

Facultat de Ciències Polítiques i Sociologia

Bachelor's Thesis

Executive Summary

**Shaping While Not in Government:
How Populist Radical-Right Parties Indirectly Change
the External Dimension of Migration Policies**

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Right-wing populism is on the rise. As of mid-2023, the largest populist radical-right parties in most EU member states had acquired representation in their national parliaments; 24 had at least one seat occupied by a radical-right populist. Some of these parties have even joined government coalitions, while others have gone further by assuming leadership roles, such as Italy's right-wing Prime Minister, Giorgia Meloni (The PopuList, 2023). All things considered; populism has become a primary topic on the agenda of many political debates, which has led to an increase in the study of this phenomenon.

Radical-right populists in Western Europe are characterized by their emphasis on the demographic and cultural shifts currently unfolding across the continent. They politicize migration by instilling fear around migrants, perpetuating a climate of hostility (Van der Brug et al., 2015), specifically targeting migrants with Islamic backgrounds, and often expressing racist and xenophobic sentiments towards them (Berntzen, 2019). So, it comes as no surprise that once populist radical-right parties make it to the executive power, they restrict their respective migration policies. While there are some academic studies on the direct impact of right-wing populists on migration policies, many authors point out that their influence outside formal governmental structures remains a topic requiring deeper exploration (Akkerman, 2018; Bergmann et al., 2021; Destradi et al., 2022; Kaya, 2023; Van Beijsterveldt 2018).

The main aim of this study has been to look beyond the electoral results, analyzing precisely the indirect impact of populist radical-right parties on migration policies. Based on previous investigation, this paper has put forward two hypotheses: 1) By politicizing migration, populist radical-right parties exert an indirect impact over parties in office, who consequently change the external dimension of migration policies. And 2) Center-right-oriented governments are more likely to be influenced by populists' politicization, leading to a higher level of intensity in their changes to the external dimension of migration policies.

Through a comparative approach, the paper has studied four populist radical-right parties and their corresponding governments in Western Europe: the PVV in the Netherlands and AfD in Germany, led by center-right governments, and

VOX in Spain and Chega! in Portugal, led by center-left governments. The first part of the study introduced a theoretical framework, displaying the scholarly definitions of populism, radical-right populism, and the external dimension of foreign policy. Subsequently, it explored the concepts of the politicization of migration, the study of change in foreign policy, and the indirect impact. The second part examined the four case studies individually. First, the analysis presented data on the politicization of migration by each country's populist radical-right party, supported by examples from public interviews, social media posts, and electoral campaigns. Then, the paper assessed whether there have been any alterations in the external dimension of migration policies - from the moment populists gain electoral recognition. Finally, the paper evaluated the intensity of that policy change.

Across the analyzed cases, the findings concluded that all four populist radical-right parties had effectively politicized migration after entering their national parliaments. A common characteristic among them was the language used to reference migrants, such as an "Islamic Invasion" (Bahceli, 2015), and talking about "The Great Replacement Conspiracy Theory" (Euronews, 2023). This politicization of migration shaped the political discourse, setting the political agenda, and compelling mainstream parties in each country to address these concerns.

All four countries showed to be impacted by populist discourse, an influence that was most apparent as the parties in office all changed their migration policies. However, the intensity of this change in the external dimension of migration policies varied across each case. The Netherlands government underwent significant changes in its migration policy - implementing measures to restrict asylum seekers and boasting one of Europe's toughest migration policies (Meijer and Deutsch, 2023). The degree of intensity of the Netherlands' policy change was 'reorientation', as it indicated a rethink of the country's stance on migration. The paper found Portugal's level of change to be 'adjustment', a pragmatic approach to addressing emerging issues while maintaining continuity with existing policy objectives; Spain and Germany witnessed minor adjustments, indicating a perceived but relatively discreet 'adaptation'. So, the analysis revealed that the

degree of intensity does adhere to an ideological pattern; center-right parties in government are more likely to implement more restrictive migration policies.

The paper aimed to challenge the widespread misconception that political parties wield influence exclusively while in governmental roles. Instead, it illustrates the capacity of populist radical-right parties to shape policy agendas and discourse even from outside the governmental sphere. Parties in office, characterized by their varying ideologies, have been influenced by populist radical-right parties and have subsequently adjusted migration policies in diverse intensities. This acknowledgment underscores the importance of recognizing and addressing the potential impact of populist radical-right ideologies on policymaking and societal norms, regardless of their formal political power.

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