

## Radical right parties & attitudes towards immigration Europe in the 2000s

The electoral success of radical right parties in Europe in the last decade has not led to people in general having a more negative attitude towards immigration. This is the conclusion of Andrea Bohman and Mikael Hjerm in their Delmi report (2014:1). Their results are based on an analysis of anti-immigration sentiment in 16 European countries between 2002–2012. Considering the general concern about increased xenophobia, the mass-media image of European racism on the rise, and sociology theories on how xenophobic attitudes are formed, this is a surprising conclusion. The report also indicates a need for further research. More studies are needed to identify and explain possible deviations from the pattern, and to monitor other consequences of the radical right parties' electoral success.

### Immigration and attitudes

Since the early 2000s, parties such as Jobbik in Hungary, the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy in the Netherlands and the Sweden Democrats in Sweden have taken seats in their national parliaments. In other parts of Europe, for example France and Austria, this type of party has been represented in local, regional and national politics for a longer period of time. Radical right parties have a populist and/or nationalist image, and a will to protect and preserve their perception of the nation from outside influence.

Even though the radical right parties in Europe aim to drastically reduce immigration, few studies have looked at what their success has meant for people's attitudes towards immigration and immigrants. Social

science theories would prompt us to assume that their political success, with all that it entails in terms of increased attention and negative gambits relating to immigration issues, has led to an increased aversion to immigration in Europe.

So far, there has been no studies to systematically test this assumption in several countries simultaneously, and to analyse the connection over time.

### Aim and method

The aim of the study is therefore to examine the importance of radical right parties for attitudes towards immigration between the years 2002 and 2012. With the help of comparative data, it looks at the consequences that the radical right electoral successes have had to the degree of anti-immigration

sentiment in 16 European countries, as well as for the development of anti-immigration sentiment over time. By using three different indicators of the electoral success of the radical right parties and attitude data from the European Social Survey (ESS), three possible consequences are studied:

1. Have people's attitudes to immigration generally become more negative?
2. Has the opposition to immigration changed and become stronger, depending on the ethnicity of the immigrants?
3. Has the attitudes towards immigration become increasingly polarised, i.e. has the opposition towards immigration increased in some while the opposition has been reduced in others?

Even if the presence of radical right parties could also have other consequences, such as influencing other political parties and migration policy, it is important to improve knowledge of how attitudes change. If negative attitudes to immigration and immigrants are increasing, it could lead to increased discrimination in society.

## Theoretical assumptions

The idea of a homogeneous nation is a central fundament of the radical right parties. The purpose of limiting immigration is to as far as possible protect the domestic population from a perceived outside threat. These can for example be perceived threats against culture and values, or against welfare and maintenance possibilities. As the radical right parties' electoral success grows, their opportunities to communicate this message also increases, as do their possibilities of influencing people's attitudes. Subsequently, attitudes towards immigration are expected to become more negative as the result of the electoral success of the radical right parties, according to the framing theory and the group threat hypothesis.

The framing theory describes how politicians communicate given frames of reference, by emphasising certain aspects of a phenomenon or presenting a certain issue in a certain way. These frames of reference affect how people view the

phenomenon in question, and by extension also the conclusions that people draw in connection to that phenomenon.

The group threat hypothesis identifies the perception of a threat as an important condition for negative feelings against other groups. Since the radical right parties communicate an interpretative framework that depict immigrants as a threat to the native population, the presence of immigrants will most likely increase the probability for such attitudes to develop. The fact that immigrant issues are brought onto the political agenda can also contribute to increasing anti-immigration sentiment. The increased visibility can in turn lead to people perceiving immigration as a greater threat, which according to the group threat hypothesis is expected to lead to more xenophobia.

