

Titel:

The migration issue in the 2019 European election: Still an ‘open political wound’?

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Kurzzusammenfassung

This chapter discusses how the migration issue has been addressed in the political debate prior to the 2019 European election. It provides an analysis of comparing and contrasting the stances that European parties have taken on migration during the EU electoral campaign of 2019 and sketches out what effects this might have on EU migration and asylum policy in the long run. While populist and right-wing parties have made migration the core of their campaigns, other parties have moved their focus to other issues such as social, economic and environmental topics.

Schlagworte

Migration, Schengen crisis, European election, Asylum Policy, political discourse

1. Introduction

Ever since the end of the Cold war and especially following the Schengen crisis of 2015-16, *migration* has become a keyword in European political debate. In the last two decades in particular, public discourse has focused on the migration-security nexus as well as the impact of migration on Europe’s integration process more generally (e.g. Huysmans 2000; Scipioni 2017). Such discourse has tended to frame migration with alarm. Media coverage on the issue seems to have offered a rather negative interpretation of the notion, while conservative and populist leaders fuelled fears against immigrants to obtain electoral success (Börzel & Risse 2018; Wodak 2015).

From 2015 to 2018, new emerging challenges related to the unprecedented numbers of ‘irregular’ migrants coming to Europe (Apap & Radjenovic 2019) prompted policymakers within the European Union (EU) to discuss reform proposals and to subsequently strengthen the EU’s common migration policy. The overall reform negotiations rotated between two main issues: first, the reinforcement of external border controls combined with an intensified co-operation with third countries of origin and transit; and second, a strengthened EU asylum policy with intensified search and rescue operations at sea. Given the diverse systems in the various EU Member States (MS) (Ripoll Servent 2017), political discussions on migration and

asylum issues have polarised voters across Europe, resulting in the rise of populist and Eurosceptic parties. Even the short campaign prior to the Brexit referendum was influenced by concerns about mass migration flows moving to the United Kingdom.

This chapter addresses the question of how ‘migration’ has shaped the political discourse (and vice versa) during the EU electoral campaign of 2019 and sketches out what effects this might have on EU migration and asylum policy in the long run. To that end, after offering a brief overview of the challenges faced by the EU and consequent reform proposals in the migration realm, the next section provides an analysis of comparing and contrasting the stances that European parties have taken on migration prior to the EU 2019 election. Finally, the last section presents possible outlooks for the EU migration policy as a whole.

The EU has been working toward achieving a common migration policy ever since the abolition of internal borders through the Schengen Agreement starting from the 1990s. In 2009, the Lisbon Treaty officially stated for the first time that the EU should frame a common policy on asylum, immigration and external border control, based on solidarity between MS.

The Schengen crisis of 2015-16 revealed the “dilemmas” attached to a common migration governance (Geddes 2015, p. 78), in which the EU and its MS share competences. While EU MS still retain their right to decide upon asylum proceedings and thus protect their national sovereignty, the European Commission can propose legislative acts on migration and asylum issues, which need to be adopted by the EU legislators, namely the Council of the European Union (hereinafter the Council) and the European Parliament (EP). The main source of conflict between EU countries has been so far the so-called Dublin system, which establishes the MS responsible for the examination of an asylum application; in practice this is generally the EU country that was irregularly entered first by the third-country national. As a result, countries whose national borders coincide with the EU’s external borders, i.e. primarily MS in the South of Europe, are assigned disproportionate responsibility in dealing with migration issues. This unbalanced sharing of responsibility was exacerbated by the 2015-16 crisis and should be counteracted by an appropriate reform of the ‘unfair’ Dublin Regulation in particular and of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) in general (Lavenex 2018). Against this background, European parties took different stands on five main reform proposals: (1) stepping up search and rescue operations at sea; (2) fighting migrant smuggling; (3) guaranteeing a fairer sharing of responsibility among MS; (4) stepping up support to third countries of origin and transit; and (5) helping EU frontline MS, such as Greece and Italy. Whereas some short- and medium-term reforms were passed, such as a swift reinforcement of border controls by

upgrading the EU border agency Frontex, most of the reform proposals related to asylum and the Dublin system are still pending.

2. European Parties and the Migration Issue

Between 2015 and 2018, the migration topic was at the centre of the political debate in almost every EU country. During these years, the EU witnessed a substantial nationalist and populist backlash not only in the relatively *new* MS, such as Hungary and Poland, but also in long-standing EU countries, such as France, Germany and Italy.

Since the exposition to migratory flows and the respective asylum systems differ significantly between individual MS, the salience of the migration issue varies across EU countries as well. According to Eurobarometer surveys (European Commission 2015a, 2015b), migration quickly rose to be the most important *national* concern for Europeans in 2015. In 2016, it remained the first national concern in Northern European countries, e.g. Denmark and Germany, whereas in most Southern European countries, such as Greece and Spain, unemployment became the first national issue (European Commission 2016, p. 4ff.).

