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Title: *Les Identitaires'* impact on French foreign policy during the 2015 crisis of the European Asylum System

In 2015, the Common European Asylum System and the Schengen regime were placed under unparalleled strain by the mass arrival of 1.2 million asylum seekers. This event was followed by the failure of the EU Commission's to promote a common approach. Within this context, this in-depth investigation explores the impact of the far-right social movement *Les Identitaires* on French foreign policy in the mid-2010s. Since the Front National contains clear roots in far-right social movements, *Les Identitaires'* impact is closely entangled with Marine Le Pen's party. Whereas past research concluded that the far right failed to directly influence key decisions in foreign policy, this study suggests that the French far right's indirect impact fostered President Hollande's unwillingness to welcome the refugees and France's inactivity at the EU level. Thus, France's cooperation with Germany foundered to unprecedented levels following President Hollande's U-turn, with significant repercussions on EU integration on migration policy.

Keywords: *Les Identitaires*, *Front National*, European Asylum System, Political Impact; Foreign policy

In 2015, the Common European Asylum System and the Schengen regime were placed under unparalleled strain by the mass arrival of 1.2 million asylum seekers (Eurostat, 2021). This crisis became a prominent topic in international media in April 2015, after several maritime disasters in Italy during the boat crossing of the Mediterranean Sea. Afterwards, most asylum seekers came to Europe using the much shorter Aegean Sea crossing from Turkey to Greece, subsequently crossing the Balkans towards other member states of the European Union (EU) by land. These inflows were mainly formed by Syrian and Afghan citizens. From an early stage, the effects of this social phenomenon fluctuated across the EU members-states according to

their geographic location and the destination of inflows (Webber, 2018). In addition to the ‘frontline’ countries like Greece and Italy, Germany emerged as the major destination, having received 200,000 asylum requests in 2014 (Tardis, 2021). Notwithstanding Germany’s pleas for greater solidarity among EU member states, comparative research indicates that France and the *Visegrád* countries adopted a ‘cautious position’ or rejected these requests due to electoral pressures from far-right parties (Zaun, 2018).

Within this context, this investigation will explore the impact of a French far-right¹ social movement named ‘*Les Identitaires*’ (formerly ‘*Bloc Identitaire*’) on France’s foreign policy during the crisis of the asylum management system in the mid-2010s. Until its legal dissolution, *Les Identitaires* were a social movement praised as a heroic and patriot group by far-right figures, which became popular for its articulation of a profound anti-immigrant and Islamophobic discourse since its creation in the early 2000s. This social movement contains deep linkages with the most prominent French extreme-right party (ERP): the *Front National* (FN, renamed *Rassemblement Nationale* in 2018), which possesses clear roots in the far-right social movement sector (Gattinara and Pirro, 2019). Consequently, the assessment of the *Les Identitaires*’ impact on foreign policy is closely entangled with the FN’s agency. Whereas international factors such as globalization are recurrently identified as a causal factor behind the emergence of the far right (Raunio and Wagner, 2020), the research on the impact of far-right on international affairs remains limited (Verbeek and Zaslove, 2015; Balfour et al. 2016; Varga and Buzogány, 2020; Destradi et al., 2021). To overcome this shortcoming, this article proposes a threefold contribution.

Most of the available research on ERP impact on foreign policy was conducted when these parties hold government seats and have direct access to the policy-making process (Verbeek and Zaslove, 2015; Destradi et al., 2021). By contrast, this investigation explores the indirect causal effects of the far-right non-party sector while the FN remained excluded from the national government. Secondly, this investigation assesses the foreign-policy impact of a far-right social movement in the context of an exogenous shock at the EU’s external borders. Thus, the scope of this investigation is closely interdependent with the definition of the EU’s

¹ Right-wing extremism is hereby interpreted as the unique combination of two ideological properties: a rejection of the fundamental values, procedures, and institutions of the democratic constitutional State; and, foremost, the denial of the principle of human equality (Carter, 2018; Mudde, 2019).

response to the 2015 crisis of the asylum management system and France's bilateral cooperation with Germany, which was widely praised as the main engine behind the integration process (Mourlon-Druel, 2017).²

