



# The rise of populist radical right parties in Europe

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## Abstract

After World War II, radical right parties in Europe experienced a decline, but over the last three decades, they have regained strength, becoming significant players in European politics. Since the early twenty-first century, they have secured representation at various levels, from local governments to national parliaments and the European Parliament. Nowadays, populist radical right parties rank among the top three most powerful political forces in one-third of European countries. In Austria, the FPÖ (*Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs*) emerged as the leading party in the 2024 elections, winning 28.9% of the vote. In Italy, the Fratelli d'Italia coalition came to power with 25.99% of the vote in 2022. In Hungary, Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party won its fourth consecutive election. In France, Marine Le Pen's National Rally (RN – *Rassemblement National*) achieved major victories in both the European Parliament and national elections, becoming the country's largest party. Though initially considered marginal, populist radical right parties have become a lasting and serious force in European politics. This special issue features six carefully selected articles, each offering empirical and theoretical insights into different aspects of the rise of radical right and right-wing populist parties in Europe, contributing to a broader understanding of this phenomenon.

## Keywords

Far-right, nativist, populism, populist radical right, radical right, anti-immigrant

## Introduction

At the end of World War II, Europe was in turmoil, a culmination of conflict, misrepresentation, and hatred (Kalijarvi, 1963). In response to the devastation of the war and the loss of significant portions of their populations, some European countries – France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg – formed the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in 1951. Their aim was to prevent such suffering and destruction from happening again and to establish lasting peace on the continent. In 1957, the six founding members of the ECSC established the European Economic Community (EEC) and the European Atomic Energy Community (EAEC or Euratom), which merged into the European Communities in 1967. Learning from the suffering caused by war, Europeans moved towards an era of prosperity marked by the development of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law after World War II (Aktaş, 2024). The European Communities expanded over time, and in 1993, they evolved into the

European Union (EU), which today, with 27 member states and a population of approximately 449 million (Eurostat, 2024), is a unique regional power.

However, the process of learning from the destruction of war did not last long. Even while witnesses of World War II were still alive, the horrors and suffering caused by war were forgotten. Nationalism – one of the main factors that drove the world into war (Kalijarvi, 1963) – was reborn in various forms, including xenophobic sentiments such as anti-immigrant attitudes, and far-right ideologies. After the Nazis were defeated in World War II, far-right parties in Europe declined and lost their social base. But in the last quarter of the century, these parties began to regroup and re-emerge on the political stage. Populist radical right parties have been a permanent feature of Western European politics since the 1980s (Arzheimer and Berning, 2019), and there has been an increase in both the number and electoral success of these parties since the 1990s (Aktas, 2014; Stockemer et al., 2018: 569). From the beginning of the twenty-first century, populist radical right parties spread like wildfire and became key political players in many European countries, gaining representation in local governments, national parliaments, and the European Parliament. These populist radical right parties, nowadays using rhetoric and methods different from those of the twentieth century, have largely become mainstream and normalized (Mondon and Winter, 2020; Mudde, 2024).

Today, populist radical right parties rank among the top three political parties in a third of European countries. They have achieved significant success in regional and national elections, especially in countries such as Austria, Italy, the Netherlands, Hungary, Poland, France, and Germany. For example, in Austria's general election on September 29, 2024, the populist radical right Freedom Party of Austria (*Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs – FPÖ*) won a historic victory, becoming the largest party. The FPÖ gained 28.9% of the vote, their best result ever in a federal election. Austria's 2024 federal election delivered a historic result for the FPÖ, driven by voter frustration with inflation, migration, and the government's handling of numerous issues (Zeglowits and Oppenauer, 2024). FPÖ's win was hailed by hard-right parties across Europe, where radical right movements have made gains in countries including the Netherlands, France, and Germany. That growing support could deepen divisions within the EU, especially on issues like the defence of Ukraine against Russia (Murphy and Graham, 2024).

