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Foreign Policy Co-optation: Managing Right-Wing Challengers Through Migration

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Abstract

The electoral rise of right-wing populism has reshaped domestic political competition across Western democracies. Democratic governments have simultaneously developed bilateral arrangements to control migration, often involving authoritarian partners with questionable legal and human rights practices. In this paper, I present a novel dataset on the emergence of these agreements across five continents and over the last thirty years. I then develop a theory of *foreign policy co-optation* that explains when and why governments appropriate flexible foreign policy instruments central to the narrative of the opposition to reduce their electoral threat. I show that bilateral security *Cooperation Arrangements on Migration (CAMs)* are most likely to emerge when incumbent governments are challenged by right-wing populist parties, especially from left-of-center governments. The findings suggest that right-wing populist pressure paradoxically enables executives to manage electoral opposition through foreign policy, highlighting the need to revisit assumptions about the domestic sources of international cooperation and migration policy.

Keywords: Migration Governance, Populism, Border Security, Bilateral Security Agreements, Foreign Policy Co-optation

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Introduction

While the electoral rise of right-wing populism has reshaped domestic political competition across Western industrialized states, democratic governments have spearheaded a number of security-oriented bilateral migration agreements emphasizing border management and migration control. On January 31, 2020, the Interior Minister of Italy and the Minister of Security and Civil Protection of Côte d'Ivoire signed an accord that finalized previous meetings between their countries' police agencies on technical assistance to combat smuggling and manage irregular migration (UniTO 2020). Shortly thereafter, the Spanish Minister of the Interior reinvigorated bilateral cooperation on migration with Mauritanian security forces (La Moncloa 2022). More recently, on August 20, 2025, the United Kingdom's Security Minister and Iraq's Deputy Foreign Minister signed a border cooperation and irregular migration management agreement, committing nearly 1 million British pounds to border security and law enforcement training (UK Government, Home Office & FCDO 2025). These bilateral agreements reflect an important tool for governments to manage migration as a multidimensional internal and external security area (Rudolph 2003).[1] Notably, 67.3 percent of recorded bilateral security agreements are enacted with non-democratic partners and more than a third with closed autocracies.[2]

What accounts for the emergence of these bilateral agreements at the international level? Scholars and common wisdom suggest these advances are a direct result of multilateral strategies or migrant pressures at the border, while studies have shown that Western democracies attempt to control migrants abroad to evade the responsibility of caring for them at home.[3] Longitudinal bilateral studies have largely focused on entry policies (Mau et al. 2015), repatriation (Şahin-Mencütek and Tsourapas 2023; Cassarino 2020), labor agreements (Kihato and Oliver 2022; Wickramasekara 2015), and issue-linkage and diplomacy (Tsourapas 2017, 2025; Thiollet 2011; Betts 2014; Adepoju et al. 2010).

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1 Conservative estimates expect the border security field to grow as much as 81 billion USD by 2030. In the EU alone, the border guard agency Frontex recently took the highest budget of all EU agencies with 5.6 billion Euros for their 2021–27 budget cycle (Akkerman 2023).

2 Extensive reporting indicates the propensity for these partnerships to raise serious human rights concerns due to the high likelihood for physical abuse, economic extortion, unmitigated detention, and interpersonal violence in partner states. For example, in June 2021, Libyan coast guards opened fire and almost rammed a small vessel carrying around 50 adults and children in the Mediterranean. Two months later, Libyan security forces shot 4 migrants and wounded several more attempting to escape a Libyan detention center. Libya receives extensive funding from Italy to control migration from at least 11 recorded CAMs.

3 Refer to Hollifield 1992; Huysmans 2000; Lahav 2004; Lavenex 2006; Godenau et al. 2008; Andersson 2014; Gammeltoft-Hansen 2013; Menjívar 2014; Wong 2015; Mann 2016; FitzGerald 2019, 2020; Kent et al. 2020; Léonard and Kaunert 2020; Bello 2022; Panebianco 2022; Pacciardi and Berndtsson 2022; Fakhoury 2022; Lavenex and Piper 2022; Brettell and Hollifield 2022; Cassarino et al. 2023; Norman and Micinski 2023; Lahav and Messina 2024.

Yet the timing and propensity of such bilateral cooperation agreements can vary over time. Despite extensive work on migration management, the mode and domestic electoral determinants of this highly publicized and meaningful security tool remain split across literatures and specifications (Greenhill 2010; Andersson 2014; Tsourapas 2025; Ippolito et al. 2020). Specifically, how these international security agreements, which often treat migration akin to terrorism and organized crime, are mostly void of the humanitarian protections that liberal democracies and their mainstream governments publicly champion. In order to understand the patterns and effects of such cooperation, I first ask under what conditions do governments engage in foreign policy co-optation resulting in security cooperation on migration?

I present a theory and novel data collection to explain the enactment of *Cooperation Arrangements on Migration* (CAMs) as an interaction among right-wing populist parties and mainstream governments in Western democracies. This original data collection advances our understanding by extensively documenting over three hundred agreements across five continents over the last thirty-three years. I directly contribute to the study of international migration cooperation, particularly bilateral security interactions[4] as the data enables us to understand the mode, frequency, and selectivity of agreements not explained just by migration pressure or multilateral approaches (see Figure 4).

I propose a theory of *foreign policy co-optation* that suggests when and why governments appropriate flexible foreign policy instruments important for the narrative of the opposition. Co-optation and realignment can keep incumbents in power with limited political cost by reducing electoral challenges (Piven and Cloward 1979; Holdo 2019; Arriola et al. 2021). I contend that as right-wing populist parties gain seats, mainstream governments engage in foreign policy co-optation, which is the implementation of foreign policy instruments associated with political challengers to reduce their electoral threat. Foreign policy in particular offers government executives a uniquely flexible domain for narrative control. Rather than solely engaging in costly domestic reforms that invite scrutiny and backlash, governments can externalize contentious issues through international instruments which are often negotiated privately and publicly framed as competent responses to crises. Parties can strategically react to right-wing and radical-right challenger parties (Abou-Chadi 2016; Van Kersbergen and Krouwel 2008) at the cost of alienating core constituencies or

[4] The work by Bermeo and Leblang (2015), Buzan et al. (1998), Dancygier (2010), Greenhill (2010), Lahav and Messina (2024), Rosenberg (2022), Rudolph (2003), Salehyan (2008), Salehyan and Gleditsch (2006), Salehyan (2024), Weiner (1992), and Weiner ([1978] 2015) exemplifies the importance of strategic migration policy in international relations and security literature.

undermining regime legitimacy by shifting their stance (Abou-Chadi 2016; Van Kersbergen and Krouwel 2008; Van Spanje 2010; Hobolt and Tilley 2016; De Vries and Hobolt 2020; Wildi 2024). In this bounded space, CAMs preempt electoral losses by fracturing opposition and tightening narrative control over the issue area (Meguid 2005).

I argue these effects are especially pronounced for governments most challenged by right-wing narratives, rather than ideologically adjoining governments. Studies have aptly recognized the smaller electoral distance in ideal points between conservative and right-wing populist parties, likely helping some parties implement right-wing policies without suffering in upcoming elections (Meguid 2005; Muis and Immerzeel 2017). In contrast, I argue that the ideological distance between mainstream incumbents and right-wing challengers is large, mainstream governments face greater incentives to adopt visible foreign policy signals that demonstrate responsiveness to voter concerns about cultural and economic grievances such as migration. This would indicate that left-leaning governments, given their perceived less-restrictive view on migration, would be more challenged to engage with policies that demonstrate control over the issue at hand. Conversely, more conservative governments that are ideologically close to right-wing populist parties are already perceived to be tougher on migration, thus are less challenged by right-wing narratives—to an extent (Williams and Hunger 2022; Hadj Abdou et al. 2022). CAMs offer mainstream governments a politically calculated alternative to more extreme forms of overreaction or posturing in migration policy without completely dislodging their party brand (Bils et al. 2023; Judd et al. 2017; Green and Jennings 2017).

To test my hypotheses, I exploit the proliferation of right-wing challengers and bilateral cooperation across Western European democracies through dyadic gravity-count models of CAMs to control for policy convergence in the frontier state, the partner state, and their dyadic relationship. I employ a second set of models analyzing the historical relationship between right-wing challengers and mainstream governments to support my arguments. My data collection spans ten European frontier states and their partners across Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas from 1990 to 2023. Results support my theory accounting for colonial relationship, refugee stocks, asylum pressures, and other characteristics.

This project makes several contributions to the literature. First, this project contributes to migration research by introducing the CAMs dataset, a novel resource for quantitative analysis of border externalization and migrant safety based on over 300 documented agreements across 10 Western European frontier states with 99 partners detailing this form of collaboration on immigration (Alpes 2015; Last et al. 2017; Williams and Mountz 2018; Üstübici 2019; Tyszler 2019). Each agreement is deconstructed across 58 individual and unique characteristics from language used when

referring to immigrants, the type of intelligence shared, to text and signatories, as shown below. Furthermore, I advance a rationalist theory of international security cooperation on migration that accounts for domestic contentious discourse that securitizes migration and relates it to the development of foreign policy and international cooperation (Hollifield 1992; Weiner 1992; Massey et al. 1993; Castles 2003). Both additions improve our understanding of how governments use flexible migration policies to counter electoral challengers.

Second, I theorize how foreign policy cost-benefit considerations are altered in the face of domestic right-wing political actors and how they incentivize international cooperation on contentious policy areas. As such, I contribute to the existing scholarship examining policy repositioning through party platforms and manifestos by focusing on tangible foreign policies in contentious issue-specific areas like migration where international constraints and domestic pressures intersect (Gandhi and Przeworski 2006; Holdo 2019; Arriola et al. 2021).[5] While existing scholarship situates co-optation in authoritarian elite management, I conceptualize it as an executive-led foreign policy strategy in Western liberal democracies responding to less-pluralist and illiberal electoral challengers (Steven and Daniel 2018; Norris and Inglehart 2019; Dahl [1971] 2008; Gandhi and Przeworski 2006; Arriola et al. 2021). This project amends our fractured understanding of the impact of the political right on international cooperation, securitized migration policy, and domestic political challenges by providing a generalizable theory of foreign policy co-optation applicable to other domains where executives can externalize contentious issues.[6]

Last, this project sheds light on delicate ongoing policies affecting millions of migrants while legitimizing non-democratic actors at home and abroad in an era of authoritarian alignment. The approach taken in the study suggests an explanation for conflicting interest in managing migration as a security concern across regimes, while championing global liberal democratic norms.[7] Ongoing scholarship in this area ought to account for how populist and illiberal actors reshape democratic institutions as these become increasingly entrenched within democratic systems.[8]

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[5] See Dalton 2009; Alonso and Fonseca 2012; Abou-Chadi 2016; Schumacher and Van Kersbergen 2016; Abou-Chadi and Krause 2020.

[6] Climate change policy is one such area, as emerging studies show similar dynamics of policy maneuvering to address international climate concerns (Tallent et al. 2024; Beacham 2023; Genovese 2019).

