, European culture will cease to exist, once the Caliph will have taken control of Europe. Then we will build a long memory of what we lost, something that was perhaps too weak. The takeover of the Caliphate was previewed by a clairvoyant, who said the Caliph would control even the Vatican. Beyond the clairvoyant, there are signs

that our culture is changing with every little cross being taken away from the schools”
(interview with a 39-year-old doorman in Rome, 16 May 2017)

Such fears were also reiterated by many other interlocutors in Germany, France, Greece, Italy, and the Netherlands. A 70-year-old former saleswoman in Dresden expressed her feelings in a similar way when she was asked to tell us about her opinion on European heritage:

“When we have an Islamic caliphate in Germany one day, the European heritage will be gone. Maybe it sounds exaggerated, but I think we should be very careful. Many Muslim refugees have dangerous thoughts in their minds. Otherwise, you would not think of driving a bus into a crowd [referring to the attack on the Breitscheid-Platz in Berlin in December 2016]” (interview with a 70-year-old, female pensioner in Dresden, 18 April 2017).

The construction of a contemporary European identity is built in part on anti-Muslim racism, just as other forms of racist ideology played a role in constructing European identity during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Use of the term ‘Islamophobia’ assumes that fear of Islam is natural and can be taken for granted, whereas the use of the term ‘*Islamophobia*’ presumes that this fear has been fabricated by those with a vested interest in producing and reproducing such a state of fear, or phobia. By describing Islamophobia as a form of *ideology*, in other words as Islamophobia, I argue that Islamophobic discourse operates as a form of *cultural racism* in Europe which has become apparent along with the process of *securitizing* and *stigmatizing* migration and migrants in the age of neoliberalism.²³ One could thus argue that Islamophobia as an ideology is being constructed by ruling political groups to foster a kind of false consciousness, or delusion, within the majority society as a way of covering up their failure to manage social, political, economic, and legal forces and consequently the rise of inequality, injustice, poverty, unemployment, insecurity, and alienation. In other words, Islamophobia turns out to be a practical instrument of social control used by the conservative political elite to ensure compliance and subordination in this age of neoliberalism, essentializing ethnocultural and religious boundaries. Muslims have become global ‘scapegoats’, blamed for all negative social phenomena such as illegality, crime, violence, drug abuse, radicalism, fundamentalism, conflict, and financial burdens. One could also argue that Muslims are now being perceived by some individuals and communities in the West as having greater social power. There is a growing

fear in the United States, Europe, Russia, and the post-Soviet countries that Muslims will demographically take over sooner or later.

Immigrants and Refugees

It is often assumed that the supporters of right-wing populist parties are by default anti-refugee individuals. Our research findings indicate that those individuals make a differentiation between economic migrants and refugees when they express their thoughts on migration-related issues. One of the striking commonalities of the interviews we conducted during the fieldwork, held between mid-March and late May 2017 in Germany, France, Italy, Greece, and the Netherlands among the supporters of the right-wing populist parties, was that a great majority of the interlocutors explicitly differentiated between immigrants and refugees. Though having great sympathy for the refugees who seek refuge from war zones, they expressed their concerns about the impossibility of their countries taking care of them permanently. The refugees should be given shelter in their own neighboring countries, and the European Union member states should help them out with economic support. Immigrants, on the other hand, are a different category as they have been embedded in their countries for decades. They are not treated very sympathetically by the interlocutors as they are perceived to be seeking to take their jobs and to use resources without contributing to their society. There is a common belief that immigrants do not integrate while taking advantage of public services, such as health care and unemployment benefits. As for the immigrants, mostly they are perceived by the supporters of the right-wing populist parties as an economic burden.

For instance, the supporters of the PVV in Rotterdam mostly agree that that should be ‘helping the one in need’. Refugees escaping from war, persecution, and ethnic cleansing should be given refuge, they believe. However, our interlocutors said that they were unreceptive towards economic migrants, who are believed to exploit the Dutch welfare system. A kind of welfare chauvinism was often expressed by the interlocutors, who mainly complained that immigrants were ‘exploiting their system’. When asked about refugees, a 56-year-old male construction worker in Rotterdam said:

With the kids, yes, we should allow them in. The others just come here to use our system, we should not even let them in... I guess the economic migrants are just here to try their luck, they shouldn't be here at all... When you look here in Rotterdam, the Turkish

people sit in their Turkish bars, where only Turkish people come, with no integration whatsoever. They stay close to each other and no outsider is allowed to enter. They don't feel the need to integrate... They think that what we are doing here is crazy, and that the image they have will never change. We allow men to marry each other, which is good, but to them, it's crazy and they will always think so (interview with a 56-year-old male, Rotterdam, 10 March 2017).

