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Racism on social media in context:

A literature review with a case study of the 2024 EU elections

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Master's Degree in Globalisation and Development 2024/2025

Master's Thesis

Title:

Racism on social media in context: A literature review with a case study of the 2024 EU elections

Author: Laura-Line Verguts

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Abstract

Racism has long been recognized as a profoundly harmful societal problem. While challenged for decades, it continues to adapt to social and political norms, often taking more subtle forms. The rise of social media has intensified its reach and impact. Online racism harms individuals and targeted groups while also threatening social cohesion, democratic processes, and fundamental rights across Europe. The EU elections of June 2024 provide a critical case study. This period was marked by high political polarization, the success of far-right parties, intense debate on migration, and increasing reliance on social media: conditions that create fertile ground for racist discourse.

This thesis investigates online racism in Europe through a systematic literature review and a case study of the 2024 elections. Four key trends are identified: First, online racism escalates during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian invasion in Ukraine, and the Hamas terrorist attack followed by the ongoing Israeli military actions and resulting humanitarian crisis in Gaza. Second, racist discourse intensified during the 2024 EU electoral period, particularly targeting refugees and migrants. Third, disinformation and AI-generated content played a growing role. Fourth, online racism contributed to the re-normalization of overt racism; demonstrating that it was never truly eliminated when it became legally unacceptable but merely transformed; while at the same time, overt racism online is contributing to its renewed normalization offline.

By situating online racism within its political and digital contexts, this thesis advances scholarly understanding of this important yet understudied phenomenon, and supports strategies for safer, more inclusive public spaces, in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals 10, 11, and 16.

Keywords: racism, social media, online racism, Europe, EU elections 2024

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Introduction

Racism has long been recognized as a profoundly harmful social problem, challenged by activists, scholars, and policymakers for decades. The rise of social media, however, has intensified its reach and impact. These platform algorithms tend to favor sensational, ideologically extreme, and emotionally charged content (Del Vicario, 2019; Anypas, 2023), creating an environment where hate speech and racist discourse can easily thrive.

Online racism is an increasingly pervasive phenomenon that seriously harms targeted groups and individuals (Ekman, 2019; Ziems, 2020; Ng, 2024). Furthermore, it also threatens social cohesion, democratic processes, and fundamental rights across Europe (European Commission, 2018; Faloppa et al., 2023; Aktas, 2024; Immenkamp et al., 2024).

The digital landscape, particularly social media, has transformed how public opinion and narratives are constructed and disseminated (Velasco, 2015), allowing racist discourse to spread rapidly, often in subtle or normalized forms (Ekman, 2019; Mathew et al., 2019; Ziems, 2020). Despite its growing impact, online racism remains an understudied area (Keum & Miller, 2018).

The European Union (EU) elections June 2024 provide a critical case study for examining these dynamics, as they were especially socially and politically significant. This period was marked by heightened political polarization, a particular surge of far-right parties, and intense public debate on migration and security (Pasetti, 2024). Notably, they mark the first time since the Second World War that far-right parties have achieved such substantial success (Mudde, 2024). In particular, the issue of (anti-)immigrant sentiment has been central (Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 2024). All of this occurred alongside the increasing use of social media for political campaigning, accessing news, and expressing public opinion (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2025).

Such a context creates fertile ground for online racist discourse to thrive. Understanding the patterns of online racism during this election period is crucial for advancing scholarly understanding but also for informing effective strategies to combat online hate speech and provide safe and inclusive online and offline public spaces in Europe, especially around highly sensitive times like elections.

The present thesis aims to identify the main trends of online racism in Europe during the 2024 EU elections. This constitutes the research objective of this study. To address this objective, a systematic literature review was conducted.

After a brief presentation of the methodology employed in this work, the present document is organized into two main chapters. Chapter 1 provides a broad theoretical framework that examines two critical dimensions of the topic: racism and social media. It begins with a review of how racism is conceptualized within academic literature, followed by a discussion of the influence of social media on society and finalizes with a review of methodological approaches for studying racism on social media.

Chapter 2 then presents the results related to the research objective and is divided into two sections. First, the context of the 2024 EU electoral period is examined, providing a foundation for understanding online discourse during this time. Second, four main trends of online racism are identified: online racism increases during periods of crisis; it intensified during the 2024 EU elections, especially targeting the group “refugee/migrant”; there is growing use of disinformation and AI; and online racism is contributing to the re-normalization of offline racism.

These key trends provide crucial insights into how social media shapes public discourse and amplifies racism, especially during sensible times. By situating online racism within its political and digital contexts, this study provides a deeper understanding of its dynamics and supports the development of informed strategies to create safer, more inclusive digital and public spaces.

This study aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations. In particular, it supports SDG 16 (16.1, 16.b) by analyzing online racist discourse, which will contribute to the promotion of peaceful, inclusive societies. Further, it aligns with SDG 10 (10.2), by focusing directly on racial discrimination, exclusion, and hate speech on social media, aiming to understand and counteract these forms of inequality. And finally, it also contributes to SDG 11 (11.7) by treating social media as a digital public space, working to ensure these platforms are safe and inclusive for all communities.

Methodology

My main research question is the following:

What are the main trends of racism on social media in Europe, specifically around the 2024 EU elections?

This thesis employs a systematic literature review in order to answer this question. This type of methodology is particularly well suited for this project, because it allows for the synthesis of a fragmented and multidisciplinary body of knowledge. As Snyder (2019) argues, literature reviews can serve as rigorous and valid research methods on their own. This is especially true when the research question addresses emerging or complex fields where direct empirical data is limited, as is the case in this study. By systematically analysing, mapping, synthesizing, and evaluating the existing studies, this thesis aims to gather insights from prior research and to identify patterns and gaps that will help situate the study of racist discourse on social media within the European context.

Before directly addressing my research question, I first situated this complex topic within a broader theoretical framework to establish a foundation, clarifying general key concepts for this research question. Therefore, I considered several guiding questions: How is racism conceptualized in the academic literature? What impact does social media have on society? What methodologies have been employed to study racism in digital spaces? These guiding questions helped to clarify important concepts and guide the later analysis. This theoretical framework makes up Chapter 1 of this study.

I then approached my research question in two phases in order to combine contextual understanding with thematic analysis. First, I analysed the European context of the 2024 EU elections, since this specific context directly shapes online content. Second, I directly addressed the research question, by examining and identifying the main trends of racism on social media within that context. The results of these two phases make up Chapter 2 of this study.

In order to find academic and relevant papers to answer my research questions, I used Google Scholar and an open AI program. These then directed me to various recognized databases, such as Elsevier, Scopus, Springer, Research Gate, among others. There I

was able to download and then thoroughly analyse the original sources. A full list of all the analysed sources is provided at the end of this document in the bibliography.

Different key words and search terms were used to find publications that analyse my research topic. Some examples of search terms include: “racism on social media conceptualization”, “racism on social media”, “social media analytics racism”, “social media analysis methods hate speech”, “Social Media impact”.

Also Boolean operators were used, such as: ("racism" OR "antiracism") AND "social media" AND "methodologies", ("racism" OR "antiracism") AND "social media" AND "methodologies", Text classification AND racism, Text classification AND racism AND Europe, Sentiment analysis AND racism.

To find relevant papers for my research objective, I applied various inclusion and exclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria were as follows: academic studies published as recently as possible, preferably after 2020 (with exceptions made to capture broader context); academic studies directly addressing racism and racist discourse, with particular emphasis on online spaces; research on social media’s role in politics, public debate, opinion formation, and related areas; academic studies focusing on EU politics between 2019 and 2025; studies employing or reviewing social media analytics methods, especially when relevant to online racism or hate speech; official EU institutional reports (such as those from the European Commission and the European Parliament); and other official institutional reports (such as those from the United Nations). Regarding languages, most sources were in English, but others were also included: reports in Spanish, French, and Dutch were analysed as well.

Exclusion criteria included: non-academic studies from non-academic sources; studies dealing exclusively with non-European contexts without a link to Europe; research on social media published before 2010; works focusing solely on other forms of discrimination (such as sexism or ageism); analyses dealing only with traditional media without reference to social media; studies on social media unrelated to politics or social issues (such as marketing or advertising); and political analyses prior to 2019 without a link to the 2024 EU elections.

It is important to note the challenges I encountered in finding relevant literature to address

my research objective. Since this is a highly specific and relatively underexplored topic, only a limited number of sources addressed it directly. To overcome this, I had to broaden the scope of my review and remain flexible with the inclusion criteria (for example, allowing academic studies published before 2020 or studies addressing contexts outside Europe, provided they had some relevance to the European context).

Identifying main trends of online racism during the 2024 EU electoral period was particularly challenging, as there was almost no direct data or academic research on this topic. To address this, I first examined general trends in digital racist discourse and then integrated contextual information about European political analysis. This allowed me to identify patterns specific to the EU.

Chapter 1. Theoretical framework: racism and social media

1. The conceptualization of racism

There are ongoing tensions and disagreements about what racism is and what is not (Kilgo, 2020). The same scholar identifies two main reasons for this debate: first, a lack of consensus, often shaped by people's ideological or political positions; and second, the fact that racism is a dynamic, evolving concept. These two reasons may actually be connected: the changing nature of racism might itself be the reason why consensus is so difficult to reach. In addition to these academic debates, it is also important to recognize that the term "racism" and "racist" circulates widely outside scholarly contexts, often used as an insult or in a colloquial way. This everyday, non-academic use adds another layer of complexity, making it even more difficult to arrive at a precise and stable conceptualization of the term.

The very existence of this debate signals a gap between our outdated understanding of racism and how it manifests today. In his famous book "*L'espace du racisme*" (translated as: The Arena of Racism), Wieviorka (1991) explains this shift in how racism operates: while in the 19th and mid-20th centuries racism operated on biological and/or racial logics (based on pseudo-scientific ideas of race and biology that claimed certain "races" were inherently inferior or superior), since the late 20th century racism has primarily operated through cultural logics (where certain groups are stigmatized as culturally incompatible with national identity or so-called "modern" society, arguing that coexistence is impossible because of differences in values, traditions, or religion).

While racism has evolved, the definitions we use have largely remained static. Under those older definitions, it may appear that racism has disappeared. But when we acknowledge its transformation and update our understanding accordingly, it becomes clear that racism is still very much present. While racism based on cultural logics may be subtler, it is just as powerful in legitimizing exclusion and discrimination.

In other words, this debate highlights that traditional definitions are no longer adequate for capturing racism in its modern forms. As racism continues to take on new and more subtle

forms, its definition must evolve too. If it doesn't, people may wrongly believe racism no longer exists. From systemic inequalities in housing, healthcare, and employment, to the perception of racial inferiority, and the rise in hate speech both online and offline (Keum & Miller, 2018), racism very much persists in Western societies.

The consequences of this misunderstanding are significant, and forms "a grave concern to the society" (Mathew, 2019, p. 8). In the first place for targeted groups, such as for example in Europe Jews, Muslims, Black and Roma people (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), 2024), who experience racism and its effects directly (Ziems, 2020), but also for society as a whole, which suffers the broader effects of systemic inequality (Tatum, 1997).

As Wieviorka (1991) notes, most research and public debates focus on morally criticizing racism ("racism is bad") or describing its effects, but they rarely look at the social relationships and changes that create and maintain it. In other words, how racism changes, develops and grows within society is often ignored. This leaves us with mere denunciation rather than true analysis.

In the same line, the FRA (2024) proposes that the first step to address the challenges of "racism and related forms of intolerance in European societies", is to properly recognize its existence, "including in their systemic and structural forms" (p. 11). In order to effectively recognize and challenge it, we must first agree on how to define it.

While there is no universally accepted definition (Mullah, 2021), scholars have tried to conceptualize racism for decades. One generally used definition is the one from Anderson (1999) (cited in Keum & Miller, 2018, p. 2), who defined it as: "beliefs, attitudes, institutional agreements, and acts that tend to denigrate individuals and groups because of phenotypic characteristics or ethnic group affiliations". In the same line, Keum & Miller (2018, p. 2) said that racism is "the acts of denigration of individuals based on their ethnic/racial group affiliation". The United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (1979, p. 2) says that "racial discrimination" means:

> "any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life".

These examples highlight the first key characteristic of racism: negative prejudices and discriminatory behaviour based on race. However, various scholars have identified another important aspect: racial hierarchy and power (Tatum, 1997; Bonilla-Silva, 2015; Bliuc, 2018; Keum & Miller, 2018). Tatum (1997) explains that racism can be defined as "prejudice + power" (p.7). She emphasizes that racism is not merely an individual attitude but a system: one built on a hierarchical structure that categorizes some groups as superior and others as inferior. This system has historical roots in colonialism (Fanon, 1965, p. 161) and continues to be present in today's cultural representations, institutions, and practices. Similarly, Bonilla-Silva (2015) stresses that racism "is systemic and rooted in differences in power between the races" (p. 1).

Similarly, I would like to cite Harrell (2000, p. 43) who explains this very well:

> *Racism is defined as* "A system of dominance, power, and privilege based on racial group designations: rooted in the historical oppression of a group defined or perceived by dominant-group members as inferior, deviant, or undesirable; and occurring in circumstances where members of the dominant group create or accept their societal privilege by maintaining structures, ideology, values, and behavior that have the intent or effect of leaving nondominant-group members relatively excluded from power, esteem, status, and/or equal access to societal resources."

In the same line, the French sociologist Michel Wieviorka (1991) offers a similar conceptualization, distinguishing between two primary patterns of racism. The first corresponds to the second type of definitions mentioned before, which the author calls "racism of inequality and exploitation." By this he means that this form of racism is rooted in economic and social hierarchies, where certain groups are marginalized and subjected to systematic disadvantages. The second form of racism, according to Wieviorka, is "racism of cultural difference and separation." This type focuses on the perceived cultural distinctiveness of groups, leading to their exclusion based on cultural or communal identities.

In short, rather than merely individual negative prejudices, racism can be defined as a systemic hierarchy rooted in racial prejudices, discriminatory ideology and power, which perpetuates the marginalization of certain groups (Black and Roma people, Jews and Muslims, among other targeted groups) and the privileging of others (white, Western, Christian people). It's a systematic form of oppression that combines prejudice with

institutional power to disadvantage one racial group over another; both socially, politically and economically but also to exclude perceived culturally different groups.

The second definition dismantles the idea of so-called “reverse racism” that appears in public debate, primarily in the United States. While Black and racialized people may hold negative prejudices or even commit hateful acts toward white people, this cannot be classified as racism because Black and racialized people do not systematically benefit from racism as a system (Tatum, 1997). What defines racism, according to many researchers and activists, is the difference in power between racial groups (Bonilla-Silva, 2015), rooted in a hierarchical system of racial superiority and inferiority. While anyone can hold racial prejudice, only dominant racial groups can reinforce it through societal structures.

Manifestations of racism evolve significantly over time (Kilgo, 2020). For example, while legal racial segregation or *apartheid* existed decades ago, such practices are no longer legally or socially accepted. Today, racism often takes more subtle forms (Keum & Miller, 2018), which remain widespread (Durrheim, 2018). To understand racism in the present, we must consider how it manifests in contemporary society.

Racism can take many forms. First of all, it can be explicit or implicit. Explicit racism is easily identifiable from the victim’s perspective and causes direct harm. In contrast, implicit racism is a more subtle form that “revolves around racial/ethnic biases, expectations, or tendencies that may affect a person’s behaviors and attitudes toward race-related experiences without awareness of their prejudicial implications” (Keum & Miller, p. 3). In short, subtle racism reflects unconscious biases that influence behavior, sometimes without the person realizing they are being discriminatory.

Keum and Miller (2018, p. 3) identify three additional forms of racism that are often subtle and indirect: aversive racism (involving avoidance of interaction with racial/ethnic groups), colorblind racism (marked by denial or ignorance of racial realities); and racial microaggressions, (which are everyday slights or insults that contain derogatory messages, often unconsciously). Further, Santos (2024) describes another four forms: pejorative name-calling, racial slurs, stereotyping and microaggressions.

One particular manifestation of racism that is especially relevant for present thesis, is cyber racism (Bliuc, 2018). This is a type of interpersonal racism that is expressed in online spaces (Santos, 2024). The same author defines cyber racism as: “when individuals from dominant racial groups engage in behaviours that diminish and harm individuals from other racial groups” (p. 1).

Many scholars distinguish between various forms of racism that can be identified online. For example, Pei (2022, p. 5), from a social science perspective, identifies four types of online racism: blame (which assigns responsibility for a crisis to a specific group), offensiveness (involving aggressive or abusive language toward a group), stigmatization (reinforcing negative stereotypes that devalue a group’s identity) and exclusion (drawing clear boundaries between in-groups and out-groups through othering).

Online racism happens both at the small-scale level of everyday users (such as for example everyday racist comments) and the larger scale of institutional actors (such as for example far-right leaders) (Ekman, 2019). In online spaces, many types of racist manifestations (explicit, implicit, subtle, colorblind racism, microaggressions, among others) often mix together.

Social media provides new ways for racism to manifest, creating a digital landscape where prejudice can spread rapidly and take on different forms. These platforms have a profound impact on many aspects of society; shaping communication, social interaction, and public opinion and discourse and even voting behaviour. The following section will examine the role of social media and its societal implications in more detail.

2. The impact of social media on society

Social media is defined as: “web-based services which allows users to post through a profile as well as allows connections to other profiles” (Madila, 2021, p.1). In the context of these political shifts, it has become a central space for public debate and political mobilization. This is particularly true around sensitive issues such as migration. These platforms are not just neutral spaces but active environments where (anti-)immigration views are shaped (Ekman, 2019). Online communities have a strong influence on how people think about immigrants

and refugees, which makes social media an important place to study how political debates and public attitudes are created, challenged, and spread.

Social media has become a dominant and rapidly expanding force in how people communicate, consume information, and participate in public life (Antypas, 2023). According to Eurostat (2024), approximately 65% of people in the EU used social networking sites in 2024, with participation among young people (aged 16–29) reaching nearly 90%. This highlights broad use but also a clear generational shift in communication habits.

More than just a communication tool, social media acts as a transformative cultural force, fundamentally changing how individuals create, share, and interact with information. In particular, the 2024 EU elections have made the impact of this "era of digital transformation" (Velasco, 2025, p. 1) very clear. Social media networks such as X/ Twitter, Facebook, TikTok and Instagram have evolved into key spaces for bringing people together and exchange (Amedie, 2015), social mobilization, discourse shaping (Velasco, 2025), emotional expression and connection (Zhang, 2025), communication between international organizations and the general public (Ozdemir, 2025), and winning votes in political elections (Antypas, 2023).

In short, social media has the potential to reshape social norms (Rachmad, 2023). It has fundamentally changed how people communicate and engage with political and social issues worldwide (Shahghasemi, 2025), making it "increasingly central in shaping political and social dynamics" (p. 1).

This influence stems in part from social media's decentralized structure, which removes traditional communication barriers (Amedie, 2015) and bypasses media gatekeeping (Velasco, 2025). As a result, individuals can participate more freely in public discourse, and political or other influential actors can express their views to large audiences without censorship. Combined with the growing use of social media as a primary source of information and the high level of user engagement, these factors make social media a powerful tool for shaping public discourse and influencing societal and political opinions (Shaghasemi, 2025).