[7] For recent discussions on system-level analysis and migration, see Natter and Thiollet 2022; Fernández-Molina and Tsourapas 2024.

[8] An excellent growing literature examines the relationship between polarization, democratic backsliding, and changes in international engagement (Chryssogelos 2017; Pevehouse 2020; Haggard and Kaufman 2021; Myrick 2021, 2025; Cottiero et al. 2025; Haggard and Tiede 2025; Carnegie and Clark 2026).

What Are CAMs?

Cooperation Arrangements on Migration (CAMs) are bilateral agreements negotiated to control migration by equating irregular migration to other forms of criminal activity, often solely focusing on irregular migration as a security issue, to be addressed through a bilateral partnership. As Schelling (1980) asserts, and Young (1989) and Milner (1997) point out, cooperation can be *tacit* or *negotiated*. CAMs represent negotiated cooperation as they emerge from policy coordination where a bargain is reached. Although I choose to focus on traceable negotiated agreements, many unrecorded arrangements between states on migration and security exist.[9] However, a key advantage of CAMs is their specificity, which includes records of dates, signatories, concessions, and explicit commitments.[10]

The collected CAMs are extracted from (1) national online legislative archives, (2) the UN Treaty Collection, (3) national government bulletins, (4) government websites, and (5) for-profit national law databases. CAMs are individually analyzed to verify the meaning of the cooperation and concessions provided. I document CAMs enacted by 10 EU frontier states: Austria, Bulgaria, France, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Romania, and Spain, from 1990 to 2023. The network of CAMs spans 99 countries across Africa, North America, South America, Asia, and Europe, with 76.7 percent of agreements concentrated in Europe, Middle East and North Africa. Figure 1 displays the distribution of CAMs per country over time, showcasing the dissimilarity of enactment across the frontier states.[11]

[9] Such is the case of an agreement between Italy and Tunisia in 1998, and Egypt in 2007, where migration and security agreements were reportedly executed but are not available in either country's online archives (Godenau et al. 2008). Ongoing work will locate these and other agreements.

[10] Each CAM is coded across 58 individual and unique characteristics.

[11] The CAMs dataset excludes special operations and project-based cooperation, such as the West Sahel Project (2011–2016), the Seahorse Project (2006–2008), and the subsequent Seahorse Network (2007–2008). While these initiatives are substantively relevant to migration management, they constitute operational or technical cooperation frameworks rather than formal bilateral diplomatic agreements enacted by executives (Ippolito et al. 2020). Since the theoretical mechanism of foreign-policy co-optation hinges on visible diplomatic enactment, including such projects would conflate operational enforcement with treaty-based signaling. Moreover, if any of these projects approximate to CAMs either in diplomacy or publicity, a portion of these projects have already been captured in the data. Many of these operations are by-products or related to formal agreements in some form by default. Additional analysis of these operations and projects is a future point in this research agenda.

Figure 1. Ridgeline density plot displaying distinct waves of CAM activity across frontier states. The quartile segmentation highlights the temporal clustering of agreements within countries, rather than differences in overall volume.

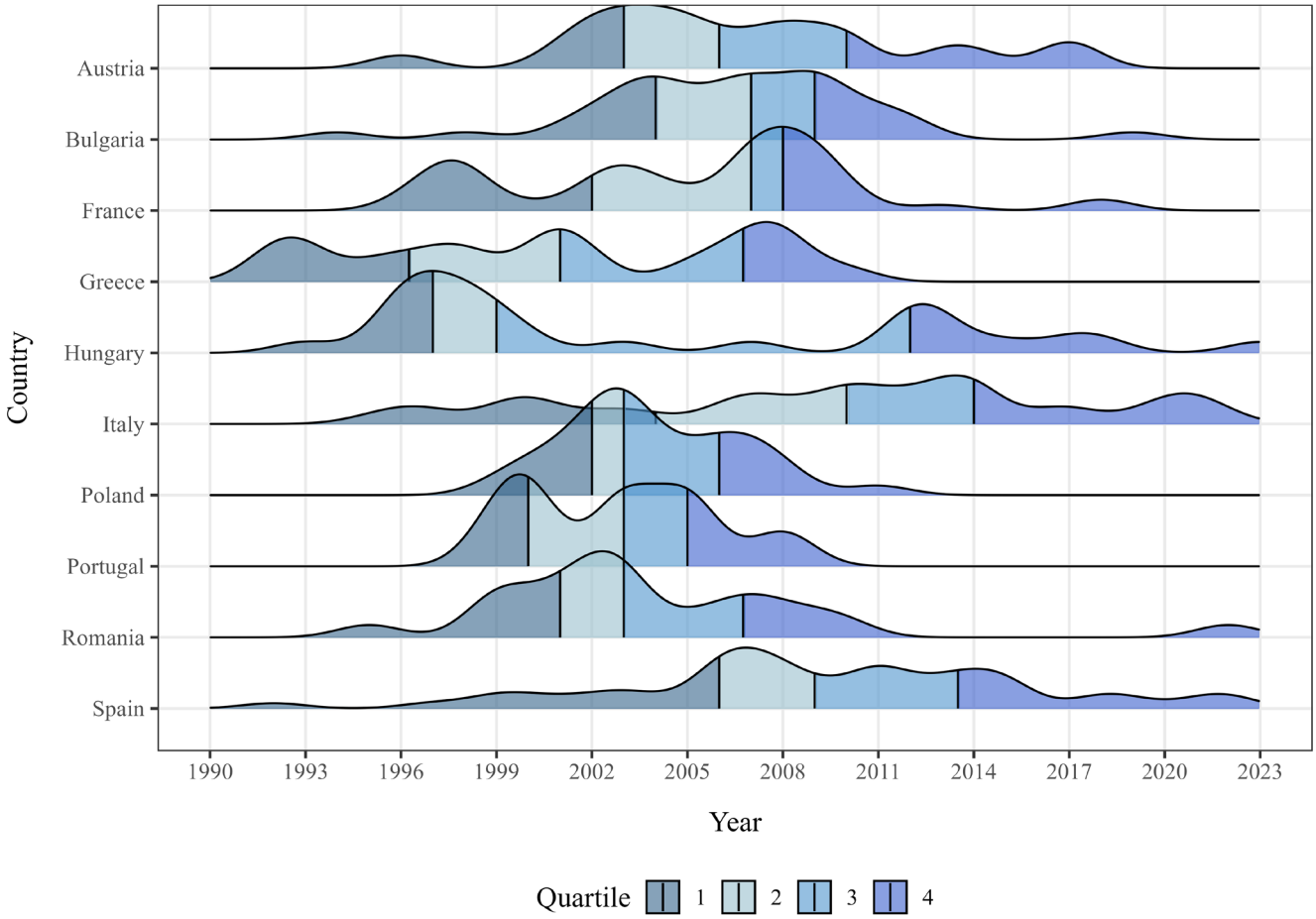
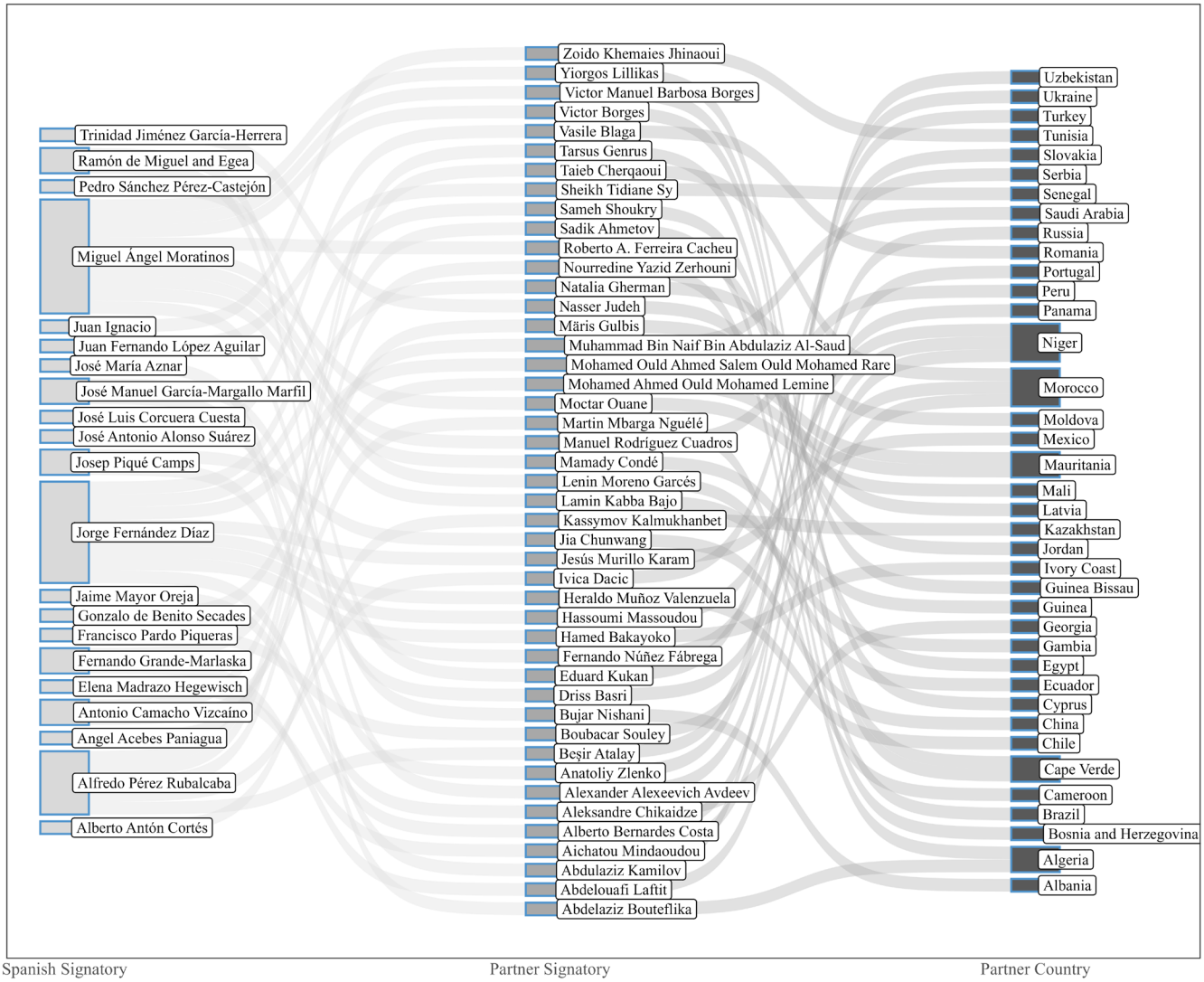


Figure 2. Sankey diagram (n = 45) showing Spanish CAM signatories and their bilateral counterparts and countries of origin. Each flow represents an agreement. Agreements with illegible signatories are excluded.