Lastly, this study focuses on the far right's impact during the term of the President François Hollande, who was the leader of the centre-left party - *Parti Socialiste* (PS), whereas most of the available research focuses on the mainstream centre-right (Varga and Buzogány, 2020). Drawing on the employment of process tracing, this research suggests that the *Les Identitaires* and the FN attained a significant indirect impact on French foreign policy in the mid-2010s. This process was closely associated with the President Hollande's U-turns on the reform of the European asylum system in 2015, as well as with the Prime Minister's hostility towards the German Chancellor. Whereas past research asserted that the far right failed in directly determining key decisions in foreign policy (Balfour et al. 2016), this investigation suggests that the French far right's indirect impact fostered an unprecedented crisis regarding French bilateralism towards Germany and subsequently on the EU's ability to devise a reform of the European Asylum System. After this general overview, the next section reviews the domain of foreign policy and its relationship with the far right.

The domain of foreign policy

Foreign policy consists of the sum of official external relations led by an independent actor in international relations, which usually but not exclusively refers to sovereign states (Hill, 2015). The main difficulty lies in the definition of the political activities referred to in the concept of external relations and how to disentangle the field of foreign affairs from that of domestic policy (Kuus, 2017). Scholars focused on the study of foreign policy decision-making seek to explain how a particular policy output was selected by the agents involved in the policy process (Stuart, 2013). Most studies explore the management of the process of decision-making by political leaders during international crises, which are characterized by high threat, short

² By the early 2010s, the engine of European integration was perceived as no longer working due to French weakness in relation to German's economic growth, as well as the policy divergences regarding the management of the Eurozone (Mourlon-Druel, 2017).

decision time, and intense social pressure. The unexpected character of such events reinforces democratic states' reliance on the foreign policy executive formed by the head of government and the foreign minister (Hill, 2015).

As world politics became more complex, the state-centred approaches began to lose their pre-eminent position in IR, and scholars adapted their methodologies and theoretical assumptions to the study of non-state, subnational actors (Stuart, 2013). The research now includes social actors that can influence policy without having a clear voice or formal mechanism for mobilizing their interests, such as the far-right non-party sector (Veugelers and Menard, 2018; Varga and Buzogány, 2020). Moreover, the role of domestic factors in determining foreign policy has expanded over the past decades due to the emergence of globalization and the ascension of regional organizations (Verbeek and Zaslove, 2018). The increased interdependence means that issues that were previously decided at the national level have now been internationalized, like migration or environmental policies (Raunio and Wagner, 2020).

In response to globalization, the sovereign states intensified their levels of international cooperation at the global and regional level, especially within the EU. This process increased the number of actors subject to the European integration process, who are increasingly interested in influencing the EU's policies (Verbeek and Zaslove, 2018). In terms of geopolitical outlook, the far right is considered distinctive from other political actors due to the exceptional hostility to international multilateralism and intergovernmentalism alongside their extreme defence of national interests and sovereignty (Raunio and Wagner, 2020). The far right is thus expected to attempt to influence national foreign policy, but this political process interacts with other contingent factors that can enhance or reduce the intensity of such influence (Destradi et al. 2021). In the mid-2010s, a think tank report asserted that far right parties had not succeeded in directly determining key decisions on foreign policy nor did they lead to the unravelling of European integration (Balfour et. al. 2016).

Lastly, the domain of French foreign policy implies a lower degree of political constraints on the scope of the far right's impact than at the domestic level. French foreign policy is a prerogative (*'domaine réservé'*) of the national President, who can negotiate and ratify international treaties, which is treated as off-limits to parliamentary scrutiny. Furthermore, the de-

cisions of the French state at the external level are not directly supervised by domestic political actors, unlike the several domestic veto players that can intervene on the French policy of immigration control such as the *Conseil d'État* (Council of State; Carvalho, 2016). Regarding the EU migration and asylum policy, the Lisbon Treaty maintains the prerogatives of member states to determine the admission of non-EU citizens entering their national territories, including asylum inflows (Geddes and Boswell, 2010). Thereby, the Europeanization process does not constraint the EU member-states to accept unwanted inflows from non-European states. The next section reviews the literature on the far right's political impact

The impact of the far right

In an early stage, academic research on the political impact of extreme-right parties was overwhelmingly focused on their core issue – immigration (Williams, 2006; Schain, 2006; Carvalho, 2016). Later, a second wave of studies focused on ERPs' impact on a variety of new topics (Röth et al. 2017; Biard et al., 2019; Krause and Giebler, 2019; Bergmann et al. 2021). Likewise, the geographic scope of the research on this topic shifted from its initial focus on Western Europe to the political systems in Eastern Europe (Minkenberg et al. 2021). This political process was initially associated with the 'co-option of radical-right issues' by mainstream parties, which implied the moderate parties' adoption of the far-right discourse to attract right-wing extremist voters (Schain, 2006). Later, this political process was conceived as the ERPs' ability to promote a policy outcome that would not have been observed in the absence of the agency of the selected ERP (Carvalho, 2016). However, recent research suggested that the presence of a relevant ERP might not be a necessary condition, as the impact of far-right ideology on immigration policy was identified in the USA during the term of President Donald Trump (Schain, 2018).

