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*(editors)*

# Human mobility and social protection in Europe

Comparative studies and professional practices



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**HUMAN MOBILITY  
AND SOCIAL PROTECTION IN EUROPE**

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# HUMAN MOBILITY AND SOCIAL PROTECTION IN EUROPE

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GRANADA, 2025

# COLECCIÓN TRABAJO SOCIAL Y BIENESTAR SOCIAL

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## 7. POLITICISATION OF MIGRATION IN ITALY AND SPAIN

### Diverging origins, converging effect

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#### INTRODUCTION

Contemporary migration has become a structural feature of Western European societies. Earlier portrayals of migration as a “challenge” have increasingly given way to interpretations that conceive migration as a structural component of contemporary societies. Yet, despite this perspective being well established in the scholarly literature, the political framing and administrative management of migration flows continue to represent a highly contested arena, marked by persistent conflict and politicization (Ambrosini, 2021). Multiple social, cultural, and political factors have contributed to transforming migration and the governance of migratory flows into a highly politicized issue. Ultimately, however, the central driver of migration politicization has been the strategic investment of political parties, which have framed migration as the primary source of citizens’ growing insecurity, the erosion of national—and even local—identities, and the strain on welfare resources already weakened by the economic and financial crises affecting Western European countries (Hadj-Abdou, 2021; Hutter and Kriesi, 2021).

This phenomenon of politicization —namely, the influence of political and partisan variables in the definition and framing of migration (Gattinara & Morales 2017)— has over time assumed relatively uniform national characteristics. These are linked both to international contingencies (such as the so-called “refugee crisis”) and to the investment of parties from the (radical) right-wing populist family, though not exclusively, as clearly highlighted by Hadj-Abdou *et al.* (2022) in their studies on the influence of center-right parties.

Although the literature on the politicization of migration shows that the drivers of politicization are not only radical right parties, and that the impact on policy-making in the field of migration does not always reveal

a direct incidence of populist radical right parties (PRRPs) in government (Lutz 2019), these parties have certainly contributed to making migration one of the most contested battlegrounds in political communication (Akkermann 2012). PRRPs have stigmatized the phenomenon of migration not only by attributing to migrants the responsibility for rising crime (Bigo 2002) and social disintegration, but also by advancing an idea of nativism (Mudde 2007), both social and economic (Betz 2019).

The politicization of migration is accompanied by increasing political polarization around the issue, a phenomenon that remains underexplored in the scholarly literature and in which national political contexts play a particularly significant role (Böhmelt *et al.*, 2024). The framing of migration as an “invasion” by radical and populist right-wing parties has progressively intensified, fueled by the dramatization and spectacularization ensured by media coverage of their positions and agendas in a context heavily shaped by technological innovations. With the advent of social media, the shift from mediated coverage to communicative disintermediation has further enabled the transfer of party agendas on migration to online platforms, where they often take the form of hate speech and extreme polarization (De Rosa *et al.*, 2021).

These dynamics have affected all Western European countries, albeit with different timing. Migration has been subject to politicization and polarization, regardless of factors such as the proportion of migrants within the total population, the strength or weakness of traditions of welcoming asylum seekers or refugees, or the availability of Welfare State resources. Not even the “historical memory” of having been, in previous centuries and up to the mid-20th century, “countries of emigration” has prevented the development, from the mid-1980s onward, of widespread anti-immigration rhetoric (Colucci 2011 for Italy; Pasetti 2017 for Spain). This applies particularly to Italy and Spain, two countries that experienced constant waves of emigration (both international and internal) until the mid-1960s and that are now experiencing the centrality of the immigration issue in politics at both national and local levels.

Despite the many differences that characterize the Italian and Spanish cases in terms of the forms and waves of politicization, the comparison between the two countries is particularly promising. Compared to Spain, Italy represents a case of early politicization of the migration issue. As will be discussed later, politicization in Italy occurred primarily through a populist regionalist party—the Northern League—which, since the early 1990s, had made the fight against migration one of its central issues (Schmidtke & Zaslove, 2014, p. 179). Anti-immigration rhetoric then spread to other center-right parties, in a dynamic of contagion that also

affected political formations outside that spectrum, especially at the local level (Castelli Gattinara 2016; Bale *et al.*, 2010). Spain, by contrast, long considered an exception with respect to the emergence of right-wing populist parties characterized, among other things, by anti-immigration rhetoric (Alonso & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2015), has only recently experienced the politicization of migration, following the electoral success of the VOX party, which introduced the issue both nationally and locally (Turnbull-Dugarte, 2019). The differences in timing are explainable and help shed light on the extra-partisan dynamics of politicization—addressed in the next section—which involve not only the national dimension but also the sub-national level (the regions in Italy and the autonomous communities in Spain).

