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Populism and Borders: Tools for Constructing “The People” and Legitimizing Exclusion

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ABSTRACT



This article argues theoretically and illustrates empirically that the “border” and “populism” are mutually constitutive concepts and should be considered as epistemic frameworks to understand each other. It compares quantitatively and qualitatively the electoral manifestos of four radical right parties —Vox, RN, UKIP, and Brexit Party—, and shows that borders are basic factors in the process of decontestation of “the people” and construction of exclusion-inclusion narratives. Likewise, this analysis exemplifies how (re)bordering claims are usually justified and articulated via populist discursive elements such as antagonism, morality, idealization of society, popular sovereignty and personalistic leadership. This article demonstrates that the border can become a method to study populism and *vice versa* and that cross-fertilization between the borders and populism literatures is desirable. Further research is needed to understand whether populists’ selective instrumentalization of borders and equivalential logic leads to a non-binary hierarchical “othering” and the emergence of a populist “meta-us”.


KEYWORDS


Populism; borders; radical right; exclusion; immigration; interdisciplinary research

Introduction

This paper seeks to shed light on the interplay between borders and populism at both a conceptual and an empirical level. It shows that bordering narratives and practices (e.g. Newman 2003; Vaughan-Williams 2009; Kinnvall 2015) are based on and feed into populist discourses and attitudes. Populism is often cited as one of the most prominent challenges to western-style pluralist democracy (Kriesi et al. 2008; Müller 2014). Migration flows, technological changes, and economic transformations linked to globalization have fueled public discontent and facilitated the rise of populism (Rodrik 2018). Additionally, shifts in social and cultural values have produced a backlash against governments and other democratic institutions which has been capitalized by populist movements (Norris and Inglehart 2019).

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Meanwhile, borders are linked to notions of sovereignty and citizenship, and part of domestic and international power struggles. They evolve and overlap (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). Borders are often interpreted as a territorialized manifestation of “boundaries”, a term that is used to capture not only political or territorial but also other social and personal divides (Parker and Adler-Nissen 2012, 775). By making cultural, linguistic, or ethnic differences more explicit, populist leaders contribute to turn those individual boundaries into something closer to a political border. These bordering processes, therefore, help categorize people and create new, or strengthen existing, distinct collective political identities. They are often used as justification for radical positions, such as the Republika Srpska and Catalan separatism, or the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

These concepts have great scholarly and policy relevance nowadays but with a few exceptions (e.g. De Genova 2018; Kallis 2018; Lamour 2020) the interdisciplinary literatures on populism and on borders have followed separate ways. This paper problematizes the relationship between the two areas of study and shows theoretical and empirical synergies between them. It combines some of the key contributions in the borders literature that can help to understand the populist phenomenon, with insights from the populism literature that suggest the prominence of the concept of border into the populist logic of articulation.

First, the article revisits the notion of border in populism theory and shows that borders and bordering practices are central elements of the populist worldview and its manifestations. Borders taken in a wider sense —not just as a political boundary between two states— are intrinsic parts of the logic of inclusion and exclusion that helps to define, and decontest, “the people” as a clearly separate entity and in opposition to “the other”. Populists dichotomize the social by creating internal frontiers and antagonistic “equivalential chains” which bring together people with different, but comparable, fear, concerns, resentments, and grievances (Laclau 2005a; 2005b, 40–44).

Secondly, this article argues that borders in practice are, not only constitutive of (as the previous section shows) but, also constituted by, populism. Populist features usually underpin bordering discourses and praxis. The article dissects populism into five dimensions —i.e. 1) the antagonistic depiction of the “other”, 2) the moralization of the distinction “us” vs. “them”, 3) the idealization of the past and identity to justify the reinforcement of protective boundaries, 4) the utilization of the concept of popular sovereignty and a majoritarian logic as means to legitimize borders, and 5) the reliance on a strong personalistic leader (Olivas Osuna 2021)— and shows how all of these dimensions are used to justify, strengthen or instrumentalize borders in (re)bordering narratives and claims.

Thirdly, to illustrate empirically the interplay between border discourses and dimensions of populism, this paper applies a content analysis methodology (Bauer 2000) to the manifestos of a set of European political parties which are often classified as populist radical right parties (PRRPs) (Mudde 2007): the Spanish *Vox*, the French *Rassemblement National* (RN), and the British UKIP and Brexit Party. The analysis indicates that, beyond the obvious differences between these political parties and contexts, there are many common subjacent ideological, discursive and performative elements. Populism theory can explain several steps and elements in the construction of insecurity, threat and fear narratives used to justify policies of inclusion and exclusion by these parties.

Finally, based on this exploratory analysis, the article suggests new research avenues worth pursuing, such as investigating how parties articulate their bordering discourses and construct fears and grievances against the “other”, and to what extent they use a binary “us” vs. “them” frame or develop a hierarchical approach to “othering” based on a selective and ambiguous utilization of borders and exclusion. This preliminary study seems to indicate that far-right parties sometimes extend the populist “us” and turn it into a “meta-us” to incorporate other Europeans which are suggested to share equivalent grievances or threats from the same or equivalent “others”.

Borders in populism

Performing the border: identity, exclusion and populist articulation

What is the role of the border in populist theory? The border, insofar as it is understood as an instrument of power and site of struggle, can be used as a method to study other social phenomena (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, 14–19). Political and geographical borders have been historically used as tools of exclusion and separation between “in-groups” —those entitled to the privileges and responsibilities of citizenship or community membership—and “out-groups” —those who belong to other communities and could be potentially hostile and threaten the in-groups. The Great Wall of China is probably the most iconic materialization of the concept of border. In recent years migration and refugee flows caused by military conflicts (e.g. Syria, Libya, Myanmar and South Sudan) and deep economic crises (e.g. Venezuela) seem to have brought the border back to the center of the political arena (Schain 2019). However, as Newman argues:

Borders are not confined to the realm of inter-state divisions, nor do they have to be physical and geographical constructs [...] They determine the extent to which we are included, or excluded, from membership in groups [...] the “us” and the “here” being located inside the border while the “other” and the “there” is everything beyond the border (Newman 2006, 172)

This paper also adopts an extensive conception of the term border including linguistic, cultural and ethnic boundaries. It suggests that all borders, physical, legal-political, or socially constructed, can be used as instruments in the discursive nationalist and populist toolkits. By alluding to borders, politicians contribute to reify and reinforce differences between individuals and groups. Moreover, borders go beyond strategy and discourse; they can be performed by take-for-granted everyday acts (Diener and Hagen 2017) and become expressions of banal (Billig 1995), ecstatic nationalism (Skey 2008), and populist performative style (Ostiguy and Moffitt 2021).

