



Spring 5-22-2021

## Breaking Point: How Migrant Crises Have Influenced the Rise of Far-Right Parties in Italy, Germany, and the UK

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**Breaking Point: How Migrant Crises Have Influenced the Rise of  
Far-Right Parties in Italy, Germany, and the UK**

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December 2020

**Abstract**

Far-right politics in Europe did not die with Adolf Hitler in 1945. In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, populist parties had a somewhat quiet existence beneath Europe's political surface and did not find much success in elections. However, as refugees and asylum seekers fled the Syrian Civil War and North Africa beginning in 2015, and as Eastern and Central Europeans flocked to the UK, European far-right parties found themselves with a new opportunity to mobilize support. Now in 2020, far-right parties have become legitimate contenders in both national parliaments and the European Parliament. The migrant crisis is perhaps one of the most significant factors allowing for the rise of the far-right in Europe. The migrant crisis provided an opening for far-right populist parties to attract supporters by nursing growing xenophobic feelings and making people believe that they genuinely do need to save their country from invasion. The Lega, Alternative for Germany, and UK Independence Party are three strong examples of this phenomenon as they have heavily used shocking anti-immigrant rhetoric to attract voters. By analyzing election trends, government responses to migrants, and the parties' use of anti-immigrant rhetoric in campaigns, this paper seeks to examine how far-right populist parties in Italy, Germany, and the UK successfully used anti-immigrant rhetoric based on the 2015 European migrant crisis and the influx of Eastern and Central European migrants to the UK to find electoral success in the twenty-first century.

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## Introduction

In 2015, civil war in Syria and the threat of ISIS loomed in the Middle East while the climate crisis spurred desertification in North Africa. Over one million migrants attempted to seek asylum in Europe in 2015 alone (Fiore and Ialongo 2018). The number of refugees and asylum seekers who risk their lives to make the dangerous trek to Europe has continued to grow. Millions of migrants risk the dangerous journey from Libya to the Italian coast or trek the Balkan route through Turkey and into Greece, hoping to make their way to northern states such as Germany (Tassinari 2016, 73). Granting the right to asylum was recognized as an international obligation in the 1951 Geneva Convention on the protection of refugees as it pertains to people who are escaping extreme harm and persecution. However, European citizens in countries such as Italy and Germany have struggled to find a balance between the humanitarian implications of the crisis and their own fears of being outnumbered in their own country.

Even though native citizens of a country may outnumber the number of migrants arriving by millions of people, the media tends to present migrants as coming as a “tsunami” or “invasion” (Fiore and Ialongo 2018). For example, in the map shown in Figure 1 in the Appendix, the arrows showing the different routes that refugees and asylum take to reach Europe from the Middle East or Africa almost mirror maps that depict invasions during war, where arrows trace the movements of invading troops into foreign territory. When large groups of people suddenly relocate to one’s native country, they might feel shocked and even scared for their livelihood. This is particularly true if someone lives in an ethnically and racially homogenous area of their country. To illustrate this, one scholar writes:

“A migrant inflow turns into a crisis after the citizens perceive the migrants as a threat to normal life conditions before the government starts responding by consequential actions though the effect of the actions is uncertain and the knowledge about the

situation is scant.... The situation in Europe turned into a crisis situation after a large number of citizens shared the messages of anti-immigrant groups and parties and perceived the increasing migration wave as a threat” (Attinà 2014, 51).

Meanwhile, citizens of the United Kingdom feel as though they are experiencing a different kind of migrant crisis. In 2004 and 2007, the European Union (EU) enlarged to include former Soviet satellite countries in Eastern and Central Europe, such as Poland and Romania. Making opportune use of the Schengen Agreement, which allows for the free movement of people within the EU and permits citizens of one EU member state to live and work in a different member state, millions of Eastern and Central Europeans flocked to the UK in search of better job opportunities. In addition to the pull of the Schengen Agreement, the UK’s Labour government had opted not to gradually integrate immigrants from the new member states, unlike most other Western European governments, and instead left the UK’s door open. Hundreds of thousands more immigrants came to the UK than the government expected, however, thus having a similar consequence in the UK as the migrant crisis in Germany and Italy. British nationals felt threatened, as though their land was being invaded. Though immigrants did not harm the economy, anti-immigrant feelings rose in the UK.

There is a different threat facing Europe, a threat to democracy and humanity. Far-right populist parties are continuing to gain traction in multiple European nations including Italy, Germany, and the UK. Of course, Europe is no stranger to far-right extremism. Three parties provide strong examples of how such ideology has been able to see a resurgence in Europe: Italy’s Lega party, Germany’s Alternative for Germany (AfD), and the UK’s United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP). All three of these parties, which have existed for decades, can be classified as far-right and populist as their Eurosceptic and anti-immigrant platforms aim to serve and uplift only the citizens of their nation. Before the migrant crisis and the enlargement of the EU in 2004, none of these parties had truly been legitimate

enough to be of note. Since these events, however, the Lega, AfD, and UKIP have largely restructured their platforms to center around anti-immigrant politics and have seen legitimate electoral success as a result.

The existence of far-right populists and extremists in Europe cannot be attributed solely to the migrant crisis. During the 2000s, the EU experienced no small amount of turmoil. For example, the EU was not immune from the 2008 financial crisis, which also provided fuel for far-right politicians.<sup>1</sup> The migrant crisis is another large piece of the growing far-right fabric of the EU and is perhaps one of the most significant factors allowing for the rise of the far-right in Europe. The migrant crisis provided an opening for far-right populist parties to attract supporters by nursing growing xenophobic feelings and making people believe that they truly do need to save their country from invasion. By analyzing election trends, government responses to migrants, and the parties' use of anti-immigrant rhetoric in campaigns, this paper seeks to examine how far-right populist parties in Italy, Germany, and the UK successfully used anti-immigrant rhetoric based on the 2015 European migrant crisis and the influx of Eastern and Central European migrants to the UK to find electoral success in the twenty-first century.

## **Literature Review**

My thesis topic is broad and can be approached in a number of different ways. There is a great deal of reading material available pertaining to the relationship between far-right politics and immigration. However, the far-right parties in my countries of interest, especially in Italy and Germany, are less widely written about in the United States. As the United States continues to navigate a new political age with its own right-wing proponent of anti-immigrant

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<sup>1</sup> For more details on how the 2008 financial crisis influenced the rise of populist parties in Europe, please refer to "The European Trust Crisis and the Rise of Populism" by Yann Algan, Sergei Guriev, Elias Papaioannou, and Evgenia Passari (2017).

rhetoric, President Donald Trump, it is valuable to have reference to similar happenings in other countries. Therefore, I hope that my thesis will contribute to the discussion of far-right populist and xenophobic parties in Europe.

This paper is based mainly on research gathered from academic papers and articles from credible sources. Credible online news websites proved to be a necessary asset for this paper due to the nature of my research. I used Fordham University's guide to reputable news sources to select websites to draw my research from.<sup>2</sup> I have also based parts of this paper on knowledge I have gained on this topic from various classes, as well as from my time interning in London with the non-profit Student Action for Refugees. As I am focusing on the political consequences of the 2015 European migrant crisis and the 2016 Brexit referendum, I have limited my sources to include those from no earlier than 2010. This topic is evolving every day. New relevant articles have come out seemingly weekly, so it has been interesting attempting to keep up with every new development. This also speaks to the importance of incorporating news articles from reliable sources in addition to peer-reviewed academic articles.

Before delving into the case studies, it was necessary to read literature regarding the general definition of right-wing populism and what right-wing populists stand for. Right-wing populism is somewhat distanced from right-wing extremism. Right-wing extremism sits on the absolute margin of the political spectrum, often employs violence, and adopts the "symbolism and rhetoric" of National Socialism (Baier 2016, 51). Meanwhile, right-wing populism attempts to appear less extreme by veiling itself as a legitimate part of parliamentary democracy (Baier 2016). Right-wing populist parties cite the "cultural difference" between racial and ethnic groups to "camouflage their racism," as they advocate for cultural purity and reject cultural diversity within states (Baier 2016, 51). The current

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<sup>2</sup> <https://fordham.libguides.com/FakeNews/Resources>



environment of the EU as a whole breeds right-wing radicalism. For example, the “arming of a security and surveillance apparatus under the pretext of fighting terrorism” and the Islamophobia which is “amplified by the media, and borders closed off to immigrants” creates possibilities for right-wing radicals (Baier 2016, 53). Based on their focus on anti-immigrant rhetoric, AfD and the Lega Nord can be classified as right-wing populist parties.

The literature also provides a solid background on the specifics of the migrant crisis. There are “destination” countries such as Germany and Denmark where migrants hope to settle, “transit” countries such as Greece and Italy that act as the entry point for migrants, “somewhat affected” countries such as Poland and Ireland which face a moderate number of migrants, and “unaffected” countries such as Portugal, which had just eight applications per one-hundred thousand inhabitants in 2016 (Karolewski et. al 2018). Transit and destination countries are arguably the most affected by the migrant crisis as these countries have the most interaction with migrants. Between 2014 and 2017, 1,766,186 migrants came to Europe by boat alone, and 624,747 of those migrants arrived in Italy, while 13,457 died or went missing before reaching Italian shores (Fiore and Ialongo 2018). With its proximity to the African continent, which is just a boat ride away from southern Italy, Italy is an ideal destination country. However, even if they did not intend to remain and settle in Italy, the sudden influx of migrants at the border was a shock to Italian natives. Furthermore, the unfortunately steep number of drownings and capsized boats carrying migrants placed a burden on Italy to protect and look out for migrant vessels as human rights watchdogs set their sights on Italy. Meanwhile, between August 2015 and October 2017, approximately 1,400,000 refugees came to Germany (Karolewski et al. 2018, 100). Due to strong economic opportunities and a brief period where its borders were completely open to Syrian refugees, Germany is by far the most sought-after destination country for migrants. In the eyes of German nationals, this

was not necessarily seen as a positive outcome. Terrorist attacks and Islamophobic opinions served to make Germans feel more afraid for their jobs and the preservation of their culture.

Academic sources regarding the Italy case study are limited. The relevant academic articles that did involve Italy focused not on the Lega, but rather on the migrant crisis itself and how the government responded through search and rescue initiatives as a result of the hundreds of migrant drownings. For example, one academic source discusses the successful but expensive operation Mare Nostrum, which was paid for entirely by the Italian government and was replaced by the less expensive and less effective Triton operation. In order to find substantive research about Italian citizens' feelings towards migrants and the response of the Lega to the migrant crisis, I relied on credible news media from sources such as *The Guardian* and *The New York Times*. These sources provide a great deal of information about the Lega's charismatic leader Matteo Salvini, who is the heart and soul of the party. These sources also go into detail about the Lega and Salvini's anti-immigrant platform, such as when Salvini declared that Italy's borders were completely closed to migrants and he held a boat carrying migrants at port for multiple days, an action for which he was on trial in October 2020. These articles also describe how Salvini has become masterful at using social media to spread his ideology and gain traction among Italian voters.

