Ahead of the Crisis?
Radical Right Parties on Facebook and the 2015 Refugee Crisis in Europe

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Abstract

Did the 2015 European refugee crisis show up on radical right parties' Facebook pages before it showed up in opinion polls? I compare 15 populist radical right party and leader pages in nine European countries with 68 other party and leader pages in the same countries, month by month from July 2014 to June 2016, using posts collected through CrowdTangle. Because CrowdTangle's capture of photo posts rose sharply in May 2015, I compare pages within the same country and month and check the results with a page-specific break and with link posts only. Compared with January to April 2015, radical right pages drew about 47% more interactions per post than other pages in the same country and month in September and October 2015, and about 26% to 42% more in later periods to June 2016. A smaller rise in July and August appears in all posts but not in link posts, so the change is clearest from September, at the height of the crisis rather than before it. Radical right pages did not post more, other populist pages saw no similar rise, and estimates are smaller without the pages whose classification is most disputed. Comparing each party's share of Facebook interactions with its polls in six countries shows no consistent order: Facebook moved earlier in Hungary and Flanders, at the same time in Norway and Slovenia, and later in Sweden. Facebook registered the crisis, but it did not clearly run ahead of the polls.

Keywords: refugee crisis; migration; radical right; populism; Facebook; engagement; opinion polls; Europe; CrowdTangle

1 Introduction

In 2015 the number of people seeking asylum in Europe rose to levels not seen for decades. Arrivals built from about June, Germany suspended the Dublin rules for Syrian applicants in late August, and the photograph of Alan Kurdi was published on 2 September. In mid-September Hungary closed its border with Serbia with a fence and several states reintroduced border controls. The assaults in Cologne on New Year's Eve kept the issue on the agenda into 2016. Populist radical right parties, for which immigration is the core issue (Mudde 2007), were widely expected to benefit, and studies of Greek islands close to the arrival routes found that exposure to arrivals went with more hostile attitudes and more votes for the extreme right (Hangartner et al. 2019; Dinas et al. 2019).

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Social media let such parties reach voters directly (Engesser et al. 2017) and may signal political change early (DiGrazia et al. 2013), so a crisis might show on Facebook before the polls. This paper asks three questions. **RQ1.** Did engagement with radical right pages rise relative to other pages in the same country as the crisis built, and when? **RQ2.** Did any rise come from posting more or from more engagement per post, and does it survive a change in how the data were captured? **RQ3.** Did radical right parties' share of Facebook engagement in their country move before, with or after their poll ratings?

2 Data and method

Pages and posts. The posts come from CrowdTangle lists of official party and leader pages in 20 European countries, built for my doctoral research and exported in October 2020 (CrowdTangle Team 2020; Hotham 2021). I aggregate posts from July 2014 to June 2016 to page-months: posts, total interactions (reactions, comments and shares) and interactions per post, overall and by post type. I keep the 140 of 165 pages that posted in at least three of the four months from January to April 2015 and in at least 14 of the 18 months from January 2015 to June 2016: 3,318 page-months (258 excluded). Pages are classed with the PopuList 4.0 as coded in the data set for 2015 (Rooduijn et al. 2024; The PopuList 2026). Fifteen populist radical right pages meet the rule, in nine countries: Vlaams Belang leader Tom Van Grieken (Belgium); the SVP (Switzerland); Danish People's Party leader Kristian Thulesen Dahl (Denmark); Vox (Spain); the Front National, now Rassemblement National (France); UKIP and Nigel Farage (United Kingdom); Jobbik, Jobbik's Péter Jakab, Fidesz and Viktor Orbán (Hungary); the SDS and New Slovenia (NSi) (Slovenia); and the Sweden Democrats and Jimmie Åkesson (Sweden). The PopuList codes Fidesz as far right from 2010, the SDS from 2015 and NSi throughout, although NSi is classed as Christian democratic elsewhere; I therefore also report a core set without Fidesz, Orbán and NSi. Five radical right pages fail the rule: Albert Rösti (SVP), who posted rarely before 2015, and four Slovak and Greek pages that began in or after mid-2015. The other 68 pages in the same nine countries form the comparison group.