Notably, the political impact of social media is so significant that Velasco (2025) refers to it as "the platformization of politics" (p. 3). The following section explores this phenomenon further. Understanding how political opinions are shaped by digital platforms is central to the

main goal of this work, which is analyzing online racist discourse during the 2024 EU elections.

2.1. The “platformization” of politics

The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2025) pointed out that election campaigns are now largely happening online, where platforms help spread political messages and give voters easier access to information about parties and candidates. Similarly, a growing body of research emphasizes that social media plays a critical role in how people access information and engage with political and social issues, shaping voter perceptions and behaviors (Shaghasemi, 2025). This makes it an increasingly fundamental part of political campaigns (Zhang, 2025). Social media’s role in politics goes beyond simple communication: it transforms the very nature of political practice.

Online platforms actively structure the way political actors interact with citizens and how political discourse unfolds in real time. These platforms offer politicians the opportunity to spread their opinions and ideas without the gatekeeping of traditional media (Velasco, 2025). Increasingly, they use these tools to reach larger audiences, gain voters, and build popularity (Antypas, 2023).

A key example of this shift was seen during the 2024 European Parliament elections (Velasco, 2025), where the EU formally recognized social media as an essential part of its campaign strategy (Ozdemir, 2025). It became clear how candidates and institutions increasingly relied on social media to mobilize supporters, attract voters, and control public narratives. Similarly, Donald Trump’s 2024 presidential campaign in the United States reflected this trend, using AI-powered ads, and personalized content (Velasco, 2025).

In this context, it’s important to note that this digital transformation in electoral communication affects individual political beliefs and public discourse beyond national borders. Social media’s ability to reach people of all ages and from different places has turned it into a powerful force in setting political agendas and encouraging civic engagement all over the world (Shaghasemi, 2025).

2.2. Social media's dual role in democratic engagement

Overall, scholars have described that social media has a dual role in democratic engagement. On one hand, it facilitates political communication and direct engagement between politicians and the public. It allows individuals to follow and interact with politicians, making political conversations more accessible (Velasco, 2025) and encouraging greater citizen participation (Antypas, 2023). Heidenreich (2022) even argues that this can positively influence elections.

On the other hand, it also introduces serious risks. Research has consistently shown that emotional content, especially sensational and negatively toned, spreads faster than neutral, fact-based information (Antypas, 2023).

For example, in a study on Twitter's emotional diffusion patterns during the German 2021 elections, Zhang (2025) demonstrated that the stronger the emotional tone of a post, the greater its spread. Moreover, among all emotional content, negative emotions appeared more dominant than positive ones. He observed that over 70% of the tweets analyzed expressed negative feelings. The study suggests that the more negative the sentiment, the broader its diffusion tends to be.

Antypas (2023) further confirmed this in a Twitter analysis on the role of emotion in political discussions: in every country studied, negatively charged tweets reached a wider audience than those conveying positive sentiment. He also notes that the influence of negative tweets has grown over time, indicating that negativity increasingly dominates digital political conversations.

According to Zhang (2025), these dynamics foster digital inequality, as they tend to favor certain groups, particularly those promoting extreme ideologies. These effects are especially visible in far-right discourse, which is known for its heavy reliance on intense negative emotions. Populist leaders often exploit sensationalist, emotionally charged (mostly negative), ideologically extreme, and engagement-driven content to gain visibility and support. Institutional actors who prioritize neutral, fact-based communication often find themselves at a disadvantage. As Zhang (2025) puts it, "social media's communication mechanisms impact the equity of the electoral process" (p. 19).

Sensational, emotion-driven content can lead to emotional segmentation and political polarization, both among politicians and the general public. More critically, Vicario (2016) warns that prolonged exposure to negative emotional content is believed to increase individuals' emotional involvement and push them toward more extreme political views.

Another well-known risk of social media is the rapid spread of misinformation, since anyone can post anything without fact-checking. A major challenge here is that sensational content spreads so quickly that fact-checkers cannot keep up (Velasco, 2025). I will further examine the topic of misinformation in the second chapter of this work.

2.3. Social media algorithms reinforce psychological mechanisms

The tendency to focus mainly on negative information is not unique to social media, but rather reflects a broader psychological mechanism that Rozin and Royzman (2001) call negativity bias. This bias means that people naturally give more weight to negative experiences or information than to positive ones of equal intensity.

In their very influential paper: "Negativity Bias, Negativity Dominance, and Contagion", Rozin and Royzman (2001) give simple examples of negativity bias in different psychological and sociological domains. For example, they argue that in moral judgment, a single immoral act can overshadow many good deeds, making negative actions more impactful. In the same line, in emotional evaluation, people may feel disgusted by a clean object simply because it was once near something unpleasant, showing how negative associations can "contaminate" neutral things.

In an additional key publication on this psychological mechanism, titled *"*Bad is Stronger than Good*",* Baumeister et al. (2001) explore why negative information tends to have a greater impact than positive. They argue that, from an evolutionary perspective, it is adaptive to react more strongly to bad than to good because being alert to threats increases the chances of survival. While missing a positive opportunity may lead to regret, overlooking a potential danger can result in serious harm or even death.

In the same line of thought, Soroka (2019) shows that the tendency to focus on negative information also applies to news consumption. In a cross-national study across 17 countries, she found that negativity bias shapes which news is selected and produced, but also how

citizens perceive current affairs (p. 1). However, Soroka also highlights that there are individual differences in how people react to news content.

Another psychological mechanism that may contribute to emotional polarization of individuals and groups in online spaces is confirmation bias. It is defined as “seeking or interpreting evidence in ways that are partial to existing beliefs, expectations, or a hypothesis in hand” (Nickerson, 1998, p. 1); in short, individuals tend to seek, interpret, and remember evidence that supports what they already believe. He explains that it is a fundamental and persistent feature of human cognition, with the (often unconscious) goal of protecting personal and group image.

Applied to social media, confirmation bias may have particularly large impacts. It facilitates the spread of fake news by leading users to engage with and share content that aligns with their preexisting beliefs, regardless of accuracy. This selective exposure, together with the abundance of both accurate and misinformation accessible (Velasco, 2025), makes users more susceptible to misinformation that confirms their opinions (Ling, 2020). Confirmation bias causes voters to share like-minded information, strengthening group identity and increasing political polarization in digital discussions (Zhang, 2025) .

This gives rise to another psychological mechanism called Social Identity Theory, explained mainly by Tajfel and Turner (1979). With this groundbreaking theory, they explain that humans tend to maintain a positive social identity. This is done partly by categorizing people into two groups: their own group (ingroup) and the other group (outgroup). By seeing their own group as superior and the other as inferior, they enhance self-esteem, which is their primary cognitive goal. This mechanism leads to prejudice against outgroups, generating social conflict.

While these phenomena have all been described as universal psychological mechanisms, social media algorithms tend to amplify them, increasing their impact. We have shifted from an intermediated selection process in traditional media to an un-intermediated selection process on social media platforms (Vicario, 2016). This change in news consumption dynamics amplifies negativity bias (leading individuals to select mostly negative news) as well as confirmation bias (causing individuals to choose information consistent with their existing beliefs).

Social media further amplifies this by personalizing algorithms that predominantly show content aligned with users' beliefs (Velasco, 2025). This contributes to the creation of echo chambers, which are like-minded digital communities (Vicario, 2016). These spaces, often taking the form of groups on social media platforms, are self-reinforcing environments (Velasco, 2025) where individuals' opinions and beliefs are strengthened not only by cognitive biases but also through interaction with others. Garimella (2018) even observed that users who share content from both sides of the political spectrum pay a social price in the form of lower engagement on these platforms.

This dynamic reduces exposure to differing views and deepens existing biases, leading users to mostly engage with content that confirms their preexisting beliefs. This effect is particularly strong among individuals who rely on social media as their primary source of information (Zhang, 2025).

This is a key feature that logically contributes to emotional and political polarization (Zhang, 2025). Interactions with solely like-minded people often makes individuals' emotions even more negative and increases group division (Vicario, 2016). As a result, it significantly limits meaningful dialogue between opposing viewpoints and constrains the expression of diverse political perspectives (Zhang, 2025).

To further complicate all of this, social media is not a neutral space for content dissemination; rather, its profit-driven algorithms are designed to maximize engagement (Velasco, 2025). This means that social media users are incentivized to produce content that maximizes interaction. Vicario (2016) described this phenomenon as "Attention Bulimia" (p. 1).

Concepts and information tend to become oversimplified and manipulated. Building on this, because sensational, negative, and emotionally extreme content draws more attention online, users and political actors are encouraged to share it instead of neutral, fact-based information. Consequently, this type of content becomes over-represented in contemporary political discussions.

On top of this, such content appears to amplify psychological mechanisms like negativity bias, confirmation bias, and in-group versus out-group dynamics, which foster echo chambers and contribute to political and emotional polarisation.

2.4. Consequences for political and social realities

Naturally, while all of this unfolds in the online world, it has significant offline repercussions, shaping public discourse on socially relevant issues (Vicario, 2016), as well as voting behaviour. As a result, political narratives shift away from objective analysis and toward emotionally driven and divisive rhetoric (Zhang, 2025), ultimately leading to a fragmentation of the political audience (Velasco, 2025).

As Heidenreich (2022) puts it: “While this can be seen as an overall undesirable dynamic, it becomes even more problematic with respect to sensitive topics, such as migration” (p. 2). In this context, the same author warns of “incivility, hostile and anti-immigration discourses on social media” (p. 16) as a consequence of these dynamics.

This raises the need to carefully monitor and address these issues, especially when they target marginalized groups. Studying these patterns carefully is essential, and to do this well, we need clear and reliable research methods. That is why the next chapter focuses on the methodologies used to study racism on social media, providing the tools to identify, analyze, and track online racist behaviors.

3. Research methodologies to study racism on social media

To identify and understand trends of racism on social media, it is essential to understand the basis on which these conclusions are obtained. Social media provides an enormous amount of fairly accessible information that individuals across Europe post daily to express their opinions. However, this data is not easily retrieved, and identifying useful information can be difficult.

The way ambiguous content from social media is collected and analysed has direct consequences for the conclusions that are drawn. To address the research question of this thesis (identifying the main trends of online racism during the 2024 EU electoral period), we must first understand the origins of the data and how researchers drew conclusions and identified trends from it.

Without a sufficient understanding of the methodologies used to obtain these trends, it is easy to reach incorrect conclusions. For this reason, this section will thoroughly analyse the

methodological approaches researchers have applied to social media data, with a specific focus on the study of racism on these platforms.

3.1. Social Media Analytics (SMA): an introduction

Because of the rapid growth, widespread use, and unique characteristics of social media networks (as explained previously); content creation and user interaction on these platforms generate an enormous amount of data every second. These vast quantities of data are produced at unprecedented speeds, connecting users, data, and information from around the world and making them accessible almost in real time (Rowe, 2021).

This “digitalization of information” (Singh, 2025, p. 1) has given rise to a new “big data era” (Singh, 2025, p. 1). Big data has been defined as “massive and complex data that require special technologies and approaches for storage, processing, and analysis” (Badshah, 2024, p. 1). These are immense volumes of data generated every second by social media users globally, encompassing both structured and unstructured formats (Madila, 2021).

All of this vast amount of information is not just a collection of random texts and images, but behind it lies valuable insight about the world we live in (Badshah, 2021; Bazzaz, 2021; Madila, 2024; Rowe, 2021). The data generated by social network users can help social science researchers understand public opinion and sentiment. It has even been shown to be able to predict political election results in some cases (Zhang, 2025). In general, it can help bring to light hidden societal trends and connections (Singh, 2025).

One key aspect is that all of this valuable data is publicly available through social media network sites. For several fields, such as health, tourism, disaster management, business, media, sports, politics, stock market, transport, cyber security, earth science, education, and more; big data availability through social media has given rise to a change in methodology when it comes to researching and decision-making (Madila, 2021; Bashah, 2024). In the words of Singh (2025): this “big data era transforms the information analysis landscape” (p. 1).

Social sciences is no exception. Where traditionally social sciences used dominantly surveys, interviews, among other techniques; they now increasingly focus on analysing these new forms of data. Traditional methods have a significant gap between data collection and release (Rowe, 2021), which social media data can overcome. This enables social

sciences scholars to detect temporal changes in dynamic, public opinion. Furthermore, traditional methods often face scale deficiency (Bazzazz, 2021), as collection of data can be expensive and time costly. However, as mentioned before, on social media networks, users generate billions of data at any moment, where they freely express their emotions and opinions about various topics.

One important aspect to mention is that this data is not generated nor collected following sample guidelines, which means that social media network data can not be generalized over the whole population (Rowe, 2021). Notably, social media networks usually represent mainly the younger population (Eurostat, 2024). However, given its magnitude, it does provide useful information about public opinion and emotions. Thus, it is very interesting to be used to complement traditional social science methods (Rowe, 2021).

Now, one important issue with big data is its difficulty to be understood. Given the nature of this enormous amount of data, it is challenging to find these useful insights behind it, both for humans as for computing tools (Mullah, 2021). Here Social Media Analytics (SMA) arises as a methodologic field of study. It has been defined as: “a scientific approach to extract data and analyse the structural characteristics of networks both quantitatively and qualitatively” (Bazzaz, 2021, p. 2). Such an approach can enable researchers to gain valuable information about societal problems from social media big data, and this way contributes to finding creative solutions. This transformation has turned SMA into a “game-changing instrument” (Singh, 2025, p. 22) in social science research.

For this to be possible, the data generated by social network sites first needs to be collected, cleaned, processed and interpreted. It would be extremely time and resources costly to do that manually, to not say completely impossible (Benítez, 2021). Therefore, Big Data Analysis is linked to Machine Learning (ML) approaches, Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Deep Learning (DP), which are advanced technologies that enable the processing of huge amounts of data (Bashah, 2024).

These “highly advanced computational methods” (Pei, 2022, p. 1), are being widely and increasingly adopted in social science research. Particularly, in the field of social media, ML and AI approaches are necessary and thus widely adopted among researchers (Ekman, 2019; Ziems, 2020; Benítez, 2021; Rowe; 2021; Lee, 2022).

Among hundreds, one concrete example is the “Detect Then Act Project”, funded by the European Commission. This project uses AI tools to detect toxic and hateful content on social media, aiming to decrease hate speech by detecting it faster. Human experts train this AI, explaining which words and images are harmful, in terms of sexism, racism, threats, among others, so that the AI can detect it faster (De Smedt, 2021). Later in this section, I will explain more specific examples of studies who employ ML approaches for SMA.

However, this field is relatively new (Mullah, 2021). Whereas topics like racism are an old societal (research) problem, social media adds new challenges. Among other factors, its detection on social media is one reason why this area of research remains relatively new. Nevertheless, given that it’s such a "powerful tool” (Vicario, 2016, p. 1), it is very fast evolving (Mullah, 2021). There are a lot of publications that use, try out and contribute to improvements of these tools.

3.2. SMA: Applications

3.2.1. Big Data Collection

The first step in any SMA application is collecting the necessary data from internet platforms. Given the scale and nature of the required data, this task can be quite challenging. The process is commonly referred to as web scraping. Various AI-driven tools and techniques have been developed to support this phase (Singh, 2025).

Among the most commonly employed tools are Application Programming Interfaces (APIs) (Bazzaz, 2021). An API is a tool or service provided by social media platforms that allows researchers to access specific types of data in an automated way. APIs (for example Twitter’s API or Meta's Graph API), allow researchers to programmatically extract data from platforms in a relatively structured and secure way.

In order to filter social media content to extract, the researcher needs to decide about how, where and what kind of data will be collected (Mullah, 2021). This is a critical step in the process of SMA, in order to capture the most relevant information for one’s study (Rowe, 2021).

First, it is important that hashtags and keywords are carefully identified, which is commonly done with the help of experts in the field (Benítez, 2021; Rowe, 2021). Another commonly

used technique to find the most relevant hashtags and keywords is what Ng (2024) explains as the “snowball sampling method” (p. 4): based on hashtags or keywords collected from past scholarship, commonly used hashtags or keywords that appear in these already selected content are identified, and so on.

Another important choice a researcher has to make is which social media platform the data is going to be extracted from. To this day, by far most studies who analyse social media content collect data from X/Twitter and to a lesser extent Facebook (Mullah, 2021). Madila (2021) observed in 2021 in a review about SMA, that over 77% of the studies analysed X/Twitter as a social media platform, which makes that this platform is clearly overrepresented in SMA.

Notably, it is important to mention that there are relevant differences in platforms with regard to how individuals use each platform. Among them, X/Twitter stands out as the most prominent space for political discussion. It encourages political participation (Antypas, 2023), promotes interaction-driven content, and is increasingly used by politicians and journalists during election campaigns (Zhang, 2025). Indeed, Velasco (2025) observes that user engagement in political discourse is higher on X/Twitter compared to other platforms. In contrast, Facebook is particularly conducive to emotional expression around political issues, often resulting in polarized communities (Vicario, 2016). Meanwhile, Threads, the Instagram extension, leans more toward informational content and tends to foster a less polarized communication style (Velasco, 2025).

Within the topic of data collection, it is important to make an ethics statement. Content published on social media platforms is publicly available. Users on these platforms know that the content that they post can be seen by anyone. This means that individuals do not have to give consent for these contents to be used for research (Benítez, 2021). The only exception is when their accounts are private and in that case, data is not available for data scraping (Vicario, 2016). However, some researchers choose to omit users’ names and other information out of privacy (Ekman, 2019).

3.2.2. Specific methods

In order to attain their research objective, researchers have to make a choice about which specific method they are going to employ. SMA is a very broad field of study, thus it includes a great variety of specific methods. In a general review about SMA, Bazzaz (2021) observed

two major categories within these specific methods: content-oriented approaches (where the specific content such as text, image, video, etc. of social media platforms is analysed) and network-oriented approaches (where the analysis focus is on user/ entities nodes and their relationships within social networks). According to this author, the mostly used approaches are the content-oriented ones (51% of the analysed studies).

To facilitate the structure of the present section, I will follow the same categorization as Bazzaz (2021), placing concrete examples of methods within these two major categories. However, it is relevant to mention that the big majority of the studies analysing social media use mixed-method approaches, combining both traditional social science methods such as surveys or interviews with various specific methods of SMA. While these methods are often used together in practice, I will present them individually to clarify their specific functions and differences within SMA.

3.2.2.1. Content-oriented approaches

In content-oriented methodologies, the research focus is analysing the specific content of social media posts and interactions. To do this, a crucial first step in any content-oriented approach involving human language is applying Natural Language Processing (NLP) (Singh, 2025). This is a field that enables computers to analyze, interpret, and sometimes generate human language. The main goal of NLP is to help computing tools understand and interact with human language in a meaningful way.

Within content-oriented approaches, different specific techniques can be employed. In this review, I will focus on 3 of the most commonly used ones: (A) text classification, (B) sentiment analysis, (C) content analysis.

A. Text classification

One common technique within content analysis is text classification, where texts are automatically categorized into predefined groups (for example; racist or non-racist). Because most of social media's data are in text-format, this is a particularly interesting method for SMA (Mullah, 2021).