Similarly, the impact of the far right is normally envisaged as a political outcome that reflects a formal deliberation process, which leads to significant policy change (Carvalho, 2016; Biard; 2019). Nonetheless, this interpretation enhances the study of the far right's impact on formal policy activity at the expense of policy inactivity. Policy inaction³ or a non-decision is a form

³ This form of policy making can be defined as an 'instance and/or pattern of non-intervention by individual policymakers (...) and where other plausible potential policy interventions did not take place.' (McConnel and Hart, 2019, p. 648).

of policy making that is not directly susceptible to observation, which is the main reason for being overlooked in political research (Page, 2008). This study will therefore consider policy inaction as a potential outcome of ERP impact, which relates to whether a government is actively 'doing nothing' regarding a particular topic (Hill, 2015; McConnel and Hart, 2019). The ERPs' impact on policy development will be also distinguished between having a direct or an indirect character depending on these parties' representation in government (Schain, 2006; Carvalho, 2016; Biard, 2019). Similarly, the indirect impact of the far right can also be traced at the social-movement level or the non-party sector (Williams, 2018). This trend is more likely when the far-right social movements are entangled with political parties represented in mainstream politics as in France (Gattinara and Pirro, 2019).

Access to government seats has been interpreted as a key enabler of direct impact on foreign policy (Verbeek and Zaslove, 2015), but this relationship has been disputed by cross-national analysis (Betz et al. 2019). This comparative research also highlighted the necessity of deepening the understanding of ERPs' indirect political impact (Betz et al. 2019). To this end, this investigation assesses the presence of a causal mechanism proposed to explain ERP impact at the cross-national level (Carvalho, 2016). In the absence of national governments led by the far-right parties, ERPs' impact can be observed when these parties pose a significant electoral threat to the objectives of mainstream parties (Carvalho, 2016; Camus and Lebourg, 2017; Bergmann et al. 2021). Secondly, the far right's political impact is contingent on the mainstream parties' strategies and must involve some level of formal/informal engagement with their political discourse or electoral programme. Nonetheless, the scope of the far-right electoral threat does not predetermine mainstream parties' strategic responses or the intensity of political impact (Carvalho, 2016).⁴ Through the application of process tracing, this investigation will assess the presence of these two distinct parts of the proposed causal mechanism.

Methodology

Drawing on past research, this investigation employs a qualitative research strategy named process tracing to explore the French far right's impact on foreign policy (Carvalho, 2016; Biard, 2019). This procedure is based on the in-depth analysis of a single case study and the

⁴ This trend was evidenced by Jacques Chirac' unwillingness to engage with the FN during the 2000s, unlike Nicolas Sarkozy's accommodative strategy during the 2007 presidential elections (Carvalho, 2016).

tracing of causal mechanisms (Blatter and Haverland, 2012). This method encompasses: ‘attempts to identify the intervening causal process – the causal chain and causal mechanism – between an independent variable and the outcome of the dependent variable’ (George and Bennett, 2005, p. 206). The objective is to identify a causal chain between the independent and dependent variables through the detailed examination of a historical episode, as well as, to assess the influence of potential intervening variables. This research strategy is particularly suited to trace the different stages of the policy process implied by President Hollande’s management of foreign policy in the mid-2010s. As a qualitative research strategy, process tracing is more valuable to assess the conditions of causal necessity and sufficiency in particular cases than to estimate the casual weight of a particular variable (George and Bennett, 2005).

