The 2010s Mediterranean Migration Crisis and the Rise of Far-right Ideology

Dr. Boutamine Alaeddine*, Abbes Laghrour University, Khenchela, Algeria, boutamine.alaeddine@univ-khenchela.dz

Received: 20-May-26 **Accepted:** 15-Jun-26 **Published:** 30-Sep-26

Abstract

The 2010s was a geopolitically eventful decade in Europe and the US, not only in terms of rapidly increasing waves of undocumented immigration but also the political repercussions of such migratory flows (Davis & Deole, 2017; Demata, 2017). As countries in Europe and North America received growing numbers of migrants, support for far-right anti-immigration parties soared (Stockemer & Barisione, 2017). This paper offers a detailed overview of the events, phenomena, and other contextual elements that coincided with, led to, and, in some instances, were caused by the Mediterranean migration crisis of the 2010s. The paper also sheds light on the rise of far-right populist parties and anti-immigration political figures in the US and across European countries. The paper provides unique insights into the origins of anti-immigration rhetoric and the successes of the populist movement during the previous decade.

Keywords: undocumented immigration – far-right populism – Brexit – Trump – Mediterranean migration

Corresponding author*

Pages: 98-129

1. Introduction

During the previous decade, unprecedented numbers of people crossed the Mediterranean Sea from North African and Middle Eastern countries toward European shores (International Organization for Migration, n.d.; Davis & Deole, 2017). Hundreds of thousands of refugees and migrants embarked on dangerous journeys across the sea to reach EU countries, creating, effectively, an international migration crisis (International Organization for Migration, n.d.). At the same time, right-wing populist movements gained increasing political prominence in the United States and across several European countries (Davis & Deole, 2017). A central and recurrent feature of far-right discourse in these places has been the overt articulation of hostility toward migrants and ethnic minorities. A substantial body of scholarship examining the rise of political figures such as Donald Trump in the United States, Nigel Farage in the United Kingdom, and Marine Le Pen in France during the late 2010s has consistently identified anti-immigration rhetoric as a defining element of their political communication (Demata, 2017; Cap, 2019; Stockemer & Barisione, 2017; Vollmer & Karakayali, 2018). The current paper aims to properly contextualise the Mediterranean migration crisis of the 2010s, thoroughly reviewing and explaining the various social, cultural, political, economic, and other circumstances surrounding this migration trend. It also provides a conveniently stratified overview of the rise of far-right

anti-immigration sentiments to mainstream politics in the US, the UK, and other major European countries.

2. Context of Mediterranean Irregular Migration

2.1 The Social Context

As noted above, a significant proportion of irregular migration toward Europe during the 2010s took place across the Mediterranean Sea. The International Organization for Migration (IOM), which is an agency operating under the United Nations, reported that migrant arrivals in Europe reached 389,976 in 2016 (International Organization for Migration, n.d.). Although these figures went down considerably in the years that followed, they remained substantial nevertheless, as tens of thousands continued to arrive annually. By 2020, 99,907 arrivals were recorded (International Organization for Migration, n.d.). These statistics illustrate the intensity of this migration trend.

The causes of migration are rarely dependent on (or explained by) a single factor. Instead, a complex network of structural pressures, political disruptions, and individual circumstances are usually at play. During the 2010s, certain factors seemed particularly relevant to explain Mediterranean migration flows. Political instability in countries such as Syria, Libya, and Mali escalated into outright armed conflicts which ended up displacing millions and claiming hundreds of thousands of lives. For many people, remaining in their home country became unsafe and untenable. Fleeing war, political and religious persecution, unsafety, and the lack of any economic

prospects, large numbers of people embarked on the Mediterranean journey in search of protection and opportunity. The decision to cross was often taken under circumstances of profound uncertainty and increasing desperation.

European societies, on the other hand, had to grapple with the challenge of receiving newly arriving migrant populations within relatively short timeframes. Questions of housing, education, labour market access, healthcare access, and social integration were now being debated in public discourse, sometimes controversially so. In some communities, civil society networks mobilised to provide support and humanitarian assistance, whereas in others, Mediterranean migration was met with worries and resistance. The social dimension of Mediterranean migration was, therefore, not limited to the migrants themselves but extended to host communities and native populations negotiating rapid demographic change that started to take place. In addition to these developments, several European countries witnessed the rise and increasing popularity of far-right political parties whose messaging centred on strong anti-immigration rhetoric (Davis & Deole, 2017; Dennison & Geddes, 2021; Stockemer & Barisione, 2017). Social reception and political realities ultimately influenced each other during this period which highlights the need for a similar exploration of the political climate.

2.2 The Political Context

Immigration is not just a social phenomenon; it is also one of the most politically salient issues of recent decades in many countries. To understand undocumented Mediterranean migration in the 2010s, it is necessary to situate it within the broader political climate of its occurrence, both in Europe and internationally. Globally, the decade was marked by significant instability as discussed in *2.1.* A series of popular uprisings known collectively as the 'Arab Spring' took place across several Arab and Mediterranean countries, including Syria and Libya. In some contexts, these revolts gave way to devastating armed conflict, collapse of governments and institutions, and humanitarian crises of a wide scale. In addition to political unrest, deteriorating economic conditions and declining prospects for employment contributed to widespread uncertainty and desperation. In several African and Middle Eastern countries, war, poverty, and the erosion of public institutions all led to the displacement of millions of people. For many, the Mediterranean route towards Europe represented a path towards stability, safety, and economic opportunity.