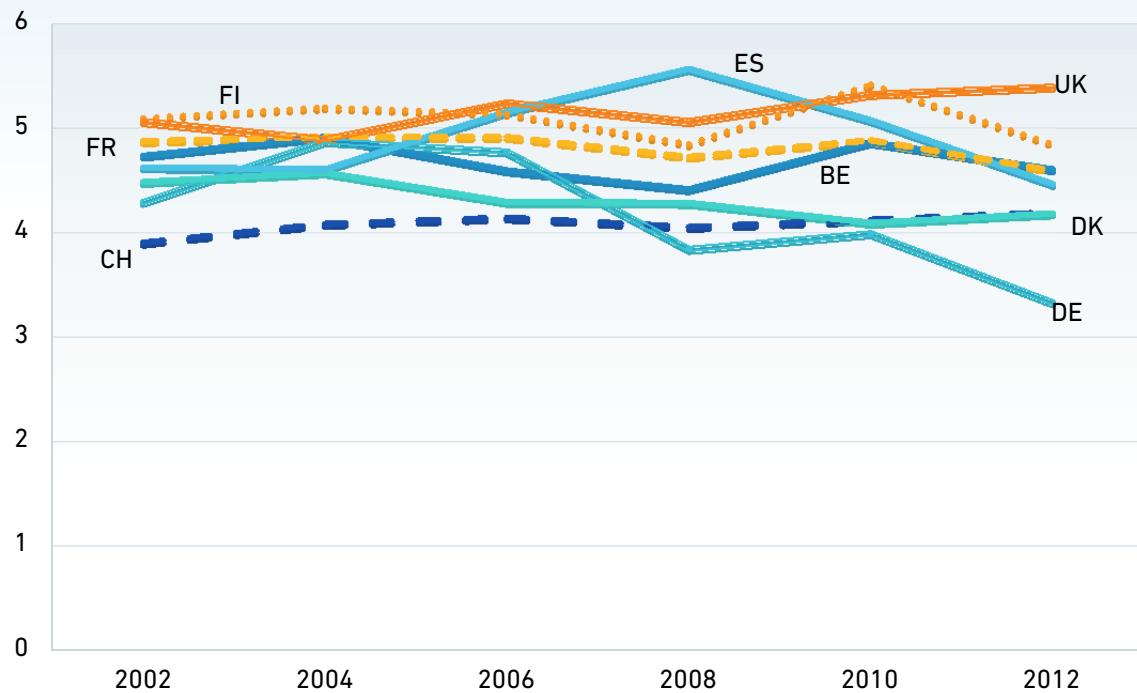
From this perspective, it can also be expected that radical right parties entering the parliament will contribute to legitimatising negative attitudes towards immigrants and immigration. The fact that a party in parliament promotes these questions can reduce the possible stigmas relating to xenophobia and anti-immigration sentiment, which in turn can make people more prone to openly express such opinions and attempt to influence others.

## Results

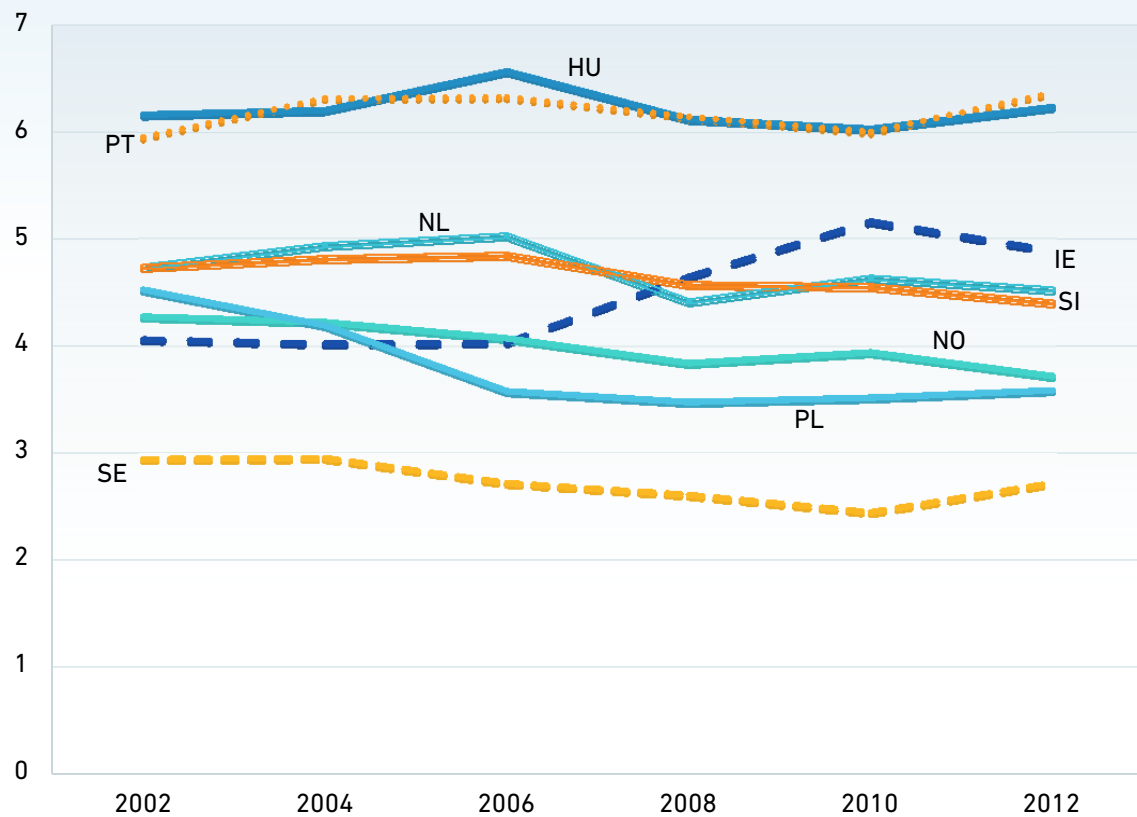
The survey looks at anti-immigration sentiment in 16 European countries in the period 2002–2012. Attitudes vary slightly depending on country. In some countries, anti-immigration sentiment increases over the studied period, while the attitudes in other countries are becoming cautiously more positive, or remain unchanged. However, the analyses in the report indicate that these differences cannot be explained by the parliamentary presence of radical right parties. Anti-immigration sentiment is not more predominant in countries where radical right parties hold a stronger position, and the changes in such sentiment that appear cannot be traced back to the electoral success of this kind of party.

