

# Right-Wing Populist Parties' Bordering Narratives in Times of Crisis: Anti-Immigration Discourse in the Genevan Borderland during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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## Abstract

Right-wing populist parties (RWPPs) view immigration as a threat to national identity and cultural and political cohesion. This paper explores the discourse on immigration of two such parties during a systemic crisis (the COVID-19 pandemic) in a borderland area that entails a specific “symbolization” of the border as a result of geographic proximity. What kind of bordering narratives occur in this context, and how do they evolve? To answer these questions, the major RWPPs operating in the Geneva region were studied: the Genevan Swiss People's Party and the Geneva Citizens' Movement. Through a critical discourse analysis, a total of 181 documents published between 1 January and 31 August 2020 were analyzed, including the parties' official Facebook posts, press releases, and newspaper articles. Results show that the context of the pandemic favored the emergence of a strong re-bordering narrative.

## Zusammenfassung

Rechtspopulistische Parteien sehen in der Zuwanderung eine Bedrohung für die nationale Identität sowie den kulturellen und politischen Zusammenhalt. Dieser Artikel untersucht den Zuwanderungsdiskurs zweier solcher Parteien während einer systemischen Krise (der COVID-19-Pandemie) in einer Grenzregion, in welcher

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die Landesgrenze aufgrund der geografischen Nähe eine spezifische “Symbolisierung” erfährt. Welche Art von Grenznarrativen treten in diesem Kontext auf und wie verändern sie sich im Laufe der Zeit? Zur Beantwortung dieser Fragen wurden die beiden wichtigsten rechtspopulistischen Parteien in der Region Genf untersucht: die Genfer Sektion der Schweizerischen Volkspartei und die Genfer Bürgerbewegung. Mittels kritischer Diskursanalyse wurden insgesamt 181 Dokumente analysiert, welche zwischen dem 1. Januar und 31. August 2020 veröffentlicht wurden – darunter befinden sich offizielle Facebook-Posts, Pressemitteilungen und Zeitungsartikel der Parteien. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass der Pandemie-Kontext die Entstehung eines ausgeprägten Grenzverstärkung-Narrativs begünstigt hat.

### Résumé

Les partis populistes de droite considèrent l'immigration comme une menace pour l'identité nationale et la cohésion culturelle et politique d'un pays. Cet article étudie le discours sur l'immigration de deux de ces partis durant une crise systémique (celle du COVID-19) et dans une région frontalière qui entraîne une “symbolisation” spécifique de la frontière en raison d'une proximité géographique accrue. Quels types de discours sur les frontières émergent dans ce contexte et comment évoluent-ils au fil du temps? Deux partis de la région de Genève ont été sélectionnés pour y répondre: l'Union Démocratique du Centre de Genève et le Mouvement Citoyens Genevois. En se basant sur la critical discourse analysis, l'analyse inclut 181 articles de sources hétérogènes depuis le 1<sup>er</sup> janvier jusqu'au 31 août 2020: posts Facebook, communiqués de presse et articles de journaux. Les résultats montrent que la pandémie du COVID-19 a favorisé l'émergence d'un discours de re-frontiérisation radical.

### Riassunto

I partiti populistici di destra considerano l'immigrazione come una minaccia all'identità nazionale e alla coesione culturale e politica. Questo articolo esplora il discorso sull'immigrazione di due di questi partiti durante una crisi sistemica (la pandemia di COVID-19) in un'area di

confine che, a causa della vicinanza geografica col confine, ne comporta una diversa “simbolizzazione”. Che tipo di narrazioni sul confine vengono prodotte in quello contesto e come si evolvono nel tempo? Per rispondere a queste domande sono stati studiati i due principali partiti populistici di destra della regione di Ginevra: l'Unione Democratica di Centro di Ginevra e il Movimento dei cittadini di Ginevra. Attraverso la *critical discourse analysis*, sono stati analizzati un totale di 181 documenti pubblicati tra il 1° gennaio e il 31 agosto 2020: post ufficiali su Facebook, comunicati stampa e articoli di giornale. I risultati mostrano che il contesto della pandemia ha favorito l'emergere di discorsi che promuovono il rafforzamento delle frontiere.

#### KEYWORDS

Anti-Immigration Discourse, Bordering Narratives, Borderland Area, COVID-19, Right-Wing Populism

## INTRODUCTION

There is a consensus in the literature that right-wing populist parties (RWPPs) often regard immigration as a threat to both national identity and the cultural and political cohesion of their country (among others, see Betz, 1994; Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Skenderovic, 2007; Wodak, 2015). But how do these parties position themselves against immigration, and which argumentation strategies do they use? While scholars already examined these questions (among others, see Krzyżanowski, 2020; Wodak et al., 2013), this paper specifically explores the right-wing populist discourse on immigration in a borderland area during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this context, stronger border controls provided new opportunities for RWPPs to address border issues.

So far, a limited number of studies focused on the discourse of RWPPs in borderland areas, and the literature on right-wing populism overlooked the issue of the politicization of borders. The goal of this research is to fill these gaps and shed light on the symbolic construction of the border – the so called bordering narratives – in RWPPs' discourse on immigration in a context of crisis, which allows them to dramatize outside threats (Brubaker, 2017). Indeed, a specific symbolization – i.e., the contextual meaning or mental image that is given to an object (see Chandler, 2002) – of the border is inherent in any right-wing populist discourse: this symbolization clearly distinguishes between the inside and the outside – “us” and “them” – and allows RWPPs to imagine the nation as a symbol of sovereignty by relying on notions such as protection, control, and differentiation (Hamman, 2013).