In Italy, the right-wing coalition led by the Brothers of Italy (*Fratelli d'Italia – FdI*) party came to power in the September 2022 parliamentary elections, winning 25.99% of the vote. Founded in 2012, FdI became Italy's leading political party within a decade, with roots tracing back to the Italian Social Movement (MSI), born from the ashes of Mussolini's fascism (Lowen, 2022). Many researchers, such as Baldini et al. (2022), Piccolino and Puleo (2023), and Vampa (2023), classify FdI as a populist radical right party. Others describe it as a 'national-conservative' party (Puleo et al., 2024). Italy is also home to two other populist parties, which together garnered nearly a quarter of the vote. The Five Star Movement (M5S), led by Giuseppe Conte, secured 15.43% of the vote, while another populist party, the League (Lega), led by Matteo Salvini, won 8.77% (Voce and Clarke, 2022).

In Hungary, right-wing populist Prime Minister Viktor Mihály Orbán, leader of the Fidesz Party, won his fourth consecutive election in April 2022 with 53.7% of the vote, extending his hold on power. After his victory in 2010, Orbán changed the rules of the

game, reshaping the system to suit his needs and effectively turning Hungary from a democracy into an autocracy (Scheppelle, 2022). Likewise, in Poland, the right-wing populist Law and Justice Party (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* – PiS for short) came to power in 2015 and dominated headlines with its anti-EU policies for about eight years. Despite Poland's history of positive democratic conditions –such as per capita economic growth, moderate inequality, rising wages, strong support for democracy, high levels of happiness, and a proportional parliamentary system– the country's democratic backsliding since PiS took power in 2015 has been seen as a surprising example of decline (Tworzecki, 2019).

In France, Marine Le Pen's National Rally (*Rassemblement National* – RN) has captured more than a third of the vote in the last two elections, becoming the country's largest political party. Le Pen garnered 34.32% of the vote in the 2017 presidential election and 33% in 2022. In the 2024 European Parliament elections, RN, led by Le Pen and Jordan Bardella, secured twice as many votes as President Emmanuel Macron's party, finishing first. The RN increased its number of seats in the European Parliament from 18 in 2019 to 30 in 2024, making it the largest group (Toussaint, 2024).

Even in Germany, the populist radical right party *Alternative for Germany* (AfD) won 15.89% of the vote in the European Parliament elections on 9 June 2024. The AfD set a new record in the state elections on 1 September 2024, winning 32.8% of the vote in Thuringia, becoming the leading party there, and securing 30.6% of the vote in Saxony, where it came second (Akal, 2024). This marked the first time since World War II that the radical right had won a state election in Germany. Founded in 2013 in response to the Eurozone financial crisis and EU policies, the AfD shifted to an anti-immigration platform during the 2015 refugee crisis, broadening its appeal (Arzheimer and Berning, 2019).

Initially, populist radical right political parties were dismissed as marginal, temporary reactions from voters, but their rapid spread across the continent, sustained voter base, and increasing institutionalization indicate that they are not a transient phenomenon, but a serious issue that demands more attention. The AfD, once seen as a party attracting protest votes, is now viewed as a credible choice by its supporters. Polls suggest that voters find the AfD's policies convincing and are consciously voting for the party. According to a survey by *Infratest Dimap*, 52% of AfD voters in Thuringia said they chose the party because they were 'convinced' by its platform. In addition, 87% of AfD voters stated that as long as the party addressed the right issues, they did not care about its radical right tendencies, and 97% agreed with the party's stance on limiting immigration and refugee entry into Germany. Polls also revealed that the AfD received the most support from the 18–24 age group, with 38% of young voters backing the party – an increase of 15% compared with the 2019 elections (Akal, 2024).

These developments highlight the grave consequences of Western democracies remaining silent in the face of the rise of radical right and populist political movements. Experts such as Mudde (2019, 2024), and Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) warn that the normalization of radical right ideology poses a serious threat to the future of democracy. The manipulative tactics and growing success of radical right parties are eroding trust and solidarity within European democracies (Larsen, 2023). Foster and Feldman (2021) argue that the populist radical right should not be seen as a temporary phenomenon

responding to specific political events, but as a fluid, adaptable, and heterogeneous group of parties and narratives. Their strategies and appeal make them a significant force that will continue to shape politics in the future.

