**Interview A**

##### Interviewer

So, let's get started then. It's actually great that you brought up Raj’s discussion of, kind of, Lega’s focus on ethnoregionalism, that kind of that turn, because one of the main things I'll be interested in this interview is Lega’s focus on ethnoregionalism and also its focus on kind of anti immigration policies, as well as. Just to start off with, how would you characterise the importance of northern autonomy, if not outright independence for Lega? How important is it as an issue?

##### Interviewee

It depends where, it is very important in the north, obviously not very much so in the south, actually, not at all in the south. In the north, I think at the moment you still have two Leagues that still live together and don’t like each other very much. One part is the part that goes back to the origins in Bossi, and they are very much in favour of an ethnoregionalist understanding of the world, and therefore they tend to be both anti-immigrant, but also anti-southerner. So, to them, that is the essence of the League, and that is still very much there, it is very strong. As I speak, I am in Como, which is one of the cradles of the League, on the Italian-Swiss border. And here, you know, it is sort of understood that the League is about the North-South dimension. And in fact, some people might even think that, you know, the anti-immigrant extreme right profile is mainly a device to increase the vote, but to them the League is essentially a North-South issue.

So I mean, just to give you examples, I'm a diver, so I’m part of a diving club. This is a working-class sporting activity, as well as a middle-class one. And so the working class component is right wing. So the question is, you know, what particular kind of right are you part of, rather than whether you are left or right. And to them, the world is about the difference between North and South. Occasionally we would go out to say to Neapolitan Pizzerias, and they would poke fun at the other owners of these places, just imitating their accent and thinking that is really funny to be from the south. Then they would not say that in public. And if you go to the festivals of the League the Pontida festival, which takes place once a year and, then they would typically be anti southerners.

##### Interviewer

Okay, great. Thanks. So then the same question, since you've already brought up the kind of strategy, I guess, perhaps of focusing on immigration, which is often seen as attracting voters. So how important do you think immigration is for Lega?

##### Interviewee

The two things, you know, the anti southerner sentiments and the anti-immigrant sentiment are not incompatible. They go together, again, same attitude. So, they think that Europe is a disaster because it didn't do anything to stop migration. And they think migration is basically a major problem in the country, mainly because of security issues. To a greater extent, I would say so to a much greater extent because of competition for resources of the welfare state and for job competition. Obviously, job competition is not a major issue to the extent that some of the northern business class people hiring migrants for their own businesses. So I think it's a case of scizophrenia. They don't like migrants, as human beings. They like them as workers.

##### Interviewer

Yeah. Okay. Then, since we've talked about these, ethnoregionalism and immigration, which do you think Lega prioritises and has that changed over time? Now you said that there's these two Legas that kind of exist in the North. So that might complicate this a bit. But what do you think is the most important issue for the party?

##### Interviewee

It depends when and where. So if you step back a few years ago, the Lega was downloading a set of corruption scandals that were mainly against the older version of the Lega, so the Bossi part. Their vote declined sharply, partly because the Lega had traditionally identified itself with anti-corruption policies. So, you know, the slogans like ‘Lega cleans the engine’, and obviously because they were just, you know, caught red-handed with major corruption, there was a decline of support. So there was a change of leadership.

You remember, they went from Bossi to Maroni, then from Maroni to Salvini, and Salvini needed a clean break, in terms of voter’s appeal, in terms of policies, in terms of the way the Lega ran itself and extreme right was at the time the best way to re-found, to re-start, the Lega, widen the electorate to the South. And so that was a strategy which paid off very intensely. So they went from a few percent point to being basically the largest party in the country.

And that was only partly because of the victory in the south, which was never really persuasive, but was also because they so appealed to a new component: to the middle-class, anti-immigrant, and socially different components, socially different in terms of being younger, in terms of being possibly a little more urban. For them, the transition from anti-southerner, ethnonationalist, they moved to the extreme right, which was a very successful move.

It lasted for a number of years, but then they started to face the competition from because Fratelli d’Italia, which is again, very different in that if you take the evolution of the extreme right in Italy, you might want to start with the MSI, which was the older fascist party surviving from the collapse of Fascism. And they went through the process of institutionalisation and moderation under Fini, which turned it into a right wing but neoliberal and essentially respectful of human rights party. That party then joined Forza Italia. It was basically I'd say, normalised, but also incorporated into Forza Italia to the point that they lost membership and they lost they lost their policies. So then they had the spin off party, which, as Fratelli d’Italia, went back to the origins in some ways, went back to their audience in that they didn't accept the newly returned, they didn't accept that the human rights turn, they didn't fully accepted the rejection of anti-Semitism, but Fratelli d’Italia was very popular because they went back to some, I'd say, social policies of the past, the idea that the state can be used to alleviate the suffering of the poorest part of the population, but state support should be for Italians and not for migrants.

So there were a space, a right-wing space that the Lega found it difficult to occupy, partly because in the heads of Southerners it was still connected very much to northern separatism. So in that context, the competition started to emerge between the two parties. And at the moment, Fratelli d’Italia is essentially competing with the Lega on possibly better grounds for a number of reasons. One, the leader is smarter, more cultured, and two, because they don't have the legacy of anti-southern policies. So for that reason, they are on the same level in terms of voting polls.

##### Interviewer

Okay, great. Yeah. That kind of leads us on nicely to my next question. So the next question was, what do you think could cause or what could or does cause the party to prioritise northern issues over cultural protectionism, and vice-versa? You've already said the corruption scandal and change in leadership is an important issue, and party competition. Is there anything else that might matter, do you think?

##### Interviewee

Well, I mean, the most important there is leadership. So the Lega is a populist, charismatic party, and it's very difficult to unseat a leader in that kind of party. The leader has committed himself to an extreme right platform. But that platform sits very uneasily with a large component of its electorate, which includes the northern Italian industrialists, solid middle-class voters. And for that social component, he is the wrong leader. They would want to change him. But as I said, because of the nature of this party, this is not likely to happen very soon.

So he's becoming more moderate, but very reluctantly. And he's facing a lot of internal competition, which is mainly represented by Giorgetti, who is the second in command in some ways. Giorgetti managed to impose a U-turn, which essentially means that the League is joining this large, fragmented government and has changed its approach to Europe. But then at the same time, in social media and at least from the leader’s perspective, it continues to be an extreme right-wing party. So, in other words, what is difficult is that many different ideologies co-exist uneasily within the League, and they're represented by different people and also by different social components.

And it is true of any party that you have got a youth faction that is more activist, you have a parliamentary party, you have local parties, and you have a party in the media. But in the case of the League, these differences can be very sharp. So to answer your question, it depends how long one Salvini manages to remain in power and at the moment, I don't think he going to be easily unseated, not in the next few years. But again, you never know.

##### Interviewer

Okay. So just to kind of narrow in the focus and perhaps one variable which you may or may not think is important, but do you think the EU has played any role in how the party prioritises these two appeals?

##### Interviewee

Of course, yes, the EU is crucial because at end of the day, Italy is in dire straits and they need EU money and you can't get European money and be anti-European, which in part explains of the U-turn of Salvini, beggars cannot be choosers, and this is the case of Italy in general and the League as well. So to the extent that his base needs European money, then anti-Europeanism doesn't play very well. That's one consideration. Second consideration is that the party didn't do very well out of marginalising itself in European institutions, especially the Parliament, because essentially, if you are anti-European, you are basically consigned to be irrelevant and you have got to be part of the extreme right group. You can use the European Parliament as a theatrical means of protest and then publicise them on social media. But in terms of actually achieving anything, you're going to fail. I mean, even Orban, who is right-wing, and conservate in social terms, has been playing a smart game by remaining part of the EPP a long time, except obviously he had to leave. But Salvini never touched that. It was actually famous for not going there. There is a level of absence. They want to never go there, they want to use it for prophetic purposes. They want to use it to bring home the bacon, the pork barrel approach. And in the case of the League, they never brought home anything.

So to summarise yes, Europe matters in many different ways, because in internal national politics Europe is important, because in terms of presence within European institution is important.

##### Interviewer

Yeah. So the presence and institutions is interesting because, for ethnoregional parties, quite a large literature looks at things like the Committee of the Regions and regional involvement, the creation of funding packages, which probably goes back to your point about the EU, you know, providing money, which is helpful. And do you think these kinds of avenues for greater regional involvement encouraged Lega to focus on ethnoregionalism at any point, or not?

##### Interviewee

I mean, to an extent, but I would say a small extent. The Committee of the Regions is not very important and it is an advisory assembly. Regional offices are a base for pork barrel politics. Regional offices are very different, some more powerful, some are less powerful. So the longer the regional office is fairly important and it could be, you know, it could be important in the way you say, basically as a way of institutionalising ethnoregionalism, but again, that's not where the real power is. If you take as an example, Scottish house is extremely important in Brussels, and there are some studies that are trying to see whether regions with a strong identity like the Catalans, the Scots, play a different game in Brussels, and I think the results are mixed. It depends on if you, in addition to having some strong identity, also have a strong economic impact, because otherwise your marginalised. If you take the Sardinians, for instance, their regional office is interpreted mainly in cultural terms. They're there to get grants, but that's not as important as the other considerations are, just in my view.

##### Interviewer

Yeah. Okay. And I guess the final question on the role of the EU is radical right parties often focus on, and dislike the EU's free movement of people, and how bad that is. And so, is this aspect of the EU important for Lega as well?

##### Interviewee

That is a source of embarrassment for the party, because obviously, free movement means, among other things, that one, you're benefiting the industrial middle-class in the north. And so if you don't want free movement, you're not going to be very popular with exporters. Secondly, free movement means that borders are open and there's a platform from which you can at least argue that migrants should be distributed across the European territories. If you say that you want to close borders and you want a nation with the policies, then that means that migrants come stay in Italy simply because they are so close.

So if that is what you want, then you also hurting yourself in terms of your own stated desire of not having too many migrants. It is partly the case because as you know, it is almost impossible to repatriate migrants simply because, you know, you don't know where they're from. They burned their password, the minute they are in Italy. Secondly, because the state is not very strong in Italy, so they just disappear from the radar. And thirdly, because illegal migrants are useful for organised crime as well as for cheap labour. So in that context and because it's too expensive to send them back, if you close the borders the migrants stay in, and people will obviously point that out.

##### Interviewer

Okay. Earlier you mentioned kind of the important role of the leader, especially given how hard it is to get rid of the leader in Lega. So I suppose that kind of makes me think about the role of party members, just how important are party members in determining how important northern interests or anti-immigrant policies are?

##### Interviewee

That's a difficult question. I mean, the honest answer is I don’t know. I mean, Lega has congresses, but the problem is the problem that we see with all political corruption, because political corruption, essentially in political science is very difficult to quantify by definition, and you have the same problem with the power of members. So if large industries give money to the Lega, they wouldn't tell me. And so there are different components of public opinion that obviously matters, but whose public opinion, I'm not sure. There have been a number of studies of the impact of social media. So Salvini, would launch Tweets in the morning and see how popular they were. If they were popular, they would be launched then. And so there would be a huge number of followers. And then obviously Salvini was playing to the crowd, using social media quite skilfully, both in terms of what he said and in terms of his theatrical actions.

But, you know, the voters of the League are very differentiated and to whom he pays more attention is difficult to say. I think it is a combination: you want to keep small artisans and small middle-class people on board. At the same time you want to please the extremists, and at the same time you want to appear responsible to the moderates. And so they play a different game in different arenas. The game they play in social media is very different from the game they play in government and from the game they play in public administration, and each arena pleases its electorate in different ways.

**Interview B**

##### Interviewer

Yes, so let's get started then. As I mentioned, I'm kind of interested in these different forms of nationalism and I suppose one form of nationalism would be to kind of focus on the regional or regional autonomy. So how important would you characterise the importance of protecting northern identity and interests for Lega? Is it important for them, or what do you think?

##### Interviewee

Look, I arrived in Italy not that long ago. Basically, when I arrived, that was when Salvini had joined the government, you know. So he's taken the party from, as you know, that fringe where he sort of started of polling at three percent or whatever, he got 18 percent in the election. So that question is kind of critical to understanding pretty much everything which happened since then.

When I arrived, the big debate, basically when I arrived, was how crazy are these guys, actually? This was the debate among diplomats, foreign policy people, people in Brussels, people in financial markets, because obviously at that point, Italy was quite a big part of the story because obviously Italy had a lot of public debt and it's finance from international investors.

So are these guys crazy or not? Is the Five Star-Lega coalition really going to sort of blow Italy up, the Eurozone up, take Italy out of the Euro? Because that's what Salvini and Five Star have been saying previously. And one of the things which was interesting at that point is there's a conference every year in the summer in Italy (Ambrosetti Forum), and lots of people like foreign policy and diplomatic, investor people come, and it's generally off the record meetings of Italian politicians. And I remember basically at that point in that summer, Salvini was basically sort of saying quite a lot of provocative stuff about the European Union, European Commission, the constraints that, you know, they were putting on Italy and stuff. But then when he met with people there, the emphasis was like we are a party of northern business. You know, we're a party, we're responsible. We're administrators. We run things well and, you know, we're not crazy. Whereas when Salvini was on the campaign trail, you know, and when he was speaking to different audiences, he would sort of say things that he knew would be highly provocative and kind of get headlines. And he was extremely good at doing that.

So, a sort of dualism there. It's changed dramatically over time. You know, obviously the Conte One government was different as he was in government, in Conte Two he was in opposition, and now with Draghi, the emphasis has changed. There’s obviously different components in the Lega, the sort of, you know, Giorgetti kind of style of, you know, very much being like a sort of representative of the northern business establishment.

But that doesn't necessarily win you votes in the centre or the south of Italy. Maybe use different messaging when you were trying to do that, but the big question now is, have they just kind of given up on that [northern autonomy]? Because when I was following Salvini in like 2019 and going around the south of Italy to see rallies and stuff. And you know, these are areas where the Lega traditionally got zero. You know, it would be absurd, the idea, you know, 10 years ago that the Northern League would be winning votes and in Apulia, right? But he was saying stuff about immigration and saying we're going to get all of the clandestine migrants, all of them out. We're going to you know, we're going to tell Brussels to shove it. And all this stuff, the message, went down pretty well. And they did really well in the European elections. And they got 34 percent of the vote. That was basically peak Salvini. But the question is basically, he obviously pivoted the strategy, you know, expertly sort of politically weaponized, the migration crisis, you know, to build much broader consensus than the party had previously achieved under Bossi. And, you know, basically after that 2019 election it’s all sort of been a bit downhill from there.

And he surrendered a lot of ground to Giorgia Maloni [leader of FdI], who is much stronger in the centre of Italy. So maybe the argument that there's a bit of a reversion to the previous model, this point of being a party of northern establishment. But when you say establishment, I mean, it's like the other key part of the Lega is that they run big regions. You know, they run Lombardia, Veneto, which, you know, a massive amount of the Italian economy. And until the coronaviruses here, you know, they would say we have a really good record. You know, we're good local administrators. We run things competently, and they're very rooted in the territories. You know, they have a lot of local organisations and local sort of activists, which is very, very different to - a lot of other parties in Italy, especially the Five Star, you know, have nothing like that.

So they have these very deeply rooted, you know, political networks in the north, an activist network. And it's very much a party which is present on the ground, as they say. And they also try to do that in the areas it is trying to conquer with their success in the South. You know, they did pretty well in some parts of the South and did quite well. I think they have done very well in Campagna. They did all right in Sicily.

But it's very much about basically to what extent? Just basic political messaging. If you're trying to win votes in the south of Italy, you can't go around saying, yeah, well, we want more autonomy for the north because we're rich and we want to run stuff. It just doesn't work. So you know, Salvini pivot's the message - we're in favour of autonomy for everyone.

##### Interviewer

OK, great. Thanks. So, yeah, there's that kind of dualism there. You've probably already answered this with kind of your focus on different audiences, and different messages for different audiences. But since we've already discussed this protection of the North, how would you characterise the importance of immigration as an issue for Lega?

##### Interviewee

Well, I think an interesting case study is the Emilia-Romagna regional election last year, which was like in January, I think just before Covid. But basically, it wasn't as close as they wanted it to be. But, you know, Emilia- Romagna was, basically along with Tuscany, the paradigm, the epitome of a red region in Italy. Like a socialist, even formerly communist region Italy and the Lega did pretty well. They didn't win at all, Salvini wanted to win it. He fielded a pretty weak candidate, but basically the big surprise was like, how is the Lega, which is right wing, your anti-immigration party, doing well in this area, which has been so staunchly communist ever since the birth of Italian democracy?

And it's interesting that because it does play into other cultural concerns of certain demographics, you know, especially in rural areas, there's a big emphasis of the party on things like agriculture and like farmers, you know, sort of welfare and like sort of policies protecting Italian products. And immigration, although it's not a really statistically massive deal in places like Emilia-Romagna, they kind of exploit fears about it for sure.

But it shows the demographic, the voters who are voting Lega, that there's an interesting component in Italy of formerly Communist Party voters in those regions who are voting Lega. So, yeah, I'm not sure if I'm answering the question. I'm just saying that it's not just the party’s evolved in terms of views, but also you have to think in the context of a kind of vacuum on the Italian right.

Yes, broadly speaking, the same percentage of people who are voting for right-wing parties in 1992 vote for right-wing parties now. The political division between right and left is quite stable. It's just the market. The share within those blocs has moved between parties, right? You've had a huge decline in support for Forza Italia, which was getting like 35 percent of the vote or whatever back in, like, 2013, and now it’s getting eight percent of the vote. So, you know, the Lega also capitalised on the fact that there were right-wing voters who wanted to vote for a right-wing party, and he was sort of the man of the moment. You know the question is like how much core vote is in, what's the party strategy and how much core vote is in the traditional northern stronghold. And that sort of is a question of strategy going forward.

##### Interviewer

Yeah, great. OK, yeah. So just to kind of summarise this discussion of these different forms of nationalism you're focussing on dualism and the different messages to different audiences, I guess. But which of the two issues, this kind of northern ethnoregionalism or anti-immigration, is the most important for the party? And has that changed over time?

##### Interviewee

There's something different, there's different parts of the party, right? And the key, the thing about all these parties is also interesting, potentially, you know, interesting, interesting research to say like what happens as they expand? Because basically, if you're like a four percent party, then you have all the guys who've been around for a long time. That's one thing. But when you go to an 18 percent party, you need new people. Right? Just literally certain new MPs and new senators and new mayors and the kind of composition of the people of the party, some of them are a bit different, you know, their from slightly different regions, you’ll have more from the centre of Italy, regions like Abruzzo, and then not the old Bossi League. But there is a you know, I interviewed somebody recently and I asked him, I was like, what is this? You know, how does this make sense? Like, you know, you started off as a northern separatist, you know, running around in T-shirts saying Padania is not Italy and stuff like that, then you became a sort of Italian nationalist running around the south saying we're going to get rid of all the illegal immigrants and stuff like that. And now you're saying, yeah, we support the Euro and Draghi and, you know, we're a responsible, centre-right party. You know, he calls himself the centre right now. That's a very key part of that, that he gets very upset. Yeah, they're very keen to not be labelled as far right or extremist as they are by most foreigners. And he, basically he's quite aware of the fact that he looks like a sort of someone who is constantly changing his political sort of values and moving around the whole time. And he kind of argued to me that it's all logically continuous in the sense of he didn't use the term, but it's sort of like, you know, you have that sort of base of nativism.

You know, you're trying to sort of protect your life, local way of life from outside threats, and at the beginning, in the north, you say you the outside threat of the southern Italians who are sort of stealing from the north or whatever, you know, the sort of general narrative about that, which was put forward by the Bossi League, you know, like thieving Rome, you know, the idea the like we’re the productive, economically productive part of the country and Rome is just the sort of succubus taking all of the resources which we create and just giving them to corrupt politicians.

But then, you know, he's sort of shifted. He's kept that same nativism, but he's shifted the emphasis of the threat over time. So, you know, now instead of the enemy being southern Italy, the idea is that, no, the enemy is well, that the enemy was like Brussels. It was Brussels basically trying to destroy our way of life by doing all of these things, allowing immigrants, and immigrants and Brussels were basically the threat.

And now, you know, the emphasis has shifted once again with the with the sort of emphasis now on the idea that a strong and united European Union, which should be able to protect the way of life of these autonomous units, including the north of Italy, so that there is, in his thinking, a continuity, which is so basically that it's not messy, contradictory or dualistic. It's actually sort of an integrated world view or basically I don't really mind the way in which to protect. You know, we have pledged to protect our way of life. That's the thing which is the uniting theme, I guess, the sort of big idea, which you have major shifts within. That's also very much his thinking on it. And that’s what he told me.

##### Interviewer

Yeah, that makes a lot of sense, interesting focus on nativism as the kind of core, because that's kind of what I do as well to some extent. So that's interesting. And so, yeah, we've kind of talked a lot about this variation in different types of appeal that can be used in changing strategies. And so I guess to try and understand that, is there anything that would or does cause the party to change which of these types of threats, I guess you could say, to emphasise?

##### Interviewee

Well, I think it's something which is related to that point. I want to mention also that you have to also think that getting, you know, a large, large, large, large amount of votes is very hard. And like it's not like a first past the post system, so governments are made up of coalitions, basically. And that means, while it's extremely important for the League to remain in pole position on the right, which is hard because Giorgia Maloni's Brothers of Italy, which is much more rooted in the centre of Italy, is kind of catching up, is basically neck and neck with them now.

But that's important because, you know, you have coalitions, and when you have coalitions it gives a lot of power to the president. The president can kind of block appointments, you know, like, for example, the president, you know, block the appointment of the original minister for economy that they wanted in the Five Star-Lega government. And also, to a certain extent, you know, the president is the only person that has the power to ask someone to form a government. And so it does mean that whilst getting votes on those issues are important, it's also another thing which has sort of has come into play more as the Salvini strategy has panned out, is there is a point when it's not helpful to be viewed as a kind of barbarian or like just sort of like a wild, dangerous populist because you will be blocked right now. As in, it's not just the game of getting votes to become, you know, Italian prime minister as the Italian political establishment has been very, very concerned about Salvini being prime minister.You know, because Salvini is someone who is viewed extremely suspiciously by Italy's allies. You know, basically, if you're talking in the European Union, Salvini was sort of viewed as an enemy of the European Union who wanted to break apart. He previously said stuff which later kind of changed about wanting Italy to leave the Euro, with, you know, threatening to completely break Italy's historical geopolitical alliances in terms of, you know, being openly in favour of relations with Putin's Russia. And, you know, he was also very pro-Trump. But basically, it's a very pragmatic party, which changes, depending on the circumstances, is what I'm really saying. Even if Salvini secretly believes that Italy would be better off outside of the Euro, he knows that he can't say that because that would make it very, very difficult to be part of this government.

Basically, there was a crossroads in February this year, where, Salvini, there's a second discussion about how much of a choice he really had, but basically in terms of pressures in his own party forcing his hand. But, Salvini, at that point, if he had a choice, which many would argue he didn’t, could either fully embrace the sort of so-called barbarian kind of, you know, political barbarians, like just I'm on the outside looking in and I'm just going to sort of yell about migrants, or I am going to show I'm a responsible kind of economically liberal, you know, kind of attempt to appear like a centrist politician who could be trusted running the country.

##### Interviewer

And what about the EU? Has the EU influenced whether northern interests or anti-immigration are more important?

##### Interviewee

Well, a lot has changed in that I mean, the Next Generation EU was a big deal, like symbolically it was a very big deal. You know, in monetary terms, it's also a big deal. And in terms of, you know, potentially real reform and change, it is a big deal. But it did shift the debate. I remember in you know, it was April 2020, it was the first month of covid lockdown. The whole of the world was shell shocked and Italy had been hit very hard and very early. In the first wave of the virus, people like Salvinia blasted the EU, that it's doing nothing for us, they're not helping us, where's the solidarity, this shows what we've always said, you know, the EU is basically just a sham. And then whenever it was, when the Next Generation plan was announced, that really removes the ability of those parties to say, look at the EU, their disgraceful, they do nothing, to suddenly, you know, we're going to get 200 billion from the EU.

So suddenly they change the debate because both in a kind of symbolic way or in a political sense and also a practical sense, the political sense being it became a lot harder for the Italian right to blast the EU as showing no solidarity because this was the most, I guess, impactful, tangible show of solidarity that had happened. And secondly, practically suddenly there's all this money. So if you're running a region in the north or something, you're like, yeah, you either sort of, you know, inside the tent, pissing outside, pissing in and, you know, in terms of spending that money and directing where that money is going to be spent. So, you know, so that was also an important choice for Salvini to take. And if you can, you know, if you have ministers in the government, which they do, and if you know you're running large, economically important regions, you know, you want to be directing that money to where you think you should go.

So the next major thing that did change things in terms of European Union, in terms of migration, was also a really important thing in that obviously migration just dropped off the map as an issue. So no one cared. Salvini was going to go on TV and go, yeah, I know there's a massive pandemic happening, but just forget about that and let me yell about immigration. No one's really going to pay any attention.

So his main platform, the sort of political issue he'd built his rise on sort of just disappeared and it was no longer effective at that point. And you saw it overall in Europe in general. That was a sort of general shift to supporting incumbent governments. And it was harder to be in opposition because, you know, it's very difficult in a pandemic where suddenly it's much more real. You know, people are actually dying, people in hospital, people losing their jobs.

The thing about migration as an issue for Salvini, is it's always been an issue which is politically very effective and in real terms, very low cost. It doesn't cost anything to yell about migration. You know, this is an issue. You can just go on TV every night and just yell about migration. It doesn't actually cost you anything, it's not the same as other issues which are difficult. You know, like he's being very vocal and, like reversing pension reforms and that those are much more thornier issues, whereas migration is so free, you know, but it was no longer electorally profitable at that point.

No one cared anymore. Well, I don't want to say that no one cared, but it was no longer the dominant, basically one of the dominant issues in Italian politics, part and in large part, thanks to Salvini for a good three, four years, you know, from the European migration crisis, of 2015. And it just dropped off the map in terms of issues that people cared about. They had to adjust.

##### Interviewer

OK, yeah, there's the EU funding packages, which are definitely important and something to come back to. To start off with, the EU does provide some kind of forums for parties focussing on regions to have some influence, such as the Committee of the Regions and creating funding structural funding packages as well. Do you think these avenues for policymaking influence play any role in the Lega’s strategy, in terms of prioritises, or not?

##### Interviewee

Oh, I don't know about that, to be honest. I mean, the Lega is clearly trying at European level to you know, if you look at his allies, you know, they've been Le Pen and Orban. You know, he can't really be allied with the Polish ruling party because of Russia. As far as I'm aware, they are viewed suspiciously because of his pro-Putinism. But in terms of Europe, it's not something which they emphasise politically, he doesn't go around going around saying, oh, yeah, the EU gives lots of regional funds, it's great. I think it’s just like the EU stealing is the subtext, either implicitly or explicitly Salvini has been stating that, you know, the EU is somehow taking away from the livelihood of those regions.

##### Interviewer

So, I suppose another thing that parties that focus on immigration tend to talk about quite a lot is free movement of people across the EU, and so has this free movement of people made it easier for Lega to focus on immigration, or not?

##### Interviewee

I think this is a very complicated issue in Italy, because really they're not explicitly, most of the time, explicitly racist, right, but it's very clear that when talking about it, they use different means of talking about it, for it not to be explicitly racialized. But when he's talking about Clandestini and, you know, I was like to him, are you a racist party? He said, no, we're not racist. You know, classic sort of far-right answer, I guess, it's like we have black members, we can't be racist, but we're against illegal migration. You know, he's like we're against illegal migration. But what that means, obviously, is where illegal migration is, you know, almost entirely people arriving from North Africa. You will be most of the time people from sub-Saharan Africa and some of the time people from North Africa. So it's sort of by talking about illegal migration, it's a sort of a dog whistle. It's very clear what he's talking about.

In terms of freedom of movement, he said, and you know, not just him, other Italian politicians too, would say pretty outrageous things about, you know, Romani populations arriving from Eastern Europe.

It also comes back to conceptions of Italian nationality, and who he counts as an Italian, right? A massive issue for Salvini is the you know, the blood right for Italian citizenship. You know, in terms of Italian citizenship, where, you know, citizenship is inherited through blood, which is a crime in Italian law and not through birth. Right. So, again, you don't say I don't want non-white Italians coming to Italy, you say we need to maintain these laws. It makes it very difficult for non- Italians from non-wealthy non-EU countries to get Italian citizenship. If you’re from an EU country, you don't need to get Italian citizenship, whereas if you're from sub-Saharan Africa and you want to move to Italy and the kids in Italy, your kids can't get citizenship most of the time until their 18th. Based on them not having apparently the right blood. So in a way, it’s not about freedom of movement, because also there is very little freedom of movement in this direction because there's not large amounts of economic migrants coming from other parts of the EU to Italy. The economy has been a disaster for two decades. There's not a ton of work. And it's not super easy as a country to move to. For various reasons which are softer, sort of less explicit, less stated barriers to movement to them or to sort of practical barriers, I guess.

##### Interviewer

Yeah, OK. So I suppose then there's two final things I kind of want to talk about, which you might be happy to hear! One thing is, I guess the role of party members and so are party members able to influence and kind of what the party prioritises or do they have a limited role?

