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Brexit: The Mainstreaming of Right-Wing Populist Discourse

Introduction

On Thursday 23 June 2016, a referendum was held to decide whether or not the United Kingdom (UK) should remain a member of the European Union (EU). More than 30 million people turned out to vote, with 51.9 per cent voting in favour of "Leave" and 48.1 per cent voting to "Remain".[1] The referendum campaign was particularly hard fought and revealed deep divisions within the country. Analysts are still piecing together the reasons why Britain voted to leave the EU, while also trying to decipher exactly what a British exit from the EU – or "Brexit" – actually entails. At a time when we are witnessing the rise of right-wing populist movements and a rejection of the establishment in Europe and the United States (US), this contribution aims to highlight how such rhetoric has managed to enter mainstream political discourse in the context of the Brexit campaign, and the negative consequences this has.

Euroscepticism: A Very British Problem

The pledge to hold an in-out referendum regarding membership of the EU was outlined in the Conservative Party's 2015 manifesto.[2] The idea was that if the Conservative Party were to win a majority in the May 2015 general election, David Cameron would try to renegotiate the UK's position within the EU and then ask the British electorate whether the UK should remain a member of the EU based on these reforms.[3] While the manifesto pledge and the Conservative Party's subsequent success in the 2015 general election are the immediate reasons why a referendum on Britain's membership in the EU took place in June 2016, this campaign has arguably been in the making for a quarter of a century.[4] Since joining the then European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973, Britain's EU membership has been a contentious issue across the entirety of the political spectrum. As a reluctant latecomer to the club, the

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1   Cf. Alex Hunt/Brian Wheeler, *Brexit: All you need to know about the UK leaving the EU*, BBC News, 10 November 2016, at: http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-32810887.
2   Cf. The Conservative Party, *The Conservative Party Manifesto 2015,* pp. 72-73, at: https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/manifesto2015/ConservativeManifesto2015.pdf.
3   Cf. ibid.
4   Cf. Andrew S. Crines, The rhetoric of the EU Referendum campaign*,* in: Daniel Jackson/Einar Thorsen/Dominic Wring (eds), *EU Referendum Analysis 2016: Media, Voters and the Campaign: Early reflections from leading UK academics*, Poole, June 2016, p. 61.

UK has displayed more of a transactional relationship with the EU than one based on ideological ties.[5] In 1975, it was the Labour Party led by Harold Wilson that put the issue of EEC membership to the public.[6] However unlike in 2016, the British population voted to remain in the EEC, with 67 per cent in favour.[7] While the Labour Party was initially more Eurosceptic,[8] and a few Labour Members of Parliament (MPs) remain so,[9] this is rather an issue that has plagued and divided the Conservative Party since Margaret Thatcher was ousted. The Economist argues that a key turning point for the Conservative Party was in 1988, when Jacques Delors – the European Commission's president at the time – announced that Europe's single market would be bolstered by tougher labour and social regulations.[10] This went too far in the eyes of some, and, as Thatcher stated in her 1988 Bruges speech: "To try to suppress nationhood and concentrate power at the centre of a European conglomerate would be highly damaging and would jeopardise the objectives we seek to achieve."[11] This speech not only inspired a generation of Conservative Party Eurosceptics, but also fuelled the right-wing British press, who have used their publications to air criticisms about the EU ever since.[12] So began the rhetoric of shadowy unelected bureaucrats in Brussels attempting to enforce a stronger economic and political union onto sovereign states.

Disunity on the issue continued during John Major's tenure as prime minister, and while the Conservatives were the opposition party between 1997 and 2010. When David Cameron assumed leadership of the party in 2005, he was brought in as a modernizer and expressed the view that his peers should stop "banging on" about Europe if they wanted to regain power after three unsuccessful elections.[13] Cameron underestimated this however, and not only did he face strong opposition from his own MPs, but the rise of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) and its leader Nigel Farage also presented major problems. Within the last decade, Farage has been able to lead

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5   Cf. The roots of Euroscepticism, in: *The Economist*, 12 March 2016, at: http://www. economist.com/news/britain/21694557-why-britons-are-warier-other-europeans-eu-roots-euroscepticism.