The political ramifications of Mediterranean migration in Europe were quite significant. It is worth remembering that this was a time when many European countries were still navigating the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis, balancing fiscal responsibility with social welfare commitments. In such an environment, immigration quickly became a factor with considerable electoral importance. Political leaders were often cautious about adopting overtly pro-immigration positions for

fear of alienating segments of voters who were concerned about economic competition or social change. Moreover, migration debates increasingly became entangled with issues of security, especially with the rise of the terrorist organisation, ISIS, during the 2010s. ISIS took advantage of political instability and government collapse in countries like Syria and Iraq and unleashed campaigns of terror inside and outside the Middle East, heightening fears of international terrorism. It was therefore not uncommon for political discourse in Europe and the United States to associate immigration with security threats or to justify restrictive measures on the grounds of counter-terrorism (Nussio et al., 2019).

At the same time, the decade saw a noticeable shift in European and international politics. Far-right parties that had previously been confined to marginal, fringe positions on the political spectrum achieved significant electoral successes in several European countries. One of the defining features of their platforms was the strong anti-immigration position they advocated for, often framed in terms of sovereignty, security, and cultural preservation. Economic uncertainty and fears related to global terrorism provided fertile ground for anti-immigration and xenophobic messaging. In many instances, these parties secured parliamentary representation, entered governing coalitions, or exerted pressure on mainstream ruling parties to adopt more restrictive immigration policies. Migration thus became a central axis around which broader political realities revolved.

2.3 The Geographical Context

Beyond its social and political dimensions, undocumented migration to Europe in the 2010s must also be understood geographically. That is because migration, by its very nature, involves the physical movement of people from and to different geographical locations. In the case of Mediterranean immigration to Europe, one needs to take into consideration the geographical proximity, maritime routes, as well as political borders, as these have all contributed to shaping patterns of arrival across different European countries.

The Mediterranean Sea, positioned between Africa, Europe, and a number of Middle Eastern nations functioned as the main stage for much of this irregular migration. Over time, particular maritime routes became well established due to the frequency with which undocumented migrants sailed along them, including the Eastern Mediterranean route and the Central Mediterranean route. These routes were hardly stable or predictable; instead, they changed and evolved in response to shifting enforcement strategies, conflict dynamics, and smuggling networks. Migrants frequently embarked on these journeys in overcrowded and unseaworthy vessels, exposing themselves to severe risks. Furthermore, prior to crossing the sea in this risky manner, undocumented migrants had to travel by land, traversing deserts, borders, and transit countries under harsh and sometimes exploitative conditions.

Although Europe, as a whole, experienced rising arrivals during the mid-2010s, migrants were not evenly distributed

across EU member states. Geography played a decisive role in shaping this reality. Countries such as Italy, Malta, Spain, and Greece, located along the Mediterranean coast, naturally became main points of entry and the primary recipients for many of the irregular migrants arriving this way. Consequently, it was these countries that had to disproportionately bear responsibility for reception and processing. According to the UN Refugee Agency (2016), between January and December of 2016, 362,376 migrant arrivals by sea were recorded. Of these, 173,450 occurred in Greece, 181,436 in Italy, and 7,490 in Spain (The UN Refugee Agency, 2016). These figures underscore the geographical concentration of migrant arrivals in the Southern frontier of the European Union, which helps explain the political tensions that later emerged within the EU over burden-sharing and responsibility allocation.

2.4 The Economic Context

Economic conditions during the 2010s are yet another essential contextual layer that the present paper takes into account. The state of the economy is likely to influence both the motivations of migrants seeking opportunity and the attitudes of native populations where many would be afflicted with economic anxieties over the distribution of state resources. Economy also shapes the policy choices that governments make as well as the narratives they communicate to voters.

The rise in Mediterranean crossings during the 2010s coincided with a period in which many European economies were still recovering from the 2008 global financial crisis. While

macroeconomic indicators began to improve by the mid-2010s, the lived experience of financial insecurity and dwindling economic chances persisted for many European citizens. Concerns over unemployment, wage stagnation, austerity measures, and diminishing social mobility remained widespread. Economic considerations are central to electoral behaviour, as voters often evaluate any incumbent government based on perceived economic performance (Lewis-Beck & Paldam, 2000; Reidy et al., 2018).

Under such circumstances, the arrival of migrants became intertwined with anxieties about the distribution of state resources and labour market competition in host societies. Far-right parties and other anti-immigration political figures frequently framed migration as an additional burden on already strained welfare systems, portraying newcomers as competitors for jobs, housing, and public services. Research literature in this area has consistently found that economic self-interest and perceptions of distributive competition play a major role in triggering and strengthening anti-immigration attitudes (Laurence et al., 2024; Sniderman et al., 2004). Indeed, increases in immigrant populations are often interpreted as a "perceived threat to the economic self-interest" on the part of the native populations (Card et al., 2005, p. 9). Whether such perceptions reflect empirical realities or subjective anxieties, they were arguably politically consequential during the 2010s.