##### Interviewee

That's a good question. I don't really know how to answer that definitively. I mean, it is a very organised party in the context of Italian parties. So if you compare it to the Five Stars, if you like the big winners post 2013 in Italian politics, the Five Star Movement and the Lega. But the Lega is often cast as a kind of, in lots of international commentary, it's sort of viewed as a part of the post 2015-6 rising in the nationalist, right, but it’s the oldest party pretty much in Italy. You know, it's old, it's been around since the late 80s in one form or another.So it has a continuity in it. And it also, due to that, has like deeply rooted connections with the territories. It's strong in that it has a large, like, local activist base. But to what extent that influence is large for the party? I mean, I think Salvini, you know, Salvini very much rebranded the party in this image and clearly, he's not a sort of he can't be a dictator because he has to say it's not so much the members of the party that you have to balance.

There are other powerful figures within the party, notably Luca Zaia, the governor of Veneto, and Attilia Fontana in Lombardy. These are important voices, and Giorgetti [Minister for Economic Development] as well. You could say maybe those people represent different branches of the party. That's sort of in personalities who represent different interests, you know.

I think it really depends on what interpretation you take on his latest decision to sign up to the Draghi government. Right, because, you know, some people will say he did it as a strategy to realise that the sort of 2016 era anti-immigrant populism has run out of road and it wasn't going to lead him any further. And so he sort of made a decision to say, I'm going to abandon the like. I don't know how and where the percentage of voters who are like extreme right or harder right, leave those to someone else. Instead of focusing on those guys, I'm going to focus much more on the centre and win over the voters who used to vote for Forza Italia, the more moderate party. I'm going to have to rebrand my image a bit, look more like a sort of sensible centrist. Or you could say Giorgetti, or others, basically sat down and just said, Salvini, the party has decided that if you don't stand up to Draghi, then it's over. In terms of really important strategic decisions, the Draghi thing is clearly extremely important and shows, I'd say signs that that part of the Lega, the Giorgetti wing, I guess the sort of northern business establishment wing has an important, very important role in deciding strategy at key moments. Obviously, this has to be viewed in the context, right? I mean, obviously, the world, as we discussed it, sort of changed the political sort of equation.

##### Interviewer

Right. OK, and since we’re in the final few minutes. What about the role of public opinion and how important is northern autonomy or immigration for public opinion? And how far does that shape what the party prioritises?

##### Interviewee

I just think that it really needs to be re-emphasised that the party prioritises different things to different audiences, at different levels of government. Like all political parties and all countries would tend to do. But, you know, I guess if you're running, you know, when they run a regional election campaign like Luca Zaia in Veneto, who I think last year won by some insane amount of like 80 percent of the vote, but yet he's not talking about the stuff that Salvini is talking about on TV. You know, he's focussed on a specific northern region. You know, it just depends on which arena you're targeting at the time. You know, the pan-Italian strategy shown in the 2019 European elections where it's just like immigration, immigration, immigration. And, you know, it worked well. But then since it hasn't worked well, they haven't been able to break through dramatically.

And they've had a couple of successes. They went to Umbria, which was a left leaning region that was a big success, was happy. But then they lost it in Tuscany, which was probably to be expected, and they lost in Emilia-Romagna, which they thought they had a fighting chance of taking. So it really depends on, you know, there's a regional strategy and there's a national strategy and there's also a European strategy. And all of those things have to follow, operate at once.

But, yeah, I don't know if it's possible to say. Like, I mean, clearly, they're a very agile party, you know. And despite clear divisions of opinion, they have an agile enough leadership structure to be able to do things like join the Draghi government. And it just sort of, you know, they can take these quite shocked, seemingly quite handbrake turns, but then also appear to maintain the continuity to important constituencies.

##### Interviewer

Ok, yeah. That's great, thanks. So that's all of the substantive questions I have. So thanks for your time!

**Interview C**

##### Interviewer

##### How important do you think northern autonomy and anti-immigration appeals are for Lega, and how has this changed over time?

##### Interviewee

So, I mean, early on, the regionalism was extremely important. I mean, it was *the* reason that individuals supported the party or the movement. And as you well know, it was such an interesting movement because it began as a sort of a regionalist movement in a region that didn't have a strong identity. And they were able to construct an identity around well, around political grievances. And I would also say because of sort of economic reasons, because they were embedded in sort of different economic relations and this tied to their political grievances, and they were able to construct a real regional sense of belonging in the early 90s.

And then also the second part of your question was then, how is this group tied to immigration? And early on, so we're talking ‘93, ‘94, ‘95, ‘96, I mean, immigration was less important, but it started to become more important as it got caught up in two things. One, their sort of insider-outsider relationships with the South and then increasingly with threats from outside in the broader sense. And then when they kind of made their, what I always thought was their radical right turn, around ‘96/’97/’98. And so this is when immigration really started to take over in terms of their, I mean it was still regionalist, but in terms of their sort of inside or outside of the nation.

So it was still opposing. It was still anti-south in some sense. But what you see now, and here I kind of differ from a lot of the scholars that look at the Lega now, I mean, what you sort of saw in the late 90s is there was already a slight move to more of a nationalist party or national party in broader Italian forms. I mean, not completely. The regionalism is still important. But I think that the anti-south, that sort of declined a little bit as they became more radical.

But also, as they started to become more of a player on the national level, and especially when they started to move to coalition politics with Berlusconi. So they still were regional. There's no question in the end, under Bossi, their regional identity remained extremely, extremely strong. And then in the early government, with the Berlusconi government's 2001-2006, I mean, yeah, they still were there for the north. And this is a party level. And I think, you know, also at individual level, I mean regional identity sort of tied in with the reasons people voted for the party, the identity of the party, and it was coupled with this this anti-immigration discourse. It becomes very complex. But it's quite fascinating.

I mean, then to sort of finish the story, I mean, then, you know, there's just this more recent evolution, the Salvini sort of evolution. I mean, when he kind of takes over from Bossi and I mean, the interesting thing about Salvini, which people forget, he was schooled in the old Lega, and he wrote for La Padania. And he was you know, he was he was just like a he's like an old Linguista. And he was and he used to kind of take it over the party now, and there's no question that that he's moved the party in a more national direction.

So I mean, in part, I think the regional identity portion has been diminished a slight bit. And the anti-immigration dimension is certainly there. I don't know if it's stronger because I think since the late 1990s, it's really the core of the party. I mean, they sit right in the party family of populist radical right in that sense. Right with the Vlaams Belang, with the Flemish bloc, and those, you know, and all those other parties, whether they're regionalists or whether they're nationalists in some sense.

But I have to say, I mean, he's really become more of a national party and he's really trying hard. But I would say, maybe two counter arguments to what everybody says now. I mean, I think that one of the reasons that Salvini is able to make more of a national move is because the party system now in Italy is restructuring. So the decline of Berlusconi is just so key. And I think that Berlusconi was really he was such an important actor on the centre-right that with his with his decline, a space just opened up for the Lega, but also for Fratelli as well. I mean, you see, they're also rising. So there's this real void there. And I think Salvini has really been able to exploit that. And so what he's been able to do is he's been able to move into other regions. I mean, moving into central Italy in some sense and also a little bit in the south.

And so, you know, going back to your question, this kind of dissipates the regionalism to some extent. But I would have to add one caveat. I just I think that what's often missed is I think within the party, still people like, Luca Zaia and the Lombardy wing at the at the more at the more regional level, they're still important. And they're still part of that party. And I mean, I haven't followed in the last couple of months as much, but when Salvini was there and especially in the first government with the Five Star Movement. I mean, he was also moving sort of decentralisation issues and he was pressured from Zaia around the around these issues. So, you know, the party hasn't lost its regional identity. I mean, it's maybe been dissipated. And I think that there's reasons because of Salvini, there's structural reasons because of the party system. But it's also a trend that's been underway in some sense. But the strongholds are still Lombardy and the Veneto. Those are still the regions.

But if I mean, if Italy ever get sort of a centre-right party, I wonder what would happen, because I wonder how many of the people that are moving to Salvini now are sort of soft supporters. I mean, in a sense, if there was sort of a more mainstream centre-right party, I think that you would probably lose a lot of his voters and they might have to sort of move back to their regionalism, but that's you know, that's a dangerous proposition to make as a political scientist.

##### Interviewer

Yeah. Predictions are difficult, exactly. That's great. You've also touched on a lot of different things that might help explain this change, so there's been some discussion of leadership change, Salvini, and party competition variables. So, what about the role of the EU? Does that have any role in influencing which of these appeals Lega prioritises?

##### Interviewee

Oh, yeah, for sure. For sure. I mean, I think in the in the early ‘90s, I mean, you know, when they were still in their secessionist mode, there was still this kind of a hope, that before the Euro, when the whole process of, you know, the budgetary constraints and all that kind of stuff, before Prodi sort of pushed Italy into the Euro. Was Italy going to qualify? I mean, there was always discussions within the Lega people of maybe the north could join [the Euro], this would increase separation and these kinds of things. So it was certainly in relation to the EU and in some sense, one often forgets as well that, and this is also the case with a lot of other populist parties, some of these parties were not as anti-EU. I mean, in some sense, the early Lega, like some of the other regionalists that you study, I mean, they kind of thought, some saw the EU as a way of promoting autonomy or separation.

So that's for sure. But then, I think that as things evolved, that as Italy became clearly part of the Euro and as integration increased and also as their emphasis became increasingly centred around migration in general, then I think that the relationship with the EU changed in some sense. And it was seen as, you know, their Euroskepticism increased. And I think the Euroskepticism in general, I think might have contributed to more of a nationalist mood.

I mean, I think the interesting thing about the legacy, I really see it in some sense that they're really playing a two-level game. In some sense, even in the late 90s, they sometimes would talk about Italy, they sometimes talk about the region, and it's never quite clear. And I think you're completely right. I mean, when the enemy was with the EU, this became more of a sort of a national discourse.

I mean, in the more recent interesting development, I think, in some sense, there you see the problematic stance for the Lega and also for Italy versus the EU. I mean, even Salvini, in the last year or so, in some sense, of course, he's anti-EU, but he also realised at some point with the asylum problems that he needed the EU, I mean, they needed to have some kind of burden sharing for the asylum seekers. And he really couldn't jump in full fully into the Erdogan boat where, you know, they're not going to share - that's actually what they needed, what they want is sharing! So, I mean, the Lega was very important for a while there. I think it's kind of dissipated with Corona in their criticism of the extent to which the Dublin agreement doesn't work anymore. And I mean, even centre-right people even said that people were saying he’s right here. I mean, this is obvious. I mean, he could make a more nationalist appeal, right? I mean, you didn't have to be a populist to see that. But, yeah, I mean, the South is overburdened. Right.

So, yeah. I mean, it's complicated, but this is all in relation to the EU. I think this just answers your question. This makes it more possible to make them more of a national Italian sort of frame in this process.

##### Interviewer

OK, great. Thanks. Um, so yeah. In the literature on ethnoregionalism, there's quite a bit of discussion about some of the institutional pathways for ethnoregional parties to have an influence in the EU, such as membership of the Committee of the Regions, getting to influence cultural funding packages. Do you think any of these pathways encourage Lega to prioritise ethnoregionalism, or not?

##### Interviewee

Well, it's really interesting you say that because I think that what's what I mean, what's often forgotten is that, you know, I mean, in the early ‘90s and the mid 90s, the idea of the Europe of Regions was much, much stronger. And it's kind of been it's kind of been forgotten in the Lega, for sure. It was buying that path right there. There's no question, but how active they were, I don't know, you know, more than I. But, I mean, this was certainly something that was actively discussed within the party. And they certainly place themselves in the framework of a Europe of regions. The nation state is dead. You know, regions are much more important and they really allow them to also place themselves in the same context as the Scots. I mean, this was, you know, in the early years. I mean, this is really where they wanted to position themselves. Right, trying to draw links with them. And obviously with some parties, it was less successful. But yeah, that was really until 1996, 1997. That was their clear goal.

But then later on I think what happened is they sort of I mean they, they started after ‘96, they really started to electorally decline, and I think it became clear to them that they needed to have a coalition with Berlusconi. And I think that kind of forced them to sort of mitigate, or the regional strategy was still there, but they needed to soften it, right? I mean, they really needed to, the idea that they could go it alone was no longer possible. And then I think, sorry, I'm going in another direction. But I think it was also the personal relationship between Bossi and Berlusconi. I mean, they really got along and I think that also had an effect. In the sense of Bossi looking more nationally. And I guess to come back to your question, this means that it was also changing in Europe, right. That Europe was declining and all this kind of stuff in there is starting to dissipate as the time progressed until Salvini now.

##### Interviewer

OK. I suppose if you flip it to look at the radical right, one of the things the radical right likes to talk a lot about is freedom of movement and how problematic that is. So has the kind of focus on this freedom of movement that played a role in influencing what led to prioritise us or not?

##### Interviewee

Well, I think it's complex, I mean, I think that there's no question that the Lega is highly critical of Schengen, and they're critical, through the years of that aspect. But on the other hand, I mean, this is related in a different way, as I said already. I mean, they also do realise that, I mean, in terms of asylum, that there needs to be more sharing between countries. So sometimes I think they tend to blur the issue. I mean, I think that the movement question, the Schengen question, the patrolling of the Southwest, these become sort of framed in their in their law and order stances. Yeah, I think they tend to blur the issue in that sense, I mean, but also because I think that, I mean, the other interesting thing about the Lega, and this, in some sense, might sort of link more with the Flemish nationalists, they're also kind of blurring the issue of globalisation. I mean, they're also highly exposed, the regions that are highly export oriented. So it's kind of gets into this question of borders. It's not really security in the way you're talking about it, but they're really not necessarily for closing borders. But it's a little bit more control of their borders is the way I would frame it right now. I mean, it's also the populists are not necessarily going to say we want to close the borders, but it's we want to have more national control of the borders.

##### Interviewer

And just to finish off for the last few minutes, what about the role of party members or public opinion? Do you think either of those were able to influence what appeals to the party focuses on, or not?

##### Interviewee

Um, yeah, for sure. The Lega is a real political party, right? I mean, it's probably *the* most political party in Italy. I mean, it's organised, right? I mean, Salvini has tried to separate himself with his leadership. And so, he's tried to, what you said, you know, focus more on public opinion and trying to, you know, run the permanent campaign and do all this kind of Facebook stuff and all that kind of stuff. But I mean, he's trying to sort of sort of de-constrain himself. But the party is, you know, real. I mean, ever since the 90s, they they've had a real party structure. And they probably have the best organised party, maybe besides the PD, in Italy, I would imagine. I mean, much more so than Berlusconi for sure. So I mean, I would ask, really I'd be interested in how much autonomy does Salvini really have? I mean, I think that would be a really interesting question. But I mean, you know, so that's what I meant as well, before when you asked about ethnoregionalism, I would imagine that the regional divisions are still very important. I mean, look at Zaia: he's been president of the Veneto since, God since, the early 2000s. But in the party, they're so important, and Maroni and all those wings and the mayors. I mean, the other thing is there's also the very pragmatic party of the mayors. For all their negative things, they've been governing these towns and regions. They must be doing something right. I mean, you know that they're not just crazy populists. They must be doing something right now. So they have infrastructure, right?

**Interview D**

##### Interviewer

So, my research focuses on different types of appeal that the party can utilise and how it decides which to focus on. So, I guess we'll start with so obvious questions. Perhaps the first is, how important do you think the focus on northern autonomy and defending northern interests is for the Lega? And has that changed over time?

##### Interviewee

So. I think the experience of Bossi, it's kind of shown the extent to which populism might, in fact, be dominant within the Lega ideology. I always thought that regionalism came first. But if you conceive of populism as an ideology which posits the existence of a homogenous, pure community which is threatened by evil, it means that, of course, depending on the context, this community could be the nation. It can be a region, it can indeed be a city - you could you could argue that Venice is being threatened by the Italian elites, in fact, there are people who argue that Venice is a nation. And I mean, obviously the debate becomes what is a nation and what is a region? But what I mean is, the community doesn't need to be a national community, of course. What I find interesting in the post-Bossi age is the extent to which this idea of community has turned out to be flexible. I'm very surprised. I mean, I'm very surprised that Salvini got away with it with so little resistance, because I don't know of any other example in Europe. I don't know of any other example in the world, but some people might, maybe I’m ignorant. But I find it quite amazing that a rich man's party, which is constructing its appeal for 30 years on the claim that northern Italians need to be protected from the likes of Italy, switched to Italians first within a few months because Salvini really moved to that from the end of 2013 when he was elected. The slogan behind him when he was elected was about protecting northern Italy, exactly the same slogan as before, and after that he was giving interviews to the press saying we need to move on from this stage of focusing on northern Italy. So that tells me that he's dominant, and if he’s dominant, then how you construct the community based on context. Tomorrow might be Europe against Islam, but certainly I mean, the Lega is being very flexible because it started with Lombardy first. Let's remember that the League was the Lega Lombardia, then it became Lega Nord, then they made up the story about Padania, which didn't take root even amongst activists, then we moved to Italians first, so God knows whether soon enough we move to Europeans first.

For those who follow politics closely, the question is how did Salvini get away with it? And I think, to an extent he got away with it because of its incredible electoral success. But whether this can be sustained in the long term, it's another question.

**Interviewer**

That kind of answers the second question, I guess, but just to just to round it off, I guess, how would you characterise the importance of immigration as an issue for Lega?

##### Interviewee

I've never seen the Lega as purely an anti-immigrant party, in my view, immigration plays an important role in the context of a wider narrative, not necessarily complex narrative, but a wider narrative which is right-wing populism. In fact, he's now become, in my view, quite a populist, radical right in the sense of Cas Mudde: authoritarianism, populism, nativism. So now it seems to me to fall within this response quite, quite well.

So immigration, yes, immigration is important as part of a wider narrative. So the wider narrative is about the people being threatened by elites. As I said, ‘the people’, that definition can change. The context changes. So the people right now, are they? It's quite shocking for somebody like me starting from the beginning. The fact is, people I remember very well what they were saying about southern Italians, but now the people are Italians.

So in the 90s, as you know very well, it was taking language from other pre-existing regional parties. So there was a lot of focus on southern Italians who, of course, moved to the north of Italy, particularly after the war in the 50s and 60s. So there are a lot of people of Southern origin. Then it became the Africans for a while, and then the Albanians - let's not forget that Albania collapsed from the period where people crossing the Mediterranean Sea across the Adriatic Sea to Italy, and then it became Africans again and later on Muslims. So I think it's part of a wider narrative about this idea of threat, which is crucial to populists. To me, it's the core of the idea of threat. So there is a threat, soon it will be too late. So, I mean, this is 100 percent Trump. So this is a moment we can turn around the ship and the threat can be; if we are talking about right-wing populism, very often it's elites and migrants mostly, but of course, the threat is also Euro, the EU is always trying to create a kind of McDonald's world in which we will be mixed like in the United States. And so, I mean, the elites can change according to the context. If we're talking about left-wing populism, then the threat is usually financial elites, political elites, supranational actors such as the EU. But it's normally, if not always, for economic and social reasons. So in my view, it plays a part in this context. So I wouldn't, and I never, classify Lega as a purely anti-immigrant party, I think there is more to it, not much more, but there is more to it. And so immigration is linked to other issues, the food, which is really focussed on for a long time what can be done. So the idea of saving traditional food, loving environment like the landscapes. All of this might sound silly, but it's not because it creates this idea of the community that we value, whose traditions which are under threat.

##### Interviewer

Well, yeah, if you're focussed on kind of preventing the McDonnalization of Italy, then focussing on food makes sense. OK, that's great. So there's these variety of threats and Lega changes which threat it focuses on, which I guess perhaps leads to the relatively obvious question, which you've kind of hinted at at times, is what causes Lega, do you think, to move from one appeal to the other?

##### Interviewee

What caused it, in my view, is that we have to look at what happened in 2008 when the leader of the National Alliance, Fini, felt forced, for a number of reasons that we can discuss, to agree to merge his own party with Berlusconi’s Forza Italia and create Popolo della Liberta (People of Liberty Party). Only to find out strange enough, that these people and himself were marginalised within the new party, that Berlusconi was treating it as his own personal creation, like he had done with Forza Italia. Surprise, surprise. That's the only way Berlusconi can do politics. So we have witnessed, and I find this quite incredible, the kind of wiping out of a clearly right-wing identity. Because AN was clearly right-wing, and Fini tried to moving it more to the centre-right, and trying to be seen as relatively moderate, a bit like Le Pen in France, but still able to pick up the support of the right as clearly its origins was in post-Fascism. Now, in 2008, AN is suddenly gone, and in the following two or three years, it becomes clear that the People of Freedom is not, in fact, such a great idea. In fact, as you know, after a few years, they went back to the previous label, to Forza Italia. It was a failed experiment. And when you went back, you ended up with the same amount of votes as before.

Well, the National Alliance, what happened to its members? This was a real rooted party, present on the ground, which suddenly disappeared into thin air and magically the party that is that to a large extent a virtual party that doesn't want to be present on the ground up. So. I think that Salvini has understood that there was a huge space on the right for a right-wing entity and his message was already OK, except the big problem was you can't go to Naples or Calabia as Umberto Bossi, because obviously you can't. So I think this is just sort of a huge space here on the right. And there's nobody there at the moment. And of course, I mean, you know, the likes of Casa Pound would never guy more than one percent, I mean, these guys are the real fascists. So you need somebody who has links to this tradition and can attract the sympathies of those people, but can also attract much wider support from right-wing voters, of which there are very many - I think that the majority is, in fact. This was genius. And we've seen the results after this turn. Immediately, his discourse changes, it becomes broader; so we published this article, which you've seen, which I think demonstrates it is on purpose, he completely avoids the issue of northern Italy, even while his own people are launching referendums about gaining more autonomy, he kept silent. So he has subcontracted this to regional leaders, and incredibly, after a short time, he can go to Sicily or Calabria. And there are people who will turn up to meet him. So, I think you see the space is occupied. That space is a problem now, but this is a more recent development. There is another entity which can lay claim to the same space, in fact, is more credible. And for a number of reasons, this party [Fratelli d’Italia] has managed to start scooping up support, in fact, from the people who looked to Salvini for representation. So, now his problem is that there is somebody on his plot.

But the way he's done this, it has been a huge success. And what he's achieved as a leader, I think, is unprecedented because he went from, let's remember, in 2013 Lega got four percent to go from that to 38 percent in polls. I mean, it's a fantastic, fantastic achievement.

##### Interviewer

OK, yeah. So, what about the role of the EU? Do you think it plays any role in an encouraging Lega to prioritise one opinion over the other or not?

##### Interviewee

No, I think I think they use it as a target of Lega’s campaigns, but is secondary in every in every respect. In reality, they play the blame game, as does Brothers of Italy, which is basically to move the target up from the national level to the EU level when it suits them.

So, like the issue of the EU is not helping enough with the Coronavirus, with the idea of the asylum seekers, they move the bar and the enemy will become the supranational elite for a while, and that's fine. I mean, that works. But I think the reality is the EU has always been a secondary theme for the League throughout its history, it has never been the primary thing. This is not UKIP. And it's never been I mean, its main focus is elsewhere, and I think it will remain as well for the reasons that I mentioned, that in reality they don't want to rock the boat.

They don't have the strength to rock the boat. Let's remember, that is a real and not Forza Italia, Salvini cannot do whatever he wants. See, even now, he's being forced to join the ranks of government. And his instincts would be to stay out of it, which electorally would have been a good idea. He can't just do what he wants. And on this he will just have to stick to the line, because the issue of the EU is just too important to the northern industry.

##### Interviewer

OK, and so that answer probably makes it relatively obvious what your answer to the next part's going to be. But in the literature on ethnoregional parties, there's often discussions about how the EU creates new forums for these parties, such as the Committee of the Regions, or letting them get involved in creation of structural funding packages. So, do you think this has any effect on whether or not Lega focuses on ethnoregionalism, or not?

##### Interviewee

No, I don't think so, although when you look at the discourse of the League throughout the decades, there's been a certain amount of articles published in La Padania on the idea that we need a different EU, we need to invest in the regions, not the nations. We need an EU that is a network of regions and even cities, there's been a lot of talk about that. But that's what it is: talk. It seems to me they don't have the intellectual power to contribute to this discussion in meaningful ways. Because in my view, if the EU didn't exist, it wouldn’t have a huge impact on that. That's the way I see it. The Lega originates to kind of highlight, what they posit as injustices in the way some communities are being treated. It would have worked perfectly well within the context of nation states, and it's very, very loose association of European states after the war.This could have happened, but in reality, Europe took another path and became clearly much more integrated. But I don't think this is what is shaping the discourse in the Lega.

##### Interviewer

Yeah, similarly, if you focus on the radical right, radical right, parties often like to talk about free movement of people and how problematic that is. But do you think the EU's policies on this or even asylum seekers has affected Lega’s appeals in anyway?

##### Interviewee

I don't think it has, because the reality is both the Lega and Brothers of Italy do not focus on freedom of movement, unlike, of course, the case of UKIP, because it's not freedom of movement that is the problem. The problem is we see people coming in from Africa, which has got nothing to do with freedom of movement, and they posited it to be an issue that the EU doesn't want to deal with. But obviously the legislation in place was signed after the war and it's got nothing to do with the EU. OK, you could say that, you know, the EU needs to take responsibility and have a scheme to distribute it. OK, you can say all of that, but that’s looking at the future, right? So, it's not the EU that has created the legislation whereby if somebody comes to your country and has a legitimate claim, you should consider granting asylum. So, this was all born after the war because of what had happened with Naziism. But it is obviously useful to them to say that the EU is not doing enough. Clearly, I mean, clearly, it's a very hot, difficult issue because of the existence of similar parties [in other Member States], which obviously would always say there's no way we need to take the people who land in Lampedusa, because that's the key to this problem, because these are the treaties, which is true. And so, I mean, that's the problem with this idea of the populist international, in reality it can never work because of because we spent. So I don't think it is the EU, precisely because, for instance, freedom of movement has never been an issue. Never.

##### Interviewer

OK, so, yeah, my next question kind of draws on your earlier point about Salvini remaining constrained to some extent. So, to what extent do you think that members of the party are able to influence what appeals are prioritised or the decisions the party makes?

##### Interviewee

Very little, it’s participation without power. I think the Lega’s always offered real participation to its members. It’s not fake, it’s real interaction, it’s real discussion, it’s real friendships, and it’s a real community, which is what other parties don't understand, the power of this.

But that doesn't necessarily translate into democracy. Participation, being able to discuss, and the representative that comes from Rome to talk to you about what is happening in government, all of this is what the Lega does. So, there is a real exchange between people within it. But that doesn't mean that the ordinary guy then can really influence strategy. They don't, and that there is a very, very strong culture, whereby the leader kind of embodies the message and you can have all the free discussions that you want at the local level, but then when it comes to bringing the message through to the electorate, you work as a disciplined machine. So, yeah, I think the chances are little, of course, how many parties in Europe give real chances to members, or any parties in Italy? In the Lega, it's kind of accepted that the leader embodies the message. In that sense, it’s a Leninist party, without the complex ideology behind it, its Leninist in the sense that it's a kind of really fighting machine and it works.

##### Interviewer

And then finally, what about the role of public opinion? Is this able to influence what the party prioritises or not?

##### Interviewee

Yes, it does. I would say more than public opinion generally, right-wing opinion is, because if you look at the right-wing alliance, which is the one that is likely to win the next elections, most of the movements are within it. If you look at the vote share of the right-wing alliance overall, you've got roughly the same amount that you got 20 years ago - we are always between 43 and 48, 49 percent. Which tells me that roughly half of the Italian electorate wants the right to be in government because they want to cut taxation, not to be assessed by the state. They want more law and order. They want less immigration. They want to feel proud of their nation. But then within the right, whether they vote for Maloni or Salvini, that changes. So, you see these movements, huge movements. So, back then Lega was going up to 38, . Brothers of Italy was at three percent, Forza Italia had gone down. But then when you add it up it's still around 40. Now you add them up, they've gone up a few points, but now you've got Lega at 20, Brothers of Italy at 21. So, I think what matters to them, quite rightly, is the public opinion on the right, because they're never going to I mean, somebody like Salvini is never going to get more than a couple of votes from the left-wing. It's just never going to work. He is truly a populist leader, which creates polarisation on purpose, he wants polarisation, he constantly divides the world into two camps, so you are either with me or against me. But obviously the price of that is that you can never try to fish in the other guy's pond, but you can fish in a very large pond on the right. And that's what matters. So that's why, surely, for instance, it is decided at the moment to moderate its language, so go more towards Forza Italia. I think it's a mistake in electoral terms, but that's what he's done. I also think he was forced to do it to a large extent within the party, but that's what he's done. You know, tomorrow he will move back to the right. But I think what he has in mind, the wishes and values and ideals of that the right-wing electorate, and that's what he needs because what they need is to win the election as a coalition. And then Maloni and Salvini need is to get one more vote than the other party and be Prime Minister. But before that, they need to achieve something together, which is winning the election. And after that, they want to be the largest party, so I think that's what he's focusing on. That's what is important to him, because there are enough votes that we don’t need to try and get votes from the other side. It is almost impossible for him anyway.

**Interview E**

##### Interviewer

So, yeah, the kind of focus of my research is how parties combine these different forms of nationalism: ethnoregionalism and focusing on protecting your regional group; and more classical radical right anti-immigration appeals. And so, let’s start of with perhaps the obvious question, I think. How important do you think protecting northern identity is for Lega?