Following the electoral success of the populist radical right, Germany began implementing temporary border controls with its EU member neighbours on 16 September 2024, citing demands for anti-immigration measures and increased security. In its notification to the European Commission, Germany highlighted the need to limit irregular migration and address current threats posed by Islamist terrorism and cross-border crime, emphasizing the protection of internal security (DW, 2024). These actions, which challenge the spirit of the Schengen Agreement that forms the backbone of the EU, have sparked concerns that similar measures might be adopted by other EU countries, potentially becoming permanent and influencing the future of the EU. As Kalijarvi noted, 'the greatest divisive force is nationalism. It encapsulates all other elements and turns them into a single attitude or power' (Kalijarvi, 1963). But how and why have populist radical right parties managed to strengthen so much, from Austria to Italy, the Netherlands to Hungary, and from France to Germany?

## **Reasons**

As Hainsworth (2008: 128) highlights, the factors behind the rise and success of the populist radical right are diverse and intricate. There is no straightforward, fast, or universal explanation for the emergence and growth of radical right movements. First of all, we are facing a significant transformation in which the classic industrial society is disintegrating, and the models of integration between modernity and the nation are losing their strength (Wieviorka, 1995). On one hand, Europe has faced significant challenges such as economic crises, technological advancements, and social upheavals brought about by the information society. On the other hand, the rising strength of radical right and right-wing populist parties has become a growing concern for European democracy (Larsen, 2023; Mouffe, 2002; Mudde, 2019).

One of the main reasons for the rise of radical right movements and parties in Europe is the public's frustration with mainstream political parties' responses to economic, social, political and security problems. The financial crises that began in 2008 further deepened these issues. By 2010, Europe was experiencing serious setbacks. European leaders, in defending their policies, often employed rhetoric emphasizing failure. For example, in 2010, Angela Merkel sought support for bailout measures aimed at resolving the crises in Greece and Southern Europe by stating, 'If the Eurozone fails, Europe fails' (BBC, 2011). Despite this, the fear of failure did little to calm the German public, who voiced their opposition, saying, 'You have no right to use our taxes to save the Greeks' (Vergin, 2011). Similarly, in 2014, European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker presented his Commission as the EU's 'last chance' (Bouillaud, 2017). Populist radical right parties used these perceived failures as propaganda, thereby increasing their public support.

In addition to economic crises, the influx of immigrants and refugees exacerbated unemployment concerns, with populist radical right parties claiming only they could solve these problems. Terror attacks in European cities, alongside the fear and security

concerns they generated, compounded the issue, creating a vicious cycle. The terrorist attacks in cities like Paris, Brussels, and London, and the 2015 refugee crisis, further fuelled anti-immigration sentiment across Europe. The inability of European leaders to offer solutions to these issues led to divisions, with 2016 being described as a ‘terrible year’ for the EU (Dempsey, 2016). The 2015 refugee crisis significantly impacted the outcome of the Brexit referendum (Garrett, 2019). Following the 2015 and 2016 Paris terrorist attacks, fears that Islamist terrorists would exploit refugee routes sparked both anti-refugee sentiment and a rise in populist nationalism and extremism in the context of Brexit, as well as growing Islamophobia in the wake of terrorist attacks in the United Kingdom (Abbas, 2020). These developments pose serious threats not only to EU institutions but also to the future of European unity and coherence. For the first time since World War II, radical right and populist movements have gained the power to shape Europe’s destiny (Balfour, 2017: 61).

Furthermore, populist radical right parties, using eclectic methods to simplify complex problems, have masked the multifaceted nature of these issues, suggesting that democratic debate and compromise are unnecessary. By downplaying social differences and polarizing society into ‘us’ versus ‘them’, these parties weaken democracy and encourage authoritarian governance. They present a binary narrative of the ‘pure people’ versus the ‘corrupt elite’, undermining democratic systems and eroding the rule of law by portraying legislative and judicial bodies as obstacles to the expression of popular sovereignty. These parties champion the supremacy of the executive, thereby weakening the principle of separation of powers (Taşkın, 2015: 242).

Understanding the causes behind the rise of populist radical right movements, which increasingly threaten democracy, peace, and stability in Europe, is of paramount importance. Despite an extensive body of literature on the subject, there remain unexplored dimensions and areas that require further analysis. The aim of this special issue of the *International Sociology* is to shed light on the overlooked aspects of radical right and right-wing populist parties in Europe and contribute to the academic discourse by addressing these blind spots.

