



Department  
of Political Science

Chair of Political Sociology

Wrong perceptions in the EU:  
The framing of immigration in the media and how  
populism takes advantage of it.

Prof. Michele Sorice  
SUPERVISOR

Rosa D'Antonio  
Matr. 083452  
CANDIDATE

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*“Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto”*  
Publio Terenzio Afro

## **Introduction**

Immigration has increasingly occupied a central position in the global political landscape. Particularly in the European context there has been a resurgence of right-wing populist parties, as a consequence to the uncertainty felt by wide sections of the society who feel threatened by globalisation, increasing migration flows and European integration.

What makes these new emerging parties extremely appealing to the public is their way to provide simple answers to such complex issues. The established elite that failed to solve the problems becomes an easy target of attacks, and populism presents itself as an attractive alternative to the existing status-quo.

In addition, the changing media environment played a key role. With the growing distrust in traditional media, and the possibility to spread users-created contents around the web, it is way easier for populist parties and supporters to share their ideas in a way that gives them a direct connection with the people. The use of social media, preferred by populist parties, has created new effective ways for the immediate and far-reaching dissemination of political ideas. Of course, these new platforms do not come without dangers. There is now, more than ever before, a relatively high risk of encountering fake news, or to be trapped into our own echo-chambers, two risks that can be conveniently used by political actors to achieve their aims.

The aim of this study is to show how populist parties can and do exploit the negative framing of the issue of immigration to their advantage, playing the right chords so to appeal to a relatively large share of public.

The research will start by analysing the so-called European refugee crisis, which reached its peak in 2015, and represented the last straw for the emergence of anti-immigration sentiments throughout Europe. The politicisation of the crisis has been central to the momentum gained by populist parties, that cleverly sought an opportunity in the anxieties and fears of the public to make their voice heard. The discourse on the need to preserve common European values and resources against the newcomers partly explains the electoral triumph of various radical right populisms.

The use of labels concerning immigrants (i.e. migrants or refugees) will be also explored, so to get an idea of how these can have consequences on the perceptions of the foreigners by the European people. At the same time, these perceptions will be investigated to find out how correct they are about the size of the immigrant population and the repercussions that they can have on the hosting countries.

The second chapter will introduce the concept of post-truth, widely discussed, and the consequent proliferation of false information of the internet that can easily be used by populists to mislead the public. Then the paper will attempt to give a definition of populism, presenting its distinctive features and the different forms in which it can exist. Finally, the second part will explore the ideologies of nationalism and nativism, their historical background and their multifaceted relationship with populism and, more generally, exclusionist attitudes.

Finally, the third chapter will analyse three different scenarios in which populist actors and parties have tailored the issue of immigration and have made use of the media to support their political agenda.

Firstly, the work will focus on the Brexit referendum of 2016, and particularly on the Leave side of the campaign.

The second part will be dedicated to the rise of Lega party in Italy, which is now in government. Starting from the origins of the party, we will examine the circumstances that made possible its success, with particular attention to the central role of the current party leader and Italian Interior Minister Matteo Salvini, his communication strategies and his attitudes towards immigrants.

Lastly, the study will analyse the very recent case of Spain, considered for a long time a European exception for its lack of an extreme right-wing party presence in parliament. The focus will be set on Vox party, which has lately emerged in the Spanish political landscape as an extremist, conservative, populist party with a very strict standpoint on immigration.

The scope of the present study is limited to Western Europe and for the purposes of this research we will only focus on the issue of immigration as common scapegoat of the populist discourse, although numerous other issues and aspects of populism would be relevant to the analysis of populist exploitation of media framing.

## **CHAPTER 1 – The issue of immigration**

### **1.1 The Refugee Crisis**

Years after the start of the European refugee crisis, the continent's divisions relating to migration still poison politics.

The European migration crisis, also known as “refugee crisis”, started around 2000 and reached its peak in 2015, becoming the largest human migration since 1945 (Zunes 2017).

In 2015, the influx of refugees to Europe touched astonishing levels, of which much has already been discussed. According to Eurostat, during the year, EU member states received more than double of the previous year's asylum requests and struggled to cope with the situation. The report prepared for the United Nations High Commission for Refugees in December 2015 states that in the first six months of 2015, approximately 137,000 refugees and migrants tried to enter the EU, representing an increase of 83% compared to the same period of the previous year (Berry, Garcia-Blanco and Moore 2015).

This sudden increase in the flow of people coming from countries such as Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq has caused many calls to manage the European borders more tightly (Krzyżanowski, Triandafyllidou and Wodak 2018). The German Chancellor Angela Merkel, for instance, described the issue of asylum as “the next major European project, one that would preoccupy Europe much more than the issue of Greece and stability of the Euro” (AFP 2015). The complexity of the so-called refugee crisis, additionally, created much uncertainty about its political, economic and societal implications (Greussing and Boomgaarden 2016), leaving many doubts about the understanding of who these coming refugees are and what their arrival means for each country (doubts that both political actors and the media have contributed to frame adversely).

The EU states have moved towards two directions in order to face the matter: on one hand, they have attempted to strengthen internal and external borders to halt migrants from making their way across Europe; on the other hand, they have tried to restrict the activities of people traffickers.

Regarding the first approach, as a result of the crisis, many of the Schengen member states established temporary border control (Nedergaard 2019). Given that in the Schengen area citizens can cross international borders without being checked, states realised that this could cause a chain reaction in which illegal and potentially dangerous migrants would enter initially into one country to then move wherever they needed or wanted to. For the same reason, several concerns were raised about the security of the European Union external borders. These concerns became, thus, a key political

problem in the context of such an emergency. Furthermore, European countries even started to build “walls” to strengthen their borders. In fact, while Angela Merkel went on with an “open gate” approach (Postelnicescu 2016), not many European countries decided to follow her strategy. The ideals of humanitarian cosmopolitanism and human security which drive countries such as Germany and Sweden (Makarychev 2018) were especially rejected by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, who refused any solidarity. As a matter of fact, the Hungarian government in 2015 started building a razor-wire fence on its border with Serbia and Croatia, which was then developed further by electrifying some parts and placing a special police body to guard it, the so-called “border hunters” (Pap and Remenyi 2017). Similarly, the Bulgarian government built a fence aiming at halting human traffickers from Turkey, and so did Spain on its border with Morocco.

Nonetheless, the problem of the European geography made the management of the crisis even harder. The maritime border is difficult to control and makes physical barriers (such as walls and fences) almost impossible to implement, so that one of the few efficient ways to deal with inflow of people seemed to be to stop them before they left Turkey to get to the Greek shores (Kugiel 2016). The deal between EU and Turkey, signed in March 2016, actually proved to be efficient to freeze the refugee crisis, but it has its disadvantages. First of all, it puts European security in the hands of the Turkish government; and secondly, this agreement does not address the roots of the problem of migration.

Since the problem of immigration persisted and many European leaders failed to express solidarity towards the refugees, there was a greater pressure on the countries that had no choice but to take them in. Countries like Italy and Greece, which represent the main entry spots in the EU, bore the highest strain of hosting refugees (Miliband 2018). As reported by Henning (2018) during the peak of the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ in 2015 and 2016, Greece was the major destination, with 856,723 arrivals in 2016 alone. Italy showed consistently high numbers of arrivals in the tens of thousands and Spain saw a significant increase in 2017 and 2018. Not surprisingly, when those countries failed in managing the large numbers of immigrants, criticism and anti-immigration sentiments rose.

As the fears about how to deal with such big masses of migrants increased exponentially, xenophobic sentiments gained momentum in elections as well (Hjerm and Bohman 2014). Burrell argues that discourses about displaced people that refer to them as the “other” contributed to this evident rise in right-wing populism across Europe (and other parts of the “global North”). The right-wing narrative, in fact, depicts refugees and asylum seekers as a burden rather than a vulnerable group of people deserving protection according to international conventions (e.g. Geneva Convention 1951, Protocol

1967 on the status of refugees, etc.). The Swedish Democrats, the National Front in UK and Pegida in Germany are only some examples of the phenomenon that started emerging from 2015. Their strategy of pointing to a real or imagined enemy that must be fought, and of appealing to emotions, is an easy but powerful way to bring people to their side.

This politicisation of the issue of the crisis has had some negative consequences, the most important probably being the fact that the crisis itself has been constructed along political and ideological visions. This means that the debate on immigration has been framed to represent the interests of certain political parties (Krzyzanowski, Triandafyllidou and Wodak 2018). Thus, given that political actors (including governments) tend to frame immigration negatively, as a problem to be tackled, they influence the public sphere. Adding to this, the media narrative usually follows political agendas and accentuates the hostile attitude towards the issue. Politics and the media are increasingly intertwined, so that the media get more powerful and gain greater influence over the wider society, which is in turn, more dependent on this mediatisation process (e.g. social media) (Krzyzanowski, Triandafyllidou and Wodak 2018).

Indeed, the media had a central role in depicting the refugee crisis as something much simpler than it is in reality, reducing refugees to either a threat, following the right-wing trend, or a group of victims, especially when making the distinction between the “real asylum seekers that are fleeing for war, violence or prosecution” (Kamer 2016) and economic migrants.

## **1.2 Migrants or refugees? The effects of labelling the “immigrants”.**

The matter of the division between the migrants and the refugees has extendedly been discussed in the past and is still source of debate. If on one hand this distinction is crucial in order to assure the protection of the refugees, on the other hand it is argued that such a distinction can actually prevent the refugees themselves from finding durable solutions which include an economic livelihood and not just humanitarian assistance. This happens especially in the light of the idea that a refugee deserves protection given that he does not claim any economic aspirations. This line of thinking, however, fails when one realises how interconnected poverty and persecution are.

These sorts of labels, i.e. “migrant” and “refugee”, especially when used in the public discourse, are able to shape the way in which displaced people are perceived and can instigate either sympathy or prejudice towards them, turning them into victims or threats.

Up until the 1950s, refugees were simply considered as a sub-group of migrants. Then, the signing of the 1951 Refugee Convention, they started to represent a completely different identity in order to

make it easier for them to claim asylum and assure them a greater level of protection and humanitarian assistance.

Nowadays, in its broadest meaning, the term “migrant” refers to someone who moves from a place to another. In general, the term denotes someone who is not forced to leave but voluntarily moves seeking better opportunities. There can be of course many reasons for people to migrate, i.e. reunion with family members or access to education, but if the reasons comprehend pursuing better jobs, then they are usually identified as “economic migrants”. On the other hand, a refugee is, according to the Refugee Convention (1951), “someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion”. A refugee is thus a “forced migrant”, who moves because of conflict, violence, human rights abuse, etc. These are the main causes that pushed the flow of migrants to Europe in 2015 from most notably Syria, but also Iraq, Afghanistan and Yemen. Following this classification, then, a migrant is generally someone who has more freedom of choice and has suffered less when deciding to leave their country, while a refugee is often seen more as a victim of the situation.

Those categories have become extremely politicised in the context of the Refugee crisis in Europe, but unfortunately, it is not so straightforward to make a distinction between the two. In essence, the above-mentioned categories not only fail to capture the complex relationship between political, social and economic drivers of migration, but have often also been used to legitimise policies of exclusion or containment during Europe’s migration crisis (Crawley and Skleparis 2017). This because while countries are free to deport “migrants” who arrive without legal papers, they cannot do the same with refugees under the 1951 convention, which determines that by law, refugees cannot be sent back to countries where their lives would be in danger. So, it is not surprising that many politicians in Europe prefer to refer to everyone fleeing to the continent as migrants (Sengupta 2015).

