

The Rise of the Politics of National Identity: New Evidence from Western Europe

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ABSTRACT Numerous West European democracies are witnessing unprecedented levels of electoral support for the populist radical right parties. By focusing on four such parties in Austria, Denmark, Germany, and the Netherlands, we demonstrate that the issue of immigration is at the core of their populist appeal. We argue that these countries' electorates already came to be politically divided over immigration to the extent that one could talk about the emergence of a new cleavage—ethnic vs. civic citizenship. We further posit that immigration, intensified by the unrelenting process of globalization, will continue to affect political dynamics of the recipient states.

Introduction

A specter is haunting Europe—the specter of populism. As a result of the major political developments in 2016, the UK vote on European Union membership and the US presidential election, this particular issue has come to the forefront of political and academic debates across the Western democratic world. While those who are still trying to come to terms with the political reality created by the aforementioned events may regard populism as a relatively new and unexpected phenomenon in this particular political context, a closer look on the recent electoral results in most European countries suggests otherwise.

Albeit being around for decades (von Beyme, 1988), populist radical right parties (PRRPs) have been on a steady rise throughout Europe over the last couple of years. Adjacent to authoritarianism and populism, the key feature of their attitudinal apparatus is nativism. It represents 'an ideology which holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group ("the nation") and that non-native elements (persons and ideas) are fundamentally threatening to the homogenous nation-state' (Mudde, 2007, p. 19). Accordingly, PRRPs are first and foremost preoccupied with 'protecting' the nation against disparate outsiders, which is why the issue of immigration stands in the focus of their political interest (Bale, 2008; Ivarsflaten, 2008). For this reason, some scholars simply labeled them 'anti-immigrant parties' (van der Brug, Fennema, & Tillie, 2000).

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Although already in the 1980s Western European party systems came under ‘heavy pressure from a radical populist right’ (Betz, 1993, p. 413), PRRPs’ influence over European politics has traditionally been considered ‘modest’ (Mudde, 2014, p. 217). However, during the last few years, a number of countries in Western Europe have witnessed unprecedented levels of popular support for the radical right, a phenomenon in the paper identified as ‘the rise of national identity politics’. This, as suggested above, was demonstrated by the results of the United Kingdom’s 2016 vote on European Union membership as well as by a series of noteworthy PRRPs’ performances in European and national elections.

Playing the card of widespread hostility to immigration was, by all accounts, one of the main reasons why the Leave campaign was able to win the British referendum against the economists’ nearly unanimous anticipation of the negative economic consequences of Brexit.¹ Indeed, one third of those who voted to break with the EU named ‘the fact that leaving offered the best chance for the UK to regain control over immigration and its own borders’ as the main reason behind their voting (Lord Ashcroft Polls, 2016).² Some even referred to the referendum as ‘a proxy plebiscite on immigration’ (Rooksby, 2016), a statement that can be strongly corroborated by actual voting patterns: for instance, where foreign-born population increased by more than 200% between 2001 and 2014, leave vote followed in 94% of cases (‘The Immigration’, 2016).

Yet, the British vote on EU was by no means an isolated political incident. Running on a political platform largely built upon identity issues, Marine Le Pen, the leader of the French right radical party National Front (*Front National*, FN) made a remarkable result in the April 2017 presidential elections. In the runoff she won nearly 11 million votes, i.e. five million more than her father in 2002 and by far the most ever received by the FN. Moreover, just like the anti-immigration UKIP in Britain, her party came first in the 2014 European elections, winning nearly a quarter of the vote. Many would argue that Le Pen’s growing influence has already pushed the topic of national identity to the fore of French politics, as conservatives increasingly adopt an FN-like political discourse.³ This brings to mind Conversi’s argument which states that ‘the political spectrum of majoritarian systems has shifted further to the right as the center-right has adopted many of the populist and ultra-nationalist themes, thereby legitimizing them and increasing their overall appeal’ (2014, pp. 33–34).

Similarly, in Sweden, a long time symbol of liberal politics and the country in which PRRPs have traditionally been regarded as ‘more or less failures’ (Rydgren, 2002, p. 27), anti-immigration Sweden Democrats (SD) currently top polls with the popular support of 24.7% (YouGov, 2017). By comparison, in the parliamentary elections held in September 2014, the party won 12.9% of the vote. In the neighboring Finland, right-wing populist Finns became the second strongest party after the 2015 parliamentary elections. In the 2003 elections, the party won 1.6% of the vote, ‘growing steadily’ ever since (Arter, 2010, p. 487). Naturally, anti-immigration rhetoric is one of the Finns’ ‘signature themes’ (Sundberg, 2015).

In recently (re-)established European democracies such as Hungary, Poland, or Slovakia, which lag behind the politically stable and economically prosperous West, strong presence of populist radical right parties might not be surprising. But how do we explain the fact that, in the face of continuously positive socio-economic trends, a number of well-established democracies of Western Europe are facing with the thus far unmatched popularity of PRRPs as well?