6   Cf. ibid.

7   Cf. Matthew d'Ancona, Brexit: how a fringe idea took hold of the Tory party, in: *The Guardian*, 15 June 2016, at: https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jun/15/brexit-how-a-fringe-idea-took-hold-tory-party.

8   Leaving the EEC was a Labour Party pledge in 1983, cf. The Labour Party, *The New Hope for Britain: Labour's Manifesto 1983*, full text available at: http://www. politicsresources.net/area/uk/man/lab83.htm.

9   Ten Labour MPs expressed their support for the Leave campaign, cf. *EU vote: Where the cabinet and other MPs stand*, BBC News, 22 June 2016, at: http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-eu-referendum-35616946.

10   Cf. The Economist, cited above (Note 5).

11   Full speech at: http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/107332.

12   Cf. Dominic Wring, From Super-Market to Orwellian Super-State: the origins and growth of newspaper scepticism, in: Jackson/Thorsen/Wring (eds), cited above (Note 4), pp. 12-13.

13   Cited in: *Cameron places focus on optimism*, BBC News, 1 October 2006, at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/5396358.stm.

his party from a single-issue fringe movement to one that has had a considerable impact on the course of British politics.[14]

The Rise of UKIP and the Right-Wing Populists

James Dennison and Matthew Goodwin attribute UKIP's success to their assuming "ownership" of the immigration issue, which had historically been a Conservative strength.[15] Immigration has become an increasingly prominent issue in British politics, and polls have shown that anxieties regarding increased immigration have surpassed economic concerns in recent years.[16] In light of this, UKIP has successfully managed to exploit these anxieties and entrench issues of uncontrolled immigration into their broader Eurosceptic and anti-establishment narrative.[17] UKIP performed well in the 2013 local elections,[18] but their real success was seen in the 2014 European Parliament elections where they came first, defeating Labour, the Conservatives, and the Liberal Democrats.[19] This victory was particularly significant as it was the first time a party other than Labour or the Conservatives had won a UK-wide election in 100 years.[20] The keys to UKIP's success were its ability to capitalize on the Labour Party's disillusioned electorate in its "Northern Heartlands" and the divisions that existed within the Conservative Party on Europe, while also exploiting both parties' perceived incompetence regarding immigration. UKIP's gains prompted the Conservatives to take the issues of immigration and the EU more seriously during the 2015 general election campaign.[21] While the first-past-the-post system largely prohibits representation of smaller parties in the parliament, UKIP accrued over four million popular votes (12.6 per cent) in the 2015 general election. The party only won one seat in parliament, yet outperformed the Liberal Democrats as the third most popular party in the UK.[22]

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14 Cf. James Dennison/Matthew Goodwin, Immigration, Issue Ownership and the Rise of UKIP, in: *Parliamentary Affairs,* supplementary issue, September 2015, pp. 168-187.
15 Cf. ibid., p. 179.
16 Cf. Ipsos MORI, *Economist/Ipsos MORI Issues Index*, October 2016, p. 2, at: https://www.ipsos-mori.com/Assets/Docs/Polls/issues-index-october-2016-charts.pdf.
17 Cf. Dennison/Goodwin, cited above (Note 14).
18 Cf. Colin Rallings/Michael Thrasher, *Local Elections in England and Wales May 2013*, August 2013, at: http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0017/163142/EandW-local-elections-data-report2-11-06.pdf.
19 Cf. European Parliament, *Results of the 2014 European Elections, Results by Country, United Kingdom*, at: http://www.europarl.europa.eu/elections2014-results/en/country-results-uk-2014.html.
20 Cf. *Farage: UKIP has 'momentum' and is targeting more victories*, BBC News, 26 May 2014, at: http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-27567744.
21 Cf. Neil Ewen, The age of Nigel: Farage, the media, and Brexit, in: Jackson/Thorsen/Wring (eds), cited above (Note 4), pp. 86-87.
22 Cf. *Election 2015, Results*, BBC News, at: http://www.bbc.com/news/election/2015/results.