Populism has a relational socio-cultural and political component. It entails a process of creation and recreations of identities, shaped by the relations between “the people” and the leader, as well as the relationships of this dyad with the “nefarious other” (Moffitt 2016, 17–25; Ostiguy 2017: 17). Borders are part of this performative constitution of “the people”. They shape individuals’ conception of the world and may be considered ontologically prior to specific entities (Thompson 2007, 15). Borders play “a constitutive role in the modes of production and organization of political subjectivity” (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013: xi). Territorialized social formations based on kinship and social adjacency can be considered as roots for identities (Agnew 2008, 178–179). Borders help produce

shared understandings of identity and a sense of inclusion, or exclusion. The self-identities of members of a group are grounded in, and thus far validated via, interactions with in-groups and out-groups (Parker and Adler-Nissen 2012, 778). Borders are also central to the construction of “imagined communities” underpinning nationhood claims (Anderson 1983) and the romanticized “heartlands” that each populist movement tries to re-enact (Taggart 2004).

Excluding the “other” is another way to reinforce the “self” and preserve identity. Like nationalists, populists often rely on a post-modern logic of inclusion and exclusion, according to which symbolic boundaries and belonging to the in-group are grounded on specific notions of “national culture” which are socially constructed and reconstructed (Lochocki 2018, 23). Borders are part of the logic of “cultural differentialism” and preservation of a distinctive identity common among populist movements (Bornschier 2010, 422–423; Ritzer and Yagatich 2012, 112–113).

Denigration of out-groups is a psychological mechanism to maintain an image of self-integrity (Steele, Spencer, and Lynch 1993, 885). In particular, the “othering” of migrants is used to reinforce the self by numerous populist and nationalist groups (Wodak 2015; Catalano and Fielder 2018). Individuals may selectively choose evidence that exacerbates inter-group differences to portray the out-group as inferior (Hamilton and Trolie 1986) and encourage in-group favoritism (Reed and Aquino 2003, 1271). Similar processes operate at a group level. Demonizing, scapegoating, and even dehumanizing the “other” are practices rooted in religious morality often adopted by populist leaders (Berlet and Lyons 2000, 7–8). Hence, populism can be considered moralistic rather than programmatic (Wiles 1969, 167). As Mouffe argues, “[f]ar from having disappeared, frontiers between us and them are constantly drawn, but nowadays they are drawn in moral categories” (Mouffe 2005, 58).

Populists not only antagonize the morally inferior “others,” but they also try to exclude them altogether (Müller 2016, 4). Borders are tools that can be used to change the *status quo* and reshape society and popular sovereignty. Populists often argue that the underserving and corrupt minorities —“the elite”, “the caste”, “the colonizers”, “the immigrants”—, do not really belong to the *demos* or the “heartland” and, therefore, the “true” or “authentic” people must fight to achieve plenitude and “have their country back” (Panizza 2005, 3–4, 2017: 409–411). The dissonance between the “empirical people” and the virtuous “ideal people”, where sovereignty “should” reside, pushes populists to create boundaries and request the extraction of part of the people from within the people (Lefort 1988; Müller 2014). Thus, the populist logic leads sometimes to the dehumanization of the “other” and becomes a justification for authoritarianism in the process of extrication of the ideal people from its empirical form, which implies the suppression of internal enemies and out-groups (Laclau 2005a, 170; Arato 2013, 167).

Borders and chains of equivalence

The discursive approach to populism, to a great extent based on the ideas originally formulated by Ernesto Laclau and developed by the so-called Essex School of Discourse Theory (Townshend 2003), deserves special attention when analyzing the role of borders in populism. Unlike the authors who argue that populism is a “thin” or “thin-centered” ideology (Mudde 2004; Stanley 2008), Laclau suggests a displacement

of conceptualization from the contents to the form and focus on how discourses are constructed (Laclau 2005a; 2005b, 44). “Discourse” in a Laclauian sense is not restricted to words and ideas but represents all “systems of meaningful practices that form the identities of subjects and objects through the construction of antagonisms and the drawing of political frontiers” (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000, 3–4). This implies considering leaders or parties as populist not because they have a specific ideology, but because they show a particular “logic of articulation” of social, political or ideological content, whatever those specific contents are (Laclau 2005b, 33–34; De Cleen 2017, 345–347). Establishing an analogy with framing theory (Chong and Druckman 2007, 105–106) populism can be construed as an interpretative framework that manifests “in communication” and “in thought” and shapes how individuals diagnose problems, make judgments, and suggest solutions.

Populist discourses aim to construct and decontest a certain “people” through a process which entails two intertwined conditions: 1) the dichotomization of the social space through the definition of an internal frontier which separates individuals, and 2) the creation of a chain of equivalential demands (Laclau 2005a, 18–19, 74, 83; Laclau 2005b, 38). This process requires application of a “logic of difference” with the discursive construction of an enemy of the people who is placed on the other side of the frontier (Laclau 2005b, 39–40), and a “logic of equivalence” to unify “the people” by presenting their individual demands, fears and grievances against the social “other” as similar. This is achieved by the discursive creation of “empty (or floating) signifiers”, which do not have clearly defined “signifieds”. They are vague and malleable symbols or conceptualizations of universal ideals, which have a homogenizing function in a highly heterogeneous reality.

These “chains of equivalence” cut across different social sectors and particular interests and help construct “the people” as the union of those who oppose the elites or other type of social “other” and struggle against different, but equivalent, forms of subordination or exploitation. (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: xviii-xix, Laclau 2005b, 38, 44-46; Mouffé 2005, 69). These equivalential chains are tools of mutual recognition and inclusion because they create links within the members of the group, “the people”. But at the same time, they contribute to a process of “othering” and exclusion, through the dichotomization of the social around an internal frontier or boundary. Thus, “the people” and

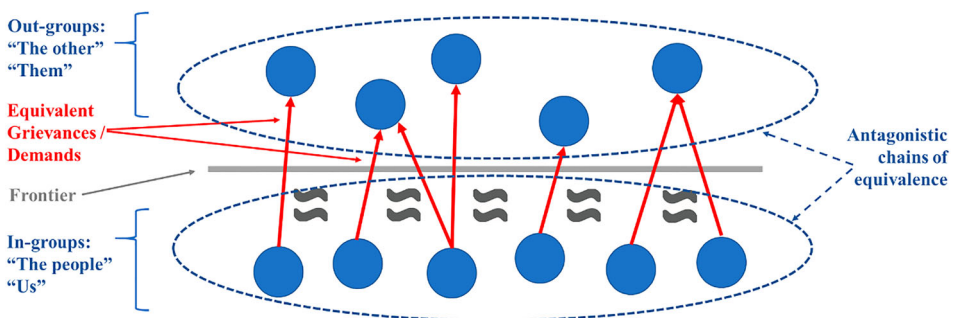


Figure 1. Chains of Equivalence.
Source: Author’s own elaboration.

the “other” become political constructs constituted through antagonistic chains of equivalence (Figure 1). In other words, antagonism becomes a mode of identification (Panizza 2005, 3)

However, this is a complex and unstable dialectic. The internal borders on which populism is grounded can be subverted by breaking the links of the chain of equivalent demands or by disrupting the internal frontier through competing equivalential re-articulations. The political dynamics of populism require these internal frontiers to be constantly reproduced or re-drawn (Laclau 2005b, 41–46). Borders become context specific or ambiguous in populist argumentation (Biancalana and Mazzoleni 2020), a discursive resource for populist leaders who pick and choose the one that suits best their agendas (Wodak 2015; Palonen 2018; Lamour and Varga 2020).

