WHO SPEAKS LOUDEST?

The real drivers behind political polarization

▶ Summary

Populist parties in Central Europe care more about immigration, climate change, and gender issues than voters do. They therefore shape these debates from the top-down, controlling the narrative, often disregarding public demand and following their own agenda by simplifying complex issues into clear, emotionally charged messages.

Immigration remains the most mentioned issue for populist success in Central Europe. However, the way in which this issue is framed might influence public attitudes. It is also important to note that traditional media and social media can create echo chambers around the topic, amplifying populist narratives.

The populist ownership of the immigration issue cannot be challenged without clear alternatives. Mainstream parties must develop programmatic responses and stimulate broader public debate to offer voters real choices.

Educating voters on how political narratives are constructed and spread as well as encouraging open, inclusive public debate on contested topics, could help reshape the agenda setting from the bottom-up.

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What's the problem?

Across Central Europe, political debates around immigration, gender, and climate are heating up, but these aren't necessarily voter-driven concerns. Instead, populist parties are pushing these topics to the top of the agenda – an effort reinforced through selective media coverage and social media activity by political elites. Populist parties continue to dominate debates (especially around immigration), because they are often the only actors offering consistent, emotionally charged narratives, regardless of how closely these align with public opinion. In many cases, mainstream parties lack clear alternative messages, while voters remain under-informed about how political framing works. At the same time, media and social platforms often amplify populist messages and false claims (frequently without adequate fact-checking) thereby reinforcing their importance and shaping public perception. These topics are often presented in simplified, emotional, or confrontational terms, designed to provoke strong reactions and divide public opinion. While such framing strategies may help populist parties gain support, they can have damaging long-term effects: they distort democratic debate, reduce space for compromise, and weaken trust in institutions.

This creates a growing disconnect between the issues which voters are concerned with and those that dominate the political agenda. It is therefore important to understand and be aware of the politicization of issues by parties. This refers to the use of selective framing to mark an issue as widespread, even though it has not been perceived as such. In a time of rising disinformation, geopolitical instability, and democratic retrogression in some EU member states, it is urgent for policymakers to understand how these narratives take hold and what can be done to promote a more balanced, inclusive political discourse. The extend to which citizens perceive immigration as a major "problem" is often exaggerated, as many non-populist parties increasingly align with anti-migrant narratives in pursuit of electoral gains.

What does the evidence show?

Despite the strong focus of populist parties on issues like immigration, climate change, and gender, ActEU results show that these topics do not significantly shape people's voting intentions. In other words, voters do not choose populist parties based on their views on these issues, rather their anti-establishment sentiment combined with lower trust in the local government drive their voting decision.

Therefore, leadership style and trust in institutions play a major role in shaping voters' choices, challenging common assumptions about the drivers of populist support.

A recent study conducted in the ActEU research project shows that immigration remains the most powerful issue for populist parties in Central Europe. These parties rely heavily on selective framing to shape the public discourse, which has a clear impact on public attitudes and helps populist parties maintain control over how immigration is perceived and discussed.

Overall, the findings suggest that these polarizing topics are shaped more by political leaders than by public opinion. Even on issues like immigration, it is often the way that parties communicate their ideas (not strong voter beliefs) that drives the debate.

What should be done?

To counter elite-driven populist discourse and its disproportionate influence on the political agenda, the EU and its member

states need to move beyond reactive strategies. A coordinated policy response should aim to rebalance political discourse, equip voters with critical tools, and support evidence-based monitoring of how narratives are created and spread. This could include systematic misinformation training, more consistent fact-checking practices, and the use of new technologies to detect and counter false or manipulative content.

Key recommendations

► **Break the monopoly on immigration narratives**: Non-populist parties should **develop clear, coherent alternatives** to populist messaging on immigration. This means moving beyond vague statements to **offer concrete policy proposals**, engaging with voters through transparent communication, and creating space for **more constructive and fact-based discussions**.

► **Strengthen voter education on political framing**: Public awareness campaigns, civic education programs, and partnerships with civil society organizations should help citizens **recognize how narratives are constructed and understand the difference between opinion, emotion, and fact**. The goal is not to tell voters what to think, but to empower them to think critically.

► **Stimulate broader public debate**: EU institutions and national governments should **invest in platforms that foster inclusive public dialogue** (e.g., citizen assemblies and structured consultations), especially on divisive topics like immigration, climate, and gender. When more voices are heard, populist narratives lose their dominance.

► **Fund independent monitoring of party discourse and media framing**: To understand and respond to the influence of elite-driven narratives, the EU should **support long-term, cross-national research initiatives** that track how political parties frame key issues and how these frames evolve over time, especially during election periods. This monitoring should cover both online and offline media, including the amplification of populist language on social media and the ways mainstream media adopt or echo these frames. Integrating more consistent and timely fact-checking into this process can help combat disinformation and lead to more trust in the democratic discourse.