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Right Move? Populist Radical Right Parties and Europe

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ABSTRACT

While before winning power populist radical right (PRR) parties are often overtly against the European Union (EU) and its policies, once in government their position can change significantly. Their threats to leave the EU are frequently replaced by requests for greater EU involvement, particularly in economic and migration issues. This Special Issue unpacks PRR parties' discourse and policies in relation to Europe, before and after gaining power. Specifically, this Introduction outlines key theoretical debates on populism, the policy positioning of PRR parties on migration, foreign policy and other issues before and after entering government, and their relationship with the EU. It then addresses the performance of PRR parties in the 2024 European Parliament elections, and provides an overview of the Special Issue.

KEYWORDS

populist radical right parties;
Europe; populism; migration;
foreign policy

In October 2022, for the first time since the end of the Second World War, Italy elected a government led by a populist radical right (PRR) party, *Fratelli d'Italia* (FdI). The party's leader, Giorgia Meloni, became the first woman in Italy's history to serve as Prime Minister. This election had important consequences not only for Italy but also for other European Union (EU) member states, and raises questions about how PRR parties' discourse and policies are affected by being in opposition or in government.

This Special Issue explores how PRR parties act once in power, placing particular attention on how they deal with the EU. Although PRR parties are often overtly critical of the EU and its policies before winning power, their position can change substantially once in government. This is what happened, for example, in the case of the *Lega* and FdI in relation to the Italian exit from the Euro (Talani 2022). Threats to leave the Union are often replaced by calls for the greater involvement of Brussels in the domestic sphere, particularly in the management of economic and migratory matters.

In order to investigate PRR parties' discourse and policies and how they are articulated before and after the PRR wins power, we ask the following questions: Does being in power affect PRR parties' discursive and policy stances, particularly with regard to the EU? If so, how? Specifically, how do these parties deal with the EU before and after winning the elections? To this end, we investigate PRR parties' positioning in national

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and European parliaments, examining their voting patterns in the European Parliament (EP) (de Candia and Bressanelli 2025, this Special Issue), and whether they moderate or radicalise on specific issues, including EU integration and foreign policy (Petrović and Bilic 2025, this Special Issue). Other contributions focus on the discursive dimension of PRR parties, analysing their positions on issues including migration (Griffini and Rosina 2025, this Special Issue), freedom (Alekseev 2025, this Special Issue) and gender (Montecchio 2025, this Special Issue). This Special Issue also provides an in-depth analysis of the concept of populism itself, by examining how it intertwines (if at all) with its seemingly opposite concept of technocracy (Cozzolino 2025, this Special Issue) and how the term is used by its critics to stigmatise opposing views and support European integration (Fifi 2025, this Special Issue).

We bring together contributions to compare realities across the EU, covering a variety of topics, countries and policy issues. The articles discuss not only party discourse and voting patterns, but also political campaigns, ideological stances, visions of history and future geopolitical, social and economic scenarios. The case studies stretch across Southern, Central and Eastern Europe, including Italy, Hungary, Poland and Slovenia. Within this geographical context, the articles explore diverse policy issues of paramount importance for the study of the PRR (such as migration, foreign affairs and gender); crucial concepts for understanding the broader theme of populism (such as technocracy and freedom); and critical junctures in the last 15 years of European history, including the global financial crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic. Overall, this Special Issue aims to contribute to the emerging literature on PRR parties and their relationship with the EU. As the PRR enjoys growing success, the findings of this research will hold significant implications for actors, states and institutions throughout the EU.

This Introduction sets the scene for the Special Issue. It begins by outlining theoretical debates on the ideological and policy positioning of PRR parties in the EU before and after entering government, as well as their relationship with the EU. It then addresses the performance of PRR parties in the 2024 EP elections. Finally, it provides an overview of the articles of the Special Issue.

Populism and PRR: definitions and debates

To understand the relationship between PRR parties and the EU, we must first define the concept of populism. Despite the frequent associations between populism and right-wing actors, the concept itself is not necessarily a right-wing phenomenon or based on Euro-scepticism. At the time of the Populist Party in the United States (US) in the late 19th century, populism was simply intended to describe a political system in which people actively participated in political life (Mudde 2017, 3). Similarly, Ernesto Laclau (2005) considers populism to be a form of radical democracy, emphasising direct participation of the people in politics, which could address the limits of liberal democracies (cited in Mudde 2017, 3). Neither of these interpretations have a specific left/right ideological connotation and certainly they do not reflect the positions of the PRR.

