

# Retoryka liczb

## Rhetoric of Numbers

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**The Revival of Numbers and Lists in Radical Right Politics**  
**Liczby i wykazy w komunikacji politycznej radykalnej prawicy**

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## The Revival of Numbers and Lists in Radical Right Politics<sup>1</sup>

On 28 June 2018, the prime ministers of the EU 27 member-states met in Brussels to discuss the most important current global and transnational challenges. The agenda, it seems however, focused overwhelmingly upon one issue: how to protect the EU from refugees and asylum seekers; that is, how to (re-)build “Fortress Europe”, one in which there would be no more entry for refugees (usually labelled “migrants” or even “illegal migrants”). This is despite a range of other imminent and important problems for the EU, such as over climate change, a potential trade-war with the US, various problems with Russia, ever more tendencies towards authoritarianism inside and at the borders of the EU, let alone Brexit and other internal challenges. Hence, it is time to ask if the political scientist Ivan Krastev, in his widely acknowledged book *After Europe* (2017), has rightly predicted that the so-called “refugee crisis” will only widen the gap between elites and voters in ways that threaten the very future of the entire European project?

Although the number of asylum seekers has drastically fallen since the summer and falls of 2015 – when over one million refugees (Buber-Ennsner, Kohlenberger 2018) crossed the Greek and Italian borders and tried to reach Sweden, Germany, and Austria – the polarized debates (Human Rights Watch 2018) about migration and border control have continued. Indeed, in some cases these concerns have become dominant in several EU member-states. However, in the polarized debates, substantiated facts are frequently challenged, distorted and presented as “fake news”.

On June 22, 2018, for example, in an interview with the German weekly *Die Zeit*, editor in chief Giovanni Di Lorenzo asked the Austrian prime minister Sebastian Kurz, from the Austrian People’s Party, what he felt when being confronted with the videos and pictures of the children who had been separated from their parents at the Mexican border. Kurz replied that “he was not able – like Di

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1. The paper was originally published at The Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right (CARR) website, source <https://www.radicalrightanalysis.com/2018/06/30/the-revival-of-numbers-and-lists-in-radical-right-politics> (June 30, 2018).

Lorenzo – to comprehend what sense this should make [*Ich hab das wahrscheinlich so wie Sie nicht nachvollziehen können, welchen Sinn das machen soll*]. The interviewer replied that he found Kurz’s reply to be very unemotional [*kühl*], and by contrast his stomach had lurched at the images. Kurz countered (“Österreichs Innenminister...” 2018) with the possibility that these accounts may have been “fake news”: ‘I don’t want to speculate, but I have devoted myself a lot to migration. I know that frequently the mistake is being made, that something is represented differently than it is’ [*Ich will da jetzt nicht mutmaßen, aber ich habe mich sehr viel mit Migration beschäftigt. Ich weiß, dass oft sehr schnell der Fehler gemacht wird, dass etwas anders dargestellt wird, als es ist*]. As Hannah Arendt asserted long ago, politicians can quickly change facts into opinions which one could then oppose – quite shamelessly – with alternative viewpoints. In this way, she argues, scholarly and factual evidence could be blunted and even negated.

Thus, anyone following debates about refugees and migrants in EU member states (let alone beyond) is almost daily confronted by an abundance of these kinds of “opinions”, drawing on various numbers and lists, frequently without giving convincing and valid sources. By contrast, here is some accurate evidence upon which to base opinions:

- Numbers of refugees wanting to enter Europe by ship from Libya (Dernbach 2018);
- Numbers of refugees on ships, who are often waiting for days for the permission to land in Greece, Italy, Spain, Portugal or Malta (“Schiffe mit...” 2018);
- Numbers of refugees estimated to have drowned in the Mediterranean (“Zahl toter Flüchtlinge...” 2018);
- Numbers of asylum seekers whose applications were rejected in Algeria, and who have been deported and left stranded in the Sahara, without water and food (Röhlig 2018);
- Numbers of children separated from their parents at the border to Mexico following a recent decision by US President Donald Trump (in the latter case, worldwide protests forced Trump to change this decision and reunite these children again with their parents) (Mindock 2018).

These figures are thrown into sharp relief by data indicating the following:

- The maximum number of asylum seekers allowed to apply for asylum in various EU member states (Greven 2017);

- Numbers of crimes allegedly committed by foreigners (refugees, migrants or asylum seekers) (Thompson 2003);
- Evidence of the costs which member states have spent or should spend on asylum seekers waiting for their applications to be decided upon (“Um Kosten...” 2017);
- Established quotas for asylum seekers to be distributed amongst EU-member states;
- The EU’s drive to lower the minimum security costs (“Um Kosten...” 2017) for asylum seekers in order to make Europe a less attractive destination target (“Migrant crisis...” 2015);
- Estimated numbers of so-called ‘illegal migrants’ who should be sent back or deported to their home countries, or to camps outside of Europe (in Libya or Algeria), as recently advocated by prominent politicians of the governing CSU-party in Germany (Schuler 2018);
- Estimated numbers of children and families to be deported from safe asylum homes to be “concentrated” (!) in centers in Lower Austria – even if gravely sick or physically challenged – as proposed by the Minister of Interior Affairs in Austria, Herbert Kickl from the radical right party (currently in a governing coalition with Kurz’s Austrian People’s Party), FPÖ (“Österreichs Innenminister...” 2018);

This “real” news goes on and on: proposals for raising the number of guards from the EU agency FRONTEX (Deutsche Presse-Agentur 2018); police officers who should be empowered (Maniar 2016) to protect EU borders; and more (“Österreich will...” 2018).