For example, Pei (2022) proposed a multidimensional classification model for racist tweets. They developed five categories (stigmatization, offensiveness, blame, exclusion, and

non-racist) and trained various Machine Learning (ML) models on a manually annotated subset of 6,000 tweets. This text classification allowed them to conclude that, from their five categories, stigmatization was found to be the most common racist theme on X/Twitter. This means that it was the most likely to act as the leading factor triggering the racist behaviours.

B. Sentiment analysis

Sentiment analysis is a more refined form of text classification method: instead of classifying text into pre-defined categories (as does text classification), sentiment analysis classifies text into a scale of emotion, generally ranging from -1 (extremely negative) to +1 (extremely positive). It uses NLP to automatically identify the subjective information collected from social media into different scales of emotions (Singh, 2025). It's also known as "opinion mining" or "emotional artificial intelligence" (Rowe, 2021, p. 8).

Sentiment analysis is a crucial, relevant and effective method for analysing public opinion and sentiment about various social topics (Singh, 2025), such as political discourse and crisis management (Zhang, 2025). It's one of the most commonly used methods within SMA (Benítez, 2021). Madila (2021) in a review about application of SMA, observed that over 54% of all reviewed articles employed sentiment analysis. Logically, there are a lot of specific examples of sentiment analysis applications. I will explain two of them.

Vicario et al. (2016) applied sentiment analysis to investigate the emotional dynamics within polarized communities on Facebook. They classified user comments into negative (-1), neutral (0), and positive (+1) sentiments using supervised ML techniques. They observed that as user involvement within an echo chamber increased, sentiment tended to become more negative. Highly active users, especially those who posted more than 100 comments, exhibited a faster shift toward negative sentiment compared to less active participants. This provided important insights about emotional polarization on Facebook.

In the same line, Rowe (2021) employed sentiment analysis to measure shifts in public sentiment on migration during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany, Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The study categorized tweets on a continuous scale from -1 (extremely negative) to +1 (extremely positive). This enabled the researchers to assess general emotional trends in the discourse surrounding migration. The findings revealed a general increase in the volume of tweets discussing immigration across

all countries studied. While moderately negative sentiments were the most common overall, the study also recorded a rise in both strongly positive and strongly negative messages. This indicates not merely a rise in xenophobic or hostile discourse, but rather a growing polarization around the topic of migration.

C. Content analysis

Content analysis is a research method within SMA in order to understand what user content on social media is talking about. Its focus is on extracting meaning from textual content (LaPoe, 2022). The main goal is to interpret the information, particularly within recurrent predefined themes.

For example, Heidenreich (2022) studied the prevalence of migration-related messages on Facebook and X/Twitter in five European countries during the refugee crisis in 2015. After collecting and classifying content that related to migration, they wanted to find out what the users were talking about within the theme of migration. They identified 4 issue-specific frames in political actors' migration-related messages on the platforms: economy, labour market, security, and welfare. The method allowed the researchers to systematically detect the presence of these frames across their dataset.

Their results showed that 52.7% of Facebook posts and 24.9% of tweets referenced at least one of the four frames, with security being the most frequently used (13.8% overall), especially in Poland (19.3%) and Germany (17.3%). Economy and labour market frames were also popular in Poland, and welfare framing was most common in Germany. It showed that most analysed migration related online content referred to security. This conclusion is in line with a former observation about the theory of securitization of migration, as will be further explained in Chapter 2 of this thesis.

3.2.2.2. Network-oriented approaches: Social Network Analysis (SNA)

While in content-oriented approaches the main goal is analysing the specific content from social media data, in Social Network Analysis (SNA) the focus is on the relationships between the users and contents (Tabassum, 2018). Singh (2025) defined it as follows: “a method for examining the connections and interactions between individuals in social systems” (p. 9).

SNA is not a new field in sociology. It has been traditionally used to understand relationships and connections between individuals and groups. Before the rise of social media, researchers relied on self-reported data to study these relationships. Now, however, social media allows for the collection of such data without direct intervention from the study subjects (LaPoe, 2022). This shift is what makes SNA revolutionary in the context of social media.

The potential of SNA goes beyond simply mapping relationships: for example, it's commonly used for influence detection and maximization (Singh, 2025), information diffusion and spread networks (Bazzaz, 2021) and community or cluster detection (Tabassum, 2028). Among these techniques, Tabassum (2018) differentiates between node level and network level.

First, node level analysis means that the focus of the analysis is on the nodes, meaning the individuals. This is used for understanding the positions of different individuals in the social network and for identifying relevant actors in the network (for example for detecting who has influence over other nodes). The author explains that to do this, one can use different statistical techniques. For example one can look at how many neighbours a specific node has, how closely it is connected to other nodes or how fast a specific node would be able to reach the whole network.

Second, network level analysis means that the focus of analysis is on the network structure as a whole, which gives "insights about important properties of the underlying social phenomena" (Tabassum, 2018, p. 4). Within this type of analysis, it is possible to assess how efficiently information flows through the network, how well the network is globally connected, or the overall degree of connectivity within the network.

On top of statistical measures, analysed social networks are often mapped with graphs. Visualization techniques in the field of SNA are not merely for the aesthetics, but are an essential element that allow researchers to gain important information about the network they are analysing (Singh, 2025). The importance can be explained by the famous example of Anscombe in his 1973 article: in Figure 1, we can see four graphs with data that have the same statistical characteristics (the same mean, standard deviance and the same correlation

between X and Y). However, the data is organized in a very different way. Without visualising the data, one would lose a big part of information about the data.

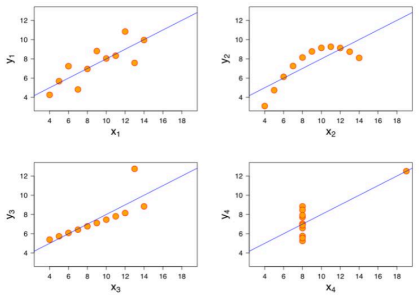


Figure 1: The importance of visual representation
Source: Anscombe (1973)

Similarly, in SNA, the representation of a social network is an important part of the information of the network analysis, especially given the enormous amount of data that is being analysed. Therefore, there are general representation characteristics that are universally used within SNA (Tabassum, 2018). For a small example, see Figure 2. This figure represents the bases of a social network with different possible characteristics.

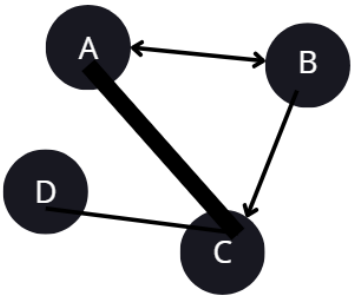


Figure 2: basic representation of a social network
Source: author's own elaboration

The circles with the letters A, B, C and D are called nodes. They can represent different entities, depending on the field of study (it can be individuals, organizations, countries, animals, etc.) (Tabassum, 2018).

They can be connected with each other through lines that are called edges. Edges can represent different kinds of relationships, depending on the field of study (it can represent relationships, flow of money, cooperation, spread of a virus, spread of information, etc.) (Tabassum, 2018; Ziems, 2020). Furthermore, these edges can be more specified.

First, they can be directed or nondirected, depending on the relationship between the nodes, which can be symmetric or asymmetric. Undirected edges are shown in Figure 2 between node A and C and between node D and C. Directed edges in Figure 2 are shown between node A and B and between node B and C.

Furthermore, edges can be weighted or unweighted, depending on the value of the connection, which can be basic or stronger/weaker. Unweighted edges are shown in Figure 2 between node A and B, node B and C and node D and C. A weighted edge is shown in Figure 2 between node A and C.

When applied to the topic of this thesis (online racism), SNA has proven particularly relevant for analyzing these issues. Understanding how racism spreads, as well as identifying the factors and individuals that influence this process, has been central to numerous published studies. To provide a clearer picture of this complex, broad, and diverse field of SNA, I will present three concrete examples of research projects that have employed this methodology within this domain.

Particularly, the study *"*Racism is a Virus*"* by Ziems (2020) is a very interesting example for the present work, as it demonstrates several key applications of SNA and provides valuable insights into online racism. The authors employed various SNA techniques to analyze the evolution and spread of anti-Asian hate speech on Twitter during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The goal of the study was to understand how hate and counterhate narratives develop and diffuse through social media networks. To do this, the researchers applied a text classification task to label the content into three categories: hate, counterhate, and neutral. A social network was then constructed by gathering follower and followee information for a random sample of users tweeting about COVID-19.

The network they mapped is shown in Figure 3, where orange nodes mean hate-speech, blue nodes mean counterhate-speech and gray nodes mean neutral speech. This visual representation clearly shows different conclusions. First, it shows that hate tweets were more prevalent than counterhate tweets. Second, it shows that hate users were generally better connected than non hate users (they followed and were followed by more users than counterhate users) as you can see in the orange clusters, while there are not really blue

clusters. Thirdly and interestingly, in contrast to different theories about polarization, Ziems (2020) showed that hateful and counterhate users were highly engaged and closely interacted with one another.

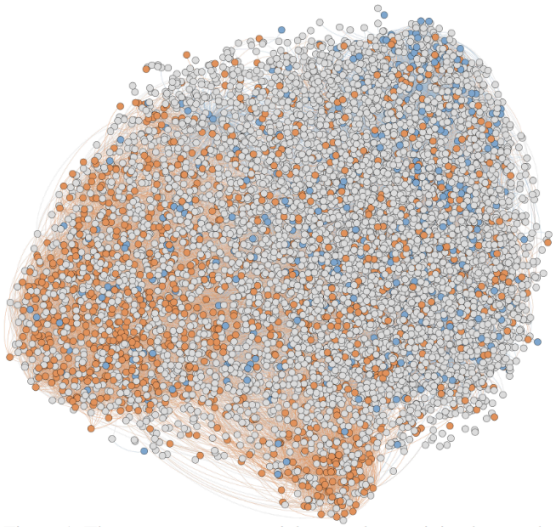


Figure 3: A modelled social network from Twitter discussing COVID-19 and Asian racism
Source: Ziems (2020), p. 1

These findings show once again that online hate speech remains a major and harmful issue on social media. This persistence is partly due to its rapid spread, driven by platform-specific characteristics. Mathew et al. (2019) showcase this by quantifying it. Specifically, they analysed how posts by hateful and non-hateful users spread on the social network platform "Gab" (a social network platform that is known for its freedom of speech, having almost no restrictions about what can be posted). They scraped posts and user connections using hate-related keywords and then classified users as hateful or non-hateful.

After that, they analysed how their content spread through different diffusion dynamics: repost cascades (chains of users who share or repost the same content) were modeled and cascade-level features were extracted: size (number of users who reposted), depth (longest chain of reposts), breadth (maximum reposts at any level), average depth (average chain length), and structural virality (how widely and indirectly the content spread)

The results showed that hateful users were far more active. Shockingly, only 0.67% of users generated 26.8% of all content. They also had more followers and formed dense, highly

interconnected networks with strong reciprocity. These observations align with the findings of Ziems (2020).

These authors statistically showed that posts from hateful users spread farther, deeper, and more virally than those from non-hateful users. This is consistent with earlier findings that negativity spreads faster on social media, as discussed in the previous section of this work. While this specific study focuses on the social network platform Gab, the same type of results have been shown on other social network sites such as X/Twitter (Maarouf, 2024).

3.3. SMA: Remaining challenges

While the findings of various studies that employed SMA have been shown to be highly effective for highlighting relevant insights about societal issues; challenges remain. One of the main challenges of SMA is that the findings are not representative over the whole population (Rowe, 2021). The data collection cannot be done with effective random sampling, because social media users are not representative over the whole population. Moreover, considering that misinformation is still an unresolved and broad issue on social media, one cannot guarantee that this big data is always correct (Badshah, 2024).

Furthermore, it is very clear that there is an overrepresentation of the platform X/ Twitter. This results in the fact that most datasets are only available from this platform. Also the English language is clearly overrepresented in SMA studies. Within context-oriented approaches, language processing is a very challenging task and important efforts have been made to train and model computational algorithms in order to process language better. However, most of these efforts have been only in English (Bazzazz, 2021; Benítez, 2021). This is why various scholars mention the difficulty to treat multilingual data as one of the main challenges of textual analysis (Antypas, 2023). Different solutions are proposed, such as using Google Cloud Translation API (Rowe, 2021) or a multilingual model like ‘XLM-T-Sent’ (Antypas, 2023), but accuracy remains lower than in English.

Specifically to textual analysis within the topic of online racism; a remaining challenge is that language is a dynamic concept (Singh, 2025). Ways to express hate are constantly changing; think about new vocabularies and slangs (Mullah, 2021). And to make things more complicated, hate speech is also subjective (Bazzazz, 2021), which makes it difficult to accurately train computing models to interpret and detect the right sentiment (Rowe, 2021).

Racism is already very complicated to conceptualize and detect for humans; let alone for computer systems. It is not always clear for a computing tool which sentiment is really being expressed. For example, a tweet might say: “I love racism”; here, the word “love” would be associated with positive sentiment, while this tweet actually represents a negative sentiment.

And lastly, social media content contains a lot of unpredictable noise (Rowe, 2021). Among others; special characters, emojis, misspellings and abbreviations (Bazzazz, 2021) are unpredictable and very complicated to teach to a computing tool, yet might contain relevant (hate) sentiments. These might be disturbing correct detection of hate speech, and are ignored in most of the studies analysing this topic (Mullah, 2021).

In conclusion, despite these remaining challenges, SMA has enabled researchers to identify relevant societal trends related to social issues, including online racism, as illustrated by the examples discussed in this chapter. Monitoring and identifying this information is crucial for understanding patterns of online behavior, public sentiment and guiding effective interventions against hate speech. The next chapter explores this topic in greater depth, focusing on a specific period: the 2024 EU elections.

Chapter 2. Results: Trends of racism on social media in the context of the 2024 EU elections

Online content never occurs in a vacuum. Social media both reflects and shapes broader political debates, making it essential to consider the context in which online racism emerges. In this chapter, I will analyze the political context of the EU during the election period and examine how it intersected with trends of racism on social media.

1. Context analysis: migration as a central issue the 2024 EU elections

> "Debates over migration policy and national identity have dominated the political discourse to such an extent, that some scholars argue these elections functioned almost as a referendum on migration." (Pasetti, 2024)

The 2024 EU elections took place in a context of increasing political polarization, a growing influence of far-right parties across member states and a strong debate around migration. This section provides a broad overview of this context; including key developments such as immigration characteristics, party dynamics, and public debates that shaped the election environment.

1.1. Migration in Europe

Migration flows refer to the movement of people who change their place of residence. In statistical terms, migration is measured as the number of people moving (Eurostat, 2025a). A migrant is a person that lives in another country from the one they were born in (Our World in Data, n.d.). From the perspective of Europe; an immigrant is defined as someone who

previously lived in another country and has established residence in a Member State of the EU for at least one year (Eurostat, 2025a).

Migration has been a constant throughout history. For decades, around 3% of the world's population has been made up of migrants. While the proportion of migrants globally has stayed fairly stable, remaining today at approximately 3% of the world's total population, destinations and origins have shifted over time (Our World in Data, n.d.).

From the 16th to the early 20th century, large numbers of Europeans migrated abroad, particularly to the Americas (the United States, Canada, Latin America, and the Caribbean). This movement was driven by a mix of factors: colonization, the search for land and economic opportunity, and the hope of escaping poverty or political unrest at home.

However, since the mid-20th century, Europe's demand for labor to rebuild the economy after the two World Wars, political and economic instability following colonization, and growing global inequality (among a large range of economic, political, and social reasons that are too complex to fully cover here), have shifted migration flows. These have turned Europe from a region people once left (emigration) into a region people now move to (immigration).

As De Haas (2023) notes, given these forces, it is surprising that migration rates are not even higher. Yet today, many European countries increasingly frame immigration as a crisis that threatens stability, making it one of the most debated issues in elections.

Before exploring these political debates, it is useful to look at the current migration statistics and trends in Europe. Migration statistics differ depending on how immigrants are defined and classified. For example, Eurostat and the European Migration Network (2025) focus on third-country nationals, referring to people who do not hold a passport from their host country.

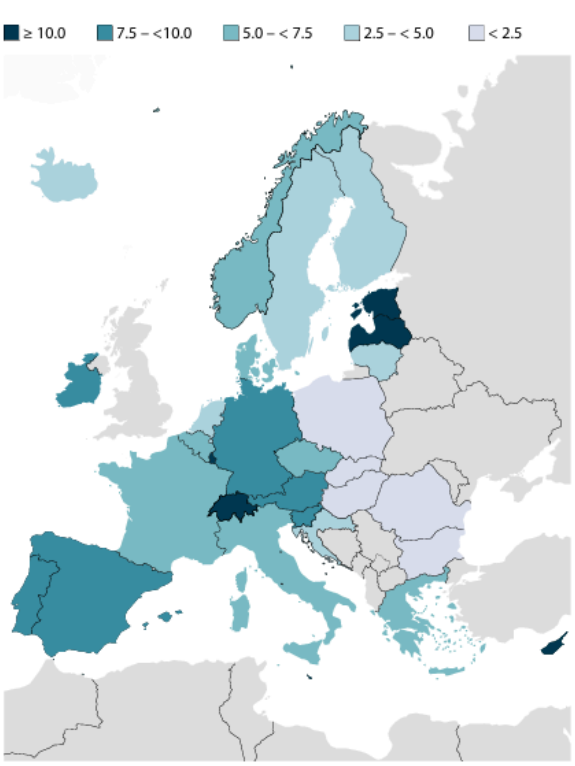
By contrast, the Migration Data Portal (n.d.) and Our World in Data (n.d.) count foreign-born residents, meaning individuals born in another country, regardless of whether they have since obtained citizenship in their host country.

A distinct group of migrants are refugees. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (n.d.), refugees are "people forced to flee their own country and seek safety in another country. They are unable to return to their own country

because of feared persecution as a result of who they are, what they believe in or say, or because of armed conflict, violence or serious public disorder".

According to the classification of Eurostat and the European Migration Network (2025), there resided approximately 29 million citizens of non-member countries in the EU on 1 January 2024. This represents 6.5% of the total EU population.

Map 1 shows their distribution across countries. In absolute numbers, the largest populations of third-country nationals were living in Germany (7.7 million), Spain (4.8 million), France (4.4 million), and Italy (3.8 million). In relative terms, the EU countries with the highest shares of third-country nationals in their populations were Malta (20.4%), Estonia (16.3%), Liechtenstein (16.2%), and Cyprus (13.8%).