With an ambition to contribute to a better understanding of this political trend, we focus on four cases of populist radical right parties' mounting influence: the Alternative for Germany (AfD), the Party for Freedom (PVV) in the Netherlands, the Danish People's Party (DF), and the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ). In line with a broader theoretical argument, we maintain that the issue of immigration is at the core of their populist appeal. Moreover, we believe that the electorates in the four countries have already come to be politically divided over this issue to the extent that one might talk about the emergence of a new cleavage—ethnic vs. civic citizenship.

In addition, unlike many who tend to associate immigration with the current European refugee crisis, we believe it is the irreversible process of globalization that intensifies it. Therefore, we argue that it will continue to have a significant impact on the political dynamics of the recipient countries, including those that we observe, and that, unless their mainstream parties take a more pro-active approach vis-à-vis this particular issue and prevent further 'contagion from the right' (Norris, 2005), PRRPs will continue to politically profit by playing the anti-immigration card.

This article employs theory-building process tracing, commonly utilized in two particular research situations: when we know that there is a correlation between *X* (in this case immigration) and *Y* (i.e. rise of PRRPs), but we are in the dark regarding potential mechanisms linking the two (*X–Y centric theory building*), as we do not have theory to guide us; and when we are familiar with an outcome (*Y*), but where we are unsure what the causes are (*Y-centric theory building*) (Beach & Pedersen, 2012, p. 25). In other words, this paper applies general principles of theory-centric process tracing to the specific nature of the process it investigates. Its main goal is to establish an uninterrupted causal path linking the putative causes to the observed effect, at the appropriate level of analysis as specified by the theoretical model being tested (George & Bennett, 2005, p. 222).

Political Breakthrough of the Western European Populist Radical Right

As demonstrated by Figure 1, Western European radical right parties have 'enjoyed increasing electoral success at the national, regional, and local levels' over the last few decades (Golder, 2003, p. 432). The average electoral result of PRRPs in Western Europe rose from 1.7% in the 1980s, to 4.8% in the 1990s, to 5.9% in the 2000s

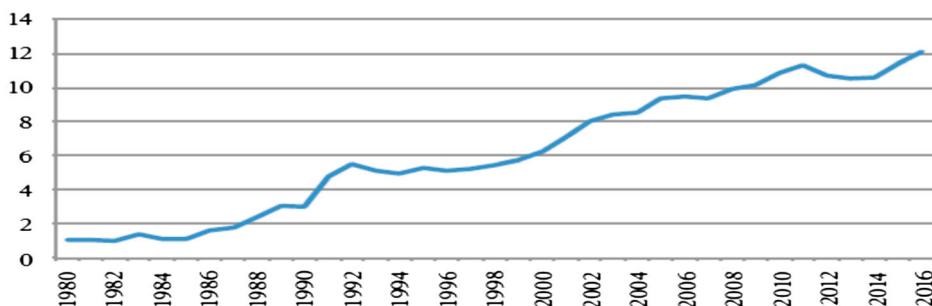


Figure 1. The rise of PRRPs in Western Europe (1980–2006)
 Source: Johansson (2016, p. 19)

(Mudde, 2013, p. 4). Yet, during the current decade, their growing political presence across Western European democracies has become as apparent as never before.

In Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Austria popular support for PRRPs has risen by extraordinary rates since the last parliamentary elections. In the 2013 elections, held just a few months after it was founded, alternative for Germany got a step away from surpassing the 5% electoral threshold (it won 4.7% of the vote). A year later, the party won 7.1% of the vote in the EU elections opposing the single European currency. Still, the major increase in the popular support for the AfD followed its 2015 programmatic shift—from anti-euro to anti-immigration. Currently, the AfD is polling at 11% (INSA/YouGov, 2017), which implies that for the first time in history of the Federal Republic of Germany a party right to CDU/CSU is likely to enter the Bundestag following the next parliamentary election. AfD's average result of 13.2% in eight state elections held since 2015 leaves little space for doubt in that regard.

In the Netherlands, the Party for Freedom (PVV) entered the Parliament in 2006, the same year it was established. In 2010, PVV even got into the Government after winning 15.5% of the vote, nearly three times more than four years earlier. The years that followed somewhat weaker performance (10.1%) in the 2012 parliamentary elections saw the growth of the party's popularity. In the last parliamentary elections held in March 2017, PVV became for the first time in its history the country's second strongest party winning 13.1% of the vote and adding five seats to its tally. What is more, until the final days of the electoral campaign the party had a stable lead in the national polls (Peilingwijzer, 2017). It is therefore fair to assume that the PVV would have done even better had it not been for the Dutch-Turkish diplomatic dispute that gave PM Mark Rutte a chance to take a tougher stance on Ankara and arguably swing some of PVV voters (Hecking, 2017a). Likewise, Rutte's occasionally populist tone best reflected in his message to the immigrants to 'act normally or go away' (Taylor, 2017) suggests that the PVV managed to push an entire political scene to the right.

Founded in 1995, Danish People's Party (DF) has been around considerably longer than its German and Dutch counterparts. DF's first 15 years have been marked by a steady growth, from 7.4% of the vote in the 1998 parliamentary elections to 12.3% in 2011. Yet, within the last half-decade, popular support for the party has nearly doubled. In the last parliamentary election, held in June 2015, DF came in second, winning 21.1% of the vote. The party currently supports minority government of the liberal-conservative Venstre. In May 2014, with the support of 26.6% of the electorate, DF won the European elections by a significant margin.