The aim of this chapter is to reflect on the rise of anti-immigration rhetoric following the politicization triggered by populist parties and the migration management policies promoted and implemented in Italy and Spain. The chapter builds on insights developed within the European project RISE Global Answer, which examines the responses of social services and social work to the needs of integration, individual and collective empowerment, and the affirmation of migrant populations and/or those with a migratory background. Within this project, coordinated by the University of Granada, the observation and analysis of the recent politicization of migration have provided the basis for a comparative reflection between the two countries.

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first outlines the politicization of migration in Italy over the past thirty years, while the second examines Spain using the same analytical framework. For each country, three phases in the development of migration politicization are identified for comparative purposes. The final section underscores how politicization and polarization constitute two central elements of migration-related narratives and policy-making in two deeply different national contexts, Italy and Spain.

## 1. ITALY'S EARLY POLITICIZATION

As has long been noted in both academic and non-academic settings, references to the presence of migrant citizens in a given national territory are never entirely certain. The validity of the numbers is affected both by problems related to data sources and by the difficulty of estimating the presence of individuals who are not stably registered—or not registered at all—in the population registers, either because they are non-residents

or because they are in situations of irregularity (Natale & Strozza 1997; Acocella 2015). Despite these difficulties, and with the awareness that the available data are incomplete, it is still possible to draw on studies conducted by institutional sources and the most accredited agencies monitoring the presence of people with a migratory background.

According to ISTAT (2024), as of January 1, 2025, the foreign resident population in Italy was approximately 5,422,000, an increase of 169,000 (+3.2%) compared to the previous year. Foreign nationals make up 9.2% of the total population. It is also interesting to report on the regional distribution: North 58.3% (3,159,000 residents, 11.5% of the region's population), Center 24.4% (1,322,000, 11.3%), South 17.3% (941,000, 4.8%). Similar data emerge from the "Caritas Migrantes" Dossier (2024). As of January 1, 2024, the resident foreign population in Italy stands at 5.308 million people, an increase of 166,000 individuals (+3.2%) compared to the previous year. Foreign nationals now make up 9% of the total population. Northern Italy hosts the majority: 3.109 million (or 58.6% of all foreigners), with a regional incidence of 11.3%. The Central regions are also highly attractive, with 1.301 million foreigners (24.5% of the total), and an incidence rate of 11.1%. The South and Islands have a more limited presence: 897,000 foreign residents (16.9%), with an incidence of just 4.5%. In 2023, over 200,000 foreign nationals acquired Italian citizenship, a figure consistent with the previous year (214,000), though slightly lower.

Certainly, the figure for the foreign population is not indicative of the real presence of migrants or people with a migratory background in Italy. What is interesting, however, is the perception of the Italian population about the presence of migrants and their percentage. The issue of perception, or rather misperception, of the immigration issue is becoming increasingly relevant in the literature (Lutz & Bischnau 2023). Research dating back to 2017, based on Eurobarometer data, showed that the majority of citizens were not able to indicate the percentage presence of migrants in the territory. In the case of Italy, the margin of error was very high (+17%, in Spain the figure was 14.4%), the highest among those recorded in EU countries. In subsequent years, the situation has not improved. Recent surveys show that knowledge of the incidence of the foreign population remains far from the actual data. An important role in creating this discrepancy between the real situation and the perception and concern about the migration phenomenon is to be attributed to political parties and the politicization of the migration issue and to media coverage.

### *1.1. The first phase: The Northern League as political entrepreneur*

Attention to the migration issue, accompanied by phenomena of politicization, has had various waves, with increasing attention from the mass media, initially press and television. Immigration has gained silence in Italy since the end of 1990's (Urso 2018). For the purposes of the comparative analysis with Spain, the politicization of migration can be divided into three main phases: (1) from the early 1990s to the early 2000s; (2) from the early 2000s to the mid-2010s; and (3) from the mid-2010s to the present.