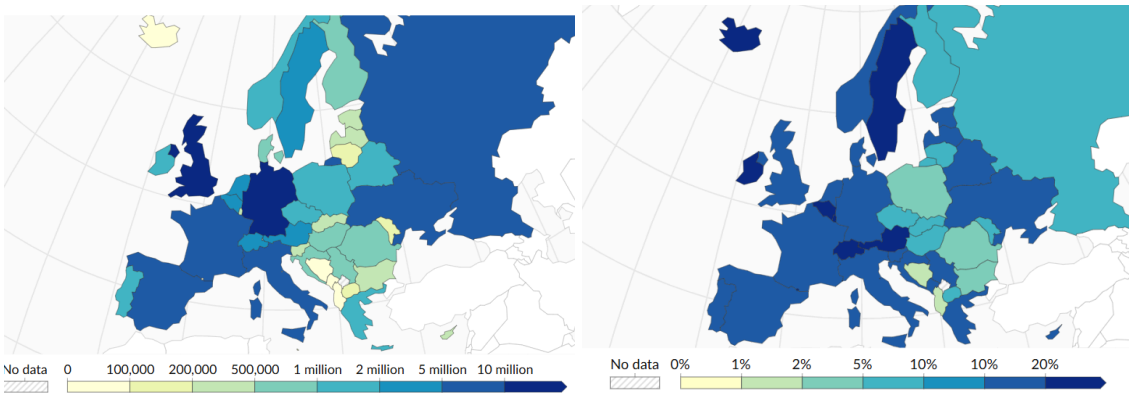


	Number of third-country nationals	Share of the total population (%)
EU	**29 031 849**	**6.5**
Belgium	637 087	5.4
Bulgaria	93 813	1.5
Czechia	756 065	6.9
Denmark	381 918	6.4
Germany	7 699 874	9.2
Estonia	223 542	16.3
Ireland	460 707	8.6
Greece	629 136	6.0
Spain	4 777 990	9.8
France	4 451 597	6.5
Croatia	96 102	2.5
Italy	3 864 018	6.6
Cyprus	133 665	13.8
Latvia	251 343	13.4
Lithuania	133 391	4.6
Luxembourg	71 983	10.7
Hungary	166 271	1.7
Malta	114 670	20.4
Netherlands	778 349	4.3
Austria	883 155	9.6
Poland	397 823	1.1
Portugal	866 122	8.1
Romania	172 587	0.9
Slovenia	182 415	8.6
Slovakia	23 585	0.4
Finland	263 464	4.7
Sweden	521 177	4.9
Iceland	17 689	4.6
Liechtenstein	6 488	16.2
Norway	275 137	5.0
Switzerland	896 072	10.0

Map 1: Total numbers and shares of third-country nationals in the EU and EFTA on the 1/1/2024
Source: Eurostat and the European Migration Network (2025), p. 8

According to the definition used by the Migration Data Portal (n.d.), there were 94.1 million people living in an EU Member State in mid-2024 who were born abroad (including those born in another EU Member State). This represents 12.4% of the total EU population.

For their distribution across countries, see Map 2. In absolute numbers, the largest populations of foreign-born residents were living in Germany (16.8 million), the United Kingdom (11.8 million), France (9.2 million), and Spain (8.9 million). In relative terms, the EU countries with the highest shares of foreign-born residents were Liechtenstein (69.4%), Luxembourg (51.2%), Malta (37.0%), and Switzerland (31.1%).



a *b*

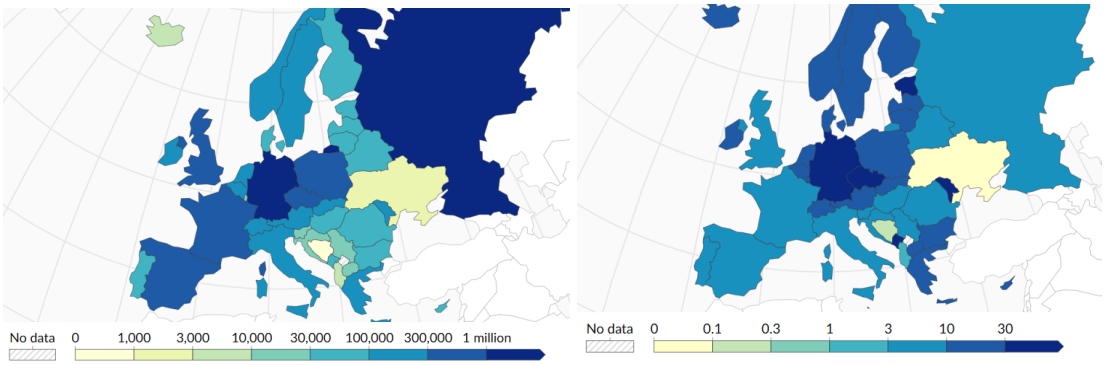
Map 2: Total numbers (a) and shares of the total population (b) of foreign-born residents in the EU in mid-2024

Source: Our World in Data (n.d.)

If only people born outside the EU are counted, there were 44.7 million such residents living in the EU on 1 January 2024, representing 9.9% of the total EU population (Eurostat, 2025b).

Regarding refugees; according to data from the Migration Data Portal (n.d.), there were 9.6 million refugees living in EU Member States in 2023. This represents approximately 1.3% of the total EU population.

For their distribution across countries, see Map 3. In absolute numbers, the largest refugee populations were living in Germany (2.59 million), Poland (940,000), France (665,000), and the United Kingdom (480,000). In relative terms, the EU countries with the highest shares of refugees in their populations were Germany (3.1%), Austria (2.8%), Poland (2.5%), and Latvia (2.4%).

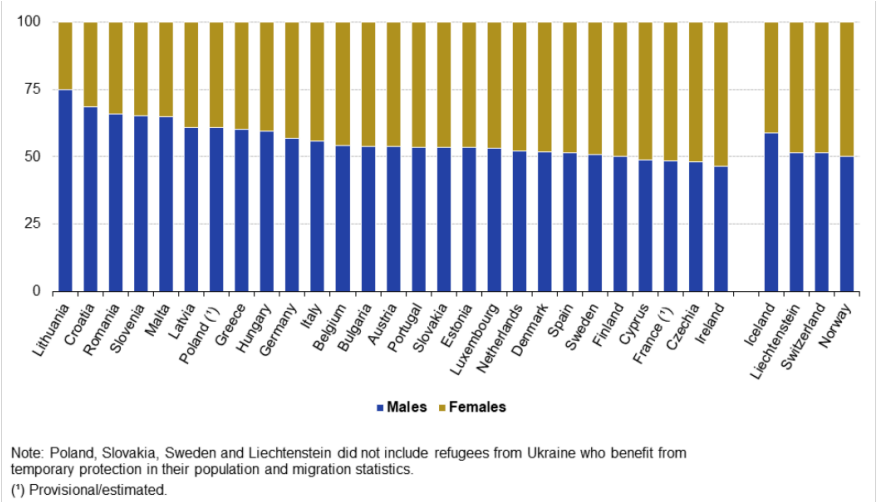


a *b*

Map 3: Total number of refugees (a) and share of refugees per 1000 people (b) living in EU countries in 2023 (latest data)

Source: Our World in Data (n.d.)

In terms of gender, the immigrant population living in EU countries in 2023 was almost evenly split between men and women (Eurostat, 2025a). As shown in Graph 1, there are some exceptions where the share of men is significantly higher. For example, in Lithuania, Croatia, Romania, Slovenia, and Malta, more than 60% of immigrants are men. By contrast, some countries have a slightly higher proportion of female immigrants, such as Ireland, Czechia, France, and Cyprus, though the differences are small.

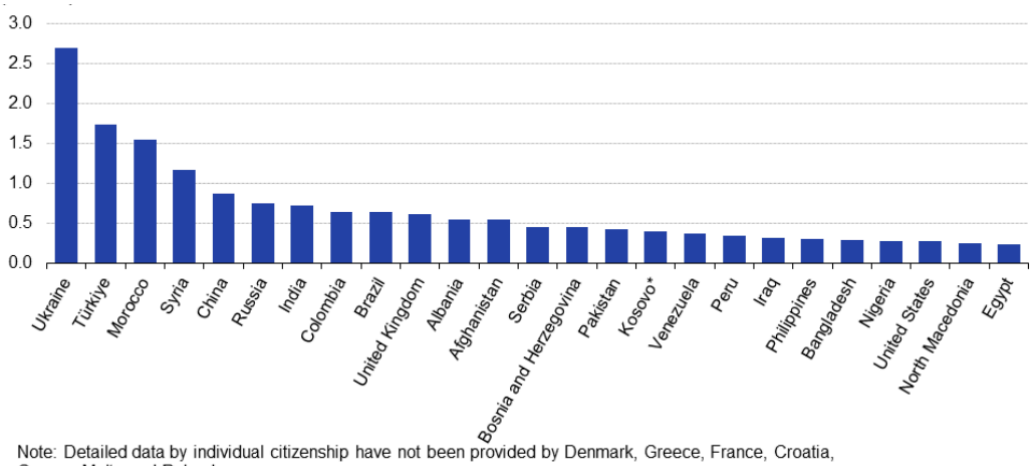


Graph 1: Percentage of all immigrants, by sex in 2023 (latest data)

Source: (Eurostat, 2025a)

Regarding the regions of origin, immigrants in Europe that are born in a non EU country predominantly come from a few specific countries. Eurostat (2025b) provides a list of the main nationalities of non-EU citizens (in million) who were usual residents in the EU on 1

January 2024 (see Graph 2). By far the largest group were Ukrainian nationals, due to the ongoing war with Russia. Other major nationalities included Turkish, Moroccan, Syrian, and Chinese.

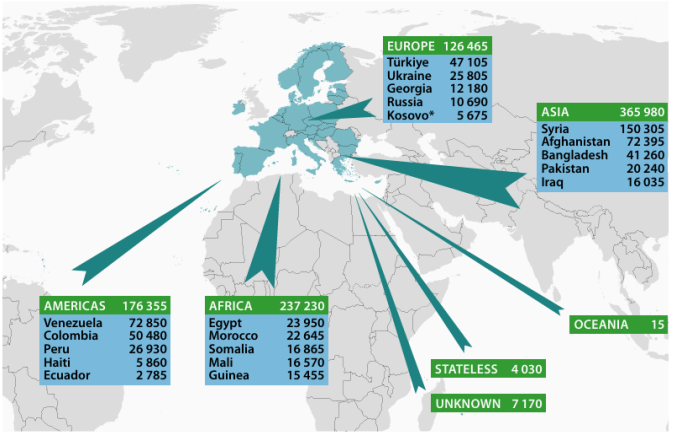


Note: Detailed data by individual citizenship have not been provided by Denmark, Greece, France, Croatia, Cyprus, Malta and Poland
Only detailed data by individual citizenship for the most numerous ones have been provided by Spain.
Poland, Slovakia, Sweden and Liechtenstein did not include refugees from Ukraine who benefit from temporary protection in their population and migration statistics.

Graph 2: Top nationalities of non-EU citizens (in million) that are usual residents in the EU on 1/1/2024

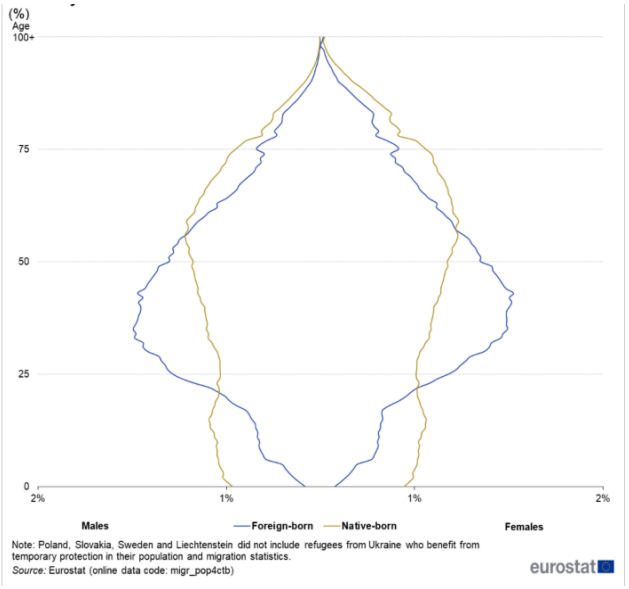
Source: Eurostat (2025b)

In terms of refugees specifically, Eurostat and the European Migration Network (2025) provide data on the regions of origin of first-time asylum applicants in Europe in 2024 (see Map 4). Of the 917,245 applicants, 39.8% came from Asian countries (mainly Syria and Afghanistan), 25.8% from African countries (mainly Egypt and Morocco), 13.7% from other European countries (mainly Turkey and Ukraine), 19.2% from the Americas (mainly Venezuela and Colombia), and 1.5% from Oceania and other regions.



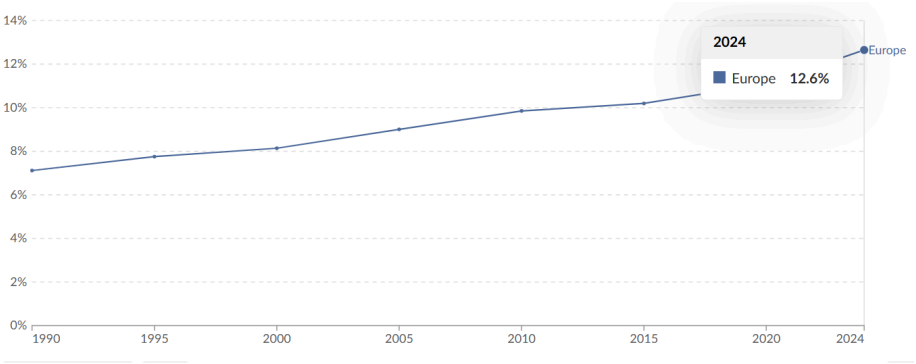
Map 4: Regions of origin of first time asylum applicants in Europe in 2024
Source: Eurostat & European Migration Network (2025), p. 13

Regarding the age profile of immigrants living in Europe, analysis shows that foreign-born people are generally younger than native-born people (see Graph 3). Most foreign-born residents are between 25 and 50 years old, while native-born populations include larger shares of older people (mainly between 55 and 70) as well as generally more children compared to foreign-born populations.



Graph 3: Age structure of foreign-born people and native-born people in Europe on 1/1/2024
Source: (Eurostat, 2025b)

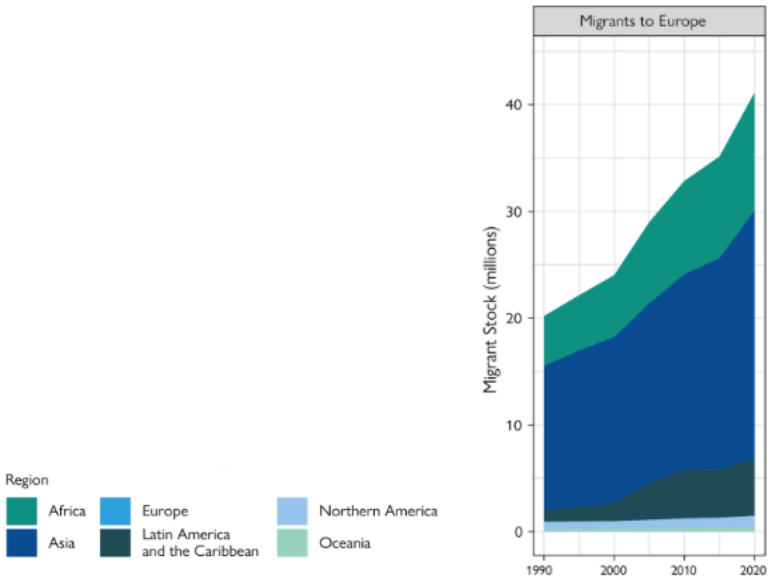
Immigration in Europe has been gradually increasing since 1990 (the earliest available data), when 51.5 million people living in Europe were born in another country, representing 7.1% of the total European population. By 2024, this number had risen to 94.1 million, or 12.6% of the total European population (see Graph 4).



Graph 4 : Evolution of the share of the total European population of people who were born in another country

Source: Our world in data, n.d.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) provides a graph showing the evolution of the main regions of origin of immigrants in Europe (see Graph 5). While the latest data are from 2020 and much has changed since then, the graph provides an overview of long-term trends. The largest group of immigrants in Europe in 1990 came from Asia; this group remains the largest and has continued to grow. The second-largest group in 1990 was from Africa, which remains the second-largest group. A smaller group of immigrants in 1990 came from Latin America and the Caribbean, and this group has also grown by 2020.



Graph 5: Origin of immigrants in Europe (1990-2020)

Source: International Organization for Migration (2024)

As mentioned earlier, factors such as Europe's historical reliance on "guest workers" to rebuild after the two World Wars, political and economic instability following European colonization and growing inequality have contributed to steadily increasing immigration over the past three decades.

Many European countries (and especially far-right parties) have framed this trend as a "crisis," portraying multiculturalism as a threat to European values and identity. This framing became particularly prominent in the 2024 EU elections, where migration emerged as a central topic in both political and public debates.

While the central topic of the 2019 European elections was the European Green Deal, the 2024 elections have largely revolved around the theme of security. According to Hernández Zubizarreta & Ramiro (2024), three main issues dominated the political agenda: defense, trade, and migration. These are all closely interconnected and tied to the broader notion of security.

Defense was framed as military security, particularly in response to the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine. Trade was linked to economic security, as the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the EU's dependency on external suppliers for essential goods such as food and critical resources like semiconductors (Taiwan docs, 2023). Migration was portrayed as a threat to both national welfare systems and to national identity, with so-called "other cultures" often depicted as undermining social cohesion and traditional national ways of living.

Debates over migration policy and national identity have dominated the political discourse to such an extent that some scholars argue these elections functioned almost as a referendum on migration (Pasetti, 2024). Far-right parties played a particularly prominent role in these debates, amplifying anti-immigrant rhetoric and framing migration as an existential threat to national identity and social cohesion.

These parties often promote the idea that national identity must be defended against the perceived threat posed by migration. Understanding the far-right's strategies, ideologies, and influence is therefore essential for analyzing how migration became such a central issue in the 2024 EU elections and is crucial for analyzing how online and offline debates about migration are shaped. The following section will examine the far-right in Europe, exploring

their ideological foundations, variations across countries, and influence on contemporary political discourse.

1.2. The far-right in Europe

Far-right parties are commonly linked to ideologies rooted in strong nationalism, exclusionary nativism, authoritarian tendencies, and a focus on ethnic or cultural identity (Mudde, 2004, as cited in Aktas, 2025). Yet, these parties are not ideologically monolithic; instead, they are multifaceted and vary significantly in form and expression across contexts (Aktas, 2025). The term "radical right" and “far-right” is frequently used, but definitions and classifications differ across academic literature.

After World War II, far-right movements were decisively pushed to the political margins across much of Europe. Discredited by their association with fascism and totalitarian violence, these groups were excluded from democratic politics for decades (Mudde, 2024). The devastating legacy of the war prompted European societies to commit to democratic rebuilding, with a central focus on human rights, legal protections, and multilateral cooperation (Aktas, 2025). This post-war consensus laid the groundwork for the continent’s reinvention, eventually giving rise to the European Union.

During this early post-war period, the dominant political project emphasized reconciliation, integration, and liberal democratic governance. Many far-right parties vanished from the political landscape altogether (Aktas, 2025).

However, by the 1990s, a shift began to take place. Nationalist and exclusionary discourses re-emerged, this time often repackaged in more strategic and electorally popular forms. The post-war consensus began to erode under the weight of new social and economic anxieties, including globalization and immigration. In this context, far-right parties began to rebuild their support through the language of cultural preservation and protecting “the real people” against the elites.

What was once considered politically untouchable has, over the last few decades, steadily worked its way into the mainstream (Mudde, 2024). The far-right is not just bringing back old rhetoric; they have updated their image and strategies to reach a wider audience (Aktas, 2025). The next chapter will explore this in greater depth.

