WHAT DO NICHE PARTIES DO WHEN THE PUBLIC OPINION OF THEIR SUPPORTERS OPPOSES THE PARTY'S IDEOLOGIES?

The Case of Right-Wing Parties in the European Parliament and their Response to Refuge and Migration Policies

By
Uliana Gosteeva

Submitted to Central European University - Private University
Philosophy, Politics and Economics

In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Bachelor of Arts degree.

Supervisor: Dr. Mariyana Angelova,

Vienna, Austria
2024

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ABSTRACT OR EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This thesis explores the dynamics between party policies and public opinion, specifically focusing on how parties adapt their stances on critical issues. At the core of my work, there is empirical data from biannual Eurobarometer polls and voting records from the European Parliament to trace the correlation between the public opinion of right-leaning Europeans and the voting behaviours of right-wing parties, particularly regarding immigration and asylum policies from 2015 to 2022. The analysis reveals that in 2022, these parties' votes aligned with a liberalising public sentiment of right-leaning respondents towards issues of asylum and migration and voted for hosting Ukrainian refugees after the outbreak of the war.

I conclude with a discussion on the unclear causality between the liberalised public opinion of right-wing supporters and party behaviour in the context of Ukrainian refugees in 2022. It notes a marked difference in attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees compared to others, suggesting a strong correlation but also highlighting the need for further research due to limited data. The study calls for a more comprehensive analysis to better understand radical right-wing parties' paradoxical behaviour and establish a more evident trend in the relationship between public opinion and party policy on immigration issues.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

EU	European Union
MSs	Member States of the European Union
EP	European Parliament
COM	European Commission
RWPs	Right-Wing Parties
RCVs	Roll-Call Votes
EB	Eurobarometer
RWS	Right Wing Supporters
EPG	European Party Groups
MEPs	Members of the European Parliament

INTRODUCTION

In 2015-2016, the EU experienced an asylum inflow of as big as 1.8 million, with most applications coming from Syrians fleeing the civil war (European Commission 2024; EUAA 2024). The sudden influx of refugees and asylum-seekers in 2015-16 coincided and is now associated with the rise of the right-wing parties (RWPs) in Europe, who place special significance on their anti-immigration values (Steinmayr 2017) despite significant evidence that immigration was politicised years before the crisis (Hadj Abdou, Bale, and Geddes 2022, 337). Since 2015, RWPs reinforced and politicised the issues of migration and refuge-seeking even further, blending the line between the two and making them the central point of electoral campaigns and domestic and inter-governmental political agenda in the EU (e.g. Grande, Schwarzbözl, and Fatke 2019; Kriesi et al. 2012; Messina 2007; Van der Brug et al. 2015; Hadj Abdou, Bale, and Geddes 2022).

As of December 2023, the European Parliament (EP) and the EU's executive branch, the European Commission (COM), have reached an agreement which gives member states (MSs) more power over the arriving migrants and refugees (Al Jazeera 2023). According to the deal, "filtering and vetting systems" will be put in place, which would allow MSs not to accept migrants from areas they do not favour, as well as choose to either take refugees in or financially contribute to the shared EU fund (Al Jazeera 2023). Opposition to migration and the right to refuge fits into the overall trend of the past, post-crisis, years of anti-immigration rhetoric.

However, there was one case in which the executives, legislators, the media, the public, and even the right-wing parties of the European Parliament shared absolute solidarity. Despite declining numbers of refugee arrivals from Ukraine, up to 5.5 million of those who fled the war in the past two years remain in Europe (UNHCR 2024). In 2022, the EU granted them an

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unprecedented set of rights and opportunities in the Union: unlike those coming from Syria, Afghanistan or Somalia, Ukrainians are allowed to receive work permits, waiting times for documents are cut short, and residence permits are being automatically extended for the third year in a row (Martín 2022; Wilson 2023; Moise et al. 2024; De Coninck 2023).

Even though between all supranational institutions of the EU, the European Parliament has always had the fame of being the most welcoming of asylum-seekers, especially with its coalition of socialists, greens, liberals and radical left between 1999-2004 (Ripoll Servent and Trauner 2014), the growing presence of RWPs might bring significant changes to it. The anti-immigration trend has been on the rise since the mid-2000s (Ripoll Servent and Trauner 2014), and there are predictions that in the 2024 European Parliamentary elections, the right-wing coalition could win the majority for the first time, while likely leading in nine EU member states (Hix et al. 2024). Hix et al. suggest that this turn would inevitably impact many vital policy areas, such as green policies, migration, and global cooperation – the newly elected government of the Netherlands has already reached the deal and formed the most right-wing cabinet in decades (Hartog 2024). In the wake of the upcoming elections, I find that unveiling the rationale behind the voting behaviour of the right-wing parties of the European Parliament is a crucial task. Moreover, this thesis contributes to the work on the connection between public opinion and policy outcomes. Scholars find that analysing voters' preferences in specific policy areas and even particular policies is beneficial as there is no convincing evidence that those consistently coincide with the left-right self-positioning of the voters (Lesschaeve 2017).

This thesis seeks to understand why RWPs did not stand against or at least abstained from voting for the most extensive refugee intake in the history of the EU. As it is an ongoing struggle, I highlight the necessity to understand why right-wing and other parties voted in favour of an unprecedentedly comprehensive set of rights for some refugees while continuously depriving others of those. In the attempt to solve this paradox, I hypothesise that they voted in

alignment with public opinion since support for Ukrainians fleeing the war was extraordinarily high, and RWPs in the European Parliament had no choice but to satisfy their voters. Therefore, the question I attempt to answer in the thesis is: *Could the shifts in public opinion of right-leaning voters in the EU explain the support right-wing parties provided to Ukraine?*

This thesis is structured as follows. In the first part, I review the existing literature on the connection between party policies and public opinion and attempt to unveil the mechanism of parties' preference shifts in policies. I build my argument on the works of Adams (2004; 2006; 2011), Ezrow (2004; 2006; 2008; 2011a; 2011b), Hix (2007; 2024), Freeman (2012), Natter et al. (2020), Thielemann (2012; 2018) and many others, illustrating my arguments by newspaper articles from POLITICO, BBC, Al Jazeera and more to highlight the relevance of my work. Parties can and often do change their positions on specific issues. However, to the best of my knowledge and at the time of this thesis, the cases where niche parties with narrow ideologies shifted away from their core values are studied in a limited manner.

In the second part of my thesis, I explain my research's theoretical framework: I predict consistent connections between the public opinion of right-leaning Europeans and the voting behaviour of right-wing parties in the European Parliament on immigration and asylum issues. For that, I turn to empirical data: using biannual Eurobarometer (EB) polls from the European Commission, I demonstrate changes in trends in public opinion regarding immigration and refugees between 2015-2022 and map them together with the voting behaviour of RWPs in the European Parliament. For that, I use roll-call votes (RCVs) and minutes of the European Parliament plenary sessions until April 2022, coded by the *Vote Watch Europe* project by Hix, Frantescu and Hagemann (2022). I find evidence that the way right-wing parties voted in the European Parliament in 2022 is consistent with liberalising public opinion of right-leaning Europeans on the questions of asylum and migration in 2022. Then, I explain the limitations of

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this method and push for a more in-depth analysis of the paradoxical behaviour of radical right-wing parties in 2022.