As Zetter (2007) underlined in his work about labelling, the line between “migrant” and “refugee” traces policy intentions rather than empirical differences between the two; as he put it “Labels do not exist in a vacuum. They are the tangible representation of policies and programmes...”. Vigil and Abidi (2018) add that, for instance, the “refugee” label has transformed in time based on the discourses of the state leaders of the moment, and that these labels often change when a new leadership is introduced.

In general, the processes by which people come eventually to arrive in Europe are usually much more complex than what is typically presented by both politicians and the media. One issue with this kind



of double categorisation is that it only takes into consideration the moving from one single place to another, without counting the various in-between movements. While the media and the politicians in Europe tend to assume that migrants decided to travel specifically to their continent, as a matter of fact, many of the people who eventually got to European shores did not plan in doing so.

For instance, according to Crawley (2016), in a poll regarding this matter he found out that more than a fifth of the respondents who arrived in Greece in 2015 had left their countries more than eighteen months before, and many of them believed to settle in the first place they had fled to.

Therefore, the line between the “migrant” and “refugee” is blurred and to trace it one must look deeper into the single cases. Individuals might change their status over time, or even fit into the two categories at the same time. For instance, how is it possible to distinguish between a “voluntary” or a “forced” migration? How can we divide economic reasons from social and political ones?

If we consider the context of Syria, many people decided to move because of economic uncertainty. However, they cannot be classified as “economic migrants” if it is taken into account that the presence of a protracted conflict has repercussions on the economy: thus, people will consider moving even if they are not directly targeted by the war, but at the same time they are not able to earn a livelihood as a consequence of war, because of the increase in the price of basic goods, the destruction of businesses or the impossibility to get to the workplace.

It is therefore clear that the categories of migrants and refugees are not natural, but they are created and can be renegotiated and redefined. In a time of crisis, when the numbers are perceived not to be manageable, it is easy to use these labels as a way to justify certain policies and reduce someone’s responsibility. Labels such as “refugee” and “migrant”, which evoke different connotations, become social categorization devices, distinguishing between who deserves certain benefits and treatments from those who are considered less-deserving and even a danger for the majority (Foucault, Senellart, Ewald, & Fontana, 2007). As Sigona (2017) states, the way in which we describe and categorize those who cross the Mediterranean has enormous implications on the kind of legal and moral obligations that the receiving states and societies feel towards them.

### **1.3 Misperceptions about immigration: Such a big problem for the EU?**

In the majority of Western countries, immigration has become a key controversial issue. Particularly in Western Europe, immigration from non-European countries has increasingly been seen as a problem and measures were taken to reduce it (Aalberg and Strabac 2017). Although it is impossible

to deny that there has been an extremely high peak in the flow of migrants towards Europe in 2015, it is also true that there is not much clarity around the exact facts and figures of such phenomenon, and that not much later those numbers were already diminishing. As a matter of fact, there is evidence that the public often misperceives the size of the immigrant population, and also that less informed people are generally more opposed to immigration, as they tend to perceive it as a threat. As Lippmann (1922) had already found out in his studies around the notion of “pictures in our heads”, in democracies people are often expected to have informed opinions on matters that they never actually first-hand experienced. As he stated, “The only feeling that anyone can have about an event he does not experience is the feeling aroused by his mental image of that event.” Naturally, Lippmann referred to events such as the war, which were very distant for the majority of people. Immigration is, on the contrary, something that is experienced directly to some extent by most. Nonetheless, it is practically impossible for anyone to actually know the problem of immigration as a whole. According to Blinder (2015), the sources of information about immigration that people can access, that comprehend the media as well as direct experiences, cannot provide a complete depiction of the extensive social phenomenon that is immigration in general. That is why, in his view, it is possible to distinguish between “statistical immigration” and “imagined immigration”, the first measured by the state and the second as it is constructed by the people.

Additionally, the attitudes towards immigration vary based on specific characteristics of particular immigrants, i.e. race and class (Blinder 2015). That is why many surveys about the attitudes towards immigration are inefficient, as, for instance, they often fail to define what it is meant by the term “immigrant” and tend to refer to immigrants as a whole homogeneous group, giving to the respondents the freedom to make their own assumptions.

In general, the native-born majority group’s adverse attitudes towards immigration are mostly driven by sociotropic concerns about its impact on the culture and the economy of the nation (Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014). Anti-immigration discourses usually comprehend the idea that foreigners will infiltrate a country and alter or even destroy its culture, language, traditions and economic well-being. According to the “competitive threat” theoretical model, the increase in the size of an outgroup population (in this case the immigrants) is likely to increase the fear of competition over resources, and in turn this fear will lead to hostility and prejudice towards that population (Gorodzeisky and Semyonov 2019), so that the larger is the relative size of immigrant population, the more people will be hostile to it. Furthermore, members of the native-born group consider themselves superior and better deserving of such above-mentioned resources (Blumer 1958).

At this point however, it is important to recall that the perceived size of this group is usually distorted and overestimated, so it becomes a vicious circle.

Given these assumptions, it does not come as a surprise that the average citizen will feel more threatened by an unskilled immigrant, rather than by an immigrant that is fully capable of support himself financially (Hainmueller and Hiscox, 2010). The same is true regarding the ethnicities of the migrants, i.e. in Europe non-European migrants are perceived as much more of a threat than a European one. As stated by Volpicelli (2015), these kinds of divisions create two categories, the “good” and the “bad” migrants, the first being wealthy and arriving legally to Europe, and the latter being those arriving on European shores as refugees and disadvantaged labour migrants.

Since we cannot rely on people’s perceptions about the issue of immigration, it is crucial to assess to what extent the “European refugee crisis” can truly be considered a crisis by looking at the real statistics about immigration in the last years.

First of all, the use of the term “crisis” itself is arguably, as Kryzanowski, Triandafyllidou and Wodak (2018) state, “ideologically charged” and has been mainly used to legitimise the special measures that were used or were going to be used in the years following the increase in the flow of migration to Western Europe. The language of “crisis” has infiltrated European vocabulary at all levels, from the elites to the media and the popular culture (Ammaturo 2018). The use of this term causes a certain degree of alarmism which carries an intentional political purpose. In the European context this alarmism has given way to a number of mobilisations to protect the endangered “Europeanness” such as the protection of national borders and the rejection of the non-European “other” to reinforce the concept of a European identity. As a matter of fact, there is a voluminous literature that links immigration (and, more accurately, the perception of it) to the recent electoral success of the radical right, which opposes and stigmatises immigrants in favour of national sovereignty and security (Stockemer 2015). In his study about the correlation between the actual size of the immigrant population and the perceived one, and their relation to the success of the radical right in Europe, Stockemer (2015) actually observed that, first of all, there is no correlation between individuals’ attitudes towards immigration and the real percentage of foreigners in a given region. Secondly, he found out that there is, instead, a strong correlation between individuals’ perceptions on immigration and electoral success of radical right parties. If this is the case, then it is important to ask ourselves what it is that makes people form these exaggerate perceptions. Is it, for example, the media that is responsible for the framing of the issue, or the mainstream parties? Or is it the strategy of the radical right itself?

In the first place, it is important to understand that it is very hard to know the exact number of immigrants and to compare this number between different European countries. As explained by the report on migration and public perception by BEPA<sup>1</sup> (2006), the comparability of Member States statistics is an issue, since many countries use citizenship instead of place or country of birth as a basis for their statistics, so in the “non-citizen” part we can find citizens of other EU Member States, as well as third countries nationals. Moreover, the data about illegal immigrants are greatly unreliable.

Nonetheless, when looking at the available data it appears evident that people misperceive both the size of the immigrant population and the dangers that it can cause to the host country.

At this point it is worth putting into context the figures of refugees coming to Europe. As stated by Connor (2016), in 2015 there were 1.3 million refugees applying for asylum in Europe (only a small fraction of the 21.3 million refugees worldwide), and according to Eurostat<sup>2</sup>, the number of people residing in an EU Member State with citizenship of a non-member country on 1 January 2018 was 22.3 million, which represents around 4.4 % of the EU28 population.

With these numbers, thus, native Europeans should not have felt so overwhelmed. However, as reported by Pelligra (2018), Eurispes data tells us that the majority of Italians think that immigrants account to a percentage that is between the 16 to 25 % of the total population, while in reality they are the 8%. Furthermore, in his article about European reactions to the migrant crisis, Fourquet found out that in France, Italy, the Netherlands and the UK, six out of ten people think that their country hosts already too many foreigners and it would be impossible to receive more. Likewise, Miano and Stantcheva (2018) noted that in their analysis on the misperceptions about immigration, in five out of the six countries taken into consideration (Germany, France, Italy, the UK and US), natives believe that there are between two and three times as many immigrants as there actually are. To add to this, in all countries, immigrants were viewed as poorer, less educated, and more likely to be unemployed than is the case.

What is even more shocking is that, even once people are given the correct information they do not change their minds but actually tend to unreceptive to reality. As noted by Betts and Collier (2018), the current crisis is not one of numbers but one of trust, since European publics believe that migration is out of control and that their leaders have no plan for handling it.

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<sup>1</sup> Bureau of European Policy Advisers, European Commission

<sup>2</sup> Migration and migrant population statistics, Eurostat, 2019

These misperceptions about the size of the immigrant populations and its effects on the hosting countries are of crucial importance in order to understand the public attitude towards it. Exaggerated perceptions usually match with exaggerate sentiments of fear. The idea of a refugee “invasion” that has spread throughout Western Europe has deeply shaken the public, leading it to assume the worst about those coming in their native country. The refugee flow has even been perceived as the “most threatening” issue for the hosting societies (Butler 2017). Since there is evidence of the link between misperceptions (or, better, inflated perceptions) and negative attitudes towards immigration, it would be the case for the issue to be deeply analysed by social scientists and policy makers. As Burrell and Horschelmann (2018) argue, in a time when racist and prejudiced discourses about displaced people have caused an alarming success for extremist politics across Europe, there is a pressing need to take seriously the potential of a skewed representation of the European crisis. So far, much of the debate in Europe has been about how to get rid of immigrants, while the real question should be how to assimilate them in the best possible way.

## CHAPTER 2 - The populist discourse on immigration

### 2.1 The post-truth era and fake news

Over the last years, the notions of “post-truth age” and “fake news” have become dominant in the public discourse. In 2016 the term “post-truth” was even selected as international word of the year by the Oxford Dictionary (Llorente 2017), which defines it as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.” That is why a lot of attention has been addressed towards the so-known “fake news”, what Waisbord (2018) defines as conventional-looking news which are intended to purposely misinform.

The popularity of these topics arose from the unexpected and controversial events of 2016, such as the divisive Brexit referendum in Europe and the comparably contentious US presidential election. Particularly in these two cases, it seemed like personal beliefs had proved to be stronger than facts and logic. The successful campaigns of the winning sides of the events that we mentioned were characterised by xenophobic, discriminatory rhetoric; lies that bordered on the impossible were spread and believed by most, and they were immediately withdrawn on winning (Lee 2017). In both campaigns, expert opinion was denigrated in favour of deceptions and hateful rhetoric, mostly focused on the damages that immigrants bring to the host countries. Slogans about “British values” and “making America great again” which gained so much popularity are as catchy as they are misleading. Of course, immigration is an easy target for political actors to gain support from the vast public, and not coincidentally this is happening at a time when there are about 244 million international migrants globally<sup>3</sup> and people are easily manipulated into perceiving strangers as competition for limited resources. In reality, not only there is no evidence that immigration is bad for the host country, but a study from Clemens (2011) actually showed that removing all barriers to migration would even increase the world GDP by between 50% and 150%. Nonetheless, political parties have been extremely successful in manipulating emotions based on falsehood and telling what people want to hear, despite the contrary concrete evidence.