In the early months of 2019, surveys showed that according to more than a third of Europeans migration was the main concern facing the EU followed by climate change (the latter being the second most mentioned national concern), whereas concerns at the national level followed a different trend. On the one side, unemployment and social security became the most important national issues for 21% of respondents across European countries, mainly in Southern Europe (e.g. Greece, Italy and Spain), while migration dropped to fifth place in the list of national concerns, thus “falling out of the top three concerns for the first time since spring 2014”. On the other side, the most frequently mentioned national concern in Northern European countries, such as Austria and Germany, were “environment, climate and energy issues” and migration was still “the third most mentioned concern” (in Italy as well) (European Commission 2019, p. 23ff.).

Hence, in 2019 Europeans put economic growth as well as the fight against unemployment at the front and centre of their priorities while climate change and environmental issues also rose in importance. On the contrary, the migration issue lost ground, although it was still among the most important concerns of undecided voters (European Parliament 2019a, pp. 9 & 56). The 2019 Eurobarometer further suggested that “citizens holding a negative image of the EU or wanting the European Parliament to play a less important role, often attribute a high priority to the issue of immigration” (ibid., p. 63). This finding runs parallel to the overall falling importance of migration as a political issue, given that the number of asylum seekers entering

the EU has substantially declined since 2016 (although a new crisis seems to be again on the rise: e.g. Christides et al. 2019).

Nonetheless, in April 2019 the leading candidate of the conservative *European People's Party (EPP)* Manfred Weber stated that 'the migration issue is the continent's open political wound', emphasising that on questions regarding migration the European conservatives represented the party of the centre straddling an inadequate 'Left', which was not in the position to maintain order at the external borders, and a xenophobic 'Right'. To the EPP's Chair, the securitisation of the European borders was the highest priority. The EPP's 2019 manifesto accordingly enumerated on its very first page the new threats that the EU is facing, which include "uncontrolled migration" into the EU as a driver of political instability (European Peoples' Party 2019). The protection of EU citizens and the related enhancement of security are thus second in the list of goals the EPP aims at. To achieve such goals, the EPP claimed that not only should the EU strengthen the protection of its external borders, but it should also set up a *Marshall Plan* with Africa, in order to limit illegal immigration to the European continent. Within the third major goal of the manifesto (*the preservation of Europeans' way of life*), the EPP mentioned the reform of the CEAS and an effective migrant return policy. Along with the enhancement of military defence and EU borders checks, the EPP referred to the fight against climate change as a further objective.

As done by national conservative parties, the EPP echoed in its programme the priorities of populist and Eurosceptic parties: security first. The difference lies in the tone and framing of its set of objectives, but the EPP's manifesto suggests that the overarching aspiration of conservative parties across Europe was to win back voters from far-right and extremists politicians.

Similar to the stand taken by the EPP, *the Alliance of Conservatives and Reformists for Europe (ACRE)* put the topic of migration front and centre in its manifesto (Alliance of Conservatives and Reformists in Europe 2019). EU solidarity in the migration policy realm could, according to the party, only be achieved through political will. Hence, although EU instruments such as the border agency Frontex can assist MS in patrolling the EU external borders, "no EU agency can legitimately replace national capacities and capabilities" (ibid., p. 9). In sum, the ACRE party stood for a *multi-faceted* approach to migration that needed however to fully respect the sovereignty of MS.

The far-right parties across the EU (e.g. the Italian *Lega*, the German *Alternative für Deutschland* and the French *Rassemblement National*) launched in 2019 the new group *Identity*

and Democracy (ID). Although ID did not have an official manifesto during the 2019 campaign, the parties' positions converged over the topic of migration. Statements such as those of Matteo Salvini (e.g. his recurrent calls to "stop the invasion" of migrants (Stille 2018)) as well as of Marine Le Pen (e.g. "Why should the European Commission force a country to accept migrants, impose the conditions in which they are received, and determine the number of migrants?") (Marlowe 2019) followed an anti-migrant and anti-EU rhetoric, in order to gain the vote of undecided voters who prioritised migration as their top issue. The ID's main idea to combat migration was to create a *fortress Europe* and accelerate migrant return operations. Although the parties' opinions diverge quite strongly on issues such as how to achieve economic growth, they "share common goals of returning power to EU member states, curbing immigration and preventing the spread of Islam in Europe" (Huet 2019). ID's goals are primarily economic growth, the enhancement of security *and* the fight against illegal immigration (European Parliament 2019b).

The manifesto of the *Party of the European Socialists (PES)* engaged with the migration issue as well, but emphasised different aspects from its conservative counterparts (Party of European Socialists 2019). Instead of concentrating on security issues, the EU should first guarantee a *fair* migration and asylum policy based on shared responsibility between MS. The migration issue was only a marginal part of the text however. The minor importance given to migration was also reflected in the discourse constructed by the PES' leading candidate Frans Timmermans, who claimed right before the 2019 European election that he wanted to make climate protection a top priority, whereas with regard to the migration matter he merely promoted comprehensive reconciliation with Africa (Deutsche Welle 2019). The PES' manifesto accordingly focused on the EU citizens' wellbeing through *social* and *ecological* progress – such as equality in the workplace, sustainable economic prosperity for all EU citizens and the fight for the environment –, before articulating its position on a common migration policy. Social justice rather than security or the fight against illegal immigration were at the forefront in the PES' programme, thus reflecting the priorities of a large majority of citizens across Europe as outlined above.