UKIP's rise is reflective of the situation across Europe and the US, where there has been a surge in support for right-wing populist parties and figures. Cas Mudde, a seasoned expert on the issue, defines populism as "an ideology that separates society into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' and 'the corrupt elite', and that holds that politics should be an expression of the 'general will' of the people".[23] Mudde argues that recent events that have stoked public anxieties, including the refugee situation, terrorist attacks in Europe in 2015 and 2016, and the Eurozone crisis, have created favourable conditions for populist parties – on both the right and the left of the political spectrum. However, Mudde contends that current events have not created such movements, and, contrary to conventional wisdom, support for right-wing populists is not necessarily attributable to economic factors – for example, among the economic "losers" of globalization or those who suffered as a result of the Great Recession that followed the global financial crisis in 2008. To understand this phenomenon, we need to look back at the first decades of the post-war era, when the political parties converged on key issues, such as increased political integration in Europe, maintaining the welfare state, neo-liberal economic policies, and promoting diversity within societies. This era was also marked by de-industrialization, and a decline in religious values. Both centre-left and centre-right parties took a step back from their historical ideologies and converged on a number of policies that "created a fertile breeding ground for populism".[24] The working class and more conservative voters that tended to opt for the centre-left and centre-right parties, respectively, found that the parties were too similar and had lost the ideology that they had once identified with. Moreover, deeper EU integration saw some aspects of power removed from national governments and placed in the hands of unelected commissioners, which some saw as a major threat to sovereignty. The internet has also aided the growth in support for right-wing populists, as alternative news is available at the touch of a button and can be shared within individuals' own "echo chambers" on social media. Populist narratives can be widely distributed through this medium, without the "gatekeeping function" of the traditional media to dispute or correct often simplified or false claims.[25] That being said, the traditional right-wing media in the UK has also been very much culpable of fabricating the truth, especially when it comes to the topic of the EU. The dedicated Euromyths website is testament to this.[26]

Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris tested two theories in relation to the rise of populism, and their results very much correlate with Mudde's idea that

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23   Cas Mudde, Europe's Populist Surge: A Long Time in the Making, in: *Foreign Affairs* 6/2016, at: https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/europe/2016-10-17/europe-s-populist-surge.
24   Ibid.
25   Cf. ibid.
26   Cf. European Commission, *Euromyths*, at: http://blogs.ec.europa.eu/ECintheUK/euromyths-a-z-index.

support for populism is not necessarily grounded in economic insecurity, but rather represents a reaction to cultural changes. In other words, populist movements are particularly attractive to those who feel that their traditional values and customs are being threatened by cosmopolitan ideas and increased diversity.[27] Inglehart and Norris argue that this is largely a result of an increased emphasis on issues such as climate change, gender and racial equality, and equal rights for the LGBT community. This in turn has created a "cultural backlash" predominantly among (but not limited to) older, less educated white males, "who once dominated the majority culture in Western societies, [and] have come to feel that they are being marginalized within their own countries".[28] Right-wing populist politicians articulate a strong rejection of new cosmopolitan values and appeal to nostalgia for the more homogenous societies of days gone by. Taken together, it is clear that these political shifts in the post-war era stimulated a climate in which right-wing populists could create a platform for themselves. Recent events such as the Great Recession and the so-called refugee crisis have "turbocharged" the growth of such parties, boosting their support. This has made it easier for right-wing populist agendas to enter the mainstream, where they have come to strongly influence public debates.[29] Mudde goes on to argue that politicians within the established parties "merely react, sometimes even adopting elements of populist rhetoric, peppering their speeches with references to 'the people' and condemnations of 'elites'."[30]

In the case of the UK, UKIP not only managed to put an EU referendum on the agenda but also to make immigration a major issue in the 2015 general election. These debates are not necessarily problematic in themselves; it is rather the way in which they have been conducted that raises cause for concern. As will be demonstrated below, those from established political parties who campaigned for Leave adopted and mimicked certain tactics used by right-wing populist parties. This is unsettling, as it effectively normalizes the more extreme aspects of right-wing populism, such as xenophobia and nationalism.

The Campaign: Facts vs. "Post-Truth"

The EU referendum campaign was officially led by two main groups: Britain Stronger in Europe and Vote Leave. While the Remain side was largely united, with David Cameron officially leading the cross-party initiative, Vote

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27 Cf. Ronald F. Inglehart/Pippa Norris, *Trump, Brexit, and the rise of Populism: Economic have-nots and cultural backlash*, Harvard Kennedy School Faculty Research Working Paper Series, August 2016, at: https://ces.fas.harvard.edu/uploads/files/events/Inglehart-and-Norris-Populism.pdf.
28 Ibid., p. 20.
29 Cf. Mudde, cited above (Note 23).
30 Ibid.