As for today, they represent a growing and persistent force in European politics. Their increasing visibility and influence demand serious scholarly and political attention (Aktas, 2025). Notably, over the past five years, far-right parties have steadily gained influence; a trend already evident in the 2019 elections. However, the 2024 EU elections marked a particularly significant surge, and the EU "took a sharp right turn in 2024" (Mudde, 2024, p. 6). All far-right groups in the European Parliament, along with the centre-right European People's Party (EPP), increased their seat counts compared to the 2019–2024 term. In contrast, all centre and left-wing parties, except for the European United Left-Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL), lost seats.

As shown in Table 1 (with far-right parties highlighted in yellow); the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) gained 7 seats, Patriots for Europe (PfE) (which is a newly formed group considered the successor to Identity and Democracy (ID)) gained 34, and Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN) gained 25. Altogether, these far-right groups added 66 seats, bringing their total to 187 out of 720 in the current Parliament. This is more than a quarter of the entire Parliament (European Parliament, 2024).

Group	2019–24	2024–29	Change (Seats)*
European People's Party (EPP)	179	188	+6
Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D)	138	136	-5
Renew Europe	98	77	-23
Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA)	70	53	-19
European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR)	69	78	+7
Identity and Democracy (ID)**	49	84	+34
European United Left–Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL)	37	46	+8
Non-Inscrits (NI)	63	33	-33
Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN)	–	25	+25
Total Seats	**703**	**720**	**-17**

Source: European Parliament, *https://results.elections.europa.eu/en/tools/comparative-tool* (accessed on 17 July 2024).
Notes: This table compares the outgoing legislature, configured as in the last parliamentary session of the ongoing legislature, with the new legislature on 17 July 2024. Note that there are 17 more MEPs in the new legislature.
* Changes in seats are adjusted for the difference in size of the outgoing and incoming legislatures.
** The "new" Patriots for Europe (PfE) group is treated as the successor to ID (see text).

Table 1: "Size of groups in previous and current European Parliament"
Source: Mudde (2024), p. 7

In contrast, the political centre and centre-left experienced a noticeable decline. The liberal Renew Europe group suffered the sharpest losses, dropping from 98 to 77 seats, which is a loss of 23 seats, reducing its share to just over 10% of the European Parliament (European

Parliament, 2024). The Socialists and Democrats (S&D), traditionally the main centre-left bloc, also declined slightly from 138 to 136 seats. The Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA) were particularly impacted, losing 17 seats and falling from 70 to 53. While The Left (GUE/NGL) was the only left-wing group to register a modest increase (from 37 to 46 seats), it remains one of the smallest factions.

What accounts for the recent gains of far-right parties in the European Parliament elections are multiple and complex, shaped by a mix of structural conditions, institutional dynamics, and changing political narratives (Aktas, 2025).

As mentioned before, since the 1990s, in a context of new economic and social worries, far-right parties are increasingly present. However, the 2024 elections marked the first such vote since a series of major overlapping crises that deeply unsettled EU politics: the Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the Hamas attack in October 2023 and ongoing Israeli military violence in Gaza, and ongoing migration pressures rooted in the 2015 refugee crisis (Aktas, 2025).

These events fostered public dissatisfaction with mainstream parties. According to Aktas (2025) and Rosina (2025); far right parties capitalized on these frustrations, framing them as evidence of elite incompetence and institutional failure, while promising to restore control and security. In this way, the current wave of populist reaction may stem from a perceived gap between EU institutions and citizens, who feel their quality of life is declining (Rosina, 2025).

In the same line, Ozdemir (2025) argues that the EU is suffering a legitimacy crisis. Many citizens increasingly question the value of EU membership and view its institutions as distant, elitist, and democratically deficient. In response, EU executives have adopted more strategic and opinionated communication, particularly on social media, aiming to project legitimacy. However, they often do so by diffusing responsibility and portraying the EU as a unified actor, which can backfire and fuel further distrust (Ozdemir, 2025).

To further complicate things, this happens within a polarized digital environment where misinformation and emotion-driven narratives thrive (Antypas, 2023), as explained in detail in the previous chapter of this document. In this context, particularly far-right movements have strategically exploited strong and negative emotions to fuel anti-EU sentiment (Velasco, 2025).

Central to the far right parties' success is their ability to simplify complex political, economic, and social challenges, often framing them through emotionally charged, binary oppositions (Rosina, 2025). Their narratives reduce nuanced debates to clear-cut oppositions between "us" and "them", where "us" is portrayed as a culturally homogenous, endangered group, and "them" as foreign invaders or threats to national identity and security.

Another important consideration as a driver of the recent surge of the far-right, is the nature of European elections themselves. According to second-order election theory, voters often engage with EU contests differently than with national ones, showing lower turnout and voting more emotionally or protest-driven rather than strategically (Mudde, 2024). This creates an electoral opportunity for smaller, oppositional, or more ideologically extreme parties to gain visibility and support, often at the expense of governing parties.

Moreover, far-right ideas were very visible during the 2024 campaign. Big parties like the center-right EPP started using some of the same messages, especially about immigration and national security. Others, such as center and left parties, focused on warning people about the dangers of working with far-right groups. But as Mudde (2024) points out, when elections center around the far right, it usually helps them, giving them more attention, media coverage, and credibility. Instead of keeping the far right on the margins, this has made them seem less extreme in ideology and stronger in EU politics.

The recent gains of far-right parties carry important implications for the composition and dynamics of the European Parliament, as well as for society in general. First of all, far-right advances have reshaped the European Parliament's composition, often at the expense of mainstream parties (European Parliament, 2024). However, despite their numerical growth, these parties have struggled to form a unified bloc. As Mudde (2024) explains with the words "the shuffle in Brussels" (p. 8); the far right's fragmentation has led to a reconfiguration of far right group structures, including the dissolution of the group Identity and Democracy (ID), the creation of new alliances such as and Patriots for Europe (PfE), and shifts in membership between existing groups.

At the same time, Mudde (2024) explains how European Parliament dynamics evolved during this 2024 election period. For example, the traditional cordon sanitaire, where far-right parties were systematically excluded from governance, has weakened. Although many far-right parties remain excluded from key positions, the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group, which includes Italy's Giorgia Meloni, has not been subject to the

same isolation, allowing it to access influential roles within the European Parliament. On top of that, because part of the center-right group EPP's 2024 campaign strategy centered on reelecting Ursula von der Leyen, Von der Leyen reached out to far-right leaders, notably Meloni, which signaled a growing openness to far right-wing cooperation at the EU level, as well as the incorporation and normalization of their ideologies. It is important to note that this provoked a backlash from the center- and left groups.

Furthermore, Passeti (2024) warns about the concrete impacts of these far right gains, especially for the safety of migrants and the protection of their fundamental rights such as asylum. However, Rosina (2025) argues that these parties rarely succeed in actually shaping concrete policies, for example concerning migration. Notably, she explains how most far right leaders soften their image once in power, giving the example of the Meloni government.

What stands out is the indirect effect of far right electoral gains at EU level. While their ability to directly shape policy may remain limited, their success has contributed to the legitimization of extreme ideologies, the securitization of issues such as immigration, and increased pressure on EU leaders to adopt firmer stances on these topics (Pasetti, 2024). As even the far-right party in France; National Rally (RN) claims in its 2024 electoral program: "Although a minority in the European Parliament, the RN MEPs have managed to achieve several ideological victories: it is no longer taboo to defend concepts such as sovereignty, reindustrialization, fair competition, pragmatic monetary policy, or migration control" (Rassemblement National, 2024, p. 6).

In the same line, the far-right party in the Netherlands; Party for Liberty (PVV) says: "A wind of change is blowing across Europe. Parties that want significantly less immigration and asylum, and that defend the interests of their own people, are on the rise. And that brings hope. Hope that we can turn the tide" (Partij voor de Vrijheid, 2024, p. 2). The far right has reshaped the EU political agenda, not necessarily by governing, but by influencing the terms of debate.

By emphasising security, crime and cultural threats, combined with a clear "us" versus "them" framing (Rosina, 2025), they have succeeded in installing politics of fear, which moves the EU further toward a "fortress Europe" model, and away from one centered on rights and humanitarian protection (Pasetti, 2024).

These trends are part of a broader global context. According to Aktas (2025), the far right surge is happening almost everywhere in the world, and even “represents one of the most significant political developments of the early twenty-first century” (p. 11). Notable is the re-election of president Donald Trump in the United States, who’s also engaging in politics of fear with a clear “us” versus “them” framing, but on top of that, implements direct policies that threaten the safety of migrants and their fundamental rights.

Analysis of the far-right within individual Member States

Far right parties secured over a quarter of seats in the European Parliament, however, their electoral performance varied widely across member states, with modest results in Portugal and Spain contrasting sharply with strong showings in Italy, France, Slovenia, and Germany (Rosina, 2025)

Election outcomes are ultimately shaped by the specific dynamics of each national political context. It is therefore essential to examine how far-right parties operate within individual Member States. Since analyzing all EU countries is beyond the limits in time and resources of this work, and given the central focus on online racism (which is closely linked to anti-immigrant sentiment), I will concentrate on the role and narratives of far-right parties in the six EU countries with the largest numbers of foreign-born residents in 2024. These were Germany, France, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, and Belgium (Our World in Data, n.d.).

As shown in Table 2,; far-right parties increased their vote share in the 2024 European Parliament elections in all these six countries. Among these, the most notable changes occurred in Italy, where Fratelli d’Italia (FdI) gained over 22 percentage points and became the largest national party, and in the Netherlands, where the Party for Freedom (PVV) increased its share by 13.4 points. In France, it is also significant that Rassemblement National (RN) has remained the largest national party since 2019. In Belgium, although Vlaams Belang (VB) (which is a Flemish separatist party in Belgium’s northern region, Flanders) gained a more modest 2.8 points, it has now become the country's largest party.

Country	Far-Right party	% vote for the European parliament in 2019	% vote for the European parliament in 2024	Gains
Germany	AfD	11	15.9	4.9
France	RN	23.34	31.37	8.03
Italy	FdI	6.44	28.75	**22.31**
Spain	Vox	6.28	9.63	3.35
The Netherlands	PVV	3.53	16.97	13.44
Belgium	VB	11.68	14.5	2.82

Table 2: Vote share of far-right parties in six EU countries for the European Parliament elections of 2019 and 2024

Source: author's elaboration based on data from European Parliament, 2024

**cases marked in red mean that it is the largest national party*

Electoral program narratives about migration

In these countries, far-right parties have not only expanded their parliamentary presence but also influenced the national political agenda, often reframing migration as a cultural and security crisis. To better understand how these parties mobilize support and legitimize exclusionary discourses, it is essential to examine their programmatic narratives in detail. This section offers an analysis of each country's far-right party program for the 2024 EU elections, focusing specifically on the theme of immigration and the narratives constructed around it.

Across all the 2024 EU electoral programs of these parties, there is a clear throughline in both the themes they emphasize and the solutions they propose. Among the most frequently mentioned and heavily emphasized issues across all programs are national sovereignty and Euroscepticism, economic sovereignty and opposition to EU regulations, so-called climate and energy "realism" (as opposed to the European Green Deal and the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations), family and social conservatism, the protection of traditional culture and identity, and strong anti-immigration stances coupled with calls for strict border control.

However, one of the most dominant and influential themes of these elections was migration, often regarded as "a cornerstone of their identity" (Rosina, 2025). For example, the PVV slogan "The Netherlands First" and VB's slogan "Flanders Ours Again" clearly illustrate how anti-immigration sentiment is deeply embedded in their political identity.

During this analysis, I found that, despite differing persuasive strategies and focal points, several common narratives emerged across nearly all programs. These include a predominant focus on the illegality of migrants, often linking migration with criminality, and frequent references to migration as a driver of crime, the portraying of migration as an uncontrollable crisis. Moreover, these political actors often blame both the EU and national governments for enabling or even facilitating this so-called crisis. Finally, all of this is based on a strong "us" versus "them" narrative, emphasizing the need to protect the national identity of "us" from the perceived threat posed by "them". In the following section, I will examine these narratives in greater depth and illustrate them with concrete examples.

Illegality of migrants

A central narrative across the electoral programs of parties such as AfD, RN, FDI, VOX, and VB is the portrayal of immigrants as predominantly illegal. For example, VB assumes that recent migration is both quantitatively and qualitatively different from earlier periods, implying that today's migration is "massive and illegal", by stating the following: "Migration is a phenomenon of all times. Throughout the centuries, people have moved from one place to another. This has often enriched society. However, it becomes a problem when migration is massive and illegal" (Vlaams Belang, 2024, p. 18).

Furthermore, irregular migration is portrayed as inherently criminal. These programs frequently refer to migration in terms of illegality, reinforcing the idea that unauthorized entry is not just a legal issue but a threat to national security, identity, and public order. Rather than acknowledging the complex reasons individuals might migrate without documentation, these parties consistently frame so-called "illegal migrants" as dangerous intruders.

For example, In Germany, AfD emphasizes the need for strict border protection to prevent "illegal entries" (Alternative für Deutschland, 2023, p. 13). In France, RN supports cooperation with Frontex only on the condition that it facilitates the immediate deportation of "illegal migrants, Islamists, and foreign criminals" (Rassemblement National, 2024, p. 5), effectively merging legal status with criminality.

In Spain, VOX uses particularly harsh rhetoric, equating illegal immigration with serious criminal behavior. This is clearly expressed in the following statement: "As for illegal immigrants, they must know that their arrival will immediately be followed by expulsion. Europe must send a clear message: no one who enters illegally will be able to regularize

their situation in any country of the Union" (VOX, 2024, p. 14). Image 1, which is retrieved from VOX's 2024 electoral program, visually reinforces this narrative by equating illegality with criminality, using the phrase "against the distribution of illegals" alongside a stereotypical depiction of criminals.

Image 1: Image from VOX's electoral program from the 2024 EU elections
Source: Vox, 2024

In Belgium, Vlaams Belang reinforces this framing by linking illegal migration to crime, terrorism, poverty, and urban decline. One example reads: "Brussels: A large city with more than 100,000 illegal immigrants. A capital with dangerous no-go zones" (Vlaams Belang, 2024, p. 12). The party even extends the criminal framing beyond illegality, suggesting that all immigration is associated with societal breakdown: "The city is burdened by poverty, crime, the spread of French influence, mass immigration, terrorism, corruption, and political mismanagement" (Vlaams Belang, 2024, p. 12).

Across these narratives, "illegality" is not treated as a neutral legal classification but rather as a moral and serious offense. Immigration procedures themselves are never critically examined; instead, anyone who violates them is automatically depicted as inherently criminal and dangerous.

Politics of fear

A central pillar of far-right discourse during the 2024 electoral period was the use of a security frame to portray immigration as a direct threat to national safety and public order. As

Heidenreich (2022) explains, the “security frame” (p. 5) is the most negative way migration is talked about in public discussions, frequently linking migrants to crime, terrorism, or societal instability. This framing reflects a broader process of securitization of migration, in which migrants are portrayed not as individuals seeking refuge or opportunity, but as threats to national security, thereby justifying stricter border controls and exclusionary policies.

This is what Rosina (2025) describes using the term “politics of fear” (p. 4). And as Pasetti (2024) argues: “fears, more than the left-right ideological divide, will determine the outcome of June’s vote” (p. 1). In the electoral programs of far-right parties in these six countries, the use and incitement of fear is very clearly present.

To begin with, immigration is portrayed, and often literally called, an important threat to the security of nationals in the receiving countries. For example, AfD speaks of “a threat to the internal security of individual nation-states” (Alternative für Deutschland, 2023, p. 15), RN of “an existential threat to European nations” and “the migratory chaos threatening France and Europe” (Rassemblement National, 2024, p. 9), VOX of “concrete threats to the lives of our fellow citizens, our culture, and our way of life” (VOX, 2024, p. 14), PVV of the “doomed path of open borders” (Partij voor de Vrijheid, 2024, p. 5), and VB of how “current immigration (...) undermines our way of life and (...) safety in our streets” (Vlaams Belang, 2024, p. 18).

Immigration is portrayed as inherently and predominantly criminal. VOX claims that migration has led to “the rise of crimes that were once unthinkable in countries like Spain” (VOX, 2024, p. 13). This shows how the issue of security is sometimes even inherently linked to immigration. As VOX puts it: “Only with strong borders will we have safe neighborhoods.” (VOX, 2024, p. 15). Similarly, FDI states: “Europe must decide who enters its territory, not criminal organizations or hostile foreign actors using migration to destabilize governments” (Fratelli d’Italia, 2024, p. 12). Along the same line, RN proposes that less migration will result in more safety: “To ensure public safety (...) the RN proposes a sharp turn toward firmness on migration” (Rassemblement National, 2024, p. 9).

Within this framework, several distinct narratives emerge. One key narrative is the correlation made between increasing immigration and rising street crime in European cities. Migration is directly linked to higher levels of violence (VOX, 2024, p. 13), knife attacks (Alternative für Deutschland, 2023, p. 15), gang activity (Alternative für Deutschland, 2023, p. 17), and the continuation of criminal behavior by people with prior records (VOX, 2024, p. 14).

Particularly prominent within this idea of increased crime is the fear of terrorism and fundamentalist Islam. For example, RN treats this as a distinct category alongside so-called mass immigration, explicitly stating: “Deport illegal immigrants, Islamists, and foreign criminals” (Rassemblement National, 2024, p. 9). FDI also presents it separately: “Counter religious extremism and Islamist terrorism” (Fratelli d’Italia, 2024, p. 19).

Some electoral programs even dedicate entire chapters to the topic. For example, AfD includes a section titled “Fundamentalist Islam: A Danger to Europe” (Alternative für Deutschland, 2023, p. 13), in which they claim that Islamic culture is incompatible with so-called European values. They aim to instill fear by asserting: “Islam sees itself as the only valid religion on Earth, to which all people must be converted. Apostasy from Islam is punishable under Islamic law” (Alternative für Deutschland, 2023, p. 13). Similarly, VB’s proposals for integration include: “withdraw recognition of Islamic worship” (Vlaams Belang, 2024, p. 20).

Furthermore, immigration is blamed for social and urban breakdown. On the one hand, it is linked to ghettoization (Alternative für Deutschland, 2023, p. 13) and no-go zones (Vlaams Belang, 2024, p. 12). On the other hand, immigrants are blamed for exploiting welfare services. For example, PVV claims that “There is mass exploitation of our welfare and services” (Partij voor de Vrijheid, 2024, p. 5) and also AfD states that “there is an excessive influx of migrants, particularly into the German welfare system” (Alternative für Deutschland, 2023, p. 15).

VB even contrasts immigration directly with the Belgian social model: “A choice must be made: more immigration, or our social model” (Vlaams Belang, 2024, p. 19). In the same line, far-right parties claim that immigration is financially unsustainable and that immigrants rely heavily on social welfare systems. They also accuse governments of allocating excessive welfare benefits and services to immigrants. For example, PVV states: “It (immigration) costs us billions every year” (Partij voor de Vrijheid, 2024, p. 2).