The selection of academic texts regarding Germany and the Alternative for Germany is slightly larger than that of Italy, but it is still limited. One academic article thoroughly detailed the rise of AfD's electoral success, from its first elections to its most recent, where it has become much more popular amongst German voters. Similar to Italy, the academic articles tend to focus on how Germany was affected by the migrant crisis and how the German government responded. Research shows that a focal point regarding the rise of AfD is the party's use of Chancellor Angela Merkel and the EU as a scapegoat for Germany's problems due to Merkel's immigration policies. News media proved useful for research

regarding the origins of AfD and how it has used anti-immigrant rhetoric to attract voters in the wake of the migrant crisis, such as through blatantly anti-immigrant, anti-Merkel, anti-EU, and Islamophobic campaign posters leading up to the 2017 German General Election.

In comparison to Italy and Germany, there are more pertinent academic papers about the UK. This is likely due to the fact that Brexit was and still is a salient issue for five years. However, news articles were still incredibly useful. Additionally, this is the case study that I had the most existing knowledge about. The academic articles provide data about Brexit and the Leave voter demographics. One source focuses on the ethnic discrimination and hate crimes exhibited towards Eastern European migrants, specifically Polish migrants, leading up to and following the Brexit referendum. This source described a number of frightening events that highlight how UKIP and the leave campaign's xenophobic rhetoric inspire violent and racist actions. The news articles provided useful information about the history of UKIP.

## **Methodology**

There are a number of European countries with far-right populist parties emerging as legitimate parties, which made settling on three countries to focus on a difficult task. Poland, for example, would make for another interesting case study with its recent headfirst descent into the realm of populism. However, I chose to focus on Italy (Lega), Germany (Alternative for Germany), and the UK (United Kingdom Independence Party). Italy and Germany are bookends of the migrant crisis in Europe: one is the country that migrants enter through, and the other is the most attractive country for migrants to settle in. Therefore, I thought it would be interesting to focus on the anti-immigrant politics of two countries that have played different roles in the crisis. Furthermore, I think it is important to consider the rise of populism in Germany in the shadow of Hitler and the Nazi party.

Regarding the UK, instead of the 2015 migrant crisis, I focus on the effects of EU expansion and subsequent Eastern and Central European migration to the UK. This ultimately culminated in Brexit, which has been an ongoing topic of international interest since 2016. By analyzing the UK, I will be able to bring all of my findings together in the discussion to compare and contrast the effects of two different migrant crises in Europe: the migrant crisis which began in 2015 stemming from the Syrian civil war and crises in Africa, and the millions of Eastern European migrants settling in the UK from within the EU.

For all three case studies, I discuss how the existing government responded to the migrant crisis, the background of the far-right party in question, and how the party has capitalized on the blunders of those governments to encourage xenophobic views among voters and gain success. To do this, I researched accounts of government and public reactions to the migrant crises, election results, and accounts of xenophobic policies. In the case of Italy and the UK, I also researched how social media has played a role in the success of the populist parties. This allowed me to have a better understanding of how, exactly, these parties were able to manipulate the migrant crisis into an opportunity for unprecedented success.

I am limited by the length of this paper. This is a rich topic, and each case study could have its own thesis dedicated solely to it. If I had the time and words available to interview migrants in Italy, Germany, and the UK and supporters of these parties, I would. However, I am limited to my research through readings. I am also limited by language barriers. I am able to read and understand Italian, and while I may miss some nuances, I have been able to look at Italian sources and understand the general sentiment of the Italian people and media towards this topic. However, I cannot read German, which means that I cannot enjoy the same breadth of material as I can with the Italy and UK case studies. However, there is enough material available in English that my thesis should be able to address the most relevant points.

## Italy

### The Italian Government's Crisis Response

As migrants made the often-fatal journey by boat across the Mediterranean from Libya to Italy, much of Italy's response to the migrant crisis has been defined by the unfortunate number of drownings that have happened on this route. In 2013, a boat carrying approximately five hundred migrants capsized. In response, the centrist Italian government launched a search-and-rescue initiative called "Mare Nostrum" (Tassinari 2016). In 2014, Mare Nostrum proved to be successful as more than 130,000 migrants were saved from drowning. However, the high monthly cost of ten million euros forced Italy to stop the initiative after just one year (Tassinari 2016). Though Italy had assumed that other EU states would help pay for Mare Nostrum since Italy perceived migrants to be a "continent-wide problem," no other country contributed to the payment (Tassinari 2016, 75). To replace Mare Nostrum, the EU began a much smaller operation called "Triton," which had only one third of Mare Nostrum's budget and could only operate within 30 miles of Italy's coast (Tassinari 2016). Though more cost efficient, Triton proved to be less effective than Mare Nostrum.

Eventually, the Italian government, particularly Marco Minniti of the centrist Democratic Party, did take a restrictive approach to the migration. Minniti made an agreement with the government of Libya that aimed to stop migrants from leaving Libya in the first place, tried to "discredit the work of non-governmental organisations working to rescue migrants," and claimed that the crisis was putting "democracy in danger" (Torelli 2018). In an EU-approved deal, Minniti and the Libyan government increased the size of the Libyan coast guard, essentially militarized tribesmen who have preside over the country's southern border, and convinced clan militias to stop migrant boats from leaving Libya's shores ("Italy's Dodgy Deal" 2017). Furthermore, the deal allocated money to Libyan mayors

to make up for any profits lost from a decrease in migrant trafficking (“Italy’s Dodgy Deal” 2017).

Though Minniti claims that he never made any direct payments to Libyan militias or traffickers in exchange for preventing migrants from leaving Libya, it is widely believed that Italian (and EU) funds were granted to them (“Italy’s Dodgy Deal” 2017). From a human rights perspective, Minniti’s deal is suspicious as the money could be used to arm Libya’s violent factions and rewards traffickers who commit horrifying human rights abuses, such as torturing migrants and selling them into slavery (“Italy’s Dodgy Deal” 2017). Shady as it may be, the deal did reduce the magnitude of migrants leaving Libya and entering Italy. With Minniti’s leadership and the agreement with Libya, the number of migrants arriving decreased by approximately 87 percent between 2017 and 2018 (“Italy’s Dodgy Deal” 2017). Though Italian agreement with Libya might have been controversial to humanitarians, the effects of it were received well in Italy itself, and set up the population to be open to an even more aggressive approach to tackling the country’s migrant dilemma.

### **The Lega Background**

Lega Nord is Italy’s primary far-right populist party, and was renamed simply the Lega in 2018. It has held seats in the Italian Parliament since 1992, and was headed by the same man, Roberto Maroni, until 2013 (“Factsheet” 2020). As a populist party, one of the main focuses of the Lega’s platform is, of course, the Italian people. Furthermore, the Lega stands for federalism. As the party’s original name would suggest, the Lega was especially committed to northern Italy. In Italy, there is a significant cultural and even economic divide between northern Italy and southern Italy. Rooted in the wealthier northern Padania region, the Lega initially called for complete separatism between the regions, then wanted complete autonomy in Padania, and finally settled to seek a federalist system between the regions

(Wolfling 2011). In addition to this, the Lega also sought devolution between provinces, meaning that some provinces would have a disproportionate amount of power in comparison to other provinces (Wolfling 2011). Such devolution would further separate the north from the south.

In 2013, the Lega's current leader, Matteo Salvini, took over. In the 2010s and into the 2020s, the party truly centers around Salvini, who is a charismatic leader. For example, in addition to changing the name to the Lega in 2018, the party also tacked on the slogan "Salvini premier," which translates to "Salvini for Prime Minister" ("Factsheet" 2020). In the 2018 general election, the Lega became the third-largest party and also formed a coalition with another prominent far-right party, the Five Star Movement, as well as the more centrist Democratic Party ("Factsheet" 2020). Therefore, Salvini became one of the two Vice Prime Ministers as well as Minister of the Interior ("Factsheet" 2020). Salvini shifted the Lega's ideological core from a focus on regional separatism and northern Italian supremacy to nativism and populism for Italians in general. This is reflected in the party's name change in 2018, which became more inclusive for all of Italy. Instead of pointing fingers at Rome and southern Italy as the enemy, the party turned its focus to the "totalitarian" EU (Albertazzi et al. 2018). By easing up on the southern Italy and no longer emphasizing the divide between north and south, the Lega was able to truly appeal to a greater number of Italians and therefore attract more supporters.

The Lega found great success in the late-2010s. Though it earned approximately six percent of the vote in the 2014 European Parliament election and placed fourth, it earned approximately 34 percent of the vote in 2019 and placed first ("Factsheet" 2020). Since 2019, the Lega has continued to have a strong block of supporters. As Figure 2, which depicts the election results of the Italian parliament's Lower House in 2019 shows, the Lega earned the second-highest number of seats (125). The winningest party, the Five Star Movement (216

seats), is another far-right populist movement in Italy, though it is regarded as somewhat less extreme than the Lega. This speaks to the growing popularity of populism among Italian voters.

### **The Lega and Migration**

The Lega gained more attention and support when Salvini, nearly immediately into his term as interior minister, forced the *Aquarius*, a ship which was operated by the non-profit SOS Méditerranée and was carrying over 600 African refugees, to turn back (Stille 2018). International media sources regarded this as a highly controversial and problematic move. Some even declared it to be a huge international relations blunder on Salvini's part. However, many Italians applauded Salvini's order. Following the incident, support for the Lega increased from 18 percent to 30 percent, jumping ahead of the Five Star Movement. Salvini earned the highest approval ratings among all Italian politicians (Stille 2018). Salvini's decision to block the *Aquarius* from docking was truly a response to the EU providing little help with Mare Nostrum and the migrant crisis in general. Salvini claimed that Malta should take in the migrants, but this was rejected since the ship was in Tunisian waters which falls under Italy's jurisdiction (Torelli 2018). By doing this, Salvini sought to create a disagreement with the EU in protest against the EU's treatment of Italy during the migrant crisis (Torelli 2018).

Since the *Aquarius* incident, Salvini has kept the Lega's focus on nativism and has continued to use anti-immigrant messaging as the primary tool to do so. In comparison to other parties in the Italian Parliament, the Lega places a greater emphasis on the allegedly too-relaxed migrant management by Italy's previous governments (Torelli 2018). Evidently, Minniti's deal with Libya did not satisfy Salvini, who believes that Italy's borders should be completely closed to migrants. In addition to shuttering Italian ports to NGO rescue vessels,



Salvini also passed a law permitting the seizure of vessels and fines to operators of up to 57,000 euros (Roberts 2020). Salvini has taken a number of steps to ensure that a few migrants as possible make their way to Italian land.

In July 2019, Salvini once again stopped migrants from disembarking a boat belonging to the Italian coast guard and reaching Italian soil. Salvini's actions towards the 131 migrants who were docked at a port in Catania, Sicily for five days caught the attention of the Italian Senate (Messia et al. 2020). The Senate voted to revoke Salvini of the legal immunity Salvini enjoyed as a member of the chamber, which gave Sicilian officials the opportunity to charge Salvini and face him in court (Messia et al. 2020). Salvini is officially charged with aggravated kidnapping, and his trial that could end with him facing 15 years in jail began in early October 2020 (Roberts 2020).