Against this backdrop, the article raises two questions: Which bordering narratives were found in the anti-immigration discourse of RWPPs in a borderland area in a time of crisis? How did those bordering narratives evolve during and after the partial closure of state borders as a result of the pandemic? While some previous studies highlighted the ambivalent discourse of RWPPs regarding bordering narratives (see Biancalana & Mazzoleni, 2020; Lamour & Varga, 2020; Mazzoleni & Mueller, 2017), I will explore if this ambivalence also applies in

the temporal and spatial context of the COVID-19 pandemic. In these studies, the border is conceptualized as an ambivalent discursive resource used by RWPPs to promote, depending on contextual opportunities and constraints, either the opening or the closing of state borders. In the former case, border corresponds to a space of exchange and integration (de-bordering narrative), while in the latter, it is seen as a barrier to prevent immigration and cross-border movements (re-bordering narrative).

From a spatial point of view, focusing on the Genevan borderland is of particular interest since the region has Switzerland's highest influx of cross-border workers. The Genevan cross-border area is characterized by a strong and increasing socioeconomic interdependence, due to a great transborder mobility of people, goods, capital, and services. Consequently, it represents a fertile ground for RWPPs to engage with issues such as immigration and borders. In addition, the canton Geneva holds a long-standing legacy of right-wing populist politicization concerning immigration and border issues (D'Amato & Skenderovic, 2009).

From a temporal point of view, the COVID-19 pandemic crisis offered RWPPs a major opportunity to mobilize against transnational flows and in favor of spatial aspects of identity (Bobba & Hubé, 2021). In this regard, the pandemic served as a context-specific break by generating instability and uncertainty from economic, political, social, and cultural points of view (see Hay, 1999). This context greatly influenced border-related issues, with the partial closure of state borders and the resulting resurgence of border controls. It also led to a re-legitimization of borders through mental re-bordering processes linked to lockdowns and, more generally, isolation (Usher et al., 2020). Accordingly, I expect that these specific spatial and temporal contexts are prone to foster a radicalized right-wing populist re-bordering narrative – i.e. a discourse focusing on the border's function as a barrier (Häkli, 2008).

In this article, I explore right-wing populist discourse using a critical discourse analysis (CDA) and specifically the discourse historical approach (DHA), which focuses on socio-political and historical contextualities (Rheindorf & Wodak, 2018). This approach allows to identify context-specific *topoi* – or argumentation strategies – related to immigration issues. I examine argumentation strategies in the discourse of the two major RWPPs in the Genevan borderland area in Switzerland: the Genevan Swiss People's Party (the cantonal branch of the national Swiss People's Party, or SVP) and the Geneva Citizens' Movement (MCG). I collected 181 articles from heterogeneous sources published between 1 January and 31 August 2020: the parties' official Facebook posts, press releases, and newspaper articles.

The contribution is structured as follows: Section 2 focuses on the relationship between right-wing populist discourse and borders. A constructivist approach allows to examine RWPPs' discourses and the symbolic meanings attached to borders. Section 3 presents the context in which the discourse is produced, namely the Genevan borderland area and the two RWPPs selected for the analysis. Section 4 displays both parties' most relevant argumentation strategies. The conclusion summarizes the results of the analysis and presents insights for future research.

## RIGHT-WING POPULISM, BORDERS, AND MIGRATION: A MAGNETIC NEXUS

The literature agrees that RWPPs tend to express nativist and conservative values that bring forth an exclusionary vision of the nation (among others, see Betz, 1994; Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Skenderovic, 2007; Wodak, 2015), conceptualized as an “imagined community” (Anderson, 2006). In a Manichean outlook, RWPPs represent the people as a homogeneous

group based on a nativist conception of the nation (Manucci & Weber, 2017; Wodak, 2015). By creating a division between an idealized *us* and the dangerous *others* (Taggart, 2000), RWPPs manage to create a romanticized construction of the past through historical, traditional, religious and cultural values. This homogeneous and undifferentiated national, cultural and economic community excludes those who do not belong to it.

The essentialization of a homogeneous community is favored by a model of territorial statehood that reifies the nation and promotes identity politics (Agnew, 2008). Using a Westphalian notion of sovereignty and its organization of space, this territorial logic makes the nation-state the main reality for people (Laine, 2016). Borders play a fundamental role in this process, as the essentialization of the nation-state favors a normative vision of the border which is perceived as a tool of defense. The nation-state is thus seen as a major source of political, cultural, and social identity, and territories are central to processes of inclusion and exclusion (Agnew, 1994; Paasi, 2013; Scott, 2015). In this view, borders are dividing lines linked with state-centered nations and ethnocultural areas (Balibar, 2002).

The next section aims to show how this essentialization of a homogeneous community and the resulting symbolic construction of the border can be detected in RWPPs' discourse.

## The discourse as framework

From a constructivist perspective, discourse can be defined as a socially constituted and constitutive semiotic practice that can create, reproduce, or change social reality (Reisigl, 2017) and construct symbolic, ideological, political, and social meanings (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). This perspective helps us explore the link between right-wing populism and borders by analyzing how the RWPPs' anti-immigration discourse contributes to a symbolic construction of the border.

On the one hand, populism is a chameleon-like phenomenon that includes a strategy for government, a political and performative style, and a set of ideas and political discourses (De la Torre & Mazzoleni, 2019; Taggart, 2000; Wirth et al., 2016). For the aim of this research, populism in general, and its right-wing form in particular, are understood as both a political style and a discursive framework. The former represents a discourse that appeals to racial or ethnic prejudices, as well as various kinds of ideologies (Canovan, 1981; Taguieff, 2002), while the latter represents the reproduction of political imaginaries – through the discursive construction of in-groups and out-groups – within a Manichean perspective (Aslanidis, 2016; Laclau, 2005).

On the other hand, discourse is important for the construction of the border. RWPPs symbolize and reify the border in order to perpetuate its categorical and normative function of differential inclusion. Migration is a defining force in the production of borders through processes such as the control over the flow of people (Casas-Cortes et al., 2015; Rheindorf & Wodak, 2020). This is clear in the concept of moralization of bordering, defined as the exclusion of a group of people through a narrative of deservingness, namely “following the principle that some people do not deserve to be treated equally or in the way we (the host society) treat human beings” (Vollmer, 2017: 4).