Migration portrayed as an uncontrollable and massive problem

On top of portraying immigration as predominantly illegal and criminal, far-right narratives depict it as an uncontrollable problem. Across the party programs, migration is systematically framed as an unmanageable, escalating flood rather than a regulated process. They suggest

that the only solution is to be extremely firm on immigrants, thereby legitimizing harsh policies and discourses about them. I will return to this point later in this chapter.

References to migration as uncontrollable and massive are highly recurrent in the electoral programs. They speak of the "uncontrolled entry of illegal foreigners" (Alternative für Deutschland, 2023, p. 15), "the submersion of the continent" (Rassemblement National, 2024, p. 6), "the massive and uncontrolled arrival of illegal immigrants" (VOX, 2024, p. 13), "unchecked mass immigration" (Partij voor de Vrijheid, 2024, p. 5), and so on. For example, VB's statement, "Belgium is more than ever a country of immigration, against its will" (Vlaams Belang, 2024, p. 19), reinforces the idea that, even if Belgium does not want immigration, it is so uncontrollable that it happens anyway.

PVV repeatedly asserts that "the Netherlands is full" and "overcrowded" (Partij voor de Vrijheid, 2024, p. 5), citing over a million asylum applications in the EU in 2023 to suggest an imminent collapse. Their slogan-like repetition of phrases such as "our country cannot handle it anymore" (Partij voor de Vrijheid, 2024, p. 5), turns population management into a zero-sum game, where any new arrival is presented as a direct threat to the well-being of the native population.

Blaming European and national governments for this problem

Across electoral programs, it is implied that this so-called uncontrollable problem and existential threat is the result of political betrayal and naïveté and not structural or demographic change. The European Union and national governments are blamed for "leading us irrevocably toward ruin and submission" (VOX, 2024, p. 5). FDI calls the European Union "politically weak and paralyzed by bureaucracy", "as evidenced by the pandemic, conflicts, and the economic, financial, and energy crises of recent years" (Fratelli d'Italia, 2024, p. 2).

This exemplifies the theory of Aktas (2025): far-right parties exploit public frustration with economic, social, political, and security challenges, and the perceived political failure of governing parties to adequately respond to recent crises. Far-right parties use these perceived failures as propaganda tools, by "simplifying complex problems (...) and downplaying social differences while portraying immigration as a threat to the nation and emphasizing the need to halt the perceived danger of invasion" (Aktas, 2025, p. 5).

According to Rosina (2025), blaming governing institutions for failing to improve living conditions in the EU fuels populist backlash.

These theoretical insights are perfectly illustrated in the following sentence from the RN electoral program:

> "In a world in crisis, plagued by economic wars, geopolitical tensions, demographic, environmental, and technological challenges, the European Union has failed to protect the peoples and position our continent in the 21st century (...) By imposing mass immigration and unfair competition, both resulting from a naïve and outdated vision of globalization, the parties that have so far held the majority in Brussels undermine our security, dismantle our civilization, and destabilize our economic and social model." (Rassemblement National, 2024, p. 9)

Here, the EU is not merely portrayed as ineffective but as actively complicit in societal decline. The language of "imposing," "undermining," and "dismantling" reinforces the idea that elites are out of touch, but also hostile to the interests of their populations.

At the national level, similar narratives appear. AfD blames the German government for a "loss of control becoming a permanent state, which overwhelms the federal, state, and local governments financially, logistically, administratively, and in terms of security" (Alternative für Deutschland, 2023, p. 13). This follows Aktas's theory (2025); immigration is not depicted as just one issue among many, it is often framed as the root cause of all others. As AfD puts it: "a central cause is the still inadequate protection of the EU's external borders" (Alternative für Deutschland, 2023, p. 13).

VOX similarly claims that the migration policies of the PP and PSOE, supported by Brussels, are rooted in "false benevolence" (VOX, 2024, p. 13), and lead to insecurity and cultural disintegration. These policies are said to reflect the interests of detached elites, "safe in their well-guarded mansions" (VOX, 2024, p. 13), rather than those of the Spanish people. VOX argues that the European Commission and national government ignore the everyday consequences of their decisions: "the growing violence in our streets and the threats to our values" (VOX, 2024, p. 15).

PVV and VB echo the same themes. PVV argues that the "fundamental mistake" of European leaders has led to "unchecked mass immigration" (Partij voor de Vrijheid, 2024, p. 5) and disastrous consequences. VB frames immigration not as a global necessity or humanitarian responsibility, but as a deliberate political decision: "Mass immigration is not a natural phenomenon that just happens to us, it is a political choice" (Vlaams Belang, 2024, p. 18).

Through these narratives, the far-right constructs the idea that the so-called migration crisis is not just mismanaged, but created and sustained by political elites who, whether through incompetence or ideological conviction, have betrayed their citizens. This way, far-right parties present themselves as the only viable alternative, capable of reversing this decline and protecting European and national populations.

"Us" versus "them" rhetoric

> "We do not believe in anonymous global citizenship, nor in a multicultural society. For Vlaams Belang, there are no minorities, only Flemings and foreigners." (Vlaams Belang, 2024, p. 78)

All of this, as Aktas (2025) theorizes, is based on a strong and racist "us" versus "them" logic, including the need to defend national and European identities against those of immigrants. This emphasizes and legitimizes "the need to halt the perceived danger of invasion" (Aktas, 2025, 6). Much far-right discourse relies on a binary worldview, where the so-called native population is seen as homogeneous, traditional, and under threat from "the other," typically defined by religion or ethnicity. It is grounded in a perceived cultural incompatibility, where defending one's identity becomes synonymous with rejecting multiculturalism, and in some cases, immigration altogether.

This perceived cultural distinctiveness, which results in the exclusion of certain groups based on cultural identity, is one of the two forms of racism described by Wieviorka (1991) and discussed in the first chapter of this work: "racism of cultural difference and separation".

In this "us" versus "them" narrative, far-right parties position themselves as the only ones who truly see this threat to the native population and as their saviors who will defend them against the foreign "other." They blame European and national governments for not recognizing this threat (or not taking it seriously) and for failing to protect the native

population, while claiming they alone will do so. For example, VB states: “Just like the ordinary man and woman in the street, Vlaams Belang wants a radically different asylum and immigration policy” (Vlaams Belang, 2024, p. 5), positioning themselves alongside ‘the ordinary people’. Similarly, VOX repeatedly accuses the EU of ignoring the voice of the Spanish people (VOX, 2024, p. 4).

This “us” versus “them” framing appears across all electoral programs but is especially visible in the VB and PVV programs. For instance, their slogans “Flanders ours again” (Vlaams Belang, 2024, p. 1), and “The Netherlands first” (Partij voor de Vrijheid, 2024, p. 1), reinforce both Pasetti’s (2024) observation that the 2024 EU elections were almost a referendum on migration, and Aktas’ (2025) point that far-right discourse is rooted in a strong dichotomous “us” versus “them” logic.

The VB program operates entirely within this dichotomy, starting with “Dear Fleming (...) we, the Flemish people, (...)” (Vlaams Belang, 2024, p. 5), and consistently using terms like “our people,” “our families,” and “our identity.” Likewise, the PVV program speaks of “our beautiful country,” “our people,” and asks rhetorically: “Will we choose more fortune seekers, or will we put the Netherlands first?” (Partij voor de Vrijheid, 2024, p. 2).

Across electoral programs, defending multiculturalism is depicted as naive, dangerous, and opposed to defending national identity. As VB frames it: “We do not believe in anonymous global citizenship, nor in a multicultural society. For Vlaams Belang, there are no minorities, only Flemings and foreigners” (Vlaams Belang, 2024, p. 78). VOX uses similarly strong language, calling multiculturalism the “suicidal multiculturalism of von der Leyen” (VOX, 2024, p. 15), implying that protecting multiculturalism threatens national identity and ways of life.

Thus, defending the nation’s identity is framed not only as cultural pride but as an existential necessity, under threat from multiculturalism. Especially from what is portrayed as the incompatible Islamic culture, seen as fundamentally opposed to so-called European values. For example, AfD claims that “rules for life based on the Quran and the Sunna cannot be reconciled with Europe’s core principles of law, freedom, and democracy” (Alternative für Deutschland, 2023, p. 12). Here, the “other” is not only foreign and different but actively dangerous to European values. VOX also claims immigrants are “spread(ing) ideas incompatible with the values and roots of European culture” (VOX, 2024, p. 14).

However, this portrayal of migration as an existential and ideological threat targets certain groups more than others. The generalization of immigration as dangerous is largely directed at non-Western and specifically Muslim migrants.

This is evident in the VB program, which states that migration should be limited to “highly educated migrants, preferably from Western countries” (Vlaams Belang, 2024, p. 33). FdI reinforces this idea by stating that “Europe represents (...) the space in which the values and principles on which our civilization is based have historically taken shape: freedom, equality, democracy, the rule of law, and the meeting of faith and reason, embodied in our classical and Judeo-Christian roots” (Fratelli d’Italia, 2024, p. 2). Here, Europe is portrayed as a civilizational project rooted in Western, Christian values; a cultural definition that inherently excludes Islamic traditions and multicultural realities.

Such distinctions reveal that opposition is not to migration per se, but to specific types of migrants, particularly those perceived as culturally incompatible. Although the discourse constructs a binary between “natives” and “immigrants”, the real division rather seems between ‘European christians’ and ‘Non-european muslims’. In this framing, Islam is both racialized and ideologized as inherently opposed to Western civilization, reinforcing the notion that the “them” refers less to migrants broadly and more to a specific religious and cultural identity portrayed as incompatible with the European way of life.

Another common distinction in far-right electoral programs is between so-called “real” and “fake” migrants. “Real” migrants are those fleeing recognized conflicts, such as the war in Ukraine, while “fake” migrants are dismissed as “fortune seekers” (Partij voor de Vrijheid, 2024, p. 2). For example, AfD calls for “providing local aid to real refugees” (Alternative für Deutschland, 2023, p. 14), implicitly excluding other migrants from deserving protection.

This binary framing reflects a fundamental lack of structural understanding of global inequality. It overlooks the economic, social, and political conditions that drive migration, often shaped by colonial legacies, trade imbalances, and climate injustice. By labeling those fleeing poverty or instability as “false migrants,” these parties deny the legitimacy of economic migration and Europe’s historical responsibility for the very conditions people flee.

AfD and RN explicitly reject “the culture of guilt and shame that postcolonial ideology seeks to establish across Europe,” claiming it “does not do justice to historical facts” (Alternative für Deutschland, 2023, p. 51), (Rassemblement National, 2024, p. 6). They argue that “the

'decolonization' of our thinking and speaking are not expressions of 'historical justice,' but rather of an anti-European and often 'anti-white' sentiment" (Alternative für Deutschland, 2023, p. 51). Instead of acknowledging colonial history and its ongoing consequences, decolonization is framed as a form of so-called "inverse racism" against whites.

Harsch policy proposals

While migration is framed as a profound, overwhelming, and existential threat, far-right actors view themselves as the only ones that are capable and willing to stop this. In their view, only harsh measures can effectively stop the threat, even if such policies approach, or outright cross, the boundaries of human rights.

The proposed measures reflect this logic. For example, VOX calls for a system "so that each Member State can decide the number and type of immigrants it needs and wants to receive" (VOX, 2024, p. 15), which effectively prioritizes national sovereignty over collective responsibility and undermines established international protections for migrants and refugees. VB openly demands: "Stop Family Reunification," "Expand the list of safe countries and regions," "Withdraw recognition of Islamic worship," "Abolish the Federal Migration Centre," and "Abolition of study allowances for non-EU citizens" (Vlaams Belang, 2024, p. 19). These examples illustrate how the perceived crisis is used to justify exclusionary and discriminatory policies.

Strategic promotion of far-right ideologies

These anti-immigrant ideologies and extreme proposals are actively promoted and legitimized through extensive and costly media strategies. Far-right parties have invested heavily in both traditional media and digital platforms, far surpassing the media expenditures of other political parties (Mudde, 2024). They have strategically exploited social media to amplify their messages through misinformation and emotional manipulation (Velasco, 2025), having effectively used algorithm-optimized messaging to mobilize support.

Research indicates that social media environments foster exclusionary and anti-immigrant language, amplifying far-right discourses and fueling their electoral successes (Heidenreich, 2022), as explained in the previous chapter of the present thesis. Overall, the far-right's use of social media's high-engagement spaces and emotional negativity is a key factor in their recent surge (Velasco, 2025).

According to Mudde (2024), even mainstream media and political parties have begun co-opting far-right framings and positions on key issues such as immigration. This normalization of far-right discourse in broader political and media ecosystems reinforces the legitimacy of harsh migration policies and further blurs the boundaries between extremist and mainstream positions.

Building on this analysis, it is important to examine how these anti-immigrant messages spread and intensified online, particularly during the sensitive period of the 2024 EU elections. In the next section, I will explore this in more detail.

2. Trends of racism on social media

As recently discussed, the 2024 EU electoral period took place in a context of a surge of far-right parties, marked by harsh and overt anti-immigrant sentiment. This occurred alongside the growing use of social media, where negative and sensational content thrives, and where algorithmic and psychological biases create incentives for individuals and political actors to engage with such content in order to gain popularity and votes, as discussed in the previous chapter of this work.

While this is concerning in general, it becomes especially problematic when directed at vulnerable groups such as refugees and immigrants (Heidenreich, 2022). In this context, an important question arises: what were the main trends in these online negative and sensational narratives targeting these groups?

Following a broad body of literature, I identified four main trends in digital racist discourse. Two of these are neither specific to the EU nor to the election period, but given their broad relevance, they clearly had a major impact in the particular context of this research. The first trend is that online racism tends to rise during times of crisis. In this regard, I paid special attention to three major crises that the EU faced immediately before and during the run-up to the 2024 elections: the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and its consequences within the EU, and the Hamas attack of October 2023, followed by Israel's ongoing military actions and the resulting humanitarian crisis in Gaza.

Given the timing, scale, and significance of these crises, as well as the well-established pattern that racism rises during such moments, it is reasonable to expect that online racism also increased during the 2024 EU electoral period. Indeed, many scholars, as well as

specific data, confirm this second trend: racism rose significantly during the electoral period, particularly targeting the (misleadingly named) group “refugees/migrants” (EOOH, n.d.).

The third trend I identified is the growing spread of disinformation and the use of AI. While this trend was particularly visible during the 2024 EU electoral period, it also reflects a broader pattern across Europe and globally.

The fourth and final trend, which was especially evident during the 2024 EU electoral period, but is also a part of an ongoing broader pattern, is the re-normalization of overt racism online. Although overt racism has been challenged for decades, becoming both legally and socially unacceptable, the rise of social media has allowed it to resurface and become increasingly normalized again. I will now delve deeper into each of these four trends, provide further explanation, and give relevant examples.

2.1. Online racism rises during crises

It is well known that hate crime and speech has increased over the past two decades (Immenkamp, et al., 2024). This has been associated with a succession of economic, social and health crises (Bąkowski, 2022; Immenkamp,et al., 2024). A crisis is defined as: “a situation of great difficulty, confusion, danger or suffering and more specifically as a singular event or a series of events that are threatening to a society in terms of health, safety or well-being” (Faloppa, et al., 2023, p. 10).

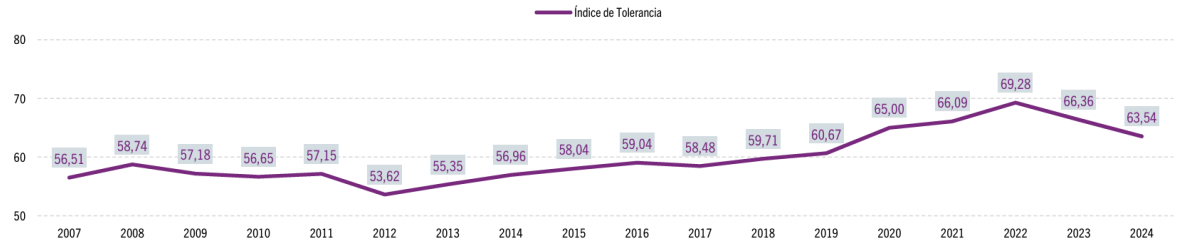
The same authors explain that a time of crisis is marked by paradoxical feelings: on the one hand, a profound sense of uncertainty and unpredictability, and on the other, an urgent belief that decisive action is necessary to prevent negative outcomes. In a context of fear and insecurity, people often seek explanations and scapegoats to restore a sense of control.

This search for scapegoats leads individuals to focus on threats (whether real or imagined) that are perceived as responsible for the crisis or capable of worsening it. The Integrated Threat Theory provides a useful framework for understanding this process: perceptions of realistic threats (such as risks to economic security or physical safety), and symbolic threats (such as challenges to cultural values or social identity), can fuel the belief that certain outgroups endanger society, even if the threats are not real (Stephan & Stephan, 2000). These perceived threats, in turn, intensify prejudice and hostility, making specific groups or

individuals more likely to be constructed as responsible for the crisis and targeted with discrimination and hate.

One specific perceived out-group threat that often emerges in Europe during crises is immigrants. Immigration is frequently framed through other domains, with the most common framings focusing on crime and economic impact (Ekman, 2019; Heidenreich, 2022). When migration is consistently presented in these terms, a crisis that threatens security or economic stability naturally reinforces the association between these problems and migration, thereby worsening public attitudes toward migrants.

A concrete example comes from a case study in the Basque Country. The Basque Observatory for Migration (Ikuspegi) has calculated a tolerance index among native Basque people toward migrants for nearly 20 years. The evolution of this index (as shown in Graph 6) clearly indicates that tolerance toward migrants decreases during crises: it dropped from almost 59 to nearly 54 between 2008 and 2012, consistent with the economic crisis in Spain and Europe overall. Afterward, the tolerance index steadily increased until 2022, when it declined again, reflecting the impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and its consequences in Europe.



Graph 6: Tolerance index from Basque people toward immigrants
Source: Ikuspegi, 2024, p. 120

It is important to note that crises do not create racism out of nowhere but intensify existing stereotypes and xenophobic tendencies during periods of heightened psychological stress. Social media further acts as a powerful amplifier of these biases, reinforcing discriminatory attitudes. However, times of crisis can also generate and evolve new narratives, feelings, and behaviors of hostility (Faloppa et al., 2023).

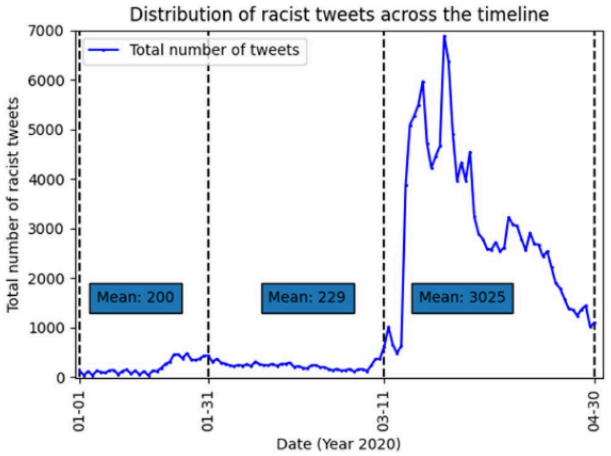
In the years leading up to the 2024 EU elections, Europe experienced several crises, including a new surge in severe climate events, economic challenges (particularly the rising

cost of living), increasing political polarization, the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the Hamas attacks followed by Israel's ongoing military actions and the resulting humanitarian crisis in Gaza. Among these, the last three are the most studied for their role in fueling hate speech against immigrants in the EU. I will now delve a little deeper into these.