During the first phase, from the early 1990s to the early 2000s, Italy for the first time structurally faced the transition from a country of emigration to a country of immigration (Martiniello, 1992). The massive arrival of migrants from Albania and other Eastern European countries, following the collapse of communist regimes, posed new social and institutional challenges. The legal and political system did not yet have consolidated instruments for managing flows, and public debate was strongly influenced by the media impact of spectacular episodes such as the landings in Bari in 1991 (Campani, 1993). It was within this context that the first wave of migration politicization emerged, rapidly occupying spaces of political and media attention that had previously remained untouched. Despite the relatively limited number of arrivals compared to countries such as France and Germany, and the low salience of the issue in public opinion, the growth of migration flows driven by international developments rendered migration a “latent” issue.

Although the politicization of migration involved parties across the political spectrum (Urso 2018), some played a more decisive role as political entrepreneurs of the issue than others. In this first period, the main party driving politicization was the Northern League. Founded in the late 1980s as a regionalist populist party with secessionist ambitions (Biorcio, 1991), the League was characterized by anti-establishment, anti-centralist, and anti-Southern rhetoric. In its struggle to affirm the superiority of northern Italy—portrayed as productive and culturally homogeneous—internal migrants from southern Italy were stigmatized as “*terroni*” (a derogatory slang term historically used in northern Italy to insult people from the south of the country), likewise exploiters of the wealth laboriously produced by the northern regions (Huysseune, 2008). The anti-Southern stereotype (Rovati 1990, p. 494) soon gave way to other forms of xenophobia, this time focused on Italy's first real confrontation with the transition from emigration to immigration. The arrival of hundreds of thousands of Albanian migrants starting in the early 1990s, coinciding

with the collapse of Albania's political system, offered the League an opportunity to align itself with the anti-immigration discourse that was simultaneously gaining traction in many other Western European countries, where right-wing (radical) populist parties were beginning to achieve success. At this stage, the prominence of anti-immigration proposals in these parties' agendas reflected their anti-establishment orientation and their effort to distinguish themselves from traditional parties through a principle they considered "sacred": the direct and unfiltered expression of the people's will, fears, and anxieties. This positioning entailed a rejection of what they depicted as the mystifying—or even deceptive—practices of mainstream parties (Tarchi, 2015) and the adoption of explicitly anti-political stances (Mastropaolo, 2005). Up until the early 2000s, therefore, politicization of migration in Italy primarily referred to the ways in which the Northern League made migration—though not its main political platform—one of its most visible battlegrounds. Among other center-right parties, immigration played a much less prominent role: in Forza Italia, founded by Silvio Berlusconi, it remained marginal, while in Alleanza Nazionale (National Alliance-AN) it received secondary attention, though still more visible than in other parties.

### *1.2. The second phase: identity politics*

Between 2000 and 2015, Italy experienced a steady diversification in the structure and countries of origin of its migrant population. At the beginning of the 2000s, flows were still strongly characterized by arrivals from Eastern Europe. Significant communities also came from Morocco, Tunisia, and Egypt, reflecting Italy's geographic position in the Mediterranean. The events of the Arab Spring marked a turning point, triggering new and intense migratory movements from North Africa, especially from Tunisia and Libya, and reinforcing the perception of Italy as the main entry point into Europe through the central Mediterranean route. From the mid-2000s onwards, increasing numbers also arrived from sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, contributing to a complex mosaic of communities differentiated by linguistic, cultural, and religious backgrounds. By 2015, Italy had consolidated its status as a multi-ethnic society, with foreign residents accounting for about 8% of the total population, and with a migrant presence that was no longer temporary or seasonal but increasingly stable, involving family reunifications, long-term settlements, and second-generation growth.

In terms of politicization, the early 2000s were shaped by the international context marked by the attacks on the Twin Towers of September 11, 2001, which redefined the perception of migration through a security lens. The polemical targets of anti-migration discourse began to add to their previous communitarian and extra-communitarian dimensions a religious connotation, with growing anti-Islamism and Islamophobia (Mammone 2024). From that moment, not only did the polemical targets of anti-immigration proposals change, but the xenophobic rhetoric advanced by the Northern League, and by other parties beginning to understand the political profitability of the migration issue, was also profoundly reshaped (Zincone 2006). It is no coincidence that the 2002 organic law on migration (Law 189/2002) bore the names of two signatories: the then leader of the Northern League, Umberto Bossi, and the then leader of the National Alliance, Gianfranco Fini. The so-called Bossi-Fini Law stipulated regular residence only for those already holding employment. The law also regulated aspects of a “security” nature already introduced by the previous Turco-Napolitano Law, issued by a center-left government in 1998, testifying to the fact that by the late 1990s the effects of the politicization of migration had “contaminated” even parties not belonging to the political culture of the right or of populism. The participation of the Northern League in center-right governing coalitions during this period (2001-2006; 2008-2011) ensured that migration assumed increasing political relevance, as confirmed by both national and supranational survey data.