CAMs are often negotiated behind closed doors but signed in public. Senior government officials, typically the Minister of the Interior or the Minister of Foreign Affairs, appear alongside their counterparts to formalize the agreement and to emphasize the agreement's expected benefits for both nations. Figure 2 displays the names of Spanish government executives who signed CAMs and their bilateral counterparts.[12] In the Italian case presented earlier, the Interior and Ivorian ministers signed a migration and security agreement in a public ceremony that included press coverage and a public reading of the document.[13] Meanwhile, the UK Minister of State for Security praised ongoing cooperation with Iraqi leadership, noting that "by working together on security, development, and migration, [they] are building stronger relationships that benefit both countries while tackling shared issues such as organized crime and irregular migration" (UK Government, Home Office & FCDO 2025). Such public-facing elements are a common feature of CAMs.

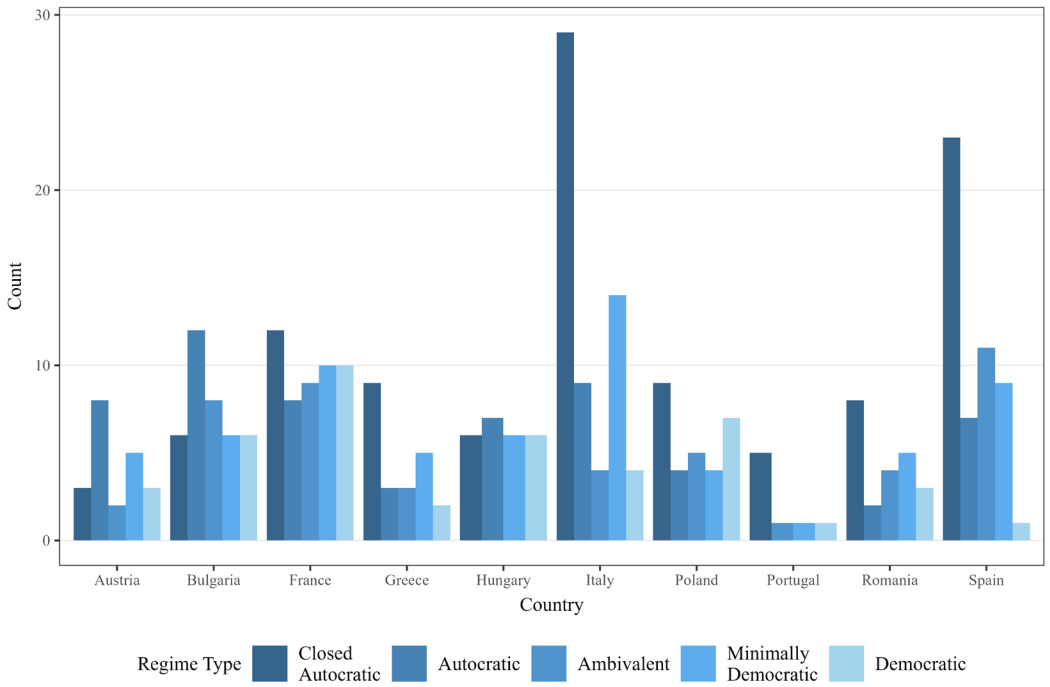
CAMs are assumed to be on average effective in decreasing migration (asylum applications to migrant-recipient countries) but expectations vary. For example, the Treaty of Friendship, Partnership and Cooperation (TFPC) between Italy and Libya reduced more than 30,000 asylum applications received in 2008, to only 17,725 in 2009, and barely 10,000 in 2010. The TFPC was instrumental in decreasing migration to Italy until its demise in the Arab Spring in 2011. A more recent example transpired in late 2022 between Spain and Mauritania. The countries reached a bilateral agreement centered on the acquisition of resources and logistic support to combat irregular migration to Spain.[14] Mauritania, where rampant corruption and slavery persist to this day, received technical assistance and recognition as an instrumental partner in stopping migration. While Spain prevented migrants from reaching its mainland and territories. Earlier that year, the joint deployment of Spain's *Guardia Civil* and Mauritania's *Gendarmerie Nationale* intercepted more than 4,000 migrants attempting to leave Mauritania's coast. However, the variation in durability and symbolic salience of CAMs suggests that their effectiveness will not be uniform across all frontier and partner states. Nonetheless, potential policy inefficiencies are unlikely to deter executives from entering CAMs when such agreements contribute to their political survival.

[12] Patterns emerge across the coded arrangements. While countries engage in bilateral relations at different rates and under varying conditions, most agreements link migration to terrorism and organized crime while rarely mentioning humanitarian provisions or migrants' rights. Partners often reaffirm the value of bilateral friendship, even when they have poor records on civil liberties. A systematic review of these patterns is forthcoming.

[13] See miltonkwami for a video recording of the meeting.

[14] See La Moncloa for the press release published on the official website of the Spanish government and the Council of Ministers.

Figure 3. CAMs signed with partners, split by an ordinalized version of the V-Dem's Multiplicative Polyarchy Index (Coppedge et al. 2021).



I restrict the collection of CAMs to post-1990 for two reasons. First, analyzing foreign migration policy before 1990 would lend itself to be under the shadow of the United States and the Soviet Union, and their hegemonic relationship to their allied states. For instance, had West Germany adopted punitive measures that categorically excluded migrants from Eastern Europe, such policies would likely have been interpreted as inconsistent with its broader geopolitical standing and would have diminished its reputation. The act of crossing national borders carried strategic weight at the time by showing defiance toward communist governments while simultaneously served the ideological and political interests of Western states (Loescher 2001; Betts 2014, 9).

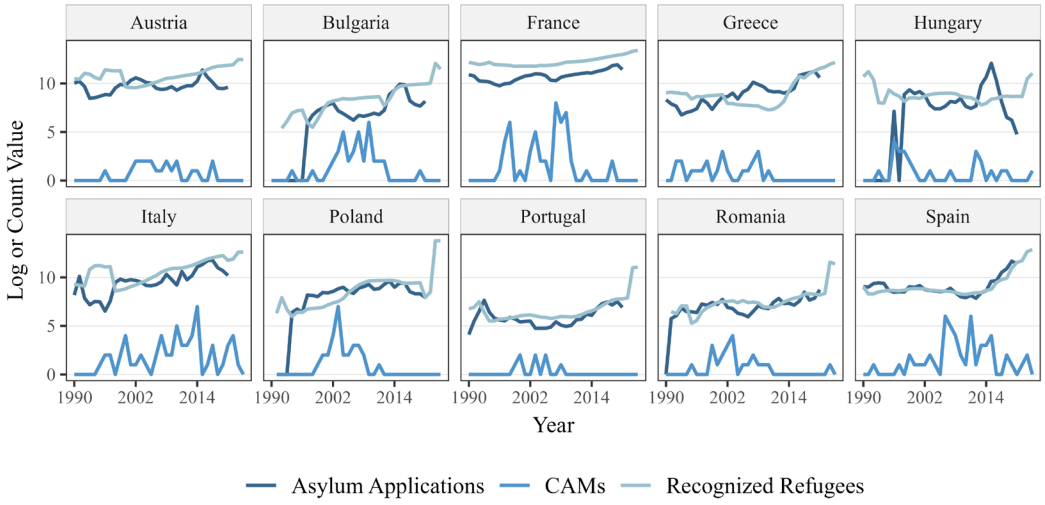
Second, the Maastricht Treaty developed the modern EU into its current state by introducing an early attempt of the concept of European citizenship and a shared security and migration policy. Additionally, the 1985 Schengen Agreement (*acquis*) was replaced by the 1990 Supplementary Agreement of the Schengen Convention in which Title II brings to the forefront the abolition of internal borders by procuring securitization of its outer borders through cooperation and policing (Huybreghts 2015; Lahav 2004, 43).[15]

[15] Refer to full text through EU-LEX.

Both events established a stable policy framework that remained largely consistent throughout the period of interest, facilitating the identification of variation across the domestic legislatures with less concern over major systematic changes affecting this study's analytical scope.

Assuming stability in international hierarchal regimes for the majority of the data collection, and assuming continuity of policies due to the Maastricht Treaty, my next assumption relates to the determinants of bilateralism in a globalized world. CAMs by themselves do not explain how parties electorally benefit from their enactment or co-optation. Explaining this requires connecting the international dynamics of migration cooperation and bilateralism, with the domestic pressures shaping mainstream government internal and external security strategies given their economic and cultural impact (Rudolph 2003).

Figure 4. Asylum applications, CAMs, and recognized refugees in the frontier countries.



Bilateralism and Migration Foreign Policy

Bilateralism in migration policy offers solutions to challenges generally found in international cooperation. On the other hand, multilateral migration cooperation amplifies these challenges as it is governed through a fragmented international architecture often referred to as a 'patchwork' regime (Geddes 2010). International cooperation emerges from the need to overcome sanctioning, monitoring, distribution, and informational problems (Morrow 1994). Seminal work by Axelrod (1980; Axelrod and Keohane 1985) additionally illustrates cooperation as an iterative interaction, where reciprocity and future payoffs deter cheating. Reputation is thus a critical long-term constraint on state behavior (Greif et al. 1994; Tomz 2007; Dai et al. 2010). Once a state's reputation is damaged, future cooperation becomes more difficult to sustain as the number of actors involved affects the potential benefits (Olson Jr 1971; Oye 1985; Keohane 1984) but also feasibility (Grieco 1990; Grieco et al. 1993).

Unlike issue areas governed by formalized global rules, migration cooperation takes place through dispersed, often informal arrangements involving origin, transit, and destination states. States may view migrants simultaneously as humanitarian cases, security risks, or labor commodities, further complicating preference convergence (Freeman 2006). Some frameworks further highlight migrants' economic value to emphasize their benefits and retrofit economic logic to migration in developed economies (Hollifield 2000; Hollifield et al. 2014; Freeman and Ögelman 1998), but the securitization of migration has blunted that narrative for several decades now (Wæver et al. 1993; Buzan 1991; Buzan et al. 1998; Rudolph 2003; Greenhill 2010). While converging on migration agreements helps overcome collective action failure on a humanitarian problem with large spillover effects (Tsourapas 2017; Betts 2014, 62), this is not always successful. This lack of overarching norms or enforcement mechanisms incentivizes governments to pursue selective cooperation where they can maximize control while avoiding the costs of poorly planned binding commitments. The changes brought by globalization, given that migration is an economic and sociological, domestic and international issue, makes cooperation on migration especially suited for bilateral attention.

Bilateral agreements simplify cooperation by matching benefits and concessions with a single partner. When an issue is salient and contested domestically, international agreements give executives a way to act visibly on the issue while distributing the political costs internationally. This allows for selective cooperation, underpinned by domestic pressures and facilitated by historical ties, geographic proximity, or mutual strategic interest (Kinne 2013). For example, Italy's enduring cooperation with Libya reflects both colonial legacies and geographic calculations. In the EU context, the first article of the Maastricht Treaty exemplifies that even under a shared union "decisions

are taken as closely as possible to the citizen" (Lahav 2004, 156). Italy can better tailor migration controls to each partner's capacity, preserving its policy preferences while minimizing collective bargaining costs and still influencing the issue at hand with lesser EU or additional partner involvement.