2.5 The Cultural Context

Migration is also a deeply cultural phenomenon. By its very nature, migration involves the movement of individuals across different cultural environments, bringing into contact significant differences and variations in term of languages, traditions, religious practices, and social norms. As a result, immigration debates frequently extend beyond economics and geopolitics to encompass deeper questions of identity and belonging.

While economic considerations are hugely influential in shaping attitudes toward immigration (Card et al., 2005), cultural concerns are also relevant in this regard. Alesina and Tabellini (2022) argue that concerns over the cultural integration of newly arriving migrants can sway public opinion. A recurring concern among segments of the native population is the belief that immigrants may be unable or unwilling to assimilate into mainstream society. Such concerns are often amplified by political actors seeking electoral advantage (Alesina & Tabellini, 2022). These perceptions are particularly evident when migrants come from ethnically, culturally, or religiously different backgrounds to that of the native population.

Another point worth discussing in this respect is cultural privilege or dominant culture privilege. Harbour et al. (2003), drawing on McIntosh (1988), describe this as the "invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions" carried by members of a dominant cultural group (McIntosh, 1988, pp. 2-3 cited in Harbour et al., 2003, p. 831). In contexts of demographic change, some members of the native population may experience anxiety over the perceived erosion or loss of this

privilege. Historically, immigrants have often been problematised and portrayed as threats to the social and cultural fabric of host societies in both the United States and several European countries (Jolly & DiGiusto, 2014).

In the case of Mediterranean irregular migration, cultural diversity can be seen across multiple levels. Migrants come from a wide range of African and Middle Eastern countries, each characterised by internal diversity and complex social histories and cultures. European societies themselves are far from being culturally homogeneous. Nevertheless, perceptions of cultural difference and debates over integration and cultural compliance featured heavily in public discourse, leading to the politicisation of migration during the 2010s.

2.6 The Historical Context

Lastly, having reviewed several levels of context, it is now fitting to situate the international developments of the 2010s within a broader historical perspective. Europe's contemporary migration patterns did not emerge in isolation; instead, they evolved through decades of demographic transformation. Until the mid-twentieth century, Europe was largely a continent of emigration rather than immigration, as significant numbers of Europeans relocated to the Americas and other parts of the world (De la Rica et al., 2013). However, after World War II, the continent started to attract more migrants from different parts of the world. Throughout the following decades, there was a continuous rise in the number of migrants arriving in Europe,

which accelerated even further from the early 1990s (De la Rica et al., 2013).

By 2013, there was over 52 million migrants in Europe or around 10% of its entire population (De la Rica et al., 2013). This major change that effectively turned Europe from a continent of out-migration to one of in-migration was primarily due to individual countries' immigration policies which were mostly "linked to the process of decolonization or to active labor recruitment" (De la Rica et al., 2013, p. 6). Hence, many of the migrants arriving in Europe throughout the second half of the twentieth century were immigrants from former European colonies and migrant workers brought in to respond to labour market shortages in European countries. The developments of the 2010s, including the surge in Mediterranean arrivals, therefore formed only one part of a longer historical trajectory. While the visibility and intensity of arrivals during certain peak years directly led to increased political and public attention, these arrivals occurred in a continent which had already undergone decades of sustained immigration and demographic change.

3. The rise of the far right in Europe and the US during the 2010s: historical context and recent events

During the 2010s, Europe and the United States experienced a significant surge in right-wing populism. Characterized by overt antagonism towards migrants and ethnic minority groups, this political movement has been the focus of extensive academic inquiry across several national contexts

(Lorenzetti, 2020; Cap, 2019; Stockemer & Barisione, 2017; Vollmer & Karakayali, 2018; Dennison & Geddes, 2021). *Section 3* explores the broader international landscape of anti-immigration discourse, while also tracing the historical and political origins that have contributed to the rise of anti-immigration sentiments in contemporary political debate in Europe and the United States.

3.1 The Right and anti-immigration discourse in the United States

As noted earlier, the past decade has seen anti-immigration populist rhetoric gain significant prominence and become mainstream both in Europe and the United States. Examining the development of such discourse in the US, as well as its historical origins and the factors that underpin its widespread appeal, provides valuable insights for understanding the Mediterranean migration phenomenon. Given the considerable cultural and political influence of the United States on Europe and the rest of the world, analysing the patterns and strategies of American anti-immigration discourses can help contextualize and clarify the social, political, and public responses to Mediterranean migration flows during this time.