In fact, Zarzalejos (2017) defines of post-truth as “not a synonymous of lie, but rather consists in the *relativisation* of the truth and the supremacy of emotional speeches”. One could, for instance, argue that immigration does create a strain on schools, housing and other services. Yet, much of the problem is caused by bad planning by governments, not by immigration per se. Hence, living in a post-truth

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<sup>3</sup> World Migration Report 2018, IOM, UN Migration Agency

era means that political actors are likely to only draw on the expertise that suits their aims and to disregard expertise that does not (De Cleen 2017).

As Gooch (2017) states, however, it is worth noticing that techniques such as the use of fake news and alternative truths are not new to the world of politics, where lies and distortions have always been used to profit from ignorance; what is new, is the singular context of political disillusionment and digital age. He goes on arguing that in today's world, where people have access to a significantly abundant amount of information and are capable of produce information themselves, the ways in which citizens relate to the media are considerably different.

Due to the enormous and incessant flow of news that they are able to receive, in fact, citizens can become even more misinformed than earlier if they do not learn to select their sources carefully enough. The speed and scale of the proliferation of false information on the internet, on social platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, has assured a completely new dimension to the issue of political deception strategies. As a matter of fact, while the public purpose of traditional journalism is well-known, i.e. to instruct the audience separating the facts from the lies and to aim at the closest representation of the truth, those who claim to be critics and dedicate themselves to spread "news" on social media often have little if no understanding of the ethical reasoning behind journalism. Speculation dressed up as truth is just about ordinary on every social platform, and the voice of the public has become significantly amplified in this sense. Considering that, according to the Statistic Portal (2018), a social platform such as Facebook counted more than 2.27 billion of monthly active users in 2018, being the most popular social network worldwide, the power that it possesses to inform and influence the public is enormous. Nonetheless, there is a fundamental drawback with these social media being the first (and possibly only) source of information of people, and in particular of voters: they tend to enforce the people pre-existing ideas and prejudices, rather than present to them an impartial coverage of a particular topic. As a result of this confirmation bias, fake or misleading news can spread uncontrollably through the "likes" and sharing between social networks friends.

Of course, one could definitely expect that social media would change the information landscape given that basically anyone is able to post about happenings with no need for supporting documentation or indications of the trustworthiness of the source (Musgrove et al. 2018).

What is more alarming, however, is that the risk of coming across misleading information is not limited to social media at all. Indeed, fake news have infiltrated the world of conventional journalism. Even if journalism has in the past claimed a special power to determine the truth, these claims are harder to defend today when there are multiple platforms claiming the same power (Waisbord 2018).

Tanz (2017) stated that: “In a post-fact era of fake news and filter bubbles, in which audiences cherry-pick the information and sources that match their own biases and dismiss the rest, the news media seems to have lost its power to shape public opinion.” We are right now experiencing a loss of trust towards traditional news sources, and this, as already mentioned above, shifts the balance of power between media and the audience, taking power from the former to give it to the latter. The audience is now able to generate its own content, and journalists have now a new role as verifiers of truth and evaluators of news. According to Riordan (2014), the verification of information remains the greatest challenge of the digital news revolution.

Journalism is supposed to be tied to the idea of objectivity, which, as stated by Mothes (2017) requires both *factuality*, i.e. the reliance on facts that reflect political reality, and *impartiality*, meaning that existing beliefs should not affect the interpretation of information. Yet these notions are now threatened by rogue politics and the current communication revolution that accelerates the spread of misinformation and dubious claims. A key question for the coming years will be how media rebuilds public trust in quality journalism (White 2017). In a time of crises and uncertainties it is vital for journalists to reconnect with their audience and to stop them from turning to the voices that echo their fears and anxieties, but rather educate them to recognise valid news.

## **2.2 Defining Populism**

During the last two decades the term “populism” has been centre of discussion across the globe. Especially within the past ten years, there has been a major outburst of populism-related research across social sciences, and particularly in the fields of politics and sociology (Baptista and Urribarri 2018). Part of this research concerns the potential dangers that populism could bring to the liberal order, especially in the light of recent happenings such as Brexit, the start of Donald Trump presidency in the US, the weakening of democratic institutions in Turkey under president Erdogan, etc. As a matter of fact, the populist phenomenon has spread at a rather quickly pace. In electoral terms, as Bernhard and Kriesi (2019) stated, populist parties have even become part of national governments, with cases such as the Greek coalition between SYRIZA and ANEL or the Italian one between the Five Star Movement and Lega.

Several conceptualisations of populism have been put forth in the past few years, since, as argued by Mény and Surel (2002) populism can be compared to an empty shell that can be made meaningful by



whatever is poured into it. Nonetheless, there is now a general consensus on its “minimal” or “core” characteristics. Populism, broadly speaking, is characterised by the juxtaposition of the “good people” against the “evil elite”.

The most used definition is that of Mudde (2004): “Populism is a thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite”, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.”

First of all, it is defined as a “thin-centred ideology” in the sense that it cannot be considered a full ideology like liberalism or socialism, because it does not provide an all-inclusive view of the world, but only looks at certain specific elements of the relation between the people and the elite (Canovan 2002; Rooduijn and Akkerman 2015). Populism derives its legitimacy from an allegedly moral superiority, according to which the society is shaped by an antagonistic relationship between “us” the pure people and “them” the corrupt elite (Mudde 2004). In the context of democracy, populism clearly seeks to confront the concept of liberal democracy, which outlines a set of institutions that include the expression of the popular will but at the same time includes other institutions that guarantee the elaboration of that will through representatives of the people and a constant debate to ensure the continuation of democracy itself. Instead populist democracies advocate for the direct and unmediated voice of people; they are impatient with the liberal intermediary institutions and require a total faith by the people in the figure of the leader, who’s function is to be the mouthpiece of the group (Crouch 2018).

Indeed, populism generally presents some other distinctive features that help facilitate its task. Two of these are the presence of a charismatic leadership, and the use of a particular style of communication, i.e. without intermediaries. Although a charismatic leader is not an inherent attribute of populism, Albertazzi and McDonnell (2008) actually argue that “the charismatic bond between leader and follower is absolutely central to populist parties”, and Smith (2010) adds that the lack of a charismatic leader could even explain the failure of populist parties to gain support in certain countries. According to Pappas’ (2016) conclusion to his study about European populist leaders, their kind of leadership is extraordinary in the sense that it is at the same time personal and tries to radically transform the established institutional order, doing so through its intrinsic political charisma. In Viviani’s (2017) view, “the leader becomes the symbol of the opposition to representative politics” and thus functions as the motivator for people’s mobilisation and as spokesman of collective resentment. Furthermore, the populist leader has the task of defining the confines of the term “people” (De La Torre 2015), This task is strictly related to the style of the populist discourse, namely the way in which the dichotomy between “us” the people and “them” is expressed and publicised. In fact,

communication is a central part of the vision and action of populist parties (Ripollés, Sintes-Olivella and Franch-Puig 2017), and academic literature has already identified the existence of a common communication style among populist politicians (Aalberg et al. 2017). This style is commonly accompanied by a plain language that provide a sense of closeness between the politically dissatisfied publics and the leaders of the party. Populist messages ought to respond to the hopes and fears of people, and therefore are intrinsically charged with emotions such as anger and fear. This kind of communication relies more on the way in which ideas are believed and supported, rather than on the truth of their content (Hofstadter 2008), and that is why there is a particular focus on the means to persuade the public. For this reason, the populism-media connection is a crucial one, as an intense media visibility can bring attention to the populist cause and can be turned into a powerful ally of populist leaders.

While in numerous studies on the topic it is assumed that populism is a dichotomous category, meaning that parties are either populist or not (Matthijs and Akkerman 2015), in reality it is more suitable to consider populism as a scale, since parties can be more or less populist. Furthermore, the “degree” of populism of a party does not depend on whether it is left or right. The populist phenomenon, being considered here as a *thin ideology*, is by definition chameleonic, in the sense that it can include both right-wing and left-wing variants (Bernhard and Kriesi 2019). There is not much agreement, however, in what constitutes right or left populism.

One general approach is that right and left populist parties are essentially similar, and thus that populism trumps the underlying ideology (Judis 2016). Following this over-simplistic view, the right-left distinction is basically blurred by the core trait of populism, namely anti-elitism. According to Rooduijn and Akkerman (2015), radical left and right “do not differ significantly from each other when it comes to their populism”, and “the general message is the same: corrupt elites neglect the interests of ordinary people”. The boundaries between the two orientations are, in fact, blurred and the central ideological element (distrust of the elite) crosses the left/right cleavage.

Other scholars, however, go further trying to more efficiently theorise the existing differences between the two kinds of populism. According to March (2017), there are three main points of distinctions. The most important is that right populism is primarily exclusionary and left populism is primarily inclusive; secondly, while right populism focuses on ethnic identities, left populism focuses more on socio-economic issues; finally, left populists are more strongly connected to their underlying ideology, since they are first populists and then socialists.

These theses were firstly explored by Mudde and Kaltwasser (2011) when they compared left populism (in Latin America) and right (in Europe). Nonetheless, March (2017) states that they can also be applied to European left populism.

This study will limit its focus on Western Europe's right-wing populism, since its more ethno-centric conception of the people and its xenophobic position against the "other" make it more relevant to find out about populism exploitation of media framing of immigration.

As stated above, right-wing populism adds a second antagonism to the "us" versus "them" dichotomy; it considers the *people* as a culturally homogenous group and juxtaposes its interests to the ones of minorities, such as migrants. In addition, it makes use of negativity in its political communication, resorting to emotionally charged speeches, to the disrespect of political correctness and even, in some cases, to personal insults (Greven 2016).

It can be argued that the success of this type of populism is linked to the reasons why populism rose in Western Europe in the first place. On one hand, the increased importance of the European and the global level in the governance structure has been perceived as a constraint on the autonomy of single states; on the other hand, the increasing *mediatization* of politics has contributed in reducing the power of the party apparatus in favour of the personalisation of political leadership (Kriesi 2014). Furthermore, the success of populist parties has also been attributed to cultural or economic crises. Many scholars have shown that the number of immigrants in a country, for instance, is directly proportional to their success (Werts et al. 2012). Given these premises, populism originated and developed by exploiting on one hand the spread of the dissatisfaction with party politics, and on the other the need to make anti-politics politically active (Viviani 2017). Its rise was particularly linked to the process by which "traditional" (non-populist) parties become more powerful reinforcing their position in office but lost legitimacy in the eyes of the public. In this context, populism presented itself as the holder of righteousness by arguing for popular sovereignty and majority rule (Viviani 2017). Essentially, according to Kriesi, starting from these premises, "The voters get the impression that the parties that habitually govern are all alike, that they all betray the public behind the scenes, and that they all deserve to be sanctioned by a popular vote in the upcoming elections."