In sum, borders are used in a multiplicity of populist discursive articulatory practices and play an important role in underpinning several of the dimensions of the populist construct. They contribute to establish an antagonistic distinction between “the people” and the “other”. These borders are usually turned into moral divides by populists who seek to delegitimize and exclude certain groups. Borders are also tools in the construction of an idealized society based on emotional and ahistorical interpretations of the past that the populist projects aspire to revive. Consequently, borders also impact their interpretation of who is part of the demos and where popular sovereignty lies. Finally, borders are instrumentalized by populist leaders to gather support and advance their political agendas.

Populism in borders

Whereas the previous section showed the crucial role of borders in populism as key elements in the process of creation and re-creation of social, cultural and political identities, this one shifts the attention to the opposite relationship: i.e. the salience of populist attributes in the articulation and reproduction of bordering claims and practices. This section draws empirical examples from the literature on borders and shows that the justifications for the creation and reinforcement of borders are grounded on a populist reasoning.

It is worth mentioning that although a populist logic of articulation usually underpins bordering claims, not all populist parties use political borders equally in their construction of “the people”. In general, left-wing populists prioritize a vertical type of exclusion—against the elite—rather than a horizontal one—against migrants, refugees or foreigners—which is more common among radical-right and nationalist parties (Verbeek and Zaslove 2017: 391-399; De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2020). However, borders are still relevant elements to understand many radical-left populist parties as they may also embrace nationalistic and Eurosceptic discourses (Halikiopoulou, Nanou, and Vasilopoulou 2012; Rama and Santana 2020).

Each of the dimensions of populism can be linked to different bordering examples. First, the antagonistic Manichean interpretation of reality underpins the descriptions of migrants as an existential threat and their labeling as exploitative “enemies”, “invaders” or “parasites” to legitimize securitization of borders (Hogan and Haltinner 2015; Kinnvall 2015; Schain 2019: 18). Populist arguments are not only used to antagonize “internal outsiders” operating “within the polity” but also to “external outsiders” such

as the European Union, American Imperialism, the global capital, and of course, political and economic refugees (Brubaker 2020, 54–58). Policies proposing new borders and even walls by right-wing movements are based on the creation of scapegoats and fear to legitimize exclusion (Wodak 2015, 2–6). For instance, [Image 1](#) portrays a poster by the Italian far-right Northern League with a reference to the Holy League coalition that defeated the Ottoman Empire in the Battle of Lepanto, and the slogan “stop the invasion”. Patrolling the external borders or enforcing internal immigration control are presented as means to reinforce security and shield citizens against them. Populist antagonism is also reflected in re-bordering claims based in anti-establishment and anti-global-elite discourses which alert over alleged institutional failure and threats to nations’ distinct identities (Kinnvall 2015, 519; Mudde 2007). Eurosceptic discourses are examples of this.

Secondly, the moral interpretation of actors, a key feature of populism (Mudde 2004, 543; Arato 2013, 156), is also central to bordering practices. There is often a moral dichotomization of society between “honorable patriots” who defend the border and the “traitors” or “internal enemies” who oppose bordering policies (Kinnvall 2015, 523). Migrants are also morally delegitimized and accused of ill-intention or causing damage to society on purpose. For example, [Image 2](#) shows the symbolic “othering” strategy used in posters by the far-right Swiss People’s Party to exclude and dehumanize immigrants, in particular Muslims. The text “Sicherheit Schaffen” means “create safety” and suggests that they constitute a threat. This process of “moralization of the bordering” implies the application of a moral hierarchy and use of narratives of deservingness to justify and rationalize exclusion (Vollmer 2017, 4). The moral distinction, which sometimes comes accompanied by a dehumanizing rhetoric, helps rationalize why some individuals are excluded from the enjoyment of certain public services and basic human rights (Rheindorf and Wodak 2018). Not only the proponents of bordering see themselves in a higher moral ground, but they also establish moral distinctions between different groups of migrants. Moral judgments on the degree of deservingness are used to justify enforcement measures targeting specific groups (Chauvin and Garcés-Mascareñas 2014, 426).



Image 1. Northern League rally in Venice, 7 October 2012. Source: Jean-Pierre Dalberá. Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic.



Image 2. Swiss People's Party (SVP) posters. Source: Hansen (2016:, 153).

The consideration of “legal” and “illegal”, “deserving” and “undeserving” may impact the allocation of resources and rights among them (Cowley 2005, 154).

Thirdly, the romanticized construction of society and its past grounded on homogeneity and exclusion (Jagers and Walgrave 2007, 323), another of the typical attributes of populism, can be customarily observed in bordering arguments. Anti-pluralist descriptions of “the people”, focusing on fixed collective identities and nationhood, help reinforce discourses about cultural and economic threats by migrants. Borders are often presented as “natural” or “irreversible” (Mostov 2008, 42). Homogenizing, differentiating, and classifying discourses are instrumental in the process of (re)drawing boundaries to separate some groups and unite others (Verdery 1993, 38). The modification of political borders is usually preceded by changes in symbolic boundaries within communities to recover or reconstruct an idealized past. Certain cultural markers are promoted while others are eliminated. National mythologies and humiliation narratives help strengthen antagonistic and moral superiority justifications for establishing or reinforcing borders (Homolar and Löfflmann 2021). Political subjects considered “illegitimate” are excluded or expelled to fit a certain nationalist or populist conception of the society (Mostov 2008, 41–42, 68).

Arguments about cultural compatibility and ethnic-based distinctions of superiority and inferiority have been historically used as discriminatory criteria in border related policies, such as national origins quota systems (Zolberg 1989, 411). Similarly, the artificial selective emphasis on difference *vis-à-vis* certain out-groups and the homogenization of past social heritages among in-groups was a central element in the formation of new states in post-colonial Asia, Africa and Latin America. These processes were accompanied in some countries with the formation of certain internal “ethnic hierarchies” which in many cases ended up in armed conflict and refugee crises (Zolberg



Image 3. *Mural Països Catalans, Vilassar de Mar, Catalonia, Spain.* Source: Wikimedia Commons user "1997", 29 July 2007, Creative Commons 3.0.