### *Conceptual background and terminology*

The rise of the populist radical right parties in Europe has become a central topic not only in academic and political discussions but also in social and cultural analyses in recent years. The radical right is typically associated with ideologies rooted in extreme nationalism, nativism, authoritarianism, and often an ethnic or cultural identity (Mudde, 2004). However, the nature, classifications, and definitions of these political movements vary across numerous studies and publications, revealing differing approaches. While some definitions are flexible and ambiguous, others are contradictory, leading to terminology issues surrounding radical right parties. Some researchers’ careless approach to naming, or their tendency to use different terms interchangeably without clear definitions, further complicates the discourse. It is not uncommon to see an author use multiple terms for the same party or group of parties within a single article (Mudde, 2007: 35).

These parties are often labelled as ‘fascist’, ‘neo-fascist’, ‘neo-Nazi’, ‘radical right’, ‘far-right’, ‘extreme right’, ‘nativist’, ‘populist’, ‘right-wing populist’, ‘populist radical

right', 'nationalist populist', 'racist', 'anti-immigrant', 'anti-foreigner', 'anti-establishment', or 'Eurosceptic'. The popularity of certain terms fluctuates with the political climate. For instance, 'populist', 'populist radical right', or 'right-wing populist' is currently among the most commonly used terms for these political parties and movements. This tendency not only complicates the proper understanding of the subject but may also contribute to the normalization and legitimization of these political movements (Uzunçayır, 2017: 365). When a party labelled as 'far-right', 'radical right', or 'neo-Nazi' by one author is described as merely 'populist' by another, some readers may begin to view the far-right or radical right as simply another populist party, inadvertently aiding its normalization. It is therefore understandable to use terms such as 'far-right' and 'radical right' or 'far-right populist' and 'populist radical right' interchangeably, but it is dangerous to use only the term populist for these parties.

A wealth of research has been published to understand the ideological foundations, voter appeal, and impact of these movements on democratic processes. Studies show that populist radical right parties in Europe derive much of their success from their ability to mobilize around both populist and anti-immigrant, nativist sentiments (Abbas, 2020; Garrett, 2019). Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser classify these parties as 'nativist populist radical right' parties (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017: 35; Betz, 2017: 335).

Mudde's (2004) inspiring work on populist radical right parties provides a framework for understanding these movements by identifying three core ideological features: nativism, authoritarianism, and populism. Nativism refers to the belief that the state should be governed solely by members of the native group and that non-natives pose a fundamental threat to the homogeneity of the nation-state. Newth (2021) interprets nativism as a racist and xenophobic discourse centred around an exclusive vision of the nation. The author confirms that this discourse constructs the 'non-native', 'foreigner', or even 'non-integrated fellow citizen' in opposition to the 'native people' along antagonistic and horizontal lines. This discourse operates on a racist logic of 'us' versus 'them', portraying immigration as a threat to the nation and emphasizing the need to halt the perceived danger of invasion. Here, the 'us' is positioned as 'civilized', while the 'others' are deemed 'barbaric'.

Populism, as a strategy to mobilize citizens, comes into play by dividing society and fostering antagonism. The conceptual ambiguity surrounding populism in contemporary usage has led to an increase in scholarly research on the term (Andreu and Simonelli, 2022; Dowling, 2023; Moffitt, 2020). Despite this, Cas Mudde's (2004) study of populist radical right parties and his definition of populism remain widely cited and supported in the literature (Dowling, 2023; Huber et al., 2017). According to Mudde (2004), populism can be understood as a thin-centred ideology that divides society into two antagonistic groups. However, whether populism is indeed an ideology is still a matter of debate. Populism frames society as divided into two homogeneous and opposing camps: the 'pure people' and the 'corrupt elite'. It argues that politics should express the general will of the people, which often leads to a rejection of pluralism (Mudde, 2004).

Laclau (2005) defines populism as a political strategy that divides society into two antagonistic groups: the 'pure people' and the 'corrupt elites'. Populism, in this sense, centres on the unfulfilled demands of the people and acts as a mode of politics that seeks

to prioritize the interests of the public. From this perspective, populist politics reveals the fragmented nature of society and draws out the antagonistic dimension of conflict, positioning the demands of the people against the elites through a discursive strategy. For this reason, Laclau (2005) emphasizes that populism lacks ideological coherence.