Process tracing observations encompass empirical data that helps to determine the temporal chain in which causal factors interact to produce the dependent variable and to assess the condition of necessity and sufficiency of those factors (Blatter and Haverland, 2012). Process tracing enables the employment of multiple types of evidence for the verification of a single inference, which can have a noncomparable character (Gerring, 2006). The number of observations employed in process tracing is indeterminate. This study employs a theory-centric variant of process tracing: ‘theory-centric variants of process-tracing enable inferences about mechanisms linking causes with outcomes through the collection of mechanistic evidence of the operation of each of the parts of a causal mechanism in a case study’ (Beach and Pedersen, 2016, p. 307). Thereby, the empirical data should be employed to test the observation of the different parts of the proposed causal mechanism behind far-right impact on policy development. This study employs a plethora of sources involving electoral data, websites of social movements, political speeches, media news, as well as autobiographies of President Hollande and his close advisers. Through the analysis of this data, the employment of process tracing helps to identify the motivations behind President Hollande’s decisions. The next section reviews *Les Identitaires*’ stances on immigration.

Les Identitaires’ discourse on immigration

In the early 2000s, a new far-right social movement emerged in France after the creation of *Jeunesses Identitaires* (Identitarian Youths, renamed *Génération Identitaire* in 2012) in 2002 and the *Bloc Identitaire – Mouvement Social Européen* (BI; Identitarian Bloc – European Social

Movement; renamed *Les Identitaires* in 2016) in 2003. Drawing inspiration from the French *Nouvelle Droite*, this social movement engaged in a cultural war aimed at the defence of ethnopluralism, the preservation of national cultures and identities to ensure the survival of the European civilization. Instead of engaging in electoral politics, the *BI*'s main objective was to influence the wider political debate by leading provocative events that attract large media coverage (Zuquete, 2018). In 2012, the *Génération Identitaire* became an organization independent from the *BI* and its members occupied the construction site of the great mosque of Poitiers in late 2012 to demand a referendum about Islam and immigration in France. After the organization of several anti-immigration protests, *Génération Identitaire* was banned by the French government in 2021, following the performance of an illegal blockade of the Italian border in the French Alps in 2019.

Until the early 2020s, the relationship between the *BI* and the *FN* was defined by a logic of complementarity rather than competition (Zuquete, 2018). Notwithstanding the de-diabolization strategy deployed by Marine, various members of the *BI/Les Identitaires* were close advisors of the *FN*'s elected representatives or the party's candidates in local and regional elections (AlJazeera, 2018). Nonetheless, the *BI* always maintained its own ideology (Camus, 2018). Unlike the *FN*, the *BI* endorsed the theory of replacement proposed by Renaud Camus which highlights the ongoing replacement of European citizens with non-European immigrants. Multiculturalism is perceived as an ideological by-product of May 1968 and a cause behind ethnic conflict (Robert, 2016). Unsurprisingly, the intense asylum inflows observed in the mid-2000s were associated by the *BI* with the multiplication of *bidonvilles* in French territory such as the 'Calais jungle'⁵. These migrant camps were described as a waste of public funds that fostered local crime rates, because they were inhabited by destitute irregular immigrants who lacked professional skills (Florent, 2016). Lastly, the *BI* interpreted the EU's relocation programme of asylum seekers as the confirmation of the theory of replacement orchestrated by the political elite (Gerber, 2016).

⁵ The Calais Jungle refers to a migrant and refugee camp set up in Calais with people hoping to reach the United Kingdom, a camp which was riddled by deplorable living conditions and mostly ignored by the centre-left government. This camp was associated with a sense of permanent crisis of the French asylum system (Tardis, 2021)

The FN's electoral growth during President Hollande's term

After observing the political mobilization of the *BI*'s Islamophobia in the early 2010s, Marine never allowed this social movement to take ownership of this issue (Camus and Lebourg, 2017). Consequently, the *FN* leader established a clear linkage between immigration and the development of radical Islamism after the Charlie Hebdo attacks in January 2015 (Reichman, 2015). With the formal support of the *BI*, Marine overturned the *FN*'s electoral decline observed in the late 2000s and obtained 17.9 per cent of the vote in the 2012 presidential elections. Marine's leadership was perceived by President Hollande as a far greater political threat than that of her father – Jean-Marie Le Pen (Davet and LHomme, 2016). For the first time, the *FN* was the most voted party nationwide in the 2014 elections for the European Parliament the 2015 departmental elections with 24.9 per cent and 25.2 per cent of the votes at these ballots (Shields, 2018).