From a normative perspective, borders serve practical purposes such as regulating political, social, and economic activities. However, they can also be seen as social constructs created by discursive processes (Bauder, 2011; Diener & Hagen, 2017; Kolossov, 2005; Paasi, 1999; Scott, 2012; Sohn & Scott, 2020). By using discourse to produce socio-political meanings, political parties can give them symbolic interpretations (Anderson & O'Dowd, 1999; Bialasiewicz, 2011; Lamont & Molnár, 2002; Mazzoleni & Mueller, 2017). In this regard, Scott (2015: 31) proposed the concept of bordering, which illustrates “the everyday construction of a border, for example through political discourses and institutions, media representations, school textbooks, stereotypes and everyday forms of transnationalism.”

Some scholars argued that the ambivalent discourse on borders oscillates between de-bordering and re-bordering narratives (among others, see Biancalana & Mazzoleni, 2020; Lamour & Varga, 2020; Mazzoleni & Mueller, 2017). The former defines the loss of state borders' structuring capacity (Paasi, 2002), while the latter defines the re-emergence of the border's function as a barrier (Häkli, 2008). In this article, I define bordering narratives as a set of discourses used to construct socio-political issues as an aspect of everyday life (De Fina, 2018). Bordering narratives can help us understand how RWPPs mobilize discourse and use borders to defend their political interests (Casaglia et al., 2020).

The next section aims to show why borderland areas are interesting cases for the study of bordering narratives. Because of their geographical proximity with the border and their transnational dynamics, borderland areas represent specific locations where RWPPs contribute to construct the border discursively and symbolically.

## Borderland areas and transnational dynamics

As a result of geographical proximity, borderland areas entail a specific symbolization of the border, which creates new political ontologies, especially through cross-border cooperation and political and symbolic belonging (Johnson et al., 2011; Laine, 2016). Sohn and Scott (2020: 21) underline that “the sense of the border is not the same for a whole nation or for a small group that is affected by it closely in its daily practices.” In the same vein, Konrad et al. (2018: 9) argue that the meaning of borders is distinctive for people living in the immediate context of a borderland: “borders mean different things to different people and those who can cross or inhabit the border gain a variety of insights about how the borders works and the impact that the border has on the lives of borderland residents, occasional border crossers, and those who do not cross”.

As territories particularly affected by the flow of people, goods, capital, and services across borders, European borderland areas have been particularly affected by globalization and European integration over the past few decades (Jensen & Richardson, 2004; Lamour, 2014). In such highly integrated areas, borders have become more permeable to transnational integration (Varol & Soylemez, 2018). Such integrated spaces can help us explore discourses in a context that goes beyond the nation-state and capture the complexity produced by transnational flows (Glick Schiller & Wimmer, 2002). Furthermore, RWPPs are strongly mobilized in territorial constituencies where they can oppose a borderless Europe.

As RWPPs tend to exploit crises by exaggerating the porousness of borders (Brubaker, 2017) and adapt their positions to the context (Pirro et al., 2018), I hypothesize that the COVID-19 pandemic would lead to a strong re-bordering narrative by RWPPs: the latter would adopt a radical discourse on borders and migration by benefitting from the pandemic context. Moreover, this narrative would change according to the various phases of the pandemic (i.e., before, during, and after the partial closure of state borders) and to the particular features of the highly integrated Genevan borderland area.

## A HIGHLY INTEGRATED CROSS-BORDER AREA

The canton of Geneva shares 95% of its territorial border with France. Since 1973, a process of cross-border cooperation has been implemented between the canton of Geneva, the two neighboring French departments (Ain and Haute-Savoie), and the Swiss canton of Vaud. The political governance of the conurbation became effective in 2004 with the creation of a regional association. The territory of this cross-border cooperation covers 2,000km<sup>2</sup> and 212 communes.



The application of the Agreement on the Free Movement of Persons (AFMP) between Switzerland and the EU in 2002 and Switzerland's entry into the Schengen Area in 2008 made it easier for EU citizens to live or work in Switzerland. This is especially relevant for the canton of Geneva, whose higher wages (compared with those on the other side of the border) attract many French cross-border employees. According to federal statistics, 91,182 French cross-border workers were employed in the canton of Geneva at the end of 2020 – the highest cross-border flow of all cross-border areas in Switzerland (FSO, 2021). The main fields in which French cross-border workers are employed are the healthcare and social sectors; 13% of French cross-border workers have a job in either of these two sectors (OCSTAT, 2020). At the end of 2017, 63% of the whole medical corps of the Geneva University Hospitals (HUG) was composed of cross-border workers from France (OTPS, 2019). The Genevan cross-border area thus represents a strong and functional form of cross-border integration, having a high intensity of socioeconomic interdependence (Sohn et al., 2009).

Two RWPPs operate on the Swiss side of this highly integrated cross-border area (Bernhard, 2017): the Genevan Swiss People's Party (SVP) and the Geneva Citizens' Movement (MCG). The Genevan SVP is the cantonal branch of the national SVP. It was created in 1987 and won its first seats in the Genevan cantonal parliament and the lower chamber of the federal parliament in 2001 and 2003, respectively. The national SVP was created in 1971, based on issues like peasantry, militarism, anti-socialism, and anti-internationalism (Mazzoleni, 2008). In the 1990s it underwent a radical right-wing populist shift and started to mobilize against immigration and European integration, and to promote a liberal pro-business agenda and the protection of national integrity (Mazzoleni & Rossini, 2016). In the 2019 federal elections, the national SVP was the strongest party in Switzerland with 25.6% of the total vote share. Similarly, the Genevan SVP focusses on making immigration controls stricter and prioritizing local employment. It furthermore blames the canton's growing number of immigrants for the rise in social costs and rents and the high unemployment rate.

The MCG was founded in 2005 and soon focused on cross-border issues. Its slogan, *Geneva and Genevans first*, summarizes its position on cross-border immigration especially from France. According to the party, French cross-border workers are the main cause of the canton's problems. In this regard, the MCG launched referenda on the protection of local employment (Bernhard, 2020).

