



The rise of populist discourse in Europe and its consequences

October Report 2022



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INTRODUCTION

There are numerous definitions of the notion of ‘Populism,’ a concept that is often difficult to capture. In his review of Benjamin Moffitt’s ‘Global rise of Populism’, Kaçar (2017) argues how the notion of populism has changed over time, modifying its nature, contents and focal points, theorising contemporary populism as a political style “encompassing an appeal to ‘the people’ versus ‘the elite’, ‘bad manners’, and crisis, breakdown, or threat”.

In *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*, Cas Mudde defines populism as “the idea that society is separated into two groups at odds with one another – “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite” (Molloy, 2018). Mudde also reported that

most successful populists today are on the right, particularly the radical right [...] Politicians like Marine Le Pen in France, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, and Donald Trump in the US, combine populism with [anti-immigrant] nativism and authoritarianism (Mudde as cited by Molloy, 2018).

The present report aspires to shed some light on the increasing connections between the global phenomenon of populism and the spread of racist sentiments, stressing how these two phenomena often go hand in hand. Again, Mudde’s conceptualisation of populism is helpful for a better understanding of the relationship between populism and racism. The opposition between the “pure people” and the “corrupt elite” is at the very basis of the common discontent that commonly affects a nation. The discourses of populists lie around the presence of external or internal others who engage in the plunging fortunes of the “honest people” (Rattansi, 2020). It is in this context that racism has its roots: the idea that minorities, immigrants, refugees, economic migrants, or LGBTQIA+ communities are behind a nation’s discontent, resulting in the creation of “policies, behaviours, rules, etc. that result in a continued unfair advantage to some people and unfair or harmful treatment of others based on race” (The Cambridge Dictionary).

After this brief introduction to the concept of populism and racism, the present report starts with the regions of eastern and South-Eastern Europe, where the presence of populists and the spread of racism is rooted in the history of the regions themselves, as they were divided into numerous multi-ethnic empires. Later, the second section discusses Southern Europe, where the populist discourses of Italy and Greece are explored in connection with the notion of racist behaviours. Section three sheds light on South-Western Europe, where Spain and Portugal developed far-right populist factions very recently – unlike other European countries that have had far-right parties since the 1980s. Afterwards, the chapter on Western Europe explores the spreading of right-wing and populist governments amongst countries such as France, the United Kingdom, Ireland, the Netherlands, and Belgium. The fifth section investigates how central European countries such as Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic – i.e.: post-communist areas) are witnessing significant levels of democratic backsliding, with many attributing it to the spread of populism. Lastly, the report delves into the increase of populist as well as racist tendencies in Northern Europe, with a particular focus on Finland, Sweden, and Norway.

EASTERN AND SOUTH-EASTERN EUROPE

Although recent media representations of the rise of right-wing populism typically depict Polish and Hungarian politics as the ‘hot spot’ of the movement, the Eastern European political scene is no stranger to national populism. Scholars highlight that, due to its history – the region used to be divided into multi-ethnic empires and was subjected to over three decades of isolationist communist regimes – the Central-Eastern European region tends to understand the nation as a cultural, ethnic community, rather than a civic one (Mach, 2022). In this view, national identity is not a matter of choice, but a natural, inherited characteristic. This discourse is used to advance an “us versus them” social dynamic, where ethnic minorities or immigrants are stigmatised as “enemies of the people” and a threat to perceived national identity (Mach, 2022, p. 23). This rhetoric is especially appealing in a region which has struggled for generations to gain independence and maintain its sovereignty, and which only recently transitioned to a democratic regime.

The recent increase in the number of right-wing populist parties across Eastern Europe can be partly explained by the series of EU crises of the past years. The 2010 financial crisis undermined the legitimacy of a stable central economy and allowed populist voices to argue for higher security of economic development under a strong national government. However, the crisis which had a greater impact on populist discourse was the 2015 refugee crisis, when the prospect of hosting high numbers of “others” (especially those of Muslim identity, seen as enemies of Christianity) generated strong resistance from nationalist parties. This was on one hand due to the threat posed by “the other” to national identity, but also due to the public perception that the plan to relocate refugees across Europe came from Brussels, home to Western elites in the European Union. Studies on the matter show that people from poorer, less influential countries in EU policy (such as Romania or Bulgaria) believe that morally problematic laws and policies are forced on their government by elites with whom they share no values (Kuhar & Patternote, 2017). For people not accustomed to a multicultural environment, the threat to their identity led to stronger support for nationalistic populism.

Nationalistic populism inherently induces racist and/or xenophobic ideas in its claim to protect the ethnic or cultural purity of the nation (Muller, 2016). One cannot discuss race in Eastern Europe without addressing the situation of the Roma minority. A historically nomadic group which arrived in Europe from India around the 11th century, Roma people constitute the largest ethnic minority in Europe. Since their arrival, the Roma community has been oppressed through 500 years of slavery and was a victim of the Holocaust and forced assimilation during the Communist era. The social division left by these events is still felt today, despite numerous EU-dictated policies and European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) decisions. Roma people are regular victims of forced evictions and displacement, as well as extreme poverty, which has hindered their access to proper education and employment for decades (Grigore, 2020).

Anti-Roma discrimination, or anti-gypsyism, has been described as “endemic across Europe” and a “commonplace form of racism” (Vrăbiescu, 2014). This sort of discrimination manifests itself overtly, as is evidenced by the overly negative portrayal of Roma individuals in the media and numerous incidents of racially motivated violence and aggressive political statements, but also covertly. Anti-gypsyism also manifests in more socially acceptable ways, ranging from the exaggeration of ethnic differences to the disproportionately low percentages of Roma children in high-status high schools (Matache et al., 2020). The most manifest symptom of this kind of racism is likely the disproportionate

representation of the Roma within the criminal justice system and excessive policing and arrests in Roma neighbourhoods.

This section of the report will focus on the recent manifestations of anti-gypsyism in Eastern Europe, during a time when nationalist populism is on a constant rise. Although other forms of racial discrimination do exist (especially in the context of the refugee crisis, as South-Eastern Europe was a transit area for asylum seekers arriving in Greece), this section will mainly focus on anti-Roma discrimination, as it is a widely accepted reality for a group that has been oppressed, marginalised, and denied social citizenship since its arrival in Europe 900 years ago. It is essential to differentiate between dimensions of racial discrimination: the apparent lack of a public hate speech record (apart from a few individual cases) does not conceal the systemic discrimination Roma people face, which will be detailed in the country-specific subsections below. Police brutality was highly exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis (Brzozowski, 2020). News from that year show mass violent raids in Romani neighbourhoods causing serious injuries to men, women, and children, some of which were beaten to death during arrest or in custody, all justified in the name of complying with emergency regulations (Lee, 2020). A 2019 landmark decision of the ECtHR recognized for the first time the issue of institutionalised racism in Europe, invoking the term “ethnic profiling” in a case involving discriminatory police practice by Romanian authorities (*Lingurar v Romania*, 2019). 85-armed law enforcement officers raided the home of a Roma family in an early morning of April 2011 and then proceeded to drag them out of their beds and beat them with truncheons, allegedly for an accusation of wood theft from the neighbouring forest (European Roma Rights Center, 2019). The Court established that the family was solely targeted based on their ethnicity since the plans for the raid were justified by the ethnic groups alleged: “antisocial behaviour and high criminality rate”, traits coined as “characteristic to Roma” (Bobis, 2019). Although it established a precedent for recognizing instances of ethnic discrimination and profiling targeting the Roma (the principle of this judgement was used in *Timishev v Russia*, a case regarding ethnic discrimination in border control), the case did not necessarily minimise the instances of profiling or facilitate stronger mechanisms of protection for the minority in the region.

2.1 BULGARIA

Similar to several other European countries, Bulgarian right-wing populism finds its origins in the 2014-2015 refugee crisis, when fear and dissatisfaction degenerated into scapegoating of vulnerable minorities. Although the number of people applying for asylum or humanitarian status in Bulgaria was relatively low, their presence incited an emotional reaction, giving rise to a populist surge in media and political forces (Otova & Staykova, 2021). Tabloids and television stations were over-reporting and exaggerating the numbers of asylum-seeking individuals, portraying, in one example, the situation as a “plan to liquidate Christian Europe” (History Campus, 2017). Another example of media’s influence on the rise of populist ethnocentric ideas was the national popularisation of a self-proclaimed “migrant hunter” who organised groups of vigilantes to patrol the Turkish border in search of Muslim refugees (Tomlinson, 2016).

From early 2014 until the middle of 2016, Bulgarian authorities worked on the construction of a three-metre-tall and 166-kilometre-long barbed wire fence at the Turkish border, to contain the surge of migrants coming from the MENA region. Following the crisis, fear of “the other” permeated mainstream politics as well: in 2016, Boyko Borisov, the Bulgarian prime minister at the time (and leader of the pro-European, centre-right GERB party), spoke of “the thousands of refugees which Turkey could release in Bulgaria any minute”. Later, after the 2017 parliamentary elections, he entered

into a governing coalition with the right-wing populist alliance, the United Patriots.

The United Patriots alliance is a cluster of three nationalist and far-right parties which is famous for its xenophobic, especially anti-Turkish and pro-Russian, rhetoric (Sweeney, 2017). They gained 9.07 per cent of popular votes, which ranked them third by the number of seats. Necessity led the pro-European GERB to enter a coalition with the alliance, which meant that the government now included openly racist ministers who advocated violence against the Roma minority and routinely engaged in hate speech against the group (European Roma Rights Center, 2021).

During the same elections, another right-wing populist party gained 4.15 per cent of the Bulgarian vote, ranking fifth – the Volya movement. Volya (“will” in Bulgarian) was founded in 2016 by Veselin Mareshki, a businessman who described himself as “an anti-establishment candidate like Donald Trump” and ran on a nationalistic, anti-immigration and pro-Russian platform (Sweeney, 2017; Barzachka, 2017).

Although none of these parties gained any seats following the 2021 Bulgarian general elections, another right-wing populist party entered the Parliament after the third National Assembly snap elections of the year: Revival. The party has been defined by analysts as ultranationalist, anti-EU, and anti-Western. Its leader, Kostadin Kostadinov, was arrested in the past for allegedly leading a group of skinheads in a violent attack on a Roma community (Paunova & Wesolowsky, 2021).

With a share of 4.86 per cent of votes, Revival ranked 7th and stood in opposition to the governing coalition. However, the party increased in popularity during the past year and even doubled its number of seats since November 2021. Following the snap elections on October 2nd this year, Revival is the fourth biggest party in the Parliament, with 9.83 per cent of votes. At the time of writing, there is no governing coalition yet.

2.1.1 Racist Discourse

The GERB-UP cabinet formed following the 2017 elections consisted, among others, of United Patriots leaders who publicly voiced blatantly discriminatory opinions. One of the deputy prime ministers, Valeri Simeonov, described the Roma as “ferocious apes that were ready to kill for the purpose of burglaries” (Bulgarian National Radio, 2015). In 2017, deputy prime Minister for national defence, Krasimir Karakachanov, states that the EU and NATO should stop migrants from entering Europe “by force of arms if necessary”, as “large smuggling networks are still trying to get people into our country” (Saeed, 2017).

Karakachanov made multiple openly racist statements regarding the Roma, such as referring to them as “unsocialized g*psies”, which resembles the Nazi “asocial g*psies” (Kingsley & Dzhambova, 2020). In the aftermath of an interethnic conflict at the beginning of 2019, which resulted in violent anti-Roma protests, Karakachanov used his platform to further incite hate towards the group:

*G*psies in Bulgaria have become exceptionally insolent. Several days ago, they beat policemen. Two days ago, they beat a soldier. This cannot continue. The tolerance of Bulgarian society has run out. [...] The truth is that we need to undertake a complete program for a solution to the G*psy problem.* (Karakachanov, 2019, cited in Zaharieva, 2019).

The initial spark of the conflict was a fight that broke out in January 2019 in the village of Vojvodino, between three men, of which one was hospitalised. What was particular to this incident was the

ethnicity of the men – the one hospitalised was a non-Roma Bulgarian citizen, while the other two were ethnically Roma-Bulgarian citizens (Uber, 2019). Following Karakchanov’s statements, who also added that he would ensure “the illegal homes in the Romani neighbourhood in the village would be removed” (Uber, 2019), five homes were demolished, and non-Roma Bulgarians gathered in mobs to protest in the village, encouraged by other political leaders. This caused all the families in the village to flee to the nearby city of Plovdiv, fearing violent attacks.

However, this was not an isolated case: in April 2019, the Roma community became the target of violent attacks once again, following the mediatisation of a video showing a conflict between the Roma people and “ethnic Bulgarians” (Zaharieva, 2019). Over 1500 individuals gathered in the village (which only had a population of 340 Roma people), destroying several houses and shouting “death to the G*psies”.