The 2000s were therefore inaugurated under the sign of anti-Islamism and a torsion of anti-immigration discourse towards an identitarian dimension. While already present since the early phases of migration politicization, this dimension began to combine the religious and cultural element (the exaltation of Christianity against the perceived threat of Islamic obscurantism) with civil elements (such as the protection of women according to the principles of femonationalism – Farris 2017), and even political ones (the opposition between the Enlightenment idea of Europe and the threat of the advance of non-democratic regimes). Scholars have underlined how the Northern League, while initially centered on a regionalist and anti-Southern rhetoric (Diamanti 1993), progressively evolved into a full-fledged populist radical right party, with anti-immigration, anti-Islamic, and ethno-nationalist discourse becoming central to its identity. This evolution paralleled broader European trends, in which migration and Islam were framed as existential challenges to national identity and social cohesion.

### 1.3. *The third phase: polarized politics*

Starting from the so-called “refugee crisis” of 2015, Italy became one of the epicenters of migration routes in the central Mediterranean (Castelli Gattinara, 2017). Landings, tragedies at sea, and images disseminated by the media accentuated the emergency framing of the phenomenon (Colombo, 2018). At the same time, the economic crisis and growing political instability fueled the perception of immigration as a threat to security, welfare, and national identity (Tuorto, Gargiulo, & Morlicchio 2024). It is in this context that politicization assumed a polarized dimension, with the entry of new political actors and the systematic use of social media as instruments of propaganda.

With the early years of the 2010s, the politicization of migration entered a new phase. This transition was shaped both by international variables and by changes in the Italian party system. At the international level, the consequences of the Arab Spring compelled Italy, from 2011 onward, to manage landings on its coasts—primarily from Libya and Tunisia—which soon assumed tragic dimensions. The Mediterranean became a lethal route for hundreds of thousands of migrants who lost their lives either in highly mediatized shipwrecks or in a daily trickle of deaths that generated habituation to the news. From a political perspective, alongside the traditional actors of anti-immigration rhetoric—the Northern League, which in 2013 changed leadership under Matteo Salvini (Albertazzi, Giovannini, & Seddone 2018), and the successor of the National Alliance, refounded in 2012 under Giorgia Meloni as— Fratelli d’Italia (Brothers of Italy) — (Baldini, Tronconi, & Angelucci 2022)—new actors emerged. The first among these was the “Five Star Movement,” founded by comedian Beppe Grillo. A new populist party, it resisted placement within the conventional left-right distinction and initially did not include migration among its main issues (Tronconi, 2015). However, the international politicization of migration and the responsibility of European countries to respond to asylum requests after the “refugee crisis” soon also affected the Five Star Movement. Despite never adopting a clear position—oscillating between widespread criticism of migrants and NGOs engaged in assistance and rescue operations (often stigmatized as “sea taxis” to underline their alleged pull factor) and a more humanitarian framing oriented toward respect for international law—the party nonetheless pursued the path of forming a coalition government with the League after the 2018 elections (Mosca & Tronconi 2021). The government, which lasted just over a year under Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, immediately signaled its anti-immigration agenda, consistent with the political history of its Interior

Minister and Deputy Prime Minister, Matteo Salvini. It approved the so-called Security Decree, which, among other measures, almost completely abolished humanitarian protection and confirmed Italy's refusal to adhere to the Global Compact on Migration (Corsi, 2019). The refusal to authorize the landing in Lampedusa of 147 migrants rescued by the "Open Arms" vessel, and the subsequent trial of Salvini, is emblematic of the extremely high level of politicization of this third phase (Castillo-de-Mesa *et al.*, 2021).