Finally, similar political tendencies can be observed in Austria. The Freedom Party has been a part of the country's political development since the very enactment of the 1955 State Treaty re-establishing Austrian independence. Subsequent to an unimpressive performance (10%) in the 2002 parliamentary elections, which came after the resignation of the charismatic party head Jörg Heider, FPÖ started growing again. In the last parliamentary elections held in 2013, the party won 20.5% of the vote. Within the last couple of years, just like in Germany, the Netherlands, and Denmark, popular support for the radical right in Austria has risen exponentially. As a result, the FPÖ stood in March 2017 at an impressive 33% of popular support (Institute Research Affairs, 2017). Moreover, after winning the first round by a landslide, party candidate Norbert Hofer lost the second round of the December 2016 presidential elections but was still able to garner more than two million votes (46.2% of the vote).

In a nutshell, populist radical right parties are not only becoming major political players in the countries under observation but, given the aforementioned political trends, are also likely to succeed in ‘securing a permanent niche’ in their political markets (Betz, 1994, p. 189). For the reasons elaborated in the remainder of this article, we further argue that the four PRRPs have already grown to such an extent that allows them to affect the very nature of political game in these democracies.

Factors Behind the Electoral Growth of PRRPs

The rise of the populist radical right parties has been followed by growing academic interest for PRRPs. Since the late 1980s, these parties have attracted ‘more academic attention than any other party family in Europe’ (Ellinas, 2007, p. 354). ‘While one is hard-pressed to find many non-German studies on the populist radical right before 1990’, Mudde effectively points out, ‘today more than a hundred scholars from across the globe work on the topic, and produce many more articles and books on this particular party family than on all other party families combined!’ (2013, p. 2).

In this burgeoning body of literature, one can identify a broad range of factors influencing electoral performances of PRRPs as pointedly summarized by Albertazzi and McDonnell:

The rise of populism in Western Europe is, in large part, a reaction to the failure of traditional parties to respond adequately in the eyes of the electorate to a series of phenomena such as economic and cultural globalisation, the speed and direction of European integration, immigration, the decline of ideologies and class politics, exposure of elite corruption, etc. It is also the product of a much-cited, but rarely defined, ‘political malaise’, manifested in steadily falling turnouts across Western Europe, declining party memberships, and ever-greater numbers of citizens in surveys citing a lack of interest and distrust in politics and politicians. (2008, p. 1)

We agree with Golder’s (2003) claim that various determinants of the rise of the populist radical right can roughly be grouped in three categories—instrumental, materialist, and ideational. The first one concerns the design of electoral institutions which constrain voters’ choices given their preferences and thus affect the ability of PRRPs to achieve their political goals (Arzheimer, 2015; Golder, 2003, p. 438). In simple terms, instrumental factor has a direct impact on these parties’ chances of transforming popularity into seats.

Among the four political systems under observation, we find considerable differences as regards electoral threshold and other criteria which determine the level of proportionality between popular support and political representation. In Germany, mixed-member proportional system is used against proportional representation in the Netherlands, Denmark, and Austria. Furthermore, the number of electoral districts in the 4 countries varies considerably, from 1 in the Netherlands, to 9 in Austria, 10 in Denmark, and as many as 299 in Germany. Likewise, national-level threshold spans from 0.67% in the Netherlands, to 2% in Denmark, 4% in Austria, and 5% in Germany. Given the divergence, we argue that the recent political ascent of PRRPs in these countries could hardly be explained by the formal set up of their electoral institutions.

The second, materialist factor relates to socio-economic issues, first and foremost unemployment (Arzheimer, 2015; Golder, 2003). And indeed, we do see this factor at play in a

number of Western democracies that have struggled economically since the onset of the 2008 global financial crisis. Greece, to mention the most obvious case, has seen a rapid rise of the populist radical right party ‘Golden Dawn’ in the wake of the economic downfall. The party that in 2009 won just 0.3% of the vote, thus failing to enter the Parliament, became the third strongest in Greece after garnering 7% in the September 2015 national elections. Similarly, many tend to associate the revival of the National Front under Marine Le Pen with the fact that the unemployment rate in France nearly reached double digits at the end of 2016 (Eurostat, 2016). During this period, in addition to the earlier mentioned political successes, FN grew to win 13.6% of the vote in the 2012 parliamentary elections, thus more than tripling the 2007 electoral result (4.3%).

However, PRRPs have lately also been doing extremely well in those countries that in the observed period did not experience economic difficulties. Austria, Denmark, Germany, and the Netherlands are very prosperous economies characterized, on average, by low unemployment over the last few years. Furthermore, unemployment rates in Germany and Denmark have recently been in constant decline. At the end of 2016 they stood at 6.2% in Denmark, 4.1% in Germany, and 6% in Austria and the Netherlands (Eurostat, 2016). Having all this in mind, we argue that the materialist factor could not have played a major role in the political ascent of the populist radical right in the four countries that we study.