Covid-19

In May 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic began to create a worldwide health, economic, and social crisis, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres warned of a "tsunami of hate and xenophobia, scapegoating and scaremongering around the world," referring to the crisis as "a virus of hate" (United Nations, 2020).

A number of researchers have examined the evolution of online racism during the COVID-19 pandemic and found that it increased significantly. For example, Pei (2022) identified racist content on the social media platform X/Twitter. They mapped this evolution and, as shown in Graph 7, online racism spiked in March 2020, coinciding with the start of national lockdowns and the transformation of the outbreak into a transnational crisis. The study further concludes that the COVID-19 pandemic brought about a "worldwide upsurge of racism" (p. 1) and even cites research suggesting that, during this period, racism spread more rapidly than the virus itself.

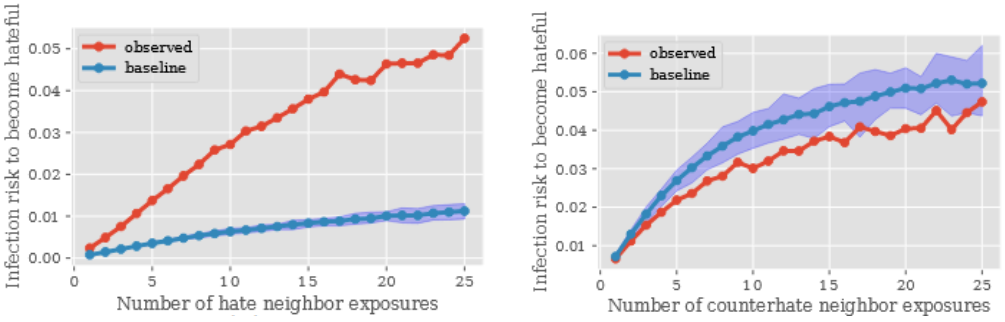


Graph 7: The number of tweets identified as racist from 1 Jan to 30 Apr 2020

Source: Pei (2022), p. 4

The study carried out by Ziems (2020), titled "Racism is a Virus" not only concluded that the health pandemic sparked racism on social media, particularly targeting Chinese and other

Asian communities, but also statistically showed how “racism was contagious” during the COVID-19 pandemic. They demonstrated that users exposed to hateful content were significantly more likely to post hate speech themselves. As Figure 4a shows; exposure to hate speech significantly increased the likelihood of adopting hate, especially with repeated exposure. In contrast, it revealed that exposure to counterhate slightly but significantly reduced the likelihood of adopting hate (as seen in Figure 4b).



a *b*

Figure 4: “The probability of a node becoming hateful after exposure to neighbours’ tweets, in the observed data and in the baseline” (Ziems, 2020, p. 7)

Source: Ziems (2020), p. 7

Also specifically in the EU, concerns have been raised about the surge of online racism during this health crisis (Bąkowski, 2022). Beyond targeting Chinese and people of Asian descent, hate speech has also increased against migrants in general, refugees, and national minorities, as well as against Jews and other “intersected grounds of discrimination” (Faloppa et al., 2023, p. 7).

As can be understood through the previously explained Integrated Threat Theory, the fear and uncertainty brought by the COVID-19 pandemic intensified nationalist rhetoric and led to the blaming of ‘outsiders,’ including foreigners, for the virus’s spread. In particular, concerns arose that the virus could be “brought in” from other countries or that marginalized communities (such as migrants, refugees, Roma people and marginalized religious groups) were responsible. This perception was further fueled by disinformation and conspiracy theories (Faloppa et al., 2023) and contributed to the observed increase in online racism.

Ukraine

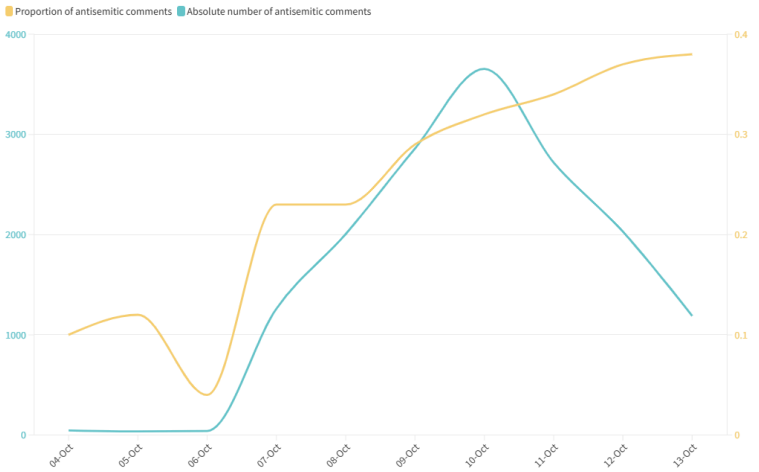
The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 led to an overall welcoming attitude in Europe toward Ukrainian refugees. This attitude, in contrast to the hostile reception of refugees from non-Western countries, has "shed light on multiple forms of racism" (Cénat et al., 2022, p. 1).

However, this crisis has also fueled online racism specifically against Ukrainian refugees. It has generated violent, dehumanizing rhetoric and hate speech across Europe, framing Ukrainians as enemies and promoting narratives that deny Ukraine's sovereignty, civic identity, and culture. On social media platforms like X/Twitter, hashtags such as #ZelenskyWarCriminal, #naziukraine, and "Ukrainians are nazis" have been repeatedly shared since the invasion. In the Netherlands, for example, the hashtag #ZelenskyWarCriminal first appeared shortly after the invasion and peaked on 4 August 2022 in response to an Amnesty International report highlighting potential risks to civilians from Ukrainian army tactics, with another notable peak on 10 October 2022 (Faloppa et al., 2023).

Gaza

Another significant crisis, although not originating in Europe, has had substantial repercussions there: the Hamas terrorist attacks on Israel in October 2023, followed by Israeli military operations and the ongoing humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip. According to a report by the European Parliamentary Research Service, this crisis has "triggered an alarming rise in threats and violence against both Jews and Muslims" in the EU (Immenkamp et al., 2024, p. 1).

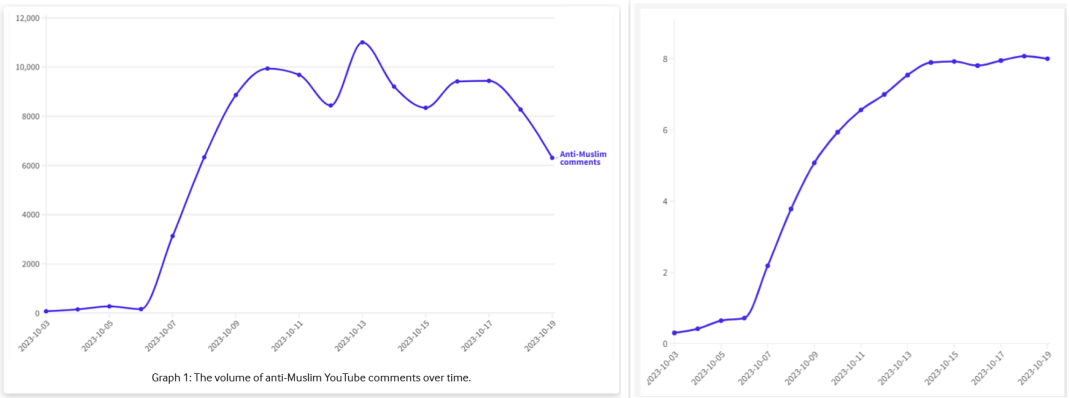
According to research by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), both anti-Muslim and antisemitic comments on YouTube rose sharply after the October 7 Hamas attack (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2023a, 2023b). Regarding antisemitism, the data show a sharp spike in antisemitic comments immediately after the attack, both in absolute numbers and relative to the number of videos posted about the conflict, as seen in Graph 8. Specifically, there was a 4,963% increase in the number of antisemitic comments and a 242% increase in their proportion. Notably, the proportion of hate comments continued to grow in the days following the attack (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2023a).



Graph 8: The proportion and absolute number of antisemetic comments on Youtube videos concerning the Israel/ Hamas conflict

Source: Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2023a

Similar results were found for anti-Muslim hate content on YouTube videos about the conflict. The data show a sharp spike in anti-Muslim comments immediately after the October 7, 2023 attack, both in absolute numbers (Graph 9a) and relative to the number of videos posted about the conflict (Graph 9b). Specifically, there was a 4,200% increase in the number of anti-Muslim comments and an 800% increase in their proportion (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2023b).



a *b*

Graph 9: The absolute number (a) and proportion (b) of anti-Muslim comments on Youtube videos concerning the Israel/ Hamas conflict

Source: Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2023b

Specifically, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA, 2024) has warned of this “alarming rise” (p. 7) in hate and discrimination against Jews and Muslims in the EU since the Hamas attack in 2023 and the ongoing Israeli operations and humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip.

2.2. Online racism increased during the 2024 EU electoral period, especially against the target group “refugee/migrant”

As recently discussed, the 2024 EU elections took place in the aftermath of several major crises, including COVID-19, the war in Ukraine, and the ongoing military operations in Gaza (Faloppa, at al., 2023). These crises have significantly influenced hate speech across Europe.

Political actors also capitalized on these crises during the election campaigns, often highlighting the EU’s perceived inability to manage them effectively. Far-right parties in particular framed these crises as the result of rising immigration, linking them directly to what they presented as failures of EU governance. Consequently, these crises were not only experienced by the population but were also repeatedly invoked and instrumentalized during the electoral period to advance specific political narratives.

Given this, it is reasonable to expect a rise in anti-immigrant sentiment across the EU, which would likely be reflected in racist discourse. This effect is expected to be especially pronounced in online spaces, where features such as the preference of sensational, negatively charged content of social media amplify hate speech.

Indeed, the European Commission Vice-President Margaritis Schinas noted that antisemitic and anti-Muslim hate crimes had "exploded" (Immenkamp, et al., 2024, p. 3) across Europe in the months leading up to the elections. Similarly, the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, in a special report about the 2024 EU elections, stated the following: “Cases of harmful rhetoric, including elements of racism, misogyny, xenophobia, islamophobia, intimidation and violence persisted throughout the campaign and increasingly online” (Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 2024, p. 14).

To better grasp these observations, I searched for concrete data to confirm this trend, which I found at The European Observatory for Online Hate (EOOH). The EOOH publishes

monthly reports on hate speech in the EU. It analyzes social media posts using AI and assigns each message a toxicity score from 0 to 1 (0 = safe, 1 = extremely hateful). EOOH distinguishes four ranges: Safe (0), Low (0–0.2), Medium (0.2–0.8), and High (0.8–1).

The system works across all 24 EU languages, plus Arabic and Russian. The score is based on lexicons of hateful or problematic words and phrases, collected from social media. Each entry is reviewed by at least two native speakers, who assign both a toxicity level and relevant categories (for example; sexism, racism). While the exact criteria are not public, they track at least six baselines of online hate: anti-LGBTQ+, anti-refugee/migrant, anti-Roma, antisemitism, Islamophobia, and sexism.

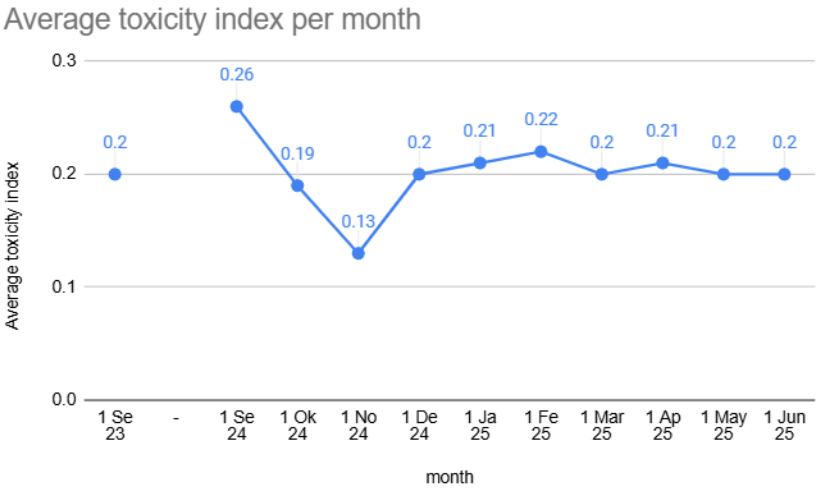
The reports cover only the last two years and lack data for January-September 2024, which coincides with the 2024 electoral period. However, because they provide information on the evolution of hate speech in 2023 and then again from September 2024 onward, we can make informed assumptions about developments during the period of interest in this thesis.

According to available data from the EOOH, the first observation is that between January and September 2023, online hate increased by about 30% (from approximately 0.16 to 0.20). Considering that 2023 was marked by multiple crises, as discussed earlier, this increase in online toxicity aligns with literature noting that racism tends to rise during times of crisis.

The next available data point from the EOOH data is from September 2024, when toxicity stood at 0.26. This is again about a 30% increase compared to the same month one year earlier. This suggests that during that period, which includes the electoral period in 2024, online toxicity rose by roughly 30%.

Graph 10 shows the evolution of online toxicity based on all available data from the EOOH. From this information, three conclusions can be drawn. First, during the 2024 EU electoral period there was a significant rise in average toxicity, reaching its highest recorded level in September 2024 at 0.26.

Second, in the aftermath of the elections, average toxicity declined, reaching the lowest level measured by the observatory (0.13) in November 2024. Third, following this decrease, average toxicity rose again to around 0.20, where it has remained stable up to the most recent data from June 2025.



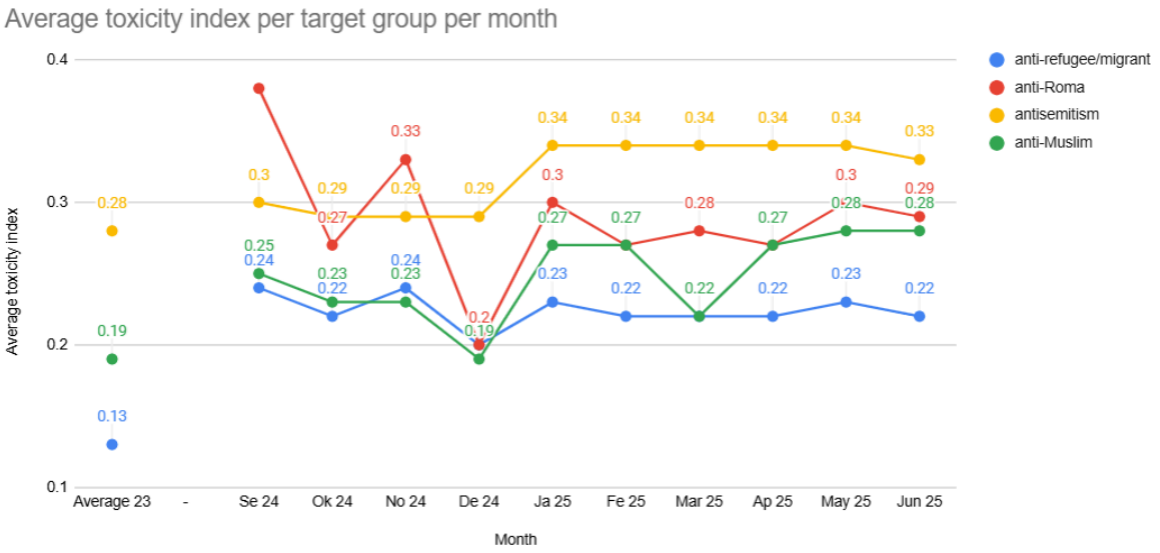
Graph 10: Average toxicity of online hate in the EU

Source: author's own elaboration with data from EOOH (2024)

While these data show interesting results that are consistent with other literature on the rise of hate speech (particularly racism) during the 2024 EU electoral period, they have important limitations. The first is that average toxicity is the only metric consistently published, meaning we cannot determine whether the observed increase is specifically due to sexist, LGBTIQ-phobic, or racist toxic hate speech.

However, the EOOH provides some segregated baseline data. The available data consist of the yearly average for 2023, followed by monthly data from September 2024. A key difference between the segregated data and the average toxicity data is that, while the average toxicity index is available for September 1, 2023, the segregated data provide only the yearly average for 2023.

Using the baselines related to racism (anti-refugee/migrant, anti-Roma, antisemitism, and anti-Muslim) and excluding “sexism” and “anti-LGBTQ+,” I created a new graph to illustrate the trend of toxicity per baseline, as shown in Graph 11. The segregated data show the same trend as the average data: between 2023 and September 2024, including the 2024 EU electoral period; online toxicity has increased for all four target groups.



Graph 11: Average toxicity of online hate per target group per month in the EU
Source: author's own elaboration with data from EOOH (2024)

The biggest increase in online toxicity has been for the target group (misleadingly called) "refugee/migrant", where in the period containing the 2024 EU elections the online toxicity index has gone up 0.11 points; from 0.13 in 2023 to 0.24 in September 2024, or an increase of about 85%. Also "anti-Muslim" toxicity has gone up in this period; from 0.19 in 2023 to 0.25 in September 2024, or an increase of about 32%. "Antisemitism" has gone up as well, but less; from 0.28 in 2023 to 0.30 in September 2024, or an increase of about 7%.

This increase in hate speech targeting migrants, refugees and Muslims aligns with the discussion in the previous section. The 2024 EU elections were largely centered on migration, and far-right groups gained significant influence, promoting openly harsh anti-migration narratives, particularly targeting Muslim migrants.

Another important observation from the EOOH data is that the highest toxicity index, both in 2023 and in almost all observed data from 2024, is for antisemitism. This has been clearly linked to the Hamas terrorist attacks in October 2023 and Israel's ongoing military actions and resulting humanitarian crisis in Gaza. One important note, as highlighted by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (2023a), is that defining antisemitism is very challenging because, in the context of the current conflict, not all criticism of Israel is directly antisemitic. For example, the slogan "from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free" can mean different

things: it could be a call to destroy Israel (antisemitic) or a call for a peaceful two-state solution. Without context, it cannot be definitively labeled antisemitic (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2023a).

The Romani people were also a significant target group, showing the highest online toxicity scores in September and November 2024. However, since no data is available for this group from 2023, it is difficult to draw conclusions about these numbers.

In conclusion, supporting the data just discussed, the FRA (2024) warned that online hate is a key challenge that needs to be addressed in election contexts.

2.3. Growing use of disinformation and Artificial Intelligence

One of the aspects that particularly triggers online hate speech during a crisis is disinformation campaigns (Faloppa et al., 2023). According to the FRA (2025), the growing spread of disinformation and use of AI are concerning threats to democracy in the EU. They urgently call for new digital regulations to ensure the protection of the fundamental rights of all citizens, especially marginalized groups, since disinformation can significantly harm how they are perceived and represented, making them more vulnerable to hate speech (Faloppa et al., 2023).