The climate of confrontation between political forces and within society was further intensified by the consolidated use of social media platforms as tools of direct, unmediated communication by party leaders. In this phase, ideological polarization became a true political spectacle, persisting even in the face of tragedies such as the shipwreck at Steccato di Cutro in February 2023, where 94 people lost their lives just a few meters from the coast. In the aftermath, Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni convened a Council of Ministers in Cutro (March 9), during which severe measures against "human traffickers" were announced and amendments to immigration law were introduced through a decree that became tragically known in public debate and among practitioners as the "Cutro Decree" (Ambrosini 2023). Both the Council of Ministers held in Cutro and the trial of Salvini—first convicted for kidnapping and later acquitted—stand as paradigmatic examples of polarized politicization, at once mediatized by traditional outlets and disintermediated through the social media strategies of party leaders, and are emblematic of the third phase of migration politicization in Italy (Lucchesi, 2025).

## 2. SPAIN'S LATE POLITICIZATION

For Spain, the politicization of migration is a relatively recent phenomenon in the political arena. Until 2000, the salience of migration was very low (Ros & Morales 2015). Despite its privileged ties with former colonies, from the mid-19th century until the 1980s Spain was often classified as a country of emigration. The situation changed in the 1990s, when Spain progressively became a country of immigration. Between 2000 and 2009, Spain received half of all migrants arriving in the EU-8 (González-Enríquez, 2017, p. 3). Spanish scholarship on migration has identified several key reasons for this boom, which transformed Spain into a net recipient of migrants: "the consolidation of a democratic political regime during the 1980s; the change in the economic structure towards an advanced post-industrial tertiary economy; and the pre-existing links with some countries that became societies of high migratory pressure"

(Ros & Morales 2015, p. 2). Combined with a favorable demographic context marked by an ageing population, these factors encouraged the inflow of migrant workers—primarily from Eastern Europe, Latin America, and the Maghreb—leading to a sharp rise in Spain’s immigrant population. This trend was temporarily interrupted during the economic and financial crisis, before resuming in 2013. From both a partisan and media perspective, however, the presence of foreign citizens did not for a long time represent a major political issue. Only after the end of the economic boom did public attitudes toward migrants become less positive (Oso *et al.*, 2021, 19).

This section develops the Spanish case by following the same structure applied to Italy: first, a brief account of the presence of foreign citizens in Spain; second, an overview of how the three phases of politicization unfolded; and finally, an analysis of the evolution of migration and its politicization, with a focus on the role of political parties in shaping the phenomenon within a continuously evolving media landscape.

In terms of incidence, the share of foreign residents in Spain is higher than in Italy. According to official data from the Spanish National Statistics Institute (INE 2024), the resident population on 1 January 2024 was 48,619,695, an increase of 534,334 compared to the previous year (+1.1%). Of this total, 42,117,413 were Spanish nationals (86.6%) and 6,502,282 foreign nationals (13.4%). Compared to 2023, the number of foreign nationals rose by 6.8%. The largest groups by nationality were Colombians, Venezuelans, and Moroccans. The perception of migration in Spain has been explored since the late 2000s, with contradictory findings, as shown by one of the most recent surveys from the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (CIS, 2024). According to this survey, migration is considered the main problem facing Spain, while ranking fourth among the most urgent problems at the individual level. Critiques of this study, echoing broader methodological debates on opinion polls as infallible representations of reality, have highlighted the extreme sensitivity of the migration issue and its politicization. As in the Italian case, the diffusion of social media has also favored practices of dramatization and polarization of news concerning migration (Aguerre *et al.*, 2025).

The political and media debate on migration in Spain has undergone significant evolution since the 1990s, reflecting changes in society, the political system, and the international context. As in Italy, it is possible to distinguish different phases of politicization, alternating between periods of heightened visibility and conflict and periods of relative calm. For comparative purposes, a three-phase periodization is proposed: (1) from the early 1990s to the early 2000s; (2) from the early 2000s to the mid-2010s; and (3) from the mid-2010s to the present.

## *2.1. First phase: from marginality to visibility*

In the 1990s, Spain had become a country of net immigration following the democratic transition and accession to the EU in 1986. Migration, however, remained marginal in political and public debate. Numbers were still relatively low, and Spain was perceived as a country still undergoing economic modernization, which shaped a relatively non-problematic image of immigration. Two factors contributed to this: first, the economic boom from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s (González-Enríquez 2017, p. 3), which attracted migrants, especially in the construction sector; second, a relatively benign public perception of migrants. Late-1990s opinion polls (Diamanti, 2000) revealed that, compared to countries such as Italy, France, and Germany, Spaniards expressed far less fear of migration and migrants.