PVV supporters' responses reveal that the main concern is not the refugees, but the migrants and their descendants. The main problem remains the same in a way – Muslim-origin migrants and their descendants, who 'do not integrate', and who construct their parallel communities. The same interlocutor continued to blame the descendants of Turkish and Moroccan migrants, who have recently become outspoken in the public space with an attitude towards their Dutch 'hosts' very different from that of their parents and grandparents:

The young Turks are even worse. While their parents or grandparents were grateful that they could come and live here in the Netherlands, they had some respect for us, the young generation doesn't have this anymore, and they don't integrate. It [integration]'s not only failed, it's even "control", there is no assimilation, but segregation, or polarization. It's unbelievable (interview with a 56-year-old male, Rotterdam, 10 March 2017).

It was often implied by the interlocutors that immigration is an inevitable outcome of the processes of globalization, about which they are very critical. The experience of immigration is differentiated from the experience of refugees in the sense that the former is a permanent action, and the latter is temporary. The experience of immigration is resented by the interlocutors in terms of its economic and cultural consequences. Economically speaking, immigrants are believed to be exploiting the welfare state regime. Culturally speaking, they are mostly associated with Islam, which is believed to be in opposition to their national values. A 49-year-old male supporter of the AfD in Dresden refers to the relevance of immigration to globalization as follows:

"The AfD is standing for strengthening our national interests. Therefore, we are ending this craze for globalisation. Immigration to Germany and in general to Europe needs to be limited. The AfD argues that more German interests should be at the centre of politics, not the interests of the other nation-states. Exactly, it should be the way it is in the United

States nowadays. There they are focusing on their national interests and that is legitimate” (interview with a 49-year-old male worker in Dresden, 10 April 2017).

Europe’s far-right parties rejoiced at Donald Trump’s win at the American elections held on 8 November 2016 and the UK’s vote to leave the EU, hailing both as a victory for their anti-immigration, anti-EU and anti-Islam stances and vowing to push for similar results in countries such as France, the Netherlands, Denmark, Hungary, Germany, and Sweden. The European public is not different from the rest of the world in the sense that it is also becoming more and more polarized between various Manichean understandings of the world as in the antagonist dichotomies of "us/them", "pure people/corrupt elite", "privileged/underprivileged", which are interpellated and hailed by populist discourse.

Socio-economic, Political, and Cultural Drivers of Right-Wing Populism in Europe

There are several different drivers to be taken into consideration to explain the sources of the populist resurgence in contemporary Europe such as the growing popular distrust in the mainstream institutions, political parties, and media, the flourishing popularity of social media, increasing social-economic and political inequalities, youth unemployment, growing culturalist and civilisational rhetoric, massive migration and refugee flows across Europe and global financial crisis. Some of these factors are related to the rise of unemployment, poverty, inequality, injustice, the growing gap between citizens and politics, and the current climate of political disenchantment. For instance, in the spring of 2014, youth unemployment in Greece was 62.5 per cent, in Spain 56.4 per cent, in Portugal, 42.5 per cent, and in Italy 40.5 per cent.²⁴ As for the Central and Eastern European countries, one should also be reminded that the collapse of the USSR has allowed long-suppressed national aspirations to find their outlet in ethno-nationalist extreme right-wing political parties and movements. JOBBIK Party in Hungary is a good example, which has been built upon such ethno-nationalist inspirations.²⁵ From the 1980s onwards, the introduction of neo-liberal policies has contributed to social and economic insecurity.²⁶ These policies implied that individuals were expected to take care of themselves within the framework of existing free market conditions. This has led to the fragmentation of society into a multitude of cultural, religious, and ethnic communities in which individuals

sought refuge. In turn, ruling elites, which include vote-seeking political parties, exploited these basic needs for protection by adopting discriminatory discourses and stigmatising the ‘others’.²⁷

The rhetoric of a “clash of civilizations” also seems to be legitimizing right-wing populist politicians, who claim the impossibility of peaceful coexistence between ethno-culturally and religiously different groups.²⁸ What is mainly a social and political problem is often reduced to a cultural and religious clash in a way that disrupts peace and social cohesion.²⁹ The growing popularity of this type of rhetoric has deepened existing ethno-cultural and religious boundaries between groups. As a result, the universal nature of human rights is being replaced by alternative views, which use culture, ethnicity, religion, and civilization as markers to define and stigmatize those with a different ethno-cultural and religious background.