In the final part of my work, I conclude that it is unclear whether liberalised public opinion caused right-wing parties to vote to welcome Ukrainian refugees in 2022 or party behaviour that made right-leaning voters change their views on this specific case. However, apparent differences in attitudes towards Ukrainian and other refugees are still demonstrated by both voters and parties, and the correlation appears to be strong. Two resolutions fall short of sufficient to compose a consistent trend, and more analysis will be needed when more data is available.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, I give a detailed overview of the existing literature on the connection between party preferences and public opinion and show that shifts in preferences of the latter often lead to changes in the former. I conclude that, to the best of my knowledge, studies on cases when a niche party moves away from its core preferences – and thus 'betrays' the trust of its supporters – remain limited and require closer attention and a more thorough analysis.

Can parties adjust policy preferences?

In democracies, the will of the people (voters' preferences) should be reflected in and satiated by political acts (policies) of the ones accountable to that public (parties) who ensure the connection between public opinion and policy outcomes (Dahl 1956). There are, however, factors that make parties more or less responsive to the public's wishes. Indeed, Freeman, Hansen and Leal highlight that policymaking in democracies does not always reflect public opinion preferences, especially in immigration policies (2012). They mention that in most

liberal democracies, except for Canada, where people have always favoured immigration, the general public is not very supportive of opening the border. Yet, their governments remain "broadly expansionist" (Freeman, Hansen, and Leal 2012, 2). They name three reasons why governments might not be able to consistently address public opinion directly by introducing shifts in policies:

1. opinion of the majority might then override the minority's opinion;
2. voters might not be fully informed about the complexities of the issues presented and would opt for easy solutions that are not politically or else feasible;
3. "passions rather than reason" could incentivise the public (2012, 2-3).

Moreover, Romeijn finds that parties in power find it harder to accommodate voters' preferences due to bureaucratic or budget constraints (2018). In contrast, those in opposition could switch policy positions much more efficiently (Romeijn 2018). As RWPs were and are still not in control of majority votes in the European Parliament, Romeijn's findings suggest that RWPs' voting could be aligned with public opinion as it would not be too costly to adjust their preferences on the issue. Freeman, Hansen and Leal add to it by suggesting that while public opinion might not *dictate* policy outcomes, it does set the *boundaries* of what could and should be said and done (2012, 4).

As every rule has exceptions, there were examples in the past when public opinion influenced ruling parties to change the direction of their rather conservative immigration policy in liberal democracies, in contrast to the inputs of Roijin (2020). Fujibayashi presents the case of Japan, whose government "exceptionally applied ad hoc and more generous policy" to Kurdish asylum seekers after Japan's civil society protested against the harsh conditions that they were faced with, and liberal pro-asylum opinion became the new norm in the society (Fujibayashi 2020,

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204). Despite RWPs not being the ruling majority in the European Parliament, I find the case of voting pro-asylum for Ukrainian refugees in 2022 a similar paradox.

Could right-wing parties change immigration policy preferences without losing supporters?

The general connection between public opinion and policymaking has been studied in abundance, and there is a consensus that niche parties, such as green or (populist) right-wing, do not respond to the general public views. Instead, they tend only to change their preferences and ideologies if their supporters shift them (Fagerholm 2016, 505; Adams et al. 2006, 518–9; Ezrow et al. 2011, 283–5; Meyer, 2013).

In contrast, some scholars claim that niche parties, such as radical right parties, do lose support when they moderate and are likely to gain votes when they radicalise, thus suggesting that voters are not blind to policy and direction changes of the parties they support (Adams et al. 2006; Lorenze Ezrow 2008; Maeda 2017; Marini 2023). Others, like Meyer and Wagner, propose that parties could implement emphasis changes instead of ideology shifts as those are not as costly: parties can discuss business-oriented policies and ignore pensions if they are leaning towards economic right and vice versa (2017, 758). By drawing more attention to some values and neglecting others, parties could almost unnoticeably change their positions on issues that do not seem central to them.

Thus, in the case of RWPs and Ukrainian refugees, this is illustrated by the radical-right Prime Minister of Italy, Giorgia Meloni, who has been supporting Ukraine and advocating for sending weapons to the frontlines and providing financial help (Ghitis 2024). It is even more striking that Meloni keeps supporting Ukraine unequivocally even though most right-wing politicians and parties in Europe, such as the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán or Austria's right-wing Freedom Party of Austria (*Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs*), FPÖ, reportedly retain close

ties with the Kremlin (Ghitis 2024). Moreover, Italy has the 5th highest population of Ukrainian refugees in the EU, and around 180,000 people have found refuge there as of 2024 (Visit Ukraine Today 2024). Thus, by primarily focusing on arms and financial aid, Meloni might not have drawn much attention to the fact that Ukrainian refugees are now welcome in Italy, especially not because other asylum-seekers must wait for their official permits to be issued for years, compared to the 'fast-track' that Ukrainians are experiencing (Wilson 2023). At the same time, Meloni's Senate passed the measure allowing Italy to ship incoming boats with migrants and potential asylum-seekers to Albania (Nadeau 2024). So, why are RWPs welcoming hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians but sending back refugees from Africa and the Middle East, and what role did the opinion of voters and supporters of RWPs play in such decisions in 2022?

What else might make parties shift their preferences?

To refute alternative explanations to shifts in party behaviour, Adams, Clark, Ezrow and Glasgow find that parties do not base their positions on the previous electoral results, whereas finding evidence that party supporters' public opinion plays a substantial role in their policy preferences (2004). Others, however, argue that parties consider previous (national) elections and might adjust their policies, primarily if the election was held recently and a significant loss of electoral support occurred (Fagerholm 2016, 504; Somer-Topcu 2009).

Moreover, Adams et al. 2009 find that parties, especially the centre and right ones, adjust their policies according to global economic changes (Adams et al. 2009, 626-7; Fagerholm 2018, 506). However, in the case of voting for the reception of people fleeing the war in Ukraine, right-wing parties could have blamed them for inflation and rising housing prices from the beginning of the crisis. Instead, some, like Meloni, advocated for unprecedented support (Ghitis 2024). In 2024, we see a more significant rise of right-wing parties and their anti-Ukrainian

rhetoric, intertwined with populism: when global economic adjustments challenged European voters, presenting them with 'easy' solutions such as cutting off aid for Ukraine is the strategy that right-wing parties chose (Hix et al. 2024; Krastev and Leonard 2024b, 2024a; Teng 2024). However, this was not the case at the beginning of the crisis in 2022.