In the most recent cantonal elections (2018), the Genevan SVP obtained 7.3% (down from 10.3% in the 2013 cantonal elections), while the MCG obtained 9.4% of the total vote share (around 10 points less than in the 2013 elections). Thus, together they represent around 17% of the cantonal parliament, which shows that they are still a substantial political force in the canton despite their exclusionist ideological profiles.

This is not the first time the canton of Geneva has had popular RWPPs. Between the 1960s and 1990s, the RWPP *Vigilance* successfully operated in the canton mobilizing on issues such as the regulation of immigration and the fight against over-foreignization (D'Amato & Skenderovic, 2009). Today, the canton faces high rates of unemployment and immigration, a lack of accommodation, an increase in rent, traffic congestion, and an increase in the number of cross-border workers. All of these are issues RWPPs typically use to blame immigrants and cross-border workers for social, political, economic, and cultural problems.

## FIGHTING IMMIGRATION: EXPLORING ARGUMENTATION STRATEGIES

This paper uses the critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach, which considers discourse as a form of social practice that regulates social structures (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). CDA is considered an approach rather than a methodology *per se*: Stemming from a social-constructivist

perspective, it aims to analyze political discourse and explore how social and political problems are discursively constructed through a problem-oriented approach (Forchtner & Wodak, 2018; Wodak & Meyer, 2015). In this regard, discourse represents, creates, reproduces, and changes social reality in specific social contexts (Reisigl, 2017). The discourse historical approach (DHA) is a prominent approach in the framework of the CDA and focuses on the historical and political dimensions of discourse. It helps to capture how discourse influences the political and social reality by emphasizing “the practice-related quality of discourses, the context dependence of discourses, and the constructed as well as the constitutive character of discourse” (Reisigl, 2017: 49).

Argumentation strategies are a core element of the DHA, and *topics* and *topoi* are devices used to explore political discourses by capturing justifications of exclusion. *Topics* summarize the most important themes in a discourse; they represent what discourse is about (Van Dijk, 1991). *Topoi* are used to justify political inclusion or exclusion. They are part of argumentation and justify the transition from arguments to the conclusion (Wodak, 2001).

A total of 181 documents published between 1 January and 31 August 2020 were collected. The texts referred to migration and border issues: texts with at least one direct reference to migration (e.g., criticizing cross-border workers, economic/criminal migrants, agreements related to migration) or the border (e.g., border portrayed as too porous against COVID-19, the need to reinforce border controls for more security) were collected. Discourses relating to borders have been integrated because they are closely intertwined with migration issues.

The data comes from the direct communication of the two RWPPs, namely the parties' official journals (the Genevan SVP's cantonal journal and the MCG's journal, *Le Citoyen*), press releases (collected from the official party websites), and Facebook posts (*UDC Genève* and *MCG Officiel*). By combining traditional and social media, this heterogeneous selection of sources aims to offer insights into how social and political issues are represented. Social media were included because of their importance in the construction of everyday social discourses (Törnberg & Törnberg, 2016). The coding was done with the software MAXQDA, which was used to identify inductively the *topics* and *topoi* in the data. MAXQDA was used to code each segment of text containing argumentation strategies relating to immigration and borders issues. Each segment can be coded with more than one *topic* and one *topos*. The first inductive coding was completed and subsequently controlled with a second reading of the data. Through MAXQDA, it is possible to identify the most-used combinations of *topics* and *topoi* and show the argumentation strategies that RWPPs used to construct specific bordering narratives during this period. The *topics* and *topoi* resulting from an inductive coding of the data body are presented in Tables 1 and 2.

To capture the evolution of the discourse, three periods – related to the closure of borders – were identified within the timespan: 1 January–12 March (arrival of the pandemic); 13 March–15 June (partial closure of state borders); and 16 June–31 August (reopening of the border). The partial closure of the borders means that state borders were closed for everyone, except for people with a work permit in Switzerland (e.g., cross-border workers). Besides the outbreak of the pandemic and the closure of state borders, this period has been crucial in relation to a popular initiative (called “limitation initiative”) launched by the national SVP and initially scheduled to be voted in Spring. This initiative aimed at ending the AFMP,<sup>1</sup> making a point about the sovereignty of Switzerland against the EU regarding the regulation of immigration. In this sense, the pandemic and the resulting partial closure of state borders represented a substantial opportunity for RWPPs to argue in favor of the initiative, using the closure of state borders to support their claims of protection (Brubaker, 2017). On 27 September 2020, the initiative was rejected by 61.7% of Swiss voters. In line with the strong socioeconomic interdependence of the Genevan cross-border area, it was rejected by 69% of voters in the canton Geneva. Indeed, looking at voting patterns on

<sup>1</sup>In case of acceptance, the initiative demanded that if no agreement can be negotiated between the Swiss national government and the EU within 12 months, the AFMP must be unilaterally abolished.



TABLE 1 List of Topics

Topic	Example
Environment	Biodiversity is harmed because of massive immigration
Security	Security must be increased by closing the borders to prevent crimes by immigrants
Health	Immigrants bring diseases (e.g., COVID-19)
Criminality	Immigrants are burglars who steal
Housing/Infrastructure	Accommodation becomes less available and more expensive because of the massive influx of immigrants
Sovereignty	There is a need to reestablish sovereignty by lowering immigration
Agreements	Among others, agreements granting the free movement of people lead to massive immigration
Permissiveness	Switzerland accepts too many people on its territory, despite the burden of immigration
Taxation	Immigrants are responsible for high taxation, due to their social assistances' costs
Employment	Immigrants are taking jobs that should go to the native population

TABLE 2 List of Topoi

Topos	Warrant
Burden	If an action or a situation causes a burden, it should not be carried out
Numbers	If numbers serve as an illustration of a problem or a burden, the issue should be solved
Abuse	If an action or a situation abuses the system, it should not be carried out
Savior	An actor presents himself as the person who could eradicate a problem or a burden because of their ideologies/positions/ranks
Fear	If an action or a situation is depicted as a danger/threat, it should not be carried out
Responsibility	If an action or a situation is depicted as being undertaken because it is for the good of the system, it should be taken
Comparison	If an action or a situation is compared to another to illustrate a burden/problem/danger/threat, it should not be carried out

Note: adapted from Reisingl and Wodak (2001).

immigration issues in Swiss popular initiatives, the canton of Geneva is one of the most Europhile borderland canton, and represents thus a compelling case study to explore the opportunities given by the pandemic to RWPPs to legitimize a radicalized re-bordering narrative.