However, the former Minister of Defence was not the only one who engaged in discriminatory discourse. Bulgarian President Rumen Radev declared in the past that “the anger of people is understandable” when reflecting on the violent protests (Zaharieva, 2019). He also described Roma people as those who “have grown up with a culture of impunity”, in a political and media context where numerous public voices depict Roma people as “non-native Europeans”, who take without giving back to society and where the group is associated with terms like “high criminality”, “high birth rates”, and “social benefits” (Zaharieva, 2019). The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), a human rights monitoring body adjacent to the Council of Europe, published its extensive report on Bulgaria earlier this year. The body directly calls out instances of hate speech in political discourse in the run-up to local or national elections, but also highlights that Roma people have been especially scapegoated and targeted in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (ECRI, 2022, PAR. 22). A Bulgarian member of the European Parliament publicly called for Roma neighbourhoods to be closed during the pandemic, as “G*psies have a very low health culture and no personal hygiene” (Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe, 2020).

However, the European Roma Rights Center (ERRC) warns that the situation described in the ECRI report is only the tip of the iceberg (2022). The NGO highlights that COVID-19 was used as a pretext to employ disproportionate police action, curfews, and blockades in already marginalised Roma neighbourhoods (Rorke, 2022). One example of this is the over-securitization and use of an ethnic-specific approach in the case of Yambol, a city with a high Roma population: the city was fully quarantined for 14 days and a helicopter sprayed 3000 litres of detergent to ‘disinfect’ the Roma neighbourhood (ERRC, 2022, p. 20). The beginning of the pandemic came with the placement of checkpoints at the entrance of “already segregated Roma areas” (ERRC, 2022, p. 21), which the UN Rapporteurs on racism and minority issues described as “a violation of Roma’s rights to equality and freedom of movement”.

The COVID-19 lockdown situation is only one piece of the bigger picture of police brutality against the minority. A Fair Trials report from 2020 shows that in Bulgaria, Roma is twice as likely to be the victims of police violence, while they make up 50 per cent of new prisoners and over 50 per cent of serving prisoners, although they represent only ten per cent of the entire population. Another 2020 report stated that 34 per cent of Roma respondents reported physical mistreatment, either during apprehension or detention at the police station (Angelova & Kukova, 2020).

2.2 ROMANIA

In contrast with the mainstream political scene of its neighbouring countries, Romania has only very recently “welcomed” a right-wing populist party in its Parliament. The 2020 parliamentary elections had a surprising outcome for many Romanians. Although the main debates and news coverage had focused on the tensions between the centre-right governing party and its populist left-wing opponent, almost ten per cent of the votes were in favour of the Alliance for Unifying Romanians (AUR), making it the fourth-largest party in the Parliament. AUR had only been founded one year before the elections and is led by an ultras leader and activist for the unification of Romania and Moldova. AUR has received significant support during the 2020 lockdowns for voicing COVID-19 sceptic and anti-mask opinions.

According to their programme, the politics of AUR are grounded on four pillars: family, patriotism, faith, and freedom. Moreover, in the same programme statement, they express their opposition to Europe as a federal superstate, calling the European Union a “socialist empire”, a “utopia” and a “colonising hegemony”. They position themselves as “the only saviours of national sovereignty and traditional values” and use rhetorical questions such as “[a]re you tired of witnessing how everything we value about our country is destroyed?” in their published programme. AUR is therefore a right-wing, conspicuously nationalist, Eurosceptic union.

Following the announcement of the electoral results, thousands of people signed up to become party members (Ofiteru, 2020). Moreover, analysts were surprised by the fact that a significant amount of votes for this party came from the diaspora, as AUR came first in elections in Italy and second in Spain (Digi24, 2020), the main destination of Romanian migrants. This made numerous authorities and researchers wonder how such a Eurosceptic programme was so appealing to workers who directly benefited from EU membership. Euroscepticism is a political doctrine that advocates disengagement from the European Union and from the values that are enshrined through the European Union as an institution.

Although not formally represented in the Parliament, the New Right (Noua Dreapta) movement, a far-right, ultranationalist organisation active in both Romania and Moldova, is mentioned in ECRI’s 2019 report (para. 28) on Romania for its organisation of events with anti-Roma and antisemitic themes. The party claims to be a successor of the Iron Guard, a revolutionary fascist and radical Orthodox movement founded in 1927 and later banned in 1940. The New Right engages systematically in hate discourse against the ethnic Hungarians in Romania, the biggest minority in the country.

2.2.1 Racism against the Roma minority

Despite politicians from the central level not having engaged in overt hate speech in recent years, ECRI (2019, para. 23) notes that racist statements from local leaders continue to be a problem, and the use of anti-Roma and nationalist discourse is used for political gain. For example, in 2016, a local councillor in the Eastern town of Mahmudia, publicly stated that “the best g*psy is a dead g*psy” (ECRI, 2019, para. 24). Moreover, anti-Roma sentiment is deeply rooted in Romanian society as a commonplace form of discrimination. A recent study indicates that only two out of ten Romanians would accept a Roma person in their family and 54 per cent consider the minority a threat to the country (Elie Wiesel Institute, 2017), while a 2018 survey shows that 72 per cent are not trusting of Roma individuals (CNCD). The Roma constantly endure hatred in public life, as they are still often portrayed as “thieves, liars, lazy” (Carrerra et al., 2019, cited in ECRI, 2019, para. 24) and associated with high criminality.

Beyond negative public discourse, they are affected by structural racism (Schulze, 2020), manifested

through the difficulty of achieving social citizenship. Social citizenship refers to the possibility of fully participating as active Romanian citizens, through the capacity to pursue personal choices regarding education, lifestyle, and employment (Grigore, 2020). Roma people are regular victims of forced evictions and displacement, as well as extreme poverty, which has hindered their access to proper education and employment for decades (Grigore, 2020). A great percentage of Romanian Roma live in substandard conditions: according to ECRI (2019, para. 77), housing deprivation affects 19.8 per cent of the population (versus 4.9 in the EU) and forced evictions as well as demolitions of the informal settlements Roma people need to live in are commonplace in many neighbourhoods.

Ethnic segregation persists in many areas of life, from residential planning to school. As for the former, it is not unusual for Roma neighbourhoods to be separated from the area where non-Roma Romanians live and for their houses to be isolated. In 2012, the mayor of Baia Mare, a city in the North of Romania, made headlines after he announced the building of a three-metre high, 100-metre-long concrete wall to separate the Roma houses from the rest of the city, as an attempt to bring “order and discipline into the area”. A lot of these marginal neighbourhoods lack access to the local water network. According to the ECRI report (2019, para. 76), in 2016, 68 per cent of the Roma population were living without tap water and 79 per cent without a bathroom in their dwellings. In terms of school-based segregation, a 2018 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights report shows that 29 per cent of Roma children attend schools where all or most of their classmates are Roma as well (ECRI, 2019, para. 25).

The most pervasive form of anti-Roma sentiment is institutional racism at all levels of the criminal justice system. The prevalence of police brutality has been noted by the UN Human Rights Council in its fifth periodic report for Romania when it requested the state to strengthen measures to prevent excessive violence and ensure that victims have access to effective remedies. A 2019 landmark decision of the European Court of Human Rights recognized for the first time the issue of institutionalised racism in Europe, invoking the term “ethnic profiling” in a case involving discriminatory police practice by Romanian organs (*Lingurar v Romania*, 2019). 85-armed law enforcement officers raided the home of a Roma family in an early morning of April 2011 and then proceeded to drag them out of their beds and beat them with truncheons, allegedly for the accusation of wood theft from the neighbouring forest (European Roma Rights Center, 2019). The court established that the family was solely targeted based on their ethnicity, since the plans for the raid were justified by the ethnic groups alleged: “antisocial behavior and high criminality rate”, traits coined as “characteristic of Roma” (Bobis, 2019). Although it established a precedent in identifying instances of ethnic discrimination and profiling targeting the Roma (the principle of this judgement was used in *Timishev v Russia*, a case regarding ethnic discrimination in border control), the case did not necessarily minimize the instances of profiling or facilitate stronger mechanisms of protection for the minority in the region.

The situation became direr during the COVID-19 state of emergency, similar to Bulgaria. The outbreak of the pandemic also provoked a surge in anti-Roma hostility, as media commentators abusively made use of tropes of “g*psy crime” to exaggerate the threat posed by local incidents, turning them into “health emergencies”. In its report on Roma rights in the time of Covid, the ERRC mentions several incidents of police brutality, with disproportionate use of force and degrading treatment of detained persons. In April 2020, a video that became viral on social media showed the Romanian police from Bolintin Vale, Giurgiu county, beating several Roma men as they lay face down in the dirt with hands bound behind their backs (ERRC, 2020, p. 38). The victims, eight men and one 13-year-old boy, were beaten for about 30 minutes and the officers can be heard using racial slurs. During the same month, the municipal police in Bucharest entered the Zabrauti Roma community in pursuit of a group of young

individuals who gathered in front of a residential building. The officers entered the building with force and started spraying tear gas in hallways and homes, forcing people to flee outdoors (ERRC, 2020, p. 39).

Even when Roma people are victims of violence by other civilians, the justice system fails to offer them adequate assistance. Earlier this year, when a 25-year-old Roma woman tried to board a minibus with her children, she was denied entrance by the driver. When she protested, the driver proceeded to beat the mother while she was holding one child in her arms – images that were made public in a video that sparked public outrage (Rorke, 2022). However, the woman ended up being fined the equivalent of 365 EUR for disturbing the peace and public order.

2.3 SERBIA

The Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) came to power in 2012 and has been ever since, as it maintains the majority in the Parliament (44.27 per cent following the 2022 snap elections) and Presidency of the Republic (Aleksandar Vučić, the leader of SNS is also the president of Serbia since 2017, following a term as prime minister between 2014 and 2017). SNS was founded in 2008 as a split from the far-right Serbian Radical Party (SRS), an Eurosceptic and Russophilic party, previously described as “neo-fascist” in the 1990s (Bodi, 2002).

For the past years, relationships between SNS and other right-wing populist parties from Central and Eastern Europe, such as Law and Justice (PiS) from Poland, Orbán’s Fidesz and Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS) in Slovenia, have strengthened (Petrović, 2020). In September 2020, Vučić held an online conference alongside Orbán and Janša, with the theme of “the future of Europe”, a conference during which Orbán stated that “keeping the EU together requires that the West does not enforce its view on Eastern countries” (Politico.com, 2020, cited in Petrović, 2020). Despite the Serbian government declaring its involvement in negotiations for EU adhesion, Aleksandr Vučić has refrained from condemning Putin’s invasion of Ukraine and imposing sanctions on Russia (The Associated Press, 2022). Moreover, the leader, who won another five-year term as president by a landslide, has boasted in the past about his ties to the Russian president.

2.3.1 Racism

According to ECRI’s 2017 report on racism and discrimination in Serbia, Roma people are the most disadvantaged group in the country, although they are the most numerous minority (stated by the Council of Europe in its population estimate).

In terms of education, only six per cent of Roma children are enrolled in preschool, while only 46 per cent complete the compulsory eight-year primary education and just 13 per cent of secondary (high school) education (ECRI, 2017, para. 77). These figures are even worse for the 23,000 displaced Roma people in Kosovo. As for housing, hundreds of Roma settlements were segregated from the rest of the villages/towns, and 72 per cent of these housing options are informal. 37 per cent of Roma households do not have access to drinking water and 67 per cent are not connected to the sewage system.

Similar to its neighbours’ situation, Serbia’s Roma is overrepresented in the criminal justice system. Yet, ERRC (2021, p. 19) emphasises that there is a lack of ethnically disaggregated data on the matter, which makes it difficult to estimate how great the issue is. Still, the main cause for this disproportionality is the spread of discriminatory views and negative stereotypes in Serbian society. Several Romani

interviewees who testified for the ERRC’s report on discrimination in the justice system expressed distrust in a system that reflects the biases in wider society, a society that views them as “less valuable, uneducated and subsidised by social welfare and theft. They just don’t like us, they look at us like we are the worst” (ERRC, 2021, p. 21). All Serbian Romani interviewees had been routinely stopped by police and half of them had direct experience of being assaulted by the police. One of them stated:

I was beaten many times [by the police], cursing my g*psy mother. They intercepted my family and harassed my parents at night for an interview. When I went to court, the police stopped me and searched the whole car without a search warrant. Once they brought me to the station, I asked for a lawyer, they didn’t allow it, but they beat me up and then they let me go as if nothing had happened.

The ERRC’s 2020 report on the rights of Roma during COVID-19 lockdowns draws attention to several accounts of racially motivated violence and excessive policing in Roma neighbourhoods. One such example is the story of Darko, a 24-year-old Roma man from the Vidikovac neighbourhood of Belgrade, who was chopping wood one night in front of his house when he saw four police officers running towards him. Without any warning, they pushed him to the ground and started beating him, before they handcuffed him and took him to a nearby police station. There, a police inspector questioned him regarding the robbing of a nearby vending machine and physically assaulted him, pressuring him to confess the crime. For several hours afterwards, several officers took turns in beating him for him to confess the crime, although Darko insisted he had been at home the entire day.