The right-wing populist parties and movements often exploit the issue of migration and portray it as a threat to the welfare and the social, cultural, and even ethnic features of a nation. Populist leaders tend to blame a soft approach to migration for some of the major problems in society such as unemployment, violence, crime, insecurity, drug trafficking, and human trafficking. This tendency is reinforced by the use of racist, xenophobic, and demeaning rhetoric. The use of words such as ‘influx’, ‘invasion’, ‘flood’, and ‘intrusion’ while explaining the current state of migration are just a few examples. Public figures like Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, Heinz-Christian Strache in Austria, and others have spoken of a “foreign infiltration” of immigrants, especially Muslims, in their countries. Geert Wilders even predicted the coming of *Eurabia*, a mythological future continent that will replace modern Europe³⁰ where children from Norway to Naples will have to learn to recite the Quran at school, while their mothers stay at home wearing *burqas*. Some populist political party leaders such as Éric Zemmour, Marine Le Pen, Thierry Baudet, Alexander Gauland, and Viktor Orbán even talk about the “Great Replacement” conspiracy in Europe. Referring to the growing visibility of Muslims in the European space, some right-wing populist leaders effectively deploy the fear of Islam as a great danger in the foreseeable future. Referring to a white supremacist slogan coined by a right-wing French writer, Renaud Camus, such right-wing populist leaders simply want to make their followers believe that a global elite is actively replacing Europe’s white population with people of color from non-European countries.³¹

Diversity has become one of the challenges perceived by a remarkable part of the European public as a threat to the social, cultural, religious, and economic security of the European nations. Initially, the idea of multiculturalism involved conciliation, tolerance, respect, interdependence, and universalism, and it was expected to bring about an “inter-cultural society”. Over time, it began to be perceived as a way of institutionalizing difference through autonomous cultural discourses. The debate on the end of multiculturalism has existed in Europe for a long time. It seems that the declaration of the ‘failure of multiculturalism’ has become a catchphrase of not only the right-wing populist parties but also of centrist political parties all across the continent.³² In 2010 and 2011, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, UK Prime Minister David Cameron, and French President Nicolas Sarkozy heavily ‘bashed’ multiculturalism for the wrong reasons.³³ Similarly, Geert Wilders, the leader of the Freedom Party in the Netherlands, made no apologies for arguing that “[we, Christians] should be proud that our culture is better than Islamic culture” (Der Spiegel, 11 September 2011). Populism blames multiculturalism for denationalizing one’s nation and decoding one’s people. Anton Pelinka explains very well how populism simplifies the complex realities of a globalized world by looking for a scapegoat:

“As the enemy – the foreigner, the foreign culture- has already succeeded in breaking into the fortress of the nation-state, someone must be responsible. The elites are the secondary ‘defining others’, responsible for the liberal democratic policies of accepting cultural diversity. The populist answer to the complexities of a more and more pluralistic society is not multiculturalism... Right-wing populism sees multiculturalism as a recipe to denationalize one’s nation, to deconstruct one’s people.”³⁴

For the right-wing populist crowds, the answer must be easy. They need to have some scapegoats to blame in the first place. The scapegoat could be the Others, foreigners, Jews, Roma, Muslims, sometimes the Eurocrats, and sometimes the non-governmental organisations. Populist rhetoric certainly pays off for those politicians who engage in it. For instance, Thilo Sarrazin was perceived in Germany as a folk hero (*Volksheld*) on several right-wing populist websites that strongly refer to his ideas and statements after his polemical book *Deutschland schafft sich ab: Wie wir unser Land aufs Spiel setzen* (German Does Away with Itself: How We Gambled with Our Country, 2010), which was published in 2010. *Die Freiheit* even tried to involve Sarrazin in their election campaign in Berlin and stated *Wählen gehen für Thilos Thesen* (Go and vote for

Thilo's statements) using a crossed-out mosque as a logo.³⁵ Neo-fascist groups like the right-wing extremist party National Democratic Party (NPD) have also celebrated the author. They stated that Sarrazin's ideas about immigration were in line with the NPD's programme and that he made their ideas even more popular and strong, as he belonged to an established social democratic party.