The Genevan cross-border area is characterized by a strong and increasing socio-economic interdependence, due to a great transborder mobility of people, goods, capital, and services. Consequently, it represents a fertile ground for RWPPs to engage with issues such as immigration and borders. In addition, the canton Geneva holds a long-standing legacy of right-wing populist politicization concerning immigration and border issues (D'Amato & Skenderovic, 2009).

Moreover, to capture the specificities of the discourse on cross-border movements (as cross-border workers could still cross the border with their work permit during the partial closure of the border and because the Genevan context presents a strong mobilization around cross-border issues), two categories of migration were identified: *all-embracing migration* and *cross-border mobility*. While *all-embracing migration* covers all kinds of migration (based on cultural, economic, or social purposes; examples include asylum seekers, economic migrants,

TABLE 3 Number of Articles per Phase, Party, and Type of Migration

	Genevan SVP		MCG		Total
	All-embracing migration	Cross-border mobility	All-embracing migration	Cross-border mobility	
1st phase	26	6	-	13	45
2nd phase	22	10	3	1	36
3rd phase	63	23	8	6	100
Total	111	39	11	20	181

*Note:* Two explanations can be given for the smaller amount of material of the MCG. Firstly, this party has fewer resources than the Genevan SVP. Secondly, according to an interview with a representative of the party, the MCG did not want to produce too many communications during this period, as doing so would have drawn hasty conclusions about the consequences of the pandemic.

and refugees), *cross-border mobility* outlines a specific category within this broad definition, as it refers to “a person who works in one country and resides in the neighboring country, and crosses the international border each workday” (Alegría, 2002: 37). In cross-border mobility, migration is not meant to be permanent but is performed during a specific period and undertaken for specific (especially labor-related) purposes (Foulkes, 2014). In order to compare the issues displayed in the anti-immigration right-wing populist discourse, each text of the corpus of data was categorized as either *all-embracing migration* or *cross-border mobility*, depending on the type of immigrants targeted. The number of articles collected for each party, phase, and type of migration are shown in Table 3.

## The arrival of the pandemic

In the first phase, RWPPs' discourses deal with the gradual increase in the number of cases, culminating in the partial closure of the state borders. The first COVID-19 case appeared in Switzerland on 25 February 2020 in the canton of Ticino. On 27 February, a prevention campaign was launched by the Swiss Federal Office of Public Health. The following day, the Swiss government banned gatherings of more than 1,000 people.

### ‘The non-existent border’

Regarding *cross-border mobility*, the Genevan SVP mainly uses the *topic* of health combined with the *topos* of fear. Example 1 underlines this pattern. In this excerpt, the party implicitly criticizes the Swiss government's measures, which are said to be unfit to deal with the danger posed by COVID-19. The party criticizes the lack of measures regarding cross-border workers – potentially bearers of the virus – who can still come to work in Switzerland. This statement makes use of irony to emphasize the ineffectiveness of the measures and to condemn open borders. This example sheds light on the need to close state borders in order to contain the disease during the first period.

#### Example 1

Italy has a quarter of its population under quarantine, but cross-borders workers working in Switzerland don't pose any threat. COVID-19 is dangerous in Italy but profitable in Switzerland. (*Facebook post – UDC Genève – 9 March 2020*)

Another common combination is the *topic* of criminality and the *topos* of fear. As illustrated in example 2, the party criticizes the ineffectiveness of the border, which since Schengen is no longer a tool of protection. The party makes use of dramatization by condemning this porousness and defines the border as “non-existent”. It implicitly condemns open borders by emphasizing the proximity with the border as dangerous because of cross-border criminality.

### Example 2

The vulnerability of the canton, because of the proximity of the border, explains the attraction that we present for foreign criminals (...). Schengen made the border not only porous but non-existent. The border no longer protects us, contrary to the promises made. On the contrary, it offers criminals all the facilities required to operate in peace: in terms of physical attacks, attacks to cash transport vans or to ATMs. (*Facebook post – UDC Genève – 9 February 2020*)

A last relevant combination is the *topic* of employment and the *topos* of burden. French cross-border workers are considered as a burden for local people because they “cost” less and, thus, steal jobs from residents. Again, this pattern is implicitly aimed to promote a tighter border control by criticizing the Free Movement of Persons and to exaggerate the volume of cross-border worker who will reach Geneva to find a job.

For the MCG, the *topic* of employment together with the *topos* of burden – that is to say, French cross-border workers as job thieves – is the most-used combination. Other combinations are the *topic* of employment and the *topoi* of responsibility and numbers. The *topos* of responsibility expresses the need for the city of Geneva to be responsible and promote the employment of local young and old people, instead of cross-border workers. The MCG uses the *topos* of numbers to illustrate the volume of French cross-border workers, dramatize the situation, and implicitly portray the canton as a victim of cross-border integration, as illustrated in example 3. Those patterns are still part of the claim to establish stricter border controls.

