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## A Nativist Zeitgeist in Western Europe and the Nordics

Mainstream Parties as Threat for Liberal Democracy

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### **Executive Summary**

Populist radical right parties in Western Europe enjoy considerable support from the public, yet they are still rejected by a vast majority of voters and cannot implement their policies alone. However, under pressure, mainstream parties increasingly cooperate with these parties and adopt their discourses and policies, leading to what I term a “nativist Zeitgeist.” This paper offers insights from the German and Nordic contexts on how democratic parties adopt nativist positions and, in the Nordic case, establish a system of repression against asylum seekers and individuals from the so-called Global South. By adopting nativist policies and rejecting human rights principles, mainstream parties – both center-left and center-right – increasingly pose a threat to liberal democracy. Nevertheless, as mainstream parties share a lack of ideological conviction, they display a weathervane-like responsiveness, and are also open to influence from progressive pressure groups. But while nativists are a minority in Western European societies, they are visible and vocal, and they dominate the headlines. To move mainstream parties away from nativist policies, the silent progressive majority must become more visible on the streets and in the headlines.

# A Nativist Zeitgeist in Western Europe and the Nordics

## Mainstream Parties as Threat for Liberal Democracy

Dr. Jakob Schwörer

### The Populist Radical Right before the European Elections

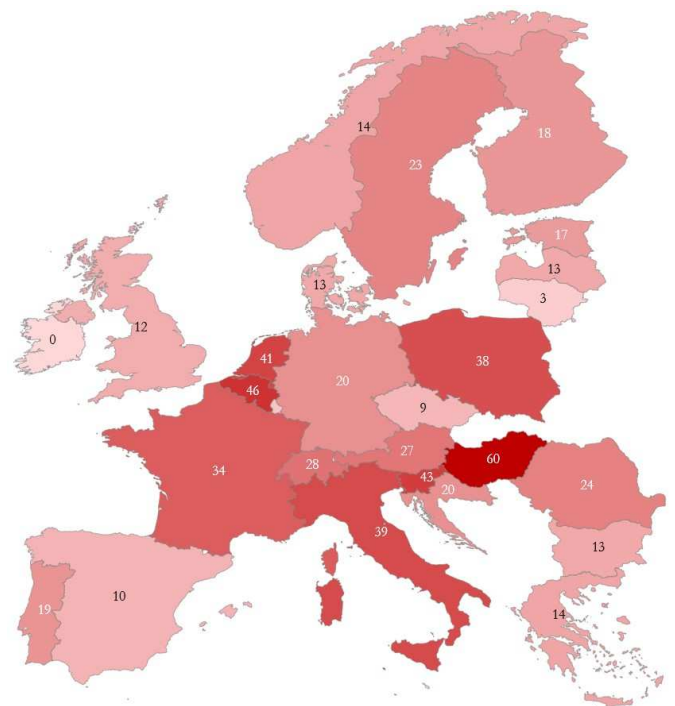
It is largely common sense in political science that the populist radical right poses a threat to democracy. They strive for a culturally homogeneous nation state in which only the “native” population has political rights and foreign elements are seen as a direct threat to stability and native values. At the same time, they mobilize against court decisions and civil rights if these do not correspond to the supposed will of the people. The electoral success of such parties should therefore worry us as it may threaten liberal democracy (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008; Canovan 1999; Mudde 2004; Müller 2016).

Before every European election, the media and policymakers highlight the unprecedented success of Populist Radical Right Parties (PRRP), which is often true, but also not unexpected given the decades-long success story of PRRP and the persistence of the cleavage between authoritarian and liberal values in Western societies (Manucci 2021). However, as Figure 1 shows, based on recent national opinion polls, PRRP do not have an absolute majority in any Western European country, and rarely receive more than 35 percent of the vote (with the exception of Italy, Belgium, and the Netherlands), and therefore cannot impose their agenda and narrative alone.

A key issue in this context is that democratic mainstream parties are adopting their positions and discourse and making it accessible to a wider section of society. Furthermore, due to the difficulty of

obtaining a majority after elections, conservative parties in particular are increasingly inclined to cooperate with PRRP.