While in police custody, Darko asked for medical help, which he was denied and was not given any food or water for the ten hours he spent there. The following day, Darko had a hearing before a judge who fined him the equivalent of 425 EUR for violating a police curfew. When the man complained about the police violence, the judge responded it was not of their concern (ERRC, 2020, p. 41). Such cases were not isolated and not only particular to the Covid-19 period. In late 2021, the case of an 18-year-old Roma boy whose taxi was stopped by police officers to beat him made headlines in Serbia (Lee, 2022). Bogdan was riding a taxi in the town of Brus when the car was suddenly stopped by the police, who started beating him “in full view of others” before taking him to the station. The police charged him with the equivalent of 130 EUR for not wearing a seatbelt and not owning his ID. The fine was later doubled since he did not have the money to pay within one week. When his father took him to the hospital, they were accompanied by the same police officers. Although there were visible bruises on his face and neck, doctors would not issue a medical report, claiming there were no sustained injuries.

This account fits into a larger pattern of inhuman and degrading treatment of Roma at the hands of the Serbian police. In 2021, ERRC submitted written comments to the UN Committee against Torture, which details several similar stories. The practice of withholding food and water during arrest as well as torture for the extraction of confession is not isolated to Darko’s case –one man was asphyxiated with a plastic bag and had a gun held to his head in an attempt to pressure a confession (Lee, 2021).

2.4 NORTH MACEDONIA

Ever since its first multi-party elections in 1990, North Macedonia (then, the Socialist Republic of Macedonia) witnessed the strong presence of a right-wing populist party in its Parliament. The Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization - Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE for short) is a nationalist and self-proclaimed Christian-democratic party which formed the Macedonian government between 2006 and 2016 under prime minister Nikola Gruevski. During

the decade, the party led with an ultra-nationalist policy, especially in the form of antiquization – a great emphasis on “the great history of the Macedonian nation” (Piacentini, 2019). Its programmatic document entitled “Doctrine” cited the following as its main pillars: “the real man, nation, market economy, private property, the culture of legalism, tradition and faith” (Vangeli, 2011).

Gruevski’s process of antiquization unfolded following typical acts of identity politics: his rhetoric fostered the idea of a unique Macedonian nation, rooted in Orthodoxy and a historical lineage reaching back to antiquity (Beyer, 2021). A concrete representation of these politics of nostalgia was the multi-million construction program “Skopje 2014”, which led to the erection of hundreds of statues, “depicting the government-curated narrative of Macedonian history” (Beyer, 2021, p. 9). Scholars (Gjuzelov & Hadjievska, 2020; Vangeli, 2011) highlight that this construction of the nation with Orthodox Christianity and antiquity at its core is a deliberate attempt to othering ethnic minorities in the country, such as Albanians. This historical construction of national identity did not acknowledge the shared history of Albanians and Macedonians and completely excluded Albanian symbols or customs.

However, Gruevski’s politics were not always so radical. Scholars (Beyer, 2021) refer to a “moderate phase” of his leadership for the first two years in office. After the 2006 elections, the party tried to strike a balance between the majority and minorities and openly celebrated the multicultural and multi-religious nature of the country by, for example, introducing holidays for other communities than the Orthodox majority, like the International Roma Day, Day of the Albanian Alphabet and Day of the Education of Turkish Language (Yabanci & Taleski, 2018). This came to a halt in 2008 when Macedonia’s application to NATO was vetoed by Greece at a summit in Bucharest, due to the long-standing country name dispute (Vangelov, 2017). The decision signalled lower chances for the state to progress in its European access process (Beyer, 2021, p. 8), which opened the door for a series of democratic backsliding occurrences. During his leadership, the initial pro-EU and pro-NATO vision of the Macedonian government shifted to a pro-Russian and anti-Western one (Mujanovic, 2018).

Due to multiple corruption and wiretapping scandals, nationwide, and anti-government protests erupted in 2015 and 2016 (led by the opposition party). Initially refusing to step down, Gruevski eventually resigned as a result of these protests, in January 2016, as part of the Pržino Agreement with the European Union. VMRO-DPMNE remained in power until the end of the year’s elections, where despite obtaining a relative majority of votes (39.39 per cent), they did not succeed in forming a governing coalition. The Social Democratic Union of Macedonia, a pro-EU social-democratic party has maintained a majority ever since.

2.4.1 Racism in North Macedonia

In June 2021, the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights reported a 49 per cent increase. In both incidents and prosecutions for ethnically motivated hate speech, emphasising that the national Commission for Prevention and Protection from Discrimination was not fully functional (Amnesty International, n.d.). These incidents typically target Albanians, Turks, and Roma people as the main ethnic minorities (however, Albanians make up a quarter of North Macedonia’s population, with a share of 25.2 per cent of citizens). Following the inter-ethnic armed conflict of 2001, the government of North Macedonia signed the Ohrid Agreement with the Albanian nationality, a commitment towards peace in exchange for a reform of the minority’s political and cultural rights. The agreement features reforms of employment legislation to ensure the equitable representation of the minority in all public bodies, as well as provisions regarding the officialisation of Albanian as a language of North Macedonia and positive discrimination in educational institutions to ensure the proportional representation of

ethnic Albanian students. As an effect of this agreement, Albanian became the co-official language of the republic in 2019.

However, Albanian individuals are still overrepresented in unemployment statistics and underrepresented in state employment (Minority Rights, 2020). When community Parliament representatives called for job subsidies to encourage Albanian employment in the private sector to address low representation in business, the proposals were rejected due to their alleged discriminatory character (Minority Rights, 2020).

The 2013 appointment of Talat Xhaferi, an ethnic Albanian, as Minister of Defense in 2013 had violent consequences. A mob of ethnic Macedonians challenged the decision in what became a violent protest, where the group was hurling stones and attacking Albanian bystanders and police officers. The mob also publicly burned an Albanian flag. This was not a singular incident, as in 2017, 200 nationalists, partly made of VMRO-DPMNE members and sympathisers, stormed the North Macedonian Parliament in reaction to Xhaferi's appointment as Speaker of the Assembly (the Parliament). The incident, also known as Bloody Thursday, resulted in several MPs being injured. The leader of the Alliance for Albanians party, Ziadin Sela, was severely beaten by several protestors who were also calling for his death.

2.4.2 Roma minority discrimination

Ethnic Albanians are not the only group which faces systemic discrimination and violence in North Macedonia. Similar to the status quo of the Roma minority in neighbouring Serbia and Bulgaria, ethnic Roma are more likely to be victims of police brutality, are disproportionately represented in the criminal system for juvenile offenders (ERRC, 2021) and Roma children face school segregation (Bogdan, 2022).

Anti-Roma discrimination is first of all structural. According to a 2016 report from ECRI (para. 65), the rate of poverty among Roma is 2.5 times higher than at the national level . 28 per cent of the group lives in informal settlements and forced evictions still occur, although at lower levels than in Romania or Serbia (ECRI, 2016, para. 66). Living conditions are still substandard for many ethnic Roma individuals and prejudice against them persists in the private housing market. When it comes to education, 17 per cent of Roma adults are illiterate, compared to 4 per cent among non-Roma. As of 2016, Roma unemployment rate was between 60-70 per cent and even higher among Roma women, more than twice as high as the national average of 26 per cent (ECRI, 2016, para. 73).

One of the most pervasive issues is that of school segregation, as emphasised by the ERRC in several articles (Bogdan, 2022; Hirschberger, 2022). Numerous schools in towns/neighbourhoods with a high Roma population have significantly high percentages of Roma children enrolled, disproportionate to the actual population distribution in the area. In 2021, the case of a primary school with 100 per cent Roma enrolment made headlines as parents demanded change. This is due to what became known as the “white flight”, a phenomenon that is not unique to that region or even to North Macedonia – when Roma enrolment in a school or Roma population in a neighbourhood reaches more than 50 per cent’, white parents tend to flee and enrol their children in a “whiter” school (Bogdan, 2022). According to research results by ERRC (2017), this happens in part due to overall stereotypes about the community in society, but also due to the segregation by school or local authorities.

Moreover, the ECRI report signals the overrepresentation of Roma children in special needs schools.

As of 2015, 37 per cent of children in special needs schools were Roma, although they represent less than three per cent of the country's population.

The issue of increased police brutality and discrimination in the pandemic context manifested itself in North Macedonia as well. In March 2020, a nine-month pregnant Roma woman and her baby died of sepsis after waiting for the results of a COVID-19 test for more than six hours outside the hospital doors (ERRC, 2020). The woman, who came from a very poor background and lived in substandard housing conditions, had visited a local clinic several times before, complaining of extreme pain and showing signs of infection, yet she was denied care and sent home every time. A neighbour who came with her recalled how the staff made insulting comments about her appearance and how she was denied help due to the way she looked, although she was begging for help (ERRC, 2020, p. 30).

In June 2020, in response to complaints regarding loud music during curfew hours, a police patrol arrived in the Skopje railway station area, beneath which ten Roma families lived together in informal housing. Although only one homeless Roma man started arguing with the police, the patrol called for reinforcements, which started beating several of the community members, "including men, women, children and elderly" (ECCR, 2020, p. 33). Five of them were arrested for charges related to failure to upkeep COVID-19 regulations. One woman recalls how police officers used racial slurs and curses during the intervention. Following the attack, one of the interviewed community members declared: "I am afraid they will come again to beat us. There is no one to protect us." (ERRC, 2020, p. 33).

Distrust in law enforcement and the general justice system is not uncommon among Roma people in North Macedonia. In the 2021 ERRC (p. 19) report *Justice denied: Roma in the criminal justice system*, a North Macedonian defence lawyer talked about the relationship between the group and the system: "Roma do not believe in the criminal justice system because, for them, there is no thorough investigation into their cases, not all evidence is taken into consideration and, in most cases, they end up with adverse convictions".

In recent years, The ECtHR decided on several cases against North Macedonia for its mistreatment of Roma individuals in law enforcement missions, arrest, and detention. In 2020, the Court ruled in favour of two Roma applicants who were brutalised in Skopje, on account of lack of effective investigation regarding police brutality. The two were brutalised when they were 16 and 13 years old, when the police were looking for two assailants who mugged a young woman. The 16-year-old was arrested and beaten for several hours until his father was summoned; one police officer still told him "find the bag or I'll kill you in front of your father" and made him sign a confession under duress (ECCR, 2020).

In 2021, the ECtHR ruled once again in favour of a police brutality victim, after finding that state authorities were in violation of Article 14, read in conjunction with Article 3. The incident occurred in 2013, when special police units conducted a raid, described by ERRC (2022) as excessive and arbitrary. In the course of an operation to find a single suspect, 50 police officers forcibly entered several houses and establishments in the Topana neighbourhood of Skopje, harassing and pushing people, punching and kicking them with fists and batons. The man who filed the case was attacked by a large group of officers while he was shopping and was kicked and shouted racial slurs at (ERRC, 20220).

2.5 MOLDOVA

There are currently no groups in the Moldovan Parliament that could be categorised as right-wing populists. However, the former Soviet country has only recently seen a shift in its political landscape,

as Maia Sandu's election as president in 2020 represented a shift from the socialist nostalgia and manifestation of Russia's cultural hegemony (Marandici, 2021). Sandu is the founder and former leader of the Party for Action and Solidarity (PAS), a centre-right, liberal and pro-European political party with a vision to reform Moldova's institutions and progress towards European membership. Her victory came after the 4-year term of Igor Dodon, a member of the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (PSRM), a left-wing group with populist tendencies, which holds Eurosceptic and Russophilic views (Locoman, 2021).

Although PSRM held majority in Parliament until 2021 (and before it, the Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova (PCRM)), Sandu's PAS won by a landslide in the most recent elections in 2021, obtaining 52.37 per cent of the votes and therefore absolute majority. The third most represented party (and the last, as the Parliament is only made of three groups), however, was the ŞOR party (Socio-Political Movement "Equality"), a populist party that openly holds Eurosceptic and Russophilic stances. The party that obtained six seats in the new assembly is meant to represent the interests of Russophones in Moldova and it aims to make Russian the official language in Moldova.

Moreover, the ŞOR party was responsible for organising weekly anti-government protests for the past month, calling for the resignation of the pro-Western government in the context of the cost-of-living crisis (Digi 24, 2022).

2.5.1 Racism in Moldova

As of 2015, it was estimated that between 12,000 and 50,000 Roma people live in Moldova, which is a significantly smaller community than in the previously discussed countries (Moldovan Diaries, n.d). This number is believed to be much higher though, since many Roma people are reluctant to self-identify, fearing social stigma (ECMI, 2017). However, the minority is not safe from authority abuses here either, especially in the context of the pandemic and the conflict in Ukraine, which forced many Ukrainian Roma to flee in neighbouring Moldova. ECRI decries widespread anti-Gypsyism in terms of societal perceptions (ECRI, 2018, para. 32), as Roma endure hatred and insults in public life— they are often portrayed as “thieves, liars, beggars, lazy” (Malcoci-Barbarosie, 2015). In terms of education access, only 54 per cent of Roma children are enrolled in primary school (compared to 90 per cent of the general population) and only 16 per cent attend high school (as opposed to 78 per cent) (ECRI, 2018, para. 81). Although data is not as specific as in neighbouring countries, many Moldovan Roma live in substandard housing conditions, with limited access to drinking water, canalisation and regular power supply, which mainly affects children and their ability to attend school (ECRI, 2018, p. 27).