Political parties are composed of many political actors and supporters, who might and usually do have dispersed preferences on different policies and policy areas. Left-wing parties could be internally divided between supporters of more protectionist policies (economic left) and human rights and open borders advocates (political/cultural left) (Perlmutter 1996, 378). Right-wing parties, then, might suffer from the internal division between the supporters of immigration by business owners (economic right) and "cultural conservatives asking for immigration restrictions" (Natter et al. 2020, 4). This illustrates how complex the decision-making process could be within a given party – even when they listen to their supporters, how can they choose which opinions to prioritise on a given policy? And could it be that in 2022, at the break of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, there was an almost unanimous agreement that the EU must help those fleeing the war? This thesis seeks to address this question by analysing the opinions of radical right-wing party supporters and contrasting this data with the voting behaviour of radical right-wing parties between 2015-2022.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Theory and Hypothesis

In 2022, the EU granted unprecedented opportunities to refugees fleeing the war from Ukraine. For example, on March 24, 2022, a month after the full-scale invasion, the European Parliament

adopted the Cohesions' Action for Refugees in Europe (CARE) C9-0057/2022, which allowed

the EU to use 2014-2020 Cohesion policy funds more flexibly, as well as provide additional

funding – a number as high as €10 billion – towards the need of refugees (European

Commission 2022; Vilkas 2022). The resolution was passed practically unanimously: 562 votes

'For', two votes 'Against' and three abstentions (European Parliament 2022c; Hix, Frantescu,

and Hagemann 2022). This thesis seeks to address why Members of the European Parliament

(MEPs) from right-wing and famously anti-immigration parties and party groups did not vote

against the measures or at least did not abstain from voting.

Political parties, especially niche ones like the right-wing parties, tend to lose support if the

opinions of their supporters shift away from their policy preferences (Adams et al. 2006, 518–

19; Lawrence Ezrow et al. 2011, 285–83; Fagerholm 2016, 505; Meyer 2013). Thus, I predict

that if this is the case, then the public opinion of right-wing supporters would be in solidarity

with Ukrainian refugees in 2022 and opposition to the asylum-seekers influx in 2015-2016 – a

crisis that was "smaller in scale though more politicised" (Moise, Dennison, and Kriesi 2024a).

Therefore, I develop a hypothesis:

> *H: Right-wing parties will support immigration policies that enjoy high public support*
> *from right-leaning voters and oppose those with lower public support from right-*
> *leaning voters.*

To test the consistency of my theory, I consider the trends between 2015-2016 and 2022, as the

EU had been receiving thousands of asylum applications annually (EUAA 2024), and right-

wing parties did not pause the anti-immigration rhetoric. Therefore, I include the inter-crisis

data in my analysis. Data for Eurobarometer 99, published in the first months of 2023, was

collected in 2022, so I included it in my study while referring to it as EB 2023a.

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Scope of Analysis

In recent years, migration and asylum have been Europeanised: since decision-making moved more and more to the EU level, dozens of regulations that entail sharing and redistributing people, resources and knowledge have been introduced (see Favell 1998; Thielemann 2012; 2018). The European Parliament's views on migration and asylum are technically limited to non-legislative competencies. However, the Council has to consult with EP and consider their position before making any decision (Tilindyte 2019; Zerka and Dennison 2019). Therefore, if the Parliament does not want the Council to adopt specific regulations, it can delay its consultation by endlessly sending drafts back to the Commission for further amendments. Moreover, it can refuse to give any opinion – and, according to the European Court of Justice ruling, the Council cannot proceed without having received the Parliament's opinion on the matter (Zerka and Dennison 2019). With the increasing numbers of right-wing anti-immigration MP's in the Parliament (Hix et al. 2024), I find analysis of the voting behaviour of parties in the European Parliament of significant interest, as they have all institutional tools that would allow them to undermine all previous progress in the field.

Since the policy area includes both the matters of migration and asylum, this thesis, in its analysis, will not be differentiating between the two categories. In their investigation of party voting on immigration policy in the EU between 1970-2012, Natter et al. suggest a weak correlation between *overall* immigration restriction and Left-Right party positioning (2020). Instead, ideology only affects the restrictiveness of immigration for certain groups, such as refugees or low-skilled workers (Natter, Czaika, and De Haas 2020, 19). While what we witness in the case of Ukrainian refugees fits the framework of 'certain groups', this distinction lies not along socio-economic dimensions or immigration status (economic migrants/refugees/asylum-seekers), as suggested by Natter et al., but along ethnic lines. If it was not for ethnic reasons, refugees from the Middle East or (Northern) Africa could have been treated with the same

hospitality. However, this was not the case (Moise et al. 2024; De Coninck 2023): Ukrainian refugees avoid the long recognition process as well as enjoy the right to obtain work permits for the three first years that they would spend in the EU (Martín 2022; Walker 2022). Considering the abovementioned divisions, I focus my research only on the few resolutions passed by the European Parliament: the milestones that regulated the intake of refugees between 2015-2016 and 2022.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Now, I will explain the design of my research. First, I quantitatively select public opinions of right-leaning European respondents on migration and asylum policies into the EU from publicly available Eurobarometer datasets. Then, I quantitatively chose the votes of right-wing party groups in the European Parliament on migration and asylum policies. I contrasted the two findings to see their consistency and test my hypothesis.

In the first part of my analysis, I turn to empirical data: using primary data from biannual Eurobarometer (EB) polls from the European Commission, I demonstrate changes in trends in public opinion from right-wing supporters (RWS) regarding immigration and refugees between 2015-2022. I map them together to reveal the overall trends of RWS in the European Union regarding migration and asylum issues. I use raw data from Standard EBs 84 to 99 and Special EBs on the EU's response to the invasion of Ukraine (EB 97-99) and contrast the two types of reactions.

Quantitative Public Opinion Selection

To select opinions of the right-wing supporters (RWS), out of more than thirty thousand responses in each Eurobarometer dataset, I limit my inquiry to around five thousand in each file by selecting only those who position themselves on the Left-Right political dimension as 7, 8, 9 or 10 (right), and who come from EU countries (EU-27 or EU-26 after Brexit in 2016). I do not consider those who respond '*Don't Know*' to Left-Right positioning or EU questions as it would entail a significant margin of error. Detailed data derived from each dataset can be found in Table 6 in the Appendix. To demonstrate trends in public opinion and contrast them against one another for a broader context, I use data from RWS in percentage points.

To map right-wing supporters' opinions regarding immigration and asylum over time, I choose a set of questions, all outlined in Table 1. Eurobarometer is not entirely consistent with its data. Some questions were not asked at all in some survey rounds: for example, in 2022 (EB 98), respondents were not asked about their opinion on standard European Asylum policy, even though the question was introduced in 2019 when the issue did not seem as pressing. Moreover, between 2020-2023 (EB 94-99), respondents were not asked about their feelings regarding immigration from other EU Member States or outside the EU; they were also not asked whether their country should help refugees. The Eurobarometer did not offer the same answer categories for all the years in question. For example, only since 2019 (EB 92) could respondents choose whether they are "very positive/negative" or "fairly positive/negative" about immigration from other EU Members or from outside the Union. Before 2019, answers suggested were only Positive/Negative/Don't Know. To keep data more consistent, in later rounds of Eurobarometer, I combine answers such as 'very positive' and 'fairly positive' into 'total positive' and 'totally agree' with 'tend to agree' into 'agree'. The same is done for 'total negative' and 'disagree'.