Other interpretations of populism focus on economic aspects or political strategies. Rudiger Dornbusch and Sebastian Edwards (1991), for instance, identify populism with fiscal irresponsibility aimed at winning elections (cited in Mudde 2017, 4). By contrast, populism is sometimes considered a political strategy that “strong and charismatic”

leaders use to rule based directly on the will of the people. Others describe populism as a political style, which allows for the activation of the masses (Ibid).

Cas Mudde (2017), one of the leading experts on populism, has famously defined populism as a ‘true’ ideology. In Mudde’s ‘ideational’ conceptualisation of populism, which has been highly successful in explaining the growth of populism in Western Europe and the Americas, the concept is described as an ideology, namely a set of ideas. This populist ideology centres on contrasting the “corrupt elite” with “the pure people” and aims to achieve the latter’s general will (6). Importantly, Mudde’s understanding of populism as an ideology does not include any reference to right-wing or left-wing principles. He defines populism as a ‘thin’ ideology, meaning that it is rather vague and unable to provide comprehensive answers to political questions. For this reason, it adapts to various changing environments and attaches itself to other ‘thick’ ideologies (such as liberalism or socialism), thus leading to “subtypes of populism” such as right-wing populism, left-wing populism and clientelist populism (Mudde 2007; 2017, 8-9). According to Mudde, populism can also lead to authoritarianism. In the populist mind, as the people are sovereign and therefore their will must be implemented, any opposition can be repressed, potentially leading to authoritarianism (Mudde 2004, 542-63; 2017, 18).

The nexus between populism and authoritarianism is also recognised by Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart (2019). They argue that populist discourse is characterised by: (i) an attack against ‘the establishment’ from elected representatives in liberal democracies and (ii) the idea that ‘the people’ are the only source of legitimacy in a democracy (Norris and Inglehart 2019). In the context of an authoritarian turn, the people at the centre of populist discourse become equated with a group whose collective security must be protected against ‘the Other’ such as foreigners, migrants, terrorists, etc. (Norris and Inglehart 2019). Moreover, the defence of this group and its values against external attacks is often couched in conservatism, which is resistant to socio-cultural changes (Ibid). Finally, in an authoritarian shift, the populist leader rises as the protector of the group and of its values. When the majority of the people is seen as the source of legitimacy, these leaders who claim to represent the will of the majority can suppress any dissent or opposition (Ibid). Here a clarification is needed. While populism inherently emphasises a rigid enforcement of law and order, not all cases of populism are authoritarian.

Nativism is also part of Mudde’s famous definition of PRR parties (Mudde 2007, 26). Nativism is the belief that ‘non-native’ people and ideas are “fundamentally threatening to the homogenous nation-state” (19). Indeed, nativism underpins the PRR’s typical anti-immigration stances. As such, PRR discourse is built on the ‘politics of fear’. The group representing the popular will is portrayed as a tribe, protected by the populist leader from ‘the other(s)’ (Wodak 2015). In Donald Trump’s discourse, for example, the tribe is represented by the nation (hence his ‘America first’ slogan), much like Boris Johnson’s Brexit campaign to leave the EU. However, the people can also be identified on the basis of ethnicity, race, sex or gender. The core of the nation is the existence of common values, which populist leaders consider to be under threat by an ‘other’ often framed as a scapegoat, creating what Norris and Inglehart call a ‘cultural backlash’ against the out-group (Norris and Inglehart 2019).

As an alternative to the notion of ‘cultural backlash’, Dani Rodrik (2017) has proposed the idea of a ‘globalisation backlash’ to explain the origins of contemporary populism. For him, populism is a reaction to the contradictions of globalisation. Along with

other (particularly US) scholars, Rodrik emphasises the economic causes of populism (Rodrik 2017; Autor *et al.* 2013; 2017a; 2017b; Frieden 2017; Colantone and Stanig 2016). In particular, the success of Chinese exports in the global political economy is often seen as having caused significant losses for large sections of the US labour force, who became economically marginalised and responded by supporting populist leaders.

For Rodrik, therefore, populism is the consequence of globalisation. Importantly, both right-wing populism (exemplified by Trump in the US) and left-wing populism (exemplified by Hugo Chávez in Venezuela) stem from opposition to globalisation, despite being grounded in opposite motivations. While in the Global North, globalisation often manifests as increased migration, in the Global South globalisation frequently means more foreign direct investments (FDIs). Therefore, while in the Global North the globalisation backlash often leads to the emergence of PRR parties opposing immigration, in the Global South it can lead to the development of left-wing populist movements mobilising against capitalism. In both cases, however, Rodrik contends that the origins of populism are not rooted in xenophobia or increased migration, but in the economic consequences of globalisation itself (Rodrik 2017; 2025).