A change in capture. The number of photo posts collected jumped from 826 in April 2015 to 3,181 in May 2015, while link posts were flat (3,384 and 3,172). The photo share of posts rose from 9% before May 2015 to 31% after on radical right pages, and from 13% to 38% on other pages. The change was broad, but it falls just before the crisis. I handle it by comparing radical right pages only with other pages in the same country and month, which removes any change common to a country; by allowing each page its own level shift from May 2015; by repeating the analysis on link posts only and on non-photo posts; and by reporting post counts and engagement per post separately.

Method. I regress the log of each outcome on indicators for radical right pages in each period, with page fixed effects and country-month fixed effects, so that each page is compared with itself in other months and with other pages in the same country and month. The reference period is January to April 2015, before both the capture change and the crisis. The periods are July to December 2014 (a check for earlier trends), then two-month periods from May 2015 to December 2015, January to March 2016 (Cologne and after) and April to June 2016; I also estimate the model month by month. Standard errors are clustered by page, with the small-sample correction that does not count fixed effects nested in clusters, and p-values use a t distribution with one fewer degree of freedom than clusters; I also report clustering by country. Coefficients are in log points; $100(e^b - 1)$ gives the percentage difference.

Polls. For the countries where the radical right party page and its leader's page could be matched to a regular poll series, I took the opinion poll tables from English Wikipedia (accessed 16 October

2026): Sweden (Wikipedia contributors 2026f), the United Kingdom (Wikipedia contributors 2026a,c), Norway (Wikipedia contributors 2026b), Hungary (Wikipedia contributors 2026d), Slovenia (Wikipedia contributors 2026e) and Flanders in Belgium (Wikipedia contributors 2026g), 873 polls in all from January 2015 to December 2016 (Hungary from April 2015, Sweden from February 2015). Norway's Progress Party, classed as populist but not far right in the data set, is included here. To remove differences between polling firms, I estimate each month's level for an average firm from a regression of poll shares on month and firm effects. I could not use Denmark (the fetched table lacked July 2015 to March 2016), Germany (the table began in September 2015, and there is no national AfD page), Switzerland (nine polls), Spain (Vox not polled separately) or France (no regular party vote intention series). A party's Facebook share is its pages' share of all interactions on a fixed set of party and leader pages in its country each month. As a description of timing, I note when each series first reached half of its rise from a March to April 2015 baseline (April to May in Hungary) to its highest point between June 2015 and June 2016, using three-month moving averages. I also regress standardised monthly poll changes on Facebook share changes in the previous, same and following month, with country fixed effects.

3 Results

3.1 More engagement per post, clearest from September 2015

Radical right pages drew more engagement per post during the crisis than other pages in the same country and month (Table 1, Figure 1, left). Against January to April 2015, the gap was zero in May and June 2015 (0.00, SE 0.08), 0.26 log points in July and August (SE 0.12, about 29%, $p = 0.04$) and 0.38 in September and October (SE 0.12, about 47%, $p = 0.002$), and it remained at 0.23 to 0.35 log points (about 26% to 42%) until June 2016. There was no earlier trend in this measure: in July to December 2014 the gap was -0.05 (SE 0.15). Month by month, the gap was small in July (0.15, SE 0.13), larger in August (0.36, SE 0.15) and largest in September 2015 (0.50, SE 0.15, about 65%). It did not grow again after Cologne (January to March 2016: 0.24, SE 0.13).

Radical right pages did not post more (-0.02, SE 0.16, in July and August; -0.06, SE 0.20, in September and October). Total interactions rose by a similar amount (0.24, SE 0.16, and 0.32, SE 0.21, about 38%), less precisely, and they were drifting upwards relative to other pages before 2015 (-0.28, SE 0.20, in July to December 2014, with monthly values down to -0.70), so the per-post measure is the more reliable one. Totals peaked in August 2015 (0.57, SE 0.25) and were close to zero again from December.