Such gaps in data limit the degree of analysis of consistency of trends in public opinion. However, even with existing data, it is possible to trace changes and biases that right-leaning respondents have had towards different immigrant groups over 2015-2022.

Quantitative Roll Call Votes Selection

To map opinions regarding immigration and asylum of RRS together with voting behaviour of RWPs in the European Parliament, I use roll-call votes (RCVs) of the European Parliament plenary sessions from 2015 until April 2022, coded by *Vote Watch Europe* project (Hix, Frantescu and Hagemann 2022). I focus my analysis on the milestone resolutions that defined the rights of refugees in the abovementioned period. Given the scope of this thesis, I consider only the 8th and the 9th European Parliaments.

According to Hix et al., *Identity and Democracy* (ID), *European Conservatives and Reformists* (ECR), and *European People's Party* (EPP) form the 'populist right coalition' (2024). EPP remains the biggest party group in the European Parliament, and their migration and asylum policies are not as restrictive as those of the ID and ECR MEPs, thus placing them into the mainstream-right position. Indeed, DeniŞ and Karaman identify their policies as ones that aim at a more significant redistribution of asylum influx: EPP claims that the EU's role is to help those fleeing wars and political persecutions (2022, 170). Therefore, I exclude EPP from this part of my analysis. Hix et al. also mention that "the majority of the non-attached MEPs are from extreme right parties" (2024, 9), but given the scope of this thesis and its focus on right-wing parties inside the European Party Groups, I have to exclude those votes as well. From the total number of votes for and against initiatives on asylum and migration, I focus on the votes of the MEPs who belong to the EPGs that belong to ID and ECR in 2019-2022. For 2014-2019, I took the *Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy* (EFDD) and *Europe of Nations and*

Freedom (ENF), which were considered right-wing by many scholars (Heinrisch 2016;

McDonnell and Werner 2020)

Figure 1: Composition of the 8th European Parliament by party groups, in percentage points. Data taken from the official European Parliament website: https://results.elections.europa.eu/en/breakdown-national-parties-political-group/2014-2019/outgoing-par
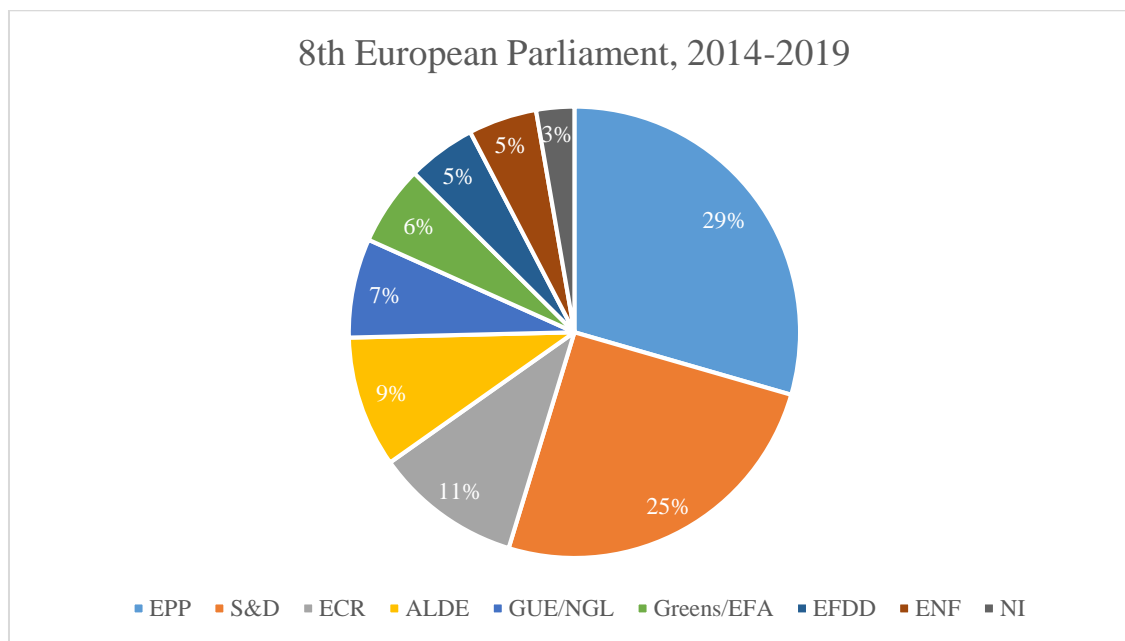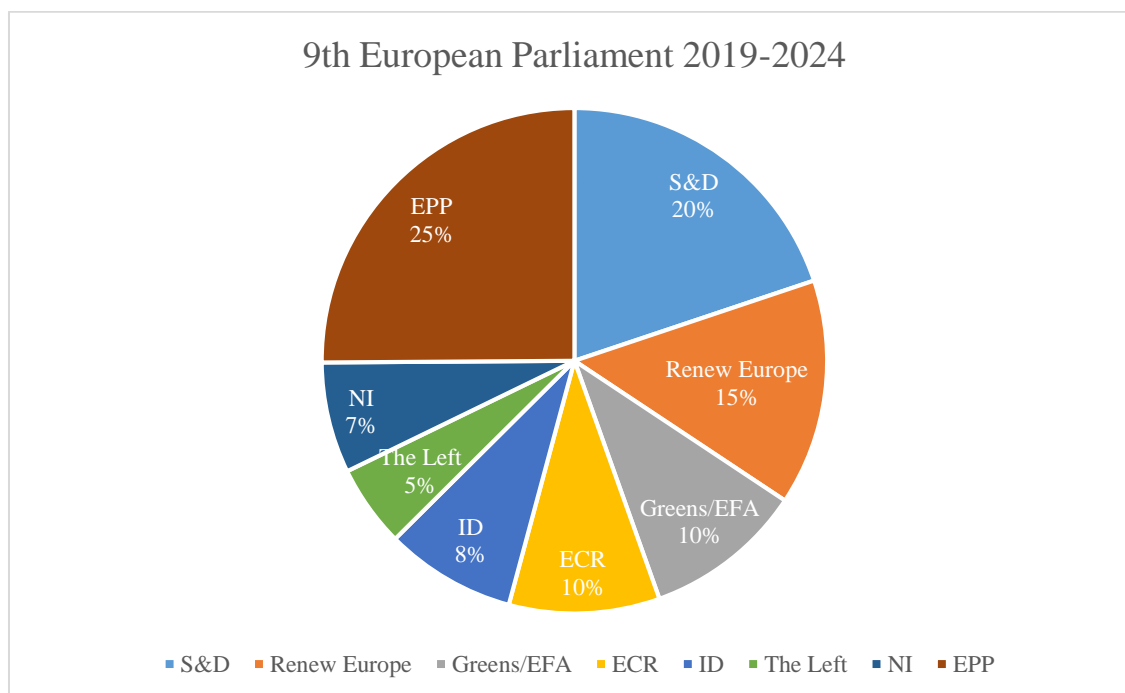

Figure 2: Composition of the 9th European Parliament by party groups, in percentage points. Data taken from the official European Parliament website: https://results.elections.europa.eu/en/breakdown-national-parties-political-group/2019-2024/outgoing-parliament/

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To select only migration and asylum initiatives in the European Parliament, I limit the scope by using the following keywords: *Migration*, *Migrant, Refuge*, *Asylum*, *Fleeing*. The last word includes the 'EU Protection of Children and Young People Fleeing the War against Ukraine', the resolution that outlined reception conditions of young Ukrainian refugees into the EU and addressed the challenges in their educational integration (European Parliament 2022e).