1989, 417–423). Irredentist, secessionist and nativist movements use populist discourses to construct idealized heartlands in order to rally support. **Image 3** shows a mural redrawing borders and stating “one nation, Catalan Countries!, one language, Catalan!”. The idea of a nation that would include different regions of Spain, the south of France and Alghero in Italy based on the use of Catalan language, constitutes a recurrent claim among the Pan-Catalanist movement. The violent dissolution of the former Yugoslavia provides an example of how cultural, religious and ethnic differences are instrumentalized in bordering practices with dramatic consequences (Mostov 2008).

Fourthly, bordering policies come usually accompanied with references to popular sovereignty and claims about the “will of the people” that are another important attribute of populism (Mudde 2004, 543; Ivaldi and Mazzoleni 2020, 210). Borders are constantly instrumentalized in “sovereignty games.” These “games” try to shape how power is distributed between supranational, national and regional organizations and/or the scope in which such power can be exercised (Gammeltoft-Hansen and Adler-Nissen 2008). For instance, the resistance to the process of European integration is usually justified on the ground of sovereignty and empowerment of the people. Moreover, border control is presented as the essence of sovereignty (Hollifield 1992, 6–10). Policing the border finds a strong normative justification in the defence of territorial sovereignty which underpins liberal and democratic claims to popular rule (Agnew 2008, 186). Populist frames become very handy to convey the appropriateness of reinforcing and policing borders. The consideration of the “other” as a morally corrupt or inferior antagonist is used to disseminate narratives about interest-based threats —i.e. security and economic threats — and identity-based threats — threats to culture, traditional lifestyles, democracy or to other forms of domestic government (Hogan and Haltinner 2015, 528). For example, **Image 4** shows an UKIP poster for the Brexit referendum that shows great numbers of Syrian refugees marching and claims that the “EU has failed us all” and that “[w]e must break free of the EU and take back control of our borders”.



Image 4. Nigel Farage in front of UKIP poster for the Leave the European Union campaign in 2016. Source: Twitter Chris Ship @chrisshipitv, 16 June 2016

Furthermore, the redrawing of borders often seeks to match politico-administrative and ethno-linguistic national boundaries (Kefale 2010). This is a process that involves the renegotiation of identity and reconstruction of *demoi*. Expansionist and secessionist political claims challenge existing, and construct new, conceptions of “the people” (Mostov 2008, 34). The dichotomous logic of inclusion-exclusion applied is often at odds with the overlapping of identities and polities. Referendums and mass mobilizations, which can be associated with a populist understanding of politics (Jacobs, Akkerman, and Zaslove 2018; Mohrenberg, Huber, and Freyburg 2019), are often key tools in the process of redrawing of borders, as in the secessionist referendums in Crimea, Scotland and Catalonia and the EU referendum in the United Kingdom. Self-determination and minority rights arguments are employed selectively (Mostov 2008, 11). The conceptions of popular sovereignty used as justification for many bordering practices presents majoritarian overtones which may clash with the principle of separation of powers and lead to bypassing minority rights (Mudde and Rovira-Kaltwasser 2012, 18–22, 205–222).

Lastly, bordering practices are often proposed by political leaders who portray themselves as guardians of the nation, or the people, and use inflammatory speeches to exacerbate fears and sense of national pride (Mostov 2008, 10–11, 32). These are usually personalist leaders who use a populist style and claim to be able to discern and articulate the “will of the people” (Kriesi 2014, 363; Müller 2016, 32–38; Moffitt 2016). Competing ethno-nationalist leaders can simultaneously play the role of the arrogant majority and an exploited minority, depending on the context of reference (Mostov 2008, 68). These leaders may act as messianic and transcendental saviors of the people and end up superseding the authority of the usual representative political institutions (Finchelstein 2019: xxxvi, 183).

An empirical illustration of the interplay between populism and borders

Data collection and methodology

Discourses are not mere ideas or words but systems of meaningful practices constitutive of identities (Howarth, Norval, and Stavrakakis 2000, 3–4). The relation between political actors and the world is mediated or constructed by language, in the form of talk and texts. To illustrate the interaction between populism and borders, this paper applies classical content analysis. This is a methodology that intends to produce quantifiable evidence about a set of categories by a systematic analysis of a set of texts (Bauer 2000), and that has been already successfully used to measure populism (Hawkins 2009; Bernhard and Kriesi 2019; Olivas Osuna and Rama 2021). Given the salience of borders and immigration in the discourses of radical-right parties, this exploratory analysis focuses on the electoral manifestos of *Vox*, *Rassemblement National* (“National Rally”, RN), United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and Brexit Party (Table 1).

This analysis is exploratory in nature and rather than providing a comprehensive picture of the discursive interaction between populism and borders, seeks to test the methodology and to inductively identify hypotheses worth pursuing in future research.

In line with recent empirical studies on the supply (e.g. Bernhard and Kriesi 2019; Norris 2020; Meijers and Zaslove 2020) and demand sides of populism (e.g. Akkerman,

Table 1. Party manifestos analyzed.

Party	Document	Release	Word count
Vox	<i>“100 medidas para la España Viva”</i>	Nov 2019	3,504
Vox	<i>“Programa electoral para las elecciones europeas 2019”</i>	May 2019	8,123
UKIP	<i>“Manifiesto for Brexit and Beyond”</i>	Nov 2019	13,542
Brexit Party	<i>“Contract with the People”</i>	Nov 2019	1,966
RN	<i>“144 Engagements Présidentiels”</i>	April 2017	5,563

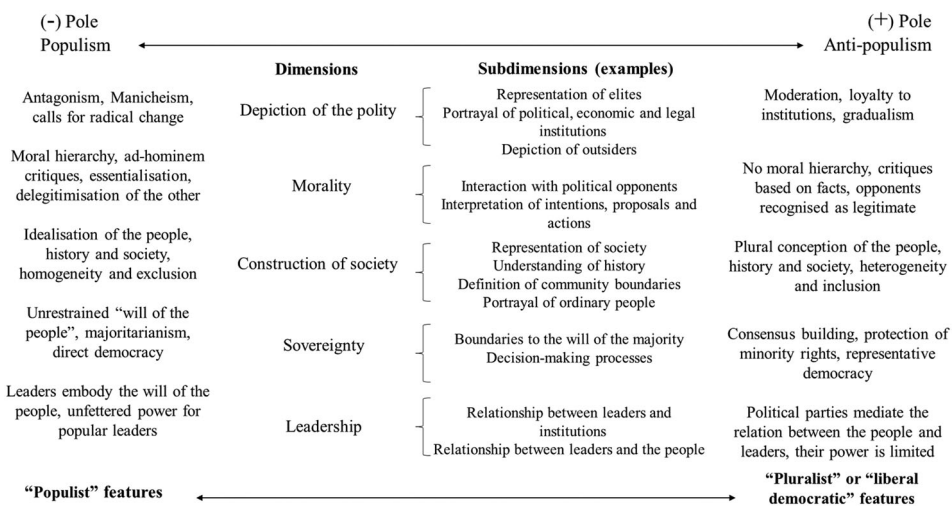


Figure 2. Five-dimensional framework with examples of dimensions and typical populist and anti-populist features. Source: Olivas Osuna (2021, 841)