The NPD is no longer popular in Germany, but the *AfD* has replaced it with its extreme right-wing populist agenda. One of our interlocutors in Dresden explicitly repeated Sarrazin's line when asked about his perspective on migration in general:

“One should differentiate between *good* and *bad* immigration. It is scientifically proven: What we have in Germany now, is possibly the worst kind of immigration. If you want immigration to help the country and its economy, you need a kind of immigration, where the average IQ of immigrants is higher than the average IQ of natives. Unfortunately, we have that kind of immigration, where the average IQ of asylum seekers is much lower than the average IQ of Germans. Besides, the gender gap has devastating effects. This is something we have to discuss in public! Unfortunately, our society is too politically correct, and the *AfD* is the only power to change that. The direct expenses of the federal government are estimated to be around 23 billion Euros, the indirect expenses are around 50 billion Euros. And we also have to talk about the costs of the federal states! How does it relate to 17 billion Euros spent on research and education?” (a 40-year-old male lawyer interviewed in Dresden, 2 April 2017).

It seems that contemporary populism has made another term very popular nowadays, i.e., *nativism*. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, nativism is prejudice in favor of natives against strangers. Today, nativism means a policy that protects and promotes the interests of indigenous, or established inhabitants over those of immigrants. This usage has recently found favor among Brexiters, Trumpists, Le Penists, and other right-wing populist groups, who seem to be anxious to distance themselves from accusations of racism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia. Nativism sounds more neutral and conceals all the negative connotations of race, racism, Islamophobia, and immigration.³⁶ Hence, the nativist European populism is now claiming to set the true, organic, rooted, and local people against the cosmopolitan, globalizing individuals and elites denouncing the political system's betrayal of ethnocultural and territorial identities.³⁷

Conclusion

The purpose of this essay has been to address the relevance of the migrants and refugees in Europe to the growing right-wing populist trend. It is often presumed that the affiliates of such populist parties are political protestors, single-issue voters, “losers of globalization”, “Fascists”, “neo-Nazis”, or ethnic-nationalists. It is also often the case that the analyses of the right-wing populist parties and their voters are not differentiated. Both levels of analyses often overlap in the literature, and both actors (parties and voters) are framed in identical ways as if they are both anti-democratic, “Fascists”, and “neo-Nazis”. This essay was not about the organized right-wing populist parties; it was rather about their voters. The picture seems to be more complex than it is often assumed.

Populist party voters often come from remote, rural, and mountainous places in Europe, which “do not matter” anymore for the political center. Those voters are dissatisfied with and distrustful of mainstream elites, and most importantly they are hostile to immigration and rising ethno-cultural and religious diversity. It is often the case that the people who are furthest away from migrant centers are the most concerned with migrants. They mostly suffer from ongoing processes of deindustrialization, regional disparities, demographic decline, an ageing population, and the disconnect between the center and the periphery. While these citizens feel economically insecure, their hostility springs mainly from their belief that immigrants are threatening their national culture, social security, community, and way of life. They are perceived by the followers of the populist parties as a security challenge threatening the social, political, cultural, and economic unity and homogeneity of their nation. The main concern of these citizens is not only the ongoing immigration and the refugee crisis, they are also profoundly anxious about a minority group that is already settled in Europe: the Muslims. Anti-Muslim sentiments have become an important driver of support for right-wing populist parties and movements. This means that appealing only to concerns over immigration such as calling for immigration numbers to be reduced or border controls to be tightened, is not enough. The root causes of such fears have been explained in the essay concerning the interviews conducted with the supporters of right-wing populist parties in Germany, France, Italy, Greece, and the Netherlands.