It is true that transnational interdependence has complicated policy development, bilateral or otherwise (Hollifield 1992; Del Sarto 2021). There will always be norm entrepreneurs that advocate for their preferred policies at the domestic level drawing from international norms or ideologies (Hobolt and Tilley 2016; De Vries and Hobolt 2020). Yet, although domestic policy development is irrevocably intermingled with international constraints (Gourevitch 1978; Putnam 1988; Evans et al. 1993), a mediating factor will still be the governments' desire to adhere to their electorate's demands. Whether we assume supranational entities force the enactment of particular policies or simply encouraging normative changes, international influence will still have to endure domestic institutions and their own processes of representation (Risse-Kappen 1995; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Checkel 2001; Cheong and Haggard 2023).[16] This domestic filtering helps explain why governments will still use bilateral migration policies due to their strategic flexibility and political ownership, even if internationalism and multilateralism remain constant in the policy maker's toolkit.

However, CAMs may foster codependent bilateral relationships that may yield additional strategic leverage. The non-democratic partner's willingness to engage in CAMs might vary depending on potential benefits, including funding, training, recognition, and access to restricted information, which they weigh through their own cost-benefit calculations (De Mesquita et al. 2005; Svolik 2008; Svolik 2012). Third-country partners that are aware of Europe's difficulty managing migration can exploit this dependence by threatening to release migrants as a coercive tool, as both Gaddafi, Erdoğan, and Lukashenko managed to do shortly after cooperating with the EU and selected frontier states. As Greenhill (2010) documents, weak states can relatively effectively weaponize migration by threatening to release detained migrants, even beyond the European context. These could result in migrant abuse, further halting progress toward good-governance goals (Weisiger and Yarhi-Milo 2015) and providing reasons to be named and shamed (Hafner-Burton 2008; Jervis 1978, 169), especially if they flaunt their agreements similar to Berlusconi working with Gaddafi or the British government with Rwanda.

[16] More on multilateralism (Ruggie 1982, 1992; Ruggie et al. 1992; Levy et al. 1995), international policies changing domestic values in Germany (Checkel 2001), and policy influence and its mediation (Risse-Kappen 1995; Biersteker et al. 2009)

Less-humanitarian partner governments can additionally benefit from retaining migrants by exploiting them as cheap labor (Shin 2017; Peters and Miller, n.d., Andresen et al. 2012; Leblang 2017), or from insulating their populations from democratic ideas and institutions (Miller and Peters 2020). As Weiner (1992) and Zolberg (2006) note, migration has been a foremost nation-building tool for centuries. These are concerns constantly measured by the frontier state which have often been ignored in the development and enactment of CAMs if we account for 2/3 of their enactment with non-democracies and 1/3 with closed autocracies.

Amid these benefits and concerns, bilateralism offers executives autonomy, speed, and targeted cooperation with limited transparency and accountability. CAMs are thus functional and politically efficient. For governments under pressure from rising challengers, bilateralism generally provides a low-cost, higher-control mechanism to signal enforcement capacity without multilateral delays. Frontier states externalize border enforcement while maintaining discretion, narrative control, and electoral signaling capacity.

Mainstream Governments and Challenger Parties

Yet international cooperation does not form in a vacuum. Foreign policy development that leads to cooperation requires vertical accountability of domestic dynamics—however contentious these might be. Recent studies have shown the success of right-wing populist parties in Western democracies driving mainstream governments to adjust their policies and underscore their usefulness in government (Wildi 2024; Williams and Zeager 2004; Lewandowsky and Wagner 2023; Holdo 2019; Piven and Cloward 1979). The 1970s saw the rise of ‘challenger’ parties as post-materialist values spurred the formation of new political movements. These parties aimed to expand the range of democratic engagement and supplement dominant mainstream parties such as conservative, liberal, Christian democratic, and socialists, laying the groundwork for the ‘counter revolution’ of right-wing parties in more recent years (De Vries and Hobolt 2020; Inglehart 1977; Lipset et al. 1967).

On the other hand, co-optation can reduce the organizational strength of the opposition, but the methods employed vary across regimes and desired outcomes (Arriola et al. 2021). In less pluralistic systems, governments often rely on tools such as repression, patronage, and information control to maintain power (Gehlbach and Sonin 2014; Hollyer et al. 2015; Tyson and Smith 2018). Democratic governments bounded by established norms and institutional restrictions instead turn to policy co-optation as a strategic alternative. Governments are aware of the volatility that immigration politics can bring and seek to decrease the political influence that right-wing populist parties might gain by claiming the incumbent as unfit to address migration.

In the case of migration, these pressures can be further exacerbated by highlighting security concerns such as terrorism (Helbling and Meierrieks 2022) and concerns over labor (Scheve and Slaughter 2001). Rising asylum applications, recognized refugee numbers, and highly visible migration-related events ensure that immigration remains a salient and electorally charged issue (see Figure 4).

The current era of voter volatility, characterized by the rise of single-issue movements and challenger parties, highlights this transformation of the political landscape (Poguntke 1987; Meguid 2005; Lahav 2004; De Vries and Hobolt 2020). But while challengers are relatively easy to identify as ideological or organizational outsiders, mainstream parties and governments can be slightly harder to define (Moffitt 2022).

I define mainstream parties as those affiliated with moderate or historically dominant ideological traditions within a given political system closely echoing the notion of orthodox parties discussed by Pop-Eleches (2010) and Moffitt (2022). These orthodox parties include ecological or green, socialist, social democratic, liberal and Christian democratic, and conservative parties (Lehmann et al. 2024). A mainstream government, in turn, is one composed primarily of these parties and led by a prime minister from this ideological family. Fortunato and Adams (2015) find that voters "map the prime minister's party's policy position onto the junior coalition partners" while little evidence for a reciprocal effect can be found. Subsequent work by Fortunato et al. (2021) also finds a consistent ordering of 'cue weights' for government roles placing the prime minister at the top under coalition governance. Thus, it is essential to conceptualize mainstream government not only by coalition composition but also by the prime minister's partisan affiliation. For instance, a coalition with a few cabinet posts held by challenger parties may still be perceived as "leftist" if the prime minister is a social democrat, prompting continued resistance from right-wing populist voters.[17] Yet, for mainstream governments to successfully co-opt the narrative and bring back voters to their side—if at all possible—they must co-opt policies that resonate with right-wing populist voters and their preferences.

[17] Additional mainstream government specification is found in the *Empirical Approach* section.

The Political Right and CAMs

Although often labeled as ideological and organizational outsiders, I explicitly define right-wing populist parties as those who seek to crystallize the demands of the in-group using a combination of anti-establishment, people-centric, and anti-elitist remarks, with often xenophobic undertones when describing migration.[18] Migration sits at the center of these claims by combining exclusionary remarks and disdain for globalization, often incorporating public smear campaigns against immigrants and fear mongering.[19] Right-wing parties are assumed to be unitary actors with a combination of policy-seeking and vote-seeking models of party behavior, following Strøm (1990) and Müller and Strøm (1999).[20]

Policy-seeking parties seek to maximize their impact on policy and would align closely to parties spatially adjacent to their position to some extent and can differentiate between beneficial policy outcomes from a range of options (Müller and Strøm 1999). Enacting policies deemed of high intrinsic value would therefore constitute an electoral win (Lubbers et al. 2002; Rydgren 2008; Norris and Inglehart 2019). On the other hand, vote-seeking models assume parties to be vote-maximizers to maintain and increase their influence in parliament (Downs 1957; Müller and Strøm 1999). Since right-wing populist parties know they are chosen for their promises in a broader ideological debate as much as their party platforms, they can safely assume most policies that address a core tenet of the party will be policy gains and in turn increase their vote share.

Under these conditions, CAMs appear as a strong combination of right-wing populist parties' core tenets and could thus provide electoral benefits if enacted by them. CAMs are expected to at least exert a nominally larger control over migration (asylum applications and recognized refugees), establish security cooperation channels to monitor corridors,[21] and signal stark measures to fulfill their promises compared mainstream governments.

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[18] Right-wing populist parties focus on the normative distinction between the 'elites' and the 'people', criticizing political correctness, and expressing divisive views of the world (Taggart 2000; Mudde 2007; Rooduijn et al. 2017; Shehaj et al. 2021). Another popular definition: populism as a 'Manichean discourse' that separates good people versus evil elites.

[19] These fears might not be unfounded as recent events could have primed people to feel uneasy about migration or particular migrants, yet these are expanded and contrived to further increase angst in the population (Williams and Hunger 2022).

[20] Scholars should not ignore the importance of particular figures driving major intra-party politics, such as Matteo Salvini from Italy's Lega Nord or Northern League (LN), or the Kaczyński brothers in Poland. Recent and upcoming work expands upon the role of personalist parties in changing democracies (Frantz et al. 2021, 2022).

[21] 'Corridors' refer to routes taken by migrants and smugglers to reach a destination country such as the West African, Balkan, or East Mediterranean routes that reach Europe, and the Darién Gap used to reach the US.

Other restrictive instruments, such as region-specific entry bans or comprehensive border closures, are available to governments but are institutionally constrained or fiscally costly. Additionally, multilateral approaches, particularly those involving funding allocations to international organizations, may conflict with the anti-multilateral, anti-elitist, and isolationist orientations of right-wing populist parties. CAMs occupy a functional middle ground between border closures and mass deportations as right-wing populist parties are tethered to popular opinion and reputational costs just as any other party (Akkerman et al. 2016, 19–20).[22] While CAMs carry potential reputational costs for governments engaging with illiberal partners (Weisiger and Yarhi-Milo 2015; Hafner-Burton 2008), their domestic political benefits in managing voter demands often outweigh these risks, especially as governments are dynamic in their policy responses when competing on migration (Gessler and Hunger 2022; Green and Jennings 2017). Nonetheless, the strategic environment must be conducive for co-optation altogether.

A Theory of Foreign Policy Co-optation

The likelihood of foreign policy co-optation depends on two key contextual conditions. The significant presence of the opposition in the legislature and the political salience of the issue at hand. In this case, this translates to a credible right-wing populist presence in parliament and a politically salient threat from migration. I posit right-wing populist parties' narrative dominance over migration drives mainstream incumbents only after that narrative is converted into parliamentary seat share. While popular mobilization matters, it is sustained electoral support that poses a real threat to re-election. Furthermore, office-seeking governments are most vulnerable when the issue area is salient for voters (Bils and Izzo 2025; Bils et al. 2023; Holdo 2019; Piven and Cloward 1979, 30). Co-optation is most likely when migration remains an actively contested narrative. While issue salience may fluctuate over time due to voter memory and institutional dynamics, governments face acute pressure to act once these conditions are present.