##### Interviewee

I think it used to be incredibly important, and it was important until the time that Salvini became leader. Now it's not particularly relevant, I don't think, because the big move, obviously, in the Lega in terms of its territorial reference point was the shift that occurs as Bossi steps down because of the scandal in 2012, Maroni takes over. Very unsuccessful, then Salvini is elected as leader in a primary in December 2013, and he almost immediately shifts the party to a typical, bog-standard radical right populist party in Western Europe, in the sense that the nation becomes the key reference point rather than regional identity. And you see, the first thing that Salvini does is, they organise a Congress in Milan, to which they invite Front National, you know, Vlaams Belang, the PVV from the Netherlands, the Austrian Freedom Party, and so on. And that was very clearly positioning the party as ‘we are like them, we're not actually regionalist anymore, we’re radical, right, populist, nativist’. So nowadays, I mean, it's quite possible, at the grassroots level that in places like Veneto and Lombardy, that the regional focus is still very important. I’ve no doubt that, if you look at regional presidents, like Luca Zaia, for example, in the Veneto, very, very strong personal vote. And I would say, I haven’t done interviews with grassroots members of the Lega for a long time, but I suspect now in Veneto that still that's an important aspect. However, in terms of the party's electoral appeal, the nation is the important thing. And I mean, to even give you a quite a trite example, in the Euros last week, Salvini was regularly tweeting about his support for Italy. Salvini very publicly cheered against Italy 10 years ago. So I think that's even another manifestation of this. So, yes, as long as Bossi was there, I would have always said the two key issues for the Lega were northern autonomy and immigration. Northern autonomy is very much gone into the background, it's been been forgotten and, you know, the party is trying to go national.

I mean, they don't have many grassroots members, but they've certainly tried to extend their organisation into the South, I mean they have branches there, their candidates even do well in some places, like Abruzzo at the top of the South. So, yeah, it's the nation now that's important.

##### Interviewer

So since the nation's important, and since you've already mentioned that Bossi also talked about immigration, how important do you think immigration is for Lega?

##### Interviewee

That's their number one issue, it's the number one issue, just like its the number one issue for every single populist radical right party in Western Europe. It's a little bit different for the ones in Eastern Europe, like Law and Justice [in Poland], but in Western Europe and we've seen it, you can find that not just in manifesto analysis, but, you know, if you look at things like Chapel Hill Experts Survey. Also, if you look at the attitudes of voters, we've known for 20 years that the key issue which drives radical right populist voting is your attitudes to immigration, in particular are you anti-immigration, and how much salience do you give to that? And if you give it high salience and it's important to you, you vote for the radical right. So I think immigration has been the constant of the Lega for a long time. And I think that's something that people in recent years have perhaps overplayed with Salvini, in the sense that I've seen some commentators sort of saying that Salvini’s really ramped up the anti-immigration rhetoric. I don't I don't buy that - I remember Bossisaying some really horrific things about migrants and the need to fire on boats coming across the Adriatic or the Mediterranean when he was a minister, and using racial slurs. It's been a constant, it's always been there. So it's one of those issues the radical right populist can never drop, and never would, because it's the number one issue. It's not like Euroskepticism, which they play around with.

##### Interviewer

All right. OK, that's great. So, yeah, you mentioned about the change of leadership from Bossi to Salvini and the importance of that and that kind of fits the next question, but is there anything that would or does cause the party to change from one appeal to the other?

##### Interviewee

Well, you know, I think certainly since Salvini takes over, immigration has really been the game in town, so there's been no question about it. There's no question at all. The only thing that I think would have approached it’s salience at one point was the anti-Euro campaign around 2014. But beyond that, no northern autonomy has not been an issue under Salvini, under Bossi yes, it fluctuates.

So, you know, obviously, if you think about 1996 and the Declaration of Independence of Padania and all that other silly business for a few years, yes. In those years, northern autonomy was the key issue. But in the 2000s, I mean, there were periods when devolution, as they called it, was one of their key issues, which, again, is about getting northern autonomy, or getting greater northern autonomy. But yeah, I mean, there were times that would have been more prominent than the anti-immigration stance, but the anti-immigration stuff never went away.

##### Interviewer

Yeah, OK. So, moving on from that, do you think the EU has any role to play in explaining how salient these appeals are for the party?

##### Interviewee

Yeah, because the EU, provides a very, very easy target for radical right populists, including the Lega, because they can be portrayed as a bunch of distant, overpaid bureaucrats in Brussels who are deciding that Italy should have to deal with these waves of refugees coming across the Mediterranean. They have a point, there is a problem about how the EU handles that, certainly from an Italian perspective. And so I think the EU has helped to fuel that.

Certainly, yeah. And, you know, it gives you the opportunity to kill two birds with one stone. They can say we've got an immigration problem and the EU is helping. You know, populist parties love to be able to make the claim that the elites are in cahoots with the dangerous others. So the idea the elites are privileging these foreigners who, you know, have different traditions and customs and values to us, their the privileging them over the native Italians and we have to pick up the pieces.

##### Interviewer

And so I suppose moving on, studies on ethnoregionalism often focus on how the EU can act as a safety net for ethnoregional parties as it provides all these forums for ethnoregional groups to have a say, such as the Committee of the Regions, or paying for infrastructure funding, et cetera, et cetera. So do you think EU membership encourages ethnoregionalism within Lega, or does it not have any effect?

##### Interviewee

I think it did in the 1990s. In the 1990s, it certainly did. The Lega’s line, and Bossi’s line, in the ‘90s was very much they were Europhile at one point. If you go and look at the what the Lega was saying, for example, in 1996, it was very much a rhetoric of Brussels will save us from spendthrift Rome and also that fitted in with the Lega’s stance at a time, which was that northern Italy was closer to Europe, rather than Rome and the south, which is portrayed to be close to Africa, and it was very much the idea of corrupt southern Rome is holding back productive northern Italy from taking its rightful place amongst the great European industrial powers. You would often hear the line that if the North was independent, it would have a GDP per capita equivalent to Switzerland. So the South and Rome were a ballast bringing the north down, keeping it out of Europe, you know, keeping it away from being at the level of other European countries.

So Brussels and also, you know, we talk about Europe of the Regions and those utterly meaningless slogans, but the Lega kind of attached themselves to that. And they stayed as the most Europhile party in the Italian system until Italy actually managed to get into the Euro, and that was the key turning point. They turned their policy upside down in a matter of months, because they had gambled, basically the whole Declaration of Independence of Padania was about preparing the ground for basically not being accepted into the first round countries in the single currency. And they were convinced that Italy wasn't going to make it, they weren't going to make the criteria at the time They gambled that Italy wouldn't make it in, and obviously if they hadn't made it, that would have been a mess and it would have been disastrous for the north and northern industrialists. But Italy did make it in and, then, you know, within a very short space of time it became the most Eurosceptic party in the Italian system. But certainly until that, EU membership, the presence of the EU, and the whole talk about subsidiarity, blah, blah, blah, that was certainly a pole of attraction for the Lega.

##### Interviewer

OK, so there's one thing I want clarified. You talk about joining the Euro as being a key turning point, and about Italy being accepted. But what was it that made them become more Eurosceptic, was it the costs of joining the Euro, or did they sense an opportunity?

##### Interviewee

They wanted Italy not to make it into the Euro, and then that would have been their huge cause. It would have been ‘look, we are being prevented from entering this great single currency by the wasteful practises and incompetence of Rome and the underdeveloped South’. And then they lost that card to play, and without that card, then remains [of the EU] is all the things that they actually hate, which is a bunch of unelected, as they would see it, bureaucrats, foreigners making decisions which impinge on their sovereignty. There's no advantages at that point to continuing to be Europhile. It was you know, they gambled everything on that card with the euro. And once you do that, you know, just like any other radical right party, if you think about it, there's not a single one of them that isn't Eurosceptic. And as I said, there's very good reasons for that, because the EU’s a very easy target and it allows you to talk about sovereignty and distant elites who are acting against the interests of the people who don't respect our values and promoting multiculturalism, globalisation, etc. etc..

**Interview F**

##### Interviewer

The participant information leaflet probably makes it pretty clear that I'm interested in different forms of nationalism and how parties use those different forms. So, for Lega, that's obviously focusing on northern autonomy and anti-immigration appeals. So that's the focus of interest, and it probably makes sense to just start by talking about how Lega uses these appeals and when it uses them. So, to start off with, how would you characterise the importance of northern autonomy for Lega, is it important or not that important?

##### Interviewee

I think that’s a very good question in the sense that it's a question that helps to understand how the Lega Nord, as a political party, has changed over time. Now, you actually use the term Lega now, but we have to remember that the original name of the party was Lega Nord. So, of course, that word North makes made it very clear that that idea of autonomy was one of the pillars of the agenda of the party.

So it was really one of the building blocks of the agenda of the Lega as it was under the leadership of Umberto Bossi, one of the founding fathers. Now, the reason why the word war north is not there anymore is because the party has changed considerably over time. And especially this process of change started since, first of all, Umberto Bossi step down as leader, perhaps it was already in the making before. But it has certainly become more kind of evident since Salvini has taken over the party.

Now, Salvini has reinvented Lega in many respects, and his attempt has been to turn it into a nationalist party rather than n regionalist one. And there is a big difference there, because, of course, the Lega Nord, at the beginning, stood for northern autonomy. And as for your question, so that was one of the pillars of the political party. Nowadays, that element doesn't exist anymore, at the national level, if we look at the national party. So, lately the Lega is trying to sell itself as a party that can get support across all of Italy, and of course, Salvini's not politicising anymore the North-South divide, in the same way in which the Lega Nord used to do. However, having said that, the idea of northern autonomy is not completely lost because while Salvini has been very successful in reinventing the party and giving the power this national image, making it a party for Italians rather than just the north, if we look at the party on the ground in specific regions, so the regional organisation of the party, well, we see a very different story there. And in particular, in places like Veneto, which is one of the areas in the regions where Lega Nord always had like a very strong level of support, in places like that, the region dimension, maybe not any more northern autonomy, but certainly regional autonomy, so autonomy for Veneto, for instance, is still something that really, really matters. So, on the one hand, Salvini has kind of pushed the party towards, you know, the national dimension. But the party on the ground, the regional leaders, the local leaders, that idea of northern autonomy is still very important for them. And we see it in the activity of leaders like Luca Zaia, for example, the president of the regional of Veneto, and many local leaders in particular in Veneto.

##### Interviewer

Perfect. That essentially answers my next question as well, but just, I suppose looking at it from the other side, how would you characterise the importance of anti-immigration appeals for Lega?

##### Interviewee

Well, the anti-immigration appeals question is a bit of a tricky one, because if you look at the history of the Lega, that is something that has been on and off the agenda for a longer period of time. So, of course, now this shift from a regionalist party to a nationalist one has meant that the focus on the national dimension. Of course, immigration really plays into that idea that Italians come first and those type of narratives. But if we look back on the programmes of the Lega also, you know, during the time when Bossi was the leader of the party, we see that immigration has always been there. So, the Lega under Bossi, used to be quite kind of against immigration on and off, maybe not in a distinctive way or so strongly as it is now under Salvini, but that is a theme that has been there for a longer period of time. And so, obviously Salvini plays the immigration card a lot. If we look at the kind of timing, he is really using immigration as a way of gathering public attention, as a way of showing that the party is the only one who cares about Italian people and puts them before everything else. So, it has become stronger, but it’s always been there for a long period of time.

##### Interviewer

OK, so, yeah, we've done a good overview of how the party uses these appeals. Well, I guess to try and understand what causes the party to focus on one appeal rather than the other, is there anything that would cause the party to focus on one appeal rather than the other?

##### Interviewee

I guess, what drives all political parties - electoral support.

Back in the days when Lega Nord was created, there was a big opening in terms of the political void to fill. And if you look at the success of the Lega, it goes hand in hand with the end of the Christian Democratic Party in Italy, which, of course, was a national party. It wasn't a regional one, but it was a party that had a lot of following, especially in places like Veneto. Of course, the two parties have two completely different agendas as the Christian Democratic Party really focused on the religious dimension, and the Lega instead appealed more to a sense of belonging, identity, difference. And so two very different type of messages from the two parties. But when the Christian democracy basically ceased to exist after the scandal of 1992, which basically wiped away most of the existing political parties in Italy, that was a crack in the system. The Lega really managed very effectively to get into that crack and occupy that political void in the north of Italy. Now, Salvini has identified another political void that then was emerging not just in the north anymore, but in and across the whole of Italy, and it was very kind of clever in kind of grasping the potential of using a purely populist approach or an activist populist approach. And for the party and looking especially at the way in which populists, like the Five Star Movement had managed to gain support in Italy in recent years.

So he managed to fill a void in the sense of a growing discontent that this time doesn't affect only the north of Italy, but is something that cuts across the country. And so using that populist narrative and pointing to things like immigration, these are the classic elements of populist parties. And it was very kind of clever in understanding the potential that was there, and the way in which the Italy has grown under Salvini, it doesn't compare to anything that happened in the past. Under Bossi’s leadership that Lega never achieved that level of support. It could not even do that, of course, because it wanted only the support of one part of the country, so you can’t directly compare the two. But, two different leaders in two different ways have been very, very clever in understanding where the political void was and how to get the support of voters.

##### Interviewer

Right. And so, to perhaps focus in on a different variable, do you think the EU plays any role in providing incentives for the party to prioritise certain appeals or not?

##### Interviewee

That's a good question. Under the leadership of Bossi, the relationship with the EU, as it is very often the case with regionalist parties, so there is no divergence with other regional parties across Europe on this one, it was a kind of an ambiguous one. There were periods where the party was strongly against Europe. There were periods when the party was more pro-Europe. So there have been fluctuations in that sense.

And why is that? Well, the relationship with the EU wasn't necessarily kind of fundamental to the agenda of the Lega Nord back then. Now, since there has been this shift from the Lega being a regionalist party to becoming a nationalist populist one, of course, the EU plays a completely different role. The centre-periphery cleavage that was politicised, you know, during the time of the Lega Nord was one that pitched the North against, well, I guess against the corrupted government in Rome. Now, as you transformed the party from a regionalist into a nationalist one, of course, that centre-periphery cleavage doesn't work anymore, you can’t say that the capital is the corrupted centre of the country. You need to support central government. Essentially, you need to want to play into central government. You actually want to win power in there and represent all of the Italians. So, Salvini was very, very, very effective in making that fact, that cleavage shift towards the away from Rome and towards the European Union.

So, if there under Bossi it was that the kind of cleavage between the north and Rome that was the most politicised, then under Salvini it is the cleavage between Italy and the European Union that has been politicised. So, of course, this has led to a more conflictual relationship with the European Union and using the European Union as is very common for populist parties as the kind of source of all the troubles for the country, or most of them. So, immigration, that is something that the European Union should do more about. The economy doesn't work. That is the fault of the European Union. We don't have a proper vaccinations system, that is the fault of the EU, and so on and so forth. So the politicisation of that cleavage has been something that has some kind of centre stage, especially under Salvini.

##### Interviewer

Yeah. It's very interesting that you raise the points of kind of the different attitudes of Lega, depending on whether it was in its ethnoregional phase or after its national turn under Salvini, because, of course, in the literature on ethnoregionalism, there's plenty of discussion about how the EU provides policymaking avenues for ethnoregional parties, like the Committee of the Regions and being involved in structural funding. Do you think these avenues for policymaking influence ever encouraged Lega to focus on ethnoregionalism more, did they ever use that in support of their ethnoregionalism?

##### Interviewee

When Bossi was leader, as I said, as many other regionalist parties across Europe, that's the case everywhere pretty much. There have been times when he was against the EU, and there were times where they totally recognised that the EU offered opportunities, through the CoR, through specific regional funds. So, opportunities that were actually focused on the local level and would benefit the north.

So that's why the relationship has always been a kind of, moments of opposition and moments of, not overly supportive, but certainly a consensual relationship, a positive relationship. That is not the case anymore. Now, under Salvini… although your question made me think that even right now, precisely because there is this difference between the narrative that Salvini portrays at the national level, and the activity on the ground of the regional leaders, where the regional leaders are still kind of quite close to the idea of more northern or regional autonomy, they still see the opportunities that the EU can offer in that sense. So, I mean, there is a bit of a detachment, with the party going on two parallel paths, with considerable differences between the national party and the party on the ground.

##### Interviewer

Yeah, I was going to ask you what you thought about their influence now, but you've answered that pretty well with this difference. And then you also mentioned earlier about how the EU is now the enemy under Salvini’s national turn. And I guess one common complaint radical right parties have about the EU concerns its immigration policies with things like freedom of movement. Do you think that these EU immigration policies encourage Lega to prioritise these appeals, or not?

##### Interviewee

Well, the immigration policy is always a problematic one for the EU because, of course, the EU has to develop policy on a scale that is quite considerable. And the Lega, in my view, as long as immigration continues to be high in terms of what voters prioritise, then I think it will continue to play that card against the EU. Immigration is not an issue that the EU can solve straight away, and the current pandemic, issues with Brexit, all sorts of things, make it a very, very difficult policy area. It's an area on which the Lega can score an open goal quite easily if it wants to, because the EU still hasn't got its act together in that respect, not because they are not capable of it, just because it's an incredibly complex policy area.

##### Interviewer

So that's all my questions about the EU. I have some broader questions about other things that might matter. And one thing that people might want to focus on is the role of party members. And so do you think party members, or even significant figures in the party, are able to shape what appeals the party prioritises?

##### Interviewee

Well, that's a complex question, and you probably came across the work of many other scholars. But if you look at generally developments over the past few years, and I want to underline that I don't know the hard data, this is just like me looking at the documents that are being produced by the party. It seems that, you know, that the statutes of the party have been changed under Matteo Salvini. And again, this underlines that shift from a regionalist party into a nationalist one. And it also seems to suggest that more and more power in terms of decision-making within the party is put in the hands of the leader and National Committee, rather than the members.

I think that, and again this is, you know, bringing us back to a split between what is happening at the party at national level and what is happening on the ground, I think when we look at the organisation of the party at regional and local level, that membership is still very important. You see this in the way in which the Lega acts on the ground. So, if you go to places like Veneto, Luca Zaia (the leader of the government of the region) is everywhere, in every local fair, in every kind of local festival, is just there with the people.

So that is an excellent way of doing politics, that old school way of doing politics. Now, of course, Salvini has been doing the same, but, you know, on the national stage and of course it's more to put things on Twitter than to develop real relationships with the people. Whereas when you look at the organisation of the party on the ground, at the regional level, this is really a way of meeting type relationships with local communities, whereas Salvini does it more for the kind of focus on this Twitter and social media.

##### Interviewer

Well, it's a very Irish way of doing politics - our politicians are everywhere, at funerals, weddings, whatever. They just show up. So, yeah, earlier you mentioned about how immigration is a salient issue for the public and that obviously creates incentives for the party to focus on it. So how important do you think these two issues, so northern/regional autonomy and immigration are for the public, and to what extent does that influence the party?

##### Interviewee

Well, I think that normal autonomy is becoming increasingly important, especially for regions like Veneto and Lombardy. And you might have come across, you know, like all the stuff on the autonomy referendums in 2017. The results of the referendums and what is being done, especially in Veneto afterwards, really seems to show the economic dimension of the debate, the fact that wealthy regions like Veneto and Lombardy, still do not get a fair share in terms of how resources are redistributed from the national level. This seems to be a very salient issue. That, of course, is an issue that is also on the on the entire national scale, because, of course, we are coming from a period of economic recession. We've got the pandemic on top of that. So, again, it depends how you play the issue, with Salvini playing it on the national stage. And you know, there is a need to rebuild the economy. And regional leaders like Luca Zaia in particular are playing it on the regional level and they're calling for further autonomy for their own regions, based precisely on that economic rationale. Those calls for autonomy, especially in Veneto, are very, very, very strong and unlike in Lombardy, are also combined with claims connected to kind of regional distinctiveness, socio-cultural and identity terms. So that, you know, makes the case even stronger. But that process of differentiated autonomy has been, I don't know if it's ever going to come back on the agenda, but certainly it has been put on the backburner for a while.

Also, basically it is an issue that no one really wants to deal with for obvious reasons. I mean, the government back in the days of 2019 didn't want to deal with it because it was the government of the League and the Five Star Movement. And so, if you give autonomy to the Veneto and Lombardy, how can you sell yourself as a party that works for the whole of Italy? That applies both to the League and to the Five Star Movement. Now, certainly the government has got other priorities, but it's an issue that has remained unaddressed. But it doesn't mean that it's going to disappear because this frustration, the economy, you know, that feeling of being basically exploited by the country as rich regions that give something in terms of contribution to the national economy, but gets back very little, is something that is not going to disappear and is something that is very important, as I said, in regions like Veneto that are known for being very hardworking.

##### Interviewer

So what was I going to say that previously, was that about immigration mattering for the public? Obviously the two are somewhat endogenous, as parties shape what the public cares about, and vice-versa. So, what's your sense of how these two are related?

##### Interviewee

I don't know who's leading what, to be honest. This is a difficult one to kind of disentangle, because, of course, immigration seems to be one of these very high intensity priorities the public seems to have. But how has that become such a big priority? I think that the way in which Salvini has played the immigration card, you know, all those big theatrical things, you know, like not letting people get off the boats, it's something that has catalysed the attention [of people], and in a way that certainly wasn't necessary. But it also kind of fuelled this kind of fear of immigration in a way that is not kind of rationally justifiable, because if you look at the numbers of the on the ground, it's not that immigration has grown exponentially in the last few years. In Italy, immigration has always been high compared to other countries because of its geopolitical location. And of course, if you're talking about illegal immigration as well, that is particularly true because it is in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea. But the numbers have not grown exponentially. What has grown exponentially is the media attention to the issue of illegal immigration. So, I think it is a sort of a vicious circle because certainly Salvini is playing into that, and you know, never lost an occasion or an opportunity to be on whatever sort of media to talk about it. And that, in turn has kind of made it more salient for the public as well.

**Interview G**

##### Interviewer

As I said, my focus is on how parties combine these different types of nationalist appeals, so it makes sense to start off by talking about, well, actually, how does Lega use these appeals to start with? So how would you characterise the importance of greater northern autonomy or independence for Lega?

##### Interviewee

This is the historical message of Lega since the beginning, it was born as a fusion of different regionalist leagues and it was the first Italian party to bring into the public scene, into politics, the region. That is, if you don't keep in mind some minor parties related to Italian autonomous regions such as in South Tyrol, or Sardinia, or Sicily. I mean, after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Christian Democrat and Communist parties as the two sources of mass identification in politics in Italy, we had a huge change in the political landscape. In that moment, which corresponded also to the switch from the First to the Second Republic in Italy, Lega brought about its message, its federalism, as something extremely new. It renewed the dying centre-periphery cleavage, which had been no longer effective after the Second World War. So, Lega recreated that connection in terms of political representation and centralisation.

So, I think it's important to keep in mind that first part of the history of the party, which was indeed a long history because the nationalist turn dates only to 2013. For the most part, the history of the party has been a regionalist history. And then, of course, you have to analyse better the nuances of this regionalist history because in the beginning, I said that the federation of several regionalist Lega, then Bossi was a sort of killer of opponents and he really realised dominance over the other smaller Lega, say the Lega Veneto of India and the Lega Piemontese, and so on, and to have control and centralisation on Lombardia. Then we had the more radical phase of independence, then, of course, following the political opportunities in Italy, we have the more moderate federalist phase, which was also with some nuances of the macro-region, this idea of the macro-region of the north, and so on. But, of course, there is some internal opposition to the nationalist turn, this is for sure. And also, it's not difficult to say that the most part of the political interest and political representation of the party is based in the north.

So, what we have to understand when we study Lega is it's chameleonic character: Lega has always been extremely good in shaping its message according to the occasions, or to the changing of alliances and the voter’s orientation. If we analyse just the ideological position of Lega, I think we risk getting lost, because really the party has changed so many times, from the smaller, nuanced changes to really big ones. So what we have to do is shift the focus from the message to the internal debate, and also to the relationship between the message and the political situation.

##### Interviewer

Right, thanks. The changing messages are what makes it so fascinating as well. You've kind of alluded to this with your discussion of the national turn once Salvini becomes leader in 2013, so this is going to be a relatively obvious question, but how would you characterise the importance of immigration for the party?

##### Interviewee

Lega, since its beginning, is a political force constructed on the opposition to a stranger. It's a radical right populist party, so it plays a really fundamental role in its history. I think the better way to understand this change is from the enemy: in the very beginning, the enemy was the south and the terroni [a pejorative term for southerners], then with time the enemy has changed and we can observe a gradual substitution of the main enemy from the southerners to the immigrants during the years. I cannot tell you anything much more specific about the dates, but it's really gradual and time after time the immigrants have become more important as an enemy. This process is deeply intertwined with the changing position of the party on the left-right spectrum, because according to the literature on the party, the original Lega was a post-ideological party, so it was difficult to position Lega on the left-right spectrum, and now it's extremely clear that it’s a radical right party. So, this is your logical shift, it has been gradual, and is directly related to construction of the enemy in terms of the immigrants, so the shift from southerners to immigrants.

##### Interviewer

So, we've talked a lot about these different appeals and the shift, this gradual change from southerners to anti-immigrant, which leads to the question of what causes Lega to move from one appeal to the other, how can we understand this?

##### Interviewee

As usual, the need to survive. If you observe the results of the last general election before the turn to nationalism [2013], it was then the worst of its history because it was four percent. It was unbelievable as a result, because the constant characteristic of Lega’s electoral cycle is the fluctuation: the party has gone to really high levels of success, and failures. So, this is not new, but after that Salvini decided to reduce this regionalism, which was in a couple of steps, it was not so rapid as it is represented, it was more gradual. The fall of Bossi is really crucial to understanding the changes in the strategy of the party, because it was a perfect storm of the financial scandals, and the leadership of Bossi led to an organisational need for change, as the party didn't have a congress in 10 years or more, so there was also an organisational, internal need for debate that was unattended, plus the crisis in terms of the political success of the Berlusconi alliance. Basically, the Lega was in power for many years, but the federalist goals remained unsolved, unattended. So, the overlap of these multiple elements of crisis, organisational, financial, legal, and political, needed a really radical answer. And that radical answer was Salvini with the nationalist turn. That is the chameleonic character of Lega.

Lega has always been this way, to solve crises. So, it's not so surprising to me. It's of course, bigger and yes, a little bit shocking because presenting yourself to the voters, switching from lazy southerners to Italians first is something huge. But if you had in mind the chameleonic character of the party, it is not so surprising. And if you have in mind also the internal difficulties of the party, which tend to be not so much studied because we don't have enough many qualitative studies, so it's difficult to grasp to grasp the internal debate of such an opaque party, because Lega is not so easy to interpret from an external point of view. As always, it is a leader-centred party, with decision-making processes that are not so clear and not so easy to reconstruct for external eyes. This is my interpretation.

##### Interviewer

To hone in on a different variable, namely the EU, some people who focus on ethnoregionalism often focus on how the EU provides policy-making avenues for ethnoregional parties, like the Committee of the Regions and being involved in structural funding. Do you think these avenues ever encouraged Lega to focus on regionalism more, or do you think this is not important?

##### Interviewee

It's difficult to say because Lega, as always, had a really ambiguous relationship with Europe because, on the one side, Euroscepticism has been a rhetorical weapon of the party, really since the beginning, more or less. It could be extremely interesting to reconstruct the debate, the public declaration of the party on Europe, because I think we could have a sort of trajectory, really, of this opposition, this critique, this rebellion against centralised power or against political correctness, against the thousand on, for instance, food and drinks production, because several MEPs of the Lega have fought against the European rules on agriculture and food production. But at the same time, I remain convinced that even the hottest moments in the opposition and critique against Europe has been not so sincere, I would say. It's always the same thing, if you observe the core interest that Lega is representing, which is the productive area of the north of Italy, are they effective Eurosceptics? It's impossible, because Lega will go really against the financial interests of our highly globalised financial and interconnected area, such as the so-called Padania. So, I think that the criticism against the EU will be more of a rhetorical weapon than meant as a political strategy that leads to something real.

##### Interviewer

My final question for the EU is that radical right parties really like to talk about freedom of movement and the EU's immigration policies and how dreadful they are, so do you think the EU's immigration policies have been important for Lega in terms of what they talk about, or not?

##### Interviewee

Yes, of course, they have been important because of the refusal of the European Union to have a real political view of migratory fluxes, and also, which is related, a political and organisational management of fluxes. This has hugely influenced the internal debate and has hugely helped Salvini in succeeding. It's a play of mirroring political emptiness, that from the larger scale of Europe, has consequences for our internal debate.

Of course, we have one thousand miles of coast in Italy. We are geographically in the middle of something which is historical. We can say that the failure of Europe in deciding about that and giving a solidaristic response, also in terms of cooperation with different countries, enormously influenced the debate. If you consider that that was exactly the strategic interest of Lega in that moment, because with the nationalist turn, Salvini needed to underline, to exacerbate, the debate on immigration. So, it was the perfect occasion. We know that Lega always does the same. Lega’s mission is not to solve the problem, it's to make it worse in order to win the political contest. So, it was perfect, yes.

##### Interviewer

Earlier, you mentioned how kind internally opaque the party is and the amount of power centralised in the leader, so the answer to this question is probably going to be pretty obvious, but do you think party members, or perhaps other figures in the party, are able to shape what Lega prioritises, or not?