Müller (2016) adds that populism is not just anti-elite but also anti-pluralist. Populist leaders claim to represent the 'real people' and label their opponents as illegitimate or traitorous. These definitions highlight populism's tendency to challenge established democratic norms and institutions. Populists often attempt to bypass institutional checks and balances in the name of representing the will of the people. This is where authoritarianism presents significant opportunities. Authoritarianism typically reflects a preference for order and authority, often upheld by a strong leader or centralized control. Populism undermines liberal democratic norms and fuels authoritarian tendencies. For instance, Mounk (2018) warns that populists, upon gaining power, often dismantle democratic institutions and establish authoritarian governance structures that prioritize the leader's agenda over the rule of law.

## **General assessment of the articles**

Each article in this special issue addresses a specific aspect of the rise of radical right and right-wing populism in Europe, contributing empirical and theoretical insights to a broader understanding of this phenomenon. From exploring the factors triggering support for authoritarian populism in Europe to examining the cultural foundations of radicalization, these contributions reveal the multidimensional nature of populist radical right parties. They also emphasize the importance of contextual factors, such as religion, identity, and attitudes towards democracy, in shaping the appeal of these movements.

## **What drives support for authoritarian populist parties?**

The first article, titled 'What Drives Support for Authoritarian Populist Parties in Eastern and Central Europe?' is authored by Pamela Irving Jackson and Peter Doerschler. This article examines the role of religion and welfare chauvinism in support for authoritarian populist parties, focusing on nine Eastern and Central European countries (Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovenia, and Slovakia). The article considers the differences between these countries in terms of the triggers for support for radical right parties, analysing each state individually. It underscores the urgency of understanding the nature of support for authoritarian populist parties in Eastern and Central European states, as these countries have only recently met the rule of law and other democratic criteria for membership in the EU, and once accepted, each state's adherence to these standards is influenced by various factors.

Although populist radical right parties had multiple paths to success, the article finds that religion played a role in promoting illiberalism. Given that authoritarian populist parties, which combine exclusionary anti-immigrant and anti-diversity rhetoric with generous social benefits for citizens, can appeal beyond regional historical and political contexts, the significance of religiosity in these findings warrants deeper exploration. In certain states, autocratic leaders capitalized on Church backing for traditional values,

social welfare payments to families, and tax breaks to win elections and steer both party structures and civil society away from institutions like an independent judiciary and a free press that might reveal corruption. It is plausible that authoritarian populism, bolstered by ethno-nationalism and social welfare incentives, could grow in scope, influence, and stability, threatening the EU and becoming a symbol of intolerance.

## **Modern barbarism and radicalism**

The second article, 'Barbarism and Modernity in S.N. Eisenstadt's Theory: Toward a Cultural Sociology of Radicalism', is written by Andrea Maccarini. This article presents a conceptual framework developed through Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt's thoughts on modern barbarism, arguing that Eisenstadt's understanding of barbarism holds significant interpretive potential for the sociological analysis of contemporary radical identities. His conceptual framework on barbarism and modernity offers a profound understanding of the inherent tensions within the process of modernization. Rather than viewing modernity as a purely progressive force, Eisenstadt highlights the contradictions and crises that it can generate, leading to various forms of barbarism. Barbarism, in this sense, is not simply a regression to a pre-modern or primitive state but a phenomenon that occurs within modern societies themselves (Eisenstadt, 1999). It manifests through the breakdown of social order, the rise of violence, and the erosion of democratic institutions. His theory of multiple modernities suggests that modernity is not a uniform process but develops in different ways across cultures, thereby creating tensions between tradition and modernity (Eisenstadt, 2000).

In the contemporary context, Eisenstadt's insights remain crucial for understanding the ongoing challenges facing modern societies, particularly in terms of the rise of authoritarianism and political violence. The focus of the article is on Eisenstadt's specific reflections on modern social exclusion, violence, and inhumane forms. The article sheds light on how these tensions can pave the way for radical right and populist movements, proposing new ways to rethink populism and redefine the concept of radicalism through a cultural framework. The study reveals how the concepts used by Eisenstadt intertwine to form a cultural theory regarding exclusionary and violent identities and institutional regimes, highlighting the importance of developing a cultural theory of radicalism today.