3.1.1 Origins

Researchers and observers generally agree that immigration is viewed and constructed more negatively by politicians on the right of the political spectrum than their left-wing peers (Han, 2015; Haynes et al., 2010). To examine the matter more closely, it is worth considering the recent historical context. Before the

1990s, opposition to immigration was "a relatively low priority" for the Christian Right in the United States which appeared to place more emphasis on "family values" matters (Diamond, 1996, p. 154). In fact, the religious Right aimed to build multi-racial support for its agenda by recruiting conservative African American and Latino members, so a full-scale and explicit hostility to immigration would not have been a politically wise decision (Diamond, 1996).

It was not until Republican presidential candidate Patrick Buchanan came into the scene that the anti-immigration cause became a high right-wing priority. Buchanan made opposition to undocumented immigration "central among his campaign themes" and came to be regarded as "the national politician most publicly identified with the anti-immigration cause" (Diamond, 1996, p. 155). Securing between 25% and 33% of the Republican primary vote in 1992 and 1996 firmly established him on the Republican political and electoral map, with an agenda prominently centred on opposition to immigration (Diamond, 1996). Moreover, Buchanan declared 'illegal immigration' as one of the targets of his "religious war" for the "soul of America" and proposed the building of a "Buchanan fence" along the US southern border to keep undocumented immigrants out, which illustrates the intensity of his stance against immigration (Diamond, 1996, p. 155). Nevertheless, Diamond (1996) notes that Buchanan was "careful to moderate his rhetoric" between 1992 and 1996,

placing greater emphasis on economic arguments in order to avoid accusations of racism (p. 155).

3.1.2 The rise of Trump

The victory of Donald Trump in the 2016 US presidential election was quite a surprise to many, especially considering the fact that Trump defeated the much more conventional and politically seasoned candidate, Hillary Clinton. Not only was Trump a political outsider with no professional expertise when compared to Clinton, but he also expressed his plans and visions for the United States in an explicitly offensive and crass manner, making him deeply unpopular with large segments of American society. Finley and Esposito (2020) argued that the election of President Trump was primarily a "logical response" to the increasing fears and concerns among the general public, which have been building up for decades (p. 179). Chief among these were economic anxieties and unfounded concerns that immigrants were taking jobs away from native American citizens. Other concerns which have been relentlessly propagated by anti-immigration politicians and media revolved around the claim that immigrants were unruly, sexually violent individuals who would endanger the safety of citizens if they are allowed into the US (Finley & Esposito, 2020).

The scholars go on to add that while the Trump administration discourse was generally "problematic" on many political issues, it was particularly so on the topic of immigration (Finley & Esposito, 2020, p. 179). During Trump's first term, the US administration constantly attacked migrants, depicted

them as 'the enemy', and utilised a wide range of rhetorical techniques to dismiss legitimate opposition concerns over immigration. By doing so, the administration ultimately aimed to influence public opinion and policy on the matter and prevent conversation and action meant to address concerns over fairness, equality, and internationally guaranteed human rights (Finley & Esposito, 2020). Finley and Esposito (2020) reflect on the consequentiality and historical precedence of Trump's presidency, as it resurrected an unapologetic form of nativism that violates basic norms and conventions of acceptable political discourse which have been around since at least the 1960s.

Lorenzetti (2020) similarly notes the role that Trump's ascendence to the US presidency has played in the rise of anti-immigration hostility. During his first presidential campaign, Trump repeatedly and unabashedly argued for the construction of a Southern border wall with Mexico in order to prevent what he crudely called "rapists" and people "bringing drugs and crime" from entering the US. The Trump administration also barred Syrian refugees escaping war from entering the country through the controversial 2017 Muslim Ban, effectively reducing the number of refugees admitted into the country on that year and violating the international human rights of people seeking protection (Lorenzetti, 2020; United Nations, n.d.). The ban, which was one of the first executive orders Trump signed after his inauguration, also blacklisted citizens from other Muslim-majority countries, preventing them from entering the United States. Expectedly, many media and political figures,

mostly on the left of the political spectrum, denounced this ban on grounds of clear and unconstitutional religious discrimination. Moreover, the ban was publicly and judicially challenged, but it did ultimately contribute to promoting a "climate of persecution and hate" (Lorenzetti, 2020, p. 98).

3.1.3 The appeal of the Trump rhetoric

The research conducted by Demata (2017) applied Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach in CDA to analyse a varied dataset of Donald Trump's rhetoric in 2015 and 2016 (which is when Trump first announced his presidential candidacy). Demata (2017) essentially aimed to identify and understand the secret behind Trump's rise and why he appealed to many American voters. The study found that the anti-immigration discourse Trump has come to be known for "reinforces a vision of the nation and of its borders which is based on a power which is realized through the legitimization of the identity of some subjects and the alienization or exclusion of others" (Demata, 2017, p. 291). It was also concluded that Trump capitalised on an already existing and widespread narrative which stipulates that strict control of the US-Mexico border is crucial to keep threats out of the country (Demata, 2017). This line of argumentation frequently involves discussions on the necessity of constructing a wall on the border with Mexico.