However, Salvini is using the trial as an opportunity to continue to rally Italians against migrants. Salvini says that his actions "defended the honor of Italy" (Roberts 2020). The Lega is marketing the trial as a "festival," and has instructed supporters to buy plane tickets to Catania to discuss immigration and security issues with members of other far-right parties (Roberts 2020). Regarding the trial, Salvini said, "Let's make it so my trial on Sunday morning is an opportunity for learning, reflection, ideas and plans for the future of the country, making Catania for these few days the European capital of freedom" (Roberts 2020). The Lega, its supporters, and other far-right Italian political parties are viewing the trial as a verdict on whether some officials think that it is illegal to "protect" the country from illegal immigrants. Regardless of the outcome, the trial will rally the Lega's supporters.

The Lega has remained Italy's favored party, which demonstrates the effectiveness of its anti-immigrant approach and the general sentiment of the population towards migrants, which allowed the Lega to truly rise to power in the 2010s. However, the Lega and Salvini's popularity has slightly decreased, with Salvini's approval rating dropping 10 points between

2019 and 2020 (Roberts 2020). Despite this, pollsters report that the majority of Italians, including some who do not vote for the Lega, support Salvini's extreme approach to migration (Roberts 2020). Therefore, this trial is almost a gift for Salvini and the Lega. The trial has returned migration issues to the front and center of Italian political discussion, which serves to reignite the Lega's base and xenophobic feelings in Italy (Roberts 2020).

### **Xenophobia and Islamophobia: The Lega**

Since Salvini's takeover of the party, the Lega has amplified its xenophobic and Islamophobic position ("Factsheet" 2020). Following the European Parliament election in 2019, the Lega co-founded Identity and Democracy, an anti-Muslim and far-right parliamentary group ("Factsheet" 2020). The Lega uses an "ethnonational definition" to "describe the in-group and the people that the party wants to defend and represent... and those deemed to be enemies of the party and the state" ("Factsheet" 2020). In the case of Italy, the "in-group" are Italians, and the "enemies" are all other people, as in people who are not Italian, European, or Christian. This sentiment is even stronger for Muslim people and migrants who the Lega view as "endorsing a culture completely different from both Italy's and Europe" ("Factsheet" 2020). Salvini promised a "mass cleaning, street by street, neighborhood by neighborhood" of migrants (Fiore and Ialongo 2018). He has also expressed the belief that brown migrants are erasing Italy's white population. To demonstrate their commitment to Italian nationals, the Lega adopted their infamous motto: *aiutiamo i popoli a casa loro*, which translates to "let's help the people in their own country" (Verbeek and Zaslove 2017, 13). This is perhaps one of the Lega's most blatant displays of xenophobia and establishes a clear "us versus them" dynamic.

Salvini and the Lega's animosity towards migrants is closely tied to Islamophobic attitudes. In 2014, Salvini even released a manifesto entitled the "People's League," which

called for a ban on all mosques in Italy and stated that Muslim people are “trying to impose a way of life incompatible with [Italians]” (“Factsheet” 2020). Once again, this behavior creates a clear us versus them dynamic and otherizes Muslim people in Italy. The Lega paints Muslim men as sex offenders, and some towns that are led by Lega officials prohibit women from wearing the niqab and hijab, despite the fact that creating such an ordinance is unlawful (“Factsheet” 2020). Furthermore, although Islam is the largest religious minority in Italy, it is not a recognized religion, meaning that mosques receive no public funding and that no Muslim holidays are officially recognized (“Factsheet” 2020).

Figure 3 shows Salvini giving a speech while on the campaign trail in 2018 with two Lega posters surrounding him. The red poster on the wall calls for Italians to “stop the invasion.” Though the poster does not explicitly say it, one can infer that it is referring to the “invasion” of migrants. Therefore, while perpetuating the image of migrants as being invaders encroaching on Italian territory, this poster also sends the urgent message that Italians must vote (for the Lega, of course) if they wish to fight against this invasion.

Additionally, the blue poster on the podium reads “Italians first.” This clearly promotes the Lega’s “Italy first” viewpoint. Italian money should only go to Italians, and Italians should only follow Italian law- they certainly should not follow the EU, the organization that abandoned them during the peak of the migrant crisis. The Lega believes that Italians must help themselves before helping others, such as migrants.

Meanwhile, Figure 4 shows a sign posted at the port of Trapani in Sicily, which is a popular entry point for migrants. The sign reads, “Stop immigration. Let’s defend the nation.” This sign was not painted by the Lega, but rather by an Italian neo-Nazi group. Far-right extremists have been inspired and invigorated by the Lega and Salvini’s fervent xenophobic stance, which has drawn them to be more vocal about their xenophobic views themselves.

## **Populism and Social Media: The Lega**

With the advent of social media, political leaders have taken to platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter to garner attention and spread their message. Salvini is one example of one such political leader. While Donald Trump has Twitter, Salvini reigns over Facebook (Stille 2018). In 2015, Salvini tripled his following on Facebook by “capitalizing on the refugee crisis and growing discontent with Matteo Renzi’s centrist government” (Stille 2018). In Figure 5, Salvini demonstrates his support for President Trump by wearing a “Trump 2020” face mask at a protest in Rome. Italians have been made to believe that there are many more migrants in Italy than there actually are. It is commonly believed that migrants comprise 30 percent of the population when in reality, they only comprise 9 percent (Torelli 2018).

Italians have bought into the populist understanding of the refugee crisis, which makes migration appear to be a threatening invasion. Instead of losing followers after making controversial and problematic statements, Salvini’s following merely grows. For example, his number of Facebook followers spiked in 2016 when he declared that Pope Francis welcoming immigrants would “encourage and fund an unprecedented invasion” (Stille 2018). As of August 23, 2020, Salvini has approximately 1.3 million followers on Twitter and over 4.6 million followers on Facebook. This demonstrates the wide reach of his often xenophobic and Islamophobic messaging.

## Germany

### Germany's History with Extremist Parties

Before delving into an analysis of the recent rise of populism in Germany, it is important to make note of the surprising popularity of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) in historical context. In the mid-1900s, Germany hosted Adolf Hitler and his National Socialist German Workers' Party, or Nazi Party, which is one of the most infamous extremist parties in history. Since World War II, Germany has been extremely careful so as not to repeat such a gross violation of human rights. For example, the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution seeks to protect Germany against neo-Nazism and the emergence of political parties that might "threaten Germany's democracy" (Bennhold 2020). The German government is cognizant of the fact that right-wing extremism and extremist violence is a threat to German democracy. In fact, no right-wing populist or extremist party had been able to establish a footing or relevancy in Germany since the end of World War II, until 2013 with the emergence of AfD (Decker 2016). In March 2020, the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution issued a warning against AfD and placed some of the party's highest-ranking officials under surveillance (Bennhold 2020). The Central Council of Jews in Germany stated that AfD's "entry into Parliament had confirmed its worst fears about a resurgence of the far right" (Eddy 2017). As AfD claimed that it would "restore law and order and a sense of national pride" in the wake of the economic and refugee crises, some Germans were concerned with its similarity to nationalist rhetoric (Eddy 2017). In fact, protests against AfD's homage to nationalism took place in major cities across Germany, including Berlin, Hamburg, Frankfurt, and Cologne (Eddy 2017). AfD's growing popularity in the face of a population that is deeply aware of Germany's past and has avoided far-right parties for decades speaks to how deeply German's felt they were affected by the migrant crisis.

### **Angela Merkel and German Government's Response**

Before the migrant crisis of 2015, Germany received the most asylum applications of all European countries. For example, in 2014, it received 202,000 applications (Tassinari 2016). Because of this, German Chancellor Angel Merkel of the center-right Christian Democratic Union took a more conservative approach to migration issues. In 2013, Merkel denied calls for help from southern European countries who were beginning to face an influx in migrant arrivals and said that Germany needed to be restrictive in terms of its migrant intake (Tassinari 2016). This is a stark contrast to Merkel's approach to the migrant crisis in 2015. In August 2015, Merkel announced Germany's humanitarian and controversial offer to refugees who had fled the Civil War in Syria. Merkel announced that Germany was implementing an open-door policy, meaning that its borders were open to all Syrian refugees who wished to seek asylum in Germany (Tassinari 2016). During this announcement, Merkel made a declaration that became infamous: "we can handle this" (Karolewski et al. 2018, 102).

Evidently, Germany could not handle it. Between August 2015 and October 2017, approximately 1,400,000 refugees came to Germany (Karolewski et al. 2018, 100). The open-door policy was not sustainable, and Germany was forced to reinstate its border control as it quickly became overwhelmed by the high number of refugees entering the country (Tassinari 2016). Merkel's open-door policy also fostered tension between Germany and other EU member states such as Greece, Italy, and Hungary as the increased number of migrants hoping to reach Germany still had to enter Europe through one of these states. Merkel had not consulted with any of these states before announcing Germany's new migration policy (Karolewski et al. 2018).

Overwhelmed by the sheer number of asylum seekers in Germany and seeing no end in sight, Merkel sought out a deal with Turkey in 2016. The deal, which like Minniti's deal

between Italy and Libya was highly controversial, stated that all migrants who arrived in Greece and were deemed unlikely to be granted asylum in Europe would be returned to Turkey (Tassinari 2016). Turkey, in turn, would receive a total of six billion euros in aid, as well as the possibility of a no-visa deal between Turkey and the EU and a “refugee swap” where the EU would take in one refugee in Turkey for each refugee who was turned away in Greece (Tassinari 2016). Merkel’s series of controversial decisions in response to the migrant crisis provided AfD with an opening to place blame on the Chancellor and fortify their base of supporters.

### **Alternative for Germany Background**

AfD emerged as a relevant political party in Germany in 2013. Alexander Gauland, Konrad Adam, and Bernd Lucke are AfD’s founders, though Lucke was replaced by Faruke Petry as party head (“How the Alternative for Germany” 2018). However, Petry exercised too much power, and Gauland and Jörg Meuthen replaced her (“How the Alternative for Germany” 2018). As of 2020, Gauland and Meuthen still head the party. AfD’s leaders have expressed some fringe views, such as when Gauland boasted that World War II and the Nazi Party was merely a “speck of bird shit” on the history of Germany (“How the Alternative for Germany” 2018). AfD’s leaders are members of the elite class and are diverse. For example, Alice Weidel speaks fluent Mandarin and raises her children with her female partner (Eddy 2017). This contradicts what one might assume leaders of a far right-wing party might look like.

During the mid-2000s, the EU experienced a significant economic crisis which left millions of Europeans in debt. As this crisis bred Euroscepticism, it gave AfD a prime opportunity to enter the political scene (Decker 2016). The Christian Democratic Union had moved further to the left, leaving more center and right-wing voters to feel “abandoned”

(Decker 2016, 10). Drawing upon German people's frustration with the ruling Christian democrats and liberal party, AfD touted "liberal economic policies and a conservative social agenda" (Decker 2016, 1). Though the party did relatively well in the 2014 election, infighting within the party caused their numbers to drop (Decker 2016). Many of the founding members of AfD had been members of Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union, which falls in the center-right of the political spectrum (Eddy 2017). They became frustrated by Merkel's plan to use German taxpayer money for a bailout of Greece, which struggled greatly in the wake of the economic crisis (Eddy 2017). Germans felt as though they had been swindled out of their own money to help a country a thousand miles away from them. Some Germans felt growing resentment and distrust towards the EU, which is known as Euroscepticism. AfD was able to capitalize off of this Euroscepticism and call Germans away from Merkel and the Christian Democratic Union.