The government then faces a binary choice. The government can either implement CAMs as a low-cost administratively tractable policy instrument, or maintain the status quo. In the absence of electoral pressure, governments would prefer to manage CAMs and broader migration policy on their own timeline. However, when both conditions are satisfied, credible right-wing populist seat share and high issue salience, the decision horizon compresses, incentivizing rapid policy action. CAMs are particularly well-suited to this constraint, given that their political signaling value is realized at the moment of

[22] A deeper exploration of CAMs and how they compare to other policies is presented in subsequent work.

signing rather than enforcement.[23] The electorate will punish or reward governments over CAMs enactment reflected in right-wing populist seat share. Governments understand that the choice of voters to punish relies on their preferences and beliefs, which might not just be informed by the policy itself. Policy diffusion, ideological voting, exogenous shocks, and misinformation could undermine co-optation and in turn maintain right-wing populist voters in the long term (Van Kessel et al. 2020; Ahlquist et al. 2020). Nonetheless, since the government is seeking to remain in office and migration narratives are being controlled by the challenger, they must act accordingly to signal competence.

Governments, as the main executors of CAMs, strategically time their implementation to maximize public attention and political gain. Yet tracing exactly *when* CAMs will be enacted becomes difficult in the context of immigration. Trends and endogenous shocks would maintain migration a constant focus regardless of real-time numbers.[24] Governments are therefore compelled to respond to the political salience of migration rather than to its empirical trends.[25] A recent American example illustrates this logic. During the 2024 campaign, President Biden met President Trump at the border to blunt Republican attacks on migration by visibly engaging the issue, going as far as asking Republicans to support the "toughest...most effective border security bill this country's ever seen."[26] The perceived weakness of Biden's policies was heightened by Republicans at the time, although in reality April 2024 saw 30 percent lower border encounters at the southwest border than April 2023.[27] It must be noted that the urgency of this signaling is not simply rhetorical. Governments that fail to respond to right-wing populist pressure face a compounding threat as challenger parties accumulate seat share, parliamentary fragmentation accelerates, shortening government survival and narrowing the window for policy action (De Vries and Hobolt 2020). Mainstream governments across Europe have repeatedly confronted this dynamic for some time now.

In 2002, leadership of Spain's People's Party (PP) explicitly linked stringent migration policy to the goal of preempting a domestic surge in far-right voting, citing far-right voting trends in neighboring France (Cornelius Wayne et al. 2004, 392).

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[23] Refer to Appendix 1.5. According to the data, two-thirds of CAMs are enacted within the first 2 years after signing, though many of these informally begin preparations or action much before (Ippolito et al. 2020, 10).

[24] This might also be further complicated by the deterioration of race relations between groups and the assignment of racial tensions to migrant flows present in European society.

[25] This does not imply that CAMs can never align with actual increases in migration pressure, only that such alignment is not required given the primacy of migration's political salience.

[26] See Gabe Gutierrez, Alexandra Marquez and Megan Lebowitz, NBC News.

[27] See US Customs and Border Protection report.

The PP went as far as rolling back migrants' rights to public services in the new version of the *Ley de Extranjeria* first implemented in January 2001 (Cornelius Wayne et al. 2004, 406). Around the same time, the rise of the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) into the government caused almost all Austrian parties to adopt more stringent political views on migration and asylum seeking (Duncan 2010; Albertazzi and Mueller 2013).

Similarly, Denmark's leftist party Social Democrats (SA) have adopted right-wing stances on migration (Khalid and Mortensen 2022). The SA revealed their new party policy in 2017 demonstrating a right-wing stance on migration and essentially "outflank their competition" with restrictive immigration bills (O'Leary 2019). Their election success in 2019 came as a result of co-opting right-wing policies to appear stronger and more fit to lead (Khalid and Mortensen 2022). This follows from a decrease in interest in accepting asylum seekers, and the passing of legislative bill L226 which would involve third-country processing and resettlement outside of the EU (Lemberg-Pedersen et al. 2021). In these instances, governments enacted policies to remain in office and attempted to appropriate the issue at hand.

Foreign policy co-optation can mitigate deeper institutional threats. Co-optation helps mainstream governments counter parliamentary fragmentation and safeguard incumbency. Right-wing populist parties are an additional option to voters shopping for representation, gradually increasing turnout rates as feelings of confidence in representation increase (De Vries and Hobolt 2020, 212). This increase of choices unfortunately creates fragmentation within legislatures. The more parties are involved in governance, the more difficult it becomes to please them all, and the harder it is to stay in government steadily (Sani and Sartori 1978; De Vries and Hobolt 2020, 223). Governments with a higher vote share for challenger parties (right and left wing) break down at an increasing rate right after 400 days, compared to the average government that breaks down at the same rate past the first 600 days (De Vries and Hobolt 2020, 226). In this context, CAMs provide a low-cost tool to counteract parliamentary fragmentation in future elections as the Spanish, Austrian, Danish, Italian, and American examples help illustrate. This brings me to my first conjecture:

H1: Mainstream governments are expected to enact more CAMs as the seat share of right-wing populist parties in parliament increases.

My second conjecture relates to the ideological family of the government. Governments most challenged by right-wing populist narratives, rather than ideologically adjoining governments, will face stronger pressure to enact CAMs to remain in power. When the ideological distance between mainstream incumbents and right-wing populist challengers is large, mainstream parties face greater incentives to adopt visible foreign policy signals that demonstrate responsiveness to voter concerns. But in doing so, they can still incur electoral costs from their own parties. Ideologically distant governments

such as ecological or green, socialist, and social democratic parties, risk losing the most support if they implement policies beyond their ideological position, thereby alienating their loyal electorate while still being punished by the voters they aim to appease. Conversely, more conservative governments that are ideologically close to right-wing populist parties are already perceived to be tougher on migration thus less challenged by right-wing populist narratives, yet still susceptible to narrative challenges (Williams and Hunger 2022; Hadj Abdou et al. 2022). Whether conservative governments actually enact stronger migration policies is inconsequential to the narratives being pushed by right-wing challengers and to the perception of the electorate, as long as the narrative is controlled by right-wing challengers. Though I expect any government to enact CAMs to combat right-wing populist opposition, my second conjecture states that:

H2: Left-of-center governments are expected to enact more CAMs as the seat share of right-wing populist parties in parliament increases.

My last conjecture relates to the regime of the partner country. A government's co-optation strategy may come at the expense of its international reputation by binding it to partners with poor humanitarian records. Scholars of international human rights enforcement have demonstrated that international audiences, including NGOs, international organizations, and foreign governments, impose real reputational costs on states that cooperate with illiberal actors (Hafner-Burton 2008). The conventional expectation drawn from this literature is that democratic governments should be reluctant to enter cooperation agreements with non-democratic partners, particularly on sensitive issues involving the movement and treatment of vulnerable populations. However, cooperation with democratic partner states dealing with similar migration pressures is less consequential to this calculation, as their involvement carries minimal reputational exposure and likely less normative costs. I assume that democratic and non-democratic alike generally prefer the ability to cooperate with their counterpart on a politically salient issue, likely equally affecting the partner state, as they reap material benefits such as training, capability building, funding, intelligence, and communication. Nonetheless, it is cooperation with non-democratic regimes that can raise costly strategic and normative dilemmas if the material benefits it receives ultimately undermine migrant safety, the safety of the population within the partner state, or altogether threaten the nature of the relationship between frontier and partner state.

The foreign state can exploit that codependency by stockpiling migrants and threatening their release in exchange for additional benefits (Betts and Collier 2017; Enough Project 2017; FitzGerald 2020). In this sense, CAMs can create strategically useful codependent relationships that might be normatively costly for democracies. Yet, mainstream governments remain primarily motivated by electoral incentives regardless of the partner state's liberal democratic values. These reputational costs are undermined by combating electoral challengers, addressing legislative fragmentation, and managing

migration. Foreign policy relating to migration can additionally positively combat feelings of economic decline and insecurity regardless of party alignment (Buzan et al. 1998; Huysmans 2000; Menjívar 2014), further decreasing the costs to making particular policy actions. The normative costs associated with working and supporting migration management in non-democracies are set aside by governments' rational approach to right-wing populist challengers. This brings me to my third conjecture:

H3: The regime of the partner country will not significantly affect the propensity to implement CAMs.

It must be noted that though this study acknowledges the dangers of enacting particular foreign policy, this condition might not be present in other applications. The theory as it is currently presented simply defines the current parameters but not its limitations. The foreign policy co-optation mechanism presented operates in (1) a competitive electoral system in which challenger parties can credibly threaten the survival of the government through parliamentary seat share, (2) where a mainstream government with executive discretion over foreign policy is aiming to stay in power, and (3) when a salient issue area's political narrative is dominated by the challenger. These conditions are broadly satisfied across Western parliamentary democracies and likely extend to non-Western parliamentary systems where political entrepreneurs and executive foreign policy flexibility are both present (De Vries and Hobolt 2020). This might allow for a higher rate or deeper engagement with foreign policy decisions suitable for government survival. Subsequent work is needed to understand its application in similar and dissimilar context. This study initiates this analysis with a set of frontier states serving as the first point of contact for migrants, where these dynamics are present for its analysis.

Empirical Approach

My objective is to explain the incidence of agreements, measured as annual counts of their signings by the ten frontier states while accounting for frontier-specific and dyadic dynamics that might affect their signing. I employ a Poisson Pseudo–Maximum Likelihood (PPML) as the main estimator with high-dimensional fixed effects to model the annual count of CAMs. The PPML estimator is appropriate given the count construction of the dependent variable, the presence of excess zeros, and potential heteroskedasticity in dyadic data (Gourieroux et al. 1984). Unlike ordinary least squares (OLS), the PPML estimator remains consistent under heteroskedasticity (Silva and Tenreyro 2006) and performs reliably even when the data contain excess zeros or suffer from overdispersion (Silva and Tenreyro 2011). Recent work on three-way fixed effects using PPML also demonstrates consistent estimates with three-way effects compared to alternative estimators (Weidner and Zylkin 2021). In this case, I select country-level fixed effects (θ_i) and decade fixed effects (τ_t) to absorb time-invariant heterogeneity across origin states and decade shocks, while the core predictors (β's) and controls (γ's)

enter linearly through a log link, making interpretation straightforward (Leblang and Helms 2023; Silva and Tenreyro 2011). I employ a directed dyad-year setup to accommodate both country-level and dyadic variables, a structure for which the PPML estimator is particularly well-suited (Weidner and Zylkin 2021).

The dataset comprises 9,493 directed dyad-year observations spanning 10 frontier states and 99 partner countries from 1990 to 2023, yielding 277 unique dyads. In relation to CAMs, Social Democratic governments account for the largest share of CAMs (37.7 percent, n = 124), followed by Conservative (31.0 percent, n = 102) and Center Right governments (24.3 percent, n = 80). Socialist governments account for a smaller but theoretically important share (5.78 percent, n = 19), while Special governments are rare (1.22 percent, n = 4). Notably, the mean CAM rate per dyad-year is broadly similar across Social Democratic (0.033), Conservative (0.039), Center Right (0.036), and Socialist (0.034) governments. This suggests that frequency differences across government types reflect variation in the number of observations rather than systematically different baseline propensities to sign CAMs. Complementary OLS models are reported in Appendix 1.7.[28]

Main Explanatory Variables ($\boldsymbol{\beta_{1-2,ipt}}$)

Despite its centrality to the argument, mainstream government resists a one-size-fits-all definition given the considerable variation in party systems and ideological landscapes across countries and time. I operationalize my identification of mainstream governance based on moderate or historically dominant ideological traditions within the post-Cold War European party systems, constructing complementing measures that vary in their treatment of coalition composition to assess robustness across specifications. The first variable captures the influence of PM's party family (*PM*). The second variable incorporates both the PM's party *and* the partisan composition of the cabinet in a rule-based assignment (*PM + Cabinet*). Although CAMs are formally signed by ministers, typically the Minister of the Interior or Foreign Affairs, the political decision to pursue them often involves the prime minister, as illustrated by Meloni's engagement with Albania and Berlusconi's with Libya. The PM-based measure therefore captures the relevant locus of political agency. The second variable weights the prime minister's party family and the overall ideological tilt of cabinet ministers, yielding a parsimonious and policy-relevant typology of executive coalitions. More generally, the two measures allow for a robustness check that moves from a direct indicator of PM partisan governance to a more comprehensive accounting of PM presence and government coalitions, providing confidence in the findings across specifications.