Apart from such easily-sourced – yet all too easily dismissed – accounts, is the new imperative to create lists. For instance, the Italian Minister for Interior Affairs, Matteo Salvini head of the radical right party Lega (also now in coalition government; in this case with the Five Star Movement), recently requested a document listing all Roma and Sinti registered in Italy (Embury-Dennis 2018) – even though he did not state what should happen with this list. It may well have been linked to his earlier call (Embury-Dennis 2018) for a ‘mass cleansing’, street by street’ in language all too redolent of Mussolini’s Italy. Salvini has also described refugees and migrants as “human flesh” (“Italiens Innenminister...” 2018); a term used to discriminate against, and dehumanize refugees arriving on boats in Italy. Victor Orbán, another radical right politician in power, in this case as the Hungarian prime minister, published a list with 200 so-called ‘Soros-mercenaries’ (including scholars, journalists, intellectuals, NGOs who allegedly supported the Hungarian-American philanthropist, who is Jewish) who are trying to help

refugees in Hungary (Verseck 2018). Indeed, Soros has been demonized via traditional antisemitic conspiracy stereotypes as the primary *Feindbild* [enemy image] of Hungary, and subsequently of all Visegrad countries in Europe, and even further afield (Dunai 2018).

Apart from the revival of lists which – in the context of enumerating people regarded as unwelcome invaders – possess a sinister history in modern Europe: the Shoah relied upon just such bureaucratic lists created by the Third Reich to deport and subsequently exterminate Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe. Related to this decisive site of memory is another negatively connotated term making headlines: ‘Axis of the willing’ [*Achse der Willigen*], launched by Austria’s prime minister Kurz to indicate a putative anti-migrant coalition between Italy (Salvini), Bavaria (Seehofer), and Austria (Kurz) – but also to challenge Angela Merkel’s policy in the EU (“Kurz und...” 2018). ‘Axis of the willing’, of course, is a term that was used from 1936 to define the coalition between Rome (Mussolini) and Berlin (Hitler) (Ripper 2018).

The meeting of EU prime ministers – as is widely reported decided to implement stricter migration policies (“Flüchtlinge sollen...” 2018; Foster and Crisp 2018) in order to achieve a unanimous resolution after many hours of negotiation. Indeed, EU borders will be closed as far as possible; refugees arriving on boats deported to so-called “regional disembarkation platforms” in Northern Africa (no details are available to date), asylum seekers stranded in Italy (and Greece) will be distributed to member states who would take them on a strictly **voluntary** basis. Finally, it was also decided to cooperate with relevant third countries as well as UNHCR and IOM, to remain, “in full respect of international law and without creating a pull factor”. As the foreign correspondent in Brussels stated on Austrian main TV late news (ZIBII, tvthek.orf.at), there was almost no mention of the terms “solidarity” or “human rights” in the debates and in the finalized text.

Obviously, the change of policies has led to a **normalization** of extreme-right nativist border- and body politics. Exclusionary rhetoric and measures have become mainstream. It is thus not surprising that 500 prominent academics are calling for a “science-based approach to immigration”, based on substantive research to counter short-term, populist decisions and violations of human rights (Percy 2018). As Austrian commentator Robert Misik maintains, it is past time to launch a counter-discourse in the formation of an ‘axis of democrats’ (Misik 2018). This would certainly make sense.

Yet it is also time to ask why this topic has achieved hegemony across Europe. Obviously, several answers suggest themselves:

Firstly, numbers serve legitimating political decisions, they possess quasi factual authority, and – as argued by psychologists and social scientists – are

a technology of distance and have enormous constitutive power (e.g., Porter 1996; Espeland 1997; Van Leeuwen & Wodak 1999). Hence, migration restrictions and control could be well legitimized authoritatively and rationally by referring to quasi objective numbers. In this way, numbers also create distance to people, they offer abstraction and dehumanize individual experiences (“The Guardian view...” 2018). Expert knowledge via quantification also helps to substantiate political and organizational preferences in cases of political debates and conflicts.

Secondly, rhetoricians have traditionally emphasized the power of numbers and lists – as being rhetorical devices appealing to emotions such as fear (of “an invasion of illegal migrants”): scenarios of danger are systematically linked to crime statistics which then allow for the following argument: “if more migrants/refugees enter our country, then crime rates will raise”, related to the topos of number (KhosraviNik 2009; Wodak 2015). However, there is a caveat – usually, narratives and accounts trigger emotions better than abstract numbers; hence a context-dependent approach is deemed necessary (Conger 1998).

And finally: Might such debates distract from other – much more uncomfortable – topics and proposals?

For example, the Austrian government is currently debating a new law to raise daily working hours from 8 to 12; and to raise the maximum weekly working hours from 40 to 60. This is legitimized by what is termed, after the familiar neo-liberal fashion, flexibility; it would thus destroy an extremely important pillar of Austria’s post-war democracy and guaranteed worker’s rights (Misik 2018; Klenk 2018). This demagogic rhetoric might also divert attention from another proposal restricting freedom of the media, suggesting that journalists would not be permitted their own opinion working in the official state-owned media ORF on personal Twitter accounts, Facebook pages and blogs (Klenk 2018). Put another way, is this simply just political Three-Card Monty?

The implementation of the above laws would obviously aggravate large parts of the electorate; indeed, raising the number of hours at work would predictably anger much of the electorate for the radical right FPÖ. One can thus speculate that national-conservative governments (such as that exemplified in Austria) have strategically decided to please their electorate with ever more restrictive migration policies – while quietly undoing the postwar social contract – despite the above-mentioned fact that the number of migrants and refugees has drastically fallen.

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