##### Interviewee

This is really complex because you need to keep in mind that I'm not updated, and so I really have to get back on the dance floor. But in the internal debate of the party, it's really complicated because, as I said, historically Lega has always been a leader-centred party, from Bossi on, with a complex mechanism of power management, because Bossi was known as an extremely control freak leader. He has a history of destroying his internal enemies, to have an inner circle that is extremely strict and based on fidelity. And if you see the end of his political trajectory, he was basically killed by bad counsellor's and yes-men. With Salvini, if you read Passarelli and Tuorto, they wrote a book in 2013 and 2018 on Lega, and they say that Lega has become even more centralised because Salvini has smashed up the internal debate.

But at the same time, if you also observe the political debate and the political agenda right now, you can clearly see that Giorgetti is the main internal opponent, and he comes from Veneto. Here, we have to turn back to the beginning of our history, which is the federalist fusion of several regional leagues, because the two big players of Lega have always been Lombardia and Veneto. In terms of electoral score, Veneto has almost always been in first place, but in the internal organisational power of the party. Lombardia has always won. So, it's complex because Veneto, as a force, in terms of voters and organisational distribution on the territory of the party, then it really has power. At the same time, Veneto also has a real regionalist identity, which in comparison to Lombardia is something different, because Lombardia has no regional history. In Veneto, you have a language, you have a flag, you have a really widespread sense of belonging to Veneto, you have a long history of independence. Before the Lega, in Lombardia, you don't have anything. It's just a fake, this history of Padania, and it's not a shared identity. So, from the one side, Veneto cannot be touched and completely absorbed by the internal power balance, which is focused on Lombardia. But on the other side, Lombardia has always won in terms of internal power. So, I think that to get a grasp of something under the surface of a very homogeneous, leader-centred party, you have to really know about this regionalist struggle between the two.

I think that now the nationalist project is really showing it's weaknesses with the growth of Fratelli d’Italia, because the real nationalist political offer is that of Giorgia Meloni. That's more coherent and makes more sense in terms of political traditions in Italy: they are fascists, and Lega was a regionalist party. So, even if Lega went through what really was a shift to the radical right position, if you completely lose the connection with your original political offer, it starts to become complex. And I think that we will see, in the future, more and more internal opposition to Salvini, in order to stay more focused on economic issues and to defend the relationship with Europe, so to make money and to be efficient in making money, in the liberal paradigm.

##### Interviewer

The final question that I have prepared is about public opinion. So how much do you think northern autonomy or regional autonomy and immigration matter for the public? And does the party follow that, or does it actually shape public opinion?

##### Interviewee

This question is difficult to answer, especially in my perspective [ethnography]. I’ve always done more locally centred work. We should analyse the electoral composition of voters now. As I said, I'm not updated, I apologise. But I suggest you go more into the electorate composition of the voters of the Lega.

I have a feeling that in the next election, Lega will be completely eaten by Fratelli d’Italia in the south. The party will resist in the centre, Emilia-Romagna and Toscana, because the rootedness is older in those regions. Now, it's impossible to turn completely back from the nationalist turn for the party, it's a sort of cul-de-sac. But I think they will more and more try to recuperate the connection with their core interests, which is the productive north, more medium-sized enterprise.

In terms of cultural values, ideologies, the militants of Lega don't like strangers. This is something that is well-established, it's part of the culture of the party. They were not the good guys that turned bad just in order to do political propaganda. It's something real, across militants and local leaders. But at the same time, immigrants are necessary to the productive structure of the north. In Veneto, immigrants are well integrated into the system, because they are productive forces indispensable to maintaining the system, and at the same time, they are isolated, criticised, the object of propaganda. It's ambiguous. So, I think that Lega will continue to use the rhetorical weapon of immigration, but maybe we can expect an internal debate that could lead to some more moderate positions. That depends also on the success of Salvini maintaining his power because Salvini and his circle in the party is really in that line, which is clearly neo- fascist, really nativist, really racist. There are, at the same time, other circles in the party which are more moderate.

##### Interviewer

OK, thanks. That's all the questions I have planned. Is there anything else you think is important to discuss?

##### Interviewee

I suggest you keep an eye always on the relationship between Lega and neo-fascists, because it does really play a role in the nationalist turn. Salvini started the turn by speaking with CasaPound, by inserting activists of Forza Nuova [New Force] and other extreme right groups, especially in the so-called civic lists, at the level of local elections. So, this is an issue, and violence is an issue, an issue more and more pervasive. If you compare it to the party I studied in 2011/2012, I think that right now violence is more of an issue than in the past, because some rhetorical changes have an effect. We cannot evaluate how permanent this effect is, but I think it's something.

And of course, also gender questions are fundamental because in the last year or so, together with the issue of immigration, Lega has really worked with the so-called anti-gender movement and groups, which in turn are often related to extreme right groups. So, it's a complex world between the extreme right and the really, really conservative Catholic groups. There is competition between Lega and Fratelli d’Italia to have hegemony on this, which is important, maybe not so much in terms of votes, but in terms of representation and construction of another enemy, and this other enemy is, of course, gender understood as the progressive values related to homosexuality, gender equality, so forth and so on. You know, the old slogan of the old Italian fascist regime was God, nation, and family. And I think you have to keep in mind the update of this slogan to the contemporary debate, because really God and family are becoming more important than in the past.

**Interview H/Interview J**

##### Interviewer

Let's get started then. My participant information leaflet should make pretty clear I'm interested in different forms of nationalism and how parties combine them. So, anti-immigration and Flemish autonomy for Vlaams Belang, and anti-immigration and northern autonomy for Lega. So it probably makes sense to start off by talking about these different types of appeals and how important they are. So how important do you think appeals centred on Flemish autonomy or Northern autonomy are for Vlaams Belang and Lega, respectively?

##### Interviewee

So, I would say that those issues are absolutely critical for the foundation and for the early years of the party. Both of them. All, or most, of the people in the party hierarchy would still say that they were for, in theory, at the maximum, the independence of Padania, although that sounds crazy in today's day and age or, just for the regionalism that the Lega always wanted. Similarly, you'd find high support for Flemish independence or confederation with the Netherlands amongst Vlaams Belang, and in the early years of the party, it was specifically when the Vlaams Belang was still the Vlaams Blok, it was the Egmont Pact that was the spark for the formation of the party. So, there's no way of understanding either of these two parties, and this is separate from some of the other anti-immigrant parties, without understanding the regional side of Lega and the Flemish question.

When you look at voters, though, these issues don't matter very much. I mean, I've yet to see really some convincing electoral data that shows that it's Flemish independence or that that desire, rather than anti-immigration or something else. That's a draw for a vanishingly small percent of the voters of these parties. Still, it forms a core message that can be grafted onto other nationalist messages, although sometimes I think one of the really interesting things with Lega Nord is how, when, or if it's going to become like its name, just a Lega now. Whether it's going to be able to develop some sort of equivalent or organisational form in the south of Italy. And there are signs that think that it's been able to do so.

But just to circle back to the question. Yes, absolutely. You can't understand either of those parties without that. And it's different from, you know, the Sweden Democrats or from the Norwegian Progress Party, or from most of the other radical right parties that are out there. But as an issue for voters, I have yet to see that.

##### Interviewer

OK. Then this question might be important, given your talk so far about voters. How important is anti-immigration appeals for both of these parties?

##### Interviewee

So it became, I think, the core appeal of both. That's what really distinguishes radical right parties. When you look at their voters and what they care about, of course, it's complex, but you can slice the data in all sorts of different ways, and still we've come to a consensus among the people who have studied this, that it's really anti-immigration. That's a driving force rather than other things like welfare state chauvinism, or antiglobalization (loosely defined), or a regional push. No, anti-immigration explains, not all of the vote for the radical right, but really the lion's share of it.

When the Lega shifted from anti-southern, anti-Rome, anti-centralised state in the early 1990s, and then it went through a series of really significant downs in the mid-90s, and in the late-90s, it returned to the theme of anti-immigration. They've been amplifying it ever since, and they have ownership over that issue In Italy, in the way that no other political party does. So, within 10 years of its founding, anti-immigration has far surpassed anti-southern sentiment as the core feature of the Lega. Also, similarly, in the case of Vlaams Belang, Flemish independence or Flemish nationalism certainly had an appeal, and it could get you pretty far in Antwerp City Council and other places, but only when it was grafted with an anti-immigrant message was there Black Monday in 1991, and that was the moment that everybody realised the Vlaams Blok had become a party like the Austrian FPO or like other radical right parties, such as Front National in France.

##### Interviewer

Yeah, that's a good discussion of how they use these different types of appeals, but of course, it's important to try and understand this. You've kind of alluded to some things already, like how it matters much more for voters and the electoral success component, but just broadly, is there anything that would cause the party to focus on one appeal rather than the other, such as regional autonomy over anti-immigration, or vice-versa?

##### Interviewee

The radical right goes through this discussion periodically. I don't think there's any way the radical right parties drop their anti-immigration and still remain potent electoral forces. Everyone says that, OK, there can be this de-diabolization of the Front National or the moderation of this, that, and the other thing. But every party that's split off from the radical right and has tried to tone down its anti-immigration rhetoric, hasn't survived it. That has not been the path to electoral success. At the same time, you know, there is something to be said for trying to drop the outright Holocaust denialists and the skinheads and the most low-hanging fruit, so to speak, that that you can disassociate yourself from as a party. So, the Vlaams Belang has done that to some degree. But I see no way, really, that regional or national issues are ever going to supplant the immigration issue in Europe, particularly after 2015 and, of course, the refugee crisis that followed. Sometimes there is talk from the N-VA in Flanders and from Bart De Wever (the mayor of Antwerp) about how he would love to see a confederation of Flanders in the Netherlands in his lifetime. But I don't think anyone thinks that's going to happen for so many reasons.

But no, I don't see that regionalism coming back and replacing, or shutting out, anti-immigration. Because, for better or worse, and mostly for worse, that's what the radical right is. That's the secret sauce in their message. It always has been. They don't make a secret about it. You know, it's not rocket science either and they don't deviate from it.

So, in periods like the refugee crisis, those parties have done very, very well. You know, there's always upticks when there's a major terrorist event or something like that. So, yeah, I don't see them abandoning that message any time soon. In some ways, maybe one move that they could do, and Vlaams Belang has sort of done this, is to turn it into a general sort of civilizational defence of your own and try to claim like this pan-European nationalism. But that project has never really succeeded either, trying to claim a nationalism above the nation state. So I don't really see that as a way out either. No, their bread and butter is xenophobia, or immigration scepticism, or fear about culture.

##### Interviewer

OK, great. So, do you think the EU has any influence on what the party focuses, on or not?

##### Interviewee

My view of where radical parties came from is different from some others, who said that they were really sort of a creature of the European Union itself, that this is a reaction to European integration. And I think that story just doesn't - it's like chronologically wrong, and the data doesn't really support it. Radical right parties are, in my view, a product of the changing demographic structure of Europe, which begins/accelerates in the ‘70s and ‘80s, and that predates not the EU itself, but Maastricht and all those other processes that really made European integration feel real to Europeans. So, on the one hand, absolutely, you do see radical right parties being Eurosceptic, but their position has always been complicated. You know, the Lega was against the eurozone bailouts, but it's been pro-European before. And I don't think anyone in northern Italy thinks that they would love to leave the European Union. And Belgium is just so much at the centre of the European project, too. It's in a way difficult to spew, although they certainly do it, an anti-EU message. So, yes, Europe is in some ways the thing to bash on for these parties, but so, too, for mainstream parties. I mean, bashing on Brussels gets mainstream left and mainstream right-wing support as well.

And in these two countries, the ones that you're focusing on, anti-EU feeling has always been checked. They are founding members, and also complicated members, with Italy long wanting to have Europeans (broadly defined) run their finances, rather than having chaotic Italian politics produce these results. And, you know, Belgium, such a complicated country. But, I don't think that Dewinter or anyone else would really want to leave the EU and set on a course of an independent Flanders outside of the EU. It just sounds wacky to me.

So, yeah, the EU is not something that really distinguishes these parties. Yes, they're more EU-sceptic than other political parties. Yes, like in 2005 in France, I think the fact that Front National rallied against the EU constitution made a difference there. But Euroskepticism just is not the driver of these parties. It doesn't differentiate them really from other parties.

##### Interviewer

So, just focusing perhaps on a specific element of the EU, which given your previous answer, you might think is not important, which is totally fine. People in the ethnoregional literature sometimes look at the policymaking avenues that the EU provides for ethnoregional parties, like the Committee of the Regions and access to structural funding. Do you think those avenues matter, or not?

##### Interviewee

They do. And I mean they matter in their own right. They matter in their own right because those policies are important. I'm not convinced they matter for the trajectory of the parties themselves. But look, these are major parts of what the European Union does. Yeah, they make dramatic differences in the policies they produce, maybe not so much in the economic outcomes. In terms of policies, I wouldn't say that they're not important at all. It's just not that central axis of conflict that they can then say, ‘Oh, we're going to campaign on these policies that we've gotten from the EU’, which is never popular in European politics in general.

##### Interviewer

And now for the final question on the EU, you’ll be happy to hear. We've already mentioned how radical right parties and mainstream parties alike, both like to criticise the EU and blame it for things. And one thing the radical right obviously likes to focus on is the EU's immigration policies and freedom of movement, dealing with the migrant crisis, things like that. Do you think that aspect of the EU is important, or not?

##### Interviewee

Yes, it's important insofar as if the EU were to come to a coherent, common, immigration and asylum policy in my lifetime, I would be surprised. Since that's not going to happen, it's always good political points for the parties to point the finger at the EU and to say that they're responsible.

On general reflection, when you have people in these parties who are then designing those policies, I used to think that ‘OK, some stuff is probably going to get watered down in committee or this or that’, but, you know, just looking at the United States, when you had a stone cold, inveterate racist in Stephen Miller designing policy and designing, on purpose, the family separation policy at the border, you definitely have times where people in these radical right parties design policy.

So that's not to be forgotten either. But back to the EU and its incoherence in solving the long-term refugee problem, that provides openings to the radical right and probably always will.

##### Interviewer

Yeah. The Stephen Miller example is good because Lega has had plenty of access to government power over the years. Vlaams Belang, not so much, of course.

##### Interviewee

That's a key difference between the two states, as I'm sure you know, the long-standing cordon sanitaire in Belgium and the absence from the beginning, really, of a cordon sanitaire against the Lega, which was treated as a party to form a coalition with, even as it radicalised in the late 1990s, that was not at all problematic for Berlusconi.

##### Interviewer

So my next question focuses on the role of party members, which you've obviously done a bit of work on the internal structure of these parties. So do you think party members are able to shape what these parties focus, on or is their role more limited?

##### Interviewee

Hmm, you know, ordinary party members are like members in any political party, you're just going to have low levels of influence on the party. There have been some attempts to have direct democracy within parties, but these have been more from left-wing populists, e.g., with Podemos, the Five Star Movement promises direct democracy. My feeling is that it hasn't manifested itself, so that even in these, direct digital democracy has not lived up to the promise of giving party members much influence over the party.

But what I will say is that both these parties [Lega and VB] do take party membership seriously, both in terms of trying to get lots of party members (some parties in the radical right don't do this, most famously, Geert Wilders, it's a party of one technically), and so they always had an interest in building party bases, and they had good organisational starting points, particularly the Vlaams Block. And Bossi, as the party was growing, he was kind of picky as he found ways of vetting all these thousands of people who wanted to become party members and having various levels of membership, but as a way of kind of testing out and making sure people were really committed. So, both parties took party membership and the whole organisational structure of the party quite seriously. That does not mean that they were democratic by any stretch, but they were not just paper tigers. And this organisational strength, is, I think, what distinguishes them from some of the other parties that come and go.

##### Interviewer

Then finally, what about public opinion? You've already mentioned how people aren’t being attracted to these parties on the basis of regionalism, and relatively support for some of these aims. So how important do you think public opinion is? How important is public opinion in what the party focuses on? Do they pay attention to public opinion?

##### Interviewee

Well, in some sense they do. They would claim that, look, we are representing the authentic perspectives of a lot of Europeans who are uncomfortable with mass immigration. I think, in Europe, by a slight plurality, you would find more immigration sceptics than people who say yes to free movement of people, yes to all of these all of these things, or even those who say yes to the existing agreements letting in this number of people from the outside. That's not to say that everybody is a hardcore, stone-cold racist in that group, although some certainly are. Jens Rydgren, whose work you might have come across, made the point about 10 or 15 years ago that if you look at public opinion data, you would find, even in historically pro-immigrant states like Sweden or Germany, close to a plurality of people who are anti-immigrant. So they say, yes, we are authentic representatives of public opinion. And in that sense, they're not incorrect. I'm not endorsing it, but it's not like their issues are ones that don't show up. They're not running on some very technical sort of thing that the population doesn't care about.

##### Interviewer

Yeah. I suppose everyone knows that public opinion and party positions are to some extent endogenous, so how do you think the connection works? Is it more the parties following public opinion or are they shaping public opinion?

##### Interviewee

You know, that's a good question in the study of the radical right. And I haven't seen a paper that has posed it like that, so I don't really have an answer for it. Look, in periods when the public finds immigration is like the most important issue, these parties tend to do well. So it's got to be public opinion doing a lot of the work here. I mean, it just you can't understand a party like the AfD in Germany, that's totally something else before the refugee crisis, then you get the refugee crisis, 1.5 million people coming into Germany and a string of regional elections where it does what no far-right party has ever done before in Germany. And similarly, during the sovereign debt crisis, as people were really worried about the economy and immigration receded a little bit, their vote share either stagnated or dropped. The Vlaams Belang, as I'm sure, you know, looked like it was in serious trouble before 2019. People predicted that sort of long demise. In the sovereign debt crisis, people were like, ‘I don't know, do we seriously, as French people, really think that Marine Le Pen is the answer here with her economic policy? No, that's crazy’. So as economic issues became more salient during that sovereign debt crisis, public opinion prioritised those. I think the radical right did a little, on average, on the aggregate, a little less well. But, you know, these are insoluble questions. There is certainly something to be said, though, for the fact that once anti-immigrant parties do have a platform and start talking about immigration, they then can move public opinion. I don't think it's, you know, 10 or 20 points. But, you know, a couple of points, certainly.

##### Interviewer

Yeah, I remember all those articles that came out when Vlaams Belang started doing poorly, about how the cordon sanitaire was killing the party.

##### Interviewee

You know, I don't really have a great story for how it got back together. What I'm reading, it's like, ‘Oh the internet plus Facebook plus a brilliant marketing campaign plus sort of a youth turnover created this new success’.

##### Interviewer

Yeah, I suppose one difference for Vlaams Belang is they have got their leadership sorted out. I mean, there's a lot less turnover in who the top leader is now, but how much of an effect that has on them, I don’t know.

##### Interviewee

They also always had this tripartite leadership structure for a while, and like other radical right parties that didn't work, but they'd been able to manage that. Yeah, they had fights and feuds and everything, and it looked like it was going downhill, but it wasn't like a Bossi-dominated party, although I even shouldn't say that, because after the stroke what looked like charismatic leadership holding this whole thing together proved to not be, as Maroni could step into those shoes, as Salvini stepped into those shoes.

But the youth movement within it, turnover and party leadership, that's kind of interesting and important because we're now getting to the stage in these parties’ lives where that's happening.

##### Interview I

##### Interviewer

As my participant information leaflet hopefully made clear, I am focused on these different types of nationalism, so it probably makes sense to start by talking about how important they are for Lega. So, to start with, how would you characterise the importance of northern autonomy for Lega?

##### Interviewee

Northern autonomy has been the defining trait of Lega from its foundation as Lega Nord until the birth of the current leadership, so from the mid 1980s until 2013/14. And since then, since Salvini gained the leadership, he took the party from its worst ever electoral result (he took the leadership when Lega was around four percent), he significantly transformed the political offer, or better, the official communication of the party by putting aside the rhetoric about the north, independence for the north and so on, and transforming the party from a separatist one to nationalist right-wing party. This is what Salvini’s leadership is focused on and what he is consistently implicating in his six/seven years [as leader]. However, at the local level, the separatist ideas are still present. If you look at the social media of some local mayors or some supporters, you see these topics are still present. However, at the national level, there's been a clear national turn.

##### Interviewer

Thanks. So, that also covers my next question, but just to focus on it a bit more explicitly, how would you characterise the importance of immigration as an issue for Lega?

##### Interviewee

That is probably the number one issue for Lega. Now, with the separatist part being overshadowed, it is definitely the first priority. And it's also what characterised the most the time they had in the first Conte government, the government when Salvini, as the Minister of the Interior, consistently tackled the issue, trying to close the ports and be very restrictive towards immigration.

##### Interviewer

That's a good discussion of the changing importance of these appeals, but as I said, one thing I'm interested in is trying to explain this and understand it. So, what do you think causes the party to prioritise one of these appeals over the other? For example, what caused the party to prioritise immigration over separatism?

##### Interviewee

First of all, immigration was also present when the party was 100 percent separatist, so that's always been a key feature of Lega Nord. It was against southern Italy, and against the hypothetical corruption of the central government, together with a strong, restrictive proposal on immigration. With the last shift, the party is not officially separatist anymore, they are nationalist. They are also collecting votes in central and southern Italy. The strategy has paid off because again, with a strictly separatist strategy, they could not maximise the consensus too much. In 2018 [general election] and in the European Parliament elections of 2019, Lega achieved very good results, in some areas of the country that was incredible. They achieved 20% in Calabria, and 15% in some Sicilian cities, and so on.

So, in the complete turn from separatist to nationalist, immigration remains. In this, I see one of the most typical populist strategies: the need for an enemy. Once the enemy was the lazy, unemployed southerners and partially the migrants, and now migrants are. Also, throughout the years, waves of migrants have become more visible, more shocking in terms of images, resulting in a greater impact on public opinion. Only examining numbers, you wouldn't see much difference because in the past, many people would come from the East through the land and would start work, etc. With some thousands of migrants coming on boats through the Mediterranean, that's really impressed, affected public again, making immigration a hot topic.

##### Interviewer

So yeah, perhaps to focus on one variable which you might think is important, or you might think isn't important. Do you think the EU plays any role in influencing what the party focuses on, or not?

##### Interviewee

This opens another topic since Lega also takes the EU as a scapegoat, as responsible for many things that are not working. It is an easy target: it looks distant, it looks like a foreign entity that an average citizen has nothing to do with. There is also a harsh rhetoric against the EU, again, under this umbrella of populist strategy. Very recently, I might say it seems that Lega, but I'm literally talking about the past six months since the current grand coalition cabinet has been formed, that Lega is trying to build a more moderate image, at least at the international level. So, it’s trying to establish some connection at the European level, and being part of this grand coalition government should help with this strategy. According to some analysts, the idea is that we might get into government again, alone, in the next cycle, so we need to not be marginalised when the time comes. However, I think it's too early to make any conclusion about it.

##### Interviewer

So, one way that people in the literature focus on the role of the EU is to focus on the fact the EU provides policymaking avenues for ethnoregional parties, like the Committee of the Regions and getting involved in creating structural funding packages. Do you think any of these avenues have influenced the Lega, or even the Lega’s rhetoric, or not?

##### Interviewee

Not in the long run. Again, there are these late signs of a potential shift. However, on this I would prefer to answer in six months or a year from now, due to this potential restructuring.

##### Interviewer

Great. Finally on the EU, radical right parties often like to criticise the EU’s immigration policies, whether that be freedom of movement or how it deals with the migrant crisis. Do you think these EU policies are important for Lega and when it focuses on, or not?

##### Interviewee

They are very important in terms of campaigning, meaning that policymakers constantly refer to the EU’s policy, its regulations, as ineffective and terrible for Italy, purposely made against Italy, and so on.

##### Interviewer

So, there's two other variables that I want to focus on, which are probably important for any political party, but just more precisely for Lega it will be interesting to see. One of them is party members. Do you think that party members, or even significant figures within the party, are able to influence what it focuses on, or is it closer to the stereotype of radical right parties of relatively weak members?

##### Interviewee

Good question. I mean, apparently Salvini’s leadership is very strong, and very much orienting the communication and the image of the party as a top-down flow that comes from the Twitter profile of the leader.

There are a couple of figures that are considered to be more moderate, more cosmopolitan, or, if you want, more willing to be integrated into the international political game. One is the Minister of Economic Development, Giorgetti, and the governor of Venento, Luca Zaia, who are often in contrast with the leader. They've been in contrast on the management of the pandemic. They are in contrast on the relation with the EU, and so on. However, Giorgetti has never been tested in an election, so he’s more of a managing figure that Lega uses when they go to government, and Zaia’s popularity is quite concentrated in Veneto.

##### Interviewer

The second variable I want to focus on is public opinion. To what extent does public opinion matter for Lega, and do you think it’s a case of Lega following public opinion, or actively shaping it?

##### Interviewee

Public opinion is crucial for Lega, and I believe they’re trying to follow whatever could be rewarding in terms of consensus, sometimes even providing messages that might be in contrast to each other. You have a quite significant example in the early days of the pandemic, when Salvini was Tweeting ‘let's open everything, open, open, open’, and then ‘close, close, close’; ‘No masks’, then ‘Yes, masks’. Similar mixed messages were sent in the early days of vaccinations. So, there is this constant strategy of trying to detect whatever can have some advantage in terms of consensus, not only on policy proposals, but also in sharing images of daily life. Whatever can generate clicks, interaction, is published.

##### Interviewer

So that's all the questions I have planned. Is there anything else you think it's important to talk about?

##### Interviewee

I'm sure you're familiar with the development in the south of Italy, but this created some legal and judicial issues, because Lega started gaining significant numbers of votes in the south without having any people there, any party members. So, they had to include in the party some people that were linked with the mafia or had some critical past. And now they're paying the price for it, probably even above their responsibilities. Basically, every day there is news of some local council or a member of Lega that has been arrested for graft or corruption. So, in this quick strategy of expanding towards the south, the party is now present and even governing in many government entities in the south of Italy. But it was full of criminals or people that are highly suspect.

**Interview with Huysseune**

##### Interviewer

From the information leaflet I gave you, hopefully it makes it relatively clear that I'm focused on how Lega combines different forms of nationalism, especially on Northern autonomy and anti-immigration appeals. So, it probably makes sense to start by discussing both these appeals. How do you characterise the importance of northern autonomy or independence for Lega?

##### Michel

So, Lega was first of all a fusion of various regionalist leagues, starting with Bossi’s Lega Lombardia, then similar leagues in various other Northern Italian regions. The fusion took place in 1991, with a shift from regional autonomy to broader northern autonomy. So, one of the issues that came up from 1991 was indeed general northern autonomy, either in the form of a microregion with an Assembly of Regions and a high degree of autonomy, including fiscal autonomy. But in these early years, such autonomy never explicitly excluded the option of independence. Institutionally, one can say that the Lega talked a lot about federalism, but never really made clear what it meant by federalism. The proposals were always shifting at that point. In 1995, the party shifted towards an outright pro-independence platform, independence for northern Italy. At that point, they organised an official declaration of independence in September, with an entire ritual, with Bossi taking water from the source of the Po, then going to Venice for the official declaration of independence. That declaration of independence included all northern regions, and also some northern central regions (Tuscany, Marche, Umbria). But the exact composition of this country Padania was not always entirely clear. It was not clear whether it systematically included northern regions, and some in the Lega wanted to limit it to not including those central regions and also not including those regions that were not Italian (or ‘Padanian’) speaking, which would mean that it would not include Alto Adige/South Tyrol, which is German speaking. The ambivalence about that was never really solved.

This explicit pro-independence platform was never entirely abandoned, but it was certainly downplayed from the late 1990s on, when the party again allied itself with the centre-right, with Berlusconi and the Italian neo-fascists. Then, they focused more on federalism and fiscal federalism, never entirely abandoning the idea of independence, but certainly downplaying it in its propaganda. It again became part of the government coalition in 2001, and they tried to include federal reform, which was won after a referendum.

Then you get to the crisis in the Lega, with Bossi getting involved in all kinds of scandals. Then with the Salvini leadership, there was first a kind of continuity, then the shift towards the national perspective where everything northern-focused was abandoned, although it's economic programme still continues to, in practise, favour northern economic interests. The northern regional authorities which are under the control of the Lega (so, Lombardia, Piemonte, Veneto) are still campaigning for more autonomy, especially for more fiscal autonomy, so it has not been entirely absent.

Concerning the appeal of this programme, one can say that it certainly has appeal in the northern regions. Specifically, it was strongest in Lombardia and Veneto, which also organised pro-autonomy referenda in recent years, which were approved by the electorate, albeit in elections where there was a high rate of abstentionism. Also, from polls in the 1990s we know that the idea of more autonomy was popular, and the idea of independence was not totally marginal - we know that 20 percent of the population in those regions were rather favourable towards the idea of independence.

##### Interviewer

So, in terms of the other type of nationalist appeal then, how would you characterise the importance of anti-immigration appeals for Lega?