Another trait often associated with populism is Euroscepticism, which can be defined as “a sentiment of disapproval towards European integration” (Halikiopoulou *et al.* 2012, 513). Some authors suggest that this is the product of the global financial crisis and the sovereign debt crisis in the EU. For example, Luigi Guiso *et al.* (2017; 2019) view the economic insecurity arising from these crises as the main driver of populism. More specifically, they contend that the demand for populism has increased not because of globalisation as Rodrik (2017) claimed, but because of the austerity policies adopted by the EU to counter the global financial crisis and the eurozone crisis. As such, the authors conclude that globalisation would not lead to populism without economic insecurity. These interpretations suggest that economic crises can act as a trigger, causing the underlying contradictions of globalisation to surface and intensify (see also Talani 2019; Kriesi and Takis 2015). In turn, it is the ineffectiveness of institutions in addressing the declining living standard of EU citizens that leads to populist reactions, typically anti-establishment in nature, and specifically targeting, in this case, EU authorities.

Finally, it is important to note that not all populist parties display the characteristics typically associated with the PRR. For example, in Italy the vote for the *Movimento Cinque Stelle* (M5S) was mostly concentrated among the young, technologically literate and educated generation. There is a certain degree of consensus in the literature that the M5S displayed many of the characteristics of a populist, anti-establishment party whose attitude was not initially anti-immigrant (Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti 2018; Bobba and McDonnell 2015; Corbetta 2017; Tarchi 2014). However, instead of relying on the resentment of older white men alienated by the liberal revolution of Western societal values, it fostered the collective identity of young, digital voters left behind by the global financial and economic crisis of 2008/09 (Talani 2018; Tronconi 2018). While it is important to acknowledge the various types of populism, their differences can also be substantial. For this reason, in this Special Issue we focus on the PRR rather than other forms of populism.

Based on this conceptualisation, the next section will explore the impact of European PRR parties on their policy and relationship with the EU and other issues. Notably, not all of these parties are Eurosceptic and the reality is more complex: they present several

nuances in their attitude towards the EU and have often undergone profound changes softening their hard Euroscepticism (Van Kessel 2024). The analysis will be corroborated by empirical evidence drawn from crucial case studies of PRR parties currently in power across Southern, Central and Eastern Europe.

The impact of PRR parties inside and outside government

Populism has been a defining feature of the politics of the past two decades, both in Europe and beyond. From Brexit in the United Kingdom (UK), to the double election of Trump in the US and Meloni in Italy, populism has broadly followed an upward trajectory. In Europe, countries including Poland, Hungary, Austria, Switzerland, Slovenia and, more recently, Finland, Slovakia, Croatia, the Netherlands and the Czech Republic, have all witnessed right-wing populist parties entering government. The articles in this Special Issue reflect this widespread success by focusing on trends and dynamics in Southern and Central and Eastern Europe. Specifically, the contributions focus on the crucial cases of Italy in Southern Europe, and of Poland, Hungary, and Slovenia in Central and Eastern Europe, placing them both within the broader context of the EU.

Italy is a prime case study by virtue of its reputation as the birthplace of modern populism. At present, the PRR *Lega* and FdI are leading (together with the centre-right *Forza Italia*) the first fully PRR government in Western Europe. The *Lega*, founded in 1991, initially identified as a regionalist party with the imagined community of Padania¹ in Northern Italy. However, between the turn of the century and the beginning of Matteo Salvini's leadership in 2013, the *Lega* transformed into a nationalist party. By contrast, FdI emerged as a nationalist party in 2012, from the ashes of the defunct PRR *Alleanza Nazionale* (AN), which itself was established from the ruins of the *Movimento Sociale Italiano* (MSI), Italy's first neo-fascist party formed immediately after the Second World War.

The case of Italy has attracted substantial academic attention that has attempted to understand how populists behave when in power (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015; Zulia-nello 2019). Indeed, even before the election of the FdI-led Meloni government, Italy had already witnessed the participation of the PRR in four coalition governments: *Lega* and AN in the *Forza Italia*-led coalitions in 1994 (Berlusconi I), 2001-06 (Berlusconi II) and 2008-11 (Berlusconi III), and the *Lega*-M5S populist government (Conte I) in 2018-19.