Mudde, and Zaslove 2014; Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel 2018), this article shows populism is a matter of degree, not simply a binary categorization by comparing the density of populist references in five dimensions (number of references per thousand words). Populism is treated as a conceptual continuum between negative (“populist”) and positive (“anti-populist”) poles (Goertz 2006, 27–35) (Figure 2). Populist and anti-populist features are recorded according to five dimensions: 1) antagonistic depiction of the polity, 2) morality, 3) idealized construction of society, 4) sovereignty, and 5) leadership (Olivas Osuna 2021) (Table A1 in Online Appendix).

In addition to the 10 codes associated to populism (5 for populist and 5 for anti-populist features), 18 “borders” codes were created based on a preliminary analysis of the literature and then refined inductively during the coding of these manifestos: references to immigration, establish/strengthen borders, migrants damage economy, migrants use/abuse of public services, deportation, critiques to supranational authorities, country or citizens first, economic protectionism, other portrayed as suspect, integration of the other, externalized borders, barriers to citizenship or residence, exclusionary-discriminatory policies, securitization, language as inclusion-exclusion tool, protecting/recovering sovereignty, culture/identity protection, and references to territorial integrity. Texts were analyzed in their entirety and manually coded using MAXQDA software, as it facilitates navigating the coded segments, examining intersections, conducting consistency checks, and generating visual representations with analytical value. Codes were not considered mutually exclusive so one sentence could be simultaneously assigned to various populism and borders codes. In addition to counting and comparing the relative density of each code and the intersections among them, segments were also analyzed qualitatively to detect recurrent and implicit themes as well as to better understand the role of populist tropes in the construction of bordering arguments, and *vice versa*.¹

A brief quantitative analysis

Given that the length of the abovementioned manifestos varies significantly, rather than analyzing the total number of segments coded, this paper compares the density of codes —i.e. number of segments coded per 1000 words—. The analysis of the party manifestos shows that the relative levels of populism are higher in the manifestos of the Brexit Party and RN than in those of the UKIP and Vox (Figure 3). The density of anti-populist references is comparatively extremely low. Apart from the Vox EU elections manifesto, with 15 anti-populist references (total anti-populist 1.84 references/1000 words) anti-populist references in the other documents are anecdotal (RN: 0.9 anti-populist 1.84 references/1000 words; Vox Spanish Elections: 0.86; Brexit Party: 0.5; UKIP: 0.3).

A more fine-grained analysis of the composition of these populist features shows a significant variation in the relative salience of each of the populist dimensions across manifestos. The reliance on a personalist leader is almost completely absent in all of them, which is not surprising in these types of formal political communications that supposedly reflect the party position on policies. Antagonism is the most salient populist attribute in the Brexit Party manifesto. The populist idealization of society is the most prominent attribute found in RN and Vox documents, whereas morality references are the more frequent in the UKIP manifesto (Figure 4).

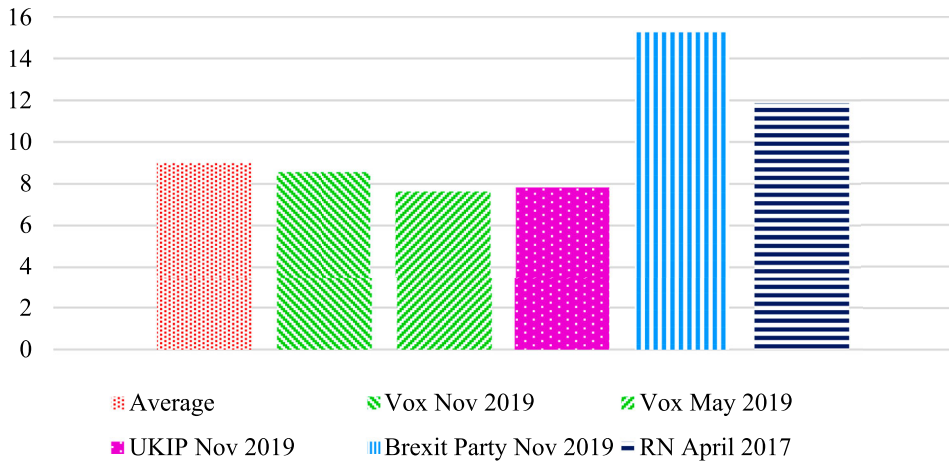


Figure 3. Populist references per 1,000 words.

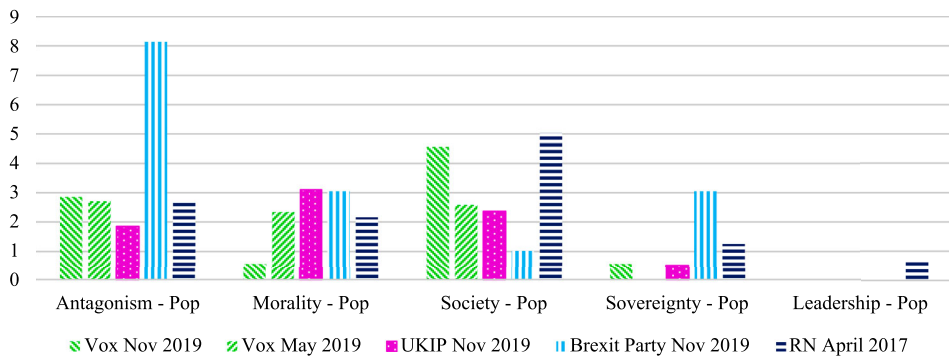


Figure 4. Populist references per dimension (references per 1,000 words).

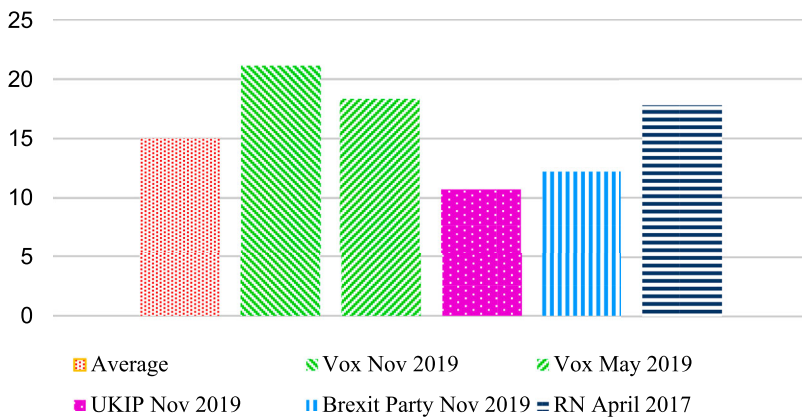


Figure 5. Borders references per 1,000 words.