3.2 The capture change and what survives it

The September and October rise in engagement per post survives every check for the change in photo capture; the July and August rise does not survive all of them (Table 1). With a separate level shift for every page from May 2015, the gap was 0.26 (SE 0.08) in July and August and 0.39 (SE 0.08) in September and October, against May and June 2015. With photos excluded it was 0.20 (SE 0.11, $p = 0.07$) and 0.39 (SE 0.11). In link posts alone, whose capture did not change, there was no rise in July and August (0.09, SE 0.10, $p = 0.36$) but a clear one in September and October (0.35, SE 0.11, about 42%). Month by month, link posts show nothing in July (0.04, SE 0.14) or August (0.14, SE 0.08, $p = 0.10$) and a gap of 0.45 (SE 0.13) in September. On the evidence that survives all checks, then, the rise came at the peak of the crisis in September, not before it.

Table 1. Radical right pages compared with other pages in the same country and month: difference by period, in log points, against January to April 2015. Standard errors clustered by page in brackets unless stated; * $p < 0.05$. Core set drops Fidesz, Orbán and NSi; wider set adds the Progress Party, its leader and four extra pages (see text). 3,295 page-months in the main specification after singleton fixed effects are dropped.

	May to Jun 2015	Jul to Aug 2015	Sep to Oct 2015	Nov to Dec 2015	Jan to Mar 2016	Apr to Jun 2016
Per post, all posts						
Main specification	0.00 (0.08)	0.26* (0.12)	0.38* (0.12)	0.23* (0.12)	0.24 (0.13)	0.35* (0.17)
Clustered by country	0.00 (0.05)	0.26* (0.07)	0.38* (0.11)	0.23* (0.10)	0.24* (0.11)	0.35* (0.11)
Page step at May 2015	ref.	0.26* (0.08)	0.39* (0.08)	0.23* (0.09)	0.24* (0.09)	0.35* (0.14)
Link posts only	−0.06 (0.07)	0.09 (0.10)	0.35* (0.11)	0.21 (0.13)	0.27* (0.12)	0.16 (0.17)
Non-photo posts only	−0.09 (0.07)	0.20 (0.11)	0.39* (0.11)	0.26* (0.10)	0.20 (0.12)	0.28 (0.17)
Without election months	0.00 (0.08)	0.27* (0.13)	0.40* (0.12)	0.27* (0.12)	0.27* (0.13)	0.34* (0.17)
Core set	−0.05 (0.07)	0.18 (0.10)	0.26* (0.10)	0.13 (0.11)	0.17 (0.13)	0.27 (0.17)
Wider set	−0.02 (0.08)	0.16 (0.11)	0.24* (0.10)	0.21 (0.11)	0.18 (0.10)	0.24 (0.13)
Month effects only	−0.12 (0.10)	0.17 (0.12)	0.24* (0.12)	0.15 (0.12)	0.15 (0.14)	0.22 (0.18)
Radical right trend	−0.05 (0.14)	0.17 (0.24)	0.26 (0.30)	0.08 (0.34)	0.05 (0.44)	0.10 (0.54)
Totals (main specification)						
Total interactions	−0.18 (0.13)	0.24 (0.16)	0.32 (0.21)	0.16 (0.21)	0.11 (0.22)	0.13 (0.22)
Number of posts	−0.18 (0.12)	−0.02 (0.16)	−0.06 (0.20)	−0.07 (0.17)	−0.13 (0.20)	−0.22 (0.16)
Total, page step	ref.	0.42* (0.11)	0.50* (0.18)	0.34 (0.20)	0.29 (0.21)	0.31 (0.20)