### Example 3

The use of cross-border labor is not weakening and is not about to stop. From December 2018 to 2019, 4,032 cross-border workers came to work in the canton, for a total of 87,104 people, the Cantonal Statistics Office reported on Thursday. That is a growth of 4.9% which comes after two years when it had only been 1.1% and 1.6%, well below a rate which is more like 5% per year... (*Facebook post – MCG Officiel – 21 February 2020*)

## ‘Immigration costs’

Regarding *all-embracing migration*, the Genevan SVP mainly uses the *topic* of employment with the *topos* of burden to condemn the employment of European immigrants instead of locals because of their lower cost. Another interesting combination is the one of the *topics* of agreements and housing/infrastructures and the *topos* of burden. By using the agreements–burden combination to portray Genevans as becoming poorer, the Genevan SVP emphasizes the need to cancel the Free Movement of Persons in order to increase the domestic product, as illustrated in example 4. By using the housing/infrastructures–burden pattern, the party seeks to underline the problems relating to the lack of accommodation and the traffic congestion resulting from a high influx of immigrants, portrayed as the cause of these issues.

## Example 4

Why is it absolutely necessary to put an end to the free movement of persons? The free movement of persons, which has been in force for 13 years, has not increased our prosperity; quite the contrary. The domestic product per capita has remained practically the same since the free movement of persons was introduced. Production has certainly increased as a result of the population's growth, but what ultimately counts is what is left in people's wallets. (*Facebook post – UDC Genève – 7 February 2020*)

Finally, another combination is the *topic* of permissiveness and the *topos* of numbers. This combination aims to show that the influx of immigrants, allowed by the Federal Council, is too high for the country. The aim is again to underline the need for stricter border controls. The MCG does not make any claim about *all-embracing migration* during this phase, focusing more on French cross-border workers – that is, *cross-border mobility*.

## The partial closure of state borders

In the second phase, state borders were partially closed, along with schools and cultural events, to contain the spread of the virus. On 13 March 2020, the Swiss government forbid gatherings of more than 100 people and closed schools. Three days later, the government declared a state of emergency and closed non-essential shops, restaurants, bars, and cultural and sports events and enforced remote working. In addition, it partially closed the country's borders by restricting entry to anyone except those with a work permit in Switzerland.

### 'The relevance of border controls'

Focusing on *cross-border mobility*, the Genevan SVP uses the *topic* of employment with the *topos* of burden. This combination refers to the fact that following the pandemic, and considered the bad condition of the French labor market, there will be a massive increase in the number of French cross-border workers in the canton of Geneva. In this phase, a new combination is used: the *topic* of security and the *topos* of comparison. This comparison aims to depict Geneva (and Genevans) as a victim(s) of the Schengen agreements, as shown in example 5. This example is of particular interest, as the border is depicted as a tool of protection in relation to its normative function and as a concrete entity. The other most-used combination is the *topic* of sovereignty and the *topos* of responsibility, which emphasizes the sovereignty (and implicit accountability) resulting from the closure of borders given the decrease in burglaries, among others.

## Example 5

Geneva is suffering the consequences of the opening of borders following Switzerland's accession to the Schengen area. Year after year, police crime statistics place Geneva on the list of the cantons with the highest crime rate, despite a reassuring official communication. With the resumption of border controls following the coronavirus pandemic, states are observing a drop in crime. It is the proof of the effectiveness of border controls in the fight against crime. (*Facebook post – UDC Genève – 22 April 2020*)

The MCG focuses mostly on the *topics* of employment and taxation together with the *topos* of burden, as well as the *topic* of sovereignty with the *topos* of responsibility. Through the taxation–burden combination, the party conveys criticism of the high amount of taxes on cross-border workers being sent to France and calls for more of those taxes to be kept in the canton of Geneva.<sup>2</sup> The party uses the sovereignty–responsibility combination to emphasize the state's responsibility towards Geneva's residents in the context of the emergency created by the COVID-19 pandemic.

## ‘Borders protect us’

Regarding *all-embracing migration*, the Genevan SVP makes significant use of the *topic* of employment with the *topos* of burden. It mentions the need for tighter border controls to prevent the high influx of immigrants – the outcome of allowing the Free Movement of Persons – because of the sharp rise in unemployment in neighboring countries and the high rate of unemployment in Switzerland resulting from the COVID-19 crisis. Two other frequently used combinations are the *topic* of permissiveness and the *topoi* of numbers and abuse. By presenting numbers and figures, the permissiveness–numbers combination refers to the necessity of border controls in order to diminish illegal migration, as illustrated in example 6. The permissiveness–abuse combination claims that immigrants take advantage of Swiss social institutions. The Genevan SVP stresses this point by dramatizing an “invasion” of immigrants and depicting them as a threat, as illustrated in example 7. Interestingly, the *topic* of health is prominent and interlinked with the *topoi* of fear and responsibility. The health–fear pattern depicts a reopening of national borders as the cause of a forthcoming healthcare disaster, while the health–responsibility pattern highlights the need for (and the responsibility to impose) stricter border controls to prevent the spread of the disease, as illustrated in example 8.

### Example 6

The entry controls and restrictions imposed at the borders due to Covid-19 caused a sharp drop in illegal entries and stays in Switzerland. Since the introduction of these measures, the number of illegal stays recorded by the authorities has fallen by 55 to 80%. (*Facebook post – UDC Genève – 23 May 2020*)

### Example 7

Swiss people will be able to make their choice in the light of the experiences made with the Covid-19 crisis, and therefore decide that Switzerland once again manages immigration on its territory, so that Swiss men and women won't feel like foreigners in their own country anymore and will prevent immigrants from exploiting their social institutions. (*Facebook post – UDC Genève – 23 May 2020*)

### Example 8

As a result of Covid-19, Switzerland has taken the decision to close its borders. This measure has not only protected us from the virus but also from criminality (...) At a time when the gradual reopening begins, the border remains more than ever a protective element, also at the economic level. (*Facebook post – UDC Genève – 5 June 2020*)

<sup>2</sup>Based on a 1973 agreement, the canton Geneva has to give back 3.5% of the cross-border workers' payroll tax to France each year.