Leave originally battled it out with another campaign, Grassroots Out (also known as Leave.EU) to be the official Leave campaign. Vote Leave was headed by prominent Conservatives, such as Boris Johnson, Michael Gove, Chris Grayling, and Iain Duncan Smith, as well as the majority of Labour MPs who supported leaving the EU, and UKIP's only MP, Douglas Carswell. Leave.EU was founded by UKIP's major donor Arron Banks and backed by Nigel Farage. Leave.EU merged with Grassroots Out shortly after the latter, which was backed by Labour MP Kate Hoey and Conservative MP David Davis, was launched in January 2016.[31] As the official campaigns, Britain Stronger in Europe and Vote Leave (hereafter referred to as the Remain and Leave campaigns respectively) were allowed increased spending limits, public grants of up to 600,000 pounds, more campaign broadcasts, and access to public meeting rooms and the electoral register. Grassroots Out/Leave.UK campaigned within its own capacity and was led by Nigel Farage who sought to distance the group from the "Westminster bubble" of the official Leave campaign.[32]

The EU referendum campaign presented a chance for an open and constructive debate on the advantages and disadvantages of EU membership and a way to address citizens' legitimate concerns. This opportunity was not taken, however, as the campaign was plagued with emotion, moral panics,[33] and deception. In 2016, the Oxford Dictionaries declared "post-truth" the word of the year.[34] The adjective "post-truth" was defined by the dictionary as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief".[35] The word was chosen as a reflection of the EU referendum and the US presidential election campaigns. Post-truth tactics are also often employed by populist politicians, who thrive on providing simple answers to very complicated, emotionally-charged issues. Take for example the Leave campaign's infamous "battle bus", which claimed: "We send the EU £350 million a week, let's fund our National Health Service (NHS) instead. Vote Leave. Let's take back control." This claim was untrue on both counts. Iain Duncan Smith back-pedalled on the pledge just days after the referendum, claiming that he never made such a promise and a "lion's share" of that money *may* be spent on the NHS depending on what the government decides,[36] notwith-

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31   Cf. *The battle to be the official EU referendum Leave campaign*, BBC News, 14 March 2016, at: http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-34484687.
32   Cf. ibid.
33   Defined in the *Oxford Dictionary* as: "An instance of public anxiety or alarm in response to a problem regarded as threatening the moral standards of society".
34   Cf. Alison Flood, "Post-truth" named word of the year by Oxford Dictionaries, in: *The Guardian*, 15 November 2016, at: https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/nov/15/post-truth-named-word-of-the-year-by-oxford-dictionaries.
35   Cited in: ibid.
36   Cf. Graeme Demianyk, Iain Duncan Smith Says £350m "Brexit" NHS Pledge Was "Never" A Commitment, in: *Huffington Post*, 26 June 2016, at: http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/iain-duncan-smith-350m-brexit-nhs-bus_uk_576f9f5ae4b0d2571149c4d1.

standing the fact that in terms of net contributions the figure is far less.[37] The Remain campaign attempted to debunk this, and a number of fact-checking websites, including Full Fact, also confirmed that the figure of 350 million pounds was wrong. However, it was too late, the message was out there, emblazoned on a bus touring the country and appealing to a wide range of people who were sincerely concerned that EU membership was causing a strain on national public services. Susan Banducci and Dan Stevens suggest that on a psychological level, individuals may selectively resist information and facts that run contrary to their own beliefs, or rather, what they want to believe. Thus, they argue in the context of the "battle bus" claim that those who really wished to spend the money on the NHS instead of the EU chose not to engage with the facts.[38] Arron Banks of Grassroots Out even boasted that "facts would not win the day",[39] a sentiment echoed by Michael Gove, who argued that "people in this country have had enough of experts".[40] Such rhetoric taps into a sentiment that is fundamental to right-wing populism: distrust of the "elite" and a disregard for experts telling the "ordinary decent person" how to live their lives. Such contempt for expert opinion from a supposedly respected MP such as Michael Gove demonstrates how populist ideas are being touted by centre-right politicians.