Quinonez (2018) analysed the language employed by Donald Trump and mainstream conservative media to promote anti-immigration sentiments and foster an atmosphere where

fear of immigrants and hostility toward them is commonplace. Quinonez (2018), who relied on the methodologies of Critical Discourse Analysis and Corpus Linguistics, argues that this effort involved demagoguery and dehumanising rhetoric, along with techniques that negatively depict the 'out-group' while framing the 'in-group' in a positive light. In addition, a variety of discursive strategies and language metaphors were used that served to strip immigrants of their humanity and associate them with looming danger. Quinonez (2018) also sheds light on Trump's use of fear in his speeches, suggesting that it likely functions as a "means of mobilizing" people. Indeed, fear has long been recognised by politicians as an effective psychological means to "get people to collaborate and to think like a group" (Quinonez, 2018, p. 83).

3.2 Brexit and anti-immigration discourse in the UK

In June 2016, the United Kingdom voted to withdraw from the EU, with 51.9% of the British voters supporting the termination of a membership in the continental union that had begun in 1975. Many observers have noted the significant implications of this electoral outcome not only for the UK's political landscape, but also at the European and international levels (Zappettini, 2019; Wenzl, 2019). Evidence from the Essex Continuous Monitoring Surveys (ECMS) indicates that concerns about immigration were among the main factors that influenced the decision of voters to support leaving (Goodwin & Milazzo, 2017). Such concerns have, in fact, contributed to a

long-term sense of unease in public attitudes toward the UK's membership in the EU (Goodwin & Milazzo, 2017).

Politicians advocating for the UK's departure from the EU seemingly recognized the importance of public concerns surrounding immigration and therefore placed considerable emphasis on anti-immigration messaging in their campaign. In certain areas of the country, voters were experiencing rapid demographic change within their local communities and historically high levels of immigration. The anti-immigration platform that Brexit campaigners promoted had a "stronger emotional resonance" among members of such communities (Goodwin & Milazzo, 2017, p. 462). Moreover, research indicates that support for leaving the EU was particularly stronger within local communities that had undergone higher degrees of ethnic change prior to the referendum (Goodwin & Milazzo, 2017).

Likewise, Cap (2019) argues that, when the 2016 referendum and the years leading up to it are examined with the benefit of hindsight, the prominence of immigration as an issue appears to have played a key role in deciding the outcome of the referendum. The salience of discussions on immigration, especially anti-immigration narratives, heightened public anxieties and fostered xenophobic positions in the Brexit debate (Cap, 2019). In this context, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), led by Nigel Farage, was widely considered to be playing "the leading role in perpetuating such attitudes" (Cap, 2019, p. 69). Over the four years preceding the

referendum, Farage's anti-immigration rhetoric then could be generally described as "conceptually bipolar," since it draws on the *Us/Them* distinction and puts this divide into practice both in ideological discourse and policy proposals (Cap, 2019, p. 81).

It is also important to point out that Cap (2019) found that of the discourse of Nigel Farage and UKIP became increasingly radical as the years went by. While "relatively moderate positions" were communicated to the public in 2013 and 2014, a significantly more radical tone emerged in 2015 and 2016 (Cap, 2019, p. 81). This growing radicalisation in Farage's discourse may be attributed to opportunistic political behaviour and the attempt to score political points as the date of the referendum drew nearer. It could also be viewed as a timely response meant to take advantage of certain events like the 2015 refugee crisis in Europe and the 2015 Paris terrorist attacks.

Along the same lines, a survey conducted in 2016 confirmed that the emphasis that 'Leave' campaigners placed on the topic of immigration, particularly in the two weeks immediately before the referendum, was a major contributor in their success (Skinner, 2016, as cited in Zappettini, 2019). According to Zappettini (2019), immigration, along with trade, represented the central discursive element in the rhetoric of the Leave campaign. Brexit advocates frequently framed immigration as an impending crisis, at times in particularly crude and controversial ways (Nigel Farage's Breaking Point poster (Thomas, 2016) shown in Figure 1 below). By presenting immigration in this manner and by conflating immigrants with

criminals and terrorists, proponents of the Leave vote helped legitimise the Brexit message with its obvious exclusionary premises (Zappettini, 2019).



Figure 1: Nigel Farage with the 'Breaking Point' poster

To investigate the rise of anti-immigration, Eurosceptic populism in the UK, Portice and Reicher (2018) analysed four speeches from 2014 and 2015 by four prominent British politicians: David Cameron from the Conservative Party, Nick Clegg from the Liberal Democrats, Nigel Farage from UKIP, and Ed Miliband from the Labour Party. The researchers concluded that in all the speeches that were examined, a "relentless problematization" of migrants as an 'out-group' against the national 'in-group' persisted (Portice & Reicher, 2018, p. 1368). Moreover, arguments were made in all speeches

for further restricting immigration both from inside and outside the EU (Portice & Reicher, 2018).