The combinations that the MCG uses most often are the *topic* of security and the *topoi* of fear, employment, and burden. The first pattern underlines the need to rediscover borders as a source of protection by exaggerating its role in protecting (and implicitly ensuring the survival of) democracy, as illustrated in example 9. The other patterns focus on undeclared work as a major problem relating to immigrants, blamed for such issues.<sup>3</sup>

### Example 9

Let's also mention the rediscovery of borders - a fight that the MCG has been leading for at least ten years - because the border is not a barrier but a protection. Let's not forget that the so-called dogmatic openness is a mortal danger for our democracy. (*Official release – MCG Website – 12 May 2020*)<sup>4</sup>

## The reopening of the border

On 15 June 2020, the Swiss government, in cooperation with the European Union, started to reopen Switzerland's external borders. The limit on gatherings was relaxed, and schools, non-essential shops, restaurants, bars, cultural and sports events reopened.

### 'Open borders leads to criminality and spreads the virus'

Regarding *cross-border mobility*, the Genevan SVP again focuses significantly on the employment–burden pattern by stating that hiring French cross-border workers costs Genevan employers less. Other combinations that are used are the *topic* of employment and the *topoi* of numbers and comparison. The goal of the employment–numbers pattern is to use numbers to overstate the surge in cross-border workers, while the employment–comparison pattern emphasizes the rise in the unemployment rate resulting from *cross-border mobility*. Another interesting pattern is the combination of the *topic* of criminality and the *topos* of fear. Using this combination, the party depicts the border as the only way to diminish criminality, as illustrated in example 10. The *topic* of health is used with the *topos* of fear to warn that reopening state borders allows contagious people to enter Switzerland. Accordingly, the party blames the Free Movement of Persons as responsible for the reappearance of COVID-19, after the closure of national borders had nearly eliminated the virus.

### Example 10

It is of course the closing of the borders that has contributed to this reduction in crime and of burglaries, in an area where cross-border crime is significant. Geneva, year after year, is placed in the list of the cantons with the higher rate of criminality of the country. (*Cantonal journal – UDC Genève – August 2020*)

The MCG mostly combines the *topic* of employment with the *topoi* of burden and responsibility. An interesting combination is the *topic* of employment and the *topos* of savior. In this pattern, the

<sup>3</sup>The context of this argumentation strategy is a referendum launched by the MCG against the funding of undeclared work through the allowance for loss of income during the COVID-19 pandemic.

<sup>4</sup>In the article, the MCG presents immigration as a threat to the existence of democracy as a set of economy, welfare, and social organization.

aim is to underline the active involvement of the MCG – the only savior – in trying to repel cross-border workers, as illustrated in Example 11.

### Example 11

The over-competition of cross-border work or the dumping of wages suffered by Geneva SMEs remain our main concerns and push us to intervene in the most active way despite our minority position. (*Official release – MCG Website – 29 August 2020*)<sup>5</sup>

## ‘Border controls provide security’

Focusing on *all-embracing migration*, the Genevan SVP mainly uses patterns such as employment–burden, permissiveness–numbers, agreements–burden, and housing/infrastructures–burden. A new pattern is the combination of the *topic* of environment and the *topos* of burden, which states that the Free Movement of Persons destroys nature because of the construction of accommodation for immigrants. Another interesting combination is security–comparison. As example 12 shows, the party invokes border controls as the only way to increase security through a normative justification of the border as a tool of defense.

### Example 12

We must control the borders. For example, since we reopened them, there was a robbery. We are much safer when the borders are monitored and controlled. (*Facebook post – UDC Genève – 22 June 2020*)

The MCG focuses not only on the employment–burden pattern to denounce the pressure of clandestine work on Swiss workers but also on the employment–abuse pattern by criticizing the state “authorizing” undeclared work. Another interesting combination is the *topic* of taxation and the *topos* of responsibility, which the party deploys to highlight its preference for social assistance over illegal work, as illustrated by example 13.

### Example 13

For us it is a cancer of society to have people who are exploited and who dump wages on the entire population. We believe that it is better to first go through social assistance than through loss of income. (*Facebook post – MCG Officiel – 6 August 2020*).<sup>6</sup>

## Argumentation strategies during the pandemic: an overview

Regarding the analysis of the argumentation strategies used by both RWPPs, the context of the pandemic and the partial closure of state borders reinforced discourses against immigration and open borders. In their statements, the RWPPs used exaggeration, dramatization,

<sup>5</sup>In the press release, the MCG wants to defend SMEs hiring Swiss workers instead of cross-border workers.

<sup>6</sup>The context of this statement is that there are illegal workers who receive money through loss of income insurance, which, according to the MCG, pushes down the wages of the rest of the population. To better combat wage-dumping and illegal work, the MCG suggests to regularize migrants. If they meet the requirements, they could receive social assistance.

victimization, and irony to legitimize the exclusion of cross-border workers and other categories of migrants, as well as to praise the benefits of stricter border controls.

With regard to *cross-border mobility*, the RWPPs mainly used *topics* such as employment, taxation, criminality, security, sovereignty, and health. Concerning employment, both parties have portrayed cross-border workers as an economic threat because they would take the Genevans' jobs. The MCG used the *topic* of taxation to condemn the high figure of cross-border taxes sent to France. Combinations such as criminality–fear, security–comparison, and sovereignty–responsibility were used by the Genevan SVP and the MCG to demonstrate how a stricter border control regime and a claim for sovereignty would diminish criminality, improve security, and prioritize Genevan residents. The combination health–fear was used by the Genevan SVP to legitimize how a stricter border control regime could contain a COVID-19 outbreak. The geographical proximity with the border was dominant in the corpus of data relating to *cross-border mobility*: The threats are related to this symbolic proximity.

With respect to *all-embracing migration*, the RWPPs mainly used *topics* like employment, housing/infrastructures, environment, agreements, permissiveness, security, taxation, and health. In comparison with *cross-border mobility*, both parties exploited the *topic* of employment to blame European economic migrants as an economic threat. The Genevan SVP also used the *topic* of housing/infrastructures to blame migrants for stealing houses and overloading roads and public transportation, the *topic* of environment to blame migrants for destroying the natural heritage of Geneva, and the *topic* of agreements to blame the Free Movement of Persons and the Schengen agreements as economic threats. Combinations like permissiveness–numbers, security–fear, and security–comparison were used by both parties to legitimize the partial closure of borders for decreasing the number of illegal migrants, and improving security. The combinations health–fear, and health–responsibility was used by the Genevan SVP to legitimize the partial closure of borders in order to avoid an “invasion” of people infected with the COVID-19. Contrary to *cross-border mobility*, the corpus of data coded with *all-embracing migration* was oriented more toward general concerns about the problems induced by migration and less toward geographical proximity with the border.