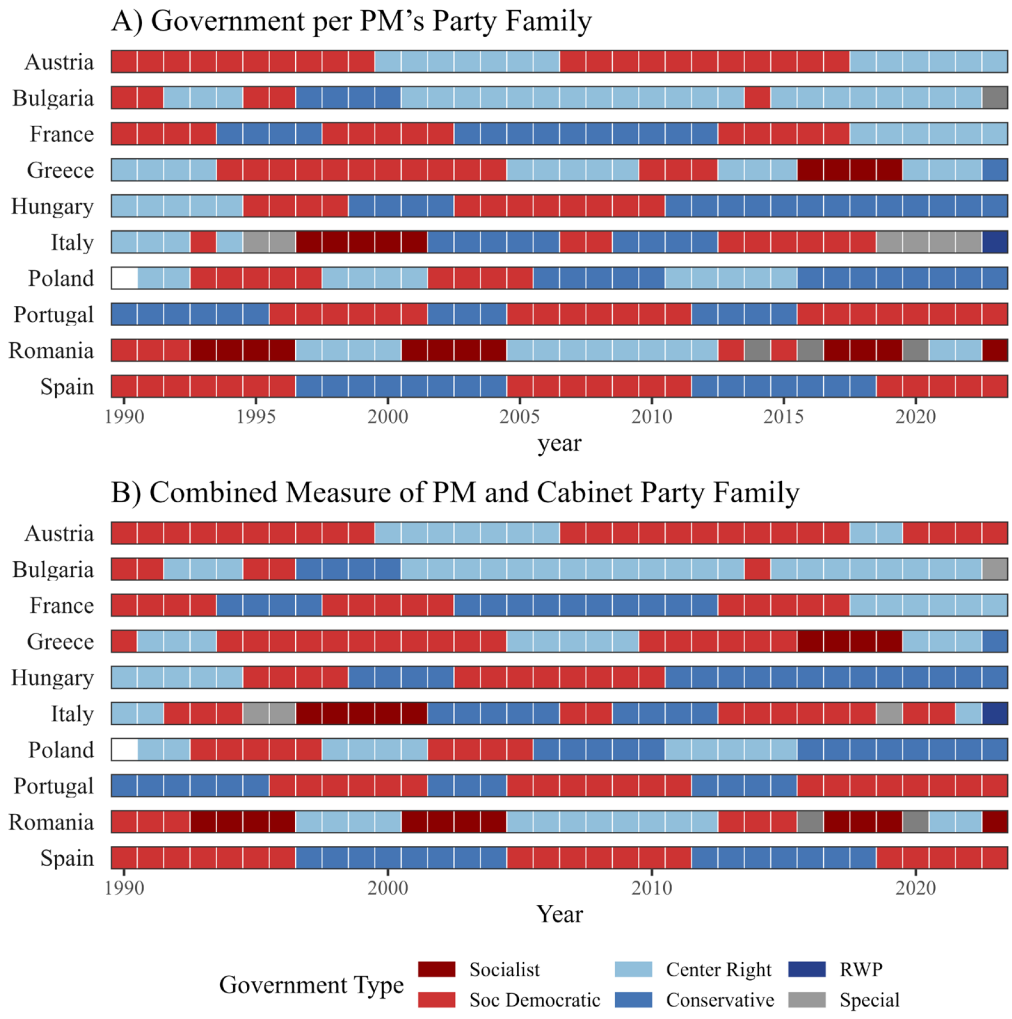
[28] Results for PPML are additionally crosschecked using the *ppmlhdfe* package in Stata as per Correia et al. (2019).

Party family classifications are drawn from the Manifesto Project (Lehmann et al. 2024) and the Party Government in Europe Database (PAGED) (Hellström et al. 2024a), cross-referenced and manually coded for unclassified or ambiguous parties to ensure consistent coverage across country-year observations. Party families include Green or Ecological, Socialist, Social Democratic, Liberal, Christian, Conservative, and Right-Wing Populist or Radical-Right parties. From these classifications, the *Government Type* across *PM* and *PM + Cabinet* are constructed into five mutually exclusive government types: Socialist (including Green or Ecological parties), Social Democratic, Center Right, Conservative, and Special. I exclude Right-Wing Populist (including Radical-Right parties) governments given that they are not counted as mainstream governments and considered the challenger in this context.

For the PM-based classification, I assign each government a type based solely on the party family of the PM, reflecting the prominent public visibility and agenda-setting authority of the head of government particularly salient under majoritarian or semi-presidential systems. Research shows that voters map government policy positions onto the prime minister's party, making the PM's partisan affiliation the most policy-relevant signal for electoral accountability (Fortunato and Adams 2015; Fortunato et al. 2021). Figure 5 displays how government type classifications vary across the *PM* and *PM + Cabinet* measures, illustrating cases where coalition composition meaningfully shifts the coding relative to the PM's party family alone. The second measure classifies governments using a weighted combination of the PM's party family and the partisan composition of the cabinet, counting the PM's party twice to reflect the prime minister's disproportionate influence over the government's perceived ideological position. Governments are coded according to rule-based thresholds for the proportion of cabinet parties on each side of the ideological spectrum. For example, a cabinet led by a Social Democratic PM and composed of at least 50 percent left-leaning parties (Socialists, Social Democrats) is coded as Social Democratic.

I conduct ex-post adjustments for a limited number of cases (e.g., Italy 1995–1996, 2019, Poland 1994–1995, and Bulgaria 2023) where the PM's party code masked substantive ideological alignment with a particular bloc (Poland) or lacked a family assignment in the source datasets (Italy, Bulgaria). These corrections are based on secondary source triangulation and expert evaluations, alongside the coding criteria established in the Manifesto Project and PAGED codebooks. I also designate a residual 'Special' category for agrarian, ethnic, and populist catch-all parties that do not fit cleanly into the five main family classifications, ensuring the typology is exhaustive across all observed government compositions despite their infrequent occurrence.

Figure 5. Change in government party families over time, by country. Panel A shows the PM's party family. Panel B shows the combined measures, including PM and cabinet family. Tile color indicates party family and government type, from 1990 to 2023.



Right-wing populist seat share (RWP Seat Share) measures the combined seat share of parties labeled as 'Right-Wing Populist' and 'Radical-Right parties' following Mudde (2007) and Carter (2013). Following the same procedure, parties and coalitions absent from the Manifesto Project were manually coded following Lehmann and Zobel (2018), with secondary sources used for Bulgaria, France, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Poland, and Romania. A full list of manually coded parties is provided in Appendix 1.6.

Formally, this is inputted into the PPML estimator, letting y_{ipt} denote the count of CAMs from origin *i* to partner *p* in year *t*, I estimate:

$$y_{ipt} \mid X_{ipt} \sim \text{Poisson}(\mu_{ipt})$$

Where the conditional mean is specified as follows:

$$E[y_{ipt} \mid X_{ipt}] = \mu_{ipt}$$

$$\log \mu_{ipt} = \beta_0 + \sum_{j=2}^{5} \beta_{1j} \, \mathbf{1}\{\text{Government Type}_{ipt} = j\} + \beta_2 \, \text{RWP Seat Share}_{ipt} + \sum_{j=2}^{5} \beta_{3j} \, \mathbf{1}\{\text{Government Type}_{ipt} = j\} \cdot \text{RWP Seat Share}_{ipt} + \sum_{k} \gamma_k \, X_{k,ipt} + \theta_i + \tau_t$$

In this specification, **1**{Government Type$_{ipt}$ = *j*}is an indicator function for the government type of *PM* and *PM + Cabinet* (*j* = 2,3,4,5), with *Center Right* serving as the reference category. Here, κ indexes the set of control variables.

Dependent Variable

The number of CAMs per dyad-year acts as the dependent variable for subsequent results. The CAMs dataset contains 329 collected arrangements from January 1, 1990, to December 31, 2023 (see Appendix 1); 58.7 percent of CAMs were enacted with a European partner, 18 percent with partners in the Middle East and North Africa, with the remainder distributed across Africa, Asia, and the Americas.[29] A majority of dyad-years involve non-democratic partners with 67.3 percent (MPI $\leq$ 0.6), of which a 35.5 percent are closed autocracies (MPI $\leq$ 0.2).[30] Among CAMs signed with non-democratic partners, 44.5 percent are enacted with non-democratic European partners, 25.9 percent with non-democratic Middle Eastern and North African countries, and 11.4 percent with Asian and Pacific partners. Non-democratic partners in West and Central Africa account for 9.1 percent of all non-democratic partners. I additionally lead the dependent variable by *t+1* and *t+2* to observe delayed effects of government type and right-wing populist strength on CAMs formation.

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[29] Region names designated by the UNHCR sub-region coding.

[30] I denominate non-democratic any country that is identified as *Ambivalent, Autocratic*, or *Closed Autocratic* at the time of the CAM given their Multiplicative Polyarchy Index (MPI). This translates to an operationalization of less than 0.60 out of 1 (Coppedge et al. 2021). Conversely, democratic states are those defined as *minimally democratic*, or *democratic*, based on the ordinalized version of the MPI measure. Figure 3 shows the distribution of the partner countries given their regime type (Coppedge et al. 2021).

Controls ($\gamma_{k,ipt}$)

I control for several predictors of CAM formation, including refugee stock and asylum applications in the frontier state, drawn from The World Bank (2024) and Eurostat (2024) respectively. Asylum applications are measured as the annual count of first-time applicants from each partner country to each frontier state, while refugee stock captures the total number of refugees hosted by the frontier state. Both variables operationalize migration pressure, capturing the credibility of migration as a political 'threat' independent of government type. I additionally control for migration-related protests as a measure of bottom-up political salience (Clark and Regan 2016), and the cumulative count of CAMs up to the observation year to account for path dependence in bilateral agreement formation.