PRR parties in Central and Eastern Europe have also been the subject of extensive academic inquiry (see, for instance, Buštková 2018; Pirro 2015). These parties, encompassing *Fidesz* in Hungary (founded in 1988 and ruling since 2010, after a first stint in government in 1998-2002), *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (PiS) in Poland (founded in 2001 and ruling from 2015 to 2023, after a first stint in government in 2005-07), and *Slovenska Demokratska Stranka* (SDS) in Slovenia (founded in 1989 and in government in 2004-08; 2012-13; 2020-22), emerged in response to the critical transformations engendered by the disgregation of the Soviet bloc starting in 1989 (Pirro 2015).

As such, these countries serve as significant case studies to analyse the PRR both within and outside government, as well as its relationship with the EU, as all these parties exhibit varying degrees of Euroscepticism (Buštková 2018). In Hungary, *Fidesz*

¹Padania refers to the territory and community of Northern Italy, at the core of the identity constructed by the *Lega*.

under the leadership of Viktor Orbán underwent a clear radicalisation process when in government. Orbán's party is the embodiment of the populism-authoritarianism nexus theorised above. Through multiple laws, Orbán has undermined constitutional as well as civil rights and freedoms. Blatant restrictions on media freedom testify to the PRR's impact on policy, blocking and defeating any dissent (Mundy 2023). Moreover, Orbán inflamed nativist sentiments against Muslim refugees from Syria (Buščíková 2018). Similarly in Poland, PiS expressed its nativist preference to take in Syrian refugees of the Christian religion only (Buščíková 2018). PiS is no stranger to authoritarianism either, as evidenced by the total ban on abortion introduced in 2020 through the Constitutional Tribunal (Guasti and Buščíková 2023). Finally, the Slovenian SDS, which has received meagre attention thus far, shares nativist, anti-minority sentiments and authoritarian tendencies *vis-à-vis* the media and the rule of law (Petrović 2020).

The examination of these case studies is essential to grapple with the puzzle posed by the PRR's behaviour when in power: does it moderate or radicalise, and how? From a theoretical point of view, Sheri Berman's (2008) "inclusion-moderation hypothesis" suggests that being in office could have a moderating effect on the PRR. However, closer scrutiny reveals that populist parties may not necessarily moderate their positions and may in fact be *directly* implementing radical policies to a significant extent. Broadly speaking, populists in government follow a trajectory located along a moderation-radicalisation spectrum. At one end are parties that embark on moderation by blunting the most extreme edges of their ideas and policy stances, thus inching closer to mainstream parties. This moderation is underpinned by the Downsian logic centred on the median voter, whereby parties entering democratic institutions strive to appeal to voters positioned in the middle of the political spectrum to enlarge their electorate and maintain their office (Akkerman *et al.* 2016). Moderation is also motivated by the duties of parties in public office, which are committed to policy-making and implementation, in addition to the day-to-day running of the administration (the so-called pothole logic) (Berman 2008). The opposite behaviour is possible as well, with parties that not only remain faithful to their original radical ideas and policy stances, but that may also radicalise.

Much of the early literature on the impact of PRR parties has focused on migration policy, often considered one of the cornerstones of their identities. Until the mid-2010s, the literature often found that PRR parties were pivotal in contributing to shifting (primarily migration-related) policies to the right of the political spectrum, in what was predominantly an *indirect* effect (Akkerman 2012; Schain 2006). In other words, by contributing to increasing the salience of migration as an electoral issue, the PRR made it increasingly difficult for mainstream parties to counter the securitisation and politicisation of migration.

On the contrary, populist parties were rarely found to have succeeded in *directly* shaping migration policies, even once in power. As argued by Mudde (2016, 14), "even when [PRR parties] make it into power, they are dogs that bark loud, but hardly ever bite". Tjitske Akkerman's (2012) analysis of nine European countries, for example, found that the presence of a PRR party in a government coalition did not substantially alter the severity of the changes made to migration policy. Indeed, once in power, PRR parties may face several challenges that limit the implementation of their agenda, as issues ranging from internal strife to political compromise can trigger a

‘de-radicalisation’ process making parties lose their most extreme fringes (Akkerman and de Lange 2012; Schain 2006).