### **Alternative for Germany and Migration**

While the economic crisis gave AfD a window to become relevant, AfD did not truly "regain its electoral fortunes" until two years later with the refugee crisis (Decker 2016, 1). Similar to how Eurosceptic ideals rose in Germany as a result of the Euro crisis, xenophobic and Islamophobic ideals rose as a result of the refugee crisis. Recognizing the upward trend towards right-wing ideals and an emphasis on national identity, AfD saw another opening to grow their base (Decker 2016). In this way, the refugee crisis can be considered an "unexpected gift" for AfD as it "grew into a mouthpiece and almost sole medium of protest for a population deeply unsettled by uncontrolled migrant streams" (Decker 2016, 10).

AfD was also able to capitalize on terrorist attacks committed by Islamic extremists around the same time of the height of the migrant crisis, such as the attacks in Paris, as well as a spike in sexual assaults being done by North Africans on New Year's Eve in Cologne (Decker



2010). For example, the AfD ad in Figure 6 says, “The tracks left by the world chancellor in Europe,” referring to Merkel, and lists various terrorist attacks that were carried out in Europe and the number of people who died as a result of each. Therefore, this poster suggests that these attacks, and consequently these deaths, are the result of Merkel’s open-door policy.

The migration crisis made native Germans feel both insecure and anxious about their place in the nation. Insecurity refers to the social side effects of the sudden influx of migrants, such as “apprehensions about a deprivation in wealth” (Decker 2016, 11). Some of the German population felt anxiety stemming from “emotions of cultural alienation, the loss of a familiar social order and its moorings” (Decker 2016, 11). When these feelings of insecurity and anxiety are combined, Germans seek to limit welfare and government services to German nationals, excluding migrants that are not German nationals. This phenomenon is referred to as “welfare chauvinism” (Decker 2016, 11).

A number of Germans were particularly displeased with Merkel’s open-door policy and overall response to the refugee crisis. In the year following her decision to open Germany’s border, in the midst of a series of small-scale Islamist terrorist attacks in Germany, Merkel’s popularity rating fell 30 points to 45 percent (Barkin 2017). At appearances, Merkel is often met with jeers with anti-immigrant messages (Barkin 2017). AfD was quick to capitalize on the German people’s disdain. Weidel promised to “initiate a parliamentary investigative committee against Angela Merkel” as AfD questioned the legality of Merkel’s migration policies (Eddy 2017). Furthermore, AfD “promised to increase border security, to push back against further European Union integration and to oppose the use of German taxpayer money to bail out foreign banks” (Eddy 2017). Essentially, AfD promised to enact policy that appears opposite to Merkel’s.

The March 2016 state elections proved to be AfD’s most successful election at that point, demonstrating the success of AfD’s anti-immigrant rhetoric. For example, in the

Saxony-Anhalt region, AfD won 24.2 percent of the vote- the highest percentage ever won by a “right-wing populist or extremist party” in the German state elections (Decker 2016, 10).

AfD’s percentages of the vote in Baden-Württemberg and Rhineland-Palatinate were also in the double digits (Decker 2016). More impressively, “a quarter of the AfD’s electorate in Baden- Württemberg and Rhineland-Palatinate and even a third in Saxony-Anhalt was made up of voters that had not taken part in previous elections,” solidifying itself as the “primary profiteer of the increasing politicization precipitated by the refugee crisis that drove up turnout by around ten percentage points in all three states” (Decker 2016, 10).

In the 2017 election, where Merkel was voted into her fourth term, AfD won approximately six million votes, with 1.2 million coming from Germans who had neglected to vote in prior elections (Eddy 2017). Furthermore, AfD took another million votes away from people who had historically voted with Merkel, including voters from the Christian Social Union and the Christian Democratic Union (Eddy 2017). However, AfD did not only pull from the right and the center-right. It earned approximately 500,000 votes from left-leaning Germans who had previously voted for the Social Democrats and an additional 400,000 from people who had voted for the Left Party (Eddy 2017). Evidently, AfD’s voters hail from every end of the political spectrum. In a time when millions of Germans felt as though their representatives had failed them and that Germany was losing its place in an “increasingly globalized world,” AfD had succeeded in advertising itself as the party for the people (Eddy 2017). The following map in Figure 7 shows AfD’s success in each state in the 2019 state elections. As the graphic shows, AfD continued to perform well in Saxony.

### **Xenophobia and Islamophobia: AfD**

“Leitkultur” is a German word meaning “core” or “guiding” culture. AfD promotes the concept of Letikultur in the way that it rejects “relativist multiculturalism” and believes

that German traditions and the German language should be the backbone of German identity and are “central to the cohesion of German society” (Gedmin 2019). In an attempt to gain support by preying on and amplifying German people’s xenophobia, AfD heavily uses Islamophobic messaging. Letikultur can also be taken to mean “an obligation of newcomers to show allegiance to democracy and rule of law, political pluralism and secularism” (Gedmin 2019). Germans across the political spectrum place great importance on secularism in particular, which gives entities like AfD opportunity to capitalize on Islamophobic tendencies. Some Germans have long questioned the place for Islam within German culture and society (Gedmin 2019). When Merkel and other Chancellors have used “inclusive language” when speaking about Muslims, AfD has opposed it, stating that Islam is “a religion that does not respect the constitution and laws of the country and is not compatible with German democracy” (Eddy 2017). In 2016, Petry went as far as saying that police officers could “open fire on asylum seekers trying to cross German borders” as a “last resort” (Faiola 2016). AfD has not kept its thoughts on Islam and Muslim people a secret.

AfD has historically partnered with the Pegida movement, which stands for “Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the Occident” (Decker 2016). Pegida seeks to stop immigrants from settling in Germany and feels as though Muslim immigrants in particular are soiling German culture. Pegida regularly stages protests across Germany, and they have spread throughout Europe. They are seen as extremist, and the protests can turn violent. Initially, AfD distanced itself from Pegida due to how extreme the movement is. However, as AfD found its base and leaned more into being outwardly anti-immigrant and Islamophobic, it became more aligned with Pegida. Furthermore, in 2013, 76 percent of AfD voters noted that they understood and agreed with Pegida’s anti-Muslim protests (Decker 2016).

Figures 8 and 9 are a series of posters from a 2017 AfD anti-immigrant and Islamophobic ad campaign. Figure 8, which shows a pregnant woman, reads, “New

Germans? We'll make them ourselves.” This sends a clear message that AfD’s Germany is not welcome to “outsiders,” and that it is not welcome to any diversity. This ad also has a strong nativist sentiment and ties into Leitkultur. Figure 9 is an ad depicting two women wearing swimsuits. It reads, “Burkas? We’d rather wear bikinis,” which is a clear reference to the religious garb that many Muslim women wear. Fitting in with the trends of AfD, this ad deepens the divide between white Germans who do not practice Islam by pointing out the differences between the cultures.

## **The United Kingdom**

### **EU Expansion in 2004 and the UK Government's Response**

In 1973, the UK joined the European Economic Community (EEC), which would eventually become the EU with the Maastricht Treaty in 1993. In 1975, there was a referendum introduced by the New Labour government to ratify Britain's membership in the EEC, which divided the parties and people within the parties between those who were pro-Europe and anti-Europe. In general, those on the right of the Conservative party and those on the left of the Labour party were against Europe. In 1997, Tony Blair and the economically and culturally liberal New Labour party came to power.<sup>3</sup>

In 2004, ten more countries joined the EU. Eight of these were former USSR satellites in Central and Eastern Europe: Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Hungary, Poland, Lithuania, Slovakia, and Slovenia. Existing EU member states in the Western Europe approached this expansion differently. France and Germany, for example, opted for a gradual integration approach that took place over the course of seven years so that French and German voters would not be completely overwhelmed by a sudden influx in Eastern European migrants (Ker-Lindsay 2015). Blair and the New Labour government, however, predicted that these migrants would lead to quick industrial and economic growth, and therefore opened up its borders immediately. Assuming that the other Western European member states were also going to open their borders, the UK government predicted that there would be less than 20,000 migrants coming to the UK. Instead, over 100,000 migrants from the new member states started moving to the UK every year (Portes 2016). These immigrants did indeed bring economic prosperity, did not increase unemployment, did not "steal" jobs from British nationals, and increased wages ("The Fiscal Impact" 2018). In 2007 when the EU expanded

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<sup>3</sup> For further information regarding the UK's history with the EU, please refer to "THE UK AND EUROPEAN 'CENTRE FORMATION' FROM 1950 TO BREXIT" by Christopher Lord (2018).

again to include Romania and Bulgaria, the UK government opted for the seven-year gradual approach (Portes 2016). However, the Conservatives were able to argue that Labour had truly dropped the ball regarding Eastern European immigration, and Labour subsequently was voted out of power in 2010, when the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats formed a coalition government.

Perhaps the most visible effect the immigrants had on the UK was how they changed the cultural makeup of the UK. In 2019, there were an estimated 3.6 million EU-born migrants living in the UK, which equates to 5.5% of the total population of the UK (“EU Migration to and from”). Of these 3.6 million EU-born migrants, most hailed from Poland, with Romania and Ireland taking the second and third rankings (“EU Migration to and from”). This represents the greatest amount of migration into the UK from people coming from countries other than British Commonwealth countries that the UK has seen. Outside of London and some of the UK’s more metropolitan areas, much of the UK was very homogenous. Therefore, the sudden and intense arrival of Eastern European (especially Polish) culture in these areas of the UK caused a kind of culture shock for the British nationals who were already living there. Some of these people felt as though British culture was being infringed upon and eroded, which, similar to the Lega and AfD, provided an opening for UKIP to rise in power. The map in Figure 10 shows how the EU has expanded over time, from the original member states marked in yellow to the Eastern and Central European countries which became member states in 2004 marked in light brown. Note that Bulgaria and Romania became member states in 2007, which was the most recent change to the EU’s size until Brexit.

## **UKIP Background**

Though it was named the Anti-Federalist League at its founding in 1991, the party was renamed the “United Kingdom Independence Party” (UKIP) in 1993. It was established with the mission of removing the UK from the EU (Sutcliffe 2012). The party was a result of when its founder, Alan Sked, campaigned against the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty (Sutcliffe 2012). In 2006, however, founding member Nigel Farage officially took over as leader. Farage stayed in power until 2016 (with one brief break), and he is now the leader of the Brexit party. Under Farage’s leadership, UKIP’s platform expanded to focus heavily on immigration and appealed to white, British nationals in the working class (Sutcliffe 2012). Therefore, its members are mainly white, older, and members of the working class.

As it capitalized on growing anti-immigrant views in the UK, UKIP saw its first true electoral win in the 2004 European Parliament election. In this election, UKIP won over 16 percent of the vote and 12 Members of the European Parliament, putting it in third place (Sutcliffe 2012). The party found even more success in the 2009 European Parliament election when it won 16.5 percent of the vote and an additional seat, thus placing second to the Conservative Party. This was particularly significant as these results made the Labour Party, which was in power at the time, drop to third place (Sutcliffe 113).