##### Michel

I would certainly characterise it as an element that has always been important in different forms, and it's important and useful to also see how the party has evolved on this issue. Basically, it started with anti-southern migration. This rhetoric was important even before Lega was officially formed, as it was also used by the prior Leagues. It has to be said that non-EU immigration is a relatively recent phenomenon, also in North Italy, and therefore it's emergence in party rhetoric was somewhat slower, but it started to appear in the late 1980s/early 1990s, together with anti-southern rhetoric. The importance of such rhetoric is also somewhat cyclical, and that is most clear with the case of anti-southern rhetoric, which was clearly dependent on political alliances. So, when Lega allied itself with the centre-right in 1993, they tended to downplay that anti-southern rhetoric, as it also tried its first attempt to reach out and also have an audience in the south in that period.

One can notice, however, that from the early 1990s, anti-non-European rhetoric and anti-Eastern European rhetoric, especially the Albanians, became more important than anti-southern rhetoric because anti-southern rhetoric has never been that systematic either, since good southern immigrants could be accepted. For example, Lega had many activists of southern Italian origins, including Bossi’s spouse. So, there was always a discourse that they could be accepted on condition. Southerners that were deemed less acceptable were those in official functions, related to Lega’s general hostility towards the state. Also, an important theme in the early Lega was people related to organised crime that were obliged to settle in the north. That created a lot of hostility in northern communities, and that was used by the Lega. But, in general, the anti-southern rhetoric has never been extremely systematic: it occurs in certain periods and in other periods it is downplayed, so it was more of an opportunistic rhetoric. Certainly, in recent years it has definitely been totally secondary.

Anti-immigration rhetoric has been more systematic, but there one also notices a number of contradictions and evolution. I would say in the 1990s, the anti-immigrant rhetoric tended to follow a pattern similar to the anti-southern rhetoric as they were accepted on condition, and also as a workforce but not as citizens, which fitted into the Italian legal tradition, which is jus sanguinis rather than jus soli, whereby immigrants rarely have access to citizenship, especially non-EU citizens. In that period, Lega had the rhetoric that good, hard-working immigrants could, in a way, be accepted as part of the workforce. And the Lega had, in fact, also branches of immigrants supporting the party. From the late 1990s on, we noticed that the anti-immigrant rhetoric has become more predominant, although Lega still presented some meritorious immigrants as possible.

What has been noticeable from the late 1990s was the previously less visible anti-Islam stance, which in the early period was irrelevant. But from the late 1990s on, Lega has presented itself as the defenders of Christianity against Islam. Indeed, the whole culture wars rhetoric has indeed, from that period on, become quite dominant. We see that Muslim immigrants are its main targets, if one looks at immigration and anti-immigrant rhetoric, which was not the case in the previous phase. Also, the Lega had a more conflictual relationship with Catholicism in that period, they defended the so-called Celtic identity of northern Italy, and its militants indeed cultivated so-called new pagan Celtic rituals against the Catholic Church. Now, it identifies itself with Catholicism, or rather, the more conservative branches of Catholicism. It always had difficulties with the more multicultural branches within the Catholic Church.

##### Interviewer

Okay, that's a good discussion of the northern autonomy, anti-immigration and anti-Islam elements of Lega. What do you think causes the party to prioritise one over the other, or is there anything that causes the party to change in these?

##### Michel

I think all of them can be mobilised at certain points, so they're always instruments that can be used. I think a lot is related to the political opportunity structure, mainly the dynamics of political alliances certainly play a role: the more Lega emphasises political alliances, the less it tends to emphasise rhetoric against southern Italian migrants. Of course, they still use them, but I think that's more related to particular events. For example, if there is a corruption scandal in the south, perhaps they will mobilise on it a little bit. What one notices, of course, is that the national party leadership certainly does not use that instrument anymore. Local activists and elites in the north might be more prone to using it. It is of course also typical, certainly of the local activists of Lega, that, for them, the local dimension is also quite important, which means creating a community of locals using local dialects, which is of course a way to exclude outsiders, including immigrants and southern Italians.

Concerning immigrants, Lega is of course always confronted with the fact that one of the characteristics of modern Italy, in most periods, is that unemployment is not such a big issue. So, it has never really been about competition for jobs. To the contrary, the workforce of immigrants was necessary, especially because Lega has strongholds in economically rather thriving communities, where in fact, the immigrant workforce is a necessity. It’s never been about that, it's never about jobs. It's rather about access to social services for Italians or locals. That’s a theme that always works. More and more there is, of course, also a theme that is used whenever crimes are committed by immigrants, when Italians commit a crime, that's a different story.

Islam is a more generic category that can always be used, and of course, there are always plenty of elements that allow such a use, so the building of mosques in local communities is an obvious one.

##### Interviewer

Okay, so to focus on a different variable that you might think matters or doesn't matter, is the EU able to influence what the party focuses on, or not?

##### Michel

I would say not that much. What one notices is that when Lega is in government it still uses anti-EU rhetoric, but it becomes less important, and it is more present when the party is in opposition. In that sense, it does play with it, but I wouldn’t overestimate that. It's also true that the party uses anti-EU rhetoric, but I don’t think it's really meant to mobilise a real Italian exit. What the party astutely noticed was that the consensus about European integration was weakening with introduction of the Euro, which caused a lot of transition problems for the Italian economy. Indeed, they did use that in their anti-EU rhetoric at that point, which they developed from that point on. Previously, the party was rather pro-European, not necessarily uncritical of the European institutions, but believing that the EU would be a good counterweight for Italian state centralism. It was also present in the Lega’s political thinking in that period, that if Italy could not fulfil the criteria for joining the European Monetary Union, the north would suffer and that would be an argument in favour of secession. That argument disappeared as Italy was accepted into the EMU in ’98, and that's when the party became more explicitly Eurosceptic.

The party is rather opportunistic on the issue as it mobilises such an argument when in opposition, but then downplays it when in government. On the other hand, even when it mobilises the issue, it still has something that it requires from the EU, namely economic protection, especially against non-European competitors like China, which is an issue for the northern Italian economy because cheap Chinese products are competitors for some branches of the northern Italian economy.

Also Lega has consistently argued that Italy, specifically northern Italy, is European. In the early period it was simply remobilizing part of an already existed discourse in Italy, which contrasted northern Italy as modern and European, with southern Italy, which was considered barbarian, non-European, African, Oriental, all the stereotypes you can imagine. So, Lega mobilised that aspect and therefore found it good to link northern Italian identity to European identity, saying we’re a wee bit like Protestants or saying that their Celtic. So, these arguments have always played a role. It’s more contemporary version is, of course, Christian Europe, no non-Christian outsiders. So, European identity has always been part of Lega’s identity discourse, notwithstanding its Euroscepticism.

##### Interviewer

Okay, thanks. Sometimes people who focus on ethnoregional parties make the claim that the EU provides lots of avenues for policymaking influence for ethnoregional parties, like the Committee of the Regions or getting involved in structural funding packages. Do you think any of these avenues are important for Lega, or do they focus on them in their rhetoric, or not at all?

##### Michel

Nothing. Regional authorities do work, like all metal authorities, to lobby for funding and such things. But they have always been rather sceptical about what the EU could do for regions. Most regionalist parties have come to the conclusion that the EU cannot really do that much for regions and have become more critical of the EU in general. So, Lega was probably just fast in reaching such a conclusion.

##### Interviewer

Finally on the EU, radical right parties often like to focus on the EU’s immigration policies, like free freedom of movement or how the EU dealt with the migrant crisis, or perhaps failed to deal with it. So, do you think this aspect of the EU is important for Lega?

##### Michel

Oh, yeah, definitely.

##### Interviewer

So just to focus on two different variables people often think may matter for parties, so it will be interesting to see what you think they mean for Lega. Firstly, do you think party members or significant figures within the party are able to influence what the party focuses on, or does it more follow the stereotype of members being relatively weak in radical right parties?

##### Michel

I think that's a difficult one to answer. Of course, the party itself has always been very hierarchical, with Bossi and Salvini determining the party line and also, if necessary, excluding people who are critical of the party line, so it has always had a very top-down, authoritarian structure. On the other hand, contrary to many political parties, certainly in Italy, it is a party of local activists, especially in small town, provincial Italy. I think it has always been obliged to also offer, at least at the local level, some leeway for local activism. Those activists are also not always extremely happy with this more Italian nationalist turn, so there are some elements of tension there. Salvini also has to manage such tension because it is still a militant and activist party. That is one of its strengths, as a matter of fact. In previous periods, one would notice the Lega solved these problems by letting some activists work on specific issues. For example, those who were generally interested in this ethnoregional independence dimension, work in some organisations, which didn't have much direct political influence, and thus didn’t bother the party leadership too much. I wouldn't be surprised if there's still some similar dynamics at play. role. At a local level, there is a certain liberty for party activists to still do their own thing.

##### Interviewer

Great, my final question concerns public opinion. To what extent do you think this shapes what the party focuses on and, perhaps at another level of complexity, do you think it's more the party follows public opinion or actively shapes it?

##### Michel

It’s a dialectic of both of them, if I may say so. In the early period, I think that it elaborated a discourse on northern autonomy, and then also adopted tips that were felt to be significant in its constituency. There are certainly also influences of this constituency like, for example, anti-southern feelings that were addressed by their constituency, hostility against the state and against outsiders, that Lega then used in its political rhetoric. But then it introduced themes, almost certainly, that were not actively present in public opinion, like the theme of Independence. So, you notice that they have also shaped public opinion, launching themes, with certain success, that were not really articulated by public opinion. It’s difficult to say up to which point they ride the wave of anti-immigrant feeling in the population, or that they also lead to the emergence of that feeling. So, I think both aspects have certainly played a role and that Lega, by its discourse, reflects tendencies that were already recently present in the population, but it's certainly also reinforced those tendencies. So, it's rhetoric plays an active role in moving public opinion on things.

##### Interviewer

Okay, great. Thanks. That's all the questions I have planned. Is there anything else you think we need to talk about?

##### Michel

There’s a gender dimension, just to finish things off. There, you notice Lega has always been a masculine party, from its origins. One of the early slogans of the Lega was ‘The Lega has a hard on’. But you could say that, in the beginning they also tried to cultivate something of a more liberal platform, to try to show that it respected ‘liberal’ values. So, it said it was for equal rights for women, and it undoubtedly gave some space to female activism, but always in rather subordinate positions. In early periods, it also had a rhetoric of ‘women’s rights were okay, but feminism exaggerated somewhat’. But from the late 1990s, the party has become more of a spokesperson of traditional values, and its nationalism also includes that dimension. So, this is the party of masculine revenge, of masculine fragility, trying to also to promote divorce laws that would give fathers a much larger role in the custody of children. They have been very much busy with those things and the abortion rhetoric. All those things have become much more prominent.

The same goes for LGBT rights, where the early period of the Lega, without really promoting them, was not hostile to them. Indeed, at some point it also had a section of LGTB activists, which overnight disappears from their website, which was related to the towards a more radical right profile, which is indeed masculine and heterosexual. So, it's also one of the dimensions where you can notice this shift. Also, contrary to some other parties like Front National, who try to use LGBT issues against Islam, you haven’t really noticed anything similar with Lega.

**Interview K**

##### Interviewer

So, yeah, the participant information leaflet hopefully made it clear that I'm focused on different forms of nationalism and how parties combine them, especially ethnoregionalism and anti-immigration appeals. To start off, to get a sense of how Vlaams Belang deals with these issues, how important do you think the pursuit of Flemish independence or greater autonomy is for Vlaams Belang?

##### Interviewee

It is crucial. It's one of the first points in their manifesto, but it's not necessarily how they sell themselves. So, I think you can distinguish between the political priorities as set out to the voters, and then their real political priorities. I think it's not something that is at the forefront of how they present themselves to the voters, especially on social media or in the media, but it is part of their core party statement. That's the foundational element of the party. It's the core element of their party statutes. But it's not something that they're advocating, because that's not their unique selling point as there’s another ethnoregionalist party in Flanders, the N-VA, for which state reform and independence's is really their core priority. So, I think they really need to distinguish themselves in terms of issues, by focusing more on migration issues and identity.

##### Interviewer

So that is a very nice segue into my next question, which is how would you characterise the importance of anti-immigration appeals for Vlaams Belang?

##### Interviewee

Yeah, that would be their top priority, and that's clearly also how they are identified by the voters. Voters associate the party with that issue clearly, whether they're in favour of their position, or not. But it's clearly an issue that is owned by the party, and so migration is at the forefront and it's been at the forefront since basically the end of the 1980s. It's a party that started with ethnoregionalism as its main goal, but that was the case within years migration has been the main issue.

##### Interviewer

OK, yeah. So this kind of moved then towards immigration as the main focus, probably leads to the obvious question of what would or does cause the party to prioritise one set of appeals over the other. So, for example, what caused Vlaams Belang to prioritise anti-immigration over ethnoregionalism?

##### Interviewee

Well, I think this is a combination, of course, of causes. I would say three elements. Of course, parties are made out of individuals and leaders of Vlaams Belang at that point, especially the new generation at the time, like Filip Dewinter, was extremely adamant to put these issues at the forefront. So I think individuals are crucial. And this was the generation that also included Annemans.

The second element is to define yourself. If you want to be electorally successful, you have to an issue that is really yours. And at the time, in the political landscape, you still Volksunie, which was the other ethnoregionalist party, which Vlaams Belang had emerged from. Vlaams Belang was critical of Volksunie, saying it was not radical enough on state reform. So I think two parties hitting the same issue in the political landscape was one too much, and it explains also the poor initial results of Vlaams Belang. And so, I think that repositioning was strategic, to try to find their place in the policy landscape, in the party system in Flanders.

And the third element is related to ideology in the sense that there's always a connection, and always room to link nationalism to exclusion. Nationalism, it's about them versus us, and the us can vary a little bit so that the jump from a democratic nationalism in the way that Volsunie was advocating, for instance, to a more exclusive nationalism with anti-immigration stances is kind of an easy step to do. And you see that today again, because N-VA is kind of leaning towards making that step too, in the more radical sense. It was the heir of the Volksunie, so the ethnoregionalist party in Flanders. It used to be prioritising independence in a very democratic, classic ethnoregionalist ideology, but they hosted a lot of Vlaam Belangers and there's a number of their figureheads that share Vlaams Belang values in the more exclusive sense. So it's kind of the border between, you know, democratic nationalism and exclusion, and the crossovers are frequent. And so I would say that's a third explanation. The nationalistic ideology has kind of left the door open for that.

##### Interviewer

OK, great. That seems pretty comprehensive. Now, to kind of hone in on a different type of variable, I guess, to see whether you think it plays a role or not. Do you think that the EU has played any role in shaping which issue is the most important for the party?

##### Interviewee

I don't think so. I mean, there has been certainly some differences in terms of how the Vlaams Belang was very critical versus how the other ethnoregionalist parties (initially Volsunie, then the N-VA) were more pro-European, but that does not necessarily have any impact on how the positions themselves, either on state reform in Belgium or on migration, I don't think. What might have had an impact is rather a diffusion from other Member States, so the rise of radical right anti-immigration forces in France or the Netherlands that might have inspired some of the leaders of the Vlaams Belang, rather than anything related to, you know, the EU itself.

##### Interviewer

Right. So, yeah, given your answer there, your answer to the next question is probably going to be relatively straightforward, but anyway. In the literature on ethnoregionalism, there's some focus on the role of European policymaking access and how that encourages ethnoregionalism. So, for example, the Committee of the Regions or involvement in structural funding packages, all of these create incentives for parties to prioritise ethnoregionalism. So the argument goes anyway. Do you think these kind of policymaking avenues have had any role in shaping what Vlaams Belang prioritises?

##### Interviewee

Not necessarily, for two reasons. First, I think that the tensions between communities in Belgium precedes the existence of the European Union. I mean, it's been there since basically the foundation of Belgium, and so that's not necessarily new. And even the process of state reform, so the decentralisation process, the main step was taken in 1970, where you had basically the creation of the regions and communities in Belgium. I think all that precedes the big moves at the European level for the Europe of Regions and the role of the regions. So I think that the yeah, the first reason why it's not necessarily that important for Vlaams Belang, is the fact these divisions precede [the EU], are very deep and long lasting, and the second one is that it is not a party that takes part in governing at all. So basically, they don't really care about policy, like real implementation of policy. So, it would be more the case, for instance, for the N-VA. So, I think for those two reasons, I don't think that that it matters too much for how Vlaams Belang positions itself.

##### Interviewer

Ok, yeah. So, on the other side, I guess, rather than kind of focussing on ethnoregionalism, there's often arguments about how radical right parties really dislike EU migration policy, such as freedom of movement or the EU’s stances on asylum seekers and so on. So do you think these kinds of EU policies have encouraged Vlaams Belang to prioritise anti-immigration appeals, or not?

##### Interviewee

Not necessarily, but that has encouraged Vlaams Belang to be the voice of Euroscepticism in Belgium. So I would say it's rather the other way around, the fact that at some point Vlaams Belang repositioned itself on migration has led it to take a more Eurosceptic's position, and be more vocal on it. Again, I think that their repositioning on migration issues were quite early on, even compared to other radical right parties in Europe.

If you think of the idea of freedom of movement within the EU, that's never really been an issue for Vlaams Belang until they linked it to the asylum and refugee migration crisis in recent years, and to their Euosceptic stances. The fact that they are also closely connected with other Eurosceptic parties in other Member States, such as the Front National in France, has led them to take more Eurosceptic positions. But this is again a diffusion of positions there.

##### Interviewer

Moving away from the EU, we've had quite an exhaustive discussion of the effects, or lack thereof, of it. Moving on to party members, or if you want to think of other important figures in the party, are they able to effectively share the party's position on which appeals it prioritises?

##### Interviewee

It’s quite a centralised party, and so the party executive is really steering the direction of the party. There's some division of labour within the executive, with some figures that are focusing on ideology, or organisation, or communication basically to the regular rank and file. I don't think they do have that much say, and you see it also in the formal party statutes. I mean, they do not have a very clear role in the main decision-making processes within the party, such as the adoption of the election manifesto, the selection of the party leader, or the selection of the candidates. That's all in the hands of the party executive. They had a recent reform regarding the selection of the leader to make it appear more democratic because all other parties have moved to a one member, one vote system. So, what they said is we're going to have formal vote for the leadership selection by the party congress, but it is still the party that chooses the nominees. And so no, the rank and file does not have much say. It's a very centralised party, it's the party executive that holds the reins of the party. And even today, the party leader has established himself as the strong figure.

##### Interviewer

OK. My final question will be about the role of the electorate on public opinion. So how important are these two issues to the electorate? And does this shift, depending on which one the party focuses on?

##### Interviewee

So the question is whether public opinion priorities are shifting the way the party positions itself? I think it's the other way around, Vlaams Belang has been extremely successful in shifting the attention of public opinion to migration. So, in an electoral survey in Belgium at the last election in 2019, migration comes as one of the top three priorities in Flanders. It is not at all coming up in French speaking Belgium, Brussels included. And I think that's despite the fact that, if you compare attitudes, what voters think, in both communities, they share the same kind of attitudes. They're not necessarily, voters in French-speaking Belgium, are not necessarily mean more welcoming of others or migrants. It's just not a priority. And so I think there, it is really the political offer that makes the difference, and they shape the agenda to their own priorities. And I think they've been extremely successful in doing so.

Also, with the help of the ethnoregionalist party, the N-VA, who basically tried to cover too much ground on the right side of the political spectrum from centre-right to the more extreme. So they talked a lot about migration. They were in charge of home affairs in the prior government at the federal level, and so they were quite tough on migration. And these two parties, one in power and the other one in opposition, they put immigration on the top of the agenda of the public opinion.

So, I would argue that it's the other way around and that it's more the political offer that has shaped public opinion, and then maybe put priorities in a different order than in French-speaking Belgium, where, again, when you measure positions and not saliency, positions on migration issues are rather similar. It's saliency that is different.

##### Interviewer

OK, great. So that's all the questions I had planned. Do you have any other ideas of what matters here or anything else you think we should discuss?

##### Interviewee

No, I think again, related to public opinion shaping, what's the widespread experience from the last campaign is how Vlaams Belang invests on social media, compared to all other parties. And then I think that again relates to shifting shaping public opinion. It is massive, the difference. Yeah, I think that's something that has played a huge role. And you see also the reverse, the French speaking Belgium, here it's the radical left party that's invested a lot and that was successful on Election Day.

**Interview L**

##### Interviewer

So, yeah, to start off with, I'm interested looking at how Vlaams Belang combines different forms of nationalism, especially Flemish autonomy or outright independence, and anti-immigration appeals. So, it probably makes sense to start talking about these two different types of appeals. How important do you think the pursuit of Flemish autonomy or independence is for Vlaams Belang?

##### Interviewee

Yeah, I think it is. That's their main aim that they want to achieve in the end, and I think it's a bit similar to what the N-VA is aiming for. But the big difference, at least how I see it, is that for N-VA, that's their big end goal and they have, you know, the governmental responsibilities, et cetera, and still also having that in their bag, because there was recently, I think it was last weekend or last week, an article about Bart De Wever [leader of the N-VA], and how they would love to get back with the Netherlands. That's actually what they would really like. He's an historian, and so that's also, historically the two countries were one before the Belgian union, whereas I think for Vlaams Belang it's really independence for Flanders that they are achieving that they want to achieve. So I definitely think that that is an important issue of their campaign.

Whereas I must say, having said that, you know, when they highlight how good everything is in Flanders compared with Wallonia and having to bail out Wallonia, et cetera, et cetera. I guess, you know, you may have done an analysis on their discourse, but what you most here about is immigrants and immigration, and I'm sure that there is survey research about what attracts Vlaams Belang voters most and whether it's really the independence of Flanders or their anti-immigration discourse.

##### Interviewer

Yes, good. So that brings me on nicely, actually, to the second question, which is how important do you think these anti-immigration appeals are for Vlaams Belang?

##### Interviewee

Yeah, I think they are big, and as I said, for attracting voters. But again, survey research should help you make the point that it's more important than Flemish independence. And I don't know whether people are so preoccupied with Flanders. You know, this discourse of ‘of course Flanders is better, look at Wallonia, they don't work, and they are lazy, and they ask for money, et cetera, et cetera’, but I don't know if that's really what people want. I think more than that, anti-immigration discourse is stronger. And then it's also something that they can combine with independence, how Flanders would do that much better if it were on its own.

##### Interviewer

Right. OK, yes. So, is there anything that would or does cause the party to shift from one appeal to the other, or to prioritise one over the other?

##### Interviewee

Well, I think the focus on Flanders, they really have competition with the N-VA, which is, I think, also conservative in terms of migration, et cetera, but to a less extreme than Vlaams Belang. So I think that they must feel that competition with the N-VA, and the need to attract those voters. So that's something, I think, where they can really juggle which topic they should probably focus on. But it's clear, I think, on the extreme side of the migration discourse is where they have their most clear position. So, yeah, I was just thinking, parties tend to be rational actors, so they probably look at what other parties are doing, because they lost voters to the N-VA.

##### Interviewer

Yeah. All right, so do you think the EU plays a role in influencing the party, in terms of what appeals it prioritises?

##### Interviewee

Yeah, I don't know whether I have seen much of that. And I think Vlaams Belang has an interesting position towards the EU because they obviously want Flemish independence and then Flanders being part of the EU. But again, if you look at their current discourse, of course, it's easy to, if something goes wrong, to blame it on the EU also. But that's what many parties and many politicians do. I mean, it's OK in Belgium, but in many European countries it's easy to blame Europe for everything that goes wrong.

##### Interviewer

OK, yeah, great. So just to focus on perhaps one of these appeals. In the literature and ethnoregionalism, there's often discussions about how the EU creates policymaking avenues for ethnoregional parties like the Committee of the Regions and structural funding, et cetera. Do you think these avenues have had any influence on Vlaams Belang in terms of what they focus on or what they don't focus on?

##### Interviewee

I don't know how much influence the EU has had on their policy making. I mean, it gets harder and here I'm talking about their position as opposition parties, when developing their policy programme, they don't need to consider the EU too much. I mean, since they are not in government, they don't need to translate EU policies, et cetera, et cetera. So, I don't know how much influence the EU has here.

##### Interviewer

Yeah, given your previous answers, this is probably going to be a similar sort of answer. But people who focus on the radical right, often focus on the EU’s immigration policies, like freedom of movement, etc. So, do you think these policies on immigration have had any influence on what the party prioritises?

##### Interviewee

Well, I think what they can do is criticise it. I don't know whether that results in a different focus or not. It's just, you know, when they don't agree with the policy making that they will criticise it. I mean, if the EU develops a policy and they don't agree with it, then I can understand the Vlaams Belang focusing on it more because obviously they want to highlight ‘look at what the EU wants to do, etc.’. So that's how I understand that there is a causal mechanism there.

##### Interviewer

Yeah, that's great. Yeah, so that's all the new questions I have about the EU. There are just two other things I want to focus on, just for a broader understanding of the party. So are party members or significant figures within the party able to influence what appeals the party prioritises, or not?

##### Interviewee

I am afraid that I don't know enough about the intra-party networks and intra-party communications to know how much influence there is. It's easy now, I think, to say no, there is not much. But I also feel like it's more of a, you know, a feeling that I have than any…, because that's what we all think. I think it needs a detailed analysis to really know what. To be honest, I think we have to be careful stating that without any detailed analysis and comparing it also with other parties. There's always ways to try to give members influence, et cetera, but then the question is also how much influence is it in the end? So, I think that needs a detailed analysis to see how it works, because it's easy to say that ‘Oh, in the radical right, there isn’t that much influence for the members’, but I don't know how that compares with other parties, et cetera. There's even a focus on that central figure. I would have the feeling that it's also the case in Vlaams Belang, but I haven't studied it in detail, so I want to be careful saying it. But what was interesting in the 1990s in Belgium, what you did see when Vlaams Belang became successful, was how other parties started to change their intraparty decision-making and make it more open, etc. Not because Vlaams Blok was open or democratic, but as a reaction and they thought we need to open our party, be more welcoming to members, give them more important, etc. So, it was just something that actually I don't think was very open at all, but they felt that the way to maybe attract Vlaams Blok voters again.

Again, you know, my gut feeling would say Vlaams Belang members also don't have much influence, but again, prejudice, maybe, we kind have about it, that they decide everything on their own, et cetera. And it's difficult, I guess, to analyse.

##### Interviewer

Yeah, that's true. OK. And finally, so perhaps an even vaguer way to try to understand party positions. Do you think public opinion plays much influence on what the party focuses on?

##### Interviewee

Doesn't it, for all parties? I don't know whether it's more for Vlaams Belang than for any other party, or why it would be. I mean, there's also the question of causality, obviously.

When I did my PhD, which was really more on the ‘90s, at that time, it was like the Netherlands was always good about the integration of immigrants, so Vlaams Belang was always looking at the Netherlands. Then all of a sudden, you had Pim Fortuyn. Public opinion didn't change at the time, it was always there, and it was just that party and Pim Fortuyn, who was able to attract those voters who have always been there, because I don't think that it was that people were more tolerant in the Netherlands than in Flanders, it was just there was no outlets that people felt attracted to. I think that that's an important explanation about why the radical right is so successful in Flanders than in Wallonia. I don't think that French-speaking people are much more tolerant than Flemish people. I think it's about a party that is able to put it on the public agenda and to make it an important issue.

**Interview M**

##### Interviewer

So, from the participant information leaflet, it should be relatively clear that I'm focussed on different types of nationalism and how parties combine them. So, for Vlaams Belang, that would be Flemish autonomy or independence, and anti-immigration appeals. So, it probably makes sense to start with questions around those types of appeals. How would you characterise the importance of Flemish autonomy for Vlaams Belang?

##### Interviewee

I think it's hugely important. It's one of the main issues. It's just at the centre of the party, together with the anti-immigration issue, definitely. When it comes to Flemish autonomy, you probably know that there's the Flemish nationalist N-VA, who are obviously a bigger party in Flanders at this point, and their main thing is also Flemish autonomy. But because they've been in power for quite a while, both on the Flemish level and on the federal government level, they had to make compromises. They also say that it's not just about Flemish autonomy anymore but more of a new kind of federalism, whereas with Vlaams Belang, it's very clear that, if they were to be in power, their political goal is definitely Flemish autonomy and they would not compromise on that or give in on that. So, it's definitely a very important issue for them, and it's very clear that, at this point, they're the only party in Flanders that are still actively trying to pursue that political goal. So that's definitely different than the other Flemish parties.

##### Interviewer

Great. OK, thanks. Since I brought up the other type of appeal as well, how would you characterise the importance of anti-immigration appeals for Vlaams Belang?

##### Interviewee

Yeah, I think they're basically on the same level, so it can be very important to them, also to their voters in the way that they at this point, they have this kind of unique position. On the immigration identity front, they're very much to the right, they're a very clear anti-immigration party, but at the same time, when it comes to social policy or whatever, they're very much more to the left, which is also another clear difference with N-VA.

Anti-immigration really goes back to the root of their party. It's also the reason that they had to change the party name because they were convicted in court for discrimination. So, yeah, it's very much one of the essences of the party, and also something very clear that they're struggling to find the right tone on, the right language to attract enough voters, but at the same time, not to make sure that you know that they're still able to talk without getting convicted for certain discrimination laws, so that's obviously a difficult balance to find. But with the current party leader, Tom Van Grieken, he actually struck the right tone in a sense that the party is growing. It's clear that when it comes to their own voters, they're still able to convince them, but at the same time, they managed to attract a lot of new voters, which is why they're currently leading the polls, because they've kind of found that difficult balance when it comes to the immigration issue.