A YouGov poll conducted on the day of the referendum asked respondents to pinpoint the most important issue (out of a choice of ten) in deciding how to vote. Most tellingly, for Leave voters, sovereignty and immigration were the two most important reasons, with 45 and 26 per cent choosing these options, respectively. For those who voted Remain, the economy played the key role in influencing 40 per cent. On the other hand, only five per cent of Leave voters cited economic concerns as the main influence on their vote. Sovereignty was a concern for 21 per cent of Remain voters; yet only one per cent claimed that immigration was important in their decision. Moreover, only two per cent of either side cited trust of the respective campaigns as an influential factor in their decision.[41]

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37   Cf. *Vote Leave "facts" leaflet: membership fee*, Full Fact, 23 May 2016, at: https://fullfact.org/europe/vote-leave-facts-leaflet-membership-fee.
38   Cf. Susan Banducci/Dan Stevens, Myth versus fact: are we living in a post-factual democracy? In: Jackson/Thorsen/Wring (eds), cited above (Note 4), p. 22.
39   Cf. Katherine Viner, How technology disrupted the truth, in: *The Guardian,* 12 July 2016, at: https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/jul/12/how-technology-disrupted-the-truth
40   Cited in: ibid.
41   Cf. YouGov Survey Results, at: https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/640yx5m0rx/On_the_Day_FINAL_poll_forwebsite.pdf.
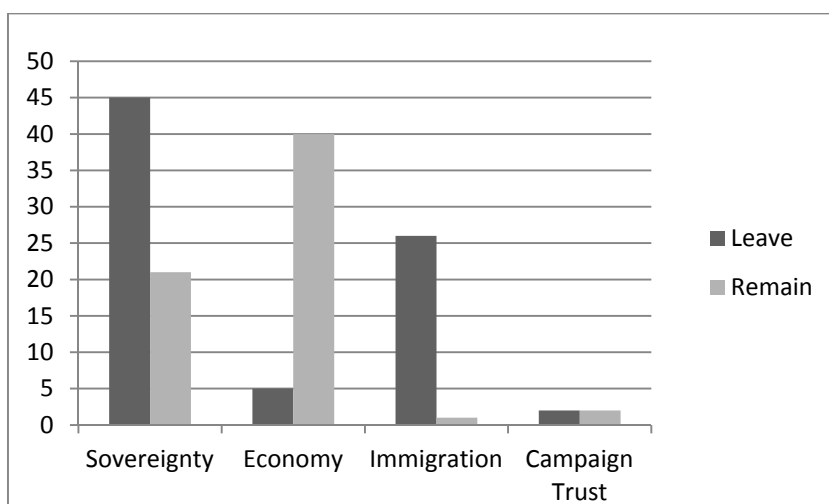
These findings are interesting, but they are not surprising given the focal points of both campaigns. As such, the Remain campaign concentrated much of its energy on the negative economic effects of a Leave vote, while immigration and sovereignty were the leading themes of the Leave campaign. As Sofia Vasilopoulou observes, the immigration frame was dominant in both the official Leave and Grassroots Out campaigns, which were successful in linking immigration with a number of themes such as security, the economy, public services, and social change. Thus, those on the Leave side were able to "successfully shift the debate to the question of immigration and portray sovereignty as the main solution to these concerns".[42] The Remain campaign, on the other hand, presented the economy in a "one-dimensional" way, avoiding the issue of immigration all together.[43] "Take back control" was an effective slogan in this case, as it encompassed the two key issues for Leave voters: controlling the borders and stopping uncontrolled immigration, as well as taking control of key decisions and not having to deal with interference from the notorious unelected bureaucrats in Brussels. The success of the Leave campaign lies in the fact that it was emotionally charged. The Remain campaign lacked such emotional pleas, and rather than putting forward a more positive case for the EU and the advantages of free movement and immigration, they argued rather uninspiringly that the EU was not perfect, but that leaving it would be awful for the economy.

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42 Sofia Vasilopoulou, Campaign frames in the voters' minds, in: Jackson/Thorsen/Wring (eds), cited above (Note 4), pp. 114-115, here: p. 114.
43 Cf. ibid.