As Van Kessel (2015) argues, in the European context populism is typically associated with xenophobic and extreme politics, with a nationalist and conservative ideology which are generally considered elements on the right end of the political spectrum. For instance, as Halikiopoulou (2018) stated, right-wing populist parties competed in most electoral campaigns in Europe in 2017. Just to name a few, the French Front National got to the second round of the French presidential elections,

and the Austrian Freedom Party gained access to office in a governing coalition with the OVP. Of course, these electoral results have to be placed in a broader context that saw the rise in the success of what we define as right-wing populist parties for the past 30 years (Halikiopoulou 2018).

In addition, across Europe right-wing populist parties have succeeded in influencing policy even when they are not in government, with parties such as Britain's Ukip, the Danish People's party, and the AfD pushing the narrative of their countries' dominant centre-right parties to the right, especially on critical subjects such as immigration.

### **2.3 Populism, nationalism, ethnicity and exclusion**

Being a thin ideology, as we mentioned earlier in this chapter, populism can easily be combined with other more elaborated, "thicker" ideologies, one of them being nationalism (Mudde 2004).

The vast existing literature on nationalism demonstrates how little agreement there is among scholars on the origins of nationalism and the definitions of the terms "nation" and "nationalism".

One of the most notorious definitions of nationalism is that by Smith (2001), that describes it as a "An ideological movement for attaining and maintaining autonomy, unity and identity on behalf of a population deemed by some of its members to constitute an actual or potential nation." Thus, for Smith there are three main goals of nationalism: autonomy, national unity, and national identity. According to Finlayson (2014), in addition, nationalism holds that every nation should govern itself, free from external interference (self-determination), and that a nation is a natural and ideal basis for a polity.

Therefore, central to nationalism is the concept of nation, which Leerssen (2006) describes as a vague and contradictory idea. For instance, Smith (1991) defines the nation as a "named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths, and historical memories, a mass public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members". On the other hand, Tamir (1995) gives a different definition, "community whose members share feelings of fraternity, substantial distinctiveness, and exclusivity, as well as beliefs in a common ancestry and continuous genealogy", which is perhaps too focused on the ethnic side of the definition and fails to account for a territorial self-determination and the political identity (Barrington 1997). This second definition, in fact, fits better what we would instead classify as "nativism" or "ethnic nationalism". Nativism is, essentially, a sub-construction of nationalism that rather than focusing on a hypothetical external "enemy" of the nation, concentrates on internal minorities, i.e. the immigrants. It blames groups of migrants as responsible for the decline of their freedom of sovereignty and the threat to the

preservation of the essence of the pre-existing “nation” (Guia 2016). Nativists argue for an ethnic and cultural homogeneity, and in the light of the recent increase in migration flows their claim has gained ground throughout Europe.

From an historical point of view, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw the irresistible rise of nationalism, a rise that did not decline after the Great War but actually reached a new peak with totalitarian regimes and the start of the Second World War; after the war, nationalism did not disappear but changed in its form (Martinelli 2018). Kedourie’s (1960) defined nationalism as “a doctrine invented in Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century that divides humanity into separate and distinct nations”, and believed that many calamitous global events, such as war, famine and genocide, were caused by a doctrine of nationalism, which justified the division of nations. Although this pessimistic view seems to select only the extreme features of nationalism, reducing it to a dangerous ideology, it has extensively been shared by both scholars and political actors in light of the events of the Second World War, when global organisations such as the United Nations have emerged in order to combat the nationalist threat.

Nowadays, though, nationalism is regaining popularity. But, as mentioned earlier, it is now presenting itself in a changed version. Rather than being a matter of competition between nations, it is more a struggle against an emerging world order that threatens national borders and authority in favour of globalisation (Kalb 2019).

The relation between populism and nationalism (and, more precisely, nativism) has recently been a focus of discussion. In Brubaker’s (2019) view, populism and nationalism are analytically distinct but not analytically independent, in the sense that they intersect but they do not perfectly coincide. On one hand, populism is characterised by the vertical opposition between the people and the elite, while on the other nationalism concerns the horizontal antagonism between the nation and the “dangerous others”. Thus, both concepts revolve around the basic separation of the world into two categories: “us” and “them”. Especially when we take into consideration the populist radical right, the two phenomena are often conceptually and empirically related (Canovan 2005). The point of intersection between them is found in the exclusionist, divisive nature of both. As a matter of fact, nationalism and populism have in common the focus on an in-group, the *nation* for nationalists and the *people* for populism, and that is why they can easily be combined. Of course, there are exceptions to take into consideration. When we deal with left-wing populism parties or movements, for instance, nativism (ethno-cultural nationalism) does not find a place.

Especially starting from 2015, with the beginning of the European refugee crisis, a new phenomenon has emerged, the rise of the so-called “new nationalism”. This term is used to describe the rise of parties that share a focus on national sovereignty, strict positions on immigration and supra-national institutions and are at the same time anti-elitist. These parties essentially consist in a merger of populist and nationalist attitudes (Halikiopoulou and Vlandas 2019). The strong emotional appeal typical of nationalism is shared by populism, and the two together have proven to be convincing and able to shape political views on pivotal contemporary issues.

These new mixed parties claim for national sovereignty based on the will of the people, and in this case the “people” is intended as the group of “pure people” of the nation, against both the corrupt elite (typical of populism discourse) and the threatening ethnic minorities. In fact, we have already affirmed that populism revolves around the antagonism between the people and the elite. However, who represents the two groups is determined by the orientation of the populist party or movement (Laclau 2005). Indeed, Bonikowski (2016) affirms that the boundaries around “the people” are often kept vague by populist exponents so to maximise the scope of their claims; nevertheless, the margins are frequently drawn to incite the hostility towards certain out-groups, such as ethnic, religious or racial minorities, thus taking up the central concept underlying nationalism. This is where the connection between the two ideologies appears: their exclusionary discourse confines “the people” to a sub-group of the public that “deserves” political power.

The nationalist rhetoric recently supported by European parties such as the Italian Lega and the German Alternative für Deutschland, as explained by Bastasin (2019), is crucial because it presents nationalist solutions (such as the idea of closed borders) as the simple response to the economic damages caused by globalisation. This despite of the fact that there is no empirical evidence of the direct link between open borders and impoverishment in Europe, and therefore the nationalist logic is not rational. This rhetoric, however, represents a further meeting point between populists and nationalists since it suits perfectly the populist agenda of offering simple and attractive solutions, appealing to the people even if not empirically proved. In the cases that we have mentioned above and several more across Europe, these appealing solutions took the form of anti-immigrant movements, so to please the native-born, typically white, voters’ dissatisfaction with demographic changes and mainstream politics (Bonikowski 2016).

Therefore, of key relevance in this context is the “ethnicity” issue. Ethnicity is a very recent term (appeared in the Oxford Dictionary only in 1972), and, as stressed by many scholars, there is no definite meaning of it. Its most shared definition would be one similar to that of Schermerhorn (1970), who referred to an ethnic group as “A collectivity within a larger society having real or putative

common ancestry, memories of a shared historical past, and a cultural focus on one or more symbolic elements defined as the epitome of their peoplehood”. Ethnicity plays a central role in the self-awareness of a certain community and very rarely it can be completely extinguished (Smith 1991). The variant of nationalism that is based on ethnicity is an expression of the process of picturing communities based on ethnic supremacy (Sriyono 2018). Although ethnic nationalism, which would entail complete exclusion or deportation of immigrants, is considered too radical by scholars to be relevant anymore today, it is however regaining support in less extreme forms.

As reported above, the recent backlash against globalization, triggered not only by economic insecurity, but also by fears of social and demographic change, can be regarded as the reason behind the rise and the electoral success of what we have defined as new nationalism.

The resulting idea of a homogenous group challenged by outsiders, who merit exclusion, interlinks with populist trends (Bieber 2018). Though Europe’s far-right parties can differ in various respects, they are motivated by a common sense of mission: to save their homelands from what they view as the corrosive effects of multiculturalism and globalization by creating a closed-off society (Sriyono 2018). The perceived need to attribute the blame for such economic and social anxieties, easily results into the reinforcement of xenophobic and isolating behaviours with respect to ethnic minorities. Unsurprisingly, the increasing influx of immigrants is one of the reasons for the recent electoral support for the far-right parties in Europe.

In 2016 British voters decided to leave the EU convinced that it threatened British sovereignty by leaving it into the hands of the overwhelming immigrants; across Europe leaders have embraced their versions of new nationalism, from Italy to Austria, to Hungary and Poland, where they hold executive power; in Spain, the rise of the new party Vox has placed immigration at the centre of the political debate with its extreme position (Cederman 2019).

The powerful combination of nationalism and populism has spread in recent years. Yet what is most startling and will be analysed in the next chapter is that, once in power, nationalist populists do not actually keep their promises of “taking back control” in behalf of the people, but instead they perform sorts of largely symbolic gestures, like promising to build walls, which in reality do not accomplish much if not increasing hatred towards minorities (Müller 2019). New nationalist parties are successful in combining both cultural and economic grievances into one single distorted narration in which evil elites coddle undeserving out-groups, such as immigrants and minorities, while disrespecting the nation’s “true” people (Snyder 2019). Through far-right nationalist populist parties this narration is

normalised and legitimised, and therefore is even eventually capable of influencing not only voters' perspective in their favour but also other less ideologically strong parties.

The opposition to globalisation is now predominant when it comes to immigration, so much that even the left-right political spectrum has become more and more blurred, with presumed supporters of left or centre parties (like working class and unemployed) embracing right-wing, nationalist populist discourses (Greven 2016). Profiting from what we defined as post-truth era, these parties increasingly reinforce the effectiveness of their messaging and undoubtedly shape the current political landscape.



## **CHAPTER 3 –The populist immigration debate across Europe**

### **3.1 Brexit campaign**

In June 2016, 52% of the British population voted to exit the European Union. The referendum decision by the United Kingdom to leave the European Union is considered as one of the most visible examples of the increasing strength of right-wing populism in the world.

In the weeks following the referendum, the most googled questions in the UK were, in order, “What does it mean to leave the EU?” and, rather worryingly, “What is the EU?” (Tamblyn 2016). According to a YouGov poll for The Times, by October 2017, the percentage of voters who felt that the results of the referendum should have been honoured was only of 28%. In light of these reactions, it comes logical to question the reasons that led voters to rush to the ballots without a clear idea of the repercussions that their choice would make on their futures. If in part this phenomenon can be explained by a combination of reaction against immigration and concern about economic insecurity, it is nonetheless crucial to look at how the Brexit campaign was portrayed by the media and how political actors acted in the months that preceded the voting, in order to comprehend how a decision of enormous consequences as such could be taken with a light heart by British citizens.

When it came to the EU Referendum campaign, national media coverage was, to say the least, crucial in determining the outcome.

According to Banducci and Stevens (2016), referenda work as legitimate instruments of democracy if three basic requirements are met. First of all, voters need to be informed about the issues they are voting for; secondly, they vote based on those issues; and thirdly, the turnout of voters should be sufficient. Apart from the third requirement which was met with the 72% of voters’ turnout, the other two seem to have been largely neglected during the Brexit referendum, as both sides were accused of misusing facts and figures.

In the context of a referendum the media has a profoundly important role, namely to convey information (as clear and as truthful as it can be) so to assist the decision-making process of voters; a task in which the British media has failed spectacularly (Barnett 2016).