##### Interviewer

OK, great. So, we’ve talked about how both of these are core to Vlaams Belang's identity, but do you think that both of them have a relatively constant salience, or has their importance changed over time?

##### Interviewee

No, to be honest, I think they are both equally important when it comes to their programme and their identity, because, for them, they're not two separate issues, it's linked. Again, for example, when it comes to immigration policy, we've had in Belgium a more leftist progressive immigration policy for a lot of years, Vlaams Belang has always been saying it's because the French speaking parties are in charge, so if we were to be a Flemish independent state, then we could have our own immigration policy. ‘We would shut the borders. We would have much stricter immigration policy, but we can’t because we are in this complex Belgian state’. So, for them, it's very much intertwined. And I mean, there's a reasoning in that because it is true that the French speaking parties have become more liberal when it comes to migration policy, in opposition to Flemish politics, but also Flemish public opinion. So, they're intertwined, and I think for them they're equally important.

However, when it comes to their public discourse, what they have been saying, the message that they want to push, to get out there, that has been more focused, especially with the current leader Tom Van Grieken, on the migration issues. Also, I think because they were just more prominent on the news agenda. We had the migration crisis in 2015 and it hasn't really gone away, the Belgian government fell in 2018 on immigration as well.

So, I mean, the issues are constantly there, whereas with Flemish autonomy, Vlaams Belang is the only one really pushing for Flemish autonomy. They try to get it on the agenda, but it doesn't really work because everyone knows it's never going to happen at this point because they just don't have enough support. Also because in public opinion, there is a lot of support for more Flemish autonomy, but not so much to really become an independent Flemish state because, you know, how would that work or what about Europe, et cetera, et cetera?

So, I think for the party, they are equally important, but when it comes to the messaging, the migration issue becomes more important.

##### Interviewer

So, you've kind of touched on a few things already that might be important in explaining this: the leadership, Tom Van Grieken getting the right tone, and public opinion as well. But, just to give you scope to answer it, I guess, more fully: is there anything that would or does cause the party to focus on one issue rather than the other?

##### Interviewee

I think definitely the overall public opinion and also just the interaction with other parties. So, at the last election, Vlaams Belang made a huge jump in the voting ballot, which almost nobody expected. So that was a huge surprise, and there was a lot of discussion, you know, how should we handle this? If you just ignore the votes, then, you know, that's not good. So, the N-VA really tried to talk to Vlaams Belang to form a Flemish government. However, they didn't have a majority. At that point, when they were talking, there was a lot of discussion about the Flemish autonomy issue. If these two parties would have just enough votes to make sure that they have a majority together for the Flemish government, what would that mean for the future of Belgium, for the future of Flanders, etc.? But in the end, they didn't have a majority. Also, there wasn't a big discussion within N-VA whether they should form this government or not, and so they didn't do it.

Then they kind of switched back to the migration issue, because you have this internal discussion, I think, in Belgian politics, Belgian media, you know, why is there so much support for this? And in all the analysis, it almost always comes down to migration and not about the Flemish autonomy thing. I mean, obviously, Vlaams Belang knows this, so it's one of the reasons that they're really pushing more on the migration issue than on the Flemish autonomy issue, because it just resonates more with voters at the centre-right or extreme-right.

##### Interviewer

So, yeah, just to hone in on a different variable a little bit more. Do you think the EU has any influence on how important these two appeals are for the party?

##### Interviewee

On the Flemish autonomy issue, not so much, I think. I mean, obviously sometimes you have the discussion about Catalan politicians, and that resonates a little bit with the with their hardcore Flemish base. But overall, it's pretty marginal, and I don't think anyone really blames the EU.

I think on the migration issue, definitely. You know, obviously, the way that the migration crisis in 2015 was handled, the migration pact over which the Belgian government fell, and now we have a discussion about the European asylum and migration pact that drags on forever and nobody is able to find a solution for that. So definitely, and I think the current Belgian government is very much aware of that. We have the state secretary for asylum and migration that is really trying to push for a European solution. Because, that's the thing with Belgium being such a small country at the crossroads of Europe, I mean, we really have this mentality that we cannot do this on our own, we need the EU to come up with solutions. But you do have this rhetoric more and more from Vlaams Belang and also the N-VA that says ‘if Europe can handle it, and they obviously can, they're not doing it, then we should take the reins and do it ourselves’. So the longer the European solutions wait and fail, the easier it becomes for these politicians to say, ‘OK, we should just do it ourselves, you know, close our borders and have stricter immigration policy, like Denmark does, for example’. Kind of a race to the bottom.

So that's really a concern for the current Belgian government, that because Vlaams Belang is already so high in the polls, if they don't find a solution, then that will just give them more ammunition to attack Europe and to attack Belgium and to move forward with more Flemish autonomy measures and stricter immigration policy.

##### Interviewer

Right. So, your answer to that question probably means that you're going to give the same answer to the next question. But the EU provides some avenues for ethnoregional access to policymaking, like the Committee of the Regions and regional involvement in the creation of structural funding packages. Do you think these avenues for policy making influence have influenced Vlaams Belang at all, or do they point to these in their rhetoric, or is it just not relevant?

##### Interviewee

I think for Vlaams Belang, it's not that relevant. It's much more relevant for N-VA, and they're very, very active in all of these things because they're less extreme than Vlaams Belang. I mean, Belgium is not that anti-EU compared to a lot of other European countries, so if we were to have a Flemish state, ideally it would be still part of the EU. So, the N-VA really has this kind of strategy to internally prepare the EU for a Flemish independent state, whereas I think Vlaams Belang is much less strategic.

You know, there's a lot of protests against everything, it's easy to stand on the sidelines and just shout that things have to change. If you'd actually been in government, you’d know that it's not that easy. Vlaams Belang has this saying that they are willing to make compromises, that they very much do want to govern. And I mean, I think with Van Grieken that's definitely the case. But when it comes to Europe, they just don't know. It's just, how would you have an autonomous Flemish state which is controlled by extreme rightists? Nobody could see that work. So, I think at this point they don't really care about those kinds of things.

##### Interviewer

You've also kind of touched on this already with your discussion of how the EU's handled, or I suppose, perhaps failed to handle the migrant crisis in 2015. Of course, radical right parties often like to focus on the EU's migration policies, things like freedom of movement or the migrant crisis, so do you think these are important for Vlaams Belang?

##### Interviewee

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. It's the perfect storm in a way. You know, remember in 2015, the images of just all these migrants walking, literally walking, through Europe, through Germany, Western Europe. I mean, that was definitely something that they jumped upon. And you still see it with the discussion about the pushbacks, right, that you have in the Mediterranean. It's the same thing every time you see NGOs saving migrants from drowning. They jump on it and they're basically constantly attacking the lack of EU migration policy or the way the EU is handling that. They argue that the EU should be much tougher, that Belgium should be much more vocal in the EU to make sure that we have a tough immigration policy. So, that interaction is not a one-time thing. It's constantly there. They're very active on that front. Absolutely. And like I said, I think the lack of a coherent migration policy on the European level is basically what they wish for, because it's politically so interesting for them to exploit that and to attack the Belgian government and the Belgian governing parties on that issue.

##### Interviewer

So that's the end of my EU-related questions, and now to discuss something that's more generally seen as important, the role of party members or other significant figures in the party. Are they able to influence what the party focuses on, or not?

##### Interviewee

So, yeah, I think we should definitely mention Van Grieken here. He took over at a point when you had this old guard of very extreme people, a lot of coups internally, so there was constantly drama going on within Vlaams Belang, you know, this guy is taking over and then this guy is taking over, constantly. These quotes that were so disgusting that even conservatives, the only thing that they were able to do was just to condemn certain quotes. So, they existed, but they were marginal since I think even in the late ‘90s. You know, they were good for these funny quotes and whatever, everybody kind of laughing, what are you saying now. I think with Van Grieken that really all changed. I mean, it's the way he looks, right? He's this kind of modern, young politician that looks very professional. He really changed the narrative of the party. So, he wants to say what people think, but he knows very, very much where the line is that he will never, never cross. And after winning a couple of elections, he also managed to really get the majority within the party in a way that, at this point, nobody disagrees with, or nobody is allowed to disagree with him and everything goes through him. He’s also, to be honest, quite respected at this point in Belgian politics overall, because he's a smart guy. He's a nice guy. And so, he's respected by our other party presidents, by politicians. Overall, he's been able to make sure that the party has been growing. He's also made clear that he actually wants to govern and that they don't just want to be the party that shouts from the sidelines.

It could well be that the party collapses at this point because he does have a row of politicians behind him, but they're only there because he has made sure that they are there and that the party is big enough to make sure that they have these seats. So, they're all kind of dependent on what he says or what he does. That's definitely key to understanding the success of the party in recent years.

##### Interviewer

Yeah, right. My final question, which you've kind of already talked about when you were talking about the variation in the importance of these appeals, is how important do you think public opinion is: is the party following public opinion, or is it trying to shift it, or what's the relationship, do you think?

##### Interviewee

I think both. It's following public opinion very much, I think, on the socioeconomic level. So, what I said earlier on, Vlaams Belang used to be like the N-VA as they used to be, on the socioeconomic level, very much to the right. They've totally shifted that. They really went for, you know, more retirements, a lot of social benefits, basically if they were to be in power, they would be throwing money around. So, they're promising all kinds of things, really, on the leftist scheme of things. I think that was really to follow public opinion, to win over voters.

But when it comes to their core things, Flemish autonomy and even migration. I mean, Flemish public opinion is anti-immigration overall and definitely more so than in the French speaking part of Belgium. They always go a little bit further than public opinion, but at the same time, they're really making sure that they don't go too far. On Flemish autonomy, I think because that's such a core issue, even if public opinion was shifted a lot away from them, they would still be rooting for Flemish autonomy. Yeah, kind of depends on the issue. But, they're really good at, and constantly say (it's probably also a typical thing for populist, radical right parties) ‘we're the voice of the people. We're the only ones that are not afraid to actually say what people think. If we weren’t there anymore, people would get even more frustrated. So, it's good that we actually voice these concerns, opposed to politically correct parties’. So they very much present themselves as the public citizen.

##### Interviewer

Right. So that's all the questions I prepared. Is there anything else you think that's important to talk about or to mention?

##### Interviewee

No, I think the only thing, just looking forward for the party, and they've said this themselves, that they had this huge win in the elections of 2019, but they weren’t able to actually do something with it. So, they have said very clearly that the goal for 2024 (the next Belgium elections, both on the regional and the federal level), is to make sure that they actually have this majority with N-VA, so that they would be able to form a government with N-VA. That's on the Flemish regional level. For them, that's very clear. And the Belgian government also in the beginning, because we had this terrible coalition crisis, like we do every time, the goal of this Belgium government is basically making sure that Vlaams Belang doesn't win 2024. So, they are still, even though they're not empowered, very much at the centre of the political debate.

**Interview N**

##### Interviewer

I focus on how Vlaams Belang combines these different forms of nationalism, so it probably makes sense to start by talking about how important these different forms of nationalism are for Vlaams Belang. How would you characterise the importance of Flemish autonomy or independence for the party?

##### Interviewee

This depends on whether you're talking about the party leadership, party representatives, or the voters. So, I would say that nationalism has decreasing importance going from the leadership to representatives and the politicians, and then finally to the voters. To start with the voters, they don't care about Flemish nationalism. So, the motives for voting for the Vlaams Belang are, to a very large extent, immigration related. So, it is actually a Flemish nationalist party, who campaigns for Flemish independence, but it’s electoral appeal has got nothing to do with Flemish independence. It’s a very weird situation because amongst the Flemish parties, it is without any doubt the most independentist party, and it has always been a Flemish independence party. The party’s name, Flemish Interest, also refers to this. And still, when you look at the electorate, but also when you look at the party manifesto, the appeal of the party is its anti-immigration and populist stances. This is what is at the heart of the party. I would say the Flemish nationalism is a by-product for most voters, they just took the Flemish nationalist with it, but that's not a reason.

##### Interviewer

Okay, great. So that kind of answered my next question about the importance of immigration as well. So, it makes sense to ask about how do you think the relative priority given to these appeals has changed over time?

##### Interviewee

I think the crucial thing is the party split off from the Volksunie in 1978, not because of immigration reasons, but because the Volksunie betrayed the Flemish interest and became a more mainstream policy party looking for a compromise, looking for casual change. Then extreme nationalists said ‘Well, Volksunie is no longer a nationalist party, we’ll make our own party of it’. But then the first real electoral breakthrough (because it was a very small, tiny, insignificant party) came in 1991, when the party suddenly jumped to around 10% of the vote, and then, already, the appeal was anti-immigration. So, you could say, for the voters, the switch from Flemish nationalism to anti-immigration was already done in the beginning of the nineties, so very early.

There is almost a mechanical connection between the salience of the migration issue and voting for Vlaams Belang. So, the issue-voting for Vlaams Belang on immigration is very strong. So, people (including on the left) consider Vlaams Belang to be the owner of immigration. And if you care about immigration, the chance you would vote for Vlaams Belang quadruples or so, it's really spectacular. So, the link between the immigration issue and voting Vlaams Belang is very, very, very strong. It's almost as strong as a link between caring about the climate and voting for the Greens, or the ownership of the environment by the Greens, not just in Belgium, but also in other counties.

That being said, the elites, so the party leadership, all combine their scepticism towards migration with a real Flemish nationalist stance, so the party is very consistent. In its communication, it's not hiding its Flemish nationalism. Not at all, it is talking about it constantly. In that sense, the party is not hiding its Flemish nationalism. It's playing it out fully. But when you ask voters, in Flanders there is another party, the N-VA. That is the Flemish nationalist party. That is the party people vote for due to Flemish nationalist reasons. It's another remainder of the Volksunie, which collapsed in 2001. Then, the hardcore Flemish nationalist wing started its own new party, the N-VA, and a good predictor of voting for the N-VA is caring about Flemish independence.

##### Interviewer

That's a good discussion of the change in these appeals, which leads us to the next question of what do you think causes the party to change what it focuses on, or what can explain this shift from Flemish independence to anti-immigration appeals?

##### Interviewee

It still emphasises Flemish independence a lot. So, when the party talks about any type of issue unrelated to immigration, so when it talks about economic growth, defence, foreign policy, pensions, social security, Vlaams Belang would constantly say that ‘the solution for the pension problem is Flemish independence, because it’s those lazy, poor Walloons, and we’re paying for them. The solution to the defence problem is having a Flemish army. The solution to economic growth is having Flemish independence, because then we will be able to tailor the economic policies to the Flemish problems, and not Walloon’s problems’. So, it's kind of a standard answer to all kinds of problems. So, they don't really have a strong economic programme, they just always emphasise ‘we need more Flemish independence, and then we will be able to solve all our problems’. So, they are framing, still now in their external communications, many problems in independentist terms. So, in that sense, I don't think it's true that Vlaams Belang has changed its communication about Flemish independence. It's talking about it all the time. Anti-immigration comes on top of it, so it's another layer. So, the anti-immigration part has not pushed aside Flemish independence.

##### Interviewer

Okay, thanks. So to hone in on a particular variable that you might think either matters or doesn't matter, but do you think the EU plays any role in shaping what the party focuses on, or not?

##### Interviewee

So, there was a consensus in Belgium, amongst all parties, left or right, that the EU is a good thing. Most had not particularly warm feelings about the EU, but still there was an EU. That consensus has broken down to some extent, and there are two parties, when you look at the main parties, actually are more Eurosceptical on this, and these are the two Flemish nationalist parties. So, it is the N-VA and Vlaams Belang that are the ones who are challenging the EU most.

This is all new. I would say it doesn't go back longer than five or ten years. Euroscepticism is another layer of the party’s identity. That’s new and it's not very appealing. Again, if you ask Belgians about the EU, most of them are pretty happy with the EU and Brussels. When people say ‘Brussels has said this’, well that’s we, that's us. It's not a foreign occupying force, we are the EU! It is very much. And I think that geographical proximity really matters. So, it is not a very successful election strategy to criticise the EU: people don't care, basically; they say the EU is there, we like it.

Opposing the EU, as Vlaams Belang does, is not really successful, I think. But it's not an issue in Belgian politics. There is a permissive consensus about the EU.

##### Interviewer

Okay, great. In the literature on ethnoregionalism, you often see academics making the argument that the EU provides policy-making avenues for ethnoregional parties, like the Committee of the Regions, or being involved in the creation of structural funding packages. Do you think these avenues influence Vlaams Belang at all, do they use them in their rhetoric, or is it just not important?

##### Interviewee

No, absolutely absent. We hear very little about that here. And it's not something that the Vlaams Belang is putting a lot of emphasis on.

##### Interviewer

Finally for the EU, radical right parties often criticise the EU for its immigration policies, whether that be freedom of movement or how the EU deals with, or perhaps fails to deal with, the migrant crisis. Do you think these are important for Vlaams Belang, or not?

##### Interviewee

No, I don’t think so. So, their two core issues (anti-immigration and their nationalism), they connect them to the other enemies, and so the EU has become an enemy. The EU is screwing up with regard to immigration, but very importantly, I think the EU is more criticised by the Vlaams Belang, not because of its immigration policies, but because of its establishment character: ‘it is an administration far away from the people, that doesn't understand what the real problems are. These are the elites in their ivory tower’. This is the image of the EU. So, it's much more criticised from a populist perspective, than from an immigration perspective, I would say. Just like the Belgian political elites, the Belgian media, or Belgian academia, who are impacting people’s lives without democratic legitimacy, and they don't understand what's really going on. Of course, it's a little about immigration as well, but it's more about the anti-establishment, anti-political angle from which the EU is criticised.

##### Interviewer

Okay, great. So, moving on from the EU, I just want to focus on two variables that people like to discuss for political parties. To start with, do you think party members or significant figures in the party are able to shape what it focuses on, or does Vlaams Belang fit the stereotype of radical right parties?

##### Interviewee

I think it fits the stereotype. The thing is, the Vlaams Belang’s internal differences of opinion, you never, ever hear about it. So, it's without any doubt the party that is most successful in keeping its internal differences under the umbrella and hiding them. So, it acts as if there is not at all any divergence, where there's no internal heterogeneity, it's just a phalanx. We really don't know. Sometimes a journalist writes a story that there is a fight within the party, between the older and the younger generation, but it's all hearsay. It's not open, never ever. I think it’s a remarkably homogenous party, a remarkably authoritarian organised party. The party doesn't have open conferences or meetings. It's very top down. If you look at the party statutes, it's the most centrally and hierarchically organised party in Belgium, without any doubt.

I think this makes sense because it's a radical party and, of course, challenging establishment gets a lot of criticism. Many people hate the Vlaams Belang. So, the external animosity towards the Vlaams Belang means that it needs to be homogenous, leave no space for an open debate, because it needs to protect itself against the evil outside world that criticises the party all the time. It has been managed successfully. Not like in the Netherlands, where, apart from Wilders’ party, they all fall apart because after a while there is in-fighting and so on. Not so with the Vlaams Belang. Is there any radical right party in Europe that has lasted for 35 years, a successful party without any schism or internal discussion? I don't think so.

We don’t know really, as outsiders. We don't know whether the part is internally split. We have no clue. I can imagine that there are different opinions between the hard liners on one hand, the street fighting type of politician, and the more moderates on the other. Dewinter is often seen as a hardliner, while the current President, Tom Van Grieken, tries to be the ideal son-in-law, he always dresses nicely, he never curses, he never goes to a demonstration, jumps on a bus and starts hitting a policeman. So, he's very in control of itself. There might be internal disputes about this, I have no clue. I can imagine that this would be the case. How frustrating must it be to be one of the largest parties and for 30 years be in the opposition and never, ever participate in power? So, I think internally there must be differences of opinion about accommodating to become part of the government.

##### Interviewer

And then finally, this is perhaps going to be a complicated question, but what about the role of public opinion? Does the party follow public opinion on these issues, or does it more shift public opinion?

##### Interviewee

I think it's a strategic party. I think it rarely happens that politicians really follow public opinion. It happens that politicians selectively emphasise issues and deemphasise other issues because of public opinion. So, if they know that their point of view, their policy position, is shared by many people, they would shout it very loudly, and try to enter the public sphere. If their point of view does not match public opinion, they would keep that point of view, but simply won't mention it. So, I think that's a strategy of most parties. In the long run, parties do adapt their positions and follow the public, but most often they don't change their position, they just change their communication. They don’t lie, it’s selective mutism.

This is what the Vlaams Belang does admirably well, but this, of course, is the advantage of being a single-issue party: the Vlaams Belang is never asked about the EU, or pension reform. They are allowed to speak only about immigration or the things they care about and on which they have a point of view that does align with what many people think. This is the difference with a policy or government party. It has to communicate, even on its unpopular stances, while an opposition party can choose to communicate only on its popular stances. And that's a game that Vlaams Belang plays remarkably well.

So, they have a very good feel for when their position matches public opinion, and then they try to create a lot of airplay around that point of view. So that's what most parties, but since the Vlaams Belang also doesn't get as much media exposure as other parties, because of the cordon mediatique, when they are allowed in the news, they will be allowed to talk about immigration. And so, they always play on their home turf.

**Interview O**

##### Interviewer

So, as my participant information leaflet hopefully made relatively clear, I'm interested in how parties combine different forms of nationalism, especially ethnoregionalism and cultural protectionism. It probably makes sense to start off by talking about how important those appeals are for Vlaams Bleang, so how would you characterise the importance of Flemish independence for the party?

##### Interviewee

It is a key point, at least in the programme, in the discourse they have, but not for their voters. What I mean is, if we look at scientific research on the electorate of Vlaams Belang, even the voters of Vlaams Belang do not want Flemish independence. Also, it is one of the major points that identified Vlaams Belang, which was, from its origin, a Flemish nationalist party wanting Flemish independence.

I don't need to explain how complex Belgium is, it's a very bipolar federal state with very, very few binding federal mechanisms. We have no national language, no national parties. We have no national media. So, there are really strong forces in Belgium that divide people: bipolar federation as we have three regions, and three communities, and a whole bunch of governments. But the most basic dynamic, of course, at the federal level, is a struggle, tension, a debate, call it what you want, between those who speak Dutch and those who speak French. By definition you have a bipolar federation, so for many Flemish and French-speaking voters, that federal element, the structure of the federal state, the relation between the regions in our country, is an issue and Vlaams Belang was launched at the end of the Seventies as the party wanting Flemish independence. They do it with the most radical tone. Why do I say that? Because we have, in Flanders, another party, N-VA, which is more centre-right to conservative, and is the biggest party in the Flemish Parlement. It's the biggest party in the national parliament. And the N-VA also wants, in theory, Flemish independence. The Vlaams Belang is more radical on that point as they say ‘we want secession. We want Flanders to be independent without any negotiation with the French-speaking parties’. They don’t call for a revolution because Flemish citizens are quite traditionally conservative, they don’t like revolutions, but they say ‘we shouldn't negotiate with the French-speaking parties. We should, in the Flemish Parlement, have a declaration of all the Flemish parties saying, from now on, we are an independent state, and we will mind our own business, so we will leave Belgium’. When you look at the N-VA, it too wants Flemish independence, but the first thing we want is a confederal Belgium, and maybe independence in the long run. This is something that Vlaams Belang does not want, it wants independence, straightforward. In contrast, N-VA says that, at the end, it is possible we will become independent, but before we get that far, maybe we should have confederalism first and we should negotiate with the French-speaking parties to reform the Belgian state in order to get confederalism. That's a whole other rhetoric to Vlaams Belang. If you listen to Vlaams Belang, they say we want Flemish independence tomorrow, no negotiations at all, just a strong declaration. No confederalism, that's it.

They also use the fact that, if Flanders would be independent, how a whole other bunch of problems would be solved, for instance, the financial burden problem. If Belgium would end, that's often analysed by many different Flemish and Belgian institutions, you could end the transfers from the rich north (Flanders) to the poor south (Wallonia). It's about 7 billion euros. So, if you would stop this transfer by ending Belgium, we would have a lot of money. And so, if there is any discussion in Flanders, how much should be invested in schools or in public infrastructure or in crime or whatever, often they say, ‘well, if Flanders were independent, we could afford all of that. But because we live in Belgium, and because the average Flemish family buys one car every year for a Walloon family (that's how the transfer is often portrayed, using very clear everyday examples), we are not allowed to do all that. If we would be independent, lots of things would be possible’. They also say that if you look at the opinions of the general public and we look at the political strength of the different parties in the North and the South, you can see quite clearly that in the south of the country, in the French-speaking part, the left parties are the dominant political force, but if you look at Flanders, the right is in the majority. So, what they say is ‘why, in Flanders, do we need to accept all that left politics and be dominated by the Southern, French-speaking, left parties? Why do Flemish citizens have to accept immigration politics, environment politics, defined by the Belgian federal level, which is too left-wing for Flanders. Why do we have to accept all that? That's because we live in Belgium. Imagine that we would be independent, then we could define our own immigration and budgetary policy, and it would be much more right-wing than it is today’.

The element of independence is quite central in their strategy because they use it to solve all kinds of problems. It's the answer to many questions, even though the majority of Vlaams Belang’s voters do not want Flemish independence. So, if you look at the majority of the Flemish voters, there isn't any majority and it's not growing, it’s not increasing, it’s not coming up. There isn't any majority in Flanders in favour of independence. If you look at all the Flemish parties, a small group of Flemish independence supporters are indeed in Vlaams Belang and the N-VA, but there isn't any majority in favour of independence, not even inside Vlaams Belang.

It's a bit strange. How do we explain that? Many people are voting for Vlaams Belang, and since the previous elections of 2019, they’re the leading party in all opinion polls. So why do so many people vote for Vlaams Belang? Is that because of Flemish independence? No, like I told you, there isn’t even a majority of Vlaams Belang voters willing to support independence. Is it because of their strong anti-migration, anti-Islam discourse? Yes. Partly, yes. Is it because they are an anti-political or populist party? They have a very clear ‘them against us, we are the people, they are the system’ discourse. So, it's a very populist party. Is it because of that? Yes, it is because of directional voting: people vote for an extreme version of what they really want to happen, they don't really want that Vlaams Belang governs and executes their programme. They don't really want that because many people think that they will not be good leaders as they’ve never been in a government. But by voting Vlaams Belang, we give a signal to the complex political system built on compromise, where there isn't any drastic change in the system, so many people are fed up with it and they want some things to change. That's why they think of supporting a radical party, which is a useful signal towards the parties, not as a party they hope will execute the whole of their programme.

So, coming back to your basic question, how fundamental is the idea of Flemish independence in the programme and discourse and visions of Vlaams Belang, it is quite important, but it is not followed by the majority of their own voters.

##### Interviewer

Okay, thanks. Since you've already mentioned it, but in passing, how do you characterise the importance of these anti-immigration and anti-Islam appeals for Vlaams Belang?

##### Interviewee

It’s one of the fundamental parts of the DNA of Vlaams Belang: the first is separatism, the second is anti-Islam. They were previously an anti-immigrant party, now they’ve changed it because of their image and they say ‘we're not against immigrants, we’re against Islam, we don't think that Islam is an something that we can have in our country, it doesn’t fit our culture, it doesn’t sit with democracy’. So, they are anti-Islam, but you can’t call them anti-immigrant, which, for me, is a very stupid way of looking at things as you can't have Islam without a Muslim, so if you're against Islam, you are, by definition, against people who believe in Islam.

But they have changed their rhetoric. In the 1990s, there was a trial against Vlaams Blok because they were charged with racism, and since then they’ve changed their approach. They say ‘we're not against immigrants. We are against people coming in with different cultures and religions, because we think that religion is incompatible with our culture, our traditions’. So, they are against the headscarves worn by women, against the fact immigrants can’t speak Dutch, etc. It’s a traditional anti-immigrant programme, but they themselves say ‘we aren’t against immigrants, we’re against Islam, but if an immigrant enters our country (which they try to make almost impossible) and he integrates quite well, we're not against those people. We are not racist. We are not against their race, we’re simply against the fact that they come from another country with another culture. They just don't fit in’.

##### Interviewer

So, now we’ve discussed these different parts of their identity, is there anything that causes the party to focus on one appeal rather than the other?

##### Interviewee

I think they don't talk that much about Flemish independence. Why? Because they know that's not something that keeps people awake at night. It is used in their basic rhetoric, it’s in their programme, that's something that they want. Everybody knows that they want Flemish independence, but it's not used that often today. In the last few years, they have mainly focused on their identity as an anti-immigration, anti-Islam party. So, it's not unimportant, but if you look at what they say, their interventions in Parliament, what they have on Facebook, etc., it's not really focused on the idea of Flemish independence.

This is something that arises in each federal election, because in Belgium we have the tradition of talking about state reform after each federal election. So, every federal election Vlaams Belang defends the idea that this should be the last federal election ever, we should have any Flemish independence. They bring it up every election, but if you look at them every week, every month, this is not the main issue. The main issue now is migration.