**Figure 1:** Success of PRRP in Europe



**Note:** Based on the classification of the Populist (Rooduijn et al. 2023). Additional PRRP included in the map: Democratic Patriotic Movement-Victory (Greece); Italexit (Italy); Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania – Christian Families Alliance (Lithuania); Platform 21 (Latvia); SOS Romania (Romania); Republika (Slovenia). Source: Politico, “Poll of Polls” for the national parliamentary elections (as of 2/18/2024).

In a seminal article in 2004, Cas Mudde described a trend toward a populist Zeitgeist. Mainstream parties, in response to the rise of populist parties, adopt populist rhetoric that portrays political rivals as out of touch with the people. While there is anecdotal evidence for this thesis, systematic empirical evidence is scarce (Breyer 2023; Rooduijn et al. 2014; Schwörer 2021). There is, however, ample empirical evidence of mainstream parties adopting anti-immigrant and

nativist (Mudde 2007) discourses that view refugees and people from the Global South as a threat to the culture, security, and economic well-being of the “native” population.

In this analysis, I examine two (and a half) distinct cases that exemplify the phenomenon of a “weathervane” approach, in which mainstream parties strategically copy nativist discourses and positions. The cases in focus include the Bavarian Christian Social Union (CSU) and the Social Democratic Party in Denmark (and Sweden). A closer look at specific cases of “nativist mainstreaming” (Schwörer, 2021) allows us to observe the impact of this strategy on the electoral fortunes of these parties, but also in terms of its consequences for the individuals affected by the resulting policy shifts.

I argue that the rightward drift of mainstream parties does not confer electoral benefits, fails to undermine the influence of the radical right, and fosters an adversarial environment for individuals from the Global South and refugees residing within these societies. By adopting nativist discourses and positions, mainstream parties themselves become a threat to liberal democracy. However, they may also be willing to dissociate themselves from the ideas of the radical right when faced with countervailing public pressure.

## **Mainstream Parties’ Reaction to the Populist Radical Right**

In many countries, mainstream parties (social democrats, liberals, conservatives and Christian democrats) initially marginalized PRRP. The democratic parties in France, for example, long excluded Le Pen’s Front National, while the

Swedish parties excluded the far-right Sweden Democrats. In Sweden, all democratic parties agreed after 2010 not to cooperate with the radical right. However, the longer these parties were in parliament, the more the mainstream became involved with the radical right — in countries such as Sweden and Denmark, governments made themselves dependent on the support of PRRP and in countries such as Italy, Norway, Finland, Austria and Switzerland, they were even directly involved in governments. The aim was to disenchant the parties and hope to tame them.

In addition to de facto cooperation, however, there is another, more common form of normalization of the radical right. When PRRP gain a significant number of votes or when public opinion changes accordingly, conservatives — but increasingly also social democrats — tend to adopt more hostile positions on immigration and multiculturalism themselves (Abou-Chadi, 2016; Akkerman, 2015; Bale et al., 2010; Schumacher & van Kersbergen, 2016; Schwörer 2021; Van Spanje, 2010). Mainstream parties hope to attract voters away from the radical right by adopting its positions, but this does not work in practice, as I will show below.

There are many examples of this cooptation in recent years, including in German politics. The dentist comment by CDU leader Friedrich Merz is just one recent example of how nativist discourses are adopted.<sup>1</sup> In fact, conservatives and liberals, but increasingly social democrats as well, repeatedly opt for far-right positions when they believe they cannot otherwise stop public pressure and their own electoral decline. It is worth taking a closer look at some cases of cooptation of radical right discourses and positions in order to understand the logic and

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<sup>1</sup> Merz claimed that people seeking protection are given preferential treatment at the dentist and take away treatment time from “natives.”

consequences of these shifts. The opportunism of politicians, who change their own positions and discourse as soon as public opinion shifts, is probably best illustrated by the first example from the German state of Bavaria.