In the report published at the end of May 2016, the House of Commons Treasury Select Committee complained that “The public debate is being poorly served by inconsistent, unqualified and, in some cases, misleading claims and counter-claims” (Renwick, Flinders and Jennings 2016).

As a matter of fact, the campaign in Britain was fought in a bitter manner, with the majority of the media, excluding public service broadcasters (which are bound to be impartial), boldly taking sides and supporting the spread of several fake news. In a study published in May 2017 by the Centre for

the Study of Media, Communication and Power of the King's College about the UK media coverage of the EU Referendum, Moore and Ramsay (2017) state that the two most covered campaign issues were the economy and immigration, with immigration being the issue that appeared most in the front pages. The disregarding of many other major issues including taxation, the environment, employment, and social welfare was striking (Deacon et al. 2016), showing the degree to which a populist, simplistic narrative was able to shape the outcome of the referendum.

The British vote to leave the EU appears to have been, indeed, a nativist reaction to the threat to their national identity and position posed by the EU (Iakhnis, Rathbun, Reifler and Scotto 2018). According to Goodwin and Milazzo (2017), perceptions of the changing nature of Britain's communities were an important factor in explaining support for Brexit, and, in fact, support for leaving was stronger in areas where during the 10 years preceding the vote there had been a significant influx of EU nationals (Goodwin and Heath 2016). Yet, these concerns were exploited and actively targeted throughout the 2016 referendum campaign so to provoke a pessimistic attitude towards the issue of immigration. In fact, as Goodwin and Milazzo (2017) state, several Leave campaigns devoted much resources and efforts to amplify public anxieties over immigration, claiming for example, that immigration was exercising pressure on public services, that Turkey would soon join the EU and that the refugee crisis had led the EU to a breaking point.

This typically nationalist populist narrative was exploited by the Leave campaign targeting at least three groups: first of all, the national liberal elite (considered as insulated by the wealth and social positions gained from Europeanisation); secondly, the European elite, in the vest of the Brussels bureaucrats strangling British liberty; and finally, the migrants, that Europe's free movement rules enabled (Clarke and Newman 2017). These feelings of betrayal, alongside with the sense of loss of sovereignty and anxieties about the future, all conveyed in the Leavers promise to "take back control". No slogan played out more than this, and it was on the topic of immigration where the desire to take back control was mostly felt (Gietel-Basten 2016).

Especially in England during the referendum the sense of national identity became opposed to that of EU membership, with the EU becoming the target of the widespread populist sentiments that were growing across the whole of Europe (Browning 2019).

As we already mentioned, immigration was the subject of strident material stemming from the two main groups campaigning for Leave: Vote Leave (the official campaign in favour of exiting the EU) and Leave.EU (the unofficial, more immigration-focused campaign). In the months preceding the vote, the negative representation of immigration became prevalent and contributed to create a general

atmosphere of panic. The idea that immigrants were pressing on infrastructures and public services was exploited to their advantage, with the common perception of a crumbling National Health Service (NHS) leading the fear for a growing burden posed by the increase in the population.

According to Nigel Farage, ex-leader of the UK Independence Party and figurehead of Leave.EU, the EU had facilitated uncontrolled immigration that was harming Britain. The populist leader and his messages did much to shift the balance of the campaign on the Leave side. Although being considered too extreme from other Leave campaigners themselves, his ideas spread and convinced many voters with the strength of their simplicity. Migrants were portrayed as terrorists, sexual predators and generally exploiters of British resources.

The UK Independence Party (UKIP), notorious for its anti-establishment, anti-EU, anti-immigrant character was in fact a central actor on this side of the referendum. Its posters became widely condemned, even among other exponents of the Leave side. Under the headline “Breaking Point, the EU has failed us all”, Farage launched a poster depicting a queue of mostly non-white bodies trying to reach Europe. It became infamous and described as “entirely inappropriate” and, according to Jeremy Corbyn it showed the extent to which the far right had infiltrated the Brexit campaign.

Possibly the most scandalous lie spread during the campaign, however, was the one suggesting that the UK was sending £350 million to the EU every week. Emblazoned on the side of buses was the slogan “we send the EU £350 million a week, let's fund our NHS instead”, which was repeatedly criticised by the ex-Chair of the UK Statistics Authority Sir Andrew Dilnot as “misleading and undermining the trust in official statistics”, as Sparrow (2016) reported. Fullfact.org (the UK factchecking website) also showed the true cost of membership after rebates and EU contributions to the UK, arguing that the impact on the economy from changes to trade after leaving the EU is likely to be far bigger than savings from the UK's membership fee, which was, however, never £350.

Through a purely populist rhetoric, British political actors, particularly on the Leave side, were able to feed the public's hopes, fears and prejudices, tapping into a selective collective memory and a nationalistic fervour (Rowinski 2016). The issue of immigration, already a familiar object of hostility, was presented as the most tangible sign of what could be changed if “we” – the Britons – had more power (Moore 2016). Expertise on the matter, that clearly supported different (if not opposite) views was derided and attributed to self-interest (Street 2016).

Furthermore, the Referendum campaign has been highly pictured on all social media platforms. These platforms have been used to shape the public agenda and were effectively exploited by the Leave supporters. As Polonski (2016) clearly explains in his study about the Impact of social media on the outcome of the EU referendum, Brexit supporters repeatedly defeated their counterparts on social

media conversations thanks to their more intuitive and emotionally charged messages. The Leave side skilfully played the social media world at its advantage by basically making Brexit everything that people wanted it to be, the solution to all problems. Indeed, Polonski (2016) found out that not only there were more Leavers on Instagram, they were also more active users. He noticed that Instagram posts by supporters of the Leave vote received more likes and comments when compared to those of the Remain side. To add to this, an analysis by Llewellyn and Cram (2016) found out that Leavers were dominating Twitter throughout the whole campaign, with “Brexit” and “LeaveEU” being some of the most shared hashtags of the time. The Leave campaign was even able to develop an app that was downloaded by thousands of people. So, through a combination of better suited arguments and social media algorithms that favour the creation of filter-bubbles, the Leave faction was eventually able to bring the victory on its side.

To sum up, on the Leave side, strong, charismatic personalities such as those of Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson (the second most quoted politicians in British articles during the campaign, and one of the most enthusiastic promoters of the scandalous lie about the £350 million) were successful in constructing a “likeable persona”, one that was perceived as open and understanding of the concerns of the voters. On the other side, they depicted David Cameron and others as distant establishment (S. Crines 2016), using the dichotomy typical of populism that divides the public from the elite. The Leave campaign basically made it look like if a vote for Remain was also a vote for Cameron and the governing elite. As a result, their narrative was more convincing, and the referendum was used, as it often happens, to punish the current government rather than to express genuine preferences about the processes of European integration (Banducci and Stevens 2016).

The Leave side was able to gain victory thanks to its populist declarations and attack politics filled with personal slurs and negativity (Renwick, Flinders and Jennings 2016), causing the already disenchanted public to look at them as sort of heroes of the people, standing up against the wicked European Union which was weakening British sovereignty.

### **3.2 The Italian case of Matteo Salvini’s Lega**

The spectre of right-wing nationalist populism did not leave out Italian politics. In the 2018 general election, the Lega and the Five-star Movement emerged as victorious exponents of a rebellion against the traditional political establishment and formed a government coalition. The Italian daily *Corriere della Sera* spoke of “the end of Italian politics as we have known it in the last 25 years” (Corbetta et al. 2018).

Matteo Salvini's Lega emerged as the main political force and was able, after weeks of negotiations and impasses, to form the new government with the Five-star Movement.

Representing very different versions of populism, the two parties found common ground in their anti-establishment, Eurosceptic characters. The two party leaders Matteo Salvini and Luigi Di Maio have christened their administration as the "government of change"; in reality, however, the question is what kind of change this would be.

Between the two parties in government, the Lega is undoubtedly the one with a harsher standpoint on immigration.

Lega Nord was an Italian political party that was born officially in 1989 in Bergamo and had at its basis the ideas of autonomism and federalism. Guided by Umberto Bossi, it became the oldest party group in the Italian parliament and gained considerable experience in government participation (Albertazzi et al. 2018). Following the abrupt end of Bossi's leadership in 2012, after a short interim period, in December 2013 Matteo Salvini was elected leader by party members.

Under the guide of Bossi, Lega Nord was purely a regionalist, populist party. Its objective was the autonomy of Northern Italy (or *Padania*), which was seen as intrinsically different from the rest of the country. The Lega Nord argued that the centralisation of political authority and economic resources was detrimental to northern regional interests (Spektorowski 2003). While at its beginnings the position of the party on the left-right political spectrum was ambiguous, during the 2000s, when it participated in government with Silvio Berlusconi, its anti-immigration, anti-Muslim attitude became a key point of the Lega Nord (Ozzano 2019). And if initially the object of hostility was immigration from southern Italy to *Padania*, the rhetoric gradually escalated to hostility towards any kind of immigration.

Under the leadership of Salvini (from 2013 onwards), the initial emphasis on northerners was abandoned in favour of a national definition of the unified community. Salvini's communication strategy was incredibly effective and impeccably timed: the Lega Nord became Lega, and the green logo representing the Po River Valley was changed to a neutral blue. This allowed the new leader to cleverly enlarge his pool of voters (Pellegrino 2019), in a time when the support from the South of Italy was necessary not to ultimately confine the party to a secondary role in the Italian political scenario. Thanks to this transformation, the Lega won 17 percent in March 2018 against the scarce 3 percent of 2013.

Following the 2014 European Parliament elections, Salvini showed an unprecedented ability of the Lega to attract voters in areas that were traditionally less prone to vote for it. He developed a new national strategy and successfully reframed the party's political discourse with new targets. The

enemy was not anymore the national government embodied by Rome, but rather the recent issues perceived as pressing by the Italians, namely the euro and mass immigration.

Salvini's manifest hard Eurosceptic attitude is in line with the revival of extreme-right parties all over Europe. At the same time, his pretentious claim to listen to the electorate's concerns and to put them on the political agenda, makes Salvini's Lega the quintessential contemporary populist movement (Brunazzo and Gilbert 2017). In fact, it fits perfectly Albertazzi and McDonnell (2008) definition of populism as "An ideology which pits a virtuous and homogeneous people against a set of elites and dangerous 'others' who are together depicted as depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice." Since its early stages the Lega Nord was able to combine its anti-elitist and anti-immigration attitudes by accusing Rome (representing the corrupt elites) of failing to protect its hard-working nationals (the people) from the invasion of immigrants that took advantage of the excessive Italian welfare state provisions for the them (Bulli and Soare 2017). In the context of the European refugee crisis, and with the shift from "Lega Nord" to Salvini's nationalist "Lega" this discourse was cultivated to become a central issue.

In the first chapter of the present study we have explored the European refugee crisis and how it has impacted the perspective towards immigrants, making them the scapegoat of numerous resentments of the European public. As we mentioned, Italy, being a key entry point to the EU, is one of the countries that was most directly affected by the crisis. This resulted in the issue of migration being extremely politicised and controversial, at the centre of attention of both the political sphere and the media (Colombo 2018).