Regarding references to borders, the manifestos of Vox and RN show a significantly higher density than those of the UKIP and Brexit Party, which are usually considered issue parties with a central bordering strategy, i.e. taking the UK out of the EU (Figure 5). References to immigration are the most frequent in all manifestos, which is not unexpected as some of the other codes are usually associated to specific discourses on migrants. In the bordering discourse of RN, references to exclusionary/discriminatory policies and to economic protectionism are very salient. The Brexit Party document emphasizes the idea of protecting and recovering Britain's sovereignty and the need to prioritize national interests over those of the EU. Exclusionary policies and protection of British sovereignty are the most common references in the UKIP manifesto. Finally, whereas the Vox EU elections manifesto gives more salience to securitization, protecting sovereignty and the critique of supranational institutions, the Vox Spanish elections manifesto emphasizes identity and culture protection, as well as discriminatory policies (Table A2, Online Appendix).

Next, having mapped the relative intensity of each of the populist dimensions and different border arguments, this paper shows that both types of codes appear intertwined. This means that segments of text coded for different categories often overlap—for instance an antagonistic reference can be used with moral connotations and/or expressed to justify a deportation or the need for securitization—a myriad of intersections between populist and borders was found: 97 between the Society-pop codes and borders codes, 60 in the case Antagonism-pop codes, 38 for Morality-pop and 8 between Sovereignty-pop borders references (Table 2). Figure 6 presents a visualization of the degree of dispersion and association among populism and borders codes in the manifestos. The thickness of connecting lines represent the frequency that two of them intersect (with a minimum frequency of 5). Figure 6 shows that, broadly, three clusters of codes emerge from these manifestos. Antagonism and morality appear associated to each other and closely connected to references to supranational authorities. Society-pop is closely related to immigration and references to discriminatory or exclusionary measures, as well as to mentions of culture and identity protection. Sovereignty-pop is connected to the protecting or recovering sovereignty code.

Table 2. Most frequent code intersections.

Populist references	References to borders	Number of intersections
Society - Pop	Immigration	26
Society - Pop	Exclusionary-discriminatory policies	21
Antagonism - Pop	Critique of supranational authorities	17
Society - Pop	Culture/identity protection	13
Morality - Pop	Critique of supranational authorities	10
Antagonism - Pop	Protecting or recovering sovereignty	10
Morality - Pop	Immigration	7
Antagonism - Pop	Immigration	7
Sovereignty - Pop	Protecting or recovering sovereignty	6
Society - Pop	Deportation	5
Antagonism - Pop	Securitisation	5
Antagonism - Pop	Exclusionary-discriminatory policies	5
Society - Pop	Other portrayed as suspect	5
Antagonism - Pop	Other portrayed as suspect	5
Society - Pop	Country or citizens first	5

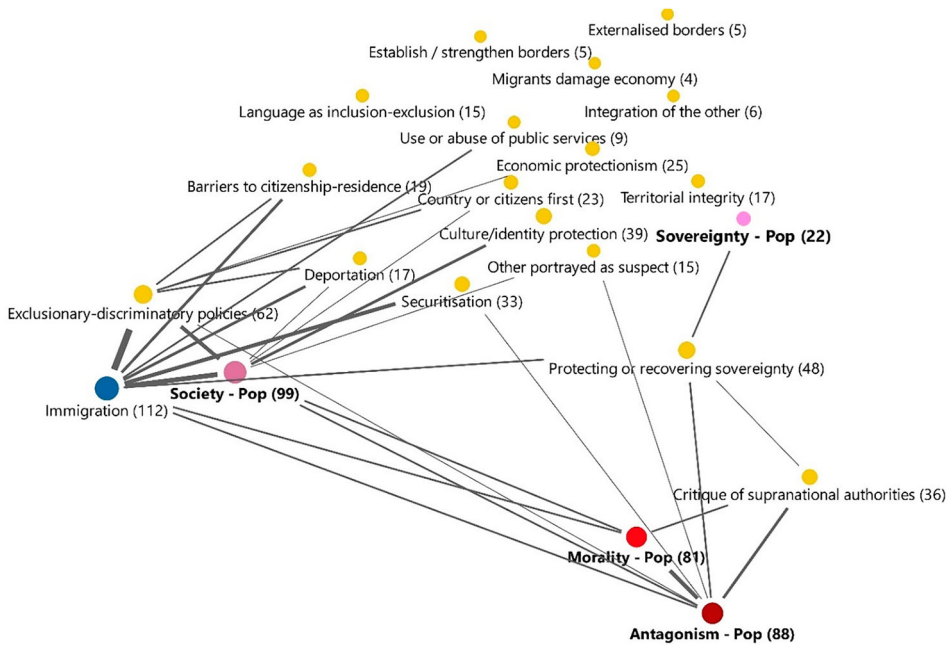


Figure 6. Map of code intersections. In parenthesis the total number of coded segments. Lines capture intersections with a minimal frequency of 5.

A qualitative overview

A qualitative analysis of the segments coded for both populist and borders references illustrates some common constructions across radical right parties in their articulation of border and populist claims.

The idealized conception of a somewhat homogeneous society that these parties try to convey is underpinned by policy proposals aiming to exclude or discriminate individuals based on political and cultural boundaries. Nationality and religion are used to define the ideal society in these “othering” discourses. For instance, Vox proposes the “deportation of illegal immigrants” and of migrants who are lawfully in the territory but have committed serious crimes or repeated minor offences. RN proposes barriers to the naturalization of foreigners and eliminating double nationality treaties with non-European countries. They also recommend the automatic deportation of migrants who have committed crimes or are connected to Islamic fundamentalism. Both parties propose the ban and closure of mosques associated with fundamentalist interpretations of Islam. UKIP suggests to “re-institute the British nationality requirement” for all civil servants and other obstacles to the obtaining of British citizenship. Vox also proposes incentives to companies that hire Spanish workers, while RN wants to prioritize employment for French people.