Normalizing Hate

The focus on immigration and the British electorate's concern regarding this issue is not new. As noted above, UKIP has successfully taken "ownership" of this concern, and, as a result, the rhetoric has slipped dangerously into nationalistic and xenophobic waters. A couple of years prior to the EU referendum, the discourse regarding EU migrants was particularly problematic. Public furore broke out upon the announcement that restrictions on freedom of movement and full EU employment rights would be lifted for Romanian and Bulgarian citizens on 1 January 2014.[44] Right-wing politicians and the press then went on to warn that there would be a surge of desperate Romanians and Bulgarians coming to more wealthy EU countries, taking the jobs of native people, and putting a strain on public services. These commentators additionally cited their fears that there would be an increase in crime and "benefit cheats".[45] Nigel Farage, in particular, expressed his discomfort at the prospect of a group of Romanians moving in next door to him, defending his statement by claiming that post-Communist countries such as Romania are highly susceptible to organized crime. Farage went on to accuse the "politically correct elite" of refraining from raising issues that are of great concern to the public.[46]

It is also worth mentioning the role of the right-wing British press in contributing to the divisive atmosphere surrounding the issue of immigration. Newspapers such as the Sun, Daily Mail, and Daily Express have been stirring up negative attitudes towards immigrants, refugees, and the EU for years. For example, in a study on how the refugee crisis was being reported in five different European countries, the analysts found that the British press were the most aggressive when reporting on the situation compared to their neighbours. In particular, the right-wing British press was devoid of humanitarian sentiment and took a staunchly anti-refugee stance that stressed the threat refugees posed to British values and the welfare state.[47] Regarding their stance on the EU, Oliver Daddow aptly argues that "the public has been fed by many quarters of the press a solid diet of anti-EU reporting, centring

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44   Cf. *End of restrictions on free movement of workers from Bulgaria and Romania – statement by László Andor, European Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion*, European Commission, Press Release Database, Brussels, 1 January 2014, at: http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-14-1_en.htm.

45   Cf. Kimiko De Freytas-Tamura, Britain's New Immigrants, From Romania and Bulgaria, Face Hostilities, in: *The New York Times*, 31 May 2014, at: http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/01/world/europe/britains-new-immigrants-from-romania-and-bulgaria-face-hostilities.html?_r=0.

46   Cf. UKIP, *UKIP leader stands by his assertion that people have a right to be concerned if a group of Romanians move in next door*, at: http://www.ukip.org/ ukip_leader_stands_by_his_assertion_that_people_have_a_right_to_be_concerned_if_a_group_of_romanians_move_in_next_door.

47   Cf. Mike Berry/Inaki Garcia-Blanco/Kerry Moore, *Press Coverage of the Refugee and Migrant Crisis in the EU: A Content Analysis of Five European Countries*, UNHCR, December 2015, pp. 252-254, at: http://www.unhcr.org/56bb369c9.html.

on an undemocratic 'Brussels' machine subverting Britain's governing insti-
tutions, British liberty and its way of life".[48] Thus, this "consistent discourse"
of taking back control of legislation and borders has been cemented in the
mainstream right-wing press and, according to Paul Rowinski, influenced the
final result of the EU referendum.[49]

Similar rhetoric was peddled by the official Leave campaign regarding
Turkey's (unlikely) accession to the EU. The Leave campaign released a
poster that portrayed a British passport as an open door with footprints going
towards it and the words: "Turkey (population 76 million) is joining the EU.
Vote Leave, take back control".[50] The Turkey issue was problematic on sev-
eral fronts, as not only was the claim totally misleading, but it also carried
white nationalist undertones. First, to join the EU, Turkey would need to ful-
fil requirements in 35 policy areas in accordance with the Copenhagen Cri-
teria;[51] at the moment Turkey has only managed to adopt EU rules in one of
these areas – "science and research". Second, the decision for any country to
accede to the Union must be ratified by all 28 member states; therefore not
only would the UK be fully entitled to have its say on the matter, but with un-
resolved tensions between Cyprus and Turkey, it is highly unlikely that Tur-
key would receive approval from all member states in the near future.[52] Even
if Turkey were to join the EU in the next few years having fulfilled all the
relevant requirements, the implicit message from the Leave campaign is
deeply troubling. In other words, the poster may as well have stated: *Beware!
Non-white individuals from a majority Muslim country will arrive in the UK
in unprecedented numbers*. In addition to the poster, the Leave campaign
argued that not only would Turkish citizens put further strain on the welfare
state, but British people would also be less safe because crime is so high in
Turkey, and EU membership would give free reign to Turkish criminals to
enter Britain.[53] Former chairman of the Equality and Human Rights Commis-
sion (EHRC), Trevor Phillips, condemned the claims by the Leave campaign
with the accusation that they were "stoking the fires of prejudice".[54] Akin to
the debate surrounding the free movement of Romanians and Bulgarians,
such moral panics are poisoning the tone of the debate on free movement and
demonizing citizens from non-Western European states.