According to Marchese (2018), the sentiments prevailing during the course the last national elections were fear and insecurity, sentiments that dominated in the media. Regarding immigration, the most used words by newspapers were "race" (*razza*), used 155 times in the two months preceding the vote, and "fear" (*paura*) used 334 times. The word "negro", which is not a commonly used word by Italian newspapers was mentioned 57 times in those months, which is more than it was used during the whole years of 2015 and 2016. In general, the frame in which the migration phenomenon is inserted is the one of security and criminality. The connection between immigration and security, however, can have the effect of identifying a social category as responsible for the deterioration of living conditions in the country, with the risk of fuelling a spiral of fear, alarm, mistrust and anger towards migrants (Barretta and Cataldi 2018).

Yet, even more worrying, as in the case of Brexit referendum campaign, is the role of alternative online information sources. According to Trevisan (2018), who is Assistant Professor at the American

University School of Communication, low levels of trust in media organisations have made Italy vulnerable to the spread of misinformation which can contain anti-immigration bias.

Salvini's Lega has presented immigrants as invaders that violate the Italian cultural and religious order, while appearing as the only legitimate defender of the natives and their cultural integrity. The slogan "our people first" (*prima i nostri*), intrinsically populist, perpetuates nativism in the Lega discourse and actually helped the party to gain support in the 2018 elections. According to Roncarolo and Mancini (2018), immigration was very relevant in the election campaign, being predominant in the Lega messages and appearing in about 14% of the articles and television news items about political matters in the traditional media. Of course, traditional media is only part of the picture.

Inspired by the American President Donald Trump, Salvini also often bypasses major media in favour of social media, his favourite being Facebook; he is, in fact, Europe's most followed politician on Facebook, with around 3.6 million followers, and he frequently uses the platform to exploit tensions over immigration, but also to run commentaries on his personal life that make him look closer to the people. In one of the most popular videos he published, in the run-up to parliamentary elections, he warned his supporters against mainstream media (hypothetic) censorship.

Through his communication strategy he is actually able to, firstly, directly connect with his followers (but also his opponents) in a way that seems transparent, genuine and trustworthy; on the other side, it allows him to shift the public's attention towards the issues that he would rather discuss. This way, for instance, his radical xenophobic discourse can easily pass for a sincere concern about the European Union management of the immigration issue and the security of the country.

At the same time, the Lega communication strategy also makes use of "La Bestia", a software that allows them to identify what are people most shared concerns (e.g. looking at comments under a Facebook post) so to consequently produce a post that strengthen those particular concerns (Forti 2018).

As a matter of fact, Matteo Salvini has been known to be an astute politician, and, as stated by Franzi and Madron (2015) he "Has a great flair: if he sniffs an urgency that is gripping the people, he immediately becomes its spokesman". He was able to build his success upon the social disorientation caused by globalisation, the fear of the unknown (embodied by immigrants) and an irreverent media activism. Being now Italy's Interior Minister, he is now in charge of Italy's policing, national security and immigration policies, placing him in an extremely powerful position. According to Walt (2018), ahead to the 2018 elections, Salvini made the impractical promise to deport 500,000 undocumented immigrants from Italy under the catchphrase of "la pacchia è finita" (the party is over). This simple

and direct rhetoric has been used to distract the public from problems that are broader and much harder to solve, while focusing on secondary, more visible issues. By ignoring major problems affecting the country such as youth unemployment, mafia and corruption, the Minister directed the attention to problems that are easily shared by the vast public and tend to drive voters towards him (much alike to what the Leave side achieved during the campaign for Brexit).

In essence, Salvini's political communication tactics can be summarised in the continuous construction of a series of enemies that need to be defeated, and in the simple ways in which they are constantly attacked. At the top of this long list of adversaries there are the dangerous illegal immigrants, and the EU and the NGOs that protect them.

He has exploited the fears and anxieties of the Italian public in order to be at the centre of the political landscape and to successfully "make the rules of the game" during the electoral campaign. His messages, truthful or unfounded as they could be, were exceptionally catchy and granted his party a large visibility on the national scene.

### **3.3 The voice of right-wing populism in Spain: Vox**

For a long time Spain has been considered an exception within the European context for the lack of a far-right political party with representation in parliament. This has certainly changed when Vox party first achieved institutional representation in the Andalusian elections of December 2018, and then was able to earn 10 percent of the vote in the last general elections (against the 0 of only 3 years before) and entered the national parliament for the first time. Furthermore, Vox was also able to enter the European chamber and gain its own MEPs.

The slogan "Make Spain great again" (*Hacer España grande otra vez*), central to the party's advertising and explicitly recalling Donald Trump's motto, was eventually able to boost electors support.

Vox was founded in 2013 by former members of the mainstream Popular Party, who had a more conservative and religious vision and argued for a tougher stance against the separatist in Catalonia and the Basque Country (Torres 2019).

Yet, the speed of Vox's rise, differently from the other populist and anti-immigration parties now in vogue around Europe, has distinctive Spanish roots. In the unique context of Spanish territorial struggle, facing the menace of Catalan separatists, Vox's party leader Santiago Abascal constructed his party as the defender of Spanish history and identity. Indeed, while the party was created in 2013, it took the 2017 Catalan independence referendum to boost its popularity.



Somehow similarly to Leave voters in the Brexit referendum, Vox supporters tend to see Spain as an exceptional country, and look at the nation's collective history as a reason of pride and with a sense of nostalgia (Solares 2019).

According to Solares (2019), Vox distinguishes itself from the rest of European radical right populist parties in its way of using ethno-nationalist narrative within its own nation rather than against the EU. Another difference with those parties elsewhere throughout Europe is Vox's support from wealthier citizens rather than from lower income voters (Torres 2019).

Despite the focus on the internal separatist threat, however, Vox is nevertheless a hard-line party when it comes to immigration. While until recently Spain had distinguished itself for the welcoming attitude towards immigrants, and even an absence of the issue in the political agenda, the situation is now increasingly changing thanks to the new radical right populist party.

As stated in the party program<sup>4</sup>, Vox argues for the deportation of undocumented immigrants and the end of social practices that supposedly encourage immigration, as well as the increase in the requested language level and integration for the acquisition of citizenship. At the same time, its program also includes plans of reinforcement of the Spanish borders, with the strengthening of a walls at Ceuta and Melilla (that would have to be payed by Morocco). According to Abascal, the defence of the national frontiers is not about being on the left or right of the political spectrum, and it is not a strategy to win votes, but rather about what the party is founded on. He even argued for the building of a "psychological wall" to dissuade migration at all, that would consist of "informing immigrants that those who enter illegally in Europe will never be able to regularize their situation nor will they have the right to stay, nor will they have social assistance, nor will they be given a health card." Abascal insists on presenting immigrants as a problem that requires "urgent measures" and claims that the objective of his party is to defend the territorial integrity of Spain and not take for granted the "open door" policy of PSOE.

As reported by Gjevori (2019), in 2018 Spain was the main entry point for migrants in Europe, with about 64.000 undocumented arrivals. That is why extreme right-wing parties such as Vox have used public concern as a weapon for electoral benefit. The discontent caused by unemployment rates and the perception that there is a competition between the Spanish and the immigrants on the labour market has played at the advantage of Vox anti-immigration politics, which appears as the only option to really improve the situation of the country.

One crucial point of attention are Islamic immigrants. Abascal has indeed differentiated between immigrants coming from "brother" Hispanic countries (*países hermanos*), who, he argues, share the

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<sup>4</sup> Vox España, [https://www.voxespana.es/biblioteca/espana/2018m/gal\\_c2d72e181103013447.pdf](https://www.voxespana.es/biblioteca/espana/2018m/gal_c2d72e181103013447.pdf)

same culture, language and the same vision of the world of Spaniards, and immigrants coming from Islamic countries who instead have cultural standards which are incompatible with the Spanish ones. In Vox's program there are even various points dedicated to this particular issue. Under the section "Defence, Security and Borders" (*Defensa, seguridad y fronteras*), Islam is presented as a threat which needs to be addressed with particular protection measures. These measures also include the prohibition to teach Islam in schools. In September 2018, Javier Ortega Smith (Vox's secretary general), argued that "Our common enemy, the enemy of Europe, the enemy of progress, the enemy of democracy, the enemy of family, the enemy of life, the enemy of the future is called the Islamist invasion" and was accused of committing a hate crime (González 2019).

Furthermore, what brings Vox together with the other populist parties is its use of unconventional media to spread its message, along with its simple, apparently sincere communication style. Indeed, its populist approach of promising to "Make Spain great again", alongside with its nativist authoritarianism, is indication of its fulfilment of Mudde's (2004) classification as a populist radical right party (Turnbull-Dugarte 2019).

Vox is not only successful in focusing its attention on matters that are pressing on Spanish people, but, as characteristic of populist parties, it is also efficient in expressing his messages through the right channels. For a long time, in fact, the mainstream media ignored Vox because of its little political relevance. According to the head of the party's online accounts, Manuel Mariscal, however, there is no longer much trust in the press from the Spanish public and for this reason the party has resorted to different communication channels.

First of all, the party website (Voxespana.es) is extremely simple in its layout, so to show as protagonist the party's proposals. Moreover, Vox is much ahead of other parties when it comes to its Instagram page (Viejo and Alonso 2018). Here as well, simplicity is the key strategy. The amateur appearance gives the party more credibility, with the unedited pictures that tend to converge the attention on the messages rather than the form.

In addition to this, according to social media analysis group Social Elephants<sup>5</sup>, Vox's messages on Twitter and Facebook generated the most interactions (likes, shares and comments) among the five main parties before the general elections.

Political actors from Vox are aware of how important it is to invest in a good social media strategy since they are the easiest, more direct way to get their ideas to the electorate. Furthermore, social media allow them to have a great reach at a minimum cost, which is essential for an emerging party.

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<sup>5</sup> Social Elephants S.L. (ES), <https://socialelephants.com/en/>

It is also thanks to their successful use of social media that they could become a relevant political force and increasingly spread their short and simple, but effective messages.

It is worth noticing, in addition, that several ideas spread by the party do not always find a confirmation in reality. For instance, much has been said about the supposed expulsion of 52.000 “illegal” immigrants (Junquera 2019), albeit without ever clarifying where the figure comes from.

Furthermore, several websites have emerged that distort real information and help magnifying feelings of fear in the public. For instance, websites such as [digitalSevilla.com](http://digitalSevilla.com) and [CasoAislado.com](http://CasoAislado.com) appear with high frequency in the Vox echo chamber and often put out stories about immigration and crime. Their purpose is to spread rumours, but unfortunately they sometimes get even more readership than established newspapers (Applebaum 2019). A crucial example here is what happened after the fire at Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris. [CasoAislado.com](http://CasoAislado.com) almost immediately posted an article claiming that hundreds of Muslims were celebrating in Paris, and Abascal even tweeted “Islamists want to destroy Europe and Western civilization by celebrating the fire of #NotreDame,” and, subsequently, “Let’s take note before it’s too late.”<sup>6</sup>

In reality, however, the number of actual Muslims in Spain is relatively low (around 4% in 2017<sup>7</sup>) and most immigration comes from Latin America, but, of course, the idea that the Christian civilisation needs to redefine itself against the Islamic enemy is an appealing one in times of uncertainty.

Vox has been described by critics as a nationalist throwback to the dictatorship of General Francisco Franco. From their side, leaders of the party have rejected the far-right label and insist that their party is simply “extremely necessary” and in step with what millions of Spaniards think. Under the slogan of “viva España”, the party has used the simple but effective strategy of dividing the nation between the good and the bad, “us” and “them”. Without complexities and with speeches made up of short slogans, supported by videos aimed at appealing to the basic instincts of the public, Vox bypassed the mainstream media. Abascal even placed his party as victim of the manipulation of the media, which he dismissed by claiming that nobody reads the headlines anymore, but many comment to the news that the party itself spreads through social media platforms.