At a more general level, many tend to associate the rise of PRRPs in Western democracies with the feeling of strong political dissatisfaction shared by the so-called ‘losers of globalisation’. The rationale behind such explanations is always the same: ‘Society is transforming fundamentally and rapidly; this leads to a division between (self-perceived) “winners” and “losers”, and the latter will vote for the populist radical right out of protest (anger of frustration)’ (Mudde, 2010, p. 1,172). In this regard, Kitschelt recognizes a particularly strong potential for the development of nativist beliefs ‘among the losers of the economic modernisation process within the working class, primarily manual workers with few or obsolete skills’ (1997, p. 9).⁴ PRRPs thus form ‘an attractive alternative for dissatisfied citizens’ (Rooduijn, 2015, p. 5), as they tend to present themselves as political outsiders who claim that the established parties are detached from ordinary people.

While acknowledging that the unfair distribution of benefits of economic globalization has alienated certain segments of the Western countries’ population thereby making PRRPs politically more appealing, we maintain that this factor cannot account for their electoral successes in the observed states. This is because their Gini coefficient scores—measuring income distribution whereby ‘0’ index expresses perfect equality and ‘100’ index stands for maximal inequality—show that while, over the last decade, the level of inequality slightly rose in Germany (from 28.5 to 29.2), Austria (from 26.9 to 28), and Denmark (from 23.2 to 25.4), in the Netherlands it actually declined (from 28.4 to 28.3) (OECD, 2016a). Likewise, when the results from 2015 are measured against those from 2010, all four countries score better on the UNDP’s inequality-adjusted Human Development Index (UNDP, 2010, 2015). Furthermore, the general argument about PRRPs profiting from the disaffection of the losers of globalization does not seem to hold as in Germany, for instance, one in three AfD voters belongs to the category of the richest 20% of Germans (Fleischhauer, 2016).

Finally, the Eurozone debt crisis has been generally recognized as another important economic contributor to the recent rise of PRRPs. Often portrayed as a consequence of the redistribution of wealth from ‘hard-working Western and Northern Europeans’ to ‘lazy Southerners’, the crisis has certainly favored the populist radical right. However,

the example of 'Alternative for Germany' illustrates clearly that this factor did not play a major role in its political ascent. In the summer of 2015, at the height of the euro crisis when Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras decided to hold a referendum on his country's bailout program, the AfD was polling at 3% ('AfD verliert', 2015). Shortly after, as the party switched from anti-euro to anti-immigration rhetoric, its popularity started growing rapidly.

The Fear of Immigration

We hold that the third, 'Ideational' factor mentioned by Golder, which relates to the 'threat to national identity and culture posed by immigration' (2003, p. 439), has decisively contributed to the electoral growth of the four PRRPs. As previously elaborated, the issue of immigration has been 'singularly dominant' for the populist radical right in Western Europe (Ivarsflaten, 2008). At the same time, there is a growing collection of empirical evidence suggesting that immigration causes people to vote for extreme right parties on ideational grounds (Golder, 2003, p. 439).

In addition to the aforementioned PRRPs' electoral performances, opinion polls conducted in Austria, Germany, Denmark, and the Netherlands over the last couple of years clearly demonstrate a high-level political salience of immigration as well as strong 'anti-immigration attitudes' (van der Brug & Fennema, 2007) among the general population. According to the 2016 Eurobarometer study, significant percentages of citizens of the four states regard immigration as the most important issue which they are currently dealing with (57% in Denmark, 56% in Germany, 46% in the Netherlands, and 41% in Austria). At the same time, only 35% of Germans, 35% of Austrians, 43% of the Dutch, and 30% of Danes feel positive about the immigration of people outside the EU (van der Brug & Fennema, 2007).

Furthermore, while accepting the general thesis about the importance of immigration in this regard, we disagree with those who argue that the latest electoral successes of the West European PRRPs resulted from a temporary mass migration triggered by the European refugee crisis.⁵ Such an understanding of the political developments in Western Europe is reflected in numerous media reports published over the last couple of years under titles like 'Europe's Anti-Refugee Parties are Dangerous Even When They Don't Win' (Robins-Early, 2016), and 'Europe's Refugee Crisis Strengthens Far-Right Parties' (Tharoor, 2015). In fact, some of the observed countries have not experienced anything like a refugee crisis during this period. Last year, for instance, the Netherlands welcomed only 43,000 refugees ('Ich will die Grenzen schließen', 2016), while merely 21,000 people sought asylum in Denmark (Delman, 2016).

At the same time, it is often forgotten that as a part of the process of globalization each of the four countries has for years now been dealing with high immigration rates. Actually, the refugee crisis only made this particular phenomenon more obvious and politically potent. Since the beginning of the century, the percentage of foreign-born population in Germany rose from 11% to 15%, in the Netherlands from 9% to nearly 12%, in Denmark from nearly 7% to 10% ('League of', 2016), and in Austria from 10% to almost 17% (OECD, 2016b). Thus, even though some of them absorbed relatively small numbers of refugees, immigration has still been an important socio-political issue in these states.

By comparison, in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, the perception of facts rather than the facts themselves seems to shape people's attitudes on immigration as the fear of an imminent flood of immigrants significantly overshadows any actual population influx. For instance, in the last 12 months there were 12,305 registered asylum applicants in Poland, 1,475 in the Czech Republic, and merely 145 in Slovakia (Eurostat, 2017). At the same time, the platform built on the fear of immigrants has proven politically profitable in each of these states. In Slovakia, to mention the most striking example, notwithstanding an insignificant number of asylum seekers, the anti-immigration 'People's Party—Our Slovakia' received 8% of the vote in the March 2016 parliamentary elections. Four years earlier, the party's electoral result stood at 1.6%.