## The Christian Social Union in Bavaria and Its Weathervane Approach

During the 2018 Bavarian state election campaign, Markus Söder, Bavarian Minister-President, used the term “asylum tourism,” implying that the search for protection from war and persecution is nothing more than a leisure activity at the expense of taxpayers. His party comrade Horst Seehofer, then chairman of the Christian Social Union (CSU), also used the term, as did the Bavarian Minister of the Interior Joachim Herrmann (Bedeutung Online 2020). CSU politician Alexander Dobrindt spoke of an “anti-deportation industry” at work in Germany, while others spoke of an “asylum industry.” These terms suggest that people who support refugees are actually profit-oriented entrepreneurs with bad intentions. The word “anti-deportation industry” was voted Germany’s “bad word of the year 2018” by linguists.

When Markus Söder realized that the CSU was losing even more votes in the polls with this nativist turn, he changed his strategy. In July 2018, before the state elections, he said, “For me personally, I will no longer use the word ‘asylum tourism’ if it hurts anyone” (Süddeutsche 2018). In the subsequent state election, the CSU lost almost 11 percentage points compared to the 2013 election — around 170,000 former CSU voters voted for the Greens, while the CSU lost 160,000 to the AfD, according to Infratest data (Tagesschau 2018).



After the 2018 Bavarian state elections, the issue of migration became less relevant to the population. According to Eurobarometer data, the number of respondents who consider migration to be one of the two most important issues facing the country dropped to 24 percent. At the same time, by the beginning of mid-2019, more Germans saw climate issues as one of the most important issues rather than immigration. The Greens climbed from 19 percent to 26 percent in the June 2019 polls. Fridays for Future mobilized more than 2.3 million people worldwide in the first climate strike in March 2019. At the same time, the far-right AfD had been losing support since the end of 2018.

Against this backdrop, Markus Söder realigned the CSU. Climate and the environment were now to become the party’s central issues. “We have invented environmental protection,” Söder proclaimed in the tabloid Bild (Eichinger and Uhlenbroich 2019), moving cabinet meetings to the countryside, hugging trees, and even calling for a ban on plastic bags and a faster phase-out of coal (Baur 2019). But the wind soon changed direction, and the party’s weathervane shifted accordingly. As

immigration emerged again as the dominant issue for the German population in 2023, surpassing climate and energy concerns, and with the AfD's national poll numbers climbing from 14 percent to over 20 percent within a year, the party reverted to a staunchly right-wing profile, resurrecting positions from 2018 that had been shelved.

Söder questioned the individual right to asylum explicitly, advocated for an “integration cap,” and called for significantly more deportations, stating that extremist “parallel societies” among immigrants would not respect the constitution. He suggested that German citizenship should be revocable, social benefits for asylum seekers reduced, and cash benefits replaced with in-kind benefits. By making life difficult for refugees in Germany, he argued, fewer asylum seekers would come to Germany, despite the fact that migration research has shown for years that “pull factors” — apart from existing personal networks — are of little relevance for the choice of destination country by those seeking protection (Di Iasio and Wahba 2024; James and Mayblin 2016; Scholz 2013). That deterrence measures are not very effective in limiting refugee immigration can also be observed in Denmark, as I will describe later.

## **The Nordics Going Nativist**

So far, the German legislation on integration and asylum policies have not been changed significantly recently despite far-right discourses from conservatives in opposition. But the mainstreaming of nativist discourses in politics and society can carry devastating consequences for individuals with no permanent residence. The Nordic countries, once known for their liberal approach to immigration and asylum seekers, have moved far to the right in recent years under pressure from radical right parties.

A recent, notably cynical decision by the Swedish center-right minority government, which relies on support from the radical right Sweden Democrats, underscores this trend. It established a new minimum income requirement for non-EU nationals, stipulating that those earning less than 80 percent of the country's median income — a high threshold often met under employment contracts covered by collective agreements — and lacking permanent residency, will no longer qualify for a residence permit. This applies even if they have resided in the country for years and their children have grown up in Sweden, thereby dismantling entire livelihoods (Löfgren 2023). Almost at the same time, the right-wing government implemented “security zones” within Swedish cities as a strategy to combat escalating gang-related crime. This measure permits police officers to conduct searches of individuals and vehicles within these zones without the need for specific suspicion, a practice already in place in Denmark. Many analysts anticipate that this will result in stigmatization and ethnic profiling, particularly affecting areas with a substantial population of individuals from immigrant backgrounds (The Local 2024).