## **Religion, secularization, and radical right populism**

The third article, titled 'Religion, Secularization, and Attitudes Toward Right-Wing Populist Parties in the Netherlands, Hungary, and Italy', addresses the complex relationship between religion and radical right populism. Written by Kenneth Vaughan, this article investigates the relationship among religion, secularization, and populist radical right collective action through case studies of three countries: Hungary, the Netherlands, and Italy. It emphasizes that religion and secularization have become significant factors shaping populist radical right movements and their 'contagious' effects. It particularly highlights that this dynamic became more pronounced following the refugee crisis of 2015 while also pointing out the challenges in defining the relationship between these elements.

Academic assessments of the relationship between religion, secularization, and populist radical right collective actors have become increasingly complex. New religious immigrants are often viewed by EU elites as invaders importing contradictory values imposed on the public, presenting threats to both Christian and secular Europeans. Scholars like Norris and Inglehart (2011) have long highlighted the secularization process that shapes political attitudes in Europe. Vaughan reminds us that while the populist radical right often emphasizes Europe's Christian roots to reject Islam, Christian theology also offers a space for embracing foreigners, whereas secular perspectives tend to stereotype Muslim immigrants as obstacles to progress.

Vaughan emphasizes that Europe has been secularizing for decades, and this process overlaps with the resurgence of populist radical right collective actions. However, he also points out that this radical right revival correlates with an increase in religious rhetoric in politics. Research indicates that in secularized societies like the Netherlands, populist radical right and right-wing populism typically focus on cultural protectionism and position themselves against multiculturalism and immigration (Koopmans, 2013). In contrast, in more religious societies like Hungary and Italy, populist leaders frequently adopt a Christian nationalist rhetoric, presenting themselves as defenders of Western civilization against the threats of Islam and secularism. However, Vaughan's article stresses that the relationship between religion and the populist radical right differs across all three countries.

The article demonstrates, albeit with some reservations, that in Hungary, Fidesz motivates Christian voters with religious nationalist appeals, while in the Netherlands, aggressive secularization motivates non-religious voters. The situation in Italy, according to the author, is more complex. These findings underscore the critical role that religious values and institutions play in voter preferences, while also suggesting competitive options for secular politics in the future.

### *Who are the 'real' people?*

The fourth article, titled 'Who Are the "Real" People? The Concept of Relational Popular Identity and the Self-Identification of Populist Voters in Poland', is authored by Michal Nawrocki and explores the phenomenon of identity in the context of radical right populism. By presenting a case study of the loyal supporters of Poland's Law and Justice Party, the article discusses how relational right-wing popular identity can serve as a 'last resort community' that unites the 'real people' through a 'mediating identity' and an immunity-building exclusion mechanism that incorporates elements of other identities to maintain its integrity. It introduces the relational identity mapping (RIM) technique used to explore the complexities of post-modern political identities and the networks of relationships that shape these identities.

According to Nawrocki, appeals to "'real' Americans, French, or Poles' have become a core element of right-wing populist politics aimed at uniting the 'real' people against an 'other' defined by populist politicians as a threat to national society. Thus, the concept of 'real' people, which implicitly suggests the existence of 'unreal' people, has been used to divide societies and enhance polarization for political gain (Müller, 2016: 3). However, this interest in populist identity framing has not been matched by an equally thorough

analysis of how populist supporters self-identify. Questions about how populist voters actually relate to populist identity framing and how they reflexively construct their identities using these discursive resources largely remain unanswered.

The article provides the necessary concepts and methods to examine the reflexive, relational self-identity of populist supporters alongside a case study of the relational identity of right-wing populists in Poland. To move beyond individual attitudes and examine varying levels of relationality in popular identities, the article introduces the concept of relational popular identity – defined through relationships with various groups – and the RIM technique.

## **Democratic backsliding**

The fifth article, titled ‘Democratic Backsliding Against a Rising Wave of Support for Democracy? Explaining Trends in Attitudes Toward Democracy in Poland (1995-2021)’, is authored by Ireneusz Sadowski and investigates trends in attitudes towards democracy in Poland. The article examines the intriguing paradox of democratic backsliding observed in Poland between 1995 and 2021, where public support for democracy has increased even as populist parties have led the country into democratic decline. The author questions whether these two trends are related and tests three hypotheses: (1) the ‘winner populist effect’, which suggests that populists support democracy more when in power; (2) the deepening of socio-political divides, which could widen the gap in support for democracy; and (3) generational change driven by long-term social changes like improved education.