UKIP is a Eurosceptic party, which refers to general opposition of the EU and European integration. There is both “hard” and “soft” Euroscepticism. Hard Euroscepticism can be defined as complete opposition of the EU and European integration and general entails having a platform demanding a member state’s withdrawal from the EU (Sutcliffe 2012). Meanwhile, soft Euroscepticism refers to opposition to specific policies, policy outcomes, and institutional aspects of the EU. Soft Eurosceptics also seek EU reform rather than its complete dissolution (Sutcliffe 2012). UKIP falls under the hard-Eurosceptic definition as it is extremely critical of the EU and calls for the return of power in decision making to British

people and the British political system, rather than the governing EU institutions (Sutcliffe 2012). It follows that most of UKIP's policies have an underlying thread of Euroscepticism. For example, it believes that the UK should have more autonomous control over its own fishing grounds beyond the rules of the EU's common fisheries policy and that withdrawing from the EU would allow the UK to save money (Sutcliffe 2012).

### **UKIP and Xenophobia: Brexit**

Citizens and popular media in the UK have historically viewed continental Europe as the "other" (Sutcliffe 2012). These citizens feel strongly connected to Britain's former Empire, British culture which involves a common law system and a national church, and its status as an island, which literally and rhetorically separates it from continental Europe (Kriesi 2020). Much of UKIP's platform centers on "restoring Britishness" (Sutcliffe 2012, 116). For example, Farage called for a ban of the wearing of the burka, claiming that it symbolizes an "increasingly divided Britain" and that it is evidence of non-Anglo-Saxon cultures "being forced on Britain" (Sutcliffe 2012, 116). One UKIP member stated that the burka is "incompatible with Britain's values of freedom and democracy" (Sutcliffe 2012, 116). UKIP believes that the EU is a threat to British identity because it "reduces national control over key areas of national life including immigration and asylum policies" (Sutcliffe 2012, 116).

The Treaty of Lisbon (2009) includes a provision allowing EU member states to secede. Brexit, which is the popular term for the campaign to remove the UK from the EU, was UKIP and the UK's ultimate response to immigration from Central and Eastern Europe. Brexit is an example of "nationalistic backlash that is expressed by the rise of the radical populist right in other northwestern European countries more generally" (Kriesi 2020, 5). It is important to note that in the past, "attitudes about immigration had been largely independent



of attitudes about EU membership,” but UK citizens grew to associate the two issues together (Kriesi 2020, 5). This is partly due to the fact that UKIP and the Leave campaign in general used clearly xenophobic and anti-immigration rhetoric in its campaign effort (Kriesi 2020). This tactic proved to be successful as most of the people who voted in favor of Brexit reported that immigration and sovereignty were the two issues that motivated their vote choice the most (Kriesi 2020). Figure 11 is an example of this, as a UKIP supporter holds signage encouraging people to vote Leave in the 2016 referendum. The slogan suggests that UKIP supporters believe that immigrants were invading the UK and encroaching upon British territory.

In the 2015 election, UKIP ran on a platform that largely centered on getting the UK to leave the EU as immigration was one of the main issues. UKIP placed second to the Conservatives with David Cameron as the Prime Minister, who promised UKIP that there would be a referendum on leaving the EU (Martill and Staiger 2018). This referendum was to be held in 2016, and the Remain campaign was leading in the polls in much the time leading up to the referendum itself. However, the undecided voters suddenly shifted to favor Leave. The Leave campaign won with 52 percent of the vote, compared to Remain’s 48 percent (Martill and Staiger 2018). As the following maps show, the majority of remain voters came from working class and rural towns in England and Wales, while the majority of voters in Northern Ireland and Scotland, two countries that might very well attempt to leave the UK, voted Remain (Martill and Staiger 2018).

Aligning with the UKIP supporter demographic, leave voters tended to come from smaller towns and cities in the UK, were less-educated blue collar workers, were older, and were white. Figure 12 displays two maps of the UK, side by side. The map on the left shows the UK as it appears normally on the map, with the addition of counties having been color coded if the county voted to remain in the EU (yellow) or leave (blue). The map on the right

shows the UK if it was resized according to the number of votes areas counted in the Brexit referendum. It swells around larger cities such as London. Essentially, Leave voters were the people who felt most marginalized by socio-economic policies of the left and of the EU (Kriesi 2020). For example, 63 percent of the British working class were Leave voters, while just 44 percent of the middle class were (Kriesi 2020). Furthermore, Leave voters' hometowns might have never had immigrants before, and they had watched as the cultural makeup of their towns changed as, for example, Polish shops emerged in small British towns that had not seen much ethnic diversity beforehand. As a result of Brexit, 50,000 fewer migrants came to the UK in 2017 (Martill and Staiger 2018).

Like the Lega and AfD, xenophobic rhetoric is one of UKIP's most successful tools to get people to mobilize. One anti-migrant poster (Figure 13) which was presented by Farage in support of the Leave campaign was even reported to the police (Stewart and Mason 2016). The complainant claimed that the poster, which depicts a long line of migrants and refugees, "incites racial hatred and breaches UK race laws" (Stewart and Mason 2016). The poster even led Boris Johnson, current Prime Minister and then-head of the Leave campaign, to distance himself from Farage (Stewart and Mason 2016).

Furthermore, more hate crimes were reported in the UK around the time of the referendum. In June 2016, the same month as the referendum, police recorded 41 percent more racially aggravated crimes than in July 2015 (Rzepnikowska 2018). As Polish people make up the largest block of Eastern European migrants in the UK, much of these xenophobic attitudes were directed towards them. For example, one of many horrors that occurred was when a 40-year-old factory worker was punched to the ground and died after being overheard speaking Polish, while others were stabbed for being overheard speaking Polish (Rzepnikowska 2018). Profane xenophobic graffiti such as that depicted in Figure 14 is directed towards Polish immigrants. As these events and others like them spiked before and

after the referendum, one might presume that there is a correlation between the increase in hate crimes, the Leave campaign's xenophobic rhetoric, and the referendum overall. When political leaders such as Farage proudly stand in front of posters such as in Figure 13, it communicates that people can and should freely act on their xenophobic and racist tendencies.

### **Populism and Social Media: UKIP**

British politics have often carried an anti-immigrant sentiment, and other parties had tried and failed to have success that UKIP eventually found. For example, there was MP Enoch Powell and his infamous "Rivers of Blood" speech, which opposed immigration to the UK (Yeginsu 2018). Then there was the National Front, which is a far-right extremist group that vehemently opposes immigration (especially non-white immigration) to the UK ("1975: National Front" 1975). However, UKIP had a charismatic leader in Farage, and it wielded what has become one of the most powerful weapons in politics: a strong social media presence.

Like Salvini, Farage and UKIP have somewhat mastered the art of campaigning and spreading their beliefs via social media. In the time leading up to the 2014 European election, which was arguably one of UKIP's most successful elections, UKIP had more Twitter mentions than any other party (Perraudin 2014). UKIP impressively is able to source engagement not just from millennials and young people, but also from older and middle-aged people (Perraudin 2014). As of November 1, 2020, UKIP has 511,658 followers on Facebook (doubled since 2014) and approximately 208,000 on Twitter, and Farage has approximately 1.6 million followers on Twitter. Part of UKIP's social media success is due to the fact that social media users are more likely to favor anti-establishment figures and to dislike

establishment politicians, which creates a perfect opportunity for UKIP to swoop in and rally supporters (Perraudin 2014).

Facebook is what truly granted the Leave campaign its success in the 2016 referendum. Billionaire Robert Mercer, a backer of Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign, owner of Cambridge Analytica, and friend of Farage, used data harvested from people's Facebook profiles to target people using personalized tactics such as targeted political advertisements in order to convince them to vote Leave (Cadwalladr 2017). Mercer's donation of these services was illegal as the donation was not reported, but it was extremely successful nonetheless. As people spent countless hours scrolling through Facebook, they were inundated with pro-Leave ads that were personally tailored to appeal to them (Cadwalladr 2017). For undecided voters, this could have been especially convincing. UKIP and the Leave campaign's control over the social media realm was a deciding factor in their win against the Remain campaign.

## Discussion and Analysis

### Italy

Time and time again, Italy has felt abandoned by the EU. The migrant crisis merely put a spotlight on the EU's alleged failures. As hundreds of helpless migrants capsized, drowned, and washed up on Italian shores, the judgmental eyes of the world zeroed in on Italy. For a short while, Mare Nostrum was able to somewhat appease humanitarians. However, the EU's cost-effective replacement of Mare Nostrum was less effective with regards to saving lives, and the Italian government took matters into their own hands and turned to making questionable deals with Libya (Tassinari 2016). Where the EU failed, the Italian government was more successful in the minds of Italian citizens. This opened Italians' minds to the possibility of a more aggressive approach to the migrant crisis and quelling the flow of refugees and asylum seekers coming to Italy. With Salvini, the Lega finally had the perfect opportunity to structure its platform in a way that would draw the most support from the Italian people, as the party turned from being regionally separatist to being openly and fully anti-migrant and xenophobic. Many Italians who had a small feeling of abandonment from the EU and a growing fear that migrants were going to take over their livelihoods and benefits were nurtured by Salvini to fully believe in xenophobic rhetoric, leading to a more prominent Lega.

Using my understanding of Italian, I perused the politics sections of two popular and credible Italian news sources: *Corriere Della Sera* and *La Repubblica*. Salvini and migration continue to make the headlines. It also appears that, more often than not, an article about migration and/or refugees is bound to include a reference to Salvini. Salvini has made himself synonymous with anti-immigrant politics in Italy. He has tied himself and his party so closely in with this issue that, despite his trial and not holding as high an office as he once did, he remains a key player in one of Italy's most relevant and long-standing issues. As migration

and borders continue to be a large part of the COVID-19 discussion, Salvini and the Lega will remain permanent facets of Italian political discussion.

## **Germany**

While Italy and the UK have deep histories with far-right politics, imperialism, and xenophobia, these historical ties are perhaps most visible with Germany. Hitler's Nazi Party is arguably the most popular reference point with regard to extremist politics due to the sheer level of harm that was done by the party during World War II. Therefore, AfD could be deemed the most intriguing case as an outside observer might balk at Germany's growing relationship with another far-right party. While Italy felt failed by the EU but found some success in the existing government during the migrant crisis, Germany felt failed by both the EU and its own government. AfD's founders had felt abandoned by Merkel years before the peak of the migrant crisis, so Merkel's open promise to refugees and asylum seekers was the last straw and gave AfD something to use to lure voters who had been on the fence about AfD. Furthermore, the overwhelming number of migrants in Germany, which AfD attributes to Merkel's policies, gave AfD an opportunity to instill anxiety and discomfort among the population. Through this fear mongering, AfD successfully persuaded numerous German voters that their culture and way of life was being threatened by Germany's new migrant population (Decker 2016).

AfD's xenophobic and Islamophobic advertisements are key examples of how populist parties seek to instill these ideologies in the general population. AfD and similar parties use unnerving numbers, such as the amounts of people killed in terrorist attacks for which the blame can be attributed to the entire migrant population, to make people feel threatened. If they feel threatened, they will want to do everything in their power to feel safe again. AfD seeks to represent this safety, sending the message that voters need to vote for a

changing of the guard in the government so that AfD can enact policy that will eliminate the threats to their livelihoods. Therefore, AfD was able to capitalize on the EU and Merkel's mishaps as well as German people's anxiety as a result of the migrant crisis to propel their platform and party to relevancy on both the national (Germany) and supranational (EU) levels.