However, far-right policies on integration and immigration are not exclusive to right-wing parties in Sweden. Instead of standing up for those affected by far-right policies, the Social Democratic Party of Sweden (SAP) has embraced them. Party leader and former prime minister Magdalena Andersson has even accused the radical right Sweden Democrats, the conservatives and liberals of not doing enough to curb immigration, saying, “Those who have pursued the most liberal immigration policy in Sweden are the right” (Nordenskiöld 2023). Andersson has positioned the SAP as the true anti-immigration party, fighting against alleged conservative efforts to liberalize immigration policies. During the 2022 election

campaign, Andersson stated that she did not want to see “Somalitowns” in Sweden and emphasized that immigrants need to speak Swedish and work (Blomberg 2022). The former Social Democratic government under Stefan Löfven had already made it more difficult to obtain permanent residency in Sweden.

The positional and discursive shift of the SAP was influenced by the success of the radical right Sweden Democrats and shifts in public opinion following the so-called Refugee Crisis of 2015/2016. More recently, however, Andersson seems to be emulating the Danish Social Democratic Party (SD), which has not only adopted radical right positions but has transformed itself into an actual nativist party.

### **The Danish Paradigm Shift**

In 2019, the Danish Parliament passed what is known as the “paradigm shift in asylum and integration policy,” receiving broad consensus across the Danish political landscape. As a result, asylum seekers now receive only a precarious protection status that can be revoked every year and must be regularly renewed, with each renewal creating uncertainty about whether the next application will be granted (Rytter et al. 2023). It is almost impossible for refugees to obtain permanent residence, even after more than 8 years. The goal of Danish asylum policy has shifted from integration to repatriation.

As of 2019, it is also possible to evict people of “non-Western” origin from their homes if they are deemed to be too concentrated in a so-called “ghetto” area (Olsen and Larsen 2023). During these forced relocations, individuals have no say in the assignment of their new residence, which may be significantly more expensive and far removed from their social networks. Cynically, the expellees

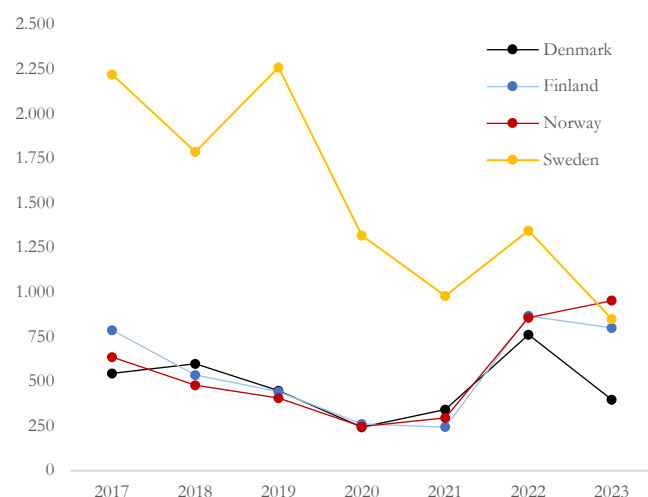
are required to contribute financially to their expulsion through a portion of their rent. A recent amendment to this controversial “ghetto” legislation now allows Ukrainian refugees to move into apartments vacated by “non-Western” individuals (Boffey 2022).

In addition to stigmatization, refugees are under immense pressure to integrate quickly, find employment, and participate in integration programs. However, even considerable integration efforts do not increase the likelihood that the precarious protection status will be extended. Refugees must, therefore, integrate into Danish society while also preparing for their possible return (Bredgaard 2020; Rytter et al. 2023).

Not surprisingly, scholars have found that insecurity of residence status hinders integration in Denmark (Vitus and Jarlby 2022). Accordingly, Suárez-Krabbe and Lindberg (2019) describe the Danish asylum system as a system of “apartheid” that intentionally criminalizes migrants, institutionalizes racist practices (e.g., in deportation camps), and aims to make migrants’ lives as “unbearable” as possible.