Within this complex background, it is instructive to briefly dwell on the crucial case of the Italian PRR when in office. Mattia Zulianello (2019) shows that, in the 2018-19 *Lega*-M5S government, the *Lega*’s anti-immigrant and law and order stance exemplifies the ‘negative integration’ of populist parties in government: both M5S and *Lega* cooperated but retained their ideological elements that challenged the liberal democratic values of checks and balances and pluralism. Jakob Schwörer (2022) argues that the *Lega* did not moderate its nativist messages in Facebook posts when part of the Conte I government. Daniela Giannetti *et al.* (2020) add that the *Lega* campaigned to restrict immigration policies in the Conte I government. Examining *Lega*’s participation in the Berlusconi governments, Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell (2015) demonstrate that the *Lega* did not moderate its immigration policy or discourse when in centre-right government coalitions. According to this stream of literature, then, the PRR in power did not undergo moderation.

Other scholarly works on the Italian PRR, however, contend that being in office does not imply a shift to radicalism in policy-making. Alice Cavalieri and Catarina Froio (2022), for example, analyse parliamentary questions from 1996 to 2019 to demonstrate that Italian populist parties in office do not behave radically, given the institutional constraints and the desire to present themselves as responsible and competent policymakers. Reinhard Heinisch (2003) suggests that the *Lega* in the 1994 Berlusconi I government did not deliver on its radical promises.

In terms of the current Meloni PRR government, has being in power affected its discourse and policy, and its stance toward the EU? Since Meloni became Prime Minister in October 2022 her government has polarised public opinion. According to a 2024 poll, the government’s first year of tenure was seen as positive by 36 per cent of respondents, while 55 per cent gave a negative assessment. According to the poll, the policy areas on which Meloni’s government received the most appreciation are foreign policy (38 per cent), economic policy (31 per cent), and immigration policy with 30 per cent of respondents praising it (*Sky TG24* 2024). This data shows that Meloni’s PRR government impacted several policy areas with mixed results, while Meloni oscillated between moderation and radicalisation.

Notably, the Meloni government softened its image in multiple ways in its first 100 days (a critical period for agenda-setting). First, it promoted a seemingly responsible economic policy leading (i) to the release of the agreed instalments of the NRRP (National Recovery and Resilience Plan), the latest of which was announced in December 2024 (Governo Italiano 2024); and (ii) to the cautiously optimistic forecast of 0.7 per cent GDP growth in 2025 (IMF 2025), which challenges Sergej Guriev’s (2024) point that populism discourages economic growth. Moreover, the government pursued a staunch policy of Atlanticism and, at least initially, a deferential stance towards the EU, particularly with respect to the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen (Griffini 2023). These traits dispel the myth of the PRR as Eurosceptic.

However, the government’s apparent moderation in EU affairs goes hand-in-hand with the radical repositioning of the FdI since the 2024 EU parliament elections. In fact, Meloni resentfully switched her allegiance away from von der Leyen, who did not formally open the collaboration between her centre-right European People’s Party

(EPP) and the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) parliamentary group Meloni presided over (up to December 2024).

The government's leanings on law and order, national security, immigration and gender rights have been less moderate. Despite failing to achieve the pledge of a naval blockade flaunted during the electoral campaign (*Fratelli d'Italia* 2022), Meloni's agreement with Albania on the externalisation of migration (see Griffini and Rosina 2025, this Special Issue) is a clear manifestation of the FdI's lingering radical stances since forming a government. In a similarly radical fashion, gender rights have been eroded as evidenced by the government ban on registering homosexual couple's adoptions, a policy consistent with FdI's long-standing and deep-seated radical heteronormativity (see Montecchio 2025, this Special Issue). This radicalism in gender rights sits uneasily with the government's implementation of measures to facilitate women's employment and maternity (*Fratelli d'Italia* 2022). The Meloni government's contradictory stance on gender rights is not unique to the PRR in Italy. In Poland, Anne Gwiazda (2021) demonstrates that PiS's anti-feminist and anti-gender ideology coexists with claims of representing conservative women's interests.

In conclusion, there is no scholarly consensus on whether PRR parties in government blunt their most radical edges and, in that context, how they engage with the EU. As such, this Special Issue aims to contribute to the growing analyses of the behaviour of PRR parties in office and their relationship with the EU. As mentioned above, much of the literature has focused on the influence of the PRR on migration policies, traditionally considered one of their key issues. As the PRR assumes a greater role in the EU's governments, however, it becomes necessary to move the analysis beyond migration. In this Special Issue, we broaden the thematic focus on the PRR with the exploration, in addition to migration, of the relationship between PRR parties' and gender issues, as well as freedom, technocracy, crises and foreign policy. Specifically, how have PRR parties articulated their discursive and policy positioning before and after taking office?