Domestic migration policy may independently predict foreign policy co-optation, incorporating deeper domestic relationships and perceptions about migration. That is, frontier states with more restrictive domestic postures toward migrants are likely to pursue more restrictive bilateral arrangements as well. I control for this alignment between domestic and foreign policy using the level of access to social assistance for recognized refugees, ranging from no access to benefits equivalent to those of residents, as a proxy for the underlying migration policy preferences of the frontier state (Römer et al. 2021). Scholars have documented that EU membership shapes both the form and frequency of migration cooperation at different levels, operating through channels distinct from domestic electoral incentives. As such, I also control for EU membership, as the shared regulatory framework on migration among member states may independently influence the propensity to enact CAMs.[31] I control for cabinet ideological cohesion (*Ideologically Connected Cabinet*), as internally aligned cabinets may more readily pursue foreign policy instruments independent of electoral pressure as ideologically different parties find it difficult to land on a policy (Walther et al. 2019; Müller and Strøm 1999; Hellström et al. 2024b, 2024a). A control for cabinet incumbency as long-serving governments may have had greater opportunity to enact CAMs independent of electoral incentives, as their long tenure could imply (Hellström et al. 2024b, 2024a).

[31] Variable summaries are available in Appendix 1.1.

Last, I include dyadic controls to account for structural characteristics of the bilateral relationship that could influence the formation of CAMs. Following standard gravity model conventions, I control for contiguous borders, prior colonial relationships, and logged bilateral distance (*Contiguous Borders, Previous Colony, Distance (Log)*) (Mayer and Zignago 2011). I additionally include logged gross domestic product (GDP) per capita (*GDPPC (Log)*) as a proxy for the partner state's economic development to account for state capacity and the economic drivers of emigration.[32] I include partner's life expectancy (in years) to proxy for humanitarian conditions, testing whether frontier states are more likely to enact CAMs with partners facing acute development challenges translating into lower life expectancy (The World Bank 2024). Similarly interested in the domestic context of the partner state, the partner state's freedom of foreign movement and electoral democracy index (*Foreign Movement Index, Partner Non-Democratic*) are included to measure whether the partner's treatment of citizens, migrants, and emigrants independently influences the frontier state's propensity to enact CAMs (Coppedge et al. 2021).

Results

If foreign policy co-optation operates as theorized, mainstream governments should respond to rising right-wing populist seat share by enacting more CAMs, with the effect most pronounced under left-of-center governments facing the greatest narrative pressure. Table 1 presents the effects of the interaction between the binary *Mainstream Government* indicator and continuous *RWP Seat Share* to test this prediction, with subsequent tables disaggregating by government type to test my second conjecture.

Model 1 (*mig*) includes only *Refugee Stock (Log)* and *Asylum Applications (Log)* to establish that objective migration pressure alone does not robustly predict CAM formation consistent with the theoretical expectation that co-optation is driven by electoral incentives rather than policy need. As the theory anticipates, migration crises are partly politically constructed. Governments and challengers can amplify the salience of any given migration flow to serve electoral ends, meaning that raw refugee or asylum figures are poor proxies for the political pressure that drives co-optation (see Figure 4). Model 2 (*basic*) includes the main explanatory variables alongside refugee stock and asylum applications, while Models 3–5 incorporate full controls and fixed effects. Models 4 and 5 forward the dependent variable by one and two years respectively to assess whether the effect of right-wing populist pressure on CAM formation persists beyond the contemporaneous observation year.

[32] This approach could be replicated with dyad fixed effects, though doing so would absorb the time-invariant dyadic variables of theoretical interest, precluding estimation of their individual effects.

Coefficients from PPML models can be interpreted similarly to log-linear regressions. In models with categorical variables (*PM, PM + Cabinet*) and a continuous variable (*RWP Seat Share*), the interpretation of coefficients follows a semi-elasticity logic, with the main effect of right-wing populist seat share capturing its impact on the expected count of CAMs under the reference government type (j) relative to the baseline ($j = Center\ Right$).[33] A coarse binary indicator of mainstream governance is also presented in Appendix 3.3, alongside a collapsed left-right measure as additional robustness checks. The appendix discusses interpretation of the lagged specification and known estimation challenges with binary treatments in PPML models with country fixed effects.

Results show support for my first hypothesis across Models 3–5, with these reaching statistical significance. Additional results from Table 2 also show support for my third hypothesis relating to the non-democratic status of the partner. There seems little evidence of the democratic status of partner country on the propensity for CAMs. Table 1 and Table 2 are in a similar structure, but I ignore the statistically insignificant controls for visibility. Results for Table 1 use the main independent variable PM, which is government type constructed solely from the prime minister's family, show support for my second hypothesis as well as displaying additional support for my first and third hypotheses. The interaction between RWP Seat Share and Socialist governments is positive and statistically significant across Models 3 through 5, with the largest effect observed in the one-year forward lag. The interaction between RWP Seat Share and Social Democratic governments is similarly positive and significant across the models, though the magnitude is considerably smaller than under Socialist governments. These results are again consistent with the prediction that ideological distance from right-wing challengers amplifies the co-optation effect.

Table 2 replicates this pattern using the *PM + Cabinet* measure, which incorporates the full partisan composition of the governing coalition, and yields substantively identical results. This pattern holds consistently across specifications with forward-lagged dependent variables (*t + 1, t + 2*). The most pronounced co-optation effects occur under left-wing governments, which enact significantly more CAMs as right-wing populist seat share rises accounting for government type measures.

[33] For log-transformed variables (*Refugee Stock (Log)*), coefficients approximate elasticities as in most gravity models. This means that a 1 percent increase changes the expected CAM count by approximately the outcome in percent. For binary variables (*EU Member*), coefficients can be interpreted by the exponentiation the coefficient ($e^{\beta} - 1 \times 100$) when switching from 0 to 1, whereas count coefficients (*Migration Protests*) follow same equation but percent changes by each one-unit increase.

Table 1. Full tables available in Appendix B.1. FE PPML models measuring the count of total CAMs, given the party family of the PM interacted with right-wing populist seat share. Center Right government is used as reference category.

	Dependent Variable				
	(1) CAMs (*mig*)	(2) CAMs (*basic*)	(3) CAMs (t)	(4) CAMs ($t+1$)	(5) CAMs ($t+2$)
Main Explanatory Variables					
Conservative		-0.38·	-0.42	-0.44	-0.12
		(0.21)	(0.51)	(0.57)	(0.54)
Soc Democratic		-0.17	-0.50	-0.64**	-0.34
		(0.29)	(0.33)	(0.24)	(0.33)
Socialist		0.006	-9.9***	-89.9***	-8.6***
		(0.39)	(2.8)	(3.3)	(2.0)
RWP Seat Share		-0.01	-0.05·	-0.04·	-0.06*
		(0.008)	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.03)
× *Conservative*		0.01·	0.04*	0.05*	0.04·
		(0.007)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
× *Soc Democratic*		0.01	0.05**	0.06***	0.05**
		(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
× *Socialist*		0.0004	0.48***	3.8***	0.42***
		(0.03)	(0.12)	(0.14)	(0.08)
Selected Control Variables					
Refugee Stock (Log)	-0.03	-0.03	0.10	0.06	0.17
	(0.13)	(0.14)	(0.18)	(0.16)	(0.22)
Asylum Applications (Log)	0.06	0.08·	0.08	0.006	0.11
	(0.05)	(0.04)	(0.07)	(0.11)	(0.11)
Partner Non-Democratic			-0.20	-0.22*	-0.06
			(0.12)	(0.09)	(0.14)
Distance (Log)			-0.36***	-0.24***	-0.09
			(0.09)	(0.07)	(0.07)
Migration Protests			-0.12*	-0.16*	-0.21***
			(0.05)	(0.06)	(0.05)
Ideologically Connected Cabinet			-0.42***	-0.41*	-0.29
			(0.12)	(0.16)	(0.18)
Observations	8,290	8,245	5,561	5,609	5,609
Squared Correlation	0.01118	0.01206	0.06622	0.02806	0.01723
Pseudo R^2	0.03593	0.03809	0.09334	0.05988	0.05037
BIC	2,728.9	2,764.0	1,910.3	1,933.3	1,956.3
Country fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Decade fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Controls included			✓	✓	✓

Clustered (Country) standard-errors in parentheses.
*Signif. Codes: p < ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1*

Table 2. Full tables available in Appendix B.2. FE PPML models measuring the count of total CAMs, given the party composition of the government interacted with right-wing populist seat share. Center Right government is used as reference category.

	Dependent Variable				
	(1) CAMs (*mig*)	(2) CAMs (*basic*)	(3) CAMs (t)	(4) CAMs ($t+1$)	(5) CAMs ($t+2$)
Main Explanatory Variables					
Conservative		-0.47·	-0.45	-0.50	0.06
		(0.25)	(0.50)	(0.59)	(0.62)
Soc Democratic		-0.32	-0.56·	-0.73**	-0.24
		(0.26)	(0.31)	(0.25)	(0.33)
Socialist		-0.04	-9.9***	-89.6***	-8.3***
		(0.39)	(2.6)	(3.0)	(1.5)
RWP Seat Share		-0.01	-0.04·	-0.04	-0.05*
		(0.006)	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.02)
× *Conservative*		0.01	0.04*	0.04*	0.03
		(0.007)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
× *Soc Democratic*		0.009	0.04**	0.06***	0.04*
		(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.02)
× *Socialist*		-0.007	0.48***	3.7***	0.40***
		(0.03)	(0.12)	(0.13)	(0.06)
Selected Control Variables					
Refugee Stock (Log)	-0.03	-0.02	0.10	0.04	0.15
	(0.13)	(0.14)	(0.18)	(0.16)	(0.21)
Asylum Applications (Log)	0.06	0.08·	0.08	0.01	0.12
	(0.05)	(0.04)	(0.07)	(0.11)	(0.10)
Partner Non-Democratic			-0.20	-0.21*	-0.008
			(0.13)	(0.09)	(0.17)
Distance (Log)			-0.36***	-0.23**	-0.09
			(0.09)	(0.07)	(0.07)
Migration Protests			-0.12*	-0.19**	-0.24***
			(0.05)	(0.07)	(0.05)
Ideologically Connected Cabinet			-0.42***	-0.41**	-0.28·
			(0.11)	(0.15)	(0.16)
Observations	8,311	8,311	5,597	5,645	5,645
Squared Correlation	0.01123	0.01234	0.06474	0.02677	0.01750
Pseudo R^2	0.03618	0.03844	0.09077	0.05416	0.04884
BIC	2,729.8	2,795.9	1,932.2	1,979.8	1,989.2
Country fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Decade fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Controls included			✓	✓	✓

Clustered (Country) standard-errors in parentheses.
*Signif. Codes: p < ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1*

The results indicate findings are in line with theoretical expectations. First, the interaction between right-wing seat share is positively and significantly associated to the enactment of CAMs when interacted with mainstream governments. Even when taking into consideration asylum applications, refugee stocks, and election effects, these effects alone do not robustly predict more CAMs once other factors are in play. Second, the further left a government is the more correlated they will be with CAMs, indicating support for my second hypothesis as these governments face the stronger brunt from the narrative. The results further indicate that governments, across the board, enact CAMs but might hold preferences for which types of governments they engage with. *Partner Non-Democratic* is never clearly significant or even positive. The regime type of partners does not affect the implementation of CAMs, supporting my third hypothesis.