Despite the hostile policy towards protection-seekers, the paradigm shift has not led to fewer asylum applications in Denmark, as Figure 2 suggests (see also: Schwörer and Birke Daniels 2024). There has been no significant change since the paradigm shift was introduced in 2019. Compared to the other Nordic countries, Denmark usually receives as many first-time asylum seekers as Norway and Finland.

**Figure 2:** Asylum application in the Nordics (per million persons)



**Note:** First-time asylum applicants — per million persons. Eurostat data.

Though initiated by Denmark’s right-wing parties, the paradigm shift gained substantial support from the Social Democrats, who not only endorsed it but also implemented it upon taking office in 2019 (and again in 2022) with the goal of “zero asylum seekers” in Denmark (The Local 2021). Mette Frederiksen, the party leader, utilized welfare chauvinist rhetoric, positing immigrants as threats to the social security system and affordable housing. She further viewed the religious and cultural beliefs of ‘non-Western’ migrants as detrimental to Danish culture, a stance she articulated in a 2019 article in the IPG Journal (Frederiksen 2019). This perspective aligns with what scholars identify as a nativist worldview (Meret 2021; Schwörer and Birke Daniels 2024; Wiggen 2023). At the same time, Frederiksen explicitly supported the idea to collaborate with the radical right Danish People’s Party (Meret 2021).

This strategy, akin to that in other nations where mainstream parties have co-opted far-right positions, aimed to diminish the influence of the radical right Danish People’s Party (DPP), which had achieved unprecedented electoral success in 2015. However, this approach did not yield the

intended results. The DPP’s decline, spurred by internal conflicts and a slight shift of voters towards the Social Democrats, was not a direct consequence of the SD’s nativist turn. Rather, it was the SD’s left turn on social and economic issues that attracted a moderate number of former DPP voters, as empirical studies have shown (Etzerodt and Kongshøj 2022; McManus and Falkenbach 2022).

More importantly, the DPP’s decline has been offset by the emergence of new radical right parties that, together with the DPP, garner as many votes as the DPP in its good years. Inger Støjberg, a convicted former migration minister from the liberal-conservative Venstre party, established the radical right “Denmark Democrats” in June 2022, following the 2015 founding of the “New Right” party by ex-members of the right-wing Conservative People’s Party, which is currently experiencing its own internal crisis.

The SD has seen a sharp decline in electoral support since the 2022 national elections. The consequence of mainstream parties’ shift towards nativism in Denmark is the normalization of far-right discourse and attitudes. And the radical right continues to push mainstream parties to adopt even more extreme positions on issues of integration and immigration.





## Cooptation as the Worst of All Options

The fact that the Danish Social Democrats (as well as the CSU in Bavaria) did not benefit from their nativist turn is not surprising. Recent comparative studies reveal that mainstream parties, including conservatives, do not benefit from adopting nativist and anti-immigration stances, nor do such strategies weaken radical right parties. Krause et al. (2023) analyzed 350 strategies of mainstream parties in 108 electoral contexts from 1976 to 2017 in 13 Western European countries. Their findings suggest that adopting nationalist positions against multiculturalism in election manifestos does not significantly reduce support for the radical right. In fact, it is more likely to cause voters to defect to the radical right, especially when it comes to established radical right parties. This suggests that accommodating nativist positions is at best ineffective and at worst counterproductive.

Spoon and Klüver's examination of voter shifts in countries such as Denmark, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the United Kingdom also comes to the conclusion that becoming more critical of immigration does not provide an electoral advantage to mainstream parties and does not prevent the loss of votes to radical right competitors.