### **The UK**

The UK case study is different from the Italy and Germany case studies as its focus is the migration of Eastern and Central Europeans to the UK rather than refugees and asylum seekers from the Middle East and Africa. Please note that this does not mean that the UK was not affected by the Middle East and North Africa migrant crisis or that UK politicians did not use the migrant crisis to foster xenophobia, but rather that the case of the UK and Eastern European migrants is unique and requires focused research. Similar to Italy and Germany, the UK's history of anti-immigrant politics can be connected to its issues with the EU, which is made obvious by Brexit. UKIP was also able to capitalize off of the misjudgment of Blair's New Labour government of allowing more immigrants from the EU's new additions to migrate to the UK than other Western European nations. As was the case with Italy and Germany, UKIP fostered the feeling that British territory was being encroached upon by immigrants. This angle allowed UKIP to appeal to the UK's white, working class population of English nationals in a way that it had not been able to in previous decades. This is due in part to Farage's visibility as a leader. Under Farage, UKIP successfully conflated its migrant issues with the EU, which, in tandem with social media campaigning, allowed it to realize its ultimate goal of seceding from the EU through Brexit.

The data harvesting that worked greatly in the Leave campaign's favor is also indicative of how manipulating voters and deluging them with information is necessary for the success of populist campaigns. In some ways, established and more normative parties become comfortable in their positions and do not feel a sense of urgency to actively recruit new voters. However, fringe parties, if they wish to be truly successful, must make a concerted effort to bring undecided voters to their side. AfD attempted this through their provocative advertisements. Regarding Brexit, the Leave campaign achieved this through Mercer's data harvesting and the implementation of targeted advertisements directed towards Facebook users (Cadwalladr 2017). The importance of this social media campaigning to the Brexit result cannot be underestimated as it can claim a great amount of the undecided voters who went to the polls and voted in favor of Brexit. Therefore, the UK is an example of how far-right fringe parties must put forth a constant flow of information to instill their rhetoric in the minds of voters in order to lure them to their party.

Looking to the future as Brexit continues to unfold more than four years after the referendum, it is possible that Brexit will change the UK beyond its status as an EU member state. Based on the findings in this paper, it appears likely that Scotland and Northern Ireland will once again seek separation from England and Wales. While the Leave campaign won, the vote was not representative of the entirety of the UK; Remain won in Scotland and Northern Ireland as the tourism these countries had enjoyed by being in the EU was a significant part of their economies (Martill and Staiger 2018). In the case of Northern Ireland, the issue once again comes down to borders as the Good Friday Agreement offers Northern Ireland a clear path to reunion with the Republic of Ireland should Northern Ireland separate from the UK (Martill and Staiger 2018). Brexit continues to be a perplexing situation regardless, making it difficult to predict some of its future consequences.



## Final Discussion and Analysis

The findings of this paper have reaffirmed one commonly held perception of the followers of far-right parties. A substantial number of these parties' followers can be categorized as people who feel left behind by their government and the "elites" (Kriesi 2020). This is in line, for example, with AfD's use of Merkel as a scapegoat for Germany's issues and the migrant wave that AfD's supporters believe they are drowning under. It is as if AfD said, "Look at the party and the Chancellor you voted in, look how they have abandoned you so that they can instead serve people who do not speak the same language as you." This is a manifestation of "backlash politics," which is a phenomenon where voters and politicians act on a feeling of needing to restore sovereignty and regain control of their own country (Kriesi 2020). As this paper has shown, this is a common phenomenon among the far-right as parties attract voters in part by warning them that they must take back control from the "elite" who are changing the face of the country (Kriesi 2020). The migrant crisis allowed this backlash politics rhetoric to be even more salient, far-right politicians convinced an impressionable population that they needed to take back control not only from the then-current government, but also from migrants and the EU.

Europe's far-right parties, as demonstrated by the Lega, AfD, and UKIP, have adopted a common language. As this paper has shown, all three parties share the tactic of fearmongering, which is common among populist parties (Akbaba 2018). This is evident with all three parties' campaign posters which link the presence of migrants to terrorism, death, and invasions. Despite the fact that globalization has made the world increasingly heterogenous, some people will never not be afraid of those who they perceive to be different from themselves. Again, this is one way in which migration presented these parties with an unprecedented opportunity for growth. Europeans had long held anti-immigrant and Islamophobic beliefs, leaving populist politicians to simply prey on and legitimize this fear

by villainizing migrants (Kriesi 2020). It is easy to take a single issue such as migration and make it the life force of a party, to rally people around it and convince them that this is the most dangerous issue they are facing, that they are fighting a war, and that they must vote the party into power to protect them. Both migration and populist parties have become mainstream and inevitable. If reigning governments did yield and completely closed borders to migrants, populist parties would not disappear, but rather would find another issue to convince voters they are threatened by. To counter the rise of populism, opposing parties must circumvent the fearmongering and expose people to facts instead of allowing far-right parties to prey on their fears.

Italy and the UK's cases share a number of similarities in particular. Both parties grew popular under controversial yet charismatic leaders, with Salvini for the Lega and Farage for UKIP. These leaders are infamous on a greater European or even global scale. Meanwhile, AfD's leader is less recognizable and party officials serve to represent the party, rather than having the party represent them. Furthermore, both parties have heavily relied on social media to spread their messages, though this is not always done in a wholly legal way, as we have seen with UKIP. In these ways, the Lega and UKIP had a similar trajectory as Donald Trump and the emergence of more far-right conservatives in the United States. In fact, Robert Mercer, the same man who helped UKIP and the Leave Party manipulate targeted Facebook advertisements to attract voters, aided Trump in a similar way during the 2016 election (Cadwalladr 2017). Trump could even be considered the blueprint for controversial and charismatic right-wing leaders of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as he is by far the most notorious and internationally known among the growing roster of divisive world leaders. For all of Salvini and Farage's success on Facebook and Twitter, it is nothing compared to Trump and his nearly 90 million Twitter followers. Trump has turned Twitter into a soapbox and a place for his followers to disseminate xenophobic and far-right ideals.

AfD, the Lega, UKIP, and Trump's followers are not the only far-right parties gaining traction. Leaders whose parties tend to be xenophobic, racist, populist and even extremist have risen in popularity in assorted nations. For example, populist and nationalist parties in Hungary and Poland have garnered international attention due to their quick rise to power in recent months. Therefore, one might wonder if the Lega, AfD, UKIP, and even Trump's success is indicative of a global trend toward populism as immigrant populations continue to rise and give these parties an opportunity to demonize migrants. Still, Trump lost the 2020 election to Democrat Joseph Biden, who earned the highest number of popular votes of any American presidential candidate in history. Does this indicate that the political left now recognizes that far-right parties are legitimate threats due to the size of their base, and have thus been inspired to actively take back power? It will be intriguing to see if European politics on both the EU and national levels will mirror the American election results in that populist parties will lose seats. Based on the findings of this paper, I argue that while European far-right parties may take a slight loss in seats, they will be quick to capitalize on another issue to ignite their supporters. In 2020, these parties have mastered not only the rhetoric to use to attract attention and support, but also how to use social media to their advantage. Trump, Salvini, and Farage are not the only people who have figured out that posting on social media is the easiest way to inundate millions of people with your own opinions, whether they are based in fact or not. However, the answer to this question is also complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which, at the time of writing, continues to affect every corner of public and private life, including politics.

### **Migration, Europe's Far-Right, and COVID-19**

Perhaps COVID-19 is the next "threat" to sovereignty that far-right politicians can spin to reinvigorate their base. Due to the novelty of the pandemic, there is limited research

regarding the effect of COVID-19 on populist parties. Of course, one of the biggest issues surrounding the pandemic is borders. Far-right leaders have been quick to point blame at open borders as COVID-19 has “exposed the fragilities of open borders between states” (Mason 2020, 1). At the height of the virus’ reign in Europe, the EU completely closed its borders to foreigners, and other countries on all continents took similar precautions. This left migrants and asylum seekers in a difficult situation as the borders that were already incredibly difficult for them to cross became even more restricted. EU member states such as Greece temporarily halted the asylum process and did not allow access for asylum seekers (Mason 2020). Furthermore, the pandemic provided some people with fuel for their xenophobic and racist fire. The virus originated in Wuhan, China, which drew some people to act increasingly racist towards ethnically Chinese people. Asian people have been publicly physically and verbally assaulted. Trump has often referred to COVID-19 as the “China virus” or the “kung flu,” which has been echoed throughout his base and reinforced the belief among his followers that Chinese people are entirely at fault for the pandemic. One of the many calamitous consequences of COVID-19 is a surge in racist behavior.

Trump is not the only leader who has weaponized the pandemic to encourage racism and xenophobia. In early 2020, Italy had some of the highest numbers of COVID-19 cases. All eyes were on the Italian government to see how it would respond. Salvini was quick to capitalize on the pandemic and used it to justify his anti-immigrant views. He took to social media, where he posted a video of a migrant ship arriving in Italy and accused migrants of causing Italy’s catastrophic outbreak (Kendall-Taylor and Nietzsche 2020). Furthermore, Salvini and other European far-right politicians criticized the EU’s decision to universally close its borders, citing this move as an imposition on people’s ability to move about freely (Kendall-Taylor and Nietzsche 2020). It seems as though Salvini is only in favor of border control when it keeps *migrants* out. However, Salvini’s approval has dropped among Italians

in the wake of the pandemic. This does not represent a shift away from the far-right; in fact, the Brothers of Italy party, which is more extreme than the Lega and has direct links to fascism, has gained popularity (Kendall-Taylor and Nietzsche 2020). Note that the strength of the correlation between this rise and the pandemic is unclear. However, it is possible that the pandemic will make populist parties fade out and push them to become more openly nationalist and authoritarian (Kendall-Taylor and Nietzsche 2020).

Meanwhile in other countries, populist governments have failed to contain the pandemic and, unlike in Italy, have pushed voters back towards the center of the political spectrum. In these cases, COVID-19 has pulled back the curtain on these parties and has exposed their inability to handle a true crisis. In Germany, for example, Merkel's CDU is becoming favorable among Germans again, which could signal the end of days for AfD (Kendall-Taylor and Nietzsche 2020). Then there is the UK, where Parliament passed a bill that bestows the government with the power to "detain and isolate people indefinitely and ban public gatherings, including protests, all with little oversight" (Kendall-Taylor and Nietzsche 2020). While it is decreasing the power of populists in some nations, the pandemic is also giving them new opportunities to seize control in others. Looking towards the future, it will be fascinating to evaluate how these trends continue to develop, and how migration will continue to be affected by the pandemic even after it has (hopefully!) been conquered.