Similarly, culture/identity protection references are a common method to define who belongs, and who does not, to their ideal community. These parties portray a model of society founded on traditional, often Christian, values. Some of the arguments they use are not directly related to borders, such as the claims by RN, Vox and UKIP in

defence of traditional families and fertility policies, and the explicit opposition of UKIP and Vox to abortion, gender reassignment and what they call “gender ideology”. However, these parties also show their ideal society threatened by out-groups with references to Islam and Islamism; these manifestos associate with radicalism, violence, and low respect for some democratic rights. For instance, Vox proposes promoting “European values, uniquely embodied in Christian civilization”, the “exclusion of Islam education from public schools” and following Hungary’s footsteps create a government agency for the protection of “endangered Christian minorities”. UKIP claims to repeal the 2010 Equality Act which protects Black and Asian minorities. Moreover, UKIP declares that they “will promote a unifying British culture” and Christian schools in the UK. Meanwhile, RN declares that they will “defend the national identity, values and traditions of French civilization”. These claims and policy proposals are grounded on (and fuel) existing prejudices and promote a sense of threat and grievance that can be instrumentalize in “othering” processes.

Antagonism against supranational and international organizations also emerges as a recurrent theme in these manifestos. For instance, Vox promises to abandon any supranational and international organization with interests conflicting with those of Spain and criticizes a “Europe that asphyxiates political freedom and cultural wealth of its member states”. Meanwhile, UKIP claims that they will abolish “all of the EU-inspired legislation that binds us to EU legal institutions”; the Brexit Party promises that there will be “no further entanglement with the EU’s controlling political institutions”. This antagonism is sometimes also combined with a moral delegitimization of supranational institutions. The Brexit party accuses the EU of being undemocratic and Vox of abusing its competences. RN does not explicitly accuse international organizations but suggests that the EU has undermined freedom and sovereignty. The critique to supranational authorities can be interpreted as an attempt to enhance national borders.

Moreover, references to sovereignty are rarely made from a pluralist interpretation of the term. These parties do not seem to recognize the logic of shared sovereignty in the EU. They suggest that their countries need to recover a lost sovereignty and regain control over their futures from the hands of global elites who do not care about the real interests of the people. For example, UKIP claims that they will “fully restore the UK’s former status as an independent, self-governing, sovereign state”, the Brexit Party requests a “Clean-Break Brexit” take control of “laws, borders, money, fishing and defence”; and RN proposes a referendum for EU membership “to regain our freedom and control over our destiny by restoring their sovereignty to the French people”.

Morality is also used to justify exclusion and prejudices against “the other”, either migrants or the elites that defend migration. For instance, UKIP warns against the “systematic and industrialized sexual abuse of under-age and vulnerable young girls by majority-Pakistani grooming and rape gangs”, and Vox insinuates that there are NGOs that collaborate with “illegal immigration mafias”. RN suggests that those who defend globalization want to destroy the great economic and social balances, by abolishing economic and physical borders to increase immigration and reduce cohesion among the French people. The Brexit Party accuses the political establishment of conspiring “to frustrate democracy over Brexit”.

There are some disparities across these manifestos that can be linked either to programmatic differences, –e.g. economic protectionism and interventionism is much more prominent in RN than in UKIP, which seems to favor a more liberal economic stance–, or to specific country contexts –e.g. Brexit Party’s manifesto is very short and focuses almost exclusively on the EU exit, while the manifestos of Vox put great emphasis on territorial integrity due to the secessionist challenge in Catalonia—. However, the quantitative and qualitative analyses developed in this section show the existence of a similar logic of articulation of populist and bordering practices across these parties and serve as an illustration of several of the arguments made in the previous theory sections.

Discussion and further research

This exploratory analysis resonates with the findings of previous studies highlighting the similarities in othering discourses across populist radical right parties (e.g. Wodak 2015; Sakki and Pettersson 2016;). In the texts analyzed, borders play a prominent role in constructing antagonistic relationships against corrupt or ill-intentioned “others” which can be either international elites, immigrants, or “deviant in-groups” who support out-groups in eroding political, economic or cultural boundaries. In their attempt to re-enact their ideal heartland and recover a purportedly lost popular sovereignty, these parties suggest to (re)establish political borders between states as well as to reinforce internal legal, economic, or cultural frontiers. They propose securitization and policing to reduce migration flows. They recommend laws to discriminate or exclude foreigners from becoming citizens, residents or from using public services based on negative moral considerations and on the assumption that some migrants are suspected of damaging the traditional ways of life and upsetting societal balances. Moreover, these parties want to reduce or stop altogether the participation in cross-border initiatives, treaties, and supranational organizations that they interpret as hindering national sovereignty.

The similarities found in the bordering policy proposals of these parties are relevant and could be framed within a wider process of discursive alignment between radical right populist parties in Europe. The manifestos of Vox allude to proposals from Hungary and the Visegrád group. This potential convergence both at the level of populist articulation and bordering is a hypothesis which deserves further scholarly attention. Although these three European countries have been historically rivals, and they still maintain some ongoing border disputes –e.g. Gibraltar, Calais, fishery rights,– their radical right parties do not give a high priority in their othering discourses to the citizens of each other. They construct supranational elites, Muslims and non-western European migrants and refugees as the main out-groups they antagonize. These parties recognize each other and the people they represent as subject to an equivalent sort of exploitation and external threats.

Although these parties claim a partial or total withdrawal from Europe, they do not portray their European neighbors as an enemy or a full-fledge “other”. By recognizing as equivalent the grievances denounced by other European radical right parties, they construct a sort second level “us” or “the people”. This is particularly evident in the case of Vox’s European Elections manifesto that seems to extend the “us”, the “in-group” to the rest of Europe and constructs an idealized “European Civilization” grounded in traditional Christian values, threatened by common external (and internal) enemies. RN

also establishes a distinction between European and non-European “others” by proposing to eliminate double nationality agreement with non-European countries. When referring to expelling “illegal immigrants” or excluding them from certain services, these parties are also implicitly acknowledging a difference between migrants according to their origin, given the EU citizens’ legal right to stay in EU countries.

This exploratory research suggests that populist parties may adopt a flexible strategy and can emphasize or underplay state and supra-state borders creating a sort of hierarchical othering and a “meta-us” based on an equivalent logic and the selective blurring of differences with some foreign groups (Figure A1, Online Appendix). This is in line with Lamour’s (2020) argument on the existence of a “meta-populism” in the Italian-Swiss border based on chains of equivalence to reduce regional and national disparities and construct an antagonism between a transregional people (“us”) and common distant enemies such as “clandestine workers and Muslims” (Lamour 2020, 3). The joint declaration signed by Le Pen (RN), Abascal (Vox), Orbán (Fidesz), Kaczyński (PiS), Salvini (Lega), Meloni (FdI), and other European right-wing leaders on 2 July 2021 where they agreed to defend together the “true European values” and their Judeo-Christian heritage from the “radical forces” carrying out a cultural, religious and political transformation of Europe, seems to confirm this growing notion of “meta-us” among radical right populist parties.²

Later, Morawiecki (PiS) hosted the “Warsaw Summit” in December 2021 that was followed up by the “Defending Europe” summit organized by Vox in Madrid in January 2022. Both were attended by many far-right leaders and delegations and had as an objective a “defending Europe against external and internal threats”, preserving EU member states’ sovereignty, Christian values, preventing “demographic suicide”, and a rapprochement concerning their divergent position *vis-à-vis* Russia, given that some of them — such as Le Pen, Salvini and Orbán — had publicly expressed admiration for Putin, while others perceived him as a menace.³ The security-related concerns expressed in those meetings were circumscribed to energy self-sufficiency and border control. Future research may shed light on how fears and grievances are also selectively emphasized or downplayed as part of the strategic bordering strategies, and the impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the refugee crisis on this “meta-us”.