In May 2015, the *FN* categorically rejected any proposal for migrant quotas whilst Marine framed the asylum inflows as economic immigration rather than forced inflows. According to Marine, the promotion of mass immigration was part of the EU's DNA while the French government was submissive to Brussels' plans (BFMTV, 2015). Germany's decision to open its borders to the refugees was the single cause behind the mass inflows into Europe in order to appease the national demographic decline and to lower wages. Moreover, the EU's mechanism for the relocation of asylum seekers was interpreted as evidence of German unilateralism (Faye, 2015). Unsurprisingly, the *FN* ranked the 'invasion of immigrants' as the top priority of this ERP's electoral campaign for the regional elections in December 2015. Following *Les Identitaires*' Islamophobic discourse, Marine referred to an 'ideological world war' against 'Islamic totalitarianism' that was a consequence of mass immigration into France (Faye, 2015).

In the first round of the 2015 regional elections, the *FN* scored 27.7 per cent of the vote and was the most voted party at the national level once more. In the aftermath of the sexual attacks in Cologne on the New Year's Eve, Marine considered the asylum seekers as a threat to women's rights, and lambasted Merkel's 'irresponsibility' as well as Hollande's 'weakness' (Ivaldi, 2018). In short, the French far right overtly rejected the redistribution of asylum seekers and the *FN* observed unprecedented electoral success. According to a closer advisor, the *FN* was a permanent concern for President Hollande, who tended to overestimate the *FN*'s electoral support (Feltesse, 2017). Thereby, the *FN*'s electoral inroads with the direct support

of *Les Identitaires* posed a significant threat upon President Hollande's ambitions for the 2017 presidential election, which suggests the observation of the first part of the proposed causal mechanism. The next sections will review France's management of the 2015 crisis.

France's unwillingness to welcome asylum seekers

In response to the succession of maritime disasters in the Mediterranean Sea, the EU Commission proposed a new European Agenda on Migration at the European Council meeting on 23 April 2015 (Pastore and Henry, 2016). Due to the intensity of asylum inflows at the EU's external borders and the collapse of local reception and processing facilities, the EU Commission proposed a temporary distribution scheme for 20,000 asylum seekers stranded in Italy and Greece. This mechanism was presented as the forerunner of a wider permanent solution involving 'a mandatory and automatically triggered relocation system' to distribute asylum seekers across member states regardless of the Dublin Convention. However, this proposal was met with hostility by some member states, in particular the *Visegrád* countries, which fostered the disappointment of the President of the European Commission (Le Monde, 2015a).

Reflecting the opposition observed at the EU summit, the French Prime Minister Manuel Valls publicly rejected any references to 'migrant quotas' or to the mandatory character of the distribution scheme (Le Monde, 2015a). After a brief tenure as interior minister, Valls was promoted to Prime Minister in 2014 to appease right-wing voters, because he was perceived as the 'Sarkozy of the left' due to his support of the Burqa ban (Carvalho, 2019). The French government demonstrated a clear lack of willingness to accept the redistribution of refugees. Moreover, the EU Commission's proposals were presented at a time when the French Senate was debating a government bill designed to curb access to asylum and to enhance the forced removals of failed asylum seekers. Thus, the EU Commission's plans for wider integration clashed with the executive's domestic agenda. Notwithstanding the French government's reluctance, polls conducted in France in mid-May highlighted that 62 per cent of respondents were favourable to the establishment of quotas for asylum seekers (Chateau, 2015).

In a joint statement with the German Chancellor in Berlin on 19 May, President Hollande stated: 'It is out of the question to have immigrant quotas because we have rules' in an implicit criticism to the EU Commission's proposals. According to the French President: 'People

come because they think that Europe is a prosperous continent, even when they are not hired by companies... must be escorted back, that is the rule', and there could 'not be quotas for these migrants' (AFP, 2015). Consequently, President Hollande associated the asylum seekers with irregular immigrants, following a securitarian approach in line with the French far right's discourse on this topic. Regarding the redistribution of asylum seekers, Hollande interpreted this measure as a means of relieving the intensity of this social phenomenon in Germany, France or Sweden rather than of reducing the pressure observed in Italy and Greece (AFP, 2015). Therefore, French solidarity towards the 'front line' countries was very diminished.