In other words, significant intake of foreigners has for a while now been a reality of the countries that we analyze. Under such circumstances, their RPPRs have successfully played the 'normative threat' card (Stenner, 2005), thereby presenting immigrants as people whose values and social norms are incompatible with those of the Western societies. Whereas the terrorism-related 'security threat' is usually given a much greater attention in this regard, it is worth mentioning that, among the four states, only Germany recently suffered a major terrorist attack (Berlin, December 2016). And in that particular case, although one might have expected popular support for the AfD to increase as a consequence, it actually dropped from 14% just before the attack to the current 11% (INSA/YouGov, 2017).

We therefore maintain that, just as it did not emerge with its outbreak, the issue of immigration will continue to play an important political role in these states—from which their RPPRs might be expected to continue politically profiting—long after the European refugee crisis is resolved. In view of numerous armed conflicts, worsening socio-economic situation and growing incidence of natural disasters around the globe, 'we have every reason to assume that migration flows will continue to intensify' (Reeskens & Hooghe, 2010, p. 594). In particular, due to global warming, mass migration could become the world's 'the new normal' (O'Hagan, 2015) as the advancement of climate instability is likely to be accompanied by the flow of refugees (Parenti, 2011). With that in mind, EU Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker warned in September 2015 that 'we should not be surprised or astonished if the first climate refugees are coming to Europe' (cited in Hockenos, 2015). In addition, it should be mentioned that migration has been strongly encouraged by the United Nations whose Millennium Development Goals are, in one part, to be realized through the lowering of barriers to human mobility (United Nations, 2010).

Furthermore, we elaborate in the following section of this paper that globalization-generated mass immigration has already started to affect the very character of political competition in the four countries that we analyze. Namely, under the alleged threat to their national identities posed by the mounting number of immigrants, a new line of political division separating those who advocate civic and ethnic concepts of citizenship is becoming tangible in these societies. While civic citizenship is based on the idea that 'adherence to legal norms is the main criterion to distinguish citizens from non-citizens', which makes it 'inherently political', ethnic citizenship implies, in contrast, that 'ethnic status or ancestry determine who is accepted as a full member of the community' (Reeskens & Hooghe, 2010, p. 579).

Moreover, the depth and intensity of this division in the four party systems are becoming so significant that, in our view, one can already talk about a gradual transformation of the

‘civic vs. ethnic citizenship’ debate into a new political cleavage, i.e. into ‘a conflict between organized socio-structural units that have a set of values and beliefs which provides a sense of identity [...] and reflects the self-consciousness of the social groups involved’ (Bartolini & Mair, 1990, p. 215). Accordingly, we believe that Maddens’ observation about voters who ‘do not get excited about the issue because of the immigrant problem as such, but because the issue works as a catalyst for a more encompassing uneasiness about recent social and economic changes’ (1996, p. 64), should be rephrased so as to point out that voters actually get excited about the issue because it works as a catalyst for the ongoing deeper socio-political change.

Globalization and National Identity

Whereas objective phenomena of globalization such as the international finance, worldwide movement of goods and people, and the spread of global culture have been well-studied, so-called subjective dimensions of this process remain largely neglected (Steger & James, 2013, pp. 17–18). One of these dimensions relates to ‘imaginaries’, i.e. ‘patterned convocations of the social life within which people understand their social existence’ (Steger & James, 2013). Until a few decades ago, the society was a national imaginary equated with ‘the community of the nation-state’ but, in more recent times, it has become an ambivalent concept ‘stretched between two contesting imaginaries: the national and the global’ (Steger & James, 2013, p. 32). As a result, ‘people from various socio-economic backgrounds around the world are developing a sense that their basic social categories, including “the person” and “the nation”, exist within in a social whole called “planet earth”, “the world”, or “the globe”’ (Steger & James, 2013, p. 36).

Thereby influencing people’s identities and the sense of belonging, globalization may push certain segments of population in a given nation toward cosmopolitanism and others toward the development of ‘resistance identities’ (Castells, 2004). Within the latter category, national identity certainly represents one of the most common forms (Ariely, 2012, p. 464). Entitled by massive migration and other forces of globalization, increasing cultural competition create new groups of ‘winners’ (cosmopolitan citizens) and ‘losers’ (citizens who strongly identify themselves with their respective national communities) (Kriesi et al., 2006, p. 922). Reactivation of national identities could therefore be interpreted as a reaction to these broader cultural homogenizing trends (Conversi, 2012, p. 1364). Thus, as national and global ‘continue to rub up against each other’, they produce new tensions with profound consequences for politics (Steger & James, 2013, p. 36).