During the Brexit debate, many have argued that several proponents of Brexit, such as Boris Johnson, who insisted that the movement was primarily concerned with sovereignty rather than immigration, were only "keen to distance themselves from charges of xenophobia" (Hix et al., 2017, p. 1). They claimed that they are not motivated by an absolute rejection of immigration *per se*, even suggesting that unskilled Eastern European migrants should not have priority entering and living in the UK over highly skilled South Asian migrants for example. In fact, a considerable minority of Britain's Asian community supported the Leave position on this basis (Hix et al., 2017). Overall, however, Brexit voters were found to prefer EU immigration over non-EU immigration (Hix et al., 2017). In a large-scale survey, 3,636 UK residents were asked separate questions about the level of immigration they preferred for the country (Hix et al., 2017). The survey concluded that not only do Leave voters prefer EU over non-EU immigrants, Remain voters, too, were found to be more in favour of EU immigration.

3.3 The rise of right-wing anti-immigration discourse in other European countries

One of the best illustrative cases of the increasing prominence of far-right, anti-immigration politics in Europe in the 2010s is the rise of the *Le Front National* party in France (known since 2018 as *Rassemblement national*). While the party has been active since the 1970s and had achieved a limited

degree of success, especially in elections to the European Parliament, it remained far from being a mainstream political force in France (Marcus, 1995; Bréchon & Mitra, 1992). In the 1974 French presidential elections, for instance, the party's leader, Jean-Marie Le Pen, secured only a marginal 0.8% of the vote (Bréchon & Mitra, 1992).

It was not until the early 2010s, when Marine Le Pen replaced her father as the head of *le Front National*, that the party achieved ground-breaking and unprecedented successes. Such successes included nearly quadrupling the number of party members from 22,000 members in 2011 to 83,000 members in 2014 as well as receiving 27.7% of the popular vote (Stockemer & Barisione, 2017). Moreover, in the 2017 French presidential election, Marine Le Pen qualified to the second round and ranked second after Emanuel Macron who ended up being president. Despite the loss, this was still a monumental achievement from a party that was previously confined to the fringes of French politics. With regard to the strategy behind these successes, Stockemer and Barisione (2017) noted that while Marine Le Pen's *Front National* kept the core "anti-immigrant, anti-establishment and nationalist sentiments" held and expressed by party members for over 40 years, immigration now was not at the centre of their programme, but was rather skilfully "interwoven with the main concerns" of large segments of French society (pp. 103-107). In other words, the new *Front National* promoted the anti-immigration cause, not as an outcome in its own right, but rather as part of a solution to

legitimate national concerns like unemployment, housing, and social security.

In Germany, the anti-immigration agenda has been most prominently advanced by the emerging party, *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD). As observed in many patterns across the European Union, right-wing populism in Germany opportunistically thrived and gained traction through the mobilisation of certain global events, like terrorist attacks in France and the Cologne incident of mass assault. These events were used to challenge and undermine the initial refugee-friendly position adopted by Merkel's government (Vollmer & Karakayali, 2018). In that sense, the German far right effectively resurrected "older patterns of hostility and suspicion toward refugees" (Vollmer & Karakayali, 2018, p. 133).

Likewise, Italy saw a similar situation of rising right-wing populism unfold during the previous decade. The far-right, anti-immigration, Eurosceptic party *Lega* (previously known as *Lega Nord*) exploited the Mediterranean refugee crisis and dominated right-wing politics and the government in Italy after 2018 (Dennison & Geddes, 2021). The tenure of Matteo Salvini, who is a *Lega Nord* party member, in the Italian Ministry of the Interior was characterised by "harsher rhetoric" on immigration along with "significantly harsher internal policies" (Dennison & Geddes, 2021, p. 16).

Another significant example of the electoral and discursive momentum gained by far-right, anti-immigration politicians in Europe comes from the Netherlands. The Party for Freedom,

under the leadership of Geert Wilders, who is sometimes described as the Dutch Donald Trump, has been at "the forefront of a wave of anti-immigrant populism sweeping Europe" and has already succeeded in shifting the country's political discourse in a more right-leaning direction (Wildman, 2017, para. 5). Wilders has advocated a range of Islamophobic and xenophobic measures, including banning the Quran, imposing a tax on the hijab, closing mosques, withdrawing from the EU, and refusing entry to Muslim newcomers to the Netherlands. In addition, he has referred to some Moroccan migrants as "'scum' who make Dutch streets 'unsafe'" (Wildman, 2017, para. 1).

While some linked the rise of far-right populism in Europe directly to increasing rates of immigration (Davis & Deole, 2017), others have, in fact, argued that this may not always be the case (Lonsky, 2021). Lonsky (2021) studied the local context of Finnish municipalities and offered a different understanding on the relation between increasing migration rates and the growth of the far right. In the study, Lonsky (2021) examined a panel dataset with seven election years to investigate the effect of immigration on electoral support for the far-right *Finns* Party in Finland. Lonsky (2021) found that a 1% growth in the percentage of foreign citizens in a municipality actually decreased *Finns* Party's share of the votes by 3.5%. Several theories and interpretations have been posited to explain this dynamic, such as the increase of voter turnout by supporters of pro-immigration parties and the intergroup contact theory

(Lonsky, 2021). This means that increases in immigration do not necessarily lead to growing support for the far right, or at least not in every country.