The 2019 election represented an unprecedented success for liberals across Europe and the *Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE)* party, which was strongly influenced by French *Macronists*. In March 2019, the French President Emmanuel Macron (2019) maintained in his op-ed, "*Pour une Renaissance européenne*", that one of the major priorities for Europe should be the protection of the continent and its citizens' "freedom in security" by rethinking the Schengen area. Macron's focus was once more on 'protection', but also on

climate and environmental issues. In their manifesto, liberals dedicated more space to the issue of migration than, for instance, the PES, by explicitly criticising the current status of the common migration and asylum policy, which is “no longer fit for purpose” (Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe Party 2019, p. 3). Since migration issues could no longer be regulated outside the EU legal framework, the manifesto clearly stated that in order to solve contemporary challenges new political avenues need to be taken, such as migration agreements with safe countries of origin and a common approach through a shared commitment by MS. At the same time, liberals jumped on the bandwagon, by addressing contemporary concerns as climate change.

The real protagonist among parties addressing environmental and climate issues was however the *European Green Party*. The migration issue was, conversely, among the last identified goals in the Greens’ manifesto, long after their main priorities, e.g. climate action and shared prosperity (European Greens 2019). Since “[b]uilding walls is not an option” (ibid., 12), the Greens advocated a reform of the Dublin system, in order to achieve a fairer sharing of responsibility among EU MS. Moreover, the party called for safe and legal migratory routes as well as EU support for legalised rescue actions in the Mediterranean Sea. By focusing on the fight against climate change and on a pro-European stance, the Greens strategically took positions contrary to those taken by their right-wing counterparts. Compared to the EPP and the PES, Greens (and Liberals) were openly and strongly supportive of environmental and climate policies, thus responding to one of the two most important European citizens’ concerns. During their 2019 campaign, the Greens thus counterweighted right-wing and populist parties, whose representatives had made migration their main subject of discussion.

Finally, the *European Left (EL)* had several commonalities with the Greens. By claiming that “Europe is guilty and absent” (European Left 2019, p. 12), the party also called for the reform of the Dublin system and the creation of safe migration paths, focusing on the protection of fundamental human rights.

Despite a redirection of the political discourse towards migration and security issues, in view of the 2019 European election Greens, Liberals and Social-Democrats tried to pick up the relatively new national and European concerns by focusing on environmental, economic and social issues, while on the other side of the party spectrum right-wing and populist parties continued to address migration as the most pressuring concern.

3. The Debate’s Effect on Future EU Migration Policy

With the 2019 election, the EP has become more diverse than ever, which might turn out to be problematic for achieving reforms in the migration policy sphere. Given this diversity and the planned European Commission's composition, it seems unlikely that the EU will lean towards a fairer responsibility-sharing in the asylum realm and deeper integration in the overall EU migration policy. In order to receive approval for legislative proposals, the President of the Commission might prefer to advance positions that are closer to the status quo over proposing innovative solutions difficult to get adopted. A critical example in this regard is the new vice-presidency post, which will also be dealing with *migration*, titled "Protecting our European Way of Life" as announced by the new President of the European Commission Ursula Von der Leyen. This juxtaposition echoes the wording of the EPP's manifesto and was heavily criticised as a reference to right-wing and populist rhetoric (Stavis-Gridneff 2019).

The question is whether the EU will grab momentum after the 2019 election or whether reforms will still be at an impasse. On the one side, the political memory of the Schengen crisis and of the problems it revealed, in particular with regards to an *unworkable* Dublin system (Carrera et al. 2015), have seemingly faded away. On the other side, the more diverse EP might be able to use its new composition as a strength and adopt a new approach to migration in the legislative process. Although the right of initiative lies with the European Commission, the EP can influence the EU decision-making by, for instance, asking the Commission to submit a proposal or requesting amendments to proposed legislative texts. In either case, strong reforms are needed for EU migration policy to properly function in an ever diverse EU. EU institutions should not only strengthen the border control policy realm, but above all advance significant reforms in the policy area of asylum. Reform proposals (such as the proposed Dublin IV Regulation), which have already been negotiated upon during the Juncker Commission without reaching a conclusive agreement, need to be picked up again, in order to achieve a fairer and functioning EU asylum system. Hence, with regard to migration, EU parties, especially the EPP and PES, should follow their own political agenda, instead of reacting to populist demands. As long as the concept of migration is linked to notions of protection and defence, the EU will keep pursuing short-term goals mainly related to border protection instead of implementing foresighted policies to achieve common standards in *both* border control and asylum related matters. A comprehensive EU migration policy based on responsibility sharing is the only solution to avoid another Schengen crisis.

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