Following the outbreak of COVID-19, local leaders in Moldova also made use of scapegoating techniques in addressing the crisis - the mayor of Edinet, a small Moldovan town, publicly stated that Roma people returning to the country from abroad constituted a public health hazard to the rest of the population (ERRC, 2020, p. 25). He requested the town to be quarantined due to Roma's presence:

The Roma are very noisy, now many have come from abroad. There were about 400, now there are over 1000 people coming. They do not obey the rules at all, they are in the streets, they are not aware of the dangers of this pandemic. We try to explain them, but it's harder. Recently they had a funeral, they had the burial with music, there were a few hundred or so Roma in the deceased's yard, can you imagine? And half of them were foreigners, so we expect to see new cases of infected people (Mayor Constantin Cojocaru, 2020, cited in ERRC, 2020, p. 25).

Moreover, the city of Soroca, known for its high Roma population and informally called the “Roma capital of Moldova”, was quarantined by the government after a relative rise in the number of infections. Over 50 soldiers and the Anti-Air Missile Regiment installed checkpoints at the entrance and exit in order to monitor the movement of people in the city (ERRC, 2020, p. 28). The Russian invasion of Ukraine affected Ukrainian Roma disproportionately, as besides the general plight of having to flee armed conflict, they faced segregation and poor conditions in the Moldovan refugee centres. After visiting three refugee centres in Chisinau which housed Ukrainian Roma, ERRC claimed that those centres only sheltered them and other people of colour in worse conditions than other locations (Lee, 2022). Roma refugees testified about the substandard conditions, as their shelters had no hot water or washing facilities, no adequate drinking water and poor nutrition, which caused food poisoning in several children (Popenko, 2022). Moreover, people coming from ethnic minorities are sent to the bordering Romania faster than other groups, often without receiving adequate information about the asylum-seeking process.

In one of those centres, a group of Roma refugees were attacked by security guards with tear gas this summer. Staff members became hostile towards the group because they were using the common space, and verbally assaulted them using racial slurs. The guards ordered everyone to leave the room before turning the lights off and using tear gas on those who remained inside. Several people, including elders and children, were affected by the gas and required medical assistance in the aftermath of the incident (ERRC, 2022).

2.6 UKRAINE

Similarly to its ex-Soviet neighbours, Ukraine’s last parliamentary elections (2019) meant a victory for pro-European liberal parties, as the newly founded Servant of the People Party (which Volodymyr Zelenskyy was also a member of) obtained 254 seats out of 450. However, the runner-up was the pro-Russian and Eurosceptic Opposition Platform - For Life party with 43 obtained seats. As a result of alleged ties with Russia during the invasion of Ukraine, the party’s faction in the Parliament was dissolved in April (Kyiv Independent, 2022). The party was then banned by a court decision. Although it only holds one seat as of the last elections, the ultranationalist Svoboda party, is also represented in the legislature. Yet, it decreased in popularity in comparison to previous years: it received 4.71 per cent of the popular vote in 2014 and earlier that year was part of the first Yatsenuk government (it held 10.45 per cent of votes following the 2012 elections).

In Ukraine, there is no recent record of overtly racist hate speech coming from politicians like in the case of Bulgaria. However, a recent organised attack on Roma homes shows that despite not being formally represented in the legislature, far-right groups still have some *de facto* power. On a Sunday in October 2021, a group of 50 members of right-wing Ukrainian movements (some from the Svoboda party, but also C-14 and the National Corps) gathered to attack Roma homes after a conflict between two Roma underage teenagers and a Ukrainian soldier. The protestors threw smoke bombs and chanted “death to drug dealers”, but their actions were countered by the presence of police (Lee, 2021).

This incident was not isolated; such attacks from far-right groups have become almost commonplace in recent years. Mob protests against local Roma communities have taken place several times, although police failed to protect them and prosecutors failed to investigate complaints (Lee, 2021). In 2016, following the rape and murder of a nine-year-old by a Roma man, a mob of over 300 set to destroy several homes of the local Roma group and forced them to flee in fear of violent attacks (Lee, 2016). During a village meeting, inhabitants unlawfully decided to demand authorities to remove Roma

individuals from the area, carrying out what was effectively a pogrom. Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported in 2017 on the attack of a Roma settlement near Lviv by ultranationalist groups, an attack that led to one death and several injuries, including one child. Some members of the group had ties with the former battalion Azov, which is implicated in numerous allegations of unlawful detention, torture and other types of abuse (HRW, 2016). According to HRW, the attack was the sixth similar assault on Roma settlements in Ukraine in two months.

In light of such experiences and considering limited response from police and prosecutors, mistrust from Roma communities in authorities is a “rational response to lived experience” (ERRC, 2021). In the aftermath of a neo-fascist attack on her camp, similar to the ones described above, a Roma woman told ERRC activists: “I don’t trust the police. The next day I saw the police officer drinking coffee with one of the guys who attacked our camp. One of the guys who attacked us threatened to find



SOUTHERN EUROPE

3.1 ITALY

In Italy, numerous parties employ populist discourse. Among them are Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy or FdI), Lega (League), Forza Italia, Movimento 5 Stelle (Five Star Movement), Sud chiama Nord (South calls North), CasaPound, and Forza Nuova (New Force) – the latter two not being represented in the Parliament. The Brothers of Italy party, with Giorgia Meloni as its leader, has recently won the September 2022 Italian Prime Minister elections with 26 per cent of the votes (Eligendo, 2022), which will make Meloni the new Prime Minister of Italy. Brothers of Italy is planning to form a coalition with the right-wing populist League party, run by Matteo Salvini, and the centre-right Forza Italia party, led by Silvio Berlusconi. Italy, therefore, awaits its most right-wing government since World War II (Kakissis, 2022).

Brothers of Italy is a national-conservative and right-wing populist party (Ferreri, 2016). The party has its roots in neo-fascism and, while rejecting to be fascist, endorses far-right ideologies, which results in it often being described as 'post-fascist' (Allaby, 2022). The motto of Brothers of Italy is "God, family, fatherland", which is indicative of the party's ideas. Giorgia Meloni also favours a 'Europe of nations', which means less power to the European Union and more power to Italy as a sovereign state (Lowen, 2022). During one of Meloni's rallies in Milan this year, she was alarmed about "*mass immigration which is a weapon of big economic and financial powers used to lower competition among workers*". In the lead-up to the elections, Meloni posted repeatedly on her social media accounts calling for a "naval blockade" to "*put an end to illegal departures to Italy*", though it is unclear what form this would entail. In addition to its proposed anti-immigration policies, Brothers of Italy regularly suggests that the government should prioritise the country's decreasing birth rate to prevent the "extinction of Italians" (Speak, 2022a).

Matteo Salvini from the League party started his electoral campaign by sharing posts on Twitter that featured news of crimes and rapes allegedly attributed to what he called "*fake refugees*". Concerning migration, he has also said that "*Italy cannot accept tens of thousands of immigrants who only bring problems. Italy is not Europe's refugee camp.*" (EURACTIV with AFP, 2022). On August 4th, 2022, he went on a two-day visit to the Italian island Lampedusa, where many migrants reach Italy each year from North Africa, where he, again, said that Italy is not the refugee camp of Europe and that "*This is shameful. But Italians will soon vote and can turn a page*" (Tondo, 2022). On September 18th, 2022, during a mass gathering of the League party in the commune of Pontida, Salvini said that "[o]nly those with permission should enter Italy" and, as a solution to the emptying of many Italian villages, he proposed: "*We don't need migrants to repopulate villages. Let's make Italians pay less tax and you'll see how they repopulate those small places*" (AFP/The Local, 2020). Brothers of Italy's, the League's, and Forza Italia's joint election manifesto includes ideas such as "fight[ing] irregular immigration", "creating hot-spots in non-European territories, managed by the EU, to assess asylum applications," and "security decrees", which were also voiced by Meloni on September 12th, 2022 during a debate with centre-left leader Enrico Letta (Speak, 2022b).

In Meloni's 2021 autobiography *Io sono Giorgia* (I am Giorgia), she wrote that mass migration weakened ethnic identity and that Italy should favour welcoming Christians and people that are "*as compatible as possible with our own national community*" (Balmer, 2022). To Meloni, this means that people coming from non-European countries, in particular those who are Muslim, are not welcome.

She has repeatedly and explicitly promoted the ‘great replacement’ theory (Speak, 2022a), a white nationalist, far-right conspiracy theory which endorses that white European populations are being demographically and culturally replaced by non-white people, especially from Muslim-majority countries (Bergmann, 2021). On June 12th, 2022, during a rally of the Spanish far-right Vox party in Marbella, Meloni said that “*radical Islam*” is “*menacing our roots*” and called for “[n]o to Islamist violence. Yes to safer borders, no to mass immigration” (The Guardian, 2022a). Since the war in Ukraine broke out in February this year, Meloni has called the Ukrainians “*real refugees*”, telling the Italian parliament in March that the government should “*take advantage of the moment*” and expel all “*illegal migrants*” (Balmer, 2022). Her favour of Ukrainians over Muslim migrants was made clear yet again on August 22nd, 2022, when she posted a video on her Twitter account that showed a Ukrainian woman being raped by an asylum seeker. “*One cannot remain silent in front of this atrocious episode of sexual violence in broad daylight in Piacenza by an asylum seeker. A hug for this woman. I will do everything possible to restore security to our cities,*” she wrote (Reuters in Rome, 2022). Disfavour towards Muslim migrants can also be found in the future coalition’s joint agenda, which mentions “*combatting all forms of Islamic fundamentalism*” (Accordo quadro di programma per un Governo di centrodestra, 2022).

3.2 GREECE

3.2.1 Populist discourses and racism in Greece

In the past, populist and racist discourses were prominently present in Greek politics. Between 1985 and October 2020, the Popular Association – Golden Dawn (Golden Dawn) party was operating, which was a neo-Nazi group (Wodak, 2015) that had parliamentary representation between 2012 and 2019 (Connor, 2021). The party was against immigration (Smith & Kingsley, 2016), used right-wing populist, antisemitic, anti-Islam, and anti-Turkism rhetoric (Ekström, Patrona & Thornborrow, 2018; Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, 2017; Anadolu Agency, 2015; Hürriyet, 2012). On October 7th, 2020, the Athens Appeals Court declared the Golden Dawn a criminal group, which has effectively banned the party from existing (Maltezou & Papadimas, 2020). The entire party’s leadership and those who participated in its activities faced charges of operating a criminal organisation while posing as a political group, attempted murder, possession of weapons, and employing violence to remove political rivals, migrants, and communists. The senior members of the party faced sentences ranging from five to 15 years in prison (Kitsantonis & Magra, 2020). However, even before Golden Dawn was *de facto* banned, due to the party’s failure to obtain seats in the 2019 legislative election, several members had already stepped down and created their own parties, promoting similar ideas as those of Golden Dawn (Tsagkroni, 2020). Among them were Ioannis Lagos, Giorgos Germenis, Nikos Kouzilos, and Panagiotis Iliopoulos, who created the National Popular Consciousness party, and Ilias Kasidiaris, who created the Greeks for the Fatherland party (Psarras, 2019).

Even though the former Golden Dawn members are currently imprisoned, they continue to promote their narratives from behind bars through what critics are calling preferential prison treatment (Papangeli & Malichudis, 2022). The most prominent of them is likely to be Ilias Kasidiaris with his Greeks for the Fatherland party. Kasidiaris claimed that Greeks of the Fatherland was a movement for the “*national preservation and revival of Hellenism*”. The party maintains many of the same views as endorsed by Golden Dawn, with a particular focus on ending illegal immigration (Counter Extremism Project, n. d.). Its party plan warns for the Greeks to become “*a minority in [their] homeland*”, that “*entire districts, villages, and even cities will become ghettos of foreigners,*” and that “*Islamisation*”

will destroy our religious and cultural identity” (Ellhnes, n.d.). Upon the recent victory of the Brothers of Italy party in Italy, Kasidiaris addressed a letter to Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini, reading:

The great victory of the National Forces in Italy marks the beginning of a common pan-European struggle with the aim of saving the supreme values: the fatherland, religion, and the family. The nations of Europe and, above all, the Greek nation, which spread the lights of civilisation through the world, are facing major problems of survival, [considering one of the problems to be Islamisation] (Ellhnes, 2022).

Kasidiaris actively uses Twitter (currently having 330,100 followers) and YouTube (116,000 subscribers and thousands of views on each of his videos) to get his views across. On his Twitter account, Kasidiaris (2022a) tweets statements such as *“Why do news channels not say that the murderer of the 17-year-old girl is Pakistani? This is the brainwashing of the Greek society that the Prime Minister is dreaming of”*; Kasidiaris (2022b), also stated, *“Albanian criminals kill and shoot police officers in Athens. The government-circus solved the issue of criminality by unlawfully keeping me in prison with the goal of not stealing their votes.”*; and *“Against the fake-right government that wants to replace Greeks with illegal immigrants, I call on you to show a strong presence in the big election battle! The Greek National Party will be the big winner!”* (Kasidiaris, 2022c). Also on his YouTube channel, Kasidiaris regularly talks about the Greek government’s policy on migrants and refugees (Counter Extremism Project, n.d.).