When adopting a resolution, the European Parliament must agree on all parts, often meaning that some parts of the text could receive mixed feedback and be amended. The legal procedure for it is voting on it. This research focuses on the initiatives adopted or turned down as a whole. Therefore, to select only resolutions, among subjects of the vote, I choose: "vote: resolution (as a whole)", "vote: AFET resolution as a whole", "vote: Commission proposal", and "vote: LIBE resolution (as a whole)".

After limiting my inquiry by using the abovementioned parameters, I am left with 29 resolutions between 2014-2019 and 18 resolutions between 2019-2022. I manually select those unlikely to regulate the reception conditions of any migrants, refugees or asylum-seekers in the EU. For example, the Resolution on Dadaab Refugee Camp (2017/2687(RSP)) is supported by the EU's resources (European Commission 2024). Since the camp is located in Kenya, and no redistribution of refugees is discussed, I do not consider this resolution relevant to this research. Additionally, I exclude duplicates from the selection: some documents contain more than one keyword, like "Asylum and Migration Fund", so I check to only count them as one entry.

After excluding all irrelevant documents that the European Parliament voted for, I am left with 11 resolutions between 2014-2019 and 8 resolutions between 2019-2022, 19 cases in total. I manually check the publicly available results of the roll-call votes on the official website of the European Parliament: all vote results are presented by party groups.

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For each resolution, I trace the behaviour of MEPs from EFDD and ENF groups in 2014-2019 and ID and ECR groups in 2019-2022. I calculate the percentage of right-wing votes for and against resolutions and abstentions on migration and asylum out of total right-wing MEPs in the Parliament to demonstrate the trend and the unified right-wing positions. To calculate percentage points, I use the following formula:

$$rightwing\ vote \div total\ number\ of\ right\ MEPs \times 100$$

In 2014-2019, total number of right-wing MEPs was 72 (36 from ENF and 36 from EFDD), and in 2019-2022 the total number equals 127 (68 from ECR and 59 from ID) (Use Your Vote n.d.). I calculate the average share of Yes, No's and Abstentions from right-wing MEPs. Detailed data can be found in Table 5.

A certain degree of inconsistency in numbers is associated with fluctuations. Some political groups emerged after the elections; for example, the ENF was only established in July 2015, a year after the elections (Tilindyte 2019). Other parties quit their groups and became *non-inscrits* (NI), such as Hungary's ruling party, Fidesz, which quit the EPP in 2021. Therefore, data exists for various periods on the exact number of MPEs belonging to each party group. I will use official metrics from the European Parliament website from 2024. Data can be found in Table 3 and Table 4 in the Appendix to this thesis.

To put that into the EU-wide context, I compare these numbers to the overall voting behaviour on the same resolutions. I use votes from the S&D party group as pro-immigration voting and anything that opposes it as anti-immigration voting. I take the theoretical framework of DeniȘ and Karaman, who analysed stances of European party groups on asylum policies: their analysis shows that S&D's migration and refugee policy is "based on solidarity and shared responsibility" (DeniȘ and Karaman 2023, 173). I go on to present my findings in the next section.

FINDINGS

In this section, I present my findings. I start by explaining the voting behaviour of right-wing party groups in the European Parliament between 2014-2022 and then move on to public opinion of right-leaning voters measured by the Eurobarometer in the same period.

First, in all but two cases in 2022, the majority of MEPs from ID and ECR in 2019-2022 and EFDD and ENF in 2014-2019 voted in opposition to S&D, meaning that 89% of all resolutions on migration and asylum that were investigated, RWPs voted in an anti-immigration manner. The two resolutions where RWPs voted mostly consistently with MEPs from other party groups are 'Refugees in Europe: CARE' of 2022, which outlined reception conditions for Ukrainian refugees and 'EU Protection of Children and Young People Fleeing the war against Ukraine' of 2022, which outlined those specifically for children. They received support from RWPs, as high as 81,2% and 35,5%, respectively. Opposition to these two initiatives was only 1,6% and 0,8%. For the second proposal, 33,1% of RWP MEPs abstained from voting. All migration and asylum initiatives before 2022, which mostly covered the situations of migrants and refugees from Africa and the Middle East, received support as high as 11,9% and 72% of opposition, on average. More information can be found in Tables 4 and 5.

Table 1: Total votes (Yes, No, Abstention) in the European Parliament between 2015-2022 on the issues of asylum and migration, each document indicated in the 'File Code' section and is demonstrated in Table 4. 'RWP Yes', 'RWP No' and 'RWP Abs' are votes only from

File Code	Yes	No	Abs	RWP Yes	RWP No	RWP Abs	RWP Yes, %	RWP No, %	RWP Abs, %
2015/2095/INI	459	206	52	15	60	0	20,9	83,4	0
2015/2121/BUD	592	75	41	25	50	10	34,8	69,5	13,9
2015/2252/BUD	577	66	14	21	59	0	29,2	82	0
2015/2321/INI	486	189	28	16	61	3	22,3	84,8	4,2
2015/2342/INI	333	310	46	0	54	15	0	75	20,9
2015/2660/RSP	449	130	93	18	9	3	25	12,5	4,2
2015/2833/RSP	432	142	57	17	59	2	23,7	82	2,8
2016/2120/BUD	526	70	44	1	52	16	1,4	72,3	22,3
2016/2257/BUD	520	53	67	1	35	32	1,4	48,7	44,5
2017/2077/BUD	535	79	31	15	50	4	20,9	69,5	5,6
2018/0248/COD	374	260	47	12	51	2	16,7	70,9	2,8
2019/2039/BUD	53	526	82	4	43	63	3,2	33,9	49,7
2020/2010/INI	495	163	32	0	131	2	0	103,2	1,6
2020/2047/INI	505	124	55	0	93	39	0	73,3	30,8
2020/2116/INI	358	309	26	0	132	3	0	104	2,4
2020/2255/INL	497	160	38	1	128	2	0,8	100,8	1,6
2021/2122/DEC	503	85	53	3	75	39	2,4	59,1	30,8
2022/0075/COD	562	2	3	103	2	0	81,2	1,6	0
2022/2618/RSP	509	3	47	45	1	42	35,5	0,8	33,1
AVERAGE							16,811	64,595	14,274
AVERAGE BEFORE UKRAINE							11,924	72,053	14,006

MEPs can change their party group affiliation anytime during their time in the Parliament. This explains inconsistencies such as 103% of RWPs voting against the 'New Avenues for Legal Labour Migration' in 2021: at the time of the vote, more than 127 MEPs were attached to ID and ECR party groups. Tracing every MEP's party group shift lies outside this thesis's scope but presents an opportunity for further, more detailed research. For this analysis, I keep the numbers derived from the original data but outline that there is a margin of error. However, I find that numbers such as 100% or 103% demonstrate the degree of consensus among right-wing MEPs and their parties, even considering the inconsistency.