Abascal’s tweets featuring the hashtag # EspañaViva, along with the party’s constant attacks on the “fake” opinion polls in the “biased” media, have the aim of making those following Vox feel like they are part of something huge. Abascal even spoke of a “patriotic movement of salvation of the

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<sup>6</sup> Santiago Abascal’s tweet, [https://twitter.com/santi\\_abascal/status/1117890168340586497](https://twitter.com/santi_abascal/status/1117890168340586497), 15/04/2019. Original language: “Los islamistas que quieren destruir Europa y la civilización occidental celebrando el incendio de #NotreDame. Tomemos nota antes de que sea tarde”.

<sup>7</sup> Suarez C. and Escudero J. (2018) El Islam sigue creciendo entre los españoles: la población musulmana, en seis gráficos, *El Confidencial*, [https://www.elconfidencial.com/espana/2018-08-21/seis-graficos-islam-espana\\_1606301/](https://www.elconfidencial.com/espana/2018-08-21/seis-graficos-islam-espana_1606301/)

national union”. The sense of greatness, amplified by the party communication strategies, resulted in a decisive increase in support for the party itself.

## Conclusion

Over the past several years a right-wing populist wave has been building throughout Europe. If initially this phenomenon could be seen as a short-lived protest aimed at vocalising the concerns of marginalised groups of the societies, it currently seems to increasingly resemble an established presence in the political landscape, with different degrees of electoral success but not nearly on the verge of disappearance. The message that all these rising parties send is essentially the same: drastically fewer migrants, tougher borders and a desire to take back control from the elites.

In general, one of the key reasons for the rise of such new parties and movements is the widespread insecurity over the consequences of the European migrant crisis. The demographic change and its (perceived) effects on a socioeconomic level can cause a nativist reaction when people feel that their national identity and position is threatened by external factors. As we have showed in the first section of the study, however, often the perceptions about the size and the effects of migration turn out to be just, indeed, *perceptions*. The idea of a refugee “invasion”, that the media has encouraged and fortified, has spread throughout Western Europe and has deeply shaken the public, to the point that the refugee flow has been perceived as the “most threatening” issue for the hosting societies.

In this analysis we tried to show how these feelings not only have been used to gain electoral support by right-wing populist parties, but have also been enhanced through their skilful use of the media. As we have realised, political actors cleverly select certain immigration-related topics and emphasise only the aspects of the phenomenon that could further their political agendas. The way in which immigrants are presented (generally as criminals or parasites) in the public debate is crucial in shaping the perceptions about the threat that they pose.

Unsurprisingly, all of the three parties that we considered for the study (namely UKIP, Lega and Vox) promised to take care of the immigrants’ invasion and to protect national values. They contributed in stirring up resentment by pointing at the supposed abuse of social-protection services by immigrants (a message that all three cared to underline) and argued for stricter integration policies.

What is also evident as a result of this study is the reciprocal influence that the media and the populists have on each other when it comes to the framing of immigration. On one hand, the alarmist tone spread from traditional and non-traditional media platforms about the migration crisis has widely been exploited by populist actors to promote their interests. On the other hand, however, those populists themselves in turn make frequently use of the same platforms, and in particular of social

media ones, to have an immediate and direct way to communicate with their supporters and spread even more fear. They present themselves as the heroes that are not afraid to challenge political correctness, and they do so using those media platforms that, according to them, are free from manipulations, such as Twitter and Facebook.

In this sense, the populist rise can be considered as both a cause and a consequence of the transformation in the media environment.

The migrant crisis and the consequent successes that populists have achieved in gaining power puts European democracies in front of new challenges, from several perspectives.

As we have broadly argued throughout our analysis, the rise of populisms in Europe is not really about immigrant numbers. Rather, it is about the narrative of immigration that uses pre-existing feelings of disillusion and uncertainty to intensify fear and anger. Thus, to deal with this kind of populism, one first needs to fix the underlying structural problems of the societies.

As a matter of fact, populist messages attract principally those who feel left behind in the transforming, increasingly globalised world. Thus, the solution cannot simply consist in reducing immigration arrivals, but rather requires developing and employing an appropriate discourse about the issue, capable of articulating all of its complexities.

If they really want to stand a chance against the current populist fever, politicians should focus more on making future growth inclusive and on reformulating the political agenda towards topics that are less easy for populists to exploit, such as the reduction in social inequality and the improvement of health and education. At the same time, people need to be encouraged to take a more participative role in politics, and to do so they need to feel as their need are actually heard and taken care of (something in which populists are very successful in conveying). Mainstream parties need to offer attractive and credible solutions to the problems that voters perceive they are facing.

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## **Riassunto**

Il tema dell'immigrazione occupa una posizione sempre più centrale nel panorama politico globale. Particolarmente nel contesto europeo, oggetto del presente studio, si è assistito ad una ripresa dei partiti populistici di destra come conseguenza dell'aumento delle preoccupazioni legate all'economia e all'immigrazione, che rivelano una profonda sfiducia nella politica e nelle istituzioni e rappresentano un terreno fertile per l'approccio populista.

Ciò che rende questi nuovi partiti emergenti così attraenti è il loro modo di fornire risposte semplici a questioni estremamente complesse. Così i precedenti governi e i partiti tradizionali, che non sono riusciti a risolvere prima questi problemi, diventano bersagli facili di attacchi, mentre il populismo si presenta come un'alternativa attraente allo status quo esistente.

Lo scopo di questo studio è mostrare come i partiti populistici emergenti sfruttino a proprio vantaggio la rappresentazione negativa da parte dei media del problema dell'immigrazione, riuscendo a persuadere una quota relativamente ampia di pubblico con i loro discorsi xenofobici e conservatori. La presente analisi si limita all'Europa occidentale e si concentra sulla questione dell'immigrazione come capro espiatorio del discorso populista, sebbene siano numerose le cause che si nascondono dietro il rinnovamento del successo dell'estrema destra populista.

Naturalmente ogni partito populista ha una propria storia, ma l'origine della loro recente ascesa in Europa può essere individuata principalmente in due avvenimenti specifici: la crisi finanziaria del 2008 (e la conseguente recessione) e la crisi dei rifugiati che ha avuto il suo picco nel 2015. È proprio in questo contesto di frustrazione generale da parte degli elettori, convinti di essere stati traditi dalle forze politiche tradizionali, che i populistici trovano le condizioni propizie al proprio sviluppo. In particolar modo la crisi dei flussi migratori e la difficoltà nella loro gestione da parte dell'Unione Europea ha dato vita a una dilagante percezione di insicurezza tra i cittadini, che a sua volta ha favorito un rinnovamento nel supporto per i la retorica populista di destra.

Pertanto, per comprendere il fenomeno populista bisogna innanzitutto analizzare la cosiddetta "crisi" dei rifugiati in Europa e le ripercussioni che ha avuto sulla percezione generale del fenomeno dell'immigrazione.

La crisi migratoria europea è iniziata intorno al 2000 e ha raggiunto il suo apice nel 2015, diventando la più grande migrazione umana dal 1945 (Zunes 2017). Nel 2015 l'afflusso di rifugiati verso l'Europa ha toccato livelli sorprendenti, di cui si è discusso ampiamente. Secondo l'Eurostat nel corso dell'anno

gli Stati membri dell'UE hanno ricevuto più del doppio delle richieste di asilo dell'anno precedente e non sorprende che abbiano faticato a far fronte alla situazione.

Questo improvviso aumento del flusso di migranti provenienti da Paesi come la Siria, l'Afghanistan e l'Iraq è stato fonte di preoccupazioni e dubbi riguardo la scarsa efficienza della gestione dei confini europei e sull'accordo Schengen.

L'Unione Europea si è mossa in due principali direzioni per affrontare il problema. In primo luogo, si è provato a rafforzare i confini sia esterni che interni all'Unione per tentare di impedire gli spostamenti dei migranti. Internamente, alcuni Paesi hanno deciso di “sospendere” il Codice frontiere Schengen e ripristinare temporaneamente i controlli alle frontiere in diverse occasioni. Per quanto riguarda la sicurezza dei confini esterni, invece, si è addirittura provveduto a costruire dei “muri” (ad esempio in Ungheria, dove nel 2015 il primo ministro Viktor Orban ha dato il via alla costruzione di una recinzione in filo spinato al confine con Serbia e Croazia).

L'altro approccio è stato invece quello di contrastare il traffico di essere umani. Tale approccio, seppure apparentemente efficace nell'arrestare il flusso di migranti, è stato ampiamente criticato per l'indifferenza da parte dei governi europei verso le brutali conseguenze della loro politica di contenimento sulle migliaia di persone che restano intrappolate tra detenzione e sfruttamento, e che sono costrette a intraprendere rotte e viaggi sempre più rischiosi per evadere.

Parallelamente alle perplessità sulla gestione delle masse di migranti, sono cresciuti esponenzialmente anche i sentimenti xenofobici che hanno permesso l'ascesa di partiti populistici di destra in tutta Europa. La politicizzazione della crisi ha avuto diverse conseguenze negative, ad esempio il fatto che il dibattito sull'immigrazione sia stato elaborato in modo da rappresentare gli interessi di determinati partiti. I partiti populistici emergenti, infatti, hanno rappresentato rifugiati e richiedenti asilo come un fardello piuttosto che un gruppo vulnerabile di persone che merita protezione secondo le convenzioni internazionali vigenti.

Allo stesso tempo i media, sempre più interconnessi alla politica, hanno ricoperto un ruolo centrale nel dipingere la crisi dei rifugiati come qualcosa di molto più semplice di quanto non sia in realtà, riducendo i rifugiati o a una minaccia, seguendo la tendenza della destra, o a vittime, specialmente quando si distingue tra i “veri” richiedenti asilo in fuga per guerra, violenza o persecuzione e i migranti economici.

La questione della divisione tra “migranti” e “rifugiati” è stata ampiamente discussa in passato ed è ancora fonte di dibattito. Questi tipi di etichette, soprattutto quando usati in un contesto politico, sono in grado di istigare simpatia o pregiudizio nei confronti di chi sbarca sulle coste europee.

Inoltre, la distinzione tra le due categorie non è necessariamente così scontata. In sostanza, le suddette categorie non solo non riescono a cogliere la complessa relazione tra i fattori politici, sociali ed economici da cui dipendono le migrazioni, ma sono anche state spesso utilizzate per legittimare politiche di esclusione o di contenimento durante la crisi migratoria. Questo perché, mentre i Paesi sono liberi di deportare i *migranti* che arrivano senza documenti legali, con i *rifugiati* non possono fare lo stesso ai sensi della Convenzione del 1951, che determina che per legge questi ultimi non possono essere rimandati dove la loro vita sarebbe in pericolo. Quindi non sorprende che molti politici in Europa preferiscano riferirsi a tutti quelli che arrivano nel nostro continente come migranti.

Le connotazioni diverse dei due termini, soprattutto in un momento di crisi, diventano strumenti di categorizzazione sociale, distinguendo tra chi merita determinati benefici e trattamenti da chi, al contrario, è considerato meno meritevole e addirittura un pericolo per la società. In sintesi, il modo in cui viene descritto chi attraversa il Mediterraneo ha enormi implicazioni sul tipo di obblighi legali e morali che gli stati e le società riceventi hanno nei loro confronti.