In addition to the blatant racist discourse used by far-right parties, racism in Greek politics also occurs in more subtle ways. The Greek government’s approach towards asylum seekers from the MENA region in particular has been hardening for years, including well-documented pushbacks on the country’s land and sea borders (Fallon, 2022). However, on February 26th, 2022, two days after the start of the war in Ukraine, the minister of Migration and Asylum, Notis Mitarachi, expressed the Greek government’s intention to provide humanitarian assistance to Ukraine on a TV morning show, saying that Ukrainian refugees *“are war refugees, these are [emphasis added] the real refugees.”* A few days later, on March 1st, 2022, the leader of the opposition party SYRIZA, Alexis Tsipras, accused Mitarachi of having double standard humanitarianism, following which Mitarachi defended his position, saying that the description of Ukrainians as “real refugees” was accurate and contrasted their cases with economic migrants and asylum seekers who *“come from distant countries and continents, passing through one or more countries”* and argued that the asylum applications of these are *“inadmissible under European law”* (Malichudis et al.2022). Following this statement, a fellow member of the ruling New Democracy party and Professor of International Politics at the Panteion University of Athens, Dimitris Kairidis, used similar rhetoric, saying

[...] if you want to say it cynically, we are not talking here about a massacre in a distant place somewhere in the depths of Africa with an irreligious African, but about - to say it completely cynically, I know it sounds politically unorthodox, but unfortunately this counts - Christians, white, European, who are from us... (The Press Project, 2022).

SOUTH-WESTERN EUROPE

Spain and Portugal are two countries that both have been considered immune to the wave of far-right populist parties that have gained popularity in recent years across Europe (Mendes & Dennison, 2021). Unlike other European countries that have had far-right parties as early as the 1980s, in both Spain and Portugal, the prominence of the far-right is a relatively recent phenomenon (Alonso & Kaltwasser, 2015).

In Spain, the far-right party Vox, which was founded in 2013, saw electoral gains between 2018 and 2019. In the two parliamentary elections of 2019, Vox gained 10.25 per cent and later 15.05 per cent of the votes, which made them the third biggest party in Spain. Since the elections of 2018 and 2019, Vox has gotten seats in all aspects of the Spanish government (Cabezas, 2022). This year also saw Vox enter their first governing position in the region of Castilla y León alongside the conservative Popular Party. In Portugal, however, the far-right populist party Chega initially saw limited gains in its first election of 2019, the same year it was founded, gaining only 1.3 per cent of the votes. In the next parliamentary elections, they gained 7.2 per cent of the votes (5 per cent of the parliament seats) and, like Vox, was made into the third largest party in the country. Despite this, they remain the far-right party with the lowest percentage of seats in parliament in the European Union.

4.1 SPAIN

4.1.1 Populist discourses and racism in Spain

Vox is a party which focuses on the principles of nativism (the favouring of native citizens over immigrants), anti-immigration, and seeing themselves as the defenders of Spanish nationalism, in part as a response to Catalanian secessionism but also due to immigration and anti-Muslim sentiments (Santana et al., 2021). These issues relate to the party's focus on law and order as it regards immigration—especially illegal immigration—as a component to the country's crime levels, but also to bring order to Catalanian secessionism, which the party considers illegal. Other populist themes prevalent in Vox's campaign are anti-progressivism and anti-feminism. Vox sees themselves as the defender of Spanish traditional and religious values against what it calls the “dictatorship of the progressives” (Alonso & Espinosa-Fajardo, 2021; Nadworny, 2022; Santana et al., 2021;). They oppose laws relating to gender equality and women's rights, as they believe that today's progressive ideas have gone too far and that these “feminist-supremacist” ideals threaten traditional Spanish values (Alonso & Espinosa-Fajardo, 2021). The underlying discourse used by Vox is one of antagonistic and divisive rhetoric meant to create a narrative of “us against them”, which seeks to divide Spain along the lines of tradition, xenophobia and racism (Mendes & Dennison, 2021).

Nationalist and anti-immigration rhetoric used by Vox and its party leader Santiago Abascal are tied to one another. Vox's anti-immigration policies call for the return of illegal immigrants to their country of origin, and that illegal migrants should receive no support from the Spanish state even if they have lived in Spain for a longer period of time (Hedgecoe, 2022; Rodriguez, 2018). Anti-immigration and nationalism is also tied to their wishes to regain control of their borders in which they want to “recover our sway in Europe and the world” —essentially, they use the rhetoric that they want to retake or reconquer their lands. This idea of anti-immigration from outside of Europe can also be seen in Vox's wish to see preferential treatment of immigrants from countries with language and cultural ties to Spain to reinforce its nationalist sentiments (Rodriguez, 2018). Anti-immigration rhetoric is also reflected with Vox's willingness to expand the walls in the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla in

Africa to prevent in their words “an invasion” of immigrants from entering (Walker, K., 2019). By using the term “invasion” it depicts immigrants as attackers and thus a threat, and divides the country between those who seek to protect Spain against those that are perceived to bring harm.

Vox’s use of nationalistic rhetoric based on taking back and reconquering borders is also heavily anti-Muslim. During the 2019 election campaign, Abascal promoted anti-Muslim sentiments by calling for a new “Reconquista” – Spanish for “reconquest”. The Reconquista was a period in Iberian history from the 8th century to the 15th century which saw the conquering of Muslim lands by Christians and later expulsion of Muslims and also Jews from the peninsula (Walker, K., 2019). Vox considers what is happening to Spain today as an invasion, similar to the Muslim conquest of Iberia, and therefore uses history to create racist divisions against Muslims. It is also, therefore, no coincidence that the 2019 election campaign for Vox began at Covadonga, the site of the first Christian victory over Muslim forces, which marked the beginning of the Reconquista, as a symbol of their beliefs (Walker, 2019). A video by Vox in 2018 depicted a future in which Spain was under Sharia law (Heyne & Manucci, 2021). This is also an example of how Vox seeks to inspire fear to gain support for their party.

The discourse around women is also related to anti-immigration and the racist belief of protecting “native” Spanish women against foreigners, specifically men (Alonso & Espinosa-Fajardo, 2021). Despite this idea of wanting to protect women, Vox’s beliefs in Christian traditions and moral values also clash with feminism and other progressive ideals, which they see as threats to society. Much of the party’s programme is focused on combating issues such as opposing gender equality laws and policies, including those put forward to prevent domestic abuse towards women. In the eyes of Vox, feminism has gone too far and framed the issue around the idea of a “totalitarian” feminist project (Alonso & Espinosa-Fajardo, 2021). Similar to their opposition to progressivism, which is framed as a “dictatorship”, Vox’s populist narrative attempts to call more progressive, liberal or left-leaning views as an overreach of power, authoritarian, or as an abuse by the state. These progressive ideals in their eyes are meant to undermine already existing equality laws by giving women more rights than men. Here we see hypocritical attempts to demonise immigrants to protect women, but blatant disregard on other issues that impact the safety and well-being of women.

4.2 PORTUGAL

4.2.1 *Populist discourses and racism in Portugal*

Like Vox in Spain, Portugal’s Chega under Andre Ventura focuses on topics of immigration and minority groups. Populist rhetoric used by Chega targets Muslims and other minority groups, such as Afro-Portuguese or Roma people, for the issues they see the country facing. After Giorgia Meloni’s Brothers of Italy victory in the recent Italian election, Chega said European voters are supporting parties who seek to defend traditional values and sovereignty of peoples, and that this change that has happened around Europe will reach Portugal (Bruxo, 2022). Similar to Spain, we see a focus in rhetoric on the defence of tradition and European values against a threat, whether it is from internal or external forces.

Part of Chega’s populist rhetoric is their plan to combat abuse to the country’s welfare program in which it blames uncontrolled immigration for and the rhetoric that Portuguese citizens “who are struggling to pay regular bills” also have to pay for those abusing the system (Lusa, 2022). The populist discourse through nationalism and retaking control over borders shows a continued similarity to Vox. By attempting to appeal to the Portuguese lower- and middle-classes, while not as explicit in

its nationalism, we see the theme of protecting “our people first” or “tak[ing] care of our own citizens” before helping others. This rhetoric also creates division between those who are considered Portuguese and those that are not. Despite these nationalistic and divisive tones, Chega denies that this is related to racism or has racist motives. Like Vox, Chega also calls those abusing the welfare programmes of Portugal as “invaders” of the county and their cities (Lusa, 2022).

Chega, alongside its anti-immigration stances, also wants to reduce immigration from primarily Muslim countries with a priority of those “known for terrorism”, according to party leader André Ventura in an interview. Similarities in populist policies like these were compared to former US President Donald Trump’s “Muslim ban” and when asked about it, Ventura agreed that they shared similar ideas (Martinho, n.d.). In November 2021, Chega proposed a resolution to put the Muslim community under surveillance to combat radical Islamic fundamentalism (Walker, N. 2022). While this policy and rhetoric claim to combat threats, they risk targeting minority groups/communities based on xenophobic beliefs rather than going after dangerous individuals.

Together with its anti-immigration stances towards Muslims, the issue of crime and security is also an area which Chega focuses on heavily, especially regarding minority groups such as Roma and Afro-Portuguese people (Alberti, 2020). In 2020, Ventura was fined for discrimination against Roma people as he said “[...]almost 90 per cent of the Romani community lives on ‘other things’ than their own work [...]” and that they are dependent on benefits from the state (The Portugal News, 2020). During COVID-19 pandemic, Chega also wanted to put Roma communities under surveillance and lockdown as they claimed they were a threat to public health (Heyne & Manucci, 2021). Chega also has protested against “Black Lives Matter” and in support of police forces who are accused of racist or discriminatory behaviour towards minority groups. They argue that there is no discrimination, instead that minorities have more rights, which to them is unfair (Carlos, 2020). Similar to Vox’s anti-feminism in Spain, they believe that granting specific laws to an affected group of people would instead increase inequality.

While Spain and Portugal have long been seen as impervious to the influence of the far-right, recent years have seen a rise in both countries. Through their rhetoric together with the rest of Europe, it has led to the normalisation of racist and discriminatory rhetoric. With the gains of Vox and Chega, the question remains if this trend will continue, especially with the recent success of other far-right European parties in 2022 in Italy and Sweden.



WESTERN EUROPE

Western Europe has been suffering from a rise in populism since the mid-2010s. Right-wing extremist parties have been increasing in popularity and breaking through into the mainstream political scene. While right-wing and populist governments have succeeded in leading governments, this is not the case in Western Europe. Parties such as Marine le Pen's Rassemblement National have nevertheless continued to entrench themselves in the popular consciousness, sometimes presenting historical scores in elections. Racism is a significant issue in Western Europe. This racism stems largely from national institutions which fail to see their biased and prejudiced approaches to governing a country. The state's response to racism also causes the population to act in discriminatory ways, especially in the areas of education, employment and housing. This section of the report focuses on France, the United Kingdom, Ireland, The Netherlands, and Belgium.

5.1 FRANCE

5.1.1 Populism in the 2022 elections

The elections held in May of 2022 saw Emmanuel Macron come out as the successful candidate, acquiring a second mandate. This result, however, is an incorrect indicator of the political situation in France, especially the stronghold that populist narratives continue to have on the voting population. Levels of political discontent are high within the French population (Aulnas, 2019). This is especially true in socio-economic classes that consider themselves "left behind" by capitalism and globalisation (Bourdin & Torre, 2021). Their voting behaviours reflect deep frustration with their economic hardships and lack of access to social services.

These fragments of the population are attracted by populist parties because the far-left and far-right embody their sentiments of injustice, anti-elitism and disenchantment. Parties such as Marine Le Pen's Rassemblement National (RN) and Jean-Luc Mélenchon's La France Insoumise (LFI) appeal to the desire to oppose France's status quo politics where the Left opposes the Right. They aim to enhance the "voice of the people", blame minorities for their unemployment, and advocate for leaving the European Union in order to enhance French sovereignty (Alexandre et al., 2021).

The populist vote in France has been increasing consistently since 2017 (Reynié, 2019). Throughout his first presidency, Macron failed to deliver on his promise of building a France that is economically strong enough to compete in a fast-paced world (Bréhier & Roy, 2022). Consequently, people have increasingly turned to the alternatives. On one hand is a very united left-wing camp composed of Mélenchon's party as well as the Greens. On the other hand, Le Pen's party has gained in strength throughout the pandemic as well as through the perceived failures of Macron's tenure. Both parties are extremely successful in cultivating a type of cult of personality. Mélenchon and Le Pen are both striking figures, successful campaigners and effective at persuading large crowds. Their primary strengths lie in being able to exploit the vulnerabilities of those struggling and latching on to the negative emotions towards traditional parties (Aulnas, 2019). It seems that much of the future of populism in France rests on Macron's second term as President, what he manages to deliver in that time.

5.1.2 Racist discourse and aggression in France

Last year's election saw heightened racist narratives and discourse disseminated by candidates. Figures such as Eric Zemmour and Marine Le Pen have not hesitated to express xenophobic views

against France's Muslim population. Much of their expression is impossible to prosecute because of the ambiguous way in which it is communicated, encouraging others to follow in their footsteps without facing repercussions (Seniguer, 2022). This is especially true for harassment and abuse online, a method preferred by racist attackers.