Figure 3: Public Opinion Trends on Immigration of Right-leaning Voters in the EU, between 2015-2023. Data between 2020 and 2023 is missing because respondents were not asked these questions. Source: Eurobarometer, 2015-2023
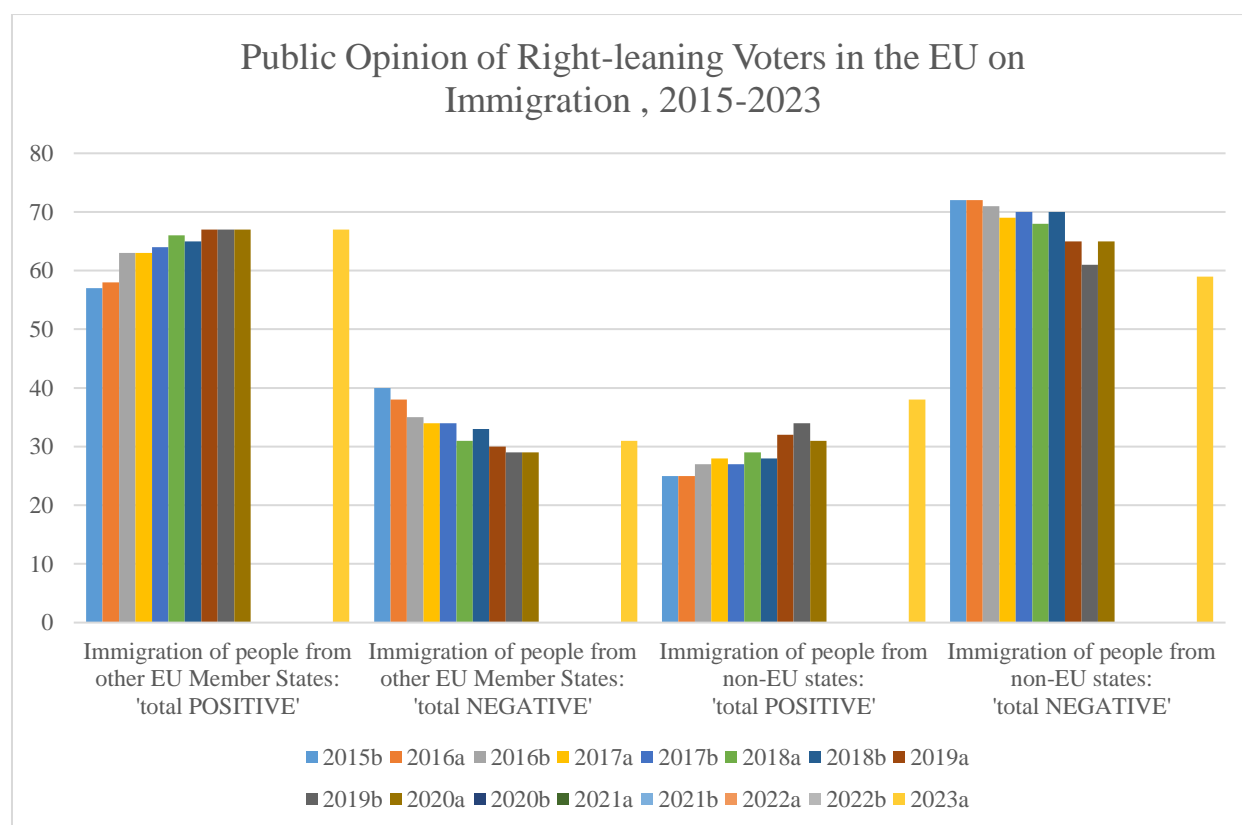
Using Eurobarometer primary data, I trace opinions of right-leaning Europeans and contrast them to EU-average views on migration and asylum over seven years, between 2015-2022. Eurobarometer is inconsistent with the data provided, as not all questions were asked in each

survey year. I put a gap where data is unavailable and continue from where it is presented again. The overall trends are, however, traceable and outlined below:

1. People tend to feel somewhat optimistic about migration from other EU states, with 64% on average among right-leaning voters, 57% being the lowest in 2015, and 67% being the highest in 2019, 2020, and 2023.

2. People tend to feel less positive about migrants from outside the EU, with 29% on average among right-leaning voters, where 25% is the lowest in 2015 and 2016, and 38% is the highest in 2023. Negative feelings towards non-EU migrants decreased from 72% in 2015 to 59% in 2023, with 67% on average.

3. On average, 60% of right-leaning voters think their country should help refugees. In 2022, the number was as low as 55%, but in 2023 it rose to 68%. By 2023, only 29% were opposing this idea.

4. In 2022, 91% of right-leaning respondents welcomed the refugees from Ukraine, and only 9% opposed it. By 2023, the numbers changed to 85% and 14%, respectively.