By late May 2015, the overall figure proposed by the EU Commission was increased to 40,000 asylum seekers, which would be redistributed according to criteria such as GDP, unemployment figures, size of population (Webber, 2018). According to these plans, Germany would take the largest share of these individuals (21.91 per cent) followed by France (16.88 per cent) (Stroobants, 2015). In response, the French and German interior ministers issued a joint press release stating that the proposed relocation mechanism should be temporary and contain an exceptional character only, whilst the Dublin Convention should be upheld in the long term (Tardis, 2016). Following a securitarian approach, the French government pressed for the employment of the hotspot approach on 'frontline countries' to process asylum claims and disentangle refugees from irregular immigrants.

In exchange, the German government included a reference to the introduction of mechanisms at the European level to curb immigration flows from the Balkan countries, which were the main points of origin for the asylum seekers reaching Germany (Cazeneuve and Maizière, 2015). At this stage, the close coordination between France and Germany on asylum was working, as it was evident at the meeting of the European Council on 25 June. In the face of opposition from the *Visegrád* countries and the reluctance of the French and German governments, the EU Commission's proposal was watered down from a mandatory to a voluntary system of relocation. In parallel, the number of benefited asylum seekers was reduced to 32,256 individuals by the end of July (Pastore and Henry, 2016). However, the situation would rapidly evolve throughout the summer of 2015

The brief French and German leadership

In August 2015, the intensification of inflows through the Balkan route led to the significant increase of arrivals in EU member states. As the main destination country, Germany estimated the arrival of 800,000 asylum seekers by the end of 2015, which was ranked as the greatest national challenge since reunification by the German government (Webber, 2018). On 24 August 2015, President Hollande visited the German Chancellor to address the exceptional asylum inflows and to propose a 'unified system for the right to asylum', which signalled the intention of these two countries to take the initiative at the EU level (Le Monde and AFP, 2015). In exchange for France's support for the mandatory character of the EU Commission proposals to redistribute asylum seekers among EU member states, President Hollande secured Germany's funding for the establishment of hotspot centres to process asylum requests in Italy and Greece under the EU's supervision (Hollande, 2019). A day after this meeting, Germany announced the unilateral suspension of the Dublin Convention to prevent the deportation of Syrian asylum seekers.

In late August, intra-party divisions over the French government's management of the crisis of the asylum system became public. At the interior ministry, public officials recognized the disrespect for France's tradition as the birthplace of the rights of man, whilst members of the PS' leadership demanded more engagement at the European level. Furthermore, the centre-left government's ambiguous discourse, which included references to irregular migrants when the vast majority were asylum seekers, was perceived as a victory for the far right (d'Almones and Lemarié, 2015). Nonetheless, the French-German executives continued to display close coordination. During a visit to Calais on 31 August, Valls presented France's agreement with Germany, saluted Germany's 'good' decisions in favour of the refugees, and invited the French centre-right to follow Merkel's example instead of following the *FN* (Le Monde, 2015b). On the same day, German Chancellor Angela Merkel declared "*Wir schaffen das*" ("We can do this") in reference to the large influx of refugees coming through the Balkan route into Germany, despite the spike in racist attacks at the domestic level.

Seizing the opportunity provided by the photo of Alan Kurdi's dead body on a beach in Turkey on 3 September, the French President decided to move on the subject (Gantzer, 2017). At the discourse level, the French executive replaced references to migrants by asylum seekers or refugees whilst humanitarian concerns were prioritized over security priorities (Lemarié and

Chapuis, 2015). In a joint letter with Merkel, President Hollande expressed his support for the EU Commission's proposal to promote the redistribution of refugees (instead of migration quotas) in the name of European solidarity, 'according to a permanent and mandatory mechanism of relocation' (Stroobants and d'Allonnes, 2015). On this occasion, Merkel informed Hollande about her imminent decision to open German borders to asylum seekers. In turn, Hollande would welcome the refugees who wanted to claim asylum in France and help to break the deadlock at the European level (Hollande, 2019). Following this period of close bilateral cooperation, both the German interior minister and President Hollande mentioned the possibility of imposing financial sanctions on the member-states that rejected refugee relocation (Webber, 2018).