It was also argued that the supremacy of cultural–religious discourse in the West is likely to frame many of the social, political, and economic conflicts within the range of societies’

religious differences. Many of the ills faced by migrants and their descendants, such as poverty, exclusion, unemployment, illiteracy, lack of political participation, and unwillingness to integrate, are attributed to their Islamic background, believed stereotypically to clash with Western liberal and secular norms and values. Accordingly, this essay has just argued that “Islamophobia” is a key ideological form in which social and political contradictions of the neoliberal age are dealt with and that this form of culturalization is embedded in migration-related inequalities as well as geopolitical orders.³⁸ The culturalization of political, social, and economic conflicts has become a popular sport in a way that explains all sorts of structural problems through civilizational, cultural, ethnic, and religious factors – a simple way of knowing what is going on in the World for the individuals appealed to the populist rhetoric. As Roger Brubaker stated earlier, the growing tide of Islamophobia is making European citizens culturally more Christian.³⁹

Notes

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- ¹ Rodrigues-Pose, “The revenge of the places that don’t matter”.
- ² Kalb, “Headlines of Nation, Subtexts of Class”.
- ³ For more detail about the research see <https://research.ncl.ac.uk/cohere/> (Grant Agreement No. 693289).
- ⁴ Islam-phob-ism project is a project on youth radicalization in Europe funded by the European Research Council and led by the author between 2019 and 2014 (Grant Agreement No. 785934, <https://bpy.bilgi.edu.tr>). Pledge (Politics of Grievance and Democratic Governance) is a Horizon Europe project conducted between 2024 and 2027 (Grant Agreement No. 101132560, <https://pledgeproject.eu>). The author led the Work Package 1 (the state of the art) in this project.
- ⁵ Shils, *The Torment of Secrecy*
- ⁶ Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist”; and Mudde, *On Extremism and Democracy in Europe*.
- ⁷ Weyland, “Clarifying a contested Concept”; Barr, “Populists, Outsiders and Anti-Establishment Politics”.
- ⁸ Wodak, *The Politics of Fear*.
- ⁹ Laclau, *On Populist Reason*.
- ¹⁰ Wrosley, “The Concept of Populism,” 247.
- ¹¹ Worsley, *The Third World*.
- ¹² Taguieff, “Political Science Confronts Populism”; Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Communism*.
- ¹³ Taggart, *Populism*
- ¹⁴ Wodak, *The Politics of Fear*, 2.
- ¹⁵ Kaya, *Populism and Heritage in Europe*.
- ¹⁶ Path dependence is based on the idea that if the historical development at one point in time goes in a specific direction, this will affect subsequent developments. Once a path has been chosen, it is difficult and costly to change course. See North, *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance*; and Putnam, *Making Democracy Work*.
- ¹⁷ Kalb, “Headlines of Nation, Subtexts of Class,” 14.
- ¹⁸ Rodrigues-Pose, “The revenge of the places,” 196-198.
- ¹⁹ Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist”; and Kaya, *Populism and Heritage in Europe*.
- ²⁰ Rydgren, “Immigration Sceptics, Xenophobes or Racists,” 740.
- ²¹ Goodwin, *Right Response*, 10
- ²² Kaya, *Populism and Heritage in Europe*.
- ²³ Kaya, “Islamophobia as an Ideology in the West”.
- ²⁴ See <http://www.statista.com/statistics/266228/youth-unemployment-rate-in-eu-countries/> accessed on 10 January 2025.
- ²⁵ Dettke, “Hungary’s Jobbik Party”.
- ²⁶ Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist”.
- ²⁷ Rose, *Powers of Freedom*.
- ²⁸ Kaya, “Backlash of Multiculturalism”.
- ²⁹ Brown, *Regulating Aversion*.
- ³⁰ Ye’or, *Eurabia*; Vossen, “Populism in the Netherlands after Fortuyn”; Vossen, “Classifying Wilders”.
- ³¹ Camus, *Le Grand Remplacement*; and Camus, *You Will not Replace Us!*.
- ³² Kaya, “Migration debates in Europe”; Kaya, *Populism and Heritage in Europe*.
- ³³ Kaya, “Backlash of Multiculturalism”.
- ³⁴ Pelinka, “Right-Wing Populism”, 8.
- ³⁵ See <http://www.morgenpost.de/politik/inland/article105070241/Pro-Deutschland-ueberklebt-Sarrazin-Plakate.html> accessed on 5 January 2025.
- ³⁶ Jack, “We called it racism, now it’s nativism.”
- ³⁷ Filc, “Latin American inclusive and European exclusionary populism”, 274.
- ³⁸ Dirlik, “Global Modernity”.
- ³⁹ Brubaker, “Between nationalism and civilization”.

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