The argumentation strategies of the first phase aimed to show the porosity of the border and, implicitly, the need to close state borders. In the second phase, the parties emphasized the benefits of having closed the borders, while in the third phase they showed the negative consequences of reopening state borders. The main differences between the two parties lie in the topics they focused on. While the MCG mostly focused on themes relating to employment, taxation, and security involving cross-border threats, the topics mobilized by the Genevan SVP were broader and ranged from health to agreements and permissiveness. Interestingly, the MCG never focused on the topic of health, despite the context of the pandemic.

## CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was to explore which specific bordering narratives arose in the right-wing populist anti-immigration discourse in a highly integrated borderland area during a time of crisis, and how those narratives evolved over time. The research fills a gap in the study of right-wing populist discourse in such Swiss and European regions, as well as in the analysis of the relationship between right-wing populism and the politicization of borders. Moreover, its aim was to focus on a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, which allowed RWPPs to use spatial aspects of identity and give both political and symbolic responses to transnational flows. The paper hypothesized that these parties would produce a strong re-bordering discourse which would vary according to the different phases of the pandemic and the partial closure of state borders. Using the discourse in a constructivist framework, I pointed out the discursive strategies that RWPPs use to symbolically construct the border.

The context of the COVID-19 pandemic was a fertile ground for both the Genevan SVP and the MCG. Through argumentation strategies combining the *topics* of health, criminality, security, permissiveness, and sovereignty with *topoi* such as fear, comparison, numbers, and responsibility, they used the context of the pandemic to discursively reinforce the imaginary of the border as protection and wall against intruders in a radicalized re-bordering narrative. Those discursive patterns linked to the partial closure of state borders during the pandemic were used as an innovative frame to legitimize a discourse against immigration and open borders.

The first phase was used to claim the closure of state borders, the second highlighted the benefits of the closure, and the third phase underlined the danger of reopening state borders. The results show that those argumentation strategies are operating according to “rationalization legitimization” (legitimizing the border as a form of defense over which control should be maintained) and with “moral legitimization” (legitimizing harsher border controls as a responsible act to preserve social security and public interests) (Rheindorf & Wodak, 2018).

Interestingly, only the Genevan SVP used the topic of health to reinforce the symbolical protection of the border in an “immunitarian” way; according to Minca and Rijke (2018: 87), borders can be conceptualized in an immunitarian fashion and serve to protect an organic territorial body “from the real or imagined contamination of alien bodies” by portraying immigrants as vectors of diseases. Those infected invaders are, in this sense, used as scapegoats to legitimize the closure of state borders (Radil et al., 2021). At the same time, other argumentation strategies developed through topics such as employment, taxation, housing/infrastructures, environment, and agreements were not necessarily related to the frame of the partial closure of borders due to the pandemic but represent the usual argumentation strategies displayed by RWPPs, generally associated with immigration (see Riaño & Wastl-Walter, 2006; Skenderovic, 2007).

This research shows that the Genevan SVP's and the MCG's argumentation strategies during the pandemic unequivocally promote the need for stricter border controls – if not an explicit closure of state borders – in what I highlighted above as the moralization of bordering. The moralization of bordering is based on the discourse of fear proposed by RWPPs that use imagined dangers (e.g. immigrants blamed as responsible for society's problems [Wodak, 2015]) to legitimize the need for tighter border controls. Similarly, Schain (2019: 18) points out that immigration issues are framed around securitization because of the challenges and dangers they pose to internal security.

The results suggest that RWPPs in the Genevan borderland area use a strong re-bordering narrative to symbolize the border as a wall and a tool for protection (Rheindorf & Wodak, 2020). The parties do this by celebrating a kind of idealized endangered heartland (Taggart, 2000). Consequently, the thesis of ambivalence related to the RWPPs' bordering narratives (see Biancalana & Mazzoleni, 2020; Lamour & Varga, 2020; Mazzoleni & Mueller, 2017) does not fit for the specific context of this study. In normal times, RWPPs must take into consideration the context in which they evolve – here, a context of strong interdependence with the other side of the border – by displaying an ambivalent discourse based on contextual opportunities and constraints. However, the context-specific break generated by the COVID-19 crisis allowed Genevan RWPPs to promote a strong re-bordering narrative. This study sheds light on how a context such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting partial closure of state borders represented a crucial opportunity for Genevan RWPPs to endorse an unequivocal discourse against the strong functional and interdependent transborder mobility of people, goods, capital and services of the Genevan borderland. Furthermore, the MCG made use of an avoidance strategy by not focusing on the health *topic*. As the party usually strongly focuses on cross-border issues, and as it knows that the Genevan health system would collapse without cross-border workers, the MCG avoided this *topic* to take advantage of the context of crisis. Thus, the party displayed a strong re-bordering narrative avoiding an ambivalent discourse.

This contribution aimed to combine political science with border and discourse studies in order to understand the bordering processes associated with the current wave of populism and, especially, how the COVID-19 pandemic put bordering narratives into play (Casaglia et al., 2020). We know that “contemporary geopolitical circumstances highlight the importance of studying and understanding contemporary border discourses” (Koch, 2018: 3). Furthermore, borderland areas represent fertile grounds for RWPPs to politicize borders because of their geographical and symbolic proximity with the border. While there have been a few studies exploring the links between right-wing populism and borders (Lamour & Varga, 2020; Ochoa Espejo, 2019), this research sought to do it in relation to borderland areas, an aspect which is still lacking in the literature.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data supporting the findings of this study is available from the corresponding author upon request.

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