Disinformation is defined by the European Commission (2018) as “verifiably false or misleading information that is created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public, and may cause public harm” (p. 3). Disinformation campaigns have a negative impact on democracy and society, as they can undermine public trust in institutions and manipulate public opinion on critical issues such as migration. Especially during periods of crisis, they can take center stage in public and political discussions, contributing to and amplifying hate speech (Faloppa, et al., 2023).

Social media plays a key role in the distribution and amplification of disinformation (European Commission, 2018). Particularly in the 2024 electoral context, manipulation and disinformation were spread on online platforms (FRA, 2025). The European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) (2024) studied the content of these, and concluded that, while most of the narratives already existed before the run-up to the elections, they strengthened when coming closer to the elections. One key strategy they found was that old messages were spread in new ways, exploiting current events.

Concerning the specific content, four key themes were identified; misleading claims about the intensification of the war in Ukraine and supposed direct participation of EU countries, repeated false narratives regarding climate change, fabricated stories challenging the integrity of elections, and the portraying of migrants as 'taking control' within EU nations (EDMO, 2024).

The EDMO (2024) explained that, within the disinformation campaign around migration, migrants were frequently depicted as violent or criminal, opposed to Western values, and unfairly entitled to benefits. EU institutions were portrayed as allowing uncontrolled immigration. This is consistent with the analysis of the far-right 2024 electoral programs, as recently detailed. In the run-up to the EU elections, widespread false narratives claimed that migrants were "seizing power," outnumbering citizens, or driving the "Islamization" of entire regions, exploiting nationalist sentiments to influence public opinion.

Because of the recognized harmful effects of disinformation, the European Parliament and the Council established the Digital Services Act (DSA), in an attempt to regulate and counter disinformation on social media. This states that online platforms must take measures to detect, remove, and prevent the spread of this type of content, ensure transparency in content moderation and advertising, and provide users with clear mechanisms to report harmful or misleading information (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2022).

However, these attempts come with important difficulties, mainly because of the interplay between the right to freedom of expression and the right to non discrimination (FRA, 2025). Disinformation is often protected as free speech and can only be restricted when it clearly breaks the law (Faloppa, et al., 2023). In addition, managing the fast circulation of disinformation is challenging because sensational content online spreads faster than fact-checkers can respond (Velasco, 2025). This happens especially in an electoral context where much campaigning is happening online (FRA, 2025).

All of this becomes even more complicated when intertwined with the surge and growing use of Artificial Intelligence (AI). The EDMO (2024) called AI-generated disinformation content "one of the most concerning scenarios foreseen by fact-checkers in the run-up to the

elections" (p. 25). Their task force article about digital media in the context of the 2024 EU elections stated that AI-generated disinformation poses significant risks due to its ability to create convincing fake content.

AI has also been linked to algorithmic bias that disproportionately affects women, marginalized groups, and minorities (FRA, 2024). Research further shows that AI systems often reinforce and even intensify existing patterns of bias and discrimination (Sanaullah, 2023).

Because of these harmful effects on society and societal cohesion, attempts to regulate the risks of AI have increasingly gained attention in the EU. The FRA (2024) highlights that these concerns are central to the 'No Place for Hate' initiative, which commits to tackling online hate speech, particularly in light of the DSA. A concrete step was taken in 2024 with the adoption of the AI Act, which the FRA (2025) describes as a "significant legislative achievement" (p. 14). However, regulation remains difficult because AI can generate new types of disinformation that are hard to identify as AI-produced (EDMO, 2024).

2.4. Online racism is re-normalizing offline overt racism

While all of these trends in the increase of online racism are generally alarming, expert reports, such as from the European Network Against Racism (ENAR, 2023), warn that these narratives are becoming increasingly normalized across society, rather than remaining individual, extreme ideologies.

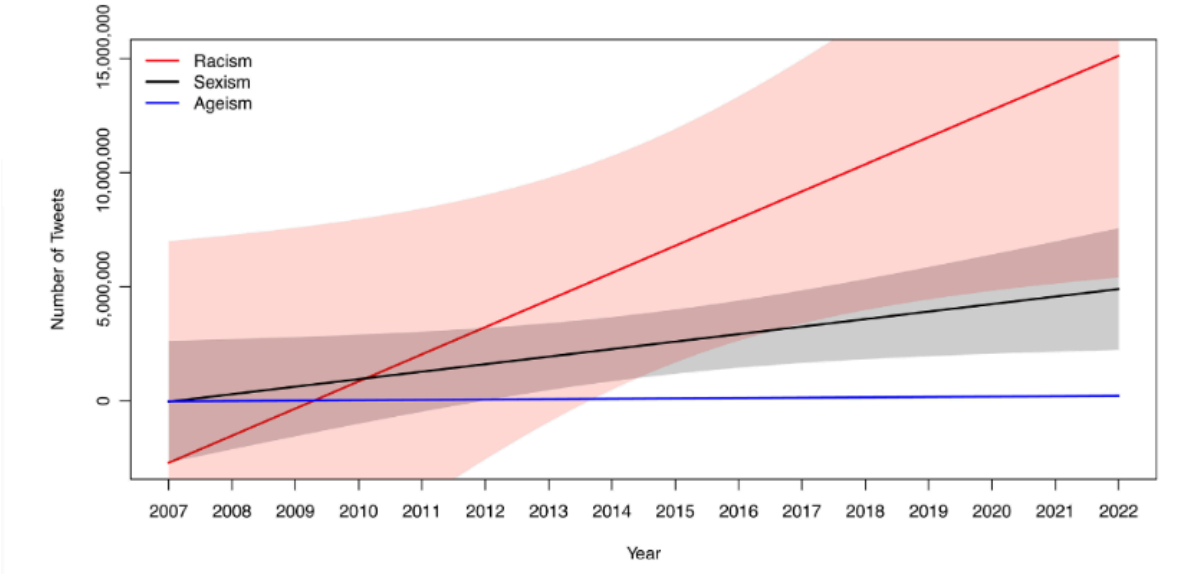
Racism in the EU has been actively challenged for decades. This first led to legal prohibitions and gradually to broader social unacceptability. Discrimination based on ethnic or racial origin has been formally prohibited since 2000 under the EU's Racial Equality Directive (FRA, 2024). The EU criminalizes and punishes hate speech and crime (Bąkowski, 2022).

Other EU initiatives have reinforced this framework: during her first term as President of the European Commission (2019–2024), Ursula von der Leyen prioritized equality in all its forms, appointing the first-ever Commissioner for Equality. Further, she launched

comprehensive action plans, including the Anti-Racism Action Plan (2020–2025) (Immenkamp, et al., 2024).

These efforts have contributed to a shift from overt racism, which was once a socially and politically effective tool (for example, in the 1930s; Durrheim, 2018), to more subtle forms of prejudice (Keum & Miller, 2018). While overt racial inequality and segregation have become socially marginalized, racist attitudes and incidents persist, and hate speech continues to occur, and is even rising (Bąkowski, 2022).

This increase in hate speech has been especially pronounced in online spaces. It has been widely noted that social media platforms offer important channels for expressing racist views (Pei, 2022). According to many scholars, racism has been thriving online and growing steadily for years (Keum & Miller, 2018). Graph 12 illustrates the evolution of English-language online racist content from 2007 to 2022, clearly showing a rapid rise over the past two decades.



Graph 12: Trend of English-language online racist tweets (2007–2022) with 95% confidence interval
Source: Ng, 2024 (p. 3)

Although this graph focuses only on English social media content, similar trends have been observed in other EU languages. Likewise, while the data extends only to 2022, research indicates that this upward trajectory has continued in recent years (EOOH, n.d.; FRA, 2024).

The suppression of overt racism in offline settings, contrasted with its persistence online, is not accidental. As noted in chapter 4, social media makes it easy for hateful content to spread quickly and reach a wide audience. I will now explain some of the most studied factors that contribute to the rapid spread of online hate speech.

The first factor that facilitates the spread of hate speech online is online anonymity. As Keum and Miller (2018) explain, people often behave very differently online than they would in face-to-face interactions because they feel invisible and unaccountable. This sense of “identity disguise" (p. 3) can remove social restraints and allow individuals to express prejudices they would normally suppress offline.

This can lead to online disinhibition, where individuals and political figures (Bąkowski, 2022) act more radically or aggressively without fearing consequences, because they feel disconnected from social norms or inhibitions. Where overt racism is discouraged and even illegal offline, online anonymity allows people to express themselves, often without social or legal consequences. Even when they are not completely anonymous, they can feel that societal norms do not fully apply in social media spaces.

Further, online anonymity may contribute to deindividuation, where users feel less like unique individuals and more influenced by group norms, often adopting in-group biases against out-groups. According to Ekman (2019), this bias is driven by a desire for belonging: individuals seek to feel part of their in-group, sometimes by discriminating against out-groups. For members of dominant groups, this can also serve to reinforce their privileged status and legitimize the existing social hierarchy.

A second factor that facilitates the spread of hate speech online is the fact that social media tends to foster negativity. Research indicates that online platforms amplify negative and exclusionary language (Ekman, 2019; Heidenreich, 2022). Hateful content is more likely to evolve over time and, due to the repeated sharing, online racist content may become ‘viral’ (Keum & Miller, 2018). Posts by users promoting hate also tend to spread further, deeper, and faster than neutral content, especially when accompanied by attachments like images or memes (Mathew, 2019). This creates an incentive structure for individuals and political actors to engage in negative messaging (Heidenreich, 2022).

Particularly, actors with overt anti-immigrant sentiment have been successful in strategically using these social media algorithmic biases, in order to gain popularity for them and their anti-immigrant ideas (Antypas, 2023; Mudde, 2024; Velasco, 2025). Ekman (2019) identified several common anti-immigrant strategies used on social media in the global North. One of the most common is resharing and recontextualizing news stories (which is often old and/or sensational) to stir fear or anger, emphasising the particular role of emotions in racist discourse.

The constant flow of bad news including immigrants and/ or refugees effectively portray them as threats. Moreover, criminal deeds of individuals are often generalized, stating that it is “refugees” or “immigrants” that act this way because of the explanatory cause that is culture, instead of the individual.

This creates a sense of victimhood among the native population, which reinforces a second identified strategy that the same author calls “victimization through binary oppositions” (p. 8). This refers to the ‘us’ versus ‘them’ rhetoric, where ‘us’ represents the native population under threat from ‘them,’ referring to immigrant individuals. Sorby (2019) exemplifies this by noting that far-right groups sometimes claim that all Muslims in Europe are secretly trying to take over and create an Islamic state, echoing old racist beliefs from medieval Spain now reused in today’s world. This rhetoric is then used to justify violence against immigrants under the claim of self-defense.

Thirdly, following this logic, another strategy identified by Ekman (2019) is the naturalization of differences between the two categories, particularly regarding culture and religion, portraying them as inherently different and incompatible. This is what Wieviorka (1991) conceptualizes as one of two patterns of racism, specifically: “racism of cultural difference and separation”. It emphasizes how groups are seen as culturally distinct, which results in their exclusion based on these cultural or community differences.

All of this occurs in a context of limited regulation on social media (Keum & Miller, 2018). As discussed in the previous section, it seems complex to regulate social media because of the tension between freedom of expression and the protection against discrimination. Social media platforms widely advocate freedom of speech (Heidenreich, 2022), while keeping user policies vague or not enforced (Ekman, 2019), which facilitates the thriving of racism in these

spaces. These weakly enforced policies can weaken the rules followed by traditional media: for example, when a news story does not reveal the suspects' identities, people on social media can still share this information (Ekman, 2019).

Moreover, spreading hateful content on social media is fast, cheap, and easy. Any individual or political actor can share information widely, and even with minimal resources, it can reach large audiences within seconds (Ekman, 2019; Mullah, 2021). In fact, according to Ziems (2020), only a small number of users are responsible for the majority of hate speech online, yet they can generate a disproportionately large volume of harmful content.

These easily shared contents also persist online and can reach the same individuals multiple times. As a result of this repeated exposure, people are likely to encounter racist content online far more frequently than they would in offline settings (Keum & Miller, 2018).

The fact that racism thrives so much on social media demonstrates that offline racism has not disappeared when it became legally and socially unacceptable, but was instead suppressed. The rise of online platforms provides individuals the freedom to express beliefs that would otherwise be silenced in offline interactions. As Keum and Miller (2018) argue, online spaces encourage a reliance on familiar group norms and stereotypes, meaning that online racist behavior does not occur in a vacuum but reflects deeply rooted societal attitudes. The persistence and spread of racist content online reveal that racism remains ongoing and integrated within society.

However, strong negative hateful attitudes, such as those against immigrants for example, may have spillover effects in society (Heidenreich, 2022); it might make negative attitudes towards target groups even stronger, and normalize expressing them. As Ekman (2019) explains: "Social media facilitates the normalization of previously marginalized racist expressions" (p. 2).

Indeed, a large body of academics and European institutions warn that hateful and discriminatory narratives are becoming increasingly normalized in Europe (FRA, 2024b), together with the racist attitudes underlying them (FRA, 2024a). Both holding racist views and openly expressing them are being normalized again, largely due to the widespread and unregulated circulation of hateful content on social media (Immenkamp, 2024). This trend

was particularly evident during the 2024 EU electoral period, through campaigning and political debates (ENAR, 2023). Rather than disappearing, “racism continues to dramatically evolve over time to reflect political and societal norms” (Kilgo, 2020, p. 2), while also contributing to overt racism becoming normalized again.

Conclusions, limitations and future research

The main research objective of this thesis was to identify the main trends of online racism in the EU, specifically during the period of the 2024 EU elections. To do this, the study employed a systematic literature review.

In Chapter 1, the first section concluded that academic literature conceptualizes racism as a dynamic, systemic phenomenon that combines negative prejudices with power structures, historically rooted in hierarchies of racial superiority and inferiority. It is a societal system that privileges dominant groups while marginalizing others. While older forms of racism emphasized biological hierarchies, contemporary racism often operates through cultural logics and subtle biases, making it less visible but still highly impactful.

The rise of social media platforms amplify these dynamics and enable the interaction between everyday users and institutional actors to produce, reproduce, spread, and normalise racist discourses. The second section of Chapter 1 of this thesis discussed how social media has become a central arena for political debate and mobilization, particularly around sensitive issues such as migration. Online platforms amplify negativity bias, confirmation bias, and in-group/out-group dynamics, fostering echo chambers, political polarization, and the disproportionate spread of emotionally charged content. These dynamics both reflect and shape public opinion, political narratives, and even voting behavior.

This means that social media platforms contain valuable insights into complex societal issues, with data that is relatively accessible to researchers. Such data can be extremely useful for social scientists seeking to understand and track public opinion and sentiment. To this end, a new methodological field called Social Media Analytics (SMA) has emerged, as analysed in the third section of Chapter 1. By leveraging big data and machine learning techniques, researchers can process vast amounts of online content. This can be done by focusing on the content of social media posts or by focusing on the relationships and interactions among users. While these methodologies enable researchers to detect and track the spread of racist content, challenges remain, including limited population

representativeness, overreliance on certain platforms and English-language data, difficulties in processing multilingual and evolving language, subjective interpretations of racist discourse, and the presence of unpredictable noise in social media content.

Despite these challenges, SMA provides essential tools for analysing online racism. This theoretical framework lays the foundation for examining the specific context of the 2024 EU elections and identifying how online racism manifested during that period, which is analysed in Chapter 2.

This first section of Chapter 2 first analysed the specific context of the 2024 EU elections and indicated that this period occurred in a highly polarized European political landscape, marked by the pronounced rise of far-right parties. While that trend had been developing over years, it became particularly pronounced as the EU took a sharp right turn in June 2024. Migration emerged as a central issue, framed by far-right actors as a security, cultural, and economic threat, often through emotionally charged “us versus them” narratives. While far-right parties may have limited ability to directly shape EU policy, their growing influence has reshaped political discourse, normalizing exclusionary ideologies, and pressuring mainstream parties to adopt tougher stances on migration. This has been affecting political dynamics and public opinion at both national and EU levels.

Public opinion analyses based on social media content revealed different things. In the second section of Chapter 2, I identified four trends in online racism during the 2024 electoral period. The first trend is that online racism rises during crises. In the European context in the period right before the 2024 electoral context: crises such as the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the Hamas terrorist attack of October 2023 followed by Israel’s ongoing military actions and resulting humanitarian crisis in Gaza, have intensified hostility. This was specifically pronounced toward migrants, refugees, Jews, Muslims and other marginalized groups in Europe.

Logically following this, the second identified trend is that online hate increased significantly during the 2024 EU elections, especially targeting the “refugee/migrant” group. Data from the European Observatory for Online Hate show that average online toxicity rose by roughly 30% compared to the previous year, with the most pronounced increase (about 85%) directed at refugees and migrants and by a 32% rise in anti-Muslim content.

The third trend of this period was the growing use of disinformation and AI-generated content, which fueled false narratives and reinforced racist sentiments across social media platforms. Disinformation campaigns, particularly during crises, exploit public fears and manipulate perceptions of marginalized groups, amplifying hate speech and undermining trust in institutions. The 2024 EU elections highlighted this dynamic, with misleading claims about migration, climate change, war, and electoral integrity spreading widely online. AI has further exacerbated these risks by generating highly convincing false content and perpetuating algorithmic biases.

The fourth trend, which was particularly visible during the 2024 electoral period but reflects a broader global pattern; is that online racism has contributed to the re-normalization of overt racism. For decades, overt racism was increasingly challenged, leading to its legal criminalization and social rejection. However, racism has never disappeared but has merely adapted to changing political and social norms, often taking on more subtle and hidden forms. Social media (with its anonymity, freedom of expression, algorithmic biases, and massive reach) has created an environment where overt racism can re-emerge. The thriving presence of racism on social media demonstrates clearly that it was never truly eliminated when it became legally and socially unacceptable, but that it has only transformed. At the same time, overt racism on social media is contributing to its renewed normalization offline.

One important limitation of this study is the fact that the first and the fourth trend are not specific to Europe or to the 2024 EU electoral period. While this is a limitation, it is justified by the lack of data addressing this issue directly. In general, the existing literature shows a clear lack of systematic, numerical evidence on online racism.

Racism is a complex phenomenon that is difficult to define and identify consistently, which makes quantification a serious challenge. Researchers often rely on different definitions and methodologies, making it difficult to compare studies or establish clear trends.

For example, data provided by the European Observatory for Online Hate is highly fragmented. Some months include one type of measurement, while others use different indicators, which complicates longitudinal analysis. To address this, I had to make my own calculations with the available information; however, this inevitably restricted the comparability of trends over time. The problem is particularly evident for the period most relevant to this thesis (the 2024 EU elections) which is precisely the timeframe not consistently covered by EOOH. Although a considerable body of literature suggests a rise in

racist discourse during that period, the supporting data remain scarce, incomplete, and primarily limited to pan-European insights.

Taken together, these limitations point to important directions for future research. There is a need for more systematic, country-specific analyses that provide statistical evidence of online racism, particularly during politically sensitive moments such as the 2024 EU electoral period. This is possible with the help of SMA methodologies and specific techniques, as discussed in this thesis. Such work would enable a better understanding of how racism develops and fluctuates in different contexts and could support the design of targeted monitoring and policy interventions. These insights are crucial to guiding effective strategies that counter racism, contributing to the promotion of peaceful, inclusive societies and fostering safe and inclusive public spaces, both online and offline.

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