Racism in France is especially perceptible in the police. Police brutality increased during the pandemic, with incidents such as a man being saved from the Seine river then mocked and beaten by police (Jobard, 2022). Racism is seen as pervasive in the police institution, an issue being tackled by the Interior Ministry. The fight against racism is seeing progress, however; the director of SOS Racisme has seen the social opportunities of those from the Maghreb region increase, and there is substantial class promotion (Seniguer, 2022). Another report sees the general population becoming increasingly accepting towards 'others' (Dru, 2020).

5.2 THE UNITED KINGDOM

5.2.1 The Tory parties populist and xenophobic policies

After the overt expression of populist sentiments in the Brexit referendum, populism made its way into British mainstream politics through the Conservative (Tory) party. The Brexit referendum demonstrated a wider trend of distrust in elites and a desire to refocus political energy on domestic issues (Lewis, 2019). In order to continue to appeal to a broader audience, the Tories have adopted elements of populism. This is most notably perceived through the UK's anti-immigration policies. Earlier this year, the UK officially signed a partnership deal with Rwanda whereby the UK is allowed to send certain people to Rwanda who would otherwise be seeking asylum in the UK (Zeybek, 2022). In exchange, Rwanda receives 120 million pounds in funding.

The legality, practicality, and cost of this initiative has been questioned by civil societies and the media. The partnership is seen as problematic under the Refugee Convention, specifically Article 33 on the principle of *non-refoulement* (Zeybek, 2022). The UK should not be able to deny asylum seekers the right to asylum. If they arrive on UK territory, individuals have the legal right, under the Convention, to go through the asylum process. Civil society groups insist that the majority of those who cross the Channel are genuine and legitimate refugees. The first flight to Rwanda was to depart on June 14th, 2022. As the flight was about to depart, an NGO submitted an appeal to the ECtHR, which issued an urgent interim measure. Several other interim measures were granted and the flight was cancelled. Despite the backlash and criticism the UK received over the policy, Truss' government remains committed to implementing it (Zeybek, 2022).

Anti-immigration policies are central to the Tory party's success. Half of their voter base identify with right-wing nationalism (Kaufmann, 2022). In order to not lose this portion of the vote, leaders such as Boris Johnson and Liz Truss have expressed more populist ideas and enforced their anti-immigration policies, regardless of how unpopular this makes the UK government internationally and domestically (Watts, 2022).

5.2.2 Systemic and Institutional Racism in the UK

As the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement reached its peak in 2020, the UK also re-examined its society's relationship to race. This especially came from public figures of colour, such as footballer Raheem Sterling denouncing the racism in the Premier League and rapper Stormzy announcing on

social media that the UK has inherently racist institutions (Yawson, 2020). People of colour have continuously expressed their ‘otherisation’ within British society. Often, they feel as though they do not share the identity created by those who are white. Much of the history and culture exhibited in the UK neglects to acknowledge centuries of oppression and colonialism (Yawson, 2020). British education does not offer a comprehensive overview of the British Empire and Britain’s role in the global slave trade. On a daily basis, Britons of colour have reported a high amount of micro, macro, and systematic aggressions. Two in five of employees of colour have faced racism in the workplace (Nabbi & Cooban, 2022). This is exacerbated when racist and xenophobic discourse is normalised by political and public figures in the mainstream media. Furthermore, the British government continues to ignore and downplay the institutional harms faced by people of colour. In a 2021 report, the government found that the British societal system does not deliberately disfavour ethnic minorities. The government also emphasised that the progress made over the last decades is not justly recognized by advocacy groups (Walker & Parveen, 2021).

No matter how strongly people of colour communicate their experiences and suffering, the Conservative government and a large part of the population still fail to recognize the harms of past British actions and the steps that need to be taken by white Britons to create a more inclusive society.

5.3 IRELAND

5.3.1 Ireland’s Left-Wing Populist Alternative

Sinn Féin is a party with a controversial historical background. During the Irish Troubles, Sinn Féin was considered to be the political face of the Irish Republican Army (IRA), which caused the deaths of thousands of Irish people (Murphy, 2020).

The party has since changed significantly since. It has undergone a process of normalisation since the early 2000s, working hard to rid the party of its nationalist principles and the more radical elements of its policies (Laurent, 2020). Today, it is focused on appealing to a broad audience and does so through promising change. Sinn Féin latches on to a sense of discontent in the Irish public. Much of this is a residue from the 2008 financial crisis – a perceived lack of state investment in quality of life, healthcare, childcare, and education (Murphy, 2020). Sinn Féin promises to fix all this through increasing public investment and a tax hike for the wealthy. The party has come under criticism, however: many more traditional parties insist that Sinn Féin makes promises that it cannot possibly keep, a classic populist tool to garner electoral support. If the party were to ever lead a government, they would be wholly unable to deliver on the immense promise they have made to the Irish public (McGee, 2022). Rather than focusing on achievable policies, people are told what they want to hear. However, Sinn Féin distinguishes itself from other European populist parties. It has a distinct pro-immigration policy, insisting that multiculturalism makes Ireland a richer society (Murphy, 2020). While the party used to be anti-European, it has now shifted to Euro-criticism. It no longer advocates for Ireland leaving the European Union, but maintains a critical eye on European policies.

5.3.2 Racism in Ireland

Much like the UK, Ireland was prompted by the BLM movement to have its own national conversation around race. Young people of colour want Ireland to become a more proactively anti-racist society, acknowledging the privilege that white people hold and calling out racism when it is witnessed (Ingle, 2020). Racism in Ireland is manifested in a casual, often indirect way. People of colour, who are

a noticeable minority in Ireland, are inherently taught to be ashamed and recognize themselves as different from the rest of the population. 82.8 per cent of people who are harassed or discriminated against do not report the incident because they don't believe anything will be done about it (Tierney, 2017). Racism is something that people of colour learn to accept in Ireland.

5.4 THE NETHERLANDS

5.4.1 Forum voor Democratie

The Forum for Democracy (FVD) party rose to prominence in the 2019 provincial elections, where it became the largest Dutch party in the Senate (Fallon, 2019). The right-wing party has dislodged Geert Wilders' party as the face of Dutch populism.

The head of the party, Thierry Baudet, is a young but staunch advocate of Dutch nationalism. He believes that Dutch culture needs to be protected and frequently brings up a certain nostalgia of a Netherlands that never really existed, a classical rhetorical method of European populist parties (Fallon, 2019). Baudet has been vocal about his opposition to immigration: his response to the 2019 Utrecht shooting was to call for less immigration due to the shooter's Turkish origin. The party is also anti-EU, criticising open border policies and the euro currency. While somewhat popular in the Netherlands, the Forum for Democracy remains a controversial and extreme political party that has not yet cemented itself in mainstream politics.

5.4.2 The Netherlands as race-unconscious

The Dutch empire had an active part in colonialism and imperialism, as well as the slave trade, a history which is often overlooked in Dutch society (Seijger, 2020). Perhaps entertaining the idea that, if the Netherlands is accepting and tolerant today, it should not have to look at its past too closely. Ignoring its history has only served to mask racism and xenophobia in the Netherlands. The UN's Special Rapporteur, Tendayi Achiume, pointed out the lack of education on the Netherlands' true history in schools. Much of the darker past of the country is simply not taught while many of the stereotypes and prejudices against people of colour continue to propagate. Indeed, more than a quarter of Dutch citizens experience racial prejudice, and this number has remained consistent for several years (Seijger, 2020). Inequality is experienced in many facets of Dutch life. This is true in the education system where white children are more likely to go to better schools and then receive higher education (Nwanazia, 2019). People of colour also struggle more with finding jobs, renting or buying houses, and interacting with government administrations (Nwanazia, 2019). Xenophobia and racism have been almost normalised in Dutch discourse. This is largely due to narratives normalised by Dutch politicians who paint a negative image of people of colour, especially those who practise Islam (Nwanazia, 2019). Racism is also prevalent in the police force. Recently, a documentary was released by a Dutch NGO, which displays discrimination within the Dutch police. One officer, a black man, was a victim of racial bullying in the academy. Other scenes depict messages in police group chats which show racial slurs and jokes about killing people of colour (The Associated Press, 2022). This documentary has been successful in sparking a debate in Dutch society and for holding the government accountable, urging for action to be taken (The Associated Press, 2022).

Finally, the issue of *Zwarte Piet* has been extremely controversial because of its depiction of black

face. This has been especially true since attention towards race issues increased in 2020 with the BLM protests (Seijger, 2020). The division within Dutch society about this famous figure is stark – pro-Piet and anti-Piet protestors become very violent with one another and are attached to their cause. Zwarte Piet and the events around the holiday of Sinterklaas see an increase in bullying of children of colour in classrooms (Nwanazia, 2019).

The Dutch government has so far refrained from taking an active stance in the Zwarte Piet issue. However, wider Dutch society has seen more questions and reflection about topics surrounding race. There is a willingness to challenge preconceived knowledge and become more aware.

5.5 BELGIUM

5.5.1 Political differences in Belgium's two regions

Far-right populist parties are most present in the Flanders region of Belgium (Georis, 2021). The main party in question is Vlaams Belang, which became the second party in the country with 11.9 per cent of the votes in a 2021 election.

There has been a considerable effort to soften the image of the party. Like many other such European parties, it has shifted in order to encompass a broader electoral base, ridding itself of its neo-Nazi roots (Georis, 2021). Flanders also experiences terrorist attempts from the far-right. Earlier this year, the police conducted an operation which killed a man in Antwerp. They found hundreds of weapons at his home (Verstraete, 2022). The fascination with arms and violence is stereotypical of right-wing extremists. There has been a marked increase in the number of individuals the Belgian government has signalled as potentially dangerous due to their far-right affiliations. Experts believe these ideologies are growing due to crises, such as the pandemic, socio-economic hardships, and a general identity crisis (Verstraete, 2022). Far-right extremists are also becoming increasingly vocal in the Wallonie region where the French-speaking party *Chez Nous* has emerged. They have a classical populist ideology, encompassing anti-immigration, anti-Islam, and security concerns (Gazeau, 2021). They focus on ending massive waves of immigration. Their appeal is also anti-elitist, trying to foster increasing distrust in traditional domestic institutions as well as European institutions (Gazeau, 2021). While populism is present in Belgium, it does not pose an immediate political threat to more established parties. It remains fairly marginalised except in parts of Flanders where an increase in populist sentiments can be observed.

5.5.2 Racism in Belgium

Just like many other European countries, Belgium rethought its relationship with race during 2020. As people and NGOs began to analyse racism in Belgian society, several aspects were noted. Discrimination in Belgium is mainly noticed in the housing and employment sectors. People of colour are routinely discriminated against when they try to find a place to live, often on requests from landlords, which is an entirely illegal practice (Noulet, 2020).

Structural racism is perceived in the education system. Students of colour are often undervalued because of their race. White children with similar abilities will be overestimated and privileged compared to a student of colour (Noulet, 2020). Unfair practices such as these have long-lasting effects, as fewer people of colour attend university and thus have less employment opportunities. Verbal abuse and harassment online has become especially problematic, with many reports submitted to organisations and the police.

CENTRAL EUROPE

The steady rise of populism in Central Europe has long been acknowledged and documented. However, in Central Europe, the emergence of political figures such as Andrzej Duda of Poland and Viktor Orbán of Hungary has led to the manifestation of populism in a manner that is distinct and unprecedented. In the last five years, parts of central Europe, specifically countries making up the EU's post-communist region (Poland, Hungary, Czechia), have witnessed unprecedented levels of democratic backsliding, with many people owing this to the rise of illiberalism and ethno-populism (Vachudova, 2020). Ethno-populism is a “form of political mobilization in which a leader rallies support from a specific ethnic group (or groups) along communal lines” (ECPS, n.d.). Ethno-populism emerges when nationalism is co-articulated with populism in a single political system, as seen in multiple post-communist central European countries. It is worth considering, why has post-communist Central Europe become a locus for the proliferation of racist, xenophobic, and populist ideologies? The answer lies in the region's communist and occupied past. When considering the tumultuous history of post-communist Central Europe in conjunction with the ongoing migration and economic crises in Europe, it is not surprising that there is a pervasive sense of fear regarding the preservation of these nations, causing the protection of the country to become the paramount concern. (Krakovsky, 2020).

Almost all nations within post-communist central Europe share four unique factors and experiences, which have arguably led to the rise of populism within their countries, the first being the integration and rebuilding of the post-communist EU regions after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The swift privatisation and subsequent introduction to global markets led to a restructuring of post-communist economies. It exposed these countries to international competition. (Krakovsky, 2020) This restructuring and introduction to global markets created severe economic crises, bringing high levels of poverty, social inequality, and unemployment to the region. Secondly, the current demographic problem of decreasing population in these nations, is due in part to large waves of emigration, lower fertility rates, and higher mortality rates. Thirdly, as most recently demonstrated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the post-communist countries in Central Europe are continually facing geopolitical instability. Due to their geographic location, Eastern and Central European countries are increasingly becoming a focal point for the tensions between the global East and West. These three factors, accompanied by the fact that post-communist Central Europe bore a significant weight of the 2015-2016 migrant crisis, have led to the rise of nationalism, Euroscepticism, and xenophobia amongst post-communist central European countries, often referred to as the European Existential crisis (Krakovsky, 2020). As a result, many central European leaders have turned to illiberalism to break off the existing liberal system and rebuild their communities with a greater focus on national interest. Central European leaders are relying on growing Euroscepticism, nationalism, and xenophobia to run on populist platforms and appeal to the public. Using illiberalism to build a “new state”, as explained by Hungary's Viktor Orbán, “does not deny foundational values of liberalism, [such] as freedom [...]. But it does not make this ideology a central element of state organization” (Orbán, 2014).