President Hollande's U-turn on redistribution plans

However, President Hollande's acceptance of the EU plan for the relocation of 120,000 asylum seekers stranded in Italy, Hungary and Greece was accompanied by France's commitment to welcome 24,000 asylum seekers only. This figure was considered extremely modest both in France and in Germany when compared to the number of daily arrivals to the latter country (twenty thousand asylum seekers arrived between 6 and 7 September). The generosity of the centre-right German Chancellor was contrasted with the lack of solidarity of the centre-left French President (Davet and LHomme, 2016). According to a close adviser, President Hollande's meeting at the Interior Ministry on 12 September with the French mayors who were willing to welcome refugees was cancelled at the last minute. This unexpected U-turn was interpreted as an indication of the '*lepénisation des esprits*' (lepenisation of spirits) by members of his staff (Feltesse, 2017).⁶ When questioned whether the 2015 crisis constituted an opportunity to rehabilitate his image among the left-wing electorate, President Hollande expressed his commitment to prevent 'accusations of instrumentalizing the refugees to strengthen the extreme-right', whilst the polls suggested that public opinion did not welcome refugees (as quoted in Davet and LHomme, 2016, p. 469).⁷

⁶ When Vincent Feltesse, his personal media advisor, questioned President Hollande about his absence from the mayors meeting, Hollande remarked: 'I am a mystery' (as quoted in Feltesse, 2017).

⁷ However, the polls conducted in 2015 indicate significant variation among public opinion regarding the distribution of 'migrants' (not refugees) across the European states (IFOP, 2018). An overall peak of 49 per cent of

President Hollande's U-turn was directly associated with the French far right and his reluctance to set an adversarial approach on the topic in order to appease the extreme right electorate. Thereby, the second part of the proposed causal mechanism was observed. On 16 September, Prime Minister Valls presented the government's plans regarding the crisis of the asylum management system, which encompassed the reinforcement of controls at the EU's external borders alongside the respect for the Dublin Convention (Valls, 2015). Thus, Valls favoured the maintenance of the status quo in detriment of the Franco-German proposal to set a 'unified asylum system' presented in late August. Moreover, Valls recalled that France had already welcomed 6,700 asylum seekers, before restating President Hollande's compromise to welcome 24,000 more refugees (Valls, 2015). Lastly, the French prime minister's discourse included several references to 'closure', which suggested that the humanitarian approach had been watered-down.

Taking advantage of the divisions between France and Germany, the *Visegrád* countries vehemently rejected the EU Commission proposal for the relocation of asylum seekers on 14 September. Whereas the German Interior Minister threatened to reduce the structural funding available for Eastern European countries who rejected the relocation of asylum seekers, the French interior minister merely highlighted the human costs associated with the decision-making delays and failed to support the sanctions proposed by Germany. In the absence of financial penalties, the EU Commission regretted the lack of means to overturn the opposition of member states who could now flout the rules without severe consequences (Stroobants and Ducourtieux, 2015). Thus, the French executive failed to keep to the pledge to commit itself to break the deadlock at the European level and adopted an inactive approach. Following this tactic of evasion, the Presidential Palace maintained its media agenda in September focused on a military intervention in Syria, at a time when the negotiations over the EU Commission's plans were at their peak (Demesmay, 2018).

Germany's reliance on France's support at the EU level became evidently fraught, and the German Chancellor shifted her focus towards Turkey's cooperation regarding asylum inflows from Syria (Tardis, 2021). On 22 September, a provisional plan for the relocation of the

favourable responses towards the distribution of 'migrants' was observed in early September 2015, despite the feeble humanitarian discourse of the French executive (IFOP, 2018).

160,000 asylum seekers stranded in Italy and Greece was agreed after a decisive majority vote (Pastore and Henry, 2016). In the absence of sanctions, Slovakia and Hungary maintained their opposition and contested the EU Council's decision at the European Court of Justice. The French-German bilateralism was maintained at the public level, but Germany was left isolated regarding the leadership at the EU level (Webber, 2018). In a joint visit to the European Parliament, the German Chancellor declared that the 'Dublin process, in its current form, is obsolete' and favoured a new system to redistribute refugees between member states. By contrast, the French President appealed for the reinforcement of controls at the EU's external borders (Le Monde, 2015c). Hence, the collapse of French and German cooperation was evident and severely weakened the EU governance, as the President of the European Parliament recognized (Wisdorff et al. 2015).⁸

The crash of French-German bilateralism

France's unwillingness to support the EU Commission's proposals to reform the common asylum system was naturally reinforced by the wave of terrorist attacks in November 2015. In the aftermath of the attacks, Valls declared that 'we cannot receive more refugees in Europe', adding that Germany had made a choice and should assume its responsibility. Any possibility of receiving more refugees in France was overtly rejected (Marlowe and Lynch, 2015). Thereby, the French Prime Minister reiterated the government's opposition to the redistribution of asylum seekers, which helps to explain France's inaction at the EU level. The alignment between the Prime Minister's and the FN's geopolitical outlook was evident, as Germany was implicitly considered as the single cause for the intensity of the asylum inflows. Nonetheless, the rift between France and Germany reached unprecedented levels in a meeting at Munich in February 2016