But, I think the third element that defines them is that they are an anti-political party, they are a populist party. They were not extreme in the Covid discussion: they didn't trust the app that the state made, they defended some of the measures, but they also defended the freedom of people who don’t want to be vaccinated. With the story of that military guy, the extreme-right terrorist who said that he would execute some of our scientists. He had some psychological issues, and there was a big manhunt, it was almost a Hollywood picture. They didn't find the guy, he was dead the day he left the building. There was a lot of discussion about him, and people say ‘I understand that guy, he had enough of the Covid measures, the dominant state that controlled us, that kept us in our homes, that says who we can see, when we can see people. I have enough of it, I want my freedom’. There was a very strong feeling in society, not exclusively, but mostly in more radical, sometimes radical right, parts of society. Vlaams Belang, during the Covid crisis, they jumped on both legs: ‘we need to have some measures, Covid is a problem. We're not anti-Covid measures, but at the same, we understand you people being frustrated, being angry, we understand your feelings, your problem. You should have the right to express yourself. Don't be violent. We condemn violence. But I hear your pain’. Being anti-apolitical is the third element that constitutes the identity of Vlaams Belang, and in the last few years the anti-immigration and anti-political elements have been prominent. As I said before, the anti-Belgium ambition is permanent, it’s always there, but they don't push it to the front, and only in the run-up to the next election does it become an issue.

##### Interviewer

Ok, great. So, to focus on a specific variable, which you might think matters, or doesn't matter. Does the EU influence how important these two appeals are for Vlaams Belang, or not?

##### Interviewee

They use it in their analysis and say, ‘well, we are being dominated not only by Belgium, but also by Brussels as European elites decide what issues to push on us, such as the environment, free movement of people’. They strongly support the Polish, and other Eastern Europeans, they call them their friends. They join with those populist radical movements in the European Parliament, and they have an anti-European discourse. They are against the European Union, because for them, it went too far, integration went too far. They want a much weaker European Union that is not supranational, but intergovernmental. So, indeed, they do have a strong EU element to their discourse too. They say that the EU has failed us: look at the immigration crisis, they didn't defend us, they didn't defend us in the climate crisis, we also have the financial crisis. On the one hand, they say Europe is a very strong state, but on the other, they say it's quite weak as it does not help, it does not defend its citizens, it’s only using a lot of money.

##### Interviewer

So, some people who focus on ethnoregional parties focus on how the EU creates policymaking avenues for ethnoregional groups, like getting involved in the Committee of the Regions or structural funding packages. Do you think these avenues for regional involvement influence Vlaams Belang at all, is it something they point to in their rhetoric, or is it just not important?

##### Interviewee

I don't think it matters. They never tell their voters, they never use in the campaigns, what are the good things that the EU does, like all the money that comes from the EU, the programmes that they have. They don't speak about it, also because Belgium (it sometimes changes) is a net contributor, we pay more than we get out of it. The Vlaams Belang don't really talk about these programmes, so it's not a huge point.

##### Interviewer

And then finally on the EU, since you already kind of mentioned it in passing, radical right parties often like to criticise the EU’s immigration policies, whether that be free movement of people or the migrant crisis. So how important do you think those immigration policies are for Vlaams Belang?

##### Interviewee

Very, very because they use them in their own anti-immigration discourse and they say ‘we have no borders anymore because European borders are open, so people get in as they land in Greece and Spain and Italy, and then can travel in Europe because there are no national borders’. They often talk about reinstating national border controls as they want to keep immigrants out. They are strong defenders of locating migrants in the region, Turkey or Africa, wherever there is a place close to where the people come from. They want to keep them out of Europe, and they often say Europe is weak because it can’t defend its own borders, and once they are in they can move freely. This is something that they often use in their anti-immigration rhetoric.

##### Interviewer

Great. So finally, there's two variables I want to focus on, which are generally seen as important for parties, but just how important might depend. To start with, do you think party members are able to influence what Vlaams Belang focuses on, or does it more fit the stereotype of radical right parties having weak members?

##### Interviewee

They are weak members. They don't have a very strong culture of member participation. For instance, in all Belgium parties, the party leader is elected directly by the members of the party. It's very, very presidential, with multiple people competing to become the leader. Belgium is a partocracy, which means that the parties are the leading political actors, so the leader of a party has more power than a Minister. So, being the leader of the party belongs to the most powerful political elites in our country. When you're a party outside the system, such as Vlaams Belang, you don't have the same leverage as being a traditional party, of course, but it's considered a top function in the political system in Belgium, much more powerful and influential than the leader of the faction in parliament, which is not that important in our system. In all parties, the election of the leader is open to all members.

Not in Vlaams Belang. In Vlaams Belang there is a more limited committee inside the party that decides who will be the next President, and there's only one candidate. So, the members of Vlaams Belang do not vote for their leader. Secondly, when there is a conference of members, they vote on the programme of the party in all Flemish parties, but in Vlaams Belang, members do not vote for the programme. So, in a way, they are the least internally democratic of all political parties. They are the party of the people, but they do not respect the idea of the power of the people inside their own structure. So, they’re quite a hierarchical party when you look at it from this organisational perspective. Outside, they are the party of the people that are against the elites, but the elites of Vlaams Belang are very dominant.

##### Interviewer

And then my final question is public opinion, how important is public opinion for what Vlaams Belang focuses on? And perhaps to add another level of complexity, is it a case of Vlaams Belang following public opinion, or managing to shape it to some extent?

##### Interviewee

This is very important for Vlaams Belang, because as a populist party they surf on public opinion, so they keep a very close eye on it and they invest a lot of money in social media. Often, they are excluded from traditional media because there is a cordon mediatique. When you compare the number of interviews or the number of square centimetres in the newspaper related to their electoral weight, if you compare that to the other parties, they are under-represented in traditional media. They are not excluded, but they are a bit left aside. Therefore, they have focused on their own media and on social media. From the very beginning, they were more professional in working with social media than other parties because they needed to, it was a matter of survival. Vlaams Belang was way ahead in social media and they use it to spread their message, and also to look at what's happening in society. So yes, they are very much aware of what is happening in the popular debate.

Do they follow public opinion? Yes, like the example I mentioned earlier when I referred to the Covid period, when there was violence and fights between protestors and the police, with people saying ‘we want our freedom back, the deep state is really putting us down’. They were following them. They look at the post and they know that this is something strong in society. They condemn the violence, they say they’re against violence because this is not something that the average voter in their house watching television, violence on the streets, so we condemn the violence. But they say, ‘we feel your pain. We know what you are going through. Yes, you’re right. Yes, the state has exaggerated’, while at the same time they are not anti-Covid measures. Tom Van Grieken has been vaccinated and everyone knows it, he worked in the vaccination campaign. So, they follow what happened.

But they also lead on anti-immigration and anti-Islam issues. For instance, often you see on YouTube a video of an innocent Flemish white girl being attacked by a black man not speaking Dutch. And if the man is a Muslim, that’s the maximum can get and then they use that video on their own Facebook and Instagram or whatever and put a lot of exposure on it. ‘This is what happens if you do not listen to us’.

**Interview with Biard**

##### Interviewer

So as I said, my interest is on these different forms of nationalism and how parties combine them, so it probably makes sense to start off by asking about these forms of nationalism for Vlaams Belang. So, how would you characterise the importance of Flemish autonomy or independence for Vlaams Belang?

##### Benjamin

There’s many things to say about that. First of all, I would remind everyone that nowadays Vlaams Belang is characterised as a far right, radical right populist party, according to the way we analyse parties. But first and foremost, it was, and it's still, a nationalist party that is willing to make Flanders independent from the Belgian state. So this is the very first moment, in the very first part of its history, Vlaams Belang was willing to be independent, but also to be part of the of the Netherlands for some of them, for the leaders of the party from the very first. This was their very first project. But then in the ‘80s, ‘90s, the party was willing to be independent completely from Belgium, but also from the Netherlands, as an independent country. So, this is how Vlaams Belang see the national question. Of course, is not the only nationalist party, we have another very important nationalist party created 30 years ago, and it's one of the parties that followed the Volksunie, which was another nationalist party, the party that took part in power in ’77. So just to remind you of the historic parts of the creation of the N-VA, on the one part, and the Vlaams Blok on the other part, and the interactions between these two nationalist parties.

##### Interviewer

That's good. Then, yeah, the second question would be, how would you characterise the importance of anti-immigration appeals for Vlaams Belang?

##### Benjamin

Yes, that’s a very interesting question. There are two faces to nationalism. The first one is the regionalist face of nationalism, that is the will to full independence, which I just talked about. The second face of nationalism developed in the ‘80s based on the French model, but also the Austria model. It means the will to create a homogeneous nation-state. So not only to be independent, but also to keep the social goods for the natives, for example. So, this is very important, particularly for Vlaams Belang too in terms of nationalism, which is not really true for N-VA, which is not a far right party. But of course, these are very important parts of its [Vlaams Belang’s] programmes, firstly against foreigners in general, and this is still the case today, of course, but more specifically towards Muslims, since I would say 20 years ago. For the last few years, it's become more and more important, particularly following the terrorist attacks in 2015, 2016.

##### Interviewer

Yeah, so your discussion of post-2015 kind of leads us on nicely to the next question, which is, which of these two issues is the most important for the party, and how has that changed over time, do you think?

##### Benjamin

It does not change much over time, I would say. Of course, I just said that it was more and more against Muslims because maybe society has also changed during that period. But the core issues for Vlaams Belang are still the same for several decades, maybe not since ‘79, which was the date of their creation, but from the ‘80s.

There are three main issues. Firstly, the nationalist issue, the will to get the independence. The second one is the second face of nationalism, that is, the nativist agenda, as Cas Mudde would say, for instance. And the last one is the law and order issue, and usually there is a link between these issues, because higher immigration leads to higher criminality in Belgium or Flanders, for example, in their discourse. It's not completely true, but it's what they say through their discourse, through their programme, and these different issues have not changed so much since then.

The party started the process of de-demonisation, as we call it, normalisation, but not to the same extent as Le Pen did it in France, for example, with Rassemblement National already. So, it's not completely done today, and they've not changed so much. But of course, some targets have evolved, for example, Muslims, which were much less the targets in the 90s, but much more since the beginning of this new century.

##### Interviewer

So, we've talked quite a bit about the different appeals Vlaams Belang prioritises, but is there anything that would or does cause the party to prioritise one over the other, or to increasingly focus on one?

##### Benjamin

These different elements are the core of its identity, so I don't think they are plenty of elements that pushed the party in this direction. In the ‘90s, the Detroux case pushed all the parties more to the right regarding crime and law and order issues, for instance. Now, of course, these terrorist attacks abroad, as in New York, for example, twenty years ago, but also in France in 2015, too. So, these are different contextual elements that helped the party, not only to go in that specific direction, but to recall that, ‘Look, we did it. In our own discourse 10, 12, 20, 30 years ago, we already said and we wrote that this would happen. That's just a very major issue. So, look, today it happens. And so we were the very first to present the problem with some specific solutions, and we are the best of do that’.

Regarding nationalism, what we can say is that the nationalist forces in Flanders, are more and more important, not only because of the Vlaams Belang, which would be, if we had elections today, the first party in Belgium in terms of votes (maybe not seats, but votes), but which is not the only one as the N-VA would be the second nationalist party, so maybe together they could approach 50 percent, at least in France. So, of course, they are are stronger and stronger in that regard.

##### Interviewer

Right. OK, so, yeah, perhaps to focus in on one potentially important area for a bit. You might not think it's important, which is totally fine. But does the EU have any influence in what the party decides to focus on, or not?

##### Benjamin

Of course, I would say the EU has an influence, because a major part of the parliamentary activity in Belgium, such as in France or anywhere else, of course, is to implement the European norms. So, to some extent, these may be the first element. The second one is that there are similarities with the other movements, parties winning their independence, inside or outside the EU. Inside, of course, I think both of Scotland in the UK, but also in Spain, or in all the other countries and also countries completely outside the EU. For some countries, it's not so easy to recognise them as real states, so this would be, I think, a difficulty for Flanders if they manage to get their independence. To what extent would it be difficult to be part of the EU again? And of course, it would be particularly difficult because this independence would be the result of a non-negotiated agreement with the French speaking part of Belgium, and so, of course, it could be difficult for its own economy.

##### Interviewer

So, some people, when they're talking about of these ethnoregional parties, they make the argument that the EU provides policymaking access for parties that want to prioritise these appeals, such as the Committee of the Regions or being involved in structural funding packages. Do you think these avenues for policy-making influence have any effect on what appeals Vlaams Belang prioritises, or not?

##### Benjamin

I don't think so, because I think, as I already said, I think that Vlaams Belang focused on very different, some specific issues, and of course, on other issues, too, because its waiting to get the power. But it's still the same issues for years. The party has never been in power, not at the local, not at the regional, and not at the federal level. So it's never made any compromise with its opponents, or even with most of its members. So, it's not complicated for them, for the party to remain what it is, an independence party, a far right party, an authoritarian party, regarding the law and order issue. So I think this will not have an influence on the party, unless the party is willing to be in power in three years (so the next elections) and is trying to develop a new strategy, in order to do break the cordon sanitaire, that agreement between mainstream parties to avoid any coalition with the far right. But I don't think there are differences on which issues are present, prioritised by Vlaams Belang, unless the context. But again, the Vlaams Belang already had its own agenda for years, and so these contextual events only give a new impression to the discourse of the far right.

##### Interviewer

So now we move to the other side of the spectrum, to the anti-immigration appeals, so this is the final question on the EU. Radical right parties often complain about the EU’s immigration policies, like freedom of movement and things like that. Do you think these policies have any influence on what Vlaams Belang prioritises, or not?

##### Benjamin

I wouldn't say there's no effect, because we cannot exclude, of course, that that their policy, particularly following the refugee crisis, Syrian refugees for almost 10 years now. I think it's much more important in other countries, such as in Germany, for example, notably because Angela Merkel adopted a specific strategy in that regard. Regarding the European Union, of course, Vlaams Belang is a Eurosceptic party, so everything that comes from the European Union is bad and they hate it. According to Vlaams Belang, the European Union is not legitimate. its policies are not legitimate. So for them, all the policies, not only regarding immigration, are bad policies and should not be adopted. So this is the first element, and the second one is, of course, when the European Union proposed some quotas, for instance, you have some countries such as Hungary, Poland, to some extent, Denmark too, adopt strong answers in that regard to some extent, refuse to accept that plan. In Belgium, the federal government accepts these policies, so Vlaams Belang has a place to create, to develop its own discourse in that regard, to some extent. So yeas, there is an inference, indirectly, and specific in the case of Flanders.

##### Interviewer

Right. OK, so, yeah, that's all the questions I have about the EU. So, I guess the next question would be focused on party members. Are party members or other figures in the party, whatever you think is more important, able to actually shape what the party prioritises, or not?

##### Benjamin

Not really. I would say it is a democratic party in the sense of respecting the rules of democracy, regarding the electoral game, but even inside the party, it respects the members, etc. But that being said, it's also a party where that internal democracy is maybe the weakest in Belgium, compared to other parties. Of course, if you compare Vlaams Belang to the ecology parties, they have much more democracy inside. Their members can choose, can vote, regarding the ministers, who can be the elected ministers from their own parties. These are the only parties doing that. So of course, if you compare them to the ecologists, it's completely different, but also to other parties, where the members are much more important, notably regarding the issues at stake inside the party, the programme etc.

But of course, members also have an important role during the Congress, for example, to define the grammar, the manifestos, etc., etc. So of course, they may have an influence, but less important. For example, when you choose the president of the party in Belgium, I think, for the other parties, or at least the parties represented in the lower house, in the Chamber of Representatives, they choose directly for the president. For the Vlaams Belang, it's not completely true. For several decades, they didn't vote for the president. The very first president, Dillen, was president since ’79, remained in power until the ‘90s, and then chose his successor, the person to follow him. Only then, but we were already in this new century, there were elections for the new president, but indirect elections: firstly, you have a group inside the party that choose a candidate for presidency, and then the candidate is proposed to the members, to the Congress. So they can choose, of course, the president of the party, you get the legitimacy from that, but it's only indirectly, through a mediated process that is completely different from other parties.

So even in that regard, the role of the members is lower. It’s not absent, of course, but it's lower than all the parties. And so the policy influence is also lower because you have a more centralised party.

##### Interviewer

OK. And then my final question is, how salient do you think the focus on Flemish autonomy and anti-immigration appeals are for the electorate, and does that shape what the party decides to focus on?

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##### Benjamin

I think these two issues, the immigration issue and the Flemish issue, are intertwined and most of the electorate of the Vlaams Belang defend both those issues. But that being said, in Flanders, in contrast to Scotland or Catalonia, for instance, you don't have a majority of the people, globally, willing the Flemish independence because they know that, from the economic point of view, it would be very difficult after independence. So, you don't have a majority, and you have sometimes more moderate discourse in that regard. But, most of the voters of Vlaams Belang are willing to have independence, and also, and maybe most importantly today, nativism, to use the term of Cas Mudde, they are willing to restrain immigration. But it's interesting because, compared to the N-VA, which is another nationalist party, you have different tendencies. One tendency is to mostly focus, because it's a nationalist party, on that specific question, the nation. But you also have a tendency that's not firstly, but also not secondly, focused on the issue, but sometimes are not concerned at all by the issue, but because it is a right-wing party regarding socioeconomic elements, and you still have a certain tendency regarding the immigration issue, not to the same extent as the Vlaams Belang, it’s not a far-right party, but still the party is less liberal than the liberal party (Open-VLD) or the Christian Democrats. And so you have some people voting for the party for that specific reason. Inside the Vlaams Belang, of course, as for maybe all parties, you have different tendencies, but mostly the people are defending the immigration agenda, and the law order, and the nationalist agenda.

**Interview with Bouteca**

##### Interviewer

So, as I said, my focus is on how parties combine different forms of nationalism, so it probably makes sense to start by talking about how important these different forms are. How would you characterise the importance of Flemish autonomy or independence for Vlaams Belang?

##### Nicolas

Well, if you speak with a politician from Vlaams Belang, I think they will say that Flemish independence is still the number one issue of the party, that is still very important. I read an interview a few weeks ago with the President of Vlaams Belang, Tom Van Grieken, and they asked him for the most important political reform he had in mind, and that still was Flemish independence. So that is still the most important issue for Vlaams Belang. But on the other hand, of course, they know that Flemish nationalism doesn't convince a lot of voters. There is some research that states that, I don't know the exact percentage, but a certain percentage of the people who vote for Vlaams Belang do prefer Belgium, are not Flemish nationalists at all. From an electoral point of view, it's not the most important issue. Migration is a far more important issue for most of the voters of Vlaams Belang. But as a result of the historical roots of the party, which is in the Flemish movement, that is still, I think, for a lot of politicians from Vlaams Belang, the most important issue.

##### Interviewer

Okay, great. You kind of touched on this already when you pointed out that migration is the most important issue electorally, but anyway, how would you characterise the importance of immigration for Vlaams Belang?

##### Nicolas

Well, like I said, it's why they are actually successful, next to the fact that they are also an anti-establishment party. And the success of Vlaams Belang, at this moment, can be explained at least partly by the migration issue. Migration was the most important issue for Flemish voters in 2019. The most important voting motive in Flanders was migration. So that explains why it got so many votes in 2019. A lot of Flemish people find it to be an important issue.

Like I said, next to Flemish independence, it is still the most important issue for Vlaams Belang, and it's there to stay because migration is still an important issue for a lot of Flemish voters. The N-VA, the other Flemish nationalist party, is trying to attract voters using that migration issue. But, to an extent, it has a little different, less extreme point of view on migration. The fact is that Vlaams Belang is the most convincing party still, when it comes to migration. If you look to issue ownership studies, people still point to Vlaams Belang as the most important party when decisions have to be made on migration. They still have that issue ownership, notwithstanding that N-VA try to get the issue ownership of that issue also. But they didn't convince all the Flemish voters on that migration issue.

For Flaming independence, if you're talking about issue ownership of reform of the state, voters actually look to N-VA and not to Vlaams Belang. That's the difference between the parties, for the voters.

##### Interviewer

Okay, that's really good to know. So just to finish up our discussion of these different forms of nationalism, have the importance of these two different forms changed over time, or have they stayed relatively constant, do you think?

##### Nicolas

I think they have changed. It changed in the 1980s already. I think the first electoral breakthrough for Vlaams Belang was in the Antwerp communal elections in 1988. At that time, it had a lot to do with migration in Antwerp, but before they emphasised migration, nationalist considerations were more important. If you look to 1978, with the Egmont Pact, that was the year when Vlaams Belang was founded because a lot of people within the Flemish movement thought that the Volksunie was compromising too much on Flemish nationalist issues, so in the beginning it was a Flemish nationalist party.

But very soon, I think it was 1986, Dewinter and Annemans entered the party. From then onwards, migration became more important. In the first years, it was not the main issue of the party, but it very soon changed [with their entry].

##### Interviewer

So, you've already focused on the role of new leaders in leading this change from Flemish nationalism to the focus on immigration, but is there anything else that would cause the party to focus on one appeal rather than the other?

##### Nicolas

Well, a lot of people think that 2024 will be an election in which there will be a lot of talk in the campaign about the reform of the state. We are planning a new reform of the state in 2024, probably the seventh state reform now, will be organised in 2024 or the years after 2024. So, if those elections are about state reform, they will feel the need, of course, to emphasise Flemish nationalism to a greater extent because it will be important in the campaign. But I think, as I said before, the issue ownership of state reform is with the other Flemish nationalist party, the N-VA. So, I don't think that they would fully emphasise that element in their campaign. I think migration will still be the number one issue for the party. I don't see any reasons why they would change that, because from an electoral point of view, I'm not sure whether it would be interesting to do that because state reform is not an issue which is often a campaign issue, in Belgium. We did a lot of state reforms, but it's not often an issue because it's not electorally so interesting to do that, or to put that issue central.

They won't change it as one of their priorities, but of course they could polarise less on migration. They could be less firm, less extreme on that issue. I think the emphasis on that issue will always be the same, but the position could probably change, with the idea of getting into the Flemish government in 2024 because Vlaams Belang could be the largest party in Flanders. If they are the largest party in Flanders in 2024, they can take the lead in the formation process on the Flemish level. So, if they would like to convince other parties to form a government with them, they could become less radical.

But, on the other hand, Tom Van Grieken has often mentioned that it was a mistake in the past to become less aggressive, less extreme, on the migration issue, because if you become less extreme, then people don't see anymore, and that is something I think they won't do any more. In one of his latest interviews in the newspaper, he actually talked about the fact that Flanders and Western Europe should be white. It was a long time ago that someone talked about the fact that Flanders should be more white, and the interview was criticised a lot. In the latest interview I read with him, he said that he would not do that anymore, he won't talk about the fact that the skin colour of someone is important. But it's an idea within Vlaams Belang that using less firm language on migration is not a winner, that they should keep the quite radical view on migration. They're also talking about the fact that Western Europe is becoming very different because of all those migrants.

##### Interviewer

Ok, that's similar to those great replacement theories that you hear from radical right parties. So, to focus on a different variable, do you think the EU has any influence on what the party focuses on or how it talks about these issues, or not at all?

##### Nicolas

Yes, in a way. I'm not sure if the EU position of Vlaams Belang has changed, but they actually emphasise the EU more than they did in the past. In Belgium, almost all parties are in favour of the EU, in the past. Parties were very lyrical about the EU, it was very good and had to get more powers, and things like that. But I think Vlaams Belang, and a little bit the N-VA, but they're less radical and less convincing on that matter, was the party for the first time in the history of our party competition to use anti-EU points of view in their campaign. And they're talking about the EU in the way that they talk about the Walloon part of the country. In fact, they're talking about money transfers from Flanders to Wallonia that exist. Well, there also exists transfers from Flanders to the EU, and they would like to get rid of those. So, they have evolved in a direction of a more anti-EU point of view, and, of course, the migration crisis in Europe, examples of Hungary, for instance, they also inspire Vlaams Belang on their migration position.

##### Interviewer

Right. So, one way perhaps of understanding the role of the EU, at least for some people who focus on ethnoregional parties, is that the EU provides policy-making avenues for ethnoregional parties like the Committee of Regions and being involved in structural funding packages. Do you think any of these avenues have encouraged Vlaams Belang to talk about Flemish autonomy or independence more, or are they not important?

##### Nicolas

I'm not sure about that because I'm not a specialist in European politics, so I think I could not give a good answer to that question.

##### Interviewer

Yeah, that's fine. Moving on from the EU, there's two final things I want to look at, which everyone wants to talk about when you talk about party positions. So, to start with, do you think party members or significant figures within the party are able to shape what it focuses on, or does Vlaams Belang more follow the stereotype of radical right parties, of members being rather weak?

##### Nicolas

Members are weak within Vlaams Belang, for sure, because if you look at the way that the President is elected, it's not the members who decide who becomes President of the party. So, no, members don't have an impact on what the party stands for. That is decided within a small group of politicians, and especially the party leader is the most important figure in deciding what points of view the party is going to defend. I can't remember a programmatic conference of that party. I think that there have been some programmatic conferences of the party in the past, but I can't remember the members playing an important role in that. So no, members don't have a large impact on what they decide.

##### Interviewer

Yeah, great. And then the final one, which you've actually already alluded to with your discussion of the salience of immigration and Flemish independence, but how important do you think the electorate is in shaping what the party prioritises, or is it more a case of the party influencing what the public cares about?

##### Nicolas

That's a difficult one, actually. I think they have become less interested in what people think, to a certain extent, in order to choose their priorities because, first of all, migration is important for any Flemish voter, so they don't have to make a lot of changes in their priorities because migration has always been their most important issue. So that's not a problem because it is a major issue.

But as I mentioned before, I think Vlaams Belang has somewhat changed their idea of becoming less radical. That was an idea in the past within Vlaams Belang, that they should become less radical to convince more voters to vote for them. But as I mentioned before, that idea has somewhat changed the last few years because they are actually convinced that, with becoming less extreme, you don't convince voters. One of the models of party competition is the directional model, and I think they actually are convinced by the directional model, which says that people actually vote more radical than they actually have in mind, for instance, that they vote for more radical parties than their own point of view. I think they are convinced that if they become too radical, voters actually think that Vlaams Belang is a neo-fascist party, that’s something they, of course, don't want. But a certain radicality is quite important, I think, for them. So, I'm not convinced that they actually follow the voter.

I think they follow their own ideology, their own views. But of course, there's always some idea of ‘we should not be too extreme, because if we are too extreme, voters will not follow us anymore’, but I think that has become less important. Of course, it has to do with the context, because the fact that a lot of Flemish people find migration important, it's easier to leave those marketing ideas behind and not to try to get to know what people think. If I look at the issue that they find important and how radical they should be, I think that has become less of an issue within Vlaams Belang. They have decided to be quite radical in order that the voters still see them, and in order to convince the voters that they are a different party than, for instance, the N-VA, which has become a member of the more traditional parties for a lot of voters because they have been in government.

**Interview with Jacobs**

##### Interviewer

So, yeah, the main thing I'm interested in is the variation in how parties combine different forms of nationalism. So, for Vlaams Belang, that's the kind of focus on Flemish autonomy, as well as anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim appeals. So, I suppose it makes sense to start off by focussing on how the party uses these to some extent. So, how would you characterise the importance of Flemish autonomy or independence for Vlaams Belang?

##### Laura

Yeah, so that is, of course, one of their main issues. It's really one of their core issues, and its also remained a constant given its history, because of course, it comes from sentiments of Flemish nationalism that go back even to the beginning of the 20th century. And of course, also with the Second World War, there was also this idea of the antagonism and opposition between Walloon's and Flemish people.

It's always remained an important issue. But what is important is that it is not the issue that is now emphasised the most, or like over the last five years, I would say, because nowadays in general, Flemish autonomy as an issue, or Flemish independence as an issue, is generally less of a salient issue in the Belgian political context. And it's also important to say that while officially Vlaams Belang strives for Flemish independence, so really a Flemish nation that is independent and liberated from Belgium, so that Belgium would cease to exist and Flanders would be an independent country. That is their objective. It's also in the programme. But because actually the public opinion is not very much in favour of actual independence, the majority actually of the Flemish people is not in favour of actual independence, which is also why the focus is always on Flemish autonomy and more competences going to the regional level, so the Flemish level, but that actually independence itself is not something that is used very often and more generally, as I said, because in Flanders or in Belgium more generally, in order to have state reform, you need to change the Constitution. And the reason why Flemish independence and Flemish autonomy is now less salient is because actually now there is not room for a change in the Constitution, because politicians need to have a two thirds majority in order to agree that there are certain laws in the Constitution that can be changed. And this definitely applies to laws that are related to state reform and the federal state, of course, in Belgium. And that's actually explaining why it's a less salient issue nowadays, especially when you compare it to the other components of Vlaams Belang and all the main issues such as immigration, etc.

But of course, it is one of their core issues. So Flemish autonomy and yes, supporting this idea that the Flemish should be responsible for as much as possible.

##### Interviewer

Right. So, since you've already mentioned about Vlaams Belang also focusing on anti-immigration appeals as well, how would you characterise the importance of those types of appeals for the party?

##### Laura

Yeah, so I would say that nowadays that is actually the main issue here, or the main focus of the party. Of course, this has never gone away, actually, but since 2015, I would argue that, of course, with the refugee crisis also linked to European policy, immigration policy, et cetera, et cetera, this has also sparked a renewed attention to that angle, the anti-immigration idea and also important to say, and of course, it is anti-immigration in general, but it focuses a lot on Islamophobia and actually accommodation of religious rights, mostly with regard to Muslims, in regard to immigrants with a Muslim background. And that is, I think, the most important reason why most people vote for Vlaams Belang.