Racism is a significant problem in Central Europe. This racist attitude primarily originates from the ongoing migration crisis that has imposed a significant burden on Eastern and Central European countries. Migrants often enter the EU through post-communist Central European countries, such as Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, and Hungary. To counter this effect, populist leaders continually adopt more dramatically uncompromising anti-refugee/migration positions. (Dragostinova, 2015) These racist government responses have caused the population to act discriminatively, especially in education, employment, and housing.

This report section focuses on Czechia (formerly the Czech Republic), Poland, and Hungary. Each of these countries is presented in their full domestic political circumstances, highlighting a recent history of the populist movement in each country and the racist discourse and consequences.

6.1 CZECHIA

6.1.1 Far-right leadership and the 2021 elections

ANO 2011, often shortened to simply ANO (“Yes” in English), with the initials meaning Action of Dissatisfied Citizens, is a far-right and populist party in Czechia. The party was conceived and started by Czechia’s now former Prime Minister, Andrej Babiš. Babiš was elected in 2017 and led the country as Prime Minister until 2021. Furthermore, the current President, Miloš Zeman, is a strong ally of former PM Babiš and has been in office since his election in 2013. Zeman has expressed pro-Russian views, and his spokesperson has likened the EU to the Third Reich (Reuters, 2017). From 2017 to 2021, Czechia’s top three governmental positions (Prime Minister, President and Speaker of the Parliament) were dominated by populists; however, the 2021 elections have shown that the Czechia’s democracy is still active and viable.

Prior to the inception of the ANO party under the leadership of Andrejs Babiš, Czechia had not appeared to be a likely candidate to succumb to the populist tendencies that have affected other post-communist nations in Central Europe.. The country’s GDP was growing, and the country’s 2.9 per cent unemployment rate was the lowest in the entire EU. Like many Europeans, Czechs hold their governments – and the European Union– in low regard, often blaming corruption for the perceived incompetence of their governments. These questions of competence were driven by the 2008 Eurozone crisis and 2015 migration crisis, and Western governments and the EU’s failure to assist central European countries with the dramatic influx of migrants into their nations and economic repercussions. Babiš capitalised on this dissatisfaction and scepticism when creating ANO in 2011. While often referred to as an authoritarian and populist, Babiš is, in fact, a “quintessential opportunist” (Jarábik, 2018). Appealing to left- and right-wing voters, ANO has become a common-denominator protest party: an acceptable choice for a sizeable plurality of voters dissatisfied with “old elites” and the status quo (Jarábik, 2018).

Babiš ran a populist government from 2017 to 2021, and before that was deputy Prime Minister from 2014 to 2017. Throughout his political career, Babiš’s policy and statements reflected strong nationalist and anti-migration beliefs. He has denounced the European Green Deal, supported Belarussian protests, and is currently on trial in a two million euro EU subsidy fraud case (Tait, 2022). In the 2021 elections, a coalition of right-of-centre parties, SPOLU, defeated ANO and Andrej Babiš and won the vote of the Czech people – “putting their parties put ideological differences aside and joining together to drive out a leader they fear has eroded the country’s democracy” (Higgins, 2021).

6.1.2 Populist government and racist discourse

Historically, racist discourse in Czechia has often been directed at the Roma minority living in the country. However, in recent years, as with much of Europe, the narrative has shifted and has become much more rooted in the migration crisis in the region. Populist leader Andrej Babiš has propagated this anti-immigrant narrative in Czechia through public statements and policy shifts.

Examples of the racist rhetoric perpetuated by Babiš and President Zeman include Babis openly and

regularly posting racist tweets targeting Muslim immigrants and Czechia's Roma minority. Examples also include President Zeman defaming the Roma population and suggesting that 90 per cent of Roma people do not work (there is no data to support this), stating "that although he despised the former communist regime, at least it made the Roma people work" (Reuters, 2018). At the beginning of the refugee crisis, President Zeman also solidified himself as a symbol of anti-Muslim, anti-refugee, racist, and xenophobic rhetoric. He became notorious for saying "no one has invited the refugees," and that the refugees are "like a tsunami which will kill me" (Allegretti, 2015). Furthermore, on the anniversary of the 1989 Czechoslovak Velvet Revolution in November 2015, Zeman sang the Czech national anthem on stage with an extremist anti-Islamic activist who demanded that gas chambers and concentration camps be set up for Muslims (Britské listy, 2015). This anti-immigrant narrative has spread throughout Czechia, promoting racism, xenophobia, hate crimes, and extremist groups throughout the country and placing minority and immigrant communities at risk.

6.2 POLAND

6.2.1 PiS and the Rule of Law Crisis

Law and Justice— known as PiS —is Poland's right-wing populist and national-conservative political party. It was founded in 2001 by twin brothers Jarosław and Lech Kaczyński, and operated under an ideology based on Christian values. PiS won the Polish election in 2005, but lost in 2007. It regained power in 2015 and has held the top office in Poland ever since, with Andrzej Duda as the President. While the wave of populism has taken over post-communist Central Europe, it is arguably in Poland (and Hungary) where it has found the most success.

The Catholic Church has had a longstanding and influential relationship with the right-wing political party, PiS, in Poland. This relationship has been reflected in the party's positions and legislation on social issues such as LGBTQ+ rights and religious minorities. (Yingst, 2020) The Catholic Church in Poland has traditionally held conservative views on these issues, and PiS has aligned itself with these views in its political platform. As a result, legislation has been passed or proposed in Poland that is discriminatory towards the LGBTQ+ community and religious minorities, particularly Muslims. (Yingst, 2020) This has led to criticism from human rights organizations and the European Union, who have accused Poland of violating the fundamental rights of its citizens. The close relationship between the Catholic Church and PiS has played a significant role in the development and implementation of such legislation.

In Poland, the rule of law crisis developed after the victory of the conservative-nationalist party PiS in the 2015 parliamentary election. With the majority in the government, PiS enacted several reforms, including changes in the Polish judiciary system. Appointing five new judges into the Constitutional Tribunal, which decides on the constitutionality of laws, assured PiS' control over the court. These changes challenged the independence of Poland's judiciary – a fundamental rule of law principle – and therefore challenged one of the EU's core values (Novakova, 2022) The power of the PiS over the Polish judiciary is not only a threat to the rule of law and the EU, but is potentially dangerous and violates the rights of Poles, who now face laws such as the strict law on abortion.

6.2.2 Racism on the rise

Ahead of Poland's last election in 2020, support was dwindling for PiS. However, their messages calling for family unity and Christian values have appealed to deeply religious sectors of the country (Yingst,

2020) This trend towards nationalism and populism risks violating the rights of those the nation deems “other”. By establishing a national identity, particularly around religion, they also establish those that do not belong to the national identity. This risks isolating and ostracising individuals (Yingst, 2020).

Notably, since PiS’ election in 2015, accounts of hate crimes and racist narratives have been on the rise in Poland. Nearly two thousand recorded hate crimes occurred in 2018 and 2019 (ODIHR, 2022). The people who bear the brunt of these attacks and crimes are typically Turks or Muslim, with much hate targeted at immigrants and religious minorities. This racism and anti-immigrant sentiment arguably stems from racist policies and government actions. In 2016, a council designed to fight against discrimination in Poland was abolished, with no replacement planned (Lindenau, 2021) Furthermore, Polish MP Adam Andruszkiewicz successfully advocated to remove the National Radical Camps symbol from police literature detailing racist symbols, further confirming the Polish government’s sympathies towards the extreme right (Lindenau, 2021).

While the future seems uncertain for Poland and Polish politics, civic action is still strong, with women protesting abortion bans at the forefront of the ongoing outcries against the government (AFP, 2021) Nonetheless, PiS maintains strong control over the Polish government, and their governing and policies have inflicted damage among minorities, LGBTQ, and women.

6.3 HUNGARY

6.3.1 Fidesz-KDNP and the fall of democracy

Like all post-communist central European countries, Hungary went through a dramatic democratic transition in 1989 following the fall of the Soviet Union and the collapse of communism. The country became a fully-fledged NATO member in 1999 and joined the European Union in 2004. Up to 2010, Hungary was a prime example of a successful democratic and economic transformation, with a score of 1 in Freedom House’s Freedom of the World rankings, the highest possible score. Freedom House’s rating system rates countries on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 being the most free democracies, based on various factors such as electoral process, civil society, independent media, national and local democratic governance, judicial framework and independence, and corruption. (Krekó, Hunyadi & Szicherle, 2022). Since the election in 2010 where populist Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz-KDNP won, Hungary has “gradually become a competitive authoritarian state or ‘hybrid regime’, where democratic institutions exist in theory, but the rule of law and civil liberties are severely limited in practice” (Krekó, Hunyadi & Szicherle, 2022). Since Fidesz-KDNP’s incumbency, Hungary’s institutional and judicial systems have been transformed. All laws defining the political structure and requiring a two-thirds parliamentary majority were revised in 2011, including those governing the electoral system, election campaigns, and the media. A new constitution, dubbed Fundamental Law, was approved only by lawmakers from the ruling party (Krekó, Hunyadi & Szicherle, 2022) With these adjustments, Fidesz established a political framework tailored to the party’s political objectives and guaranteed its control over politics and the public debate – stifling dissent and incapacitating political competition.

A large part of Orbán’s political tactics derives from eradicating independent media and creating and growing his own, Fidesz-controlled media empire. This empire reaches a broad audience and essentially eliminates independent media other than web portals and much smaller news outlets. This media domination allowed Orbán to frequently spread large amounts of disinformation and pro-Russia, racist, and anti-immigrant narratives.

6.3.2 Xenophobic and Anti-Muslim Rhetoric

Before the migrant crisis of 2015, immigration was not a prevalent political issue. In fact, in the earlier days of Orbán’s administration, his stance on immigration was supportive and a springboard for economic and demographic prosperity (Korm, 2013). With that being said, as for many post-communist Central European countries, the 2015-2016 migrant crisis started to bring anti-immigrant and specifically anti-Islamic sentiments to the top of the immigration political discussion. Before 2015, the Roma and the Jewish minorities were primary targets of the Hungarian populist and racist rhetoric. However, since the migrant crisis began, xenophobia, mainly related to immigration, has become the primary political strategy for the populist right in Hungary. “While objection against the Roma was always the strongest, opposition to refugees/migrants, Arabs and Muslims has caught up with or even eclipsed it” (Krekó, Hunyadi & Szicherle, 2022). Orbán’s government has used its control of the media and public messaging to shape a strong anti-immigration and anti-refugee sentiment across Hungary.

Like Poland’s PiS, Fidesz-KDNP utilises the strong relationship between Hungarians and the Catholic Church to emphasise solid Christian values in their political agenda and leverage these Christian values to ostracise those who do not fit into the traditional ideology. Most recently, this ostracization has been targeting Muslims (namely immigrants) as the government “strengthens Christian values by fighting against the “Islamization” of Europe, and they protect the traditional values against the liberal, “post-1968” ideologies such as multiculturalism and gender equality, which currently rule the West but at the same time undermine its strength and immune system” (Szabolcs, 2018).

Despite the government’s anti-EU efforts for many years, most Hungarians still strongly favour their nation’s participation in the EU. Nevertheless, the handling of the refugee crisis and mass immigration by the EU has dramatically angered the Hungarian people. Furthermore, when asked about the allocation of refugees, Hungarians claim that they have “little tolerance for suffering,” which means that they want wealthy member states to assist poorer ones, but are unwilling to reciprocate. While the populist government may not share the views of all Hungarians, the government’s emphasis on sovereignty and national identity rings true for many Hungarians, as the concern about the EU’s ability to govern and assist Hungary is growing.



NORTHERN EUROPE

The increase of populist discourses and racism are phenomena that have been identified in the region of Northern Europe over the past few years. This section of the report aims to explore and assess the populist as well as racist tendencies in Northern Europe, with a particular focus on Finland, Sweden, and Norway. The following analysis focuses on the evolution of populist and racist sentiments in the selected countries, with the aim of identifying relevant patterns in the region.

7.1 FINLAND

7.1.1 Populist discourses and racism in Finland

The Finns Party is arguably one of the most deeply populist parties among all European challenger parties. The Finnish Rural Party (SMP) was founded in the 1950s aiming to support “the small people” (Palonen, 2021). According to data collected in August 2022, the Finns Party has grown in terms of the support it has been receiving by one per centage point (Helsinki Times, 2022).