The variable, selective or context-specific utilization of borders and grievances by populist leaders and parties may also be construed as part of the strategy of “calculated ambivalence” typical of right-wing populism (Wodak 2015, 46–47). Despite their negative views on the EU institutions, these parties consider Europe as a civilizational space with physical and symbolic boundaries that encapsulate a distinct identity. This is an identity they embrace in addition to their national one and that they also consider threatened by some dangerous “others” (Lorimer 2020, 2017–2022). Ambiguity about certain borders serve as a unifying discourse and a means to establish an additional “us” that encompasses allied right-wing movements across state borders (Biancalana and Mazzoleni 2020). The selective blurring of borders and overstretched definition of the “Russian nation” by Putin, as justification for the intervention in Crimea and Donbass from 2014, and the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, also resonates with a non-dichotomous separation between “us” and “them”. Although Putin is not considered a populist but an autocratic leader, he has employed a populist discursive strategy referring to Ukraine as both: “antagonistic other” and as part of the “self” (Tipaldou and Casula 2019: 351–353).

Therefore, the construction of this flexible “meta-us” may help normalizing exclusionary policies and provide legitimacy for these movements and some of their radical policies.

Although further research is needed to properly test these hypotheses—and extend the analysis to left-wing populists and populists in other regions—, this paper shows that the usually assumed binary or dichotomous interpretation of the polity between “us”, (“the people”) and “them” (“the corrupt other”) central to populism (Mudde 2004, 543; Laclau 2005b, 39) may be reconsidered as a more complex hierarchical distinction or relationship. In addition to creating or enhancing borders, populist leaders can blur existing ones as a means to strategically create new narratives of equivalence and layers of identity and otherness.

Conclusions

This paper has argued theoretically and shown empirically that borders are constituted by and constitutive of populist discourses and can be used as epistemic frameworks to understand each other. Populism has an important relational component as it implies a process of (re)creation of political identities via an established antagonism between “the virtuous people” and “the nefarious others”. Borders shape shared understandings of the self and the community and are central elements in this performative constitution of the people. They are tools of exclusion used to categorize individuals along territorial, linguistic, religious or biological traits. Identities are generated and validated via interactions with in-groups and out-groups which are separated by political, physical, and socio-cultural borders. As argued by Laclau, the dichotomization of the social space through the definition of an internal frontier that separates individuals, and the creation of chains of equivalential demands or grievances are the bases of populist articulation. Populists seek to bring equivalential homogeneity to a heterogeneous reality. A shared antagonism across a border becomes the unifying feature that serves to decontest a certain notion of “the people.” Borders not only contribute to establishing an antagonistic and moral distinction between “the people” and the “other”, but also become tools in the construction of populist heartlands, and in (re)interpretations of the sovereign *demos*.

However, the relationship between borders and populism is bidirectional, so after signaling the salience of the border in populism theory, this paper has argued that populism underpins the articulation and reproduction of bordering practices and claims. It shows that the (re)bordering policies highlighted by the borders literature are customarily justified via populist discursive elements, i.e. antagonism, morality, idealized construction of society, popular sovereignty and personalistic leadership. Populist tropes and rhetoric become common tools for those who seek to create new (or modify and strengthen existing) borders.

An exploratory comparative quantitative and qualitative analysis has served to substantiate empirically the interactions between populist and borders allusions in the political manifestos of four European radical right populist parties, such as Vox, UKIP, Brexit Party and RN. Borders are key instruments in their construction of antagonistic relationships against (poor) migrants, international elites, and “deviant” in-groups. Although they reflect some discrepancies in terms of policy priorities and relative intensity of populist dimensions, all these parties propose to reinforce political and cultural

frontiers and a series of discriminatory and exclusionary policies against those who do not belong to their somewhat homogeneous conception of an ideal society.

Moreover, these populist parties seem to establish a hierarchy in their othering discourses and to mutually recognize each other as subjects of similar fears and grievances. The selective blurring of boundaries depending on the context, allows them to recreate a sort of “meta-us” and establish a common front with other groups in different countries that share equivalent perceived threats. This ambiguity, worth investigating further, may be part of a calculated strategy to normalize and legitimize their bordering exclusionary policies against other out-groups or in-groups.

There are some limitations to this study that need to be acknowledged and addressed in future research. First, the parties analyzed to illustrate this new research approach are not representative of populism, but of Western European radical right populism. Therefore, the analysis of the intersection of populist and borders codes requires further investigation among left-wing and other types of populist movements in Europe and beyond. Secondly, since populist discourses are context-dependent, it would be important to analyze the evolution of party manifestos over time, as well as other forms of political communications, such as speeches, leaders’ interviews and posts on social networks. Thirdly, this article has focused almost exclusively on the supply side of populism and needs to be complemented with the analysis of citizens’ attitudes and beliefs *vis-à-vis* populism and borders. Surveys, in-depth interviews and experiments would help confirm to what extent support for bordering policies relies on a populist worldview, and whether “othering” processes in populist identity formation are primordially binary or hierarchical.

In sum, this paper has justified theoretically and illustrated empirically the complex interdependence relationship between borders and populism. It has suggested important synergies between these two interdisciplinary fields of study and shown, via the application of an innovative methodology, that the border can be a useful method to study populism and *vice versa*.

Notes

1. The MAXQDA file is available at Harvard Dataverse: <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/XSZZME>: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1JjDvv7TwVcZ0eGhTlcGxKlbEwtqNVkD6/view?usp=sharing>
2. Rassemblement National, 2 July 2021, “Declaration sur l’avenir de l’Europe”, Visegrád Post, 5 July 2021, “Orbán, Kaczyński, Salvini, Le Pen, Abascal and other right-wing leaders united in defense of true European values”.
3. Euractive, 6 December 2021, “Warsaw Summit: European populist far-right parties oppose EU federalization”; Euronews, 29 January 2022, “Europe’s far-right meets in Madrid for two-day summit led by Spain’s Vox”; About Hungary, 29 January 2022, “European conservative leaders: The European Union confronts threats both external and internal”.

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