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48   Oliver Daddow, UK newspapers and the EU Referendum: Brexit or Bremain? In: Jack-
      son/Thorsen/Wring (eds), cited above (Note 4), p. 50.
49   Cf. Paul Rowinski, Mind the gap: the language of prejudice and the press omissions that
      led a people to the precipice, in: Jackson/Thorsen/Wring (eds), cited above (Note 4), p. 52
50   Cited in: Daniel Boffey/Toby Helm, Vote Leave embroiled in race row over Turkey se-
      curity threat claims, in: *The Guardian*, 22 May 2016, at: https://www.theguardian.com/
      politics/2016/may/21/vote-leave-prejudice-turkey-eu-security-threat.
51   Cf. European Commission, European Neighbourhood Policy And Enlargement Negoti-
      ations, *Conditions for membership*, at: http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/policy/conditions-
      membership/index_en.htm.
52   Cf. *Is Turkey likely to join the EU?* Full Fact, 26 May 2016, at: https://fullfact.org/europe/
      turkey-likely-join-eu.
53   Cf. Boffey/Helm, cited above (Note 50).
54   Cited in: ibid.

The lowest point in the campaign was the "Breaking Point" poster proudly showcased by Nigel Farage one week before the country went to the polls. It was endorsed by Grassroots Out, and quickly denounced by key members of the official Leave campaign. However the mere presentation of such a poster shows how far such extreme right-wing rhetoric has seeped its way into the mainstream discourse. The image depicted a line of non-EU and non-white refugees crossing the border between Slovenia and Croatia, with the words "BREAKING POINT: The EU has failed us all. We must break free of the EU and take back control of our borders." Again, this poster was littered with falsehoods. The UK is not part of the Schengen Agreement, and therefore any refugees that enter Europe would not be able to come into the UK legally or under the principles of free movement, as they are not EU citizens. Regardless, the underlying message is worrying in the sense that it visually "others" young non-white individuals as burdens on British society, and blames the EU in the process. James Morrison argues that the poster set race discourse back decades while exploiting "the insecurities and anxieties of those it claimed to represent: the 'ordinary decent people' of the post-industrial North-East, South-West, Wales and eastern coastal fringes now so besieged by global market forces they are primed to be on the lookout for scapegoats".[55] This poster additionally taps into the insecurities that membership of the EU continues to threaten homogenous white societies.

The very same day that Nigel Farage unveiled his latest assault on immigrants and the EU, the Labour MP Jo Cox was brutally murdered by right-wing terrorist Thomas Mair. Jo Cox was campaigning for Britain to remain in the EU and had advocated strongly for the UK to accept more refuges at the height of the crisis in 2015. Mair reportedly shouted "Britain first" and "keep Britain independent" as he murdered his local MP.[56] While it would be misleading to directly blame the referendum campaign for the assassination of Cox, as Mair had harboured Nazi and apartheid-era material in his home for nearly two decades before he acted upon his beliefs,[57] it is likely that the hostile atmosphere created by the campaign played a role in triggering Mair's decision to murder a local political figure who supported remaining in the EU. As Alex Massie correctly observes: "When you shout BREAKING POINT over and over again, you don't get to be surprised when someone breaks. When you present politics as a matter of life and death, as a question of national survival, don't be surprised if someone takes you at your word.

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55   James Morrison, Break-point for Brexit? How UKIP's image of 'hate' set race discourse reeling back decades, in: Jackson/Thorsen/Wring (eds), cited above (Note 4), pp. 66-67.
56   Cf. Ian Cobain/Matthew Taylor, Far-right terrorist Thomas Mair jailed for life for Jo Cox murder, in: *The Guardian*, 23 November 2016, at: https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/nov/23/thomas-mair-found-guilty-of-jo-cox-murder.
57   Cf. Ian Cobain/Nazia Parveen/Matthew Taylor, The slow-burning hatred that led Thomas Mair to murder Jo Cox, in: *The Guardian*, 23 November 2016, at: https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/nov/23/thomas-mair-slow-burning-hatred-led-to-jo-cox-murder.