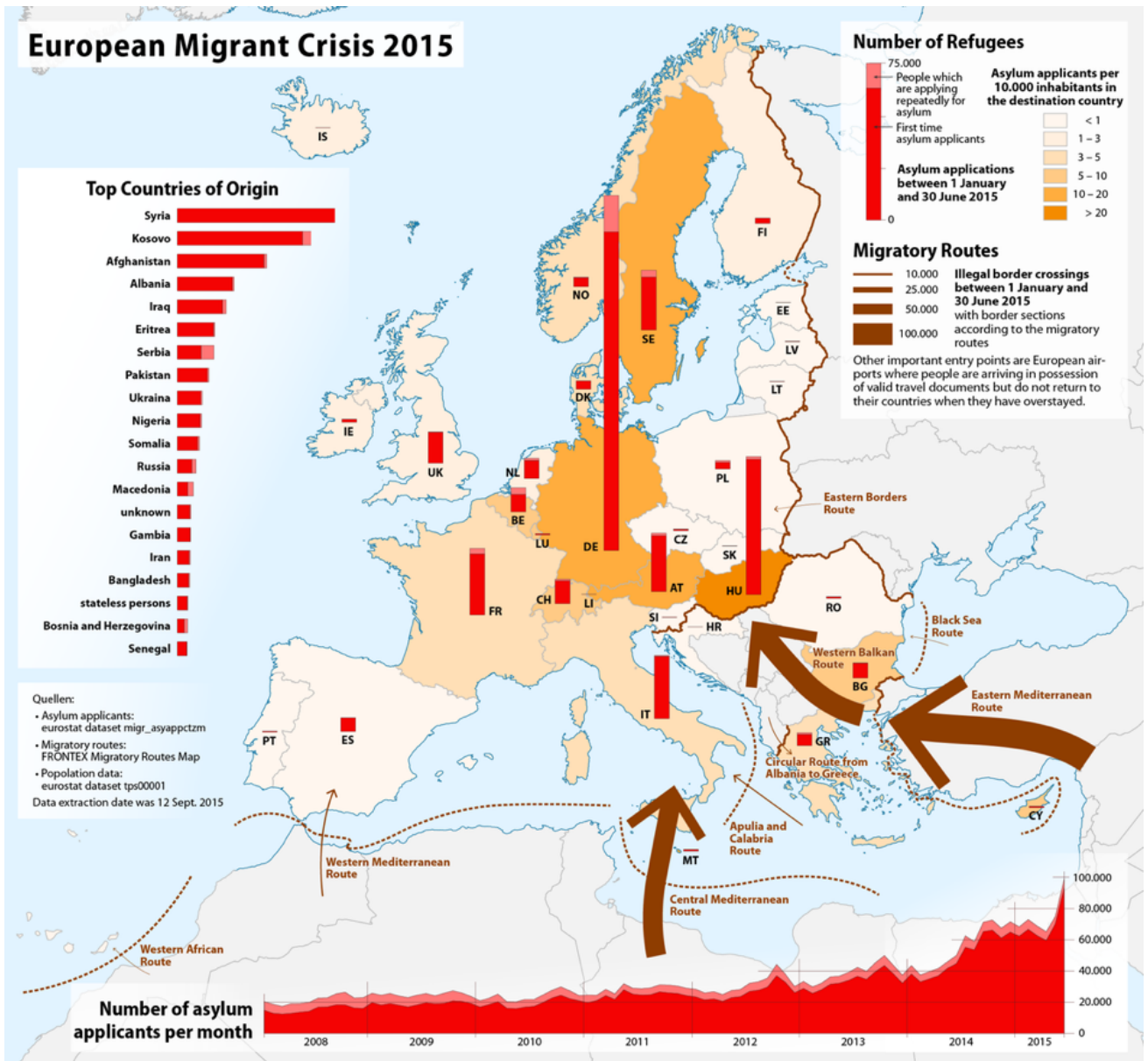
## Conclusion

The rise of far-right populist parties in 21<sup>st</sup> century Europe cannot be attributed to only one cause. Neither the economic crisis nor the migrant crisis alone beckoned European voters to the far-right. Instead, this issue must be looked at in the context of a larger fabric made up of the 2008 economic recession, the migrant crisis from the Middle East and North Africa, the migration of Eastern and Central Europeans to Western Europe, displacement caused by climate change, and the failures of the EU to address the needs and problems of member states, which has led in part to an increase in Eurosceptic feelings across the EU. Furthermore, it is essential to understand that these are not the first far-right populist parties to exist in Italy, Germany, and the UK, but rather that this is the first time that such parties have found this degree of success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The Lega, AfD, and UKIP have managed to find a leader, a party, and the rhetoric to have political legitimacy in their countries. Additionally, all three of these countries have histories that have been stained by periods of significant nationalism, populism, and exploitation. The most notable examples are Italy and Germany's fascist governments from the 1920s to the 1940s, and the UK's centuries of imperialism.

However, the seemingly sudden and overwhelming influx of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers in Europe presented the Lega, AfD, and UKIP with an opportunity to capitalize on. As the research discussed in this paper shows, these parties had enjoyed only minimal success and legitimacy prior to the migrant crisis. With the migrant crisis and a heavy stream of Eastern and Central Europeans migrating to the UK, far-right leaders could fan the flame of anti-immigrant feelings that had long existed within much of the Italian, German, and British populations. These parties leapt at the opportunity to reframe their platforms accordingly, and thus made themselves appear to be the potential saviors of their respective nations from the great threat of migrants. The Lega, AfD, and UKIP relentlessly

used jarringly xenophobic campaign advertisements, speeches, and social media posts to cement their platforms in the minds of voters- and it worked. UKIP and the Leave campaign managed to funnel their energy and new support into a successful campaign to completely separate from the EU. Therefore, it was the perfect storm of migrant crises, growing xenophobic views among the general public, and the advent of social media that gave European far-right parties such as the Lega, AfD, and UKIP the ability to grow and possess a level of power which had previously evaded them.

Appendix

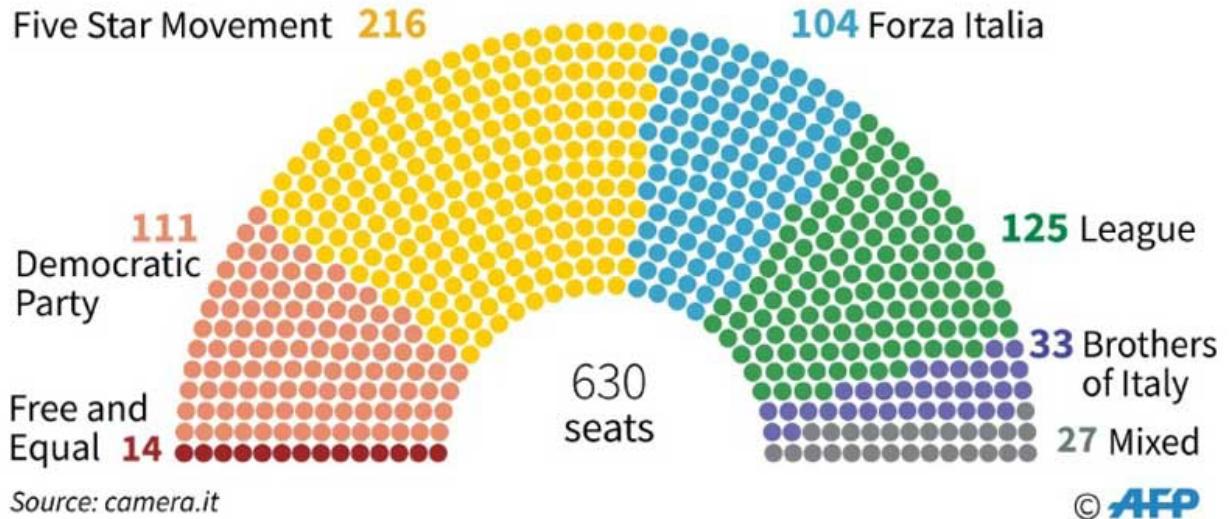


**Fig. 1.** This map shows the number of asylum applications each European country received in 2015, as well as the routes the refugees and asylum seekers take. It is clear that Germany (DE) received many more applications for asylum than any other European nation, and that Italy (IT) had some of the highest numbers of illegal border crossings. Source: Wikipedia, 2015.



# Italian parliament

Chamber of Deputies (Lower House), seats per party



**Fig. 2.** Visual depiction of seats in the Italian parliament’s Lower House won by parties from the 2019 Italian parliament election. Source: European Data News Hub, August 2019.



**Fig. 3.** Matteo Salvini speaking on the campaign trail with two Lega campaign posters surrounding him. The red sign on the wall translates to “Stop the invasion,” while the blue sign on the podium translates to “Italians first.” Source: umbria24.it, February 2018.



**Fig. 4.** A sign posted by Italian neo-fascist movement CasaPound at the port of Trapani in Sicily, a popular entry point for migrants. The message translates to “Stop immigration. Let’s defend the nation.” Source: *The Guardian*, April 2018.



**Fig. 5.** Matteo Salvini endorsing President Donald Trump’s re-election campaign by wearing a “Trump 2020” face mask at a protest in Rome. Source: *The Guardian*, October 2020.

**Die Spur der Welt-Kanzlerin durch Europa.**

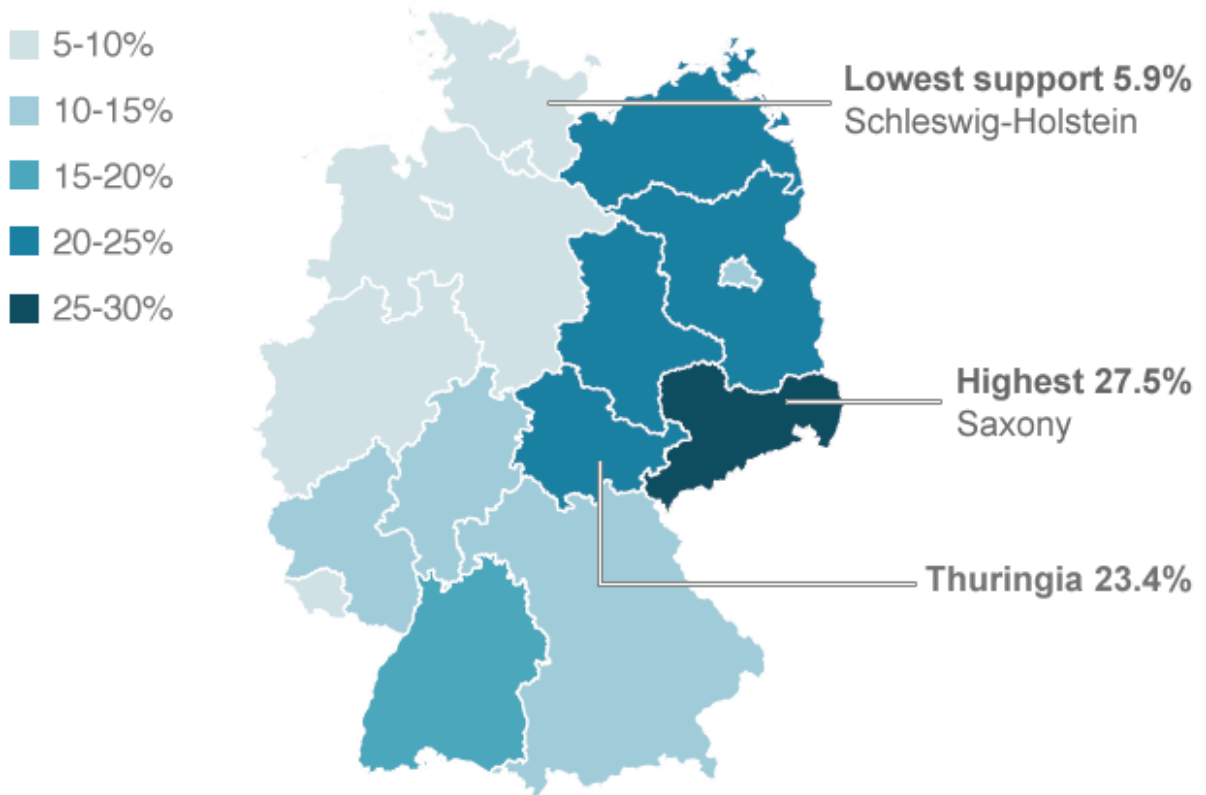
Date	Location	Tote	Verletzte
19.12.2016	BERLIN	11	55
7.4.2017	STOCKHOLM	5	14
3.5.2017	LONDON	3	48
9.8.2017	LEVALLOIS-PERRET	6	6
17.8.2017	BARCELONA	13	120
18.8.2017	FINNLAND, TURKU	2	8
22.5.2017	MANCHESTER	23	116

**TRAU DICH, DEUTSCHLAND!**

**Alternative für Deutschland**

**Fig. 6.** One campaign advertisement promoting the Alternative for Germany’s anti-Merkel, anti-Europe, and Islamophobic platform. The headline translates to “The tracks left by the world chancellor in Europe,” referring to German Chancellor Angela Merkel, on whom AfD and its supporters place the blame for terror attacks in Europe. The text boxes give the dates, locations, and death tolls of recent terror attacks that had taken place in Europe. Source: Vox, October 2017.