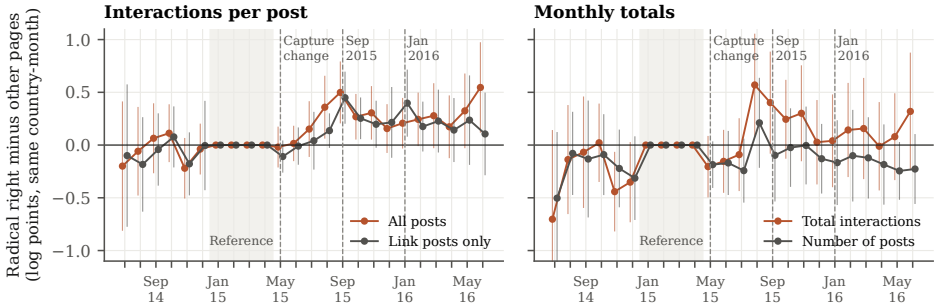


Figure 1. Radical right pages minus other pages in the same country and month, by month, in log points, against January to April 2015 (shaded). Left: interactions per post, all posts and link posts only. Right: total interactions and number of posts. Bars are 95% confidence intervals clustered by page. Dashed lines mark May 2015 (the change in photo capture), September 2015 and January 2016. 15 radical right and 125 other pages, July 2014 to June 2016.

With calendar-month effects only, the estimates were smaller (0.17, SE 0.12, and 0.24, SE 0.12). Removing the 286 page-months within one month of a national election changed little; leaving out one country at a time, the September and October estimate ranged from 0.33 to 0.48. A linear radical right trend left the estimates similar (0.17 and 0.26) but imprecise, since a trend fitted across the crisis absorbs much of it.

3.3 Which pages

The rise was common but uneven: 12 of the 15 pages had higher relative engagement per post in September and October 2015 than in January to April. The largest rise was for Viktor Orbán's page, whose government was at the centre of events in Hungary, while UKIP's party page and the pages of Jakab and Åkesson fell back. The two Slovenian pages rose in July and August 2015 and stayed at that

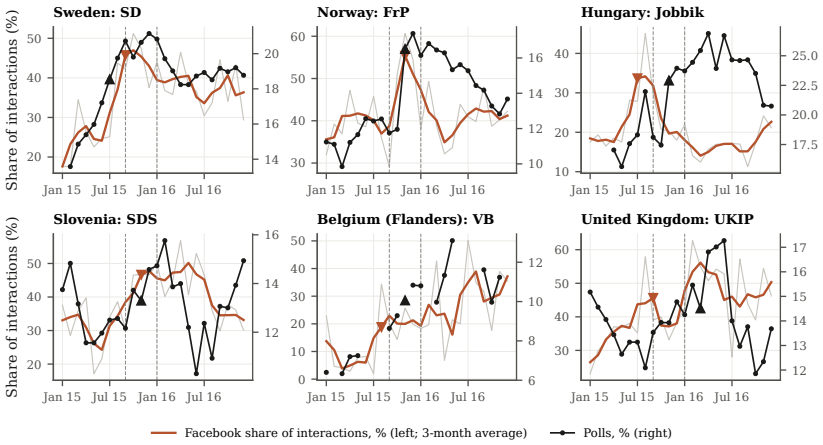


Figure 2. Radical right party's share of Facebook interactions in its country (left axis; grey monthly, orange three-month average) and its poll rating adjusted for firm effects (right axis), January 2015 to December 2016. Downward triangles mark the month in which the Facebook share first reached half of its rise from the March to April 2015 baseline to its highest point between June 2015 and June 2016; upward triangles the same for polls. Dashed lines mark September 2015 and January 2016. Polls from Wikipedia tables.

level, before the main route through the Balkans shifted to Slovenia in mid-October. Dropping Fidesz, Orbán and NSi, the estimates were smaller (0.18, SE 0.10, $p = 0.08$, and 0.26, SE 0.10, $p = 0.01$). Adding the Progress Party, its leader and four pages from separate CrowdTangle exports (AfD North Rhine-Westphalia, the NPD, Peter Skaarup of the Danish People's Party and Björn Söder of the Sweden Democrats) gave 0.16 (SE 0.11) and 0.24 (SE 0.10). The 21 other populist and Eurosceptic pages, of the left and right, saw no similar rise in engagement per post (0.15, SE 0.11, and 0.01, SE 0.12).