You didn't make them do it, no, but you didn't do much to stop it either."[58] This is precisely the problem with right-wing populist discourse entering the mainstream; it has the potential to encourage those who harbour the more extreme elements of the ideology to act upon their beliefs.

The National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) noted an increase in reported hate crime in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland following the referendum – a 58 per cent increase in reported incidents compared to 2015. July 2016 saw the sharpest rise, with levels declining in August, but remaining higher than in previous years.[59] "Post Ref Racism", an initiative dedicated to sharing experiences and incidences of race hate and xenophobia was established shortly after the referendum. The group released a report arguing that the rise in hate crime following the referendum campaign is "an expression of the 'insiders' vs 'outsiders' rhetoric increasingly prevalent in mainstream politics and the media".[60] The authors of the report analysed the data submitted to the dedicated Post Ref Racism platform and found that abuse was not limited to Europeans, but could target anyone perceived as "foreign". Nearly a third of incidents were directed at those from Black, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds. 21 per cent of incidents were directed at Europeans, with 40 per cent of these being aimed specifically at Polish people. Virtually all of the reported abuse happened offline and most of it was verbal abuse (76 per cent).[61] In 51 per cent of the incidents, the referendum was explicitly referred to. This category included phrases such as, "go home", "leave", "we voted you out", and "we're out of the EU now, we can get rid of 'your lot'".[62] The fact that there has been an apparent rise in hate crime and that the referendum was explicitly referenced in these attacks demonstrates that the nature of the campaign gave licence to those with racist views to openly attack people in public. It is important to emphasize that the majority of people who voted Leave are not bigots and had legitimate reasons for voting the way that they did. However, this does not take away from the fact that the rhetoric encouraged certain individuals to air their frustrations and hatred towards innocent people who were demonized throughout the campaign.

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58   Alex Massie, A Day of Infamy, in: *The Spectator*, 16 June 2016, at: http://blogs.spectator.co.uk/2016/06/a-day-of-infamy.

59   Cf. NPCC, *Tackling hate crime remains a priority*, 7 September 2016, at: http://news.npcc.police.uk/releases/tackling-hate-crime-remains-a-priority; Hannah Corcoran/Kevin Smith, Hate Crime, England and Wales, 2015/16, in: Home Office, *Statistical Bulletin 11/16*, 13 October 2016, at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/559319/hate-crime-1516-hosb1116.pdf.

60   Priska Komaromi/Karissa Singh, *Post-referendum racism and xenophobia: The role of social media activism in challenging the normalisation of xeno-racist narratives*, p. 1, at: http://www.irr.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/PRRX-Report-Final.pdf.

61   Ibid., pp. 5-6.

62   Ibid., p. 7.

Conclusion

The EU referendum campaign effectively showcased how right-wing populist discourse has been normalized. The rise of populist movements is largely attributable to the fact that established parties have converged in the middle and have become indistinguishable in ideological terms. While it is healthy to debate alternative views and challenge the status quo, especially when it is alienating a large portion of society, it becomes problematic when nativist sentiments are stoked up and blame is appropriated to others. The far-right populist parties across Europe have carefully tried to re-brand themselves away from outwardly neo-Nazi sentiments, and labels such as "populist", "alt-right", and "far-right" try to censor the reality. However, the ideals of these groups are still entrenched in white-supremacist, nationalist, and borderline extremist ideologies that set out to divide and polarize societies even further. Tragically, established politicians, such as Boris Johnson and Michael Gove, who campaigned officially for Leave, adopted elements of right-wing populist discourse, such as inflammatory rhetoric, emotional appeals laced with nostalgia, "othering" of immigrants – particularly non-white immigrants – and a disregard for experts and "elitist" opinion, littering their campaign with deception and post-truths instead. Established parties should be very careful not to legitimize and normalize such discourse, as it risks fuelling prejudice and xenophobia from certain quarters of society. Rather, they should speak about issues that are of concern to the electorate, but in a civilized manner that relies on positive emotional appeals combined with facts, and not fear-mongering or othering.