Figure 4: Public Opinion of Right-leaning Voters in the EU on helping Refugees, between 2015-2023. Data between 2020 and 2023 is missing because respondents were not asked these questions. Source: Eurobarometer.
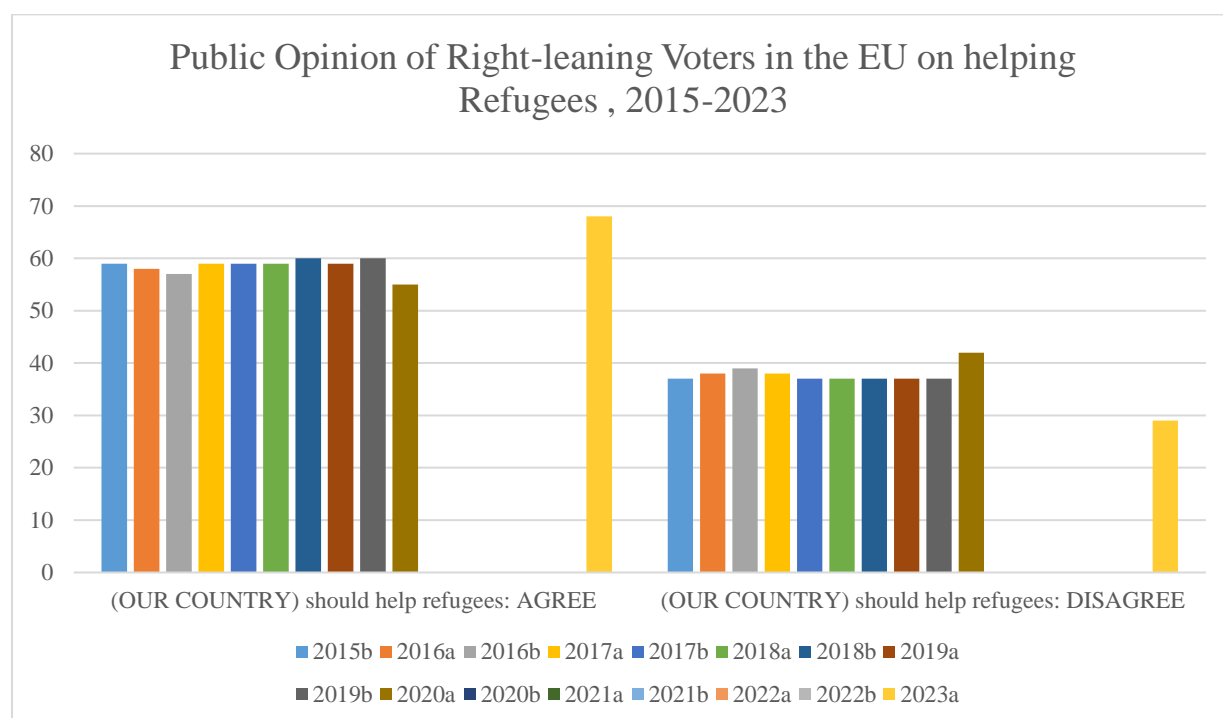
While no single question would be asked by the Eurobarometer survey consistently enough to see the difference in attitudes towards different migrant and refugee groups, some trends can still be highlighted from the context. Thus, we see a much higher support for *Ukrainian refugees* than when it is just *refugees*. The difference is 20-30% in different years. Even though by 2022, not all questions received significantly liberalised answers, a clear trend towards more inclusion and welcome is demonstrated. This trend coincides with the latest votes of right-wing MEPs in the European Parliament on the matters of asylum for Ukrainian refugees. As my hypothesis predicted, their votes coincide with the public opinion of right-leaning voters. The findings, however, pose a new question: why is 60% support for refugee help not sufficient for right-wing parties to vote accordingly? How far below 90% should the support of right-wing voters fall for RWPs to go back to restrictions?

However, it is not all negative: there is evidence that the reception experience of Ukrainian refugees has a positive spillover effect on asylum-seekers and migrants from elsewhere (Moise,

Dennison, and Kriesi 2024b). This thesis demonstrated that by 2022, the general feeling about migrants and asylum-seekers has improved, as evident from Figure 4.

DISCUSSION

Limitations of this Research

This research has its limitations. Firstly, and fundamentally, the correlation between public opinion and parties' behaviour exists, but extracting the causation and identifying one as the reason for the other is a dubious task. This thesis did not seek to address the causal links, but perhaps further research could go into that. Secondly, Eurobarometer data is inconsistent and should be updated in the following survey versions, at least in its standard part. To make an analysis of public attitudes towards migration and asylum more detailed, questions like '*Do you agree that YOUR COUNTRY/EU should be more open for people fleeing wars and natural disasters?*' could be asked. The separation between national and EU-wide efforts would be helpful for future policymaking. Thirdly, more nuanced data is needed to trace every MEP and the shifts between EPGs. This would help with coding their voting behaviour better, as many right-wing parties choose to stay *non-inscrits*, which is not a party group and therefore is not considered for this research.

Alternative Explanations

There is substantial empirical evidence, based on Eurobarometer data, that European voters do not respond to shifts in policy statements. No adjustments to left-right positioning or partisan loyalty were observed (Adams, Ezrow, and Somer-Topcu 2011). If so, and if parties know that, then parties might not and should not care about losing voters over shifts in specific policy areas. Then, a different rationale would have to explain the situations when parties change their

policy preferences, especially when it comes to the parties' core values. Indeed, as party politics is a phenomenon of considerable multi-dimension and complexity, the reasons for the behaviour of any political actors inside the system cannot be explained by one hypothesis but rather by a combination of intertwined factors. Despite the focus of this paper on parties' responsiveness to their supporters' opinions, I seek to provide alternative explanations as to why RRWPs might vote against their core values.

Security

The war in Ukraine is the first full-scale military conflict in larger Europe since the Balkan wars of the 1990s. Its proximity is a lot closer emotionally to a European voter and geographically – to a European legislator and security decision-maker (De Coninck 2023). Scholars of the evolution of the EU Migration policy point out that most restrictiveness these days is born out of consideration for security and not humanitarianism (Moldovan 2018). Building on this, European voters and parties might have perceived the spread of conflict further into the West as a more significant threat than hosting Ukrainians fleeing the war. As conflicts in Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia, etc, are considerably further away from the everyday lives of Europeans, the feeling of threat to security was not comparable. Even some argue that after the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, the risk of terrorist attacks in Europe rose (Schindler 2021), it was not perceived as substantial.

Racism

It could be argued that it is blatant racism that makes European right-wing parties vote in favour of white Christian asylum-seekers from Ukraine and oppose Muslim refugees of colour from Africa or the Middle East (Wilson 2023; Moise et al. 2024; De Coninck 2023). Whether it is voters or parties that exercise that is a question for further investigation: it is unlikely that public opinion surveys on this topic would appear trustworthy, as respondents might not want to reveal

what is perceived negatively in society. Notwithstanding, racism may play a significant role in this difference between attitudes towards different groups of refugees.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I sought to unveil the connection between the voting behaviour of right-wing parties in the European Parliament on migration and asylum issues and the public opinion of right-leaning supporters in the EU. Resting my analysis on the works of Adams (2004; 2006; 2011), Ezrow (2004; 2006; 2008; 2011a; 2011b), Hix (2007; 2024), Freeman (2012), Natter et al. (2020), Thielemann (2012; 2018) and many others, I demonstrated that right-leaning respondents of Eurobarometer survey did support the reception of Ukrainian refugees in 2022. The numbers were as high as 90%, compared to previous survey rounds when questions did not specify which refugee respondents' countries should have helped more – then, support was only measured at around 60%. It coincided with the voting behaviour of right-wing parties in the European Parliament: until 2022, the average rate of pro-immigration votes was only around 11%. When it came to the reception of people fleeing the war in Ukraine, the two main resolutions received unprecedented support from right-wing parties.

It is difficult to say whether public attitudes towards people fleeing the war in Ukraine made right-wing parties vote in their favour or vice versa. However, we observed that the positions of voters and parties strongly correlated in 2022 even though they opposed the core values of right-wing ideologies.

This thesis has limitations but could serve as a starting point for future research. Further investigations could be applied to the roles of right-wing parties among the *non-inscrits*. They do not constitute a separate party group in the European Parliament. However, because their number has grown in the past few years, they can still present significant threats to progress in

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migration and asylum areas. More research can also be done on the side of public opinion: asking not only people's left-ring positioning but the exact parties they support, as well as differentiating between different kinds of refugees and the role of national governments and in the EU in future surveys. I believe it is crucial to understand the rationale behind right-wing supporters, as their numbers, and thus influence, on the political arena of the European Union are increasing annually.