3.4 Facebook and the polls

These comparisons are descriptive: the half-rise month depends on a baseline, a peak and smoothing, so a month or two means little. In five of the six countries both the party's Facebook share and its poll rating rose during the crisis, in varying order (Figure 2). In Hungary, Jobbik's Facebook share rose from 18% to a peak of 34% around August 2015, reaching half its rise in July, while its poll rating (16% to 26%) did so in November. In Flanders the Vlaams Belang leader's share reached that point in August, three months before the party's polls, but there were only 18 Flemish polls, with several months missing. In Norway and Slovenia both series moved in November 2015, or a month apart. In Sweden the polls moved first: the Sweden Democrats were rising from the spring (15% to 21%) and reached half their rise in July 2015, while their Facebook share did so in August (link posts) or September (all posts). In the United Kingdom UKIP's polls did not rise with the crisis, and its highest Facebook shares came in early 2016, ahead of the referendum.

Pooling the five countries with monthly polls, a one standard deviation change in Facebook share went with a 0.22 standard deviation poll change in the same month (SE 0.12) and 0.15 in the next (SE 0.14); poll changes did not predict later Facebook changes (-0.11, SE 0.09). Using link posts only, the same-month and previous-month associations were 0.26 (SE 0.10) and 0.24 (SE 0.10). With 103 country-months in five countries, these estimates are imprecise: they fit two series moving together, with at most weak and inconsistent signs of Facebook moving first, not a leading indicator.

4 Discussion

From September 2015 their posts drew about a quarter to a half more engagement than other parties' posts in the same country and month, and the gap persisted into 2016. The rise came from engagement per post, not from more posting, and was not shared by other populist or Eurosceptic pages. This fits the view that the salience of immigration benefits the parties that own the issue (Mudde 2007), and a wider engagement premium for populist pages (Hotham 2026).

The answer to the title question is mostly no. Engagement per post rose with the most visible phase of the crisis: in all posts a smaller rise is visible in August, but in link posts, which are unaffected by the capture change, the rise came only in September. Its order relative to the polls varied, and monthly changes in the two series were related mostly within the same month, perhaps because both respond to the same news.

The design has clear limits. The checks for the May 2015 capture change cannot rule out a change that affected radical right pages differently, which is why the July and August estimates are not treated as firm. Totals were already drifting upwards on radical right pages before 2015, and the selection rule conditions on pages staying active to June 2016. Engagement is not reach, and the data do not show who engaged. The radical right group is small and varied: it includes Hungary's governing party and its leader and NSi, which other classifications place outside the radical right, and the results are weaker without them. Polls come from Wikipedia tables, transcribed with a text extraction tool and spot-checked against the source; they cover six countries, Flanders sparsely, and the Facebook shares in Hungary have a baseline that includes May 2015. Elections, the European Union referendum and the November 2015 Paris attacks overlap with the period. None of the estimates is causal.

5 Conclusion

During the 2015 refugee crisis, posts by populist radical right parties and leaders drew substantially more engagement than other parties' posts in the same countries, clearly from September 2015 and into 2016, and this held in checks for a change in CrowdTangle's capture. An earlier rise in July and August does not hold in link posts. Facebook did not clearly show the crisis before the polls did: engagement rose with the crisis, sometimes before the polls and sometimes after.

Data and code

The posts were exported from CrowdTangle in October 2020. CrowdTangle's terms do not permit sharing the raw posts. The analysis code, the list of pages, page-month aggregate data, and the poll tables transcribed from Wikipedia with their source pages are available from the author.

Provenance and AI use

The data were exported from CrowdTangle in October 2020 for my doctoral research. This paper builds on my doctoral thesis (Hotham 2021). The analysis and writing were completed in 2026.

I designed the study and am responsible for the analysis and conclusions. I wrote the text, with drafting

and editing assistance from Claude (Anthropic), which also helped prepare the analysis code and transcribe the poll tables. I reviewed and checked all text and results.

Ethics

Not applicable: the study involves no human participants. The data are public posts by the official Facebook pages of political parties and party leaders, analysed only as counts of posts and interactions aggregated by page and month, together with published opinion poll figures. No post content is quoted or reproduced, and no data on individual users are used.

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