In Ireland, even though the far right has largely been absent as a major electoral player in national politics, there has been a considerable rise of far-right activity and ideology in the last decade or so (Kirby, 2024; Fanning, 2021a; McDaid, 2020; McEnroe, 2016). A number of political parties which advocate for far-right policies were founded, although these have mostly remained minor and electorally ineffectual. One example of such parties is the Irish Freedom Party which expresses hostility towards immigrants and explicitly professes an anti-immigration ideology (McDaid, 2020). The National Party is also a far-right, Eurosceptic political organisation with an open anti-immigration agenda, which operates in Ireland since 2016 (Fanning, 2021a; McDaid, 2020; McEnroe, 2016). Interestingly, the leadership of the National Party acknowledged that they launched the party as an attempt to take advantage of the political momentum of Trump's victory in the 2016 American presidential election (McEnroe, 2016). By the 2020 Irish general election, around 30 far-right candidates ran as independents and on behalf of the National Party, the Irish Freedom Party, and Anti-Corruption Ireland (Fanning, 2021b).

4. Conclusion

Mediterranean irregular migration in the 2010s must be understood within an interconnected social, political, economic, cultural, geographical, and historical context. Arrivals peaked at

389,976 in 2016 before declining in subsequent years (International Organization for Migration, n.d.), driven largely by armed conflicts and instability following the Arab Spring, particularly in countries such as Syria and Libya. In Europe, migration became increasingly politicised and securitised, with debates often linking mobility to terrorism in the context of ISIS (Nussio et al., 2019) and contributing to the electoral rise of far-right parties (Davis & Deole, 2017; Dennison & Geddes, 2021; Stockemer & Barisione, 2017). Economic anxieties in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis reinforced perceptions of migrants as a "perceived threat to the economic self-interest" of native populations (Card et al., 2005), while cultural concerns regarding assimilation and identity further shaped public attitudes (Alesina & Tabellini, 2022). At the same time, these developments occurred within a longer historical trajectory in which Europe had transitioned from a continent of emigration to one of sustained immigration since the post-World War II period (De la Rica et al., 2013).

At the same time in which the Mediterranean migration crisis of the 2010s was unfolding, a wave of right-wing, anti-immigration populism was building up in Europe and the United States. Across many countries, the far right gained considerable ground and achieved numerous political victories during this time. Whether the appeal of far-right populism comes from presenting anti-immigration policies as the ultimate solution to nations' problems or from instilling fear of immigrants as a mobilisation strategy, it has reached and

resonated with millions of voters internationally (Stockemer & Barisione, 2017; Portice & Reicher, 2018; Quinonez, 2018). This growth of anti-immigration sentiments can be particularly harmful to vulnerable communities of migrants around the world, notably those from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

References

Alesina, A., & Tabellini, M. (2022). *The political effects of immigration: Culture or economics?* https://www.nber.org/papers/w30079

Bréchon, P., & Mitra, S. K. (1992). The National Front in France: The emergence of an extreme right protest movement. *Comparative Politics*, 25(1), 63-82.

Cap, P. (2019). 'Britain is full to bursting point' immigration themes in the Brexit discourse of the UK Independence Party. In V. Koller, S. Kopf, & M. Miglbauer (Eds.), *Discourses of Brexit* (pp. 69-85). Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Card, D., Dustmann, C., & Preston, I. (2005). *Understanding attitudes to immigration: The migration and minority module of the first European Social Survey*. Centre for Research and Analysis of Migration, University College London. https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/14315/1/14315.pdf

Davis, L., & Deole, S. S. (2017). Immigration and the rise of far-right parties in Europe. *ifo DICE Report*, 15(4), 10-15.

De la Rica, S., Glitz, A., & Ortega, F. (2013). *Immigration in Europe: Trends, policies and empirical evidence*. Institute for the Study of Labor. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2363279

Demata, M. (2017). A great and beautiful wall: Donald Trump's populist discourse on immigration. *Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict*, 5(2), 274-294. https://doi.org/10.1075/jlac.5.2.06dem

Dennison, J., & Geddes, A. (2021). The centre no longer holds: the Lega, Matteo Salvini and the remaking of Italian immigration politics. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 1-20. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1369183X.2020.1853907

Diamond, S. (1996). Right-wing politics and the anti-immigration cause. Social Justice, 23(3) (65), 154-168.

Fanning, B. (2021a, 15 May). Rise of Ireland's far right relies on abandoned social conservatives. *The Irish Times*. https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/rise-of-ireland-s-far-right-relies-on-abandoned-social-conservatives-1.4563122

Fanning, B. (2021b). *Diverse Republic*. University College Dublin Press.

Finley, L., & Esposito, L. (2020). The immigrant as Bogeyman: Examining Donald Trump and the right's anti-immigrant, anti-PC rhetoric. *Humanity & Society*, 44(2), 178-197.

Goodwin, M., & Milazzo, C. (2017). Taking back control? Investigating the role of immigration in the 2016 vote for Brexit. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 19(3), 450-464.

Han, K. J. (2015). When will left-wing governments introduce liberal migration policies? An implication of power resources theory. *International Studies Quarterly*, 59(3), 602-614.