Serious incidents, however, began to increase visibility and tension. The most emblematic case was the anti-migrant riots in El Ejido (Almería) in February 2000, when several days of violence targeted Moroccan agricultural workers following the murder of a local woman. The riots exposed the structural vulnerabilities of Spain's agricultural economy, which relied heavily on irregular migrant labor, and revealed underlying racism and hostility toward migrant communities (Barrero 2003). At the same time, irregular sea routes across the Strait of Gibraltar became a growing concern. Throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s, small boats known as pateras attempted the dangerous crossing from Morocco to Andalusia, with a rising number of shipwrecks and deaths at sea (Carling, 2007). These tragedies drew considerable media attention, contributing to debates around "pull factors" and the perceived limits of Spain's capacity for reception (Oso, Sala & Comet 2021, p. 15). Media coverage increasingly concentrated on these events, reinforcing the narrative of Spain's transformation from a country of emigration to a country of immigration. Nevertheless, during this first phase, migration did not yet represent a source of systemic polarization, remaining a relatively secondary issue within the broader political debate.

## *2.2. Second phase: the rise of security and cultural frames*

The second phase of politicization began in the early 2000s. A shift from relative acceptance to greater tension and politicization can be traced to two main factors. The first was economic: after a decade of extraordinary growth, by the early 2000s the Spanish economy began to show signs of slowdown. The bursting of the real estate bubble and the

onset of the Great Recession (2008-2013) exposed the structural fragility of an economy heavily dependent on construction, tourism, and low-skilled services—sectors in which migrant labor had become central (Domínguez-Mujica *et al.*, 2014). As unemployment soared to over 25% by 2012, with migrant unemployment rates disproportionately high, immigration became increasingly framed as a pressure on jobs, housing, and welfare. Anti-immigration sentiments thus gained renewed legitimacy, even as migrants had contributed decisively to Spain's economic boom in the preceding decade.

The second factor was securitarian: following the September 11, 2001 attacks, Spain too began to frame migration through a security lens. The 2004 Madrid train bombings further reinforced this perception and made the alleged link between migration and terrorism a recurrent theme in political and media debates. Although the subsequent Zapatero government (PSOE) attempted to counterbalance these dynamics by enacting a mass regularization in 2005 that granted legal status to more than 500,000 migrants (Finotelli & Arango, 2005), insecurity and cultural threat frames linked to Islam gained increasing traction (Ramírez & Mijares, 2005). Media narratives increasingly emphasized these issues, contributing to the rise of identity-based discourses.

In 2006, Spain faced one of the most visible migration episodes of the decade: the arrival of over 31,000 irregular migrants in the Canary Islands, mostly from Senegal, Mauritania, and other West African countries, in what became known as the Cayucos crisis. The use of large wooden fishing boats (cayucos) highlighted the growing dangers of irregular sea crossings and triggered dramatic media coverage of overcrowded vessels and humanitarian emergencies (Díaz & Montes, 2008). This crisis encapsulated the tension between humanitarian responsibility and border control, and firmly situated Spain's migration debate within the broader European Union framework (Dudek & Pestano, 2019).

Despite these developments, the far right remained fragmented and marginal throughout this period. Scholars described the “absent presence” of a populist radical right party in Spain, attributing this to structural and electoral factors, such as the dominance of the Partido Popular on the right and the limited political opportunity structures available (Alonso & Rovira, 2015; Kaltwasser 2015). Opinion polls from the mid-2000s onward showed a gradual rise in critical attitudes toward immigration, and the salience of the issue grew accordingly, laying the groundwork for future polarization.

### 2.3. *Third phase: the rise of VOX and polarized politics*

The third phase began with the 2015 “refugee crisis,” which accelerated politicization in Spain. Media pressure, combined with arrivals via the western Mediterranean and the enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, intensified public debate. Research shows that press narratives began to adopt more dramatic tones, increasingly structured around the populist polarization of “us” versus “them” (Terrón-Caro *et al.*, 2022). The turning point came with the rise of VOX, a far-right party founded in 2013 that became a parliamentary force in 2018 after entering the Andalusian parliament. VOX built part of its political identity on explicitly anti-immigration, sovereigntist, centralist, and anti-Islamic rhetoric. The ascent of VOX, however, cannot be explained solely by the increased salience of migration. Other factors played a crucial role, including the territorial crisis triggered by Catalan independence demands (Turnbull-Dugarte, 2019) and a broader anti-political climate within a rapidly changing party system (Rama *et al.*, 2021). While VOX cannot be considered a single-issue anti-immigration party, its nativist and ultraconservative positions quickly became defining features, and with them the media polarization that followed. The party strategically linked migration to other core issues—such as national sovereignty, security, and family values—creating a multidimensional platform that resonated with segments of the electorate disillusioned with mainstream parties.

