



Wednesday, January 10, 2024

HOW WILL MIGRATION IMPACT THE ELECTORAL PROSPECTS OF EUROPE'S FAR-RIGHT?

Bottom Line Up Front:

- The issue of migration has again emerged as a key political priority across Europe and will likely be the determinative factor in several upcoming elections across the continent, including the European Parliament elections in June.
- 2023 marked a record-setting year for irregular border crossings – as well as one of the deadliest for migrants attempting the journey to Europe.
- The recent passage of a restrictive immigration bill in France, in part to appease the French far-right, demonstrates how European far-right populist parties have successfully mainstreamed their priorities and policies, especially on the issue of migration.
- The electoral momentum of the European far-right, including recent successes in Germany and the Netherlands and a strong outlook for the European Parliament's elections, speaks to the continued resonance of its populist messaging with European electorates.

The issue of migration has again emerged as a key political priority across Europe and will likely be the determinative factor in several upcoming elections across the continent, including the European Parliament elections in June. In 2023, the number of irregular border crossings into the European Union (EU) reached over 355,300, according to Frontex, the European agency that manages EU borders. The 2023 figure marks the highest total recorded crossings since 2016, the height of Europe's refugee and migrant influx. The past year was also one of the deadliest for migrants seeking to reach Europe, with [thousands dying](#) in the Mediterranean during their journey due to overcrowded boats capsizing or sinking.

At the EU member state level, the issue of migration has featured significantly in legislative efforts. In December, the French parliament passed a controversial migration bill, despite internal dissent within French President Emmanuel Macron's party. The bill, initially criticized for appeasing the far-right National Rally party led by Marine Le Pen, ultimately gained enough support to pass in parliament. While stricter immigration controls could favor Macron's Renaissance Party in the EU parliamentary elections by demonstrating it prioritizes controlling migration, Le Pen claimed the legislation as an "undeniable ideological victory" for the far-right.

The legislation tightens immigration rules and introduces migration quotas. Although the law aims to

facilitate residency permits for migrants in labor-scarce sectors, it also streamlines the expulsion of irregular migrants, denies French-born children of foreigners access to automatic birthright citizenship, delays migrants' ability to obtain welfare benefits, allows for dual-nationals convicted of homicide to be stripped of their French citizenship, and tightens family reunification procedures. The legislation has been heavily criticized by human rights organizations and left-wing parties; a joint statement by 50 organizations published called it "the most regressive bill of the past 40 years for ... foreigners." It is currently being reviewed by the Constitutional Council in France, which will determine whether the law can be enforced in its current form or if it will require amendments. The immigration bill's passage reflects the complex political landscape in France, forcing Macron to balance a centrist agenda with placations of [far-right sentiments](#) that are set to dominate the European Parliament elections. Moreover, it demonstrates how far-right populists have mainstreamed anti-immigration policies and capitalized on the issue to achieve political power. Perhaps most starkly, French interior minister Gérald Darmanin spoke to the political potency of this issue by arguing that the administration would need to adopt tough immigration measures to stem the rise of Le Pen's far-right party.

Rising migration levels, as well as the impacts of the [cost-of-living crisis](#), have provided ample fodder for far-right populist parties' messaging, translating into several key electoral successes. The tactic has historically proven successful, providing a groundswell of support in the aftermath of the 2015 "refugee crisis" and a wave of momentum electorally for the far-right, including in Germany, Belgium, and Sweden. In the Netherlands, the Party for Freedom (PVV), led by the infamous anti-Islam politician Geert Wilders, achieved a significant triumph in the November 2023 general elections, emerging as the country's largest political party. Although Wilders has pledged to moderate his most hardline policies, as many of his anti-Islam measures are seen as infringements on constitutionally protected rights, his party's victory shows that restrictive immigration policies resonate deeply with the Dutch electorate. A surge in Wilders' popularity post-election – a mid-December poll showed that more than 30 percent of voters would now back the PVV if an election were held now – indicates this resonance may be enduring. Moreover, as its failure to reach a deal on immigration restrictions led to the collapse of the Dutch government last summer, and immigration issues dominated the campaigning that resulted in Wilders' victory, migration is likely to be a priority for any governing coalition, which could have to deliver considerable concessions for the far-right. There are still obstacles to the PVV's ability to form a government, but its electoral success is part of a broader [strengthening of the far-right](#) across Europe.

In Germany, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party continues to build on its breakthrough successes last summer, with an AfD-backed candidate winning a mayoral race in the state of Saxony in mid-December. The win was an important symbolic victory for the party, as it marks AfD's first city mayorship and serves as an important signal for its normalization and mainstreaming strategy. Saxony's Office for the Protection of the Constitution classified the regional association of AfD as an extremist organization in early December, following similar decisions in two other states. Earlier last year, Germany's domestic intelligence agency classified the [AfD's youth wing](#) as an extremist group pursuing anti-constitutional endeavors, as it did for two other far-right entities part of the so-called "New Right" in Germany. AfD's support has also reached a record-high 23 percent with German voters, according to a poll conducted in December 2023 by the Forsa Institute. The polling, coupled with the sustained electoral momentum of the AfD, indicates that prior prognostications that the party had maxed out its support base may have been premature. The issue of migration, in addition to the fallout from a national budget crisis, may continue to bolster the support for AfD, sustaining the party's momentum in upcoming elections in three eastern states this year.

As the issue of migration dominates political discourse at the national level of various European states, parallel debates have continued more broadly in the European Union. In December, the bloc reached a deal on asylum and immigration reform after years of negotiations. The deal seeks to balance the responsibilities of frontline southern European states like [Italy](#), Greece, and Spain, which initially receive the most asylum seekers and migrants via the Mediterranean route, with the principle of solidarity across the EU. While the pact does not alter the Dublin Regulation, which stipulates that the country of arrival carries the burden of processing asylum requests, it provides significant resources for countries that

receive a disproportionate number of migrants at their borders. The deal also aims to limit the entry of migrants and expedite the ability to deport those unlikely to win asylum claims, attempting to curtail the rising far-right ahead of the European Parliament elections in June. According to a projection by Europe Elects in December 2023, the far-right Identity and Democracy Party (ID) is on track to become the third largest party in the European Parliament. This outlook found that if elections had been held at the time of publication, ID would have won 12.1% of the popular vote, its highest level of support since February 2020. The 93 parliamentary seats the party was projected to win would be the party's best-ever performance in the European elections. Although the results are a victory for the far-right, it is highly likely that the centrist coalition between the European People's Party (EPP), the Socialists and Democrats (S&D) and Renew Europe (RE) will maintain a comfortable absolute majority. Yet, as national dynamics have demonstrated, the far-right may have considerable success in mainstreaming and normalizing their priorities, particularly on migration, significantly shaping EU policies and priorities moving forward.