The report highlights three different aspects of the radical right parties' presence; their actual presence (whether they are represented or not), their

## Immigration resistance 0-10



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representative strength (how great a share of the seats in parliament they hold), and their nationalist message (how much emphasis they put on their own nation in their policy). The analysis thereby takes into account the fact that radical right parties differ in terms of size and, to some extent orientation. However, the results unequivocally show that the success of the radical right parties cannot explain the development of anti-immigration sentiment in the period of 2002–2012. Nor do the radical right parties seem to have had any direct influence on the nature of opposition or the polarisation of attitudes towards immigrations.

In other words, the presence of radical right parties has not led to an increase in the overall opposition towards immigration. Nor has it led to people in general becoming more prone to prefer immigrants of the same ethnicity as the majority population in the country, or make attitudes towards immigration more polarised within the countries.

## Conclusion and policy relevance

What do the results of the study entail in a broader perspective? Does this mean that the success of radical right parties in Europe is unimportant? This interpretation would not only be problematic, but completely wrong, and for several reasons.

First of all, the study results do not exclude radical right parties being able to influence people in other ways than in terms of attitudes. Previous research has shown that people are more prone to act in accordance with their attitudes if they feel that the people around them are more allowing. To the extent that radical right parties contribute to a more permissive climate, their presence might make xenophobic individuals more prone to act on their attitudes, for example by treating people differently based on their origin and appearance.

Secondly, the radical right parties can also influence immigration and integration policy in a country. Previous research shows that this can happen both directly, if they manage to take part in government, and indirectly if the traditional parties embrace the ideas of the radical right parties in order to win over

their voters. Based on this study, it is impossible to make any statements regarding the extent to which this has happened during the studied time period.

Third of all, there is a risk that the presence of radical right parties influences people who are not included in their definition of the national community. If, as an immigrant, a person is indicated as an illegitimate user of the welfare systems, a criminal or a threat to certain cultural values, this can contribute to a feeling of impotence, which further hinders the integration process.

The general conclusion of this study does not exclude the possibility that radical right parties may have influenced attitudes in more limited contexts, for example in certain municipalities or individual countries. For this reason, more research is needed to investigate whether there are cases – in countries or municipalities – deviating from the general pattern. Researchers should then look at possible causes, such as factors related to the radical right party as such, the actions of traditional political parties, the party's influence over policy, or other social factors, such as the situation in the labour market or the scope of the welfare state.

In a broader perspective, this study should be seen as a contribution to the research on what influences the view of immigration and the conditions for integration and social inclusion. The study provides no conclusive answer, but constitutes an important puzzle-piece in the work to understand the consequences of the radical right parties' electoral success in Europe.