

Investigating the discourse of right-wing populists

★ Right-wing populist parties in Europe have developed an electoral agenda based on strengthening state border control. How do these parties adapt their discourse in cross-border regions characterized by strong economic interdependences? We spoke to **Dr Christian Lamour** and **Professor Oscar Mazzoleni** about their work in analysing populist discourse in cross-border regions.

The European integration process has encouraged the development of cross-border functional regions based on the daily influx of workers from beyond national borders. Prominent examples include Luxembourg in the EU, and also the cities of Geneva, Basel and Ticino in Switzerland, which all attract commuters from the neighbouring EU states. For instance, 200,000 cross-border workers are employed in the Luxembourg economy. This economic interdependence across borders is facilitated by EU political agreements and policies, but what about Eurosceptic right-wing populist parties, which have based much of their electoral appeal on a desire to strengthen nation-state borders and oppose an EU that they perceive as "borderless"? This question is central to the work of the CROSS-POP project, in which researchers are looking at the discourse produced by right-wing populists in the Luxembourg and Swiss cross-border functional regions.

Cross-border workers The presence of cross-border workers in these regions can lead to a degree of antagonism with local residents, who maybe move around less and resent those who they see as exploiting the economic opportunities in open borderland regions. As political groups, right-wing populist parties often claim to represent the

Right-wing populism is based on an antagonistic vision of society implying a **frustrated people**, a **frustrating elite** and **threatening "others"** such as **migrants**.

interest of geographically fixed citizens, and in some cases may scapegoat the more mobile cross-border workers. This active population then becomes one subcategory of the migrants who constitute a major community opposed to the people as suggested by Christian Lamour, senior researcher at LISER in Luxembourg.

One can notice that Europe borderlands can be characterised by the presence of strong right-wing populist parties, as seen in the selected case studies of the CROSS-POP project. "In the case of Ticino there are two strong populist parties, on both sides of the Swiss-Italian border. In Basel, Luxembourg and Geneva, there is a strong, right-wing populist mobilisation

on only one side of the border," says Oscar Mazzoleni, a Professor in the Institute of Political Studies at the University of Lausanne. "How can we explain this variation? How do these parties mobilise? Is the cross-border regional integration a central issue in the opposition of the people to the elite and others? Usually

radical right-wing populist parties are studied at the state-border national level, but we're taking a regional approach at the cross-border scale."

This research aims to analyse the discourse employed by right-wing populists during electoral periods, looking at how they seek to appeal to voters. The project is focused primarily on three research questions. "The first is to look at the specific workings of this radical right-wing discourse. Secondly, was there any convergence of right-wing populist discourse at the scale of cross-border regions? The third question was about the role of the media in the circulation of right-wing populism in border regions," outlines Dr Lamour. In a way, populists 'perform crisis' during election campaigns to use the expression of Benjamin Moffitt. They give the impression to the electorate that there is an overall structural problem that has to be resolved, and that conventional politicians can't provide the solution. "When addressing the common people, the message from right-wing populists is: 'We can secure your living conditions, through taking back control.' There is a commonality here between the Swiss, Italian and French populist parties analysed in our case studies. This message of taking back control is strictly connected with the defence of the border," says Professor Mazzoleni.

The common enemy to an extent in each of the cases is the European Union, which is often portrayed by right-wing populists as a remote, bureaucratic elite acting against the interests of the citizens. There is a certain level of scepticism across the continent about the European Union, and a hostility to the idea of open borders within the Union. "Populist parties are to an extent reacting to an anti-EU mood in the population and favour this Euroscepticism," says Dr Lamour. These radical right-wing parties are typically nationalist in outlook, focused on strengthening borders, so might be expected to oppose the idea of collaborating with others, yet Professor Mazzoleni says they do in fact cooperate at different European levels including sometimes in cross-border regions such as the polarised area around Ticino, where populist parties hold executive powers on both sides of the border. "When you have two parties that are close to the border, they may find common enemies in order to avoid conflict."

In groups vs out groups

The antagonism promoted by right wing populist is partly about the opposition of people-centred in-groups to out-groups combining elites and others who can be represented as a threat to the people. This antagonism can vary depending on our cross-border regional contexts. Cross-border workers turn out to be considered differently by right-wing populists in border regions. Dr. Christian Lamour notices that they are often included into the negatively-defined out-group by the Swiss populist parties in Ticino and in Geneva, but less so in Basel, while the populist right in Luxembourg can include cross-border workers both in the out-group and the in-group depending on contexts and issues. The French and Italian populist parties in the CROSS-POP case studies do not criticize cross-border workers, as most of them reside in their electoral districts and can constitute an electorate to be attracted by scapegoating other communities such as Extra-European migrants or the liberal elite, who are perceived as being responsible for a borderless Europe which frustrates the people.

Populist party representatives may seem to belong to the political, economic and cultural elite due to their enduring presence in politics, their personal wealth and their educational background. "Nevertheless, they often use a popular communication style and more broadly represent themselves as the representative of the victimized people," says Dr. Lamour.

The approach of the media towards reporting this discourse is another major topic of interest in the project. While some media outlets may look to profit from sensationalist discourse, using it as a means to attract attention and increase sales, Dr Lamour says a desire to contain populist rhetoric is also evident in some regions. "For example, in Luxembourg there is what we call a cordon sanitaire. The mass media is cautious about reporting on the ideas and arguments of right-wing populist parties," he explains.

A number of research papers have already been published, while Professor Mazzoleni has just co-authored a book exploring some of the themes which have been investigated in the project. This research represents a valuable contribution to the literature on right-wing populism in Europe. "Our analysis is quite innovative as cross-border functional regions are considered as spatial conditions and resources for populist mobilisation within multiscaling settings, including European scale," says Professor Mazzoleni.

CROSS-POP

The Right-Wing Populist Discourse in European Cross-Border Areas. A comparison between Switzerland and Luxembourg

Project Objectives

The goal of the CROSS-POP project is to analyse the right-wing populist discourse (RPD) in European cross-border regions. This project follows a comparative approach focusing on four cross-border areas centred on Luxembourg, Geneva, Basel and Ticino. Some broader aspects of bordering processes, in connection with populism are also focused.

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