## AfD share of the vote at most recent state elections



Source: Regional returning officers

BBC

**Fig. 7.** A map of Germany divided by states showing the success of AfD in each state in the 2019 German state election. States which are shaded darker, such as Saxony, saw a higher percentage of voters supporting AfD in the election. Source: BBC, February 2020.

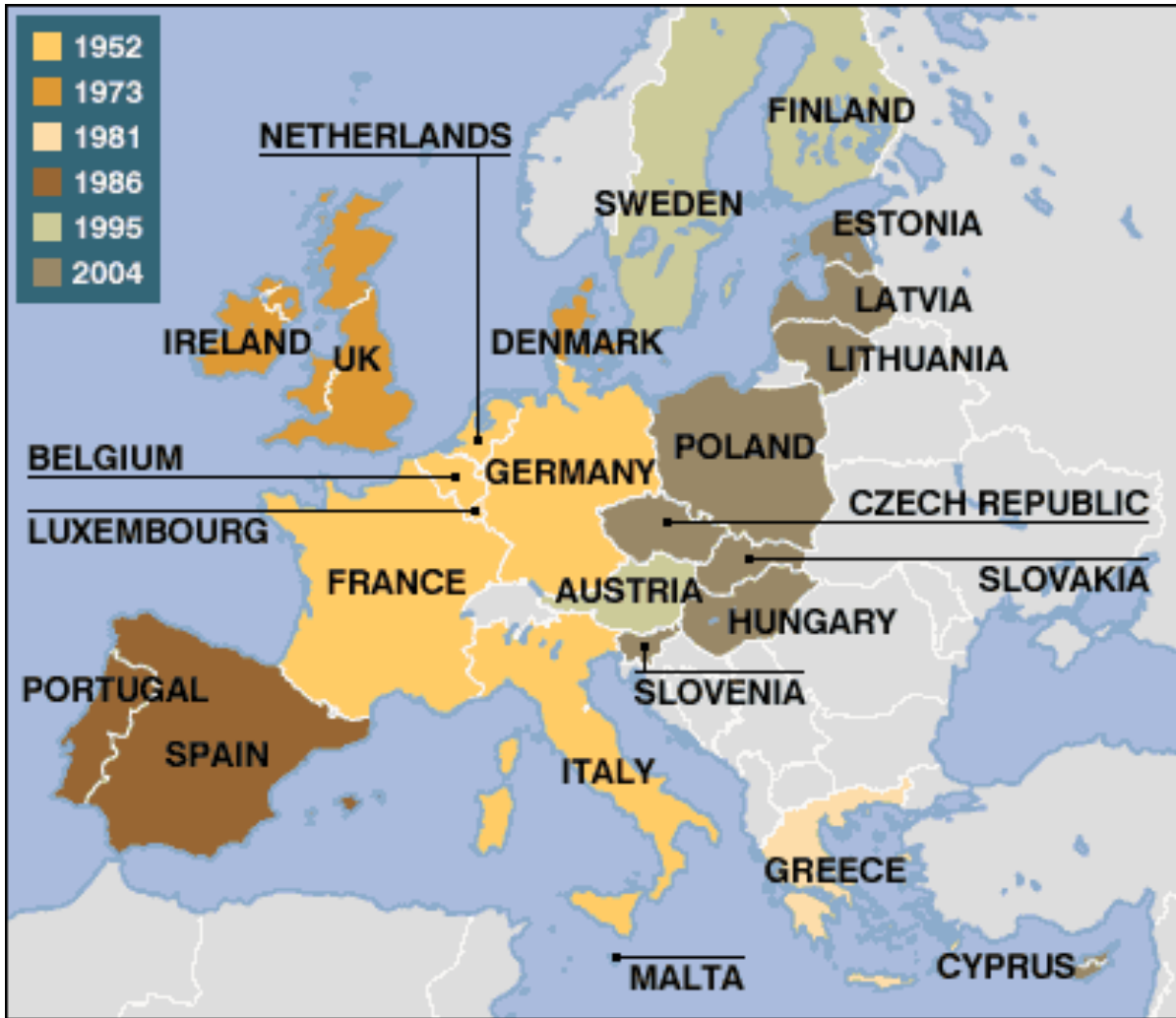


**Fig. 8.** An advertisement from AfD’s anti-immigrant campaign depicting a pregnant white woman. The text translates to “New Germans? We’ll make them ourselves,” meaning that native Germans can reproduce to add to the population instead of allowing immigrants into Germany. Source: Vox, October 2017.



**Fig. 9.** An Islamophobic campaign poster that AfD produced for the 2017 general election in Germany. The text translates to “Burkas? We like bikinis,” referring to the headscarf that many Muslim women wear. The poster has been vandalized with paint. Source: Vice, September 2018.





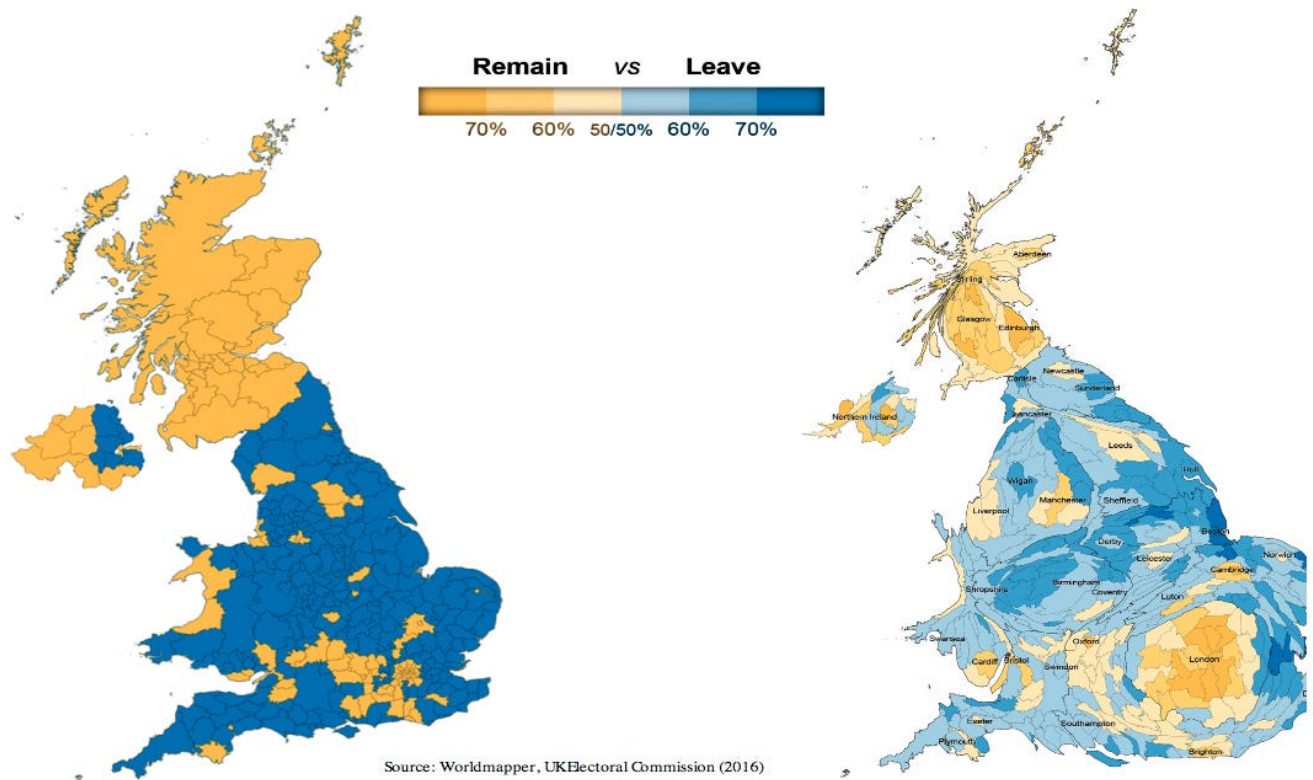
**Fig. 10.** This map shows how the EU has expanded over time, from the original member states marked in yellow to the Eastern and Central European countries which became member states in 2004 marked in light brown. Please note that Bulgaria and Romania became member states in 2007, which was the most recent change to the EU’s size until Brexit. Source: BBC.



**Fig. 11.** A UKIP supporter holding signage encouraging people to vote Leave in the 2016 referendum. The slogan clearly suggests that UKIP supporters believe that immigrants were invading the UK and encroaching upon British territory. Source: Vox, June 2016.

**Exhibit 6: Two Nations**

The UK resized by number of votes in the BREXIT referendum



**Fig. 12.** Two maps of the UK, side by side. The map on the left shows the UK as it appears normally on the map, with the addition of counties having been color coded if the county voted to remain in the EU (yellow) or leave (blue). The map on the right shows the UK if it was resized according to the number of votes areas counted in the Brexit referendum. It swells around larger cities such as London. Source: Business Insider, June 2017.



**Fig. 13.** Nigel Farage points to a Leave campaign poster which reads “Breaking point: the EU has failed us all” and depicts a line of migrants and refugees. It incited much controversy and was reported to the police for breaking UK race laws. Source: *The Guardian*, June 2016.



**Fig. 14.** Profane xenophobic graffiti directed towards Polish immigrants found near a UK bus stop in 2006. Source: Vox, June 2016.

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Figure 3: <https://www.umbria24.it/fotogallery/matteo-salvini-terni-pienone-allhotel-valentino>

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Figure 10:

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/spl/hi/europe/04/enlarging\\_europe/html/eu\\_expansion.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/spl/hi/europe/04/enlarging_europe/html/eu_expansion.stm)

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Figure 13: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jun/16/nigel Farage-defends-ukip-breaking-point-poster-queue-of-migrants>

Figure 14: <https://www.vox.com/2016/6/23/12005814/brexit-eu-referendum-immigrants>

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