The rhetoric of the Finns Party, as analysed by Östen Wahlbeck, depicts the “true” Finns as victims who are being discriminated against in their own country due to the welcoming of cultural diversity (Vieta & Poynting, 2016). The leadership of the party used to self-identify as populist that represents the “ordinary people” with the focus nowadays being directed more towards concerns regarding migration and the start of a cultural war (Palonen, 2021). However, nowadays the narrative revolving around the separation between the elite and the people still exists as an effort to antagonise liberal elites (Palonen, 2021). The new leader, Purra, holds a strict stance regarding immigration; the party policy includes denying asylum to asylum seekers, while placing emphasis on concepts such as nationalism and patriotism (Palonen, 2021). The two concepts are distinct yet interconnected: while nationalism bases its narrative on the belief that one’s nation is superior to others, patriotism emphasises one’s love and devotion to their own country (Hasa, 2021). Such ideologies lead to policies aiming to limit welfare benefits solely to Finnish nationals and native speakers (Palonen, 2021). Overall, the discourse of the Finns Party has nativist characteristics, reinforcing the notion of protecting the interests of natives over those of immigrants (Europeana, n.d.; Palonen, 2021).

According to data collected in 2020, the Finns Party was the most popular political party among the younger generations, and more specifically among individuals aged from 15 to 29 years old (Vanttinen, 2020). The survey that was conducted indicated that if parliamentary elections were held at that point, the nationalist party would be expected to obtain approximately 19 per cent of overall votes (Vanttinen, 2020). Within the context of youth support for the Finns Party, a ground-breaking event took place towards the end of 2020: on October 28th, 2020, the Pirkanmaa District Court said that two members of the Finns Party youth wing would have to face trial on the grounds of inciting ethnic hatred (Yle News, 2019). The case was triggered by public posts made by the two defendants on Twitter; the tweet in question featured a picture of a dark-skinned family with their new-born baby which was accompanied by the following description: “Vote for the Finns Party so Finland’s future won’t look like this”. The prosecutor noted that one of the defendants had been actively involved in an online debate, advocating that “there were no dark Finns” (Yle News, 2019).

According to the prosecutor, the relevant posts on Twitter not only constitute a violation of the dignity of dark-skinned groups but also encouraged a sentiment of hate and intolerance towards those groups. On the other hand, the defendants denied the charges and argued that the tweets in question did not

generate hate against any person on the grounds of their colour, race or ethnic colour to such an extent that it would amount to a criminal offence. One of the defendants publicly apologised for the Twitter post and declared that the post in question merely embraced the ideology of the Finns Party and the Eurosceptic stance it has adopted and has been representing. However, in February 2020, the above-mentioned defendant was officially expelled by the Finns Party after he publicly declared that he was a fascist. In the immediate aftermath of this declaration, which took place on Twitter, the chair of the Finns Party stated that “the party’s youth wing has a small group of people that don’t seem to understand the party’s line”. Nevertheless, the chairperson himself had been convicted in 2012 on the grounds of agitating against an ethnic group and disturbing religious worship after publishing texts that imply that Islam shows acceptance towards pedophilia. (Yle News, 2019). Additionally, he had implied that Somalis were responsible for street crime such as robbing and that they exploited social benefits. (Yle News, 2019).

An equally fundamental aspect of the present discussion around the role of the Finns Party within the context of Finnish society is the stance that the party held during the COVID-19 pandemic. The outbreak of the pandemic constituted a springboard for the Finns Party to advocate against political asylum; more specifically, a Member of Parliament of the Finns Party at that time criticised government actions and underlined that “even in the midst of the biggest crisis in our recent history caused by the coronavirus ... [the government has] the time and money to consider increasing the interests of asylum seekers” (Wondreys & Mudde, 2022).

The immigrant community of Finland has been facing hostility from a political party that exerts a great degree of influence within the country and which also represents a considerable part of the votes of young people. The very fact that the narrative analysed above advocates for the non-granting of asylum-to-asylum seekers while promoting welfare and other benefits only for Finnish nationals shifts the populist discourse to a rather discriminatory practice that leads to racism.

7.2 SWEDEN

7.2.1 Populist discourses and racism in Sweden

The Sweden Democrats is Sweden’s third largest party and holds a far-right populist along with anti-immigration ideology (The Guardian, 2022b; Vieten & Poynting, 2016). The party was founded in 1988 and combined various elements of the far-right environment of Sweden that included white supremacy proponents and fascists; nevertheless, in the middle of the 1950s, the party officially denounced Nazism as an ideology (Diehn, 2022).

In 2005, the current party leader came into power and altered the image of the party towards a rather populist direction that would advocate for ordinary people “against a corrupt elite at the height of a global recession”, as scholar Danielle Lee Tomson has described the rise of the Sweden Democrats (Diehn, 2022). As a result of the refugee crisis of 2015, Sweden received around 163,000 asylum seekers according to data dating until September 2022 (Diehn, 2022). Following political scientist Martinsson, the arrival of many asylum seekers in Sweden has played a fundamental role in the success and popularity of the Sweden Democrats (Diehn, 2022). Martinsson has characterised the Sweden Democrats as “mainly an anti-immigration party with a nationalist ideology”. In general, the Sweden Democrats aim to not have asylum-seekers and opt for a wider use of deportation, while holding an Eurosceptic stance (Diehn, 2022). It is inextricably linked to populism and to a general negative feeling towards receiving immigrants (Ray, n.d.). However, it is worth noting that the Sweden Democrats had

been shaping an anti-Islam narrative long before the influx of immigrants that was triggered in 2015 (Tomson, 2020). More specifically, Islam had already been proclaimed by the Sweden Democrats as the most prevalent public enemy years before the immigration wave. In 2009, Akesson, a member of the Swedish parliament, stated that

as a Sweden Democrat I see this [Islam and Muslims in Sweden] as our biggest foreign threat since World War II [...]. Leading representatives of the Muslim community will demand the implementation of the Sharia law in Sweden; that the Swedish municipal health board would use taxes to circumcise totally healthy young boys; that Sweden would have a higher level of rape and that Muslim men would be strongly represented among the rapists; the Swedish swimming clubs would introduce separate timetables for women and men (Tomson, 2020).

Interestingly, despite the fact that Sweden has historically been one of the countries that has constituted a safe haven for refugees over the past years, the Sweden Democrats have adopted a hostile stance towards immigration. They have been blaming Muslim immigration and political correctness for social issues such as crime. (Tomson, 2020). When faced with allegations of representing and perpetuating racist views, the Sweden Democrats direct their focus towards the classic populist ideology that they stand out for the ordinary working-class people while placing their attention on socio-cultural and socio-economic challenges brought by the influx of non-Western refugees. The Sweden Democrats argue that such challenges are left untouched by traditional political parties and thus require much attention and action (Tomson, 2020).

Exploring the evolution of the Sweden Democrats to date, on September 12th, 2022, after the general elections were held on a national level, the Sweden Democrats won almost 21 per cent of the overall votes. In this manner, the Sweden Democrats became the largest right-wing party to have a collective majority within the Parliament (Lundius, 2022). This electoral result demonstrates that a considerable percentage of Swedish society sympathises with the party's ideology, in a national historical shift to populist support within the country (Lundius, 2022). This means that the fear of organised crime being linked to the existence of a migrant and multicultural environment has now become a core characteristic of Swedish society, generating implications that are fundamental to the clash between cultures within the country (Lundius, 2022).

After having explored the current socio-political environment in Sweden, it may be argued that the label of “populism” has yielded its position to racist practices. The Sweden Democrats have been using propaganda against immigrants even before the massive influx in 2015 by demonising Islam and disseminating information to further defame members of this community. Even though the political line of the party is defined as “populist” with a focus on fighting against the “corrupt elite”, the manner with which immigrants are confronted demonstrates an unjustifiable and unproportional separation between immigrants and nationals.

7.3 NORWAY

7.3.1 Populist discourses and racism in Norway

During the 1980s, Norway's with respect to immigration policy had been formulated by the political party of Fremskrittspartiet (FrP). The main focus of this political map was to establish and promote an anti-immigration policy, which in fact governed the country for more than a decade. In fact, the governing coalition in 2011, composed of the labour party, Arbeiderpartiet, Sosialistisk Venstreparti

and Senterpartiet, maintained the basic elements of the FrP anti-immigration plan (Wiggen, 2021).

The socio-political scene in Norway has been considerably impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. In March 2020, there was a wide political consensus to introduce a lockdown for reasons of public health and safety. The Progress Party, Fremskrittspartiet (FrP), holding anti-immigration views demanded stricter border controls with respect to migrant labour on the basis of spreading the virus within the country. Nevertheless, unlike many other far-right parties around the world, the FrP has not been sympathetic with people opposing the COVID-19 vaccine. In fact, by 2021 the FrP's popularity had dropped and been replaced by the rising popularity of the Senterpartiet (SP) (Wiggen, 2021).

The SP's leader, Trygve Slagsvold, has been travelling the country and engaging in dialogue with the "ordinary people" and promoting the idea of standing up to the "elite". The SP was present in the political scene since the 1920s and mainly received the support of workers of the public sector, small businesses and farmers, especially in the rural regions, yet gradually also in urban areas such as Oslo. During the pandemic, the gap between the value of property in the north and the south became wider with rural areas being placed in a disadvantageous position. For instance, small businesses lost their quotas to larger companies in the south and fishing rights have been privatised. The SP's role in this situation has been critical as it managed to replace the FrP in addressing this group of society. Promising the redistribution of wealth from big enterprises to smaller businesses was part of SP's strategy (Wiggen, 2021).

Another fundamental issue at the heart of Norwegian politics? is anti-Muslim hatred or Islamophobia. According to the report submitted to the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief by Dr Ahmed Shaheed in 2020, an estimate of 4.2 per cent of the overall Norwegian population is Muslim (Dr Shaheed, 2020). The report states that national representative surveys demonstrate a general negative feeling against Muslims in Norway: 31 per cent agree with the statement that "Muslims want to take over Europe", 48 per cent believe that "Muslims have themselves to blame for the increase in anti-Muslim harassment", while 39 per cent consider Muslims as a "threat against Norwegian culture" (Dr Shaheed, 2020). This anti-Muslim sentiment has been accompanied by discrimination in law and practice. For instance, the counterterrorism policy of Norway is connected to the Muslim community of the country: after the terrorist attack by Anders Behring Breivik on July 22nd, 2011, who was a supporter of the above-mentioned Progress Party, considerable tension was created between non-Muslim Norwegians and the Muslim community (Mahadika, 2021). The perpetrator was embracing anti-Muslim sentiments and aimed at fighting against "Islamisation". He was also a proponent of the idea that multiculturalism constitutes a threat to "Western values and culture", condemning European governments that promote it.

In fact, the news media initially? presented the event as an attack orchestrated by a Muslim; Helge Luras, a Norwegian politician, stated that "though it need not be an organised group with an international agenda. It might also be a local group of [Muslim] immigrants hostile to Norwegian society" (Mahadika, 2021). However, the attack was undertaken by a Christian Norwegian. Breivik's narrative spread terror among the local Norwegian people, leading to the creation of a general fear towards Muslims (Mahadika, 2021).

In addition, the above-mentioned report states that as a result of the far-right terrorist attack of August 2019 against a mosque in the region of Bærum, Norwegian mosques have been forced to allocate excessive amounts of funds on security, including but not limited to security guards, safety infrastructure and safety training for the staff of the mosque. These additional costs have not been

funded or compensated by the state, overburdening the mosques.

As it has also been the case with the other two Scandinavian countries analysed in this report, political parties in Norway have been significantly promoting the rights of “ordinary people” against the elite while trying to provide for smaller business. Nevertheless, since 2011, the anti-immigration policies of the FrP have been maintained by the governing coalitions and have evolved to the creation of Islamophobic practices, shifting once again the populist narrative to a racist narrative.



CONCLUSION

The present report aimed at revealing how the tendency of populism – often intertwined with racism – is increasing among European societies. Populism is defined as a “thin ideology”, *characterised* by the idea of a society divided between “the people”, understood as radically good, and “the elite”, assumed to be fundamentally corrupted and disconnected from every-day life (Baker, 2019).

The first section discussed the spread of this phenomenon throughout the eastern and south-eastern European regions – Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia – showing how populist and racist tendencies have always been rooted in the core of these regions and their histories. The second section examined Southern Europe, where the link between populism and racism is explored in Italy and Greece. Section three highlighted how far-right discourses and populist trends were a very recent notion in south-western Europe, focusing on Spain and Portugal, two countries that have historically been considered almost immune to these influences. Afterwards, the chapter on Western Europe investigated the spread of right-wing and populist governments among France, the United Kingdom, Ireland, the Netherlands, and Belgium. In the last decade, right-wing extremist parties have gained popularity and penetrated the mainstream political scene. The fifth section analysed how central European countries of Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic – i.e.: post-communist countries – have been witnessing unparalleled democratic regressions, which the population attributed to the spread of populism. Lastly, the report investigated the increase of populist as well as racist tendencies in northern European countries, with a specific focus on Finland, Sweden, and Norway.

In conclusion, the present report demonstrated how populist and racist discourses are profoundly embedded throughout societies and the political discourses of European countries. As Peter C. Barker (2019) asserts in *The Guardian* series *The New Populism*, “populism sounds like something from a horror film: an alien bacteria that has somehow slipped through democracy’s defences [...] and is now poisoning political life, creating new ranks of populist voters among ‘us’.”



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