Prime Minister Valls remarked that Merkel's liberal refugee policy was 'unsustainable in the long term' and added: 'we have to say this clearly: Europe cannot take in all migrants from Syria, Iraq or Africa. It has to regain control over its borders, over its migration and asylum

⁸ According to Martin Schulz, "When Franco-German cooperation does not work well, the whole of Europe suffers. If, in crises, France and Germany come to a good compromise, it is beneficial for all partners and the whole of the EU" (Wisdorff et al. 2015).

policies' (Lemâitre, 2016). Consequently, French-German cooperation at the EU level regarding the promotion of unified asylum system was buried, whilst Valls' remarks on German soil constituted a rare breach of diplomatic etiquette. Furthermore, Valls employed an ironic tone by remarking that the 'French media were asking "Where is the French Merkel?" and wanted to give the Nobel prize to the chancellor. Today, we see the results' (Lemâitre, 2016). In the aftermath of the 2015 regional elections, the French far right's impact on the French management of foreign policy seemed evident in Valls' hostility towards Merkel and the accommodation of the FN's discourse.

Instead of condemning his prime minister's discourse, President Hollande acknowledged them as the official government position. (Webber, 2018). According to the French President: 'he thinks, and I do too, that the French are anxious and they have to be reassured, in particular in relation to migrants and refugees (as quoted in Davet and Lhomme, 2016, p. 472). This attitude strained the French-German cooperation to unprecedented levels. Days later, a cleavage within the *PS* emerged after left-wing figures directly criticized Valls' comments, the government's rejection of welcoming more asylum seekers, and the inaction observed at the EU level (Aubry et al.; 2016). Remarkably, Germany's failed to criticise France because it understood the pressure imposed by the French far right and the terrorist attacks but expected more engagement 'in managing the crisis' according to a German senior politician (as quoted in Webber, 2018, p. 165). By the end of the Presidential's term, Hollande lacked any chance of re-election in face of his deep unpopularity across the electorate. The French government's accommodation of the far right's approach to the 2015 asylum inflows was most likely among the causal factors driving the implosion of the *PS*'s electorate in the 2017 elections.

Conclusions

Les Identitaires and the FN enjoyed a significant indirect impact on the foreign policy deployed by President Hollande during the 2015 crisis of the European asylum system. *Les Identitaires* and the FN's impact was evidenced by the securitarian discourse deployed by the French executive in detriment of humanitarian concerns, President Hollande's U-turn from his pledges to push for the reform of the EU asylum system, and France's inaction in the negotiations at the EU level. Within this context, the wave of terrorist attacks observed in November 2015

only amplified the far-right's impact on the French foreign policy. This process culminated in Valls' exceptional comments on the German Chancellor's decision to welcome the refugees. Consequently, the French executive overtly dropped the international principle of solidarity between EU member-states and prioritized its national interests. The far-right's indirect impact on French geopolitics was associated with the FN's electoral inroads and the President Hollande's readiness to accommodate the far-right preferences to appease this segment of the electorate. Therefore, far-right actors can hold significant indirect impact during the terms of left-wing executives.

The French far right indirect impact on the national foreign policy provoked a discontinuity regarding France's bilateral relationship with Germany, which was a cornerstone of French geopolitics since the post-war. The reduction of the bilateral relationship to a mere façade contributed to enhance German's position as the 'lonely liberal hegemon' within the EU (Webber, 2018). The French far right indirect impact also severely weakened the EU governance, as the divorce of the French-German couple deprived this supranational organization from the engine driving the integration process. Furthermore, France's posture as a 'crisis bystander' weakened the ability to find compromises between EU member-states, since reluctant states could now break the rules without facing severe penalties. In general, the French far right did not provoke the unravelling of European integration, but its indirect impact on French foreign policy severely weakened multilateralism at the EU level and transformed the European geopolitical outlook. Thus, French domestic politics affected the foreign policy domain. Lastly, research on the far-right's political impact should also consider political inaction as a potential outcome of this political process.

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