Harbour, C. P., Middleton, V., Lewis, C., & Anderson, S. K. (2003). Naming the other: How dominant culture privilege and assimilation affect selected underrepresented populations at the community college. *Community College Journal of Research & Practice*, 27(9-10), 829-842.

Haynes, A., Power, M. J., & Devereux, E. (2010). *How Irish politicians construct transnational EU migrants*. Doras Luimní.

Hix, S., Kaufmann, E., & Leeper, T. J. (2017). UK voters, including Leavers, care more about reducing non-EU than EU migration. *British Politics and Policy at LSE*. http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/81918/

International Organization for Migration. (n.d.). *Migration Flow to Europe: arrivals*. https://dtm.iom.int/europe/arrivals

Jolly, S. K., & DiGiusto, G. M. (2014). Xenophobia and immigrant contact: French public attitudes toward immigration. *The Social Science Journal*, 51(3), 464-473.

Kirby, P. (2024). The rise of the far-right: From condemnation to understanding. *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, 113(449), 105-114.

Laurence, J., McGinnity, F., & Murphy, K. (2024). *Attitudes towards immigration and refugees in Ireland: Understanding recent trends and drivers*. The Economic and Social Research Institute. https://www.esri.ie/publications/attitudes-towards-immigration-and-refugees-in-ireland-understanding-recent-trends-and

Lewis-Beck, M. S., & Paldam, M. (2000). Economic voting: an introduction. *Electoral Studies*, 19(2-3), 113-121.

Lonsky, J. (2021). Does immigration decrease far-right popularity? Evidence from Finnish municipalities. *Journal of Population Economics*, 34(1), 97-139.

Lorenzetti, M. I. (2020). Anti-immigration rhetoric in Italy and in the USA: A comparative perspective. In M. Demata & M. Mariano (Eds.), *Euro-American relations in the age of globalization: Risks and opportunities* (pp. 97-121). https://www.researchgate.net/publication/344236936_Anti-Immigration_Rhetoric_in_Italy_and_in_the_USA_A_Comparative_Perspective

Marcus, J. (1995). *The National Front and French Politics: The Resistible Rise of Jean-Marie Le Pen*. NYU Press.

McDaid, S. (2020, 23 Mar). What is the radical right in Ireland (and where is it heading)?. *UIO*. https://www.sv.uio.no/c-rex/english/news-and-events/right-now/2020/what-is-the-radical-right-in-ireland.html

McEnroe, J. (2016, 18 Nov). National Party president wants immigrants to leave. *Irish Examiner*. https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/arid-20431172.html

Nussio, E., Bove, V., & Steele, B. (2019). The consequences of terrorism on migration attitudes across Europe. *Political Geography*, 75 (2019), 1-10.

Portice, J., & Reicher, S. (2018). Arguments for European disintegration: A mobilization analysis of anti-immigration speeches by UK political leaders. *Political Psychology*, 39(6), 1357-1372.

Quinonez, E. S. (2018). *(Un)Welcome to America: A critical discourse analysis of anti-immigrant rhetoric in Trump's speeches and conservative mainstream media* [Master's thesis, California State University] https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/etd/635/

Reidy, T., Suiter, J., & Breen, M. (2018). Boom and bust: Economic voting in Ireland. *Politics*, 38(2), 148-164.

Sniderman, P. M., Hagendoorn, L., & Prior, M. (2004). Predisposing factors and situational triggers: Exclusionary reactions to immigrant minorities. *The American Political Science Review*, 98(1), 35-49. https://doi.org/10.1017/S000305540400098X

Stockemer, D., & Barisione, M. (2017). The 'new' discourse of the Front National under Marine Le Pen: A slight change with a big impact. *European Journal of Communication*, 32(2), 100-115.

The UN Refugee agency. (2016, December 31). *Refugees & migrants sea arrivals in Europe*. https://reliefweb.int/report/greece/refugees-migrants-sea-arrivals-europe-monthly-data-update-december-2016

Thomas, M. (2016). *Nigel Farage with the poster* [photograph]. https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jun/16/nigel-farage-defends-ukip-breaking-point-poster-queue-of-migrants

United Nations. (n.d.). *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights

Vollmer, B., & Karakayali, S. (2018). The volatility of the discourse on refugees in Germany. *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, 16(1-2), 118-139.

Wenzl, N. (2019). 'This is about the kind of Britain we are': National identities as constructed in parliamentary debates about EU membership. In V. Koller, S. Kopf, & M. Miglbauer (Eds.), *Discourses of Brexit* (pp. 32-47). Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Wildman, S. (2017, 15 Mar). Geert Wilders, the Islamophobe some call the Dutch Donald Trump, explained. *Vox*. https://www.vox.com/world/2017/3/14/14921614/geert-wilders-islamophobia-islam-netherlands-populism-europe

Zappettini, F. (2019). The Brexit referendum: How trade and immigration in the discourses of the official campaigns have legitimised a toxic (inter) national logic. *Critical Discourse Studies*, 16(4), 403-419.