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APPENDIX

Table 2: Composition of public opinion on migration and asylum overtime, 2015-2022. Questions and Answers considered, in percentage points, from Eurobarometer data 2015-2022 (Eurobarometer 84-99), in this study .

Questions	Answers considered, %			
Please tell whether each of the following statements evokes a positive or negative feeling for you. Immigration of people from other EU Member States.	EU-average		Right-Wing Supporters	
	Very positive + Fairly positive	Very negative + Fairly negative	Very positive + Fairly positive	Very negative + Fairly negative
Please tell whether each of the following statements evokes a positive or negative feeling for you. Immigration of people from outside the EU.	EU-average		Right-Wing Supporters	
	Very positive + Fairly positive	Very negative + Fairly negative	Very positive + Fairly positive	Very negative + Fairly negative
For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you totally agree, tend to agree, tend to disagree or totally disagree: (OUR COUNTRY) should help refugees.	EU-average		Right-Wing Supporters	
	Totally agree + Fairly agree	Totally disagree + Fairly disagree	Totally agree + Fairly agree	Totally disagree + Fairly disagree
For EB 97-99 only: The EU has taken a series of actions as a response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of these measures taken? Welcoming in the EU people fleeing the war.	EU-average		Right-Wing Supporters	
	Totally agree + Fairly agree	Totally disagree + Fairly disagree	Totally agree + Fairly agree	Totally disagree + Fairly disagree

Table 3: Composition of the 8th European Parliament by party groups, in percentage points. Data taken from the official European Parliament website: https://results.elections.europa.eu/en/breakdown-national-parties-political-group/2014-2019/outgoing-parliament/.

Political Group	Number of seats	% of seats
EPP	216	28.84%
S&D	185	24.70%
ECR	77	10.28%
ALDE	69	9.21%
GUE/NGL	52	6.94%
Greens/EFA	42	6.94%
EFDD	36	5.61%
ENF	36	4.81%
NI	20	2.67%

Table 4: Composition of the 9th European Parliament by party groups, in percentage points. Data taken from the official European Parliament website: https://results.elections.europa.eu/en/breakdown-national-parties-political-group/2019-2024/outgoing-parliament/

Political Group	Number of seats	% of seats
EPP	177	25.40%
S&D	140	20.00%
Renew Europe	102	14.20%
Greens/EFA	72	10.09%
ECR	68	9.51%
ID	59	8.24%
The Left	37	5.40%
NI	50	7.10%

Table 5: Full list of documents on migration and asylum that European Parliament voted on between 2014-2022 used in this analysis.

(European Parliament 2015d, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2016b, 2016a, 2016c, 2017b, 2017a, 2019a, 2019b, 2020, 2021b, 2021b, 2021a, 2022c, 2022a, 2022d, 2022b; Hix, Frantescu, and Hagemann 2022)

Date	Title	Interinstitutional file number
12.04.2016	The situation in the Mediterranean and the need for a holistic EU approach to migration	2015/2095/INI
7.07.2015	Draft amending budget No 5/2015 - Responding to migratory pressures	2015/2121/BUD
14.10.2015	Draft amending budget No 7/2015: Managing the refugee crisis: immediate budgetary measures under the European Agenda on Migration	2015/2252/BUD
5.07.2016	Refugees: social inclusion and integration into the labour market	2015/2321/INI
05.04.2017	Addressing refugee and migrant movements: the role of EU External Action	2015/2342/INI
29.04.2015	Report of the extraordinary European Council meeting (23 April 2015) - The latest tragedies in the Mediterranean and EU migration and asylum policies	2015/2660/RSP
10.09.2015	Migration and refugees in Europe	2015/2833/RSP
01.12.2016	Mobilisation of the Flexibility Instrument to finance immediate budgetary measures to address the ongoing migration, refugee and security crisis	2016/2120/BUD
01.12.2016	Draft amending budget No 4/2016: Update of appropriations to reflect the latest developments on migration and security issues, reduction of payment and commitment appropriations	2016/2257/BUD
30.11.2017	Mobilisation of the Flexibility Instrument to finance immediate budgetary measures to address the on-going challenges of migration, refugee inflows and security threats	2017/2077/BUD
13.03.2019	Asylum and Migration Fund	2018/0248/COD
10.10.2019	Adjustments to the amounts mobilised from the Flexibility Instrument for 2019 to be used for migration, refugee inflows and security threats	2019/2039/BUD
20.05.2021	New Avenues for Legal Labour Migration	2020/2010/INI
09.02.2021	Implementation of Article 43 of the Asylum Procedures Directive	2020/2047/INI
19.05.2021	Human rights protection and the EU external migration policy	2020/2116/INI
25.11.2021	Legal migration policy and law	2020/2255/INL
04.05.2022	Discharge 2020: European Asylum Support Office	2021/2122/DEC
24.03.2022	Refugees in Europe: CARE	2022/0075/COD
07.04.2022	EU Protection of children and young people fleeing the war against Ukraine	2022/2618/RSP

Table 6: Full list of questions considered for this analysis, between 2015-2023, with answers from right-leaning respondents from the EU

(European Commission And European Parliament, Brussels 2019; European Commission, Brussels 2019a, 2019a, 2019b, 2020b, 2020a, 2020c, 2021, 2022a, 2022b, 2022b, 2022c, 2023a, 2023b, 2023c, 2023d, 2024; European Union n.d.).

	2015b	2016a	2016b	2017a	2017b	2018a	2018b	2019a	2019b	2020a	2020b	2021a	2021b	2022a	2022b	2023a
Number of respondents who self-position as RIGHT (7-10), who are from EU, who did not refuse to answer	5851	5851	5887	5837	5952	5969	5323	5998	5932	6659	7020	6866	6639	6837	6122	6251
Immigration of people from other EU Member States: 'total POSITIVE' (from 2019, very positive + fairly positive), for RW, %	57	58	63	63	64	66	65	67	67	67						67
Immigration of people from other EU Member States: 'total NEGATIVE' (from 2019, very negative + fairly negative), for RW, %	40	38	35	34	34	31	33	30	29	29						31
Immigration of people from non-EU states: 'total POSITIVE' (from 2019, very positive + fairly positive), for RW, %	25	25	27	28	27	29	28	32	34	31						38
Immigration of people from non-EU states: 'total NEGATIVE' (from 2019, very negative + fairly negative), for RW, %	72	72	71	69	70	68	70	65	61	65						59
(OUR COUNTRY) should help refugees: AGREE (totally agree + fairly agree), average across EU among RW, %	59	58	57	59	59	59	60	59	60	55						68
(OUR COUNTRY) should help refugees: DISAGREE (totally disagree + fairly disagree), average across EU among RW, %	37	38	39	38	37	37	37	37	37	42						29
To what extent you agree or disagree with each of these measures taken? Welcoming in the EU people fleeing the war. AGREE (totally agree + fairly agree), for RW, %														91	89	85
To what extent you agree or disagree with each of these measures taken? Welcoming in the EU people fleeing the war. DISAGREE (totally agree + fairly agree), for RW, %														9	10	14

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