A populist surge? The 2024 European elections

The EU parliamentary elections in June 2024 highlighted the growing influence of the PRR within the EU. These parties performed well gaining 187 seats, slightly more than a quarter of the total number of seats in the EP. At the time of the EU elections, PRR votes were mainly split between two groups: the ECR and Identity and Democracy (ID). In July 2024, ID dissolved and two new parliamentary groups attracting PRR members emerged: Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN) and Patriots for Europe (PfE) (Starcevic and Vax 2024). At the time of writing, PfE tops the ranking with 84 MEPs, followed by the ECR with 78 MEPs and ESN trailing behind with 25 MEPs (European Parliament 2024). Despite amassing more than a quarter of the seats in the EP, the success of PRR parties has varied significantly across the EU member states. For instance, its moderate gains in Portugal (with *Chega*) and Spain (with *Vox*) diverged from the results of the PRR in Italy (FdI won 28.8 per cent of the votes), France (with the *Rassemblement National* [RN] being first at the polls with 31.4 per cent of votes), Slovenia (with SDS gaining 30.61 per cent of votes) and Germany (with the *Alternative Fur Deutschland* [AfD] winning second place at the polls with 15.9 per cent of votes) (*POLITICO*

2024). However, it should be noted that these landslides at the domestic level did not translate into a significant increase in parliamentary seats at the EU level.

Even if the success of the PRR was not uniform across EU member states and did not translate into a seismic change of the parliamentary composition, it is clear that these parties will impact coalition-making and thus policy-making in the EU parliament (see Bressanelli and De Candia 2025, this Special Issue). Indeed, it is probable that the ECR votes will entice the centre-right EPP to form a coalition in order to obtain a parliamentary majority (361/720 seats). Therefore, the ECR may have a degree of influence over the pro-EU (and largest group) EPP, with the potential to shift their policies further to the right. As Nicholas Vinocur's (2024) incisive analysis maintains, "[w]hile Europe's right-wing parties are unlikely to unite as a single block, their surge in support – and their normalization as political forces – will increase pressure on European leaders to crack down on migration to the bloc, water down plans to decarbonize the economy and possibly dial back the EU's support for Ukraine".

The Italian case, as this Special Issue shows, is peculiar in the context of the latest EU Parliament elections, as it highlighted tensions within the Meloni government coalition and between the PRR parties and the EU. Notably, there is a rift between *Lega* led by Salvini, which is now part of the PFE (though it was part of ID during the elections) and has been critical of von der Leyen, and Meloni's FdI, which leads the ECR and seeks to maintain a cordial relationship with the EU, especially on specific key policy issues such as the war in Ukraine. Indeed, Meloni courted von der Leyen at length in her first 100 days of government (Griffini 2023). In comparison to its previous results, the European election results demonstrated *Lega's* relative irrelevance, polling only 9.1 per cent of the vote (*YouTrend* 2024). Despite this setback, Salvini has been vying for attention *vis-à-vis* Meloni by making a series of radical remarks on a plethora of topics. Moreover, while proclaiming hostility against von der Leyen and the EU generally during the elections, Salvini has strengthened ties with RN's leader Marine Le Pen in a ham-fisted attempt to steer ID group dynamics.

Thus, the recent EP elections brought to the forefront the growing influence of PRR parties not only at the national level but also at the EU level. This increased relevance underscores the urgency of further examining these parties' discursive and policy positions, particularly before and after entering government, and their relationship with the EU. The Italian case study is accompanied by additional case studies aimed at extending the analytical reach of the Special Issue beyond Western Europe, to relevant countries in Southern, Central and Eastern Europe where the PRR has enjoyed stints in government.

Findings of the Special Issue

Covering a wide range of policy areas and countries, this Special Issue investigates how being in opposition or in government shaped PRR parties' discursive and policy positioning broadly speaking, with a particular emphasis on how parties frame and engage with the EU.

The research articles contribute to these discussions by focusing on multiple aspects. Starting with the examination of the behaviour of the PRR in the EU, this Special Issue opens with an analysis of the voting behaviour of the ECR group in the EP by de Candia and Bressanelli. Next, Cozzolino and Fifi offer a robust conceptual grounding of

populism, by analysing, respectively, how the concept of populism is entangled with technocracy and how it is employed by its critics. The focus of the Special Issue subsequently shifts to migration and foreign policy, with articles by Petrović and Bilić examining continuities and discontinuities in PRR's foreign policy and by Griffini and Rosina analysing Italy's migration externalisation agreements with Libya and Albania. We then move to the policies and discourse of the PRR concerning freedom and gender. Specifically, Alekseev assesses the discursive construction of 'freedom' and Montecchio examines anti-gender agendas in the PRR discourse.