Importantly, the findings of the aforementioned studies apply to both conservative and social democratic parties. Regarding the latter, Abou Chadi et al. (2021) analyzed survey data to track where voters, who left social democratic parties in Western Europe since the turn of the millennium, have gone. They found little evidence to support the narrative of a mass exodus to PRRP, with only about 10 percent of these former voters turning to the radical right. Instead, social democrats lost voters mainly to the Greens, the left and the centrist

parties. Since social democratic parties do not primarily compete with the radical right for voters, adopting right-wing positions to appeal to these voters is largely futile. This is partly because the working class, which has both shrunk and diversified since the mid-twentieth century, now includes a larger proportion of women and people from immigrant backgrounds.

But the decision to coopt radical right discourses is also harmful from a normative perspective. By normalizing radical right positions and discourses against people from the Global South, mainstream parties (and the media) can also influence public opinion. A growing body of research shows that political discourses, especially those emanating from mainstream parties rather than radical right parties, significantly influence public opinion (Carter and Lippard 2015; Messing and Ságvári 2021, Schemer 2012, Wirz et al. 2018).

Schmidt-Catran and Czymara (2023), for example, highlight how exclusionary discourses from parties explain public hostility towards immigrants, as measured by statements on multiculturalism and national values in election manifestos. The good news from their findings, however, is that when political elites opt for more positive discourses on immigration, Europeans tend to be more open-minded. Similarly, Valentim et al. (2023) found in their survey experiments that xenophobic rhetoric from mainstream politicians has a more significant impact on societal norms than similar statements from radical right politicians. Mainstream politicians are perceived as more moderate and credible and can therefore erode democratic norms more effectively than fringe politicians, who often provoke a positive backlash from more progressive individuals.

## Perspectives

Mainstream parties are increasingly becoming a threat to liberal democracy, as they have played a significant role in fostering a hostile social climate towards individuals from the Global South and in normalizing radical right ideas. This even affects center-left parties in the Nordic countries, which have long supported liberal approaches to asylum and immigration.

While this analysis has delved into specific cases, it is crucial to note that, barring some exceptions, mainstream parties across Western Europe tend to shift rightward on matters of immigration and integration when they feel pressured by the radical right or public opinion (Abou-Chadi, 2016; Akkerman, 2015; Bale et al., 2010; Schumacher & van Kersbergen, 2016; Schwörer 2021; Van Spanje, 2010).

Not all of them go fully nativist. However, the distinction between advocating for stricter immigration controls and nativist blame attribution to specific groups is often subtle (Schwörer 2021). Essentially, the radical right's influence extends not that much through securing political majorities but through the co-option of their positions by mainstream parties, thereby elevating these stances to political prominence.

The persistence of the nativist *Zeitgeist* hinges on multiple interrelated factors: the electoral strength of populist radical right parties, the salience of immigration among the public, media narratives, and the subjective perception of mainstream parties and politicians. Typically, there is a majority in Western European countries that upholds liberal values and rejects the proposals of the radical right. However, this majority often remains silent and does not attract media attention with large-scale protests. A notable counterexample is Germany,

where in early 2024, perhaps the largest anti-fascist demonstrations since World War II took place, targeting the far-right AfD.

It is imperative to acknowledge that mainstream “catch-all” parties often lack strong ideological commitments, preferring to adopt positions as the political winds shift, even though this has often proven unsuccessful for them. While this needs to be critiqued, this simple empirical observation also offers a lesson. When more liberal narratives gain media prominence and shape the public agenda — or at least are perceived to do so — mainstream politicians are likely to shy away from far-right politics and instead appeal more to progressive groups. Initiatives such as Fridays for Future have demonstrated their ability to steer party discourse towards climate action through mass protests (Schwörer and Fernández-García 2023). Early indications suggest that the massive anti-fascist protests in Germany have begun to pressure mainstream parties to distance themselves more clearly from the AfD.

However, any prediction of the future may fail, as protest and public opinion are often driven by events that are difficult to foresee. The only certainty is that many mainstream parties seem unable to learn from their mistakes and continue to appeal to the relatively few voices of the radical right, if they are louder than the progressive ones.

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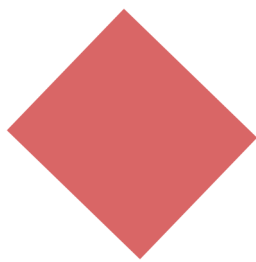
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