Departing from this theoretical point, we claim that globalization in the form of intensified immigration is increasingly polarizing the observed Western European societies, politically separating those who believe in the homogeneity of values from those who cling to the idea of ethnic homogeneity. With more and more immigrants arriving to the four countries, the issue of citizenship, as mentioned above, naturally moves into the focus of political debate. And while their PRRPs offer an alternative, ethnic-based notion of citizenship, mainstream parties insist on the preservation of its civic character.⁶

In a sense, this debate represents a political contest between the two different approaches to the issue of nation-building—top-down and bottom-up. With regard to that, two fundamentally opposed ways of understanding the meaning of nation could be

identified in the pertinent literature. On the one hand, some believe that nations are built around ‘pre-existing ethnic cores’ that are ‘based on the lasting myth–symbol complexes of common descent’, ‘transmitted from one generation to the next’, and as such ‘necessary for the maintenance of cohesive societies’ (Smith cited in Conversi, 2014, p. 27). Understood in those terms, common identity of a national group is determined by ethnic origins of its members, which implies that a group’s ethnic diversification is bound to weaken its social cohesion (Hooghe, 2007; Putnam, 2007).

On the other hand, there are those who argue that nation and ethnicity are essentially social constructs, i.e. ‘the product of specific historical and geographical forces rather than biologically given ideas’ (Horrell, 2011, p. 136). In keeping with this assumption, Holtug (2010) maintains that

a common identity based on values such as tolerance, beneficence, equality, optimism, dialogue and faith in democracy may well stimulate trust, whereas a common identity of intolerance, egoism, pessimism, inequality and lack of faith in dialogue and democracy will probably not.

On a deeper level, the aforementioned debate on citizenship might also be regarded as a reflection of the societal polarization between those who equate culture with ethnicity and those who substantially differentiate between the two. Whereas ethnicity stands for ‘a group’s shared and subjective belief in putative descent’, culture is defined by ‘the objective existence of an innerly coherent, yet plural, set of tangible outputs whose proper crafting is passed on through generations (and renewed with each generation) within a system of values and codes conveyed by its own symbolism’ (Conversi, 2004, p. 820). Yet, notwithstanding the implicit flexibility of the notion, culture is often understood and politically articulated as ‘a rigid entity’ attached to a particular individual ‘nearly as part of one’s body’ (Conversi, 2004). Obviously, thus conceived ‘ethno-cultural individual’ cannot belong to other cultures except as a consumer which ‘temporarily borrows from them’ (Conversi, 2004, pp. 820–821). As elaborated in the following section, this is clearly the position held by the four parties that we study.

In contrast, many would argue that in liberal democratic societies culture must remain an inclusive concept unrelated to one’s ethnicity. Simply stated, culture ought to be regarded as ‘a choice and not a destiny’ (Conversi, 2004, p. 818), and everyone including immigrants should be given a possibility to acquire it. Understood as such, democratic ‘we’ does not represent a fact that one can just detect but ‘a process during which the belonging is constantly being renegotiated’ (Müller, 2017, p. 22). In that sense, regardless of their ethnic background, ‘outsiders could become insiders’ (Horrell, 2011, p. 137).

The Four PRRPs: A Heterogeneous Group with One Common Feature

As previously mentioned, the parties that are in the focus of our analysis differ considerably with respect to age. Danish People’s Party and, in particular, Freedom Party of Austria have been around much longer than their German and Dutch counterparts. This is just one among many differences that could be identified when these parties are compared. Although they belong to the same party family, a mere glimpse of their manifestos and electoral platforms reveals substantial program-related variation.

In terms of foreign policy orientation, the four parties diverge considerably. While criticizing the European Union for being too centralized, both FPÖ and AfD are in favor of Austria's and Germany's EU membership (AfD Party Program, 2016, p. 10; FPÖ Party Program, 2015). On the contrary, DF and PVV oppose the EU, with the referendum on Dutch EU membership being one of the key elements of the latter's manifesto for the March 2017 elections (DF Party Program, 2002; PVV Election Program, 2016). In addition, DF 'unconditionally supports' Denmark's NATO membership (DF Party Program, 2002) and, similarly, PVV holds Dutch participation in the alliance to be 'crucial' (PVV Election Program, 2012, p. 49). On the other hand, whereas AfD's support for German NATO membership is conditioned by the preservation of the Alliance's defensive character (AfD Party Program, 2016, p. 20), FPÖ endorsed traditional Austrian neutrality (FPÖ Party Program, 2015). Furthermore, PVV is strictly against development aid (PVV Election Program, 2016), whereby the other three parties are not, with the AfD calling for a more active German role in the world (AfD Party Program, 2016, pp. 20–23; DF Party Program, 2002; FPÖ Party Program, 2015).

The differences among the four parties concerning economic issues are as significant. Two of them, FPÖ and DF, support the idea of state intervention in the economy. FPÖ thus stands for 'a market economy with social responsibility' and 'an economic policy based on the concrete challenges of the time, free from ideological reservations', thereby advocating socially balanced tax system, equality of labor and capital income, etc. (FPÖ Party Program, 2015). In the same spirit, DF holds that the education system and health care, including public hospital service, nursing, and the care for elderly and disabled are public responsibility and 'must be of the highest standard' (DF Party Program, 2002).