In the first article, "The European Conservatives and Reformists Group: Cooperation or Opposition in Europe's Parliament?", Margherita de Candia and Edoardo Bressanelli investigate the position of the ECR group within the EP. The focus on the EP is particularly significant starting point for the Special Issue as it is a crucial arena where one can gauge the PRR's relationship with the EU. Traditionally supporting a nationalist, conservative and Eurosceptic (but not anti-European) stance, the ECR is becoming increasingly important. Not only has it become the third largest group in the EP following the recent elections, but its member parties have also enjoyed success in their domestic governments, as seen in the cases of FdI in Italy, the Civic Democratic Party (ODS) in the Czech Republic, the PiS in Poland and the New Flemish Alliance (N-VA) in Belgium. By analysing 1,300 EP plenary votes between 2019 and 2022, de Candia and Bressanelli examine whether the ECR supported the majority coalition in the EP, or whether they acted as an opposition group. Their findings reveal that the ECR mostly played a cooperative role, aligning more often with the centre-right EPP than with that of the far-right ID group. Notably, however, while the ECR aligned with the EPP on several matters, this was not the case for three key policy areas (constitutional affairs, international development and gender issues), where their traditional 'soft-Eurosceptic' ideology was prioritised. Furthermore, by examining EP negotiations on the New Pact on Migration and Asylum as a crucial case study, the authors question whether national parties grouped in the ECR share a common ideology or whether national interests prevail. They reveal that the general anti-migration stance of the ECR group often fails to translate into cohesive voting patterns, with national political groups within the ECR frequently prioritising their national interests.

In the following article, "It Takes Two to Tango: The Technocracy-populism Nexus in Italy and the EU from a Critical-realist Perspective", Adriano Cozzolino explores the relationship between populism and technocracy in Italy, in the broader context of the EU. The country is taken as a crucial case given its growing number of technical ministers and its four technocratic-led or fully technocratic governments since the 1990s. Adopting a critical-realist approach, the author explores the complementarity and historical roots of populism and technocracy, arguing that the two originate from the same roots – namely, the crisis of party politics and representative democracy since the 1990s. Specifically, Cozzolino argues, this period acted as a critical juncture that triggered several path-dependent processes, including the rise of experts and agencies in policy-making, the strengthening of executives and the expansion of the EU policy framework. Following the Berlusconi governments of the 2000s, the 2008 global financial crisis strengthened the ties between populism and technocracy. Throughout, the EU played a key role in defining the relationship between populism and technocracy, due to its strong technocratic core, which promoted top-down and expert-led decision-making. It also

contributed to shaping this relationship by affecting domestic dynamics, including by setting macroeconomic constraints and offering populist parties the opportunity to position themselves against a ‘Europe of technocrats’.

In “Inventing and Re-inventing Populism to Protect Europe: The Case of the Italian *Partito Democratico*, 2007-2022”, Gianmarco Fifi uses the Italian case to explore how the term ‘populism’ is used by its critics to support European integration. While the literature pays significant attention to populist actors’ role, discourse and influence, how the label is employed by its critics to warn the public against potential challenges to the *status quo* and to stigmatise unwelcomed stances requires further analysis. Focusing on the case of the Italian centre-left *Partito Democratico* (PD), Fifi shows that the party has adapted the meaning of ‘populism’ to varying circumstances and debates at the EU level. In the early 2010s the term was used by the PD to challenge allegedly unproductive uses of spending by the Berlusconi government and then by the M5S-*Lega* coalition. As European endorsement of austerity shrank, since 2019 populism has been used as a synonym for right-wing anti-Europeanism. Notably, Fifi concludes, the PD’s anti-populist discourse has evolved over time, targeting policy areas that, from time to time, were perceived as threats to the EU and to European integration more broadly.