And it's also important, I think, to understand the political context more generally, in Flanders. Of course, there's also another Flemish nationalist party in Flanders, the N-VA. And you see that actually they enter into competition quite a lot on this specific topic, and this competition has really grown and become more important over the years because the Flemish autonomy has become less important, as I mentioned before, and that makes it that the N-VA has also focused more on immigration, trying to become the main issue owner of the immigration issue and really entering into competition with Vlaams Belang. For a while it seemed that they pulled it off, but now you see that more recently Vlaams Belang is gaining again, winning at the elections, and actually a bunch of voters that voted for the N-VA due to the immigration issue are now shifting back to Vlaams Belang. But I would say that if you were to ask me to say, OK, what's now the most important issue to focus on, it would indeed be the immigration issue, specifically to Muslims and also adding a criminal angle to that, so the criminal threat, law and order, etc., focusing also on the cultural threats that Islam would pose, for instance. So that's all facing that same angle, of course. But yeah, there's no doubt that that is the main feature, and the main focus, Vlaams Belang, and also the main reason I think most people vote for the Vlaams Belang.

##### Interviewer

Right. That's a very comprehensive discussion of the various appeals, but it's most important to try to understand what causes it. You've mentioned a variety of things that might matter there in terms of the shift towards immigration, like the migrant crisis, the difficulty of trying to achieve anything on devolution, party competition with the N-VA. So, is there anything else that you think causes Vlaams Belang to prioritise one appeal over the other?

##### Laura

Yeah, like I said, the general salience of the issues, because in the current context, immigration is just an important issue. I also think that, and of course, again, it's linked to the foundation of the party; it was founded in Antwerp, which is the biggest city in Flanders, and also it's a city, of course, that's hosts a lot of immigrants, mostly also from Muslim descent. So, of course, there is a reason why this party has been founded in Antwerp, and it also tends to be the strongest in these types of cities. But it, of course, also links to this ideology, so an ideology of nationalism of the Flemish people in opposition to outgroups, and then they define various outgroups, and then indeed, one of the main outgroups are immigrants, mainly Muslim immigrants. But of course, other outgroups are also Walloons or, for instance, elites and the other mainstream parties, et cetera.

So, of course, it all links back to this idea of the Flemish people that is in opposition to various enemies or outgroups. Indeed, you see this mostly becoming evident in this anti-immigration viewpoint. So, of course, there's also an ideological component there, linked to ethnic nationalism, linked to populism. So that's, of course, always present there as well.

##### Interviewer

So perhaps focussing in on a specific potential variable, but do you think that the EU plays any role in influencing what the party prioritises?

##### Laura

I actually would not think that's the case because, I mean, of course, it will be the case, but I think it will be a main defining feature, because I think in Belgium, of course, it is one of the founding fathers of Europe, so it's going to influence it in the sense that of all the Flemish parties, of all the parties in Belgium, of course, Vlaams Belang is the most Eurosceptic party. So that is, of course, definitely the case, but it's not as if that is something that is shifting. That's just something that is constantly present there. And I would not say that whatever Europe does now or this political position of Europe would shift the priorities of Vlaams Belang. I think in general, the specific issues may change a little bit and they may frame it a little bit more within a European framework, for instance. The specific issues may differ, but it will always still fit in this general idea, this general framework. Also because in Flanders or in Belgium, Europe is not something that's very much politicised or polarised because there tends to be somewhat of a consensus about Europe. So, the idea is that generally Europe is good. Of course, Vlaams Belang is more Eurosceptic, but even they would not dare to argue, for instance, for Flanders leaving Europe, or stuff like that. So, there are always the same boundaries that will still apply, and they would still operate within these boundaries. And of course, if there is a migration crisis at European level, for instance, or if we see discussions regarding Catalonia or Scotland and the UK or in Spain, and the idea of these people that are also advocating for more powers etc, then you will see that Vlaams Belang will try to articulate their claims for Flemish autonomy, and they try to frame it within these existing salient debates within the EU.

But it's not that the EU is really giving them new things or something, and it's also that they don't really mobilise on anti-EU policy, they more mobilise on anti-immigration policy. And then of course, it would also focus on Europe if, for instance, Europe is also an important policy-maker in that regard.

##### Interviewer

Yeah, fair enough. So that probably answers my next few questions, which focuses on more specific elements, but still, I might as well ask them. So, one thing that the literature on ethnoregional parties often focuses on is how the EU creates avenues for policymaking influence for these parties, like access to the Committee of the Regions or how they play a part in creating structural funding packages. Do you think these types of avenues for policymaking influence do anything to affect the saliency of different appeals?

##### Laura

I would not say so very specifically, indeed in line with my previous answer. Of course, whenever a specific issue relating to those programmes or specific policies would come up, of course, you would see that they try to link this to one of their existing issues. So, we would see that if they can link it to Flemish autonomy, they will do it. If they can link it to opposition between Flanders and Wallonia, they will do it. if they can link it to the stability of the country, to the fact that this may be an equal division regarding policy, regarding financial resources, of course, then they will try to do it and frame it as such and they will use that. If that's something that is stated, then that comes up in the debates. But, I would say that's Europe, very specifically, is not a very salient topic for Vlaams Belang. Only if they can link it to immigration and to Flemish autonomy, but then they will always try to promote this domestic angle rather than just focussing on the EU in general.

##### Interviewer

Yeah. So, yeah, we’ve focused on how Vlaams Belang focuses on immigration, and how it can use Europe for this anti-immigration angle. Of course, plenty of radical right parties criticise the EU for freedom of movement and its broader immigration policies. Do you think these types of things have any influence on what Vlaams Belang prioritises, or not?

##### Laura

Yeah, so if in Europe, immigration becomes an important issue, like during the 2015 refugee crisis, for instance, and also the discussions regarding the Marrakesh Pact. So then there, of course, you see some effects on the discourse of Vlaams Belang, but again, always again, fitting in that same narrative, so actually making use of the fact that it has become salient again, which gives them the chance to reiterate their existing views. If, of course, an immigration crisis comes up, or there's a specific salient issue regarding immigration in Europe, then of course, they will use this and try to mobilise on that. That's, of course, something that you can see; that's not only Vlaams Belang, by the way, but of course, all political parties do the same. But so, yeah, of course, they would take this as an opportunity to, again, reiterate their claims regarding migrants.

But it’s not like the claims really change or shift. So, it's really quite constant and always the same narrative, something on which they are very consistent. But indeed, they really make use of whenever an important, salient issue comes up at the European level, then it will try to use it to again shift attention to their specific policy focus, or use it to make it again salient and to advocate their views on it.

And yeah, I think you saw that very clearly in the refugee crisis in 2015, because it's also a little bit around the period that you see Vlaams Belang become relevant again, because actually before that it was very big from the 1990s,early 2000s, and then you see that the N-VA has come up and to a certain extent, they filled a gap, via entering competition regarding the immigration issue. But then indeed you see that from the refugee crisis onwards, it helped Vlaams Belang again. It was such an important issue that there was also more room for the Vlaams Belang, again, to mobilise on that and also to get more attention. And, indeed, in that way they have made use of this wave of anti-refugee sentiment and indeed decided, that at some point in time, immigration was the most important issue in Europe and also in Flanders and Belgium, for months.

And of course, this has helped them in the sense that it's a more salient issue at European level. And this has also made them more relevant, again, as a domestic political factor in Flanders. So, in that regard, of course, it has an impact on their discourse and on the fact that they certainly have become relevant again, but not on the direction of the discourse or the content of discourse, because it's always yeah, this is very consistent.

##### Interviewer

So you've mentioned a few times about the role of public opinion, both in terms of not being particularly important for the focus on Flemish autonomy, or on the importance of 2015 for immigration. So how important is public opinion in shaping what the Vlaams Belang focuses on?

##### Laura

Yeah, I would say it's important, like for any political party, of course, but I think more specifically for Vlaams Belang, because of course one of the other elements, or one of the other defining features of Vlaams Belang, next to autonomy and nationalism and then indeed authoritarianism, there's also the populism, of course. That means that indeed they try to present themselves as one of the main advocates of the common people, that they're the ones that are really representing the interests of the people, whereas mainstream parties are not in touch with the ordinary people. So, it also makes Vlaams Belang feel like it is so important and tries to really pretend as if they represent the common people. But of course, it also means that they very closely monitor, for instance, the topics that come up, the salient debates and issues, and also indeed make references to the public opinion and to the citizens and to the ordinary people to actually back up their claims. For instance, they would say, yes, it's now the time for stricter immigration policy, because indeed, public opinion polls show that a majority of the Flemish people are in favour of this.

So, of course, they make a lot of appeals to public opinion, to Flemish people. Of course, also, again, using this idea of Flemish people as a homogeneous nation, whereas this may not be the case because, of course, there are a lot of different opinions in Flanders. But, yeah, of course, that is something I would always refer to.

And indeed, again, as you can see, that's what I mentioned before, they do sense, for instance, that really advocating for Flemish independence is not something they would be able to do because they know that there's not a majority for that. They know that there is not a majority of people in Flanders wanting to leave the EU, for instance. So, you see the use of public opinion to kind of see what the boundaries are. So, of course, it all fits within their ideology and within the discourse, so it's always quite consistent. But indeed, the level of extremism, they try to denigrate it a little bit based on how extremists the average Flemish person is. So, they are in favour of independence, but they know that the average person, even those people that are voting for Vlaams Belang, are not in favour of independence, so then they are not really too loud in articulating that. So, I would say that the Vlaams Belang use their sense of what the average public opinion would be, also as a way to see how far they can go and how extremist they can go. And indeed, as I said, they would not dare to mention Flanders leaving the EU.

##### Interviewer

Finally, what about the role of party members? Are party members or certain major figures in the party able to influence what it prioritises, or not?

##### Laura

So, I would say because you have these two main stances or two main issues, of Flemish autonomy and general nationalism on the one hand, and then this anti-immigration angle, on the other hand, you do quite clearly see that there are people in the party that are on the Flemish nationalists side, that will mostly focus on autonomy and on more competences for the regions, and on the opposition between Flanders and Wallonia, and on the other hand, you have also party members that have this clear anti-immigration stance. You see that Vlaams Belang is kind of balancing between those two, and you see that they have. Yes, it seems that the members are specialised in usually one of these two issues or topics. Also, a little bit, of course, to the level of extremism, because you have party members that have been recruited from quite questionable organisations like, you know, neo-Nazi organisations or racist organisations, but also more acceptable persons that did have this more moderate view, mostly focussed on Flemish autonomy. So, yeah, that's where you see that they try to balance a little bit because they know that there are some people that are moderates and will not be tempted by very extremist or racist language, but then there are other people that try to serve that part of the electorate by making these false statements, et cetera. But you clearly, clearly see also that in that way, the idea that there has been some of a shift in the discourse of Vlaams Belang because before, in the ‘90s and also the early 2000s, the rhetoric was really hard and blatantly racist, also pretty insulting sometimes, really like borderline very racist. And then, of course, they have been condemned in 2004, not the party itself, but certain organisations that are part of the vehicle set up by the party. And then you have now also new leaders and you see that they very easily try to make the Vlaams Belang more acceptable and try to also seduse other parts of the electorate that otherwise would not be convinced by the more blatantly racist discourse.

And you'll see that that is always how Vlaams Belang is doing, so always trying to balance a little bit between those that are just really concerned about immigration but are not necessarily racist or prejudiced or whatever, and then, of course, the electorate that is, and you see that indeed they do have specific party members that try to serve and try to cater to the specific needs and the specific issues that are relevant and not present in the discourse of the Vlaams Belang.

##### Interviewer

So that's all the questions I had prepared. Is there anything else you think that's relevant or important to talk about in order to understand this?

##### Laura

I think another issue angle, something that has now become more important, also due to the Covid-19 crisis and that's, of course, a general component that you also see a lot for other parties in Europe, but you also really have this idea that there is a general sentiment of political disillusion, discontentment, and they try to adopt this more and more also as part of their discourse. And of course, due to the Covid-19 crises, there was less news about immigration, and also the autonomy issue was also not on the agenda. So, you see that now they are more jumping into that vacuum. And now they are indeed also mobilising on, you know, the corrupt elites, and they should not tell you what you have to do, for instance, regarding face masks, et cetera, also vaccination - not as strongly as in other countries like France and the Netherlands, but still, you see that now because immigration has become less important now, they are now also focusing this idea of the corrupt elite, and we are not being governed very well, and there are always these corruption scandals, and they were telling us what to do. They are eroding democracy. And so you see that that has now really become a more important topic. Also, I think it's really also to attract new people that are not only concerned about immigration, but also much more concerned about our rights, like curfews, et cetera. So, of course, they also make use of that. I think that's important to say, because now I think that's a big part of why people vote for Vlaams Belang. Yes, because of their anti-immigration stance, yes, because they want more Flemish autonomy, but also because they are angry and fed up with mainstream politics. And that is something that, of course, becomes evidence that there is such a big crisis, such as the Covid-19 crisis.

##### Interviewer

That's interesting. Probably helps that they're also mostly excluded from mainstream politics as well, so they can make that claim pretty easily.

##### Laura

Definitely, oh, yeah, that's something that's definitely important to consider also, I think maybe to take into account that, yes, Vlaams Belang, of course, has never been part of a government. There is indeed a formal cordon sanitaire. And also in Wallonia, there was also a cordon mediatique, so they also don't try to interview people from Vlaams Belang, et cetera. And of course, in Flanders, they still on television etc, but indeed, they are really completely excluded. And of course, this feeds the antagonism that they've never been part of a Flemish government or of the federal government, although there have been negotiations actually, after the last election in 2019 between the N-VA and Vlaams Belang for a Flemish government, but then eventually it didn't proceed because it they did not have a majority. But this is really very important to the future, because actually there are more and more people, maybe I mean, one out of four Flemish people, now votes for Vlaams Belang, but they are consistently excluded, and mainstream parties have a lower number of seats each election.

And there is a question like, what should we do about this? And there is also a real possibility that actually in 2024, the Flemish nationalist parties, they'll be able to actually form a Flemish government. And of course, at the federal level, this will never be the case because there's also the Walloon parties and that will never proceed because they will not agree to it, but actually at the Flemish level it's a real possibility that maybe in 2024, they would actually together have a majority in the Flemish Parlement.

And it'll be interesting to see what will happen because like I said, the N-VA is losing votes. They have less of this momentum also because they are in the government, the Flemish government, for instance, also the Covid-19 crisis, so they are also responsible for Covid-19 legislation and rules and policies. And of course, this puts Vlaams Belang in a very comfortable position because they can always criticise, and they are never making decisions. So, they can always hide behind other parties.

Yeah, and that is why nowadays in Belgium, Vlaams Belang is an attractive party for many people because they are shifting blame and they don't have the responsibility themselves at all. So, yeah, that's also important.

**Interview with Scheltiens**

##### Interviewer

The participant information leaflet hopefully made it relatively clear that I'm interested in how Vlaams Belang combines different forms of nationalism, particularly Flemish autonomy or independence, and anti-immigration appeals. So that's going to be the subject of this interview. And it probably makes sense to start off by focusing on those two different types of appeals and their ideology. So, to start off with, how would you characterise the importance of Flemish independence or greater autonomy for Vlaams Belang?

##### Vincent

It's the key issue for Vlaams Belang, and in fact, it's the most important point in its political programme and the independence of Flanders, getting rid of Belgium, that was actually, in ’77, the reason why two small far right parties were formed by people who came out of the Volksunie (the People's Union), which was the Flemish nationalist party. That party, in ‘77, participated in a Belgian government to have an institutional reform to get more autonomy for the Flemish region, and some people inside the Volksunie made the balance sheet and said ‘this is treason, we don't have to participate in the Belgium government. Volksunie is not doing the right thing. We are getting out and we are going to start a new, more radical Flemish nationalist party’, where two parties, one party was headed by a guy named Dillen and the other by a former banker, and the two small parties went together in an electoral alliance. That was where the name Flemish bloc, Vlaams Blok, was invented. They didn't have a lot of success and there was only one person elected, Dillen from Antwerp, and the Vlaams Block continued as a single party, which kept as its main issue, main point, the independence of Flanders.

A few years later, the beginning of the ‘80s, some younger people came inside the leadership of Vlaams Block, and you got immediately not a shift, but a second very important issue, which was immigration. Stop immigration. And they linked immigration and the economic crisis of the beginning of the ‘80s, massive unemployment, etc., with slogans like ‘less immigrants is less unemployment. If there is unemployment, why immigration?’. Slogans that also exist already in the ‘30s after the crash of ‘29 in Germany, the link between immigration, the presence of people coming from outside and the massive unemployment. OK, so Vlaams Blok went ahead, so immediately the question of immigration electorally brought them much more votes than Flemish independence. So, they always stood for Flemish independence, but the, let's say it as it is, the racist issue was for them, more important electorally. So today, they manage to combine the two as the main features of Vlaams Belang, as they call them now, and linking those two. They say there has to be some kind of white dominance in Europe, in Flanders, a leading culture, and for that, Flanders has to be more independent from Belgium.

So you will notice that there has been a change of name in 2004. Three small organisations forming part of Vlaams Blok were condemned by justices for racism. So they have to change their name. It was not the creation of a new party. It was the same party who continued with another name: Vlaams Blok (Flemish Block) was replaced by Vlaams Belang (Flemish Interest). The president was the same, the elected people were the same, all the apparatus was the same, and also the discourse was the same. So Flemish independence is very important for Vlaams Belang.

Now, we see, Vlaams Belang at this moment, in the polls, is the main party in Flanders (in the north of Belgium). They are the strongest party heading to 30 percent, even more. And the second party is the new Flemish alliance (N-VA), a centre-right party created after the Volksunie disappeared. The Volksunie broke up in several factions and N-VA was the more important of them. They were the biggest party in the polls. So it means that the two main parties in Flanders at this very moment, are both of them in favour of more autonomy for Flanders. I say more generally, because the step from today to total independence is a big step. For example, N-VA defends the idea of confederalism, the step from federalism (Belgium is a federal state today) to confederalism. The difference is that in a confederal state like Switzerland, for example, are the parts will decide what they will do together in the future, and not like in a federal state, the opposite, where you have a national institution, several national institutions, who give some kind of autonomy to lower institutions. That's not the case in confederalism. That is what N-VA wants to put on the table in 2024, where we will have the next general elections on the Belgian level, on the Flemish level, and on the level of the cities et cetera. Now, the problem for them is that together they have practically 50 percent of the votes, following the polls today, but when you see studies and polls of the population of Flanders, asking them, ‘what is your position, are you in favour of more autonomy for Flanders, are you in favour of separatism, are you in favour of independence from Belgium’, there isn't even 20 or 25 percent of the people who is in favour.

So what does that mean? That is not new, it means that lots of people vote for Vlaams Belang for other reasons than Flemish independence. They vote for them because they say we have to get rid of refugees, migrants, et cetera. That's the main point in the Vlaams Belang electoral propaganda, and since 2001, it's openly Islam as a religion and the presence of Islamic people, mosques in the city, et cetera, and a kind of Islamophobia, which gives them lots of votes. And then there is a third, and quite new, but not so new, strong electoral issue by Vlaams Belang, and that's what I have called social nativism. So. their main slogan is ‘Their own people have to go first. First, we serve our own people’. They also translate that to the social economic level and say ‘we are for more prosperity, we are for higher unemployment benefits, we are for higher pension, etc., but for our own people’. Social nativism is something that works because lots of people, I don't know how many, but many working class people identify with that kind of discourse and think that indeed, without strangers having benefits from social security, we could have more for ourselves.

So that's an important point that I think, and some studies point in that direction, gave them lots of votes in the last elections.

##### Interviewer

Great, thanks, that's a very comprehensive overview of their ideology that answered several of my next questions, so we can move on now to trying to understand what causes Vlaams Belang to move from one appeal to the other. So you've already highlighted the role of the new generation of political leaders entering and the role of public opinion. But more generally, what do you think causes the party to move from Flemish autonomy to anti-immigration?

##### Vincent

They don't exactly move from the one to the other, they use the two. They see, of course, that lots of people, and that's not only a Flemish or a Belgian condition, it's European, lots of people lose their trust in centre politics. And so, they're trying to give answers, and at the same time, they know that not all, but a great part of the public are working class people, people not only classical working class, but employees, people with middle or low salaries. Those people have difficult times with government, due to social cuts, et cetera, et cetera. And that's an answer that fits quite well towards those people, but on the other hand, they also gained a lot of support outside the big cities, where people are not at all, where you have very well middle class, high or middle class. There you have another reaction. People got started voting for Vlaams Belang because they think that their wealth is somehow threatened by all the things that happen. The great turbulence of globalisation, immigration, refugees, poor people, the cities, coming up towards them. So it's an action of pushing them way, pushing it away. So voting Vlaams Belang, in the minds of those people, is trying to keep their living standards without sharing.

Now, there is indeed a younger generation now leading Vlaams Belang. The founder, Dillen, died years ago. The young people who came into the leadership at the beginning of the ‘80s, middle of the ‘80s, are now people in their 50s, people like Dewinter, Annemans, etc. But you have a new generation of people who mostly all come from university, from some far-right student groups, student associations. The most important is the KVHV (the Catholic Union of High School Students), where lots of young people chose, some for the N-VA, but many others for Vlaams Belang. It's President, Tom Van Grieken is a good example. They have one main aim now, and that is to get into the Flemish government, so the party exists already a long time, has got its influence on politics, but more like putting pressure on politics, but they never have been really in a government. And so, with the polls on their side, with the N-VA, which is a bit of the same Flemish nationalist family, ‘when we come first in the election of 2024, we can take an initiative’. The aim was to get to gain respectability, to show people who were hesitant to vote for them that they are well prepared to be in government. It happened in other countries. It happened in Austria, for example, also a young leader of the FPO, which was important because that way they can show that it is possible elsewhere, so why not in Flanders. There was a kind of large normalisation around Vlaams Belang with those new leaders having some kind of respectability, being invited in mass media on the public television, participating in debates, et cetera, et cetera, like other parties and like other party leaders and spokesmen.

So that went quite well. There is a little problem for them, that is that at the same time, people inside their party, and around their party, came to the attention of the mass media as being not so respectable, of being active on very discreet social media channels, like Discord, et cetera, for identitarian, very militant identitarian groups. In those groups, there was openly racism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, et cetera, in their messages. Nevertheless, their leader, was invited by Vlaams Belang, was invited to be the top of their list for the last elections, and he got elected in Belgium parliament. In the meantime, he lost his parliamentary immunity. And he has to defend this group membership and his freedom in court in a few months, I think. So that is, at the same time, a bit in contradiction with the aim of gaining respectability. But, at the same time, he got elected and he got elected easily, and he has a large public. He has a lot of young people. You can't deny that somewhere, he is backed by people. And then very, very recently, there was the case of that professional soldier, saying ‘I'm going to kill some of the scientists who are preparing the government measures against the Covid pandemic’, he stole some weapons from the military barracks and then he was found much later, he apparently killed himself. But you saw immediately on the social media, a support for that guy. Almost 50,000 people said, ‘we understand that guy. He's a victim himself, et cetera, et cetera’. And there you saw Vlaams Belang, instead of condemning that guy, they didn't approve openly, they tried to surf on the empathy that people had for that person.

So you see that they tried to gain respectability, but at the same time, they are moving the margins of what is normal, what is tolerated, et cetera. And I think that's my own impression for the moment, that it works well for them, works quite well.

##### Interviewer

Yeah, so to move to a more specific variable, which you might think matters or doesn't matter, do you think the EU plays any role in influencing what the party focuses on, or not?

##### Vincent

Yes, the question of Europe in general, and more specifically the EU, plays an important role. You could say that towards the European Union, Vlaams Belang had always a very pessimistic view, a view of distrust, which is part of their general distrust of internationalism, cooperation, global approaches of global economy, etc., because they defend a sort of withdrawal on themselves, on Flanders, cleaning up Flanders, withdrawing. All international institutions which are seen as taking away sovereignty are seen as a major threat. And there is indeed a problem with the European Union, which works quite well in the direction of the far right. That is, that all the making of the European Union, and especially from the beginning of the ‘90s, still today, displaced a lot of sovereignty to the international, took away sovereignty on the national level, but didn't make a new sovereignty on the international level. Mostly, the institutions who will lead our economy, our currency, our monetary politics, our employment politics, etc., are nonelected institutions. That is also seen like that by a part of the population. And the answer of the far right is ‘let's draw ourselves back on Flanders’. But the the sort of social and democratic deficit existing inside the European Union is used by the far right for their discourse of throwing themselves back on Flanders.

At the same time, and that sounds a bit complicated, they have a vision of Europe. They have a vision of Europe, which is not a vision of the European institutions, but they have a vision of Europe as the holy Europe, the Judeo-Christian Europe, especially its Christian roots, who have to be defended against the hordes that are coming from the east or from the south, and who are trying to invade in. That's the discourse. And who’ll kill our culture and our heritage.

And so that's what they say, don't forget. Tom Van Grieken said it literally in a very important interview some months ago: ‘in Europe, there has to be a white dominance, we are under threat’. The idea of the replacement of people, which they use now openly, ‘we are being replaced. We have to take measures, et cetera’. And so you see, they are quite defiant against the European Union, but they have at the same time a discourse on Europe, which is a positive discourse: ‘We Europeans against the barbarians who are trying to invade and kill our cultural heritage’.

##### Interviewer

Thanks So to kind of now focus a bit more on the EU, some people who work on ethnoregional parties think that the EU provides avenues for policymaking influence for these types of parties, such as the Committee of the Regions or structural funding packages. Do you think that this has had any influence on the Vlaams Blang or do they ever use these avenues in their own discourse, or is that not really relevant for the party?

##### Vincent

Well, I think because they are for an independent Flanders, they also have an idea shared by other far right, and more respectable right, political parties that once independent, they make a better chance in a unified Europe. Because being independent inside Europe makes for them that they have got rid of the Walloons and Brussels. Also, it's a bit like you had in the ‘80s and ‘90s, and still today, but not with the regionalist discourse, the Italian far-right party, Lega Nord saying ‘let's get rid of the South, the poor people, thieves, lazy people, Rome infected, et cetera, et cetera. We the north, Lombardia, we on our own, we can do better’. I must say, unfortunately, there are also traces of the discourse in Catalan, in some Catalan nationalist parties: ‘we are the better part of Spain, the richer part of Spain. If we would be independent in the European Union, we would have the same strength and the same weight as Denmark, but now we are imprisoned in Spain, etc.’. That's also what the Vlaams Belang believes: ‘socially, economically, we are much more stronger if we get rid of the Walloons and we have nothing in common with the Walloons, so why not get rid of them as soon as possible?’ And I think that their rejection, or their pessimistic view of the European Union, would change a little bit, but at the same time, inside the European institutions, the Parliament, the Commission, et cetera, they align very easily with parties like the other far right parties, identitarian parties. They also have a lot of sympathy for the Polish PiS party, Fidesz in Hungary, et cetera, et cetera, because these are examples of how you get rid of refugees and how you would defend the Catholic historical roots of society against Islamic invasion, or whatever they call it. So, they will always be in in that part of the European Union, which is in a position of high tension on human rights, cetera.

##### Interviewer

OK. And then finally on the EU, radical right parties always like to criticise the EU's policies on immigration, whether it be freedom of movement or how it deals with the migrant crisis. So, do you think the EU's immigration policies are important for Vlaams Belang, at least in the form of a target?

##### Vincent

They are important because, for the moment, the position of the Vlaams Belang is that these policies are not restrictive enough, they have to be stronger. And that's why they say, for example, that Viktor Orban is right, et cetera, et cetera. So they are for a really fortress Europe for shame, really cut off Europe from any poor people coming from the east or the south, or whatever. So that's indeed important for Vlaams Belang.

Just like the N-VA, they are very, very upset when the European Union, or other institutions like the United Nations, propose platforms or agreements on solidarity, immigration, asylum, et cetera. For them, that's not legal. The N-VA left the government because Belgium signed the agreement on migration written by the United Nations, the Marrakesh Pact. So they went out of the government, and Vlaams Belang saluted that departure from government. They say, well, those international institutions that come here and tell us that we must open our borders, et cetera, that's some left talk, et cetera.

##### Interviewer

Then my final question I've prepared is, do you think either party members or public opinion is able to shape what the party focuses on?

##### Vincent

I don't know, I think. Their party leadership is quite coherent, in age, with the team coming from the same student life, militant Flemish nationalist student life. I think they have their plan to move forward Flemish independence by getting into government and by forcing it, and by forcing N-VA to participate. They don't count on other parties because every other party refuses to be in government in Vlaams Belang, that is what we call the cordon sanitaire.

At the same time, we saw that they the ability of adapting their political activity and their political line on what happens inside the population. When you are fighting to gain respectability, and then a far right extremist military escapes with stolen weapons; if you only are trying to gain respectability, you don't sympathise with the guy, but they saw that the guy had some support, so they started to sympathise, or to show empathy, for the guy. They can adapt because they wanted to win those people for themselves, not by saying that guy is right in what he is doing, but by saying the way he's chased is not good, we have to see the problem, et cetera, face the problems. So, yes, they have an ability. But I think, for that they also look to other parties in Europe. For example, Front National in France, the way Marine Le Pen changed the profile for her party to get ready to win the presidential elections. They look to Austria, where also there was a kind of respectability, and with young leaders that are well-dressed – that’s also the Vlaams Belang do, it's important for their image.