On the contrary, economic policies of AfD are largely dominated by neoliberal concepts whereas PVV's agenda for this field appears ideologically ambiguous. The AfD party program declares that state intervention in the economic life must be limited to the necessary minimum, as summarized by the following motto: 'The more competition and the lower public spending, the better for all' (AfD Party Program, 2016, p. 50). Likewise, during the 2013 parliamentary election campaign, PVV vowed to reduce minimum wages and social benefits (Hecking, 2017b). In the following period, the party additionally promised lower income taxes and less money for art, innovation, and public broadcasting (PVV Election Program, 2016). However, PVV also embraced several social welfare policies such as early retirement, lower healthcare premiums, and more state money for nursing (Hecking, 2017b).

Yet, notwithstanding important programmatic differences, the four parties share a devotion to the ethnic concept of citizenship. Like other similar political organizations they regard the state as 'the nation's political arm' (Mudde, 1999, p. 188). Accordingly, their basic political aim is to (re)create a 'mono-cultural or "pure" nation-state, whereby the nation is defined by blood ties and other ethnic criteria' (Mudde, 1999). At the same time, they reject fundamental values and principles of liberal democracy such as tolerance, pluralism, and the protection of minorities and their rights (Mudde, 2007, pp. 25–26).

The Alternative for Germany whose political ascent, as previously mentioned, coincides with its policy shift from anti-euro (currency) to anti-immigration, considers German citizenship to be 'inextricably linked to German culture and language' (AfD Party Program, 2016, p. 49). For this reason, the party pledges to eliminate the territorial principle (*ius soli*) from the German citizenship law. Furthermore, the AfD regards the ideology of

multiculturalism as ‘a serious threat to social peace’ and ‘to the continued existence of the nation as a cultural entity’ (AfD Party Program, 2016, p. 32). In that spirit, the party manifesto states that ‘Germany is not a classical country of immigration’ (AfD Party Program, 2016, p. 42) and that a growing number of Muslims pose ‘a major challenge to the country’ (AfD Party Program, 2016, p. 34).

In a similar fashion, Austrian Freedom Party’s manifesto prioritizes the protection of national identity—which, interestingly enough, is defined as German—as well as the notion that Austria is not a country of immigration (FPÖ Party Program, 2015). The document underlines that only those immigrants who are ‘already integrated, irreproachable and legally present, who speak German, fully recognize our values and laws and have rooted culturally, can acquire our citizenship’ (FPÖ Party Program, 2015).

Such claims can also be found in political platforms of the Dutch Party for Freedom and the Danish People’s Party. In the campaign for the 2012 parliamentary elections, the PVV argued that mass immigration was ‘intensely damaging the Netherlands’ (PVV Election Program, 2012, p. 35). It therefore called for binding assimilation contracts for immigrants, restrictions on immigrant labor from Islamic countries as well as for the defense of ‘the essential elements of the Dutch culture’ (PVV Election Program, 2012, p. 37). In the new platform adopted ahead of the 2017 general elections, the party went even further by pledging to ban immigration from Muslim countries altogether and close all Mosques and asylum centers in the country (PVV Election Program, 2016). As ‘elaborated’ by the PVV leader Geert Wilders: ‘Islam wants to destroy us and I want to stop that’ (Koelbl, 2016).

The DF manifesto accentuates the party’s ‘historic obligation to protect the Danish cultural heritage’ including Christianity as an integral part of Danish life (DF Party Program, 2002). It further states that ‘Denmark is not and has never been an immigrant country’ and that the DF ‘will not accept its transformation into a multiethnic society’ (DF Party Program, 2002). According to the document, ‘Denmark belongs to the Danes’ and, for that reason foreign nationals should be able to obtain Danish citizenship ‘to a limited extent, according to special rules, and in conformity with the stipulations of the Constitution’ (DF Party Program, 2002).

For decades, these ideas did not seem to have any chance for political realization in West European democracies. Namely, albeit starting with ethnic notions of citizenship, these countries—including the ones that we analyze—gradually evolved toward more open, civic concepts (Kaufman, 2000). Accordingly, political issues largely associated with the radical right could not come to dominate party competition in Western Europe. Therefore, PRRP’s primary task was to make those issues politically more salient, i.e. ‘to shift public’s attention away from socio-economic issues like unemployment toward the socio-cultural issues like immigration’ (Mudde, 2010, p. 1,179).

In this regard, by pushing the issues of immigration and national identity toward the center of political debate in the four countries under observation, globalization proved extremely beneficial to the political cause of the populist radical right. Under the impression of PRRPs’ rhetoric, fueled by the rising immigration, ethnic concept of citizenship seems to be gaining popular support in these states. Already a few years ago, those who believed that the acquisition of citizenship should be conditioned by ethnic criteria were quite numerous (33% in Austria, 32% in Denmark, and 21% in Germany) (Ariely, 2012, p. 470). Moreover, Pew Research Center poll from 2016 suggests that significant parts of the Dutch (83%) and German (73%) population believe that it is important to

share native customs and traditions to be considered German or Dutch. In addition, a vast number of interviewees regard birthplace (42% in the Netherlands, and 34% in Germany) and religion (30% in Germany, and 24% in the Netherlands) as important for national identity.