In “Why History Matters? Populist Radical Right Governments in the EU and Their Foreign Policy”, Nikola Petrović and Josip Bilić compare the cases of *Fidesz* in Hungary, PiS in Poland, SDS in Slovenia and FdI in Italy, to analyse whether PRR’s visions of history explain their attitudes towards the EU and their foreign policy choices in opposition and in government. Interestingly, the authors argue, the four analysed parties were all shaped by their historical opposition to communism, which they reappropriated against new targets, especially liberal pro-Europeans. The findings indicate it is imperative to recognise nuances in the behaviour of the PRR before and after entering government. Indeed, the authors suggest that in Central and Eastern Europe, the PRR radicalised while in power, whereas the opposite occurred in Italy. In Poland and Hungary, PiS and *Fidesz* adopted more extreme and oppositional stances, emphasising the need to reclaim national sovereignty and “even play[ing] with hard Euroscepticism”. According to the authors, this is motivated by the perception that these countries’ sovereignty was undermined both during the Cold War and the strenuous process of joining the EU. In Slovenia, SDS’s Euroscepticism was less pronounced, potentially reflecting the fact that the country never sought regional leadership, unlike Poland and Hungary. In Italy, once FdI entered government it moderated its Eurosceptic position. As the authors explain, Meloni sought to present herself as a credible politician for EU partners with the ambition to secure a strong role for Italy consistent with its status as a founding member state. The authors also examine the crucial case of the war in Ukraine. While PiS, SDS and FdI all moderated their stances and moved closer to mainstream positions, *Fidesz* maintained an oppositional stance and became more isolated within the EU. Overall, Petrović and Bilić argue that PRR parties’ visions of history are key to understanding their contemporary stances towards the EU and their foreign policy in general.

Foreign policy is also the focus of Marianna Griffini’s and Matilde Rosina’s article, “An Ideological Divide? Political Parties’ Discourse in Italy’s Migration Cooperation with Libya and Albania”. The authors investigate PRR parties’ discursive positioning on the externalisation of migration controls in Europe. Focusing on the crucial cases of Italy’s migration agreements with Libya in 2017 and Albania in 2023, they question whether

parties' traditional ideological distinctions still hold in debates over migration externalisation and how the EU is portrayed in such debates. The authors argue that two logics – a security logic and a rights-oriented one – predominated in parties' discourse on migration externalisation, cutting across party lines. Such logics were particularly blurred in the deal with Libya, less so with Albania. This leads Griffini and Rosina to suggest that parties' discursive stances on migration externalisation are likely to be more ambiguous during times of (real or perceived) crisis and when centre-left parties are in power. Furthermore, parties frequently depicted the EU as an arena for Italy to project its influence and, in this case, to advance the country's role as a mediator with Libya and Albania. In the case of Albania, PRR parties also portrayed the EU as a source of legitimacy, to validate the deal and the government's international standing, and to withstand criticism. Overall, the article demonstrates that parties with different political orientations can present unexpectedly similar rhetoric on the externalisation of migration and that PRR parties may use the EU to validate their domestic policies and international reputation.

In the next article “Freedom in Populist Radical Right Discourses: The Polish ‘Island of Freedom’ in the 2019 European Parliament election”, Alexander Alekseev explores how PRR parties construct the notion of ‘freedom’ in the context of the EU when in power. Indeed, PRR parties throughout Europe have engaged in a discursive struggle over the meaning of freedom, with many reclaiming the term ‘freedom’ in their names (such as the Freedom Party of Austria and the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands). During the 2019 EP elections, the clash between PiS-led Poland and the EU became a conflict over sovereignty, leading PiS to leverage the term by referring to their country as “an island of freedom” in Europe. Overall, looking at the case of Poland's PiS and its 2019 EP election campaign, the author argues that freedom is employed as an important tool to define Polish national identity, as well as to delineate between Poland and its enemies in the European milieu.

Laura Montecchio concludes the Special Issue by investigating PRR parties' stances on gender policy in her article “Italy's Populist Radical Right and Anti-Gender Discourses: Lega, FdI and the Case of the Zan Bill”. Had this bill been adopted, it would have criminalised homo-bi-transphobia and discrimination against women and people with disabilities. Following active campaigning by the PRR *Lega* and FdI, however, the bill was rejected, in line with the Italian PRR's support for traditional notions of family and gender roles. Montecchio draws from the case of the Zan Bill to argue that the Italian PRR not only targets immigrants as external ‘others’, but also depicts the LGBTQ+ community as an internal threat to the community through the process of Othering.

In conclusion, by examining a variety of countries, this Special Issue contributes to ongoing debates about the discursive and policy positions of PRR parties before and after entering government, with a specific emphasis on their relation to the EU. While the Special Issue does not lay claims to an exhaustive representation of the whole of Europe, these contributions mark a meaningful step toward understanding the implications of the increasing influence of the PRR across the European political landscape in Italy, Slovenia, Poland and Hungary. Future research could build on these findings by exploring the evolving dynamics of PRR parties in other European countries, as well as their shifting stances and influence on additional policy issues such as the welfare state, rule of law and climate change.

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This article analyses existing data as cited in the “References” section.

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