The findings reveal a weak direct connection between populist backsliding and increased support for democracy. Instead, both trends appear as part of a broader sociological ‘division’ within Polish society. Education and generational change play significant roles: individuals with higher education levels tend to support democracy more, while less educated individuals gravitate towards populism. Each new generation is becoming more educated, leading to increased support for democratic principles. This suggests that younger generations are more pro-democracy not only because of their education levels but also due to generational values.

## **Vox in Spain: Similarities and differences with the far-right family**

The final article, titled ‘Vox in Spain: Similarities and Differences with the Far-Right Family’, is written by Guillermo Fernández-Vazquez. This article examines the characteristics that define the current political stance of the radical right party Vox in Spain, analysing its similarities and differences with other populist radical right far-right movements across Europe. By conducting an in-depth analysis of Vox as both a political and strategic actor, the article provides insights into the role this party plays as a bridge among populist radical right parties on both sides of the Atlantic.

The article explores the concepts of ‘Iberosphere’ and ‘Hispanic nativism’ within the context of the Spanish radical right, examining the similarities and differences between Vox and other members of the populist radical right family. It identifies the ideological

and strategic factors that both align Vox with and differentiate it from other parties within the current political spectrum. Fernández-Vazquez also investigates to what extent these strategic elements influence the party's ideological orientation, showing that Vox has adopted an unusual strategic trajectory among existing populist radical right parties. Unlike many populist radical right parties in Europe that focus on national sovereignty and regional autonomy, Vox stands out as a relatively unique party. Notably, Vox has defended Spanish unity against the separatist policies of independence-seeking Catalans, making its impact felt not only in Spain but also, to a limited extent, in Latin America (Alonso and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2015).

How does Vox's strategy and policy influence the Catalan independence movement and the future of Spain? Can Vox's strategy impact radical right and right-wing populist parties in Europe? If so, how might that impact manifest? These and similar questions could guide future studies on the topic.

Indeed, among its peers, Vox is the youngest party within the radical right and right-wing populist movements in Europe, and interestingly, it serves as a junction and meeting point for all other similar parties. As Fernández-Vazquez points out, Vox positions itself as a bridge or connection point among various right-wing actors on the global stage, a role that was clearly demonstrated during a rally it organized in Spain in May 2024. This event brought together global populist radical right leaders, including Marine Le Pen from France, Javier Milei from Argentina, José Antonio Kast from Chile, André Ventura from Portugal, Mateusz Morawiecki from Poland, Giorgia Meloni from Italy, and Viktor Orbán from Hungary. Vox's role as a bridge became even more apparent with the establishment of the 'Madrid Forum', an alliance of conservative parties and organizations from Europe, Latin America, and the United States. This role as a continental meeting point for populist radical right parties has been institutionalized through the enduring structure of the Madrid Forum and its regular global and regional summits. How will these meetings affect the future of the populist radical right in Europe? In this context, how will the populist radical right influence the future of the EU?

## Conclusion

In an environment where populism and radical right movements are on the rise almost everywhere in the world, scholars and experts express concerns over the erosion of democracy, its values, and liberal principles (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018; Mounk, 2018). The rise of populist radical right and right-wing populist movements in Europe also represents one of the most significant political developments of the early twenty-first century. As the articles in this special issue illustrate, these movements are driven by a complex array of factors, including anti-immigrant sentiment, religious, cultural, and identity concerns, as well as dissatisfaction with democratic institutions. Shared themes such as nativism, authoritarianism, and populism form the commonalities among populist radical right movements in Europe, while significant differences arise based on each country's specific historical, cultural, and political contexts (Mudde, 2007). This special issue, which examines these movements from various perspectives, aims to provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the rise of the populist radical right in Europe.

In conclusion, the studies contributing to this special issue highlight the importance of research on populist radical right and right-wing populist parties. The significance of this work is particularly pronounced given these movements' potential to undermine democratic institutions and deepen societal divides. As the EU grapples with challenges such as immigration, globalization, Euroscepticism, and economic inequalities, the continued presence and challenge of populist radical right and right-wing populist movements in the political arena complicate matters even further. Understanding the roots of these movements' appeal to voters and their impact on societies will be vital for developing effective strategies to address the challenges facing liberal democracy.

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