Furthermore, the aforementioned electoral results demonstrate that—as anticipated by Roemer (2001)—along with the salience of the immigration issue among the wider public grew its significance for party competition and electoral politics. PRRPs' standard claims about immigrants threatening national identity and societal cohesion thus came to be 'in tune' with broadly shared attitudes in the countries we observe. As a result, tapping into the popular anti-immigration sentiment, these parties' ethnic-based platform for political mobilization became extremely attractive and various segments of the electorate embraced them as genuine 'protectors' of national identity.

Finally, by occupying one pole on the 'civic vs. ethnic citizenship' axis of political competition, PRRPs might be expected to maintain electoral growth at the expense of the traditional center-right and left parties. In return, the polarizing politics of national identity, followed by frequent manifestations of populism and political extremism could become these countries' 'politics as usual'. In any case, further deepening of the cleavage separating advocates of civic and ethnic citizenship seems almost inevitable.⁷

Concluding Remarks

In light of the outcome of the June 2016 British EU membership referendum and the subsequent US presidential elections, populism has become one of the hottest topics in political and academic debates around the globe. With this article, we sought to contribute to a better understanding of this notion by analyzing the recent wave of electoral successes of the populist radical right parties in Austria, Denmark, Germany, and the Netherlands. Irrespective of the positive socio-economic trends in these countries over the last couple of years, public support for their PRRPs has been on a steady rise.

By comparing their manifestos and electoral platforms, we demonstrated that, albeit belonging to the same party family, the four parties are far from making an ideologically homogeneous group. And while holding considerably different views on the most important policy issues, these parties share one important feature—the adherence to the idea of ethnic homogeneity. Accordingly, the issue of immigration stands at the very center of their political programs.

We therefore argued that, in the context of the rising numbers of immigrants in their respective countries, these parties achieved the recent electoral growth mainly by appealing to popular fears of the erosion of national identity. In addition, by pointing to the latest opinion polls, we indicated that the immigration issue deeply divided electorates in the four countries. In this context, considering the intensity of the ensuing political debate between proponents of the two concepts of citizenship, civic and ethnic, one could even talk about the emergence of a new political cleavage in these societies.

Furthermore, unlike many who regard it as a consequence of the current European refugee crisis, we posit that mass immigration is not a temporary issue. In our understanding, this phenomenon is inextricably linked to the process of globalization which is why we expect that it will continue to influence political dynamics of the recipient countries. At the same time, this will provide PRRPs with an opportunity to further politically benefit by tapping into people's fears of immigration.

With that regard, in view of the wide room for their future political maneuver, it is fair to say that the four parties that we observed are almost unquestionably ‘here to stay’ (Mudde, 1999, 2010). For that reason, we believe that political accommodation of the popular concerns linked with immigration, in the situation where its further growth seems inescapable, represents and for years to come will remain the key challenge for pro-civic mainstream parties in the four countries of our interest.

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Notes

1. Nigel Farage, one of the main advocates of Brexit, has earned much of his political reputation by criticising immigration. In 2014, he commented that mass immigration was making parts of the UK appear ‘unrecognizable’ and look like ‘a foreign land’ (Sparrow, 2014).
2. The fact that the town (Boston) that voted most keenly for Brexit (76%) is the one with the highest percentage of EU incomers among its population (13%) (“Brexitland versus Londonia”, 2016) should therefore not be regarded as a surprise.
3. In reference to this political phenomenon, Albertazzi and McDonnell noted that ‘we can see evidence of a broad populist *Zeitgeist* in Western Europe in which not only have dyed-in-the-wool populists been successful, but where many other mainstream political leaders [...] have regularly dipped into populism’s box of tricks’ (2008, p. 2).
4. Electoral studies have long ago shown that disaffected voters are a ‘natural reserve’ of the extreme right (Mudde, 1999). In that spirit, numerous analyses of the recent British referendum on the EU focus on economic factors and the ‘left behind’ thesis, arguing that globalisation brought about prosperity all over the world except to the working class in Western societies (Haidt, 2016).
5. Our assumption was supported by Thomas Oppermann, chairman of the German SPD parliamentary group, who told us in a recent interview that ‘the reasons behind the electoral success of the AfD are much deeper than the ongoing refugee crisis’ (Berlin, September 2016).
6. Analyzing manifestos of German Social-Democratic Party (SPD) and the Christian-Democratic Union (CDU), Austrian Social-Democratic Party (SPÖ) and the People’s Party (ÖVP), Denmark’s Social-Democrats (Socialdemokraterne) and the Liberal Party (Venstre), and the People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) and the Labour Party (PvdA) in the Netherlands, one can identify an important common position: without mentioning ethno-national background, they all identify the key values of their societies such as democracy and human rights as the most important criteria for social integration. See: CDU Party Program (2007), ÖVP Party Program (2015), PvdA Party Program (2016), Socialdemokraterne Party Program (2016), SPD Party Program (2007), SPÖ Party Program (1998), Venstre Party Program (2006) and VVD Party Program (2016).
7. In an interview (Berlin, January 2017), Ralf Bammerlin, the head of the planning team in the SPD parliamentary group told us that such a scenario was indeed possible to imagine in Germany. In that sense, he mentioned the surveys conducted by his party in the summer of 2016 which showed that 46% of German voters agreed with the following statement: ‘I am not in favor of AfD but I am glad that the party performed well in recent elections’.

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