L'aumento dei flussi migratori è indubbiamente una sfida per gli stati europei. Allo stesso tempo, però, è fondamentale avere ben chiara la distinzione tra le statistiche e i numeri reali e quelli percepiti. Nonostante sia molto difficile conoscere il numero esatto degli immigrati in Europa, quando si esaminano i dati disponibili appare evidente che la percezione sulle dimensioni della popolazione immigrata sia assolutamente errata, così come quella sui pericoli che essa può causare ai Paesi ospitanti. Nonostante circa l'85% dei rifugiati nel mondo continui a trovare accoglienza nei Paesi limitrofi a quelli dai quali fuggono, i cittadini europei continuano a credere che ci siano tra due e tre volte più immigrati quanti ce ne sono in realtà. Queste percezioni esagerate di solito corrispondono a sentimenti altrettanto esagerati di paura. L'idea di un'*invasione* di rifugiati che si è diffusa in tutta l'Europa occidentale ha scosso profondamente il pubblico, portandolo ad assumere il peggio da chi arriva sulle nostre coste. Difatti il flusso di rifugiati è stato persino percepito come il problema più grande per la nostra società (anche se statisticamente ci sono altre questioni che meriterebbero la stessa attenzione). I mezzi d'informazione, mettendo l'immigrazione al primo posto della *agenda setting*, nutrono le percezioni esagerate dei cittadini europei e contribuiscono a creare un clima di ansia e timore.

Il discorso sull'immigrazione, inoltre, si pone nel contesto attuale dell'era della "post-verità" (post-truth era), concetto esploso nel 2016 a seguito della Brexit e delle elezioni americane vinte da Trump. La post-verità indica l'idea per cui, soprattutto nell'ambito politico, l'emotività e le convinzioni personali abbiano finito per prendere il sopravvento sui dati oggettivi.



Tuttavia, vale la pena ricordare che l'uso di notizie false e di verità “alternative” non è nuovo nel mondo della politica, dove da sempre nelle campagne elettorali lo screditamento dell'avversario con false notizie è uno strumento largamente impiegato. Ciò che è nuovo, invece, è il singolare contesto attuale in cui queste tecniche vengono utilizzate, ovvero nell'epoca della disillusione politica e della digitalizzazione. Dal momento che oggi tutti hanno accesso a una quantità di informazioni significativamente abbondante e sono in grado di produrre informazioni in prima persona, i modi in cui ci si relaziona ai media è cambiato radicalmente. La velocità della proliferazione di false informazioni su Internet, e in particolare sui social network (come Facebook e Twitter), ha garantito una dimensione nuova al problema delle strategie politiche. La post-verità e le fake news hanno infiltrato finanche il mondo del giornalismo tradizionale, e per questo c'è un urgente bisogno di ricostruire un rapporto di fiducia tra i media e la gente, così da impedire che quest'ultima si concentri solamente sulle voci che rispecchiano le sue idee e alimentano le sue paure (il fenomeno delle echo-chambers), e si confronti anche con informazioni, notizie e opinioni che potrebbero smentire le sue precomprensioni.

I social network, dando la possibilità di raggiungere rapidamente e direttamente un vastissimo numero di persone, hanno quindi parzialmente amplificato la rinascita del fenomeno populista.

A questo punto diventa però indispensabile dare una definizione del termine populismo.

Negli ultimi anni sono state avanzate diverse concettualizzazioni di populismo, poiché, come sostenuto da Mény e Surel (2002), esso può essere paragonato a un guscio vuoto che assume significato in base a cosa vi sia versato all'interno. Ciononostante, esiste attualmente un consenso generale sulle sue caratteristiche essenziali. Il populismo, in linea di massima, si basa sulla contrapposizione tra il popolo “puro” e le élite corrotte.

Tra le altre caratteristiche che lo distinguono, inoltre, troviamo la presenza di un leader carismatico, capace di motivare la mobilitazione popolare e diventare simbolo della lotta contro l'establishment, e uno stile di comunicazione diretto, senza mediazioni istituzionali e intrinsecamente carico di emozioni.

Naturalmente il populismo, essendo una “ideologia debole”, è per definizione camaleontico, nel senso che può includere varianti sia di destra che di sinistra. La principale differenza fra il populismo di destra e quello di sinistra è la diversa concezione di “popolo”: mentre quello di sinistra tende ad essere più inclusivo, e cioè a comprendere nel “popolo” più categorie sociali, in quello di destra il concetto è più selettivo, chiuso, esclusivo (a volte addirittura su base razziale). Quest'ultimo, infatti, aggiunge un secondo antagonista alla dicotomia “noi” contro “loro”: considera il popolo un gruppo

culturalmente omogeneo e contrappone i suoi interessi a quelli delle minoranze, come ad esempio i migranti.

A causa di questo aspetto esclusionista, il populismo di destra si combina perfettamente con il nazionalismo, che si fonda sulle idee di esaltazione e difesa della nazione. Soprattutto a partire dal 2015, con il picco della crisi dei rifugiati, è emerso un nuovo fenomeno, ovvero l'ascesa di partiti che essenzialmente fondono atteggiamenti nazionalisti e populistici, unendo un concetto difensivo dell'idea di frontiera a un'accezione negativa del significato di diversità.

Prendendo in considerazione tre casi diversi (Regno Unito, Italia e Spagna), è facile notare come la retorica populista e nazionalista sia stata accolta con entusiasmo in circostanze politiche e sociali differenti.

Nel Regno Unito, dove nel giugno 2016 si è votato per la Brexit, ovvero per l'uscita dalla UE, la stessa retorica ha fatto pressione su due punti chiave. Da un lato c'è l'idea della riconquista della sovranità rispetto ai poteri che si stanno trasferendo a Bruxelles, mentre dall'altro si guarda alla necessità di controllare i confini inglesi, o in altre parole, di ridurre l'immigrazione. Il voto "Leave" è stato essenzialmente un voto anti-immigrazione, a sfondo xenofobico e pessimista, incitato da un gruppo di politici populistici (quali Nigel Farage e Boris Johnson) che hanno saputo sfruttare le preoccupazioni degli elettori a proprio vantaggio. Spesso per tale scopo la campagna del "Leave" si è servita anche di scandalose menzogne, come la famosa questione dei 350 milioni di sterline inviati dal Regno Unito alla UE ogni settimana (soldi che, dopo l'uscita, sarebbero stati impiegati nel Servizio sanitario nazionale, l'NHS). Bugie come questa, rivelatesi poi totalmente infondate, sono state comunque decisive nell'indirizzare il voto del popolo. Durante tutta la campagna poi, sono state diffuse notizie false riguardanti anche l'immigrazione: dall'imminente entrata della Turchia nella UE, ai cartelloni sul "Punto di rottura" (Breaking point) che raffiguravano masse di disperati in arrivo.

La copertura mediatica del referendum è stata piena di pregiudizi e i dati sono stati utilizzati a seconda dell'obiettivo che si voleva raggiungere, al punto che gli elettori hanno votato non essendo pienamente consapevoli delle conseguenze della loro decisione (non a caso, nelle settimane successive al referendum le domande più cercate su Google sono state "Che cosa vuol dire lasciare l'UE?" e "Cos'è l'UE?").

Gli argomenti anti-immigrazione e euroscettici hanno trovato terreno fertile anche in Italia, dove nel marzo 2018 la Lega e il Movimento 5 Stelle sono usciti vincenti dalle elezioni e hanno formato il nuovo governo da loro battezzato "governo del cambiamento". I due partiti hanno vinto basando le

loro campagne sulle paure degli Italiani, sugli stereotipi dell'Europa di "burocratici e banchieri" e dei migranti "che ci tolgono il lavoro".

Con la guida di Matteo Salvini (dal 2013 in poi), la Lega è riuscita ad abbandonare la sua enfasi iniziale sul Nord e ad allargare il suo consenso al Sud, fornendo al popolo un nuovo nemico: gli immigrati. Servendosi di slogan come "Prima i nostri" e "La pacchia è finita", l'attuale Ministro dell'Interno ha presentato gli immigrati come invasori che violano l'ordine culturale e religioso italiano. La sua retorica trova consenso soprattutto tra le aree più povere e vulnerabili del Paese, dove più immigrati significano meno lavoro e più delinquenza. Proprio questo è infatti il punto chiave della strategia comunicativa leghista: distrarre il pubblico da problemi più ampi e difficili da risolvere, concentrandosi su questioni secondarie, più visibili. Ignorando i problemi più gravi che affliggono il Paese, tra cui la disoccupazione giovanile, la mafia e la corruzione, Salvini rivolge l'attenzione a problemi facilmente condivisibili dal vasto pubblico e che tendono a spingere gli elettori verso di lui.

Lo spettro della destra populista e nazionalista non ha lasciato indenne neanche la politica spagnola, che fino a poco fa rappresentava un'eccezione nel panorama europeo per la mancanza di rappresentazione in parlamento di esponenti della destra populista. Nel dicembre 2018 il partito di destra radicale Vox è entrato per la prima volta nel Parlamento locale della regione autonoma dell'Andalusia e successivamente ha guadagnato circa il 10% dei voti nelle ultime elezioni generali. Il partito ha come scopo quello di difendere la "Spagna viva" e, guidato da Santiago Abascal, ha sollevato molte critiche per le sue proposte ultraconservative. Nonostante il contesto spagnolo sia molto diverso dai due analizzati precedentemente e, nonostante Vox sia principalmente opposto ai separatisti spagnoli e si concentri sull'abolizione delle regioni autonome ("il cancro del Paese"), non mancano anche in queste circostanze gli attacchi all'immigrazione. Con l'aumento degli sbarchi sulle coste Andalusie, e l'indignazione popolare che ne deriva, Vox propone essenzialmente ciò che propongono gli altri partiti populistici di estrema destra. Tra le proposte nel programma del partito si trovano l'arresto del flusso migratorio, la costruzione di un muro a Ceuta e Melilla, l'opposizione all'entrata della Turchia nell'Unione Europea e finanche il divieto di insegnare l'Islam nelle scuole. Restituire la Spagna agli Spagnoli (*España para los españoles*) diventa l'obbiettivo solenne del partito, che con la sua retorica semplice ma efficace si appella a quella parte della popolazione frustrata dalla politica tradizionale.

Come risulta da questo studio, il successo del populismo in Europa non deriva direttamente dalla realtà dei fatti riguardo la cosiddetta crisi dei migranti, ma piuttosto dall'esagerazione e della percezione errata del fenomeno stesso. La centralità del tema dell'immigrazione è addirittura per certi

versi paradossale, se si considera che siamo lontani dall'emergenza, ma si spiega con la paura della perdita della propria identità nazionale a causa della globalizzazione. Non a caso i messaggi populistici attraggono maggiormente coloro che si sentono lasciati indietro rispetto alle trasformazioni demografiche e sociali degli ultimi tempi. Gli svantaggiati, gli impoveriti, “quelli che stanno peggio di come stavano prima” non si sentono rappresentati da nessuna forza politica, e formano quindi la base su cui si fonda il populismo. È proprio per questo che combattere l'ascesa populista non significa semplicemente arrestare l'arrivo dei migranti, ma anche e soprattutto concentrarsi sul rendere la crescita futura più inclusiva ed elaborare un discorso politico alternativo a quello populista.