The polarization introduced by VOX was amplified across both traditional and digital media. On television and in print, debates increasingly revolved around the dichotomy between VOX’s discourse of “invasion” and humanitarian counter-discourses. On social media, VOX leaders, particularly Santiago Abascal, adopted a combative communication style marked by dramatization, conspiracy rhetoric, and the circulation of sensationalist frames (Domínguez-García *et al.*, 2025). Studies have shown how VOX systematically uses platforms like Twitter and Facebook to spread narratives portraying migrants as criminals, welfare abusers, or threats to national identity, while simultaneously denouncing NGOs as “accomplices” in irregular migration (Soler *et al.*, 2022). VOX also systematically attacks traditional media (Carratalá & Palau-Sampio, 2022), reinforcing the anti-elite climate that is typical of populist discourse.

In this phase, migration has been portrayed as a multidimensional threat: to security, culture, the economy, and welfare. The resulting polarization is stark: on one side, the “invasion” frame promoted by VOX and echoed by parts of the Partido Popular; on the other, the humanitarian frame, largely supported by civil society organizations,

progressive media, and left-wing parties such as Podemos. The Covid-19 pandemic further strengthened securitarian and nationalist discourses, often coupled with fake news portraying migrants as virus carriers or as undeserving beneficiaries of public resources. This combination of populist polarization, strategic media use, and the securitization of health risks has entrenched migration as one of the central battlegrounds of Spain's political communication.

## CONCLUSIONS

The comparative analysis of Italy and Spain shows both converging effects and diverging origins in the politicization of migration. Italy represents a case of early politicization, where the Northern League pioneered anti-immigration discourse in the early 1990s and progressively transformed it into a central ideological marker, later adopted by other center-right and even center-left actors. Spain, by contrast, long displayed what scholars termed an “absent presence” of a radical right, with migration remaining marginal until the mid-2010s, when VOX rose to prominence and consolidated anti-immigration rhetoric as a core component of its platform.

Despite these different trajectories, the outcomes converge: in both countries, migration has become a central battleground of political communication, framed through securitarian logics, dramatization, and increasingly polarized narratives. The role of international contingencies—9/11, the Arab Spring, the 2015 “refugee crisis,” and the Covid-19 pandemic—was decisive in amplifying politicization in both contexts. At the same time, the evolution of the two party systems shaped the timing and intensity of politicization. In Italy, the early presence of a strong populist radical right actor within governing coalitions accelerated the mainstreaming of anti-immigration discourse. In Spain, by contrast, the late but rapid success of VOX occurred within a fragmented party system already under stress from the Catalan territorial crisis and broader patterns of political distrust.

The politicization of migration also affects the realm of welfare and social services. In Italy, welfare chauvinism has been a crucial instrument in the transformation of the Northern League into a fully-fledged radical right populist party. As Bellè and Gargiulo (2025) demonstrate, the League has increasingly promoted welfare policies at the local level that privilege “deserving” Italians over migrants. This process of localizing rights has institutionalized exclusionary practices and reinforced the idea that welfare

resources should primarily serve natives. By coupling welfare chauvinism with its longstanding anti-immigration rhetoric, the League has successfully linked questions of welfare provision with national identity, consolidating its populist appeal and framing migrants as both an economic burden and a cultural threat. In Spain, VOX has followed a similar trajectory, albeit within a different political and institutional context. Fernández-Suárez (2021) shows how VOX has mobilized welfare chauvinism by portraying migrants simultaneously as undeserving beneficiaries of public resources and as a challenge to security and social cohesion. Taken together, the Italian and Spanish cases reveal how welfare chauvinism has become a defining feature of right-wing populist strategies in Southern Europe, linking welfare, migration, and identity in ways that deepen polarization and undermine inclusive citizenship.

This chapter represents a first step toward a systematic comparison of politicization in Italy and Spain. Further research should refine at least three dimensions: first, the mechanisms of populist contagion whereby mainstream parties adopt frames initially developed by radical right actors; second, the predominance of the securitarian approach in European migration governance and its implications for national party competition; third, the specific features of online polarization, with social media enabling communicative disintermediation and the spread of hate speech in ways that reinforce political divides.

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