Historical Right-Wing Challenger Pressure

How governments handle right-wing populist seat share, and the narrative pressure alongside it, can be further refined by looking at the level of pressure throughout the data. Countries will vary their ability to withstand right-wing populist parties' pressure in their parliament given the historical and political system. For example, Figure 6 displays CAMs and the share of right-wing populist seat share across each cabinet (after each election) with some having a usually higher threshold for right-wing populist parties such as France and Spain, compared to others like Romania and Greece. Yet, although most countries display an enactment of CAMs when countries are challenged by right-wing populist parties, but these parties haven't taken control of government, their endogenous resistance to right-wing populist pressure is necessary to paint a clearer, more appropriate picture of mainstream governments. To identify whether CAM formation under mainstream governments is conditional on the intensity of such pressure, I estimate PPML models interacting *PM + Cabinet* with indicator variables for right-wing populist seat share above or below the mean, up to one standard deviation (above or below) in the distribution.

These thresholds (mean, standard deviations) are calculated dynamically up to the corresponding cabinet to reflect the government's evaluation of right-wing populist seat share up to that point (see Figure 6). Mainstream governments respond to right-wing threats only when these become electorally salient even across a wide range of variation. For instance, Italy's second and third Prodi governments were between Berlusconi-led governments. While the final Berlusconi government working closely with right-wing populist parties would later face backlash for its controversial migration deals with illiberal regimes, the Prodi cabinets, governing earlier, could only assess the precedent set by Berlusconi's first term. Results in Table 3 show that CAM formation significantly increases only when right-wing populist pressure is above one standard deviation from the mean, particularly under left-wing governments. I extend the time to $t + 3$ to observe if these patterns stay over a longer period of time or decrease. There is

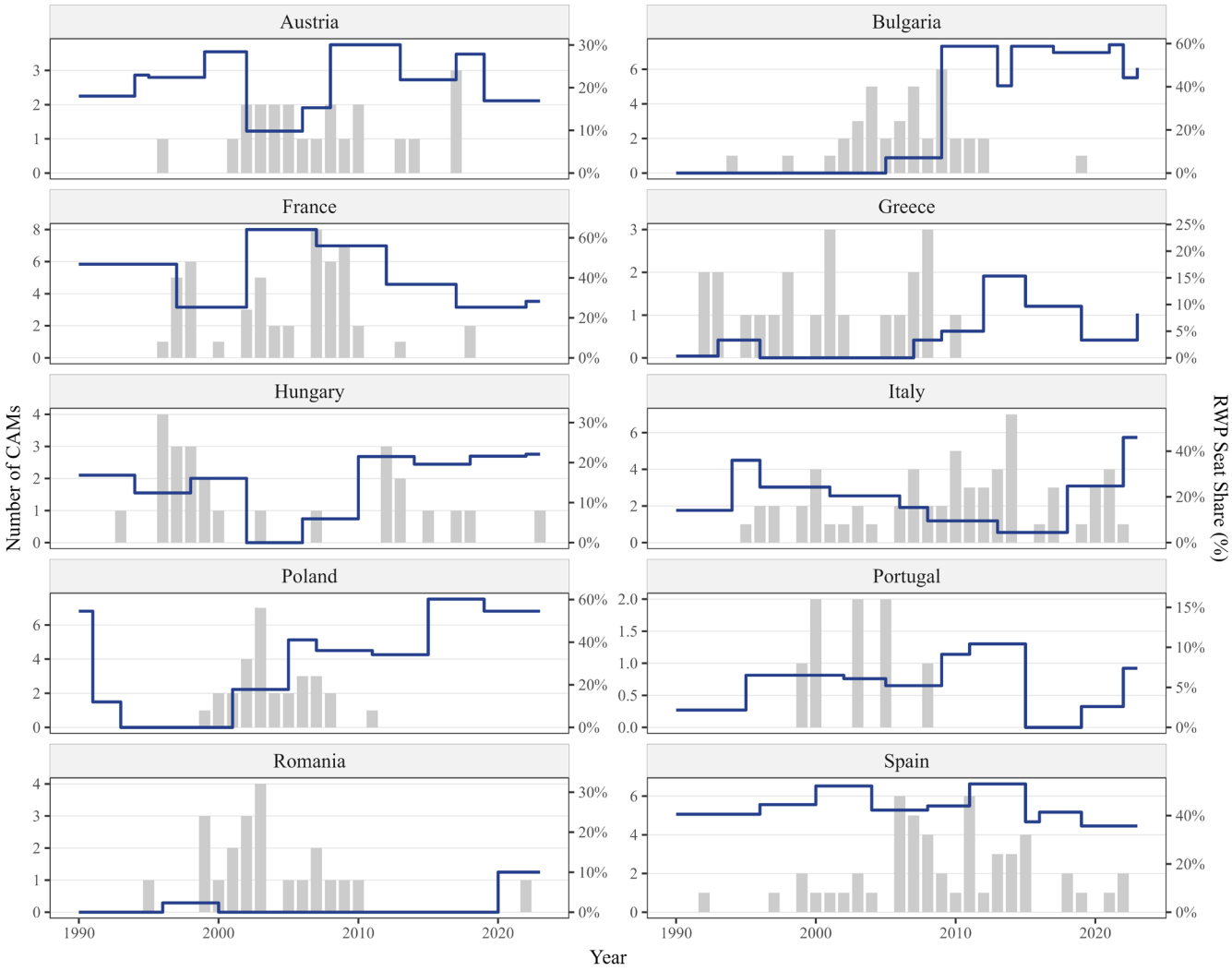
no significant positive effect when right-wing populist pressure is moderate or below average. In fact, quite the opposite is found in Table 3's third model. This finding aligns with the logic of strategic co-optation in general. Additional patterns in Greece and Romania display that the enactment of CAMs could have warded off some increase of right-wing populist seat share, but such interpretation should still be taken lightly. Modified measures of government type and outcome placebo test can be found in Appendix 3 and 3.2.

Table 3. Fixed-effects PPML estimates of the count of CAMs at varying times, by government type interacted with right-wing populist seat share bins. Full table available in Appendix B.3.

	CAMs (t)		CAMs (t+1)		CAMs (t+2)		CAMs (t+3)	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Conservative	-0.04	-0.13	0.41	0.17	0.20	0.10	0.04	-0.21
	(0.33)	(0.36)	(0.36)	(0.44)	(0.34)	(0.49)	(0.31)	(0.37)
Soc Democratic	0.002	-0.02	0.48	0.10	0.27	0.07	-0.05	-0.01
	(0.33)	(0.32)	(0.37)	(0.36)	(0.36)	(0.36)	(0.39)	(0.34)
Socialist	0.20	-1.4*	0.74	-13.9***	0.22	-1.4	-0.25	-1.5*
	(0.51)	(0.66)	(0.61)	(0.36)	(0.67)	(0.89)	(0.59)	(0.69)
RWP Below Mean to -1 SD	-0.48		0.98***		0.42·		-0.68*	
	(0.40)		(0.22)		(0.22)		(0.34)	
× *Conservative*	-0.71		-1.7**		-0.80		-0.32	
	(0.51)		(0.54)		(0.71)		(0.42)	
× *Soc Democratic*	-0.21		-1.4***		-0.58*		0.33	
	(0.56)		(0.38)		(0.28)		(0.35)	
× *Socialist*	-0.85		-15.4***		-1.5**		-0.44	
	(0.71)		(0.75)		(0.51)		(0.41)	
RWP Above Mean to 1 SD		0.50		-0.40		-12.9***		-13.1***
		(0.64)		(1.2)		(0.45)		(0.39)
× *Conservative*		0.08		0.22		12.5***		13.8***
		(0.68)		(1.2)		(0.90)		(0.46)
× *Soc Democratic*		-0.20		0.32		12.9***		13.1***
		(0.91)		(1.4)		(0.76)		(0.55)
× *Socialist*		1.9**		15.1***		14.7***		14.8***
		(0.67)		(1.7)		(0.67)		(0.54)
Observations	5,561	5,561	5,609	5,609	5,609	5,609	5,561	5,561
Squared Correlation	0.07318	0.07432	0.02713	0.02515	0.01533	0.01629	0.01268	0.01333
Pseudo R^2	0.09720	0.09159	0.05887	0.05421	0.04452	0.04628	0.04000	0.03961
BIC	1,903.4	1,913.5	1,935.1	1,943.3	1,966.6	1,963.5	1,955.9	1,956.6
Country fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Decade fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Controls included	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Clustered (Country) standard-errors in parentheses.
*Signif. Codes: p < ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1*

Figure 6. Outgoing bilateral CAMs (gray bars, left axis) alongside each country's right-wing populist party seat share (blue line, right axis).



Conclusion

This study has set out to provide a novel documentation of international migration cooperation and its determinants across Western democracies. The findings carry broader implications for research on international order, cooperation, and migration. First, the dataset provides a foundation for future research on border externalization and migrant safety by systematically cataloging CAMs. Future research can extend this analysis to other contexts, including the United States, Commonwealth democracies, and emerging democracies, similar dynamics may operate under different conditions. Second, theorization must move beyond CAMs to capture the broader militarization of humanitarian migration cooperation that has developed over the last thirty years, especially agreements led by Global South countries, such as tripartite repatriation arrangements and refugee-centered peace agreements.

Second, the study posits a theory of foreign policy co-optation to clarify which type of foreign policy mainstream governments pursue amid ongoing and rising right-wing populist threat. This is achieved by dissecting the type of government in power and by accounting for several predictors of migration cooperation—of which simple migration pressure was not enough to predict CAMs. The study additionally suggests how Western democratic states are not dissuaded by less pluralistic regimes when creating bilateral migration arrangements. I find that as right-wing populist parties gain electoral ground, mainstream governments respond by increasing the enactment of CAMs. These effects are most pronounced for left-of-center and moderate governments, which face the greatest need to reclaim narrative control over migration from right-wing challengers. Last, contrary to common expectations that regime type would moderate partnerships, the findings suggest that partner regime types have little influence in the domestic electoral calculus of mainstream governments.

Furthermore, the theory of foreign policy co-optation presented can extend to other policy domains. For example, in contexts where left-wing populist parties dominate the challenger space, as in parts of Latin America, mainstream governments might engage in analogous foreign policy co-optation through bilateral development or labor agreements that appropriate the challenger's narrative. Climate policy may follow a similar logic when challenger narratives might push mainstream governments toward visible international agreements timed to electoral rather than environmental need. Even in two-party systems, where parties are often concerned about differentiating themselves and large programmatic shifts, we can still observe co-optation of narrative-important policies when political survival is at stake. The study of CAMs offers a comprehensive test of this logic precisely given that the reputational costs of cooperating with non-democratic partners are large. If co-optation operates here, it is likely to operate in less costly domains.

The results more comprehensively suggest that migration policies aligned with right-wing populist standards can extend into the international arena, reshaping patterns of cooperation in ways that may undermine or reshape global democratic norms, and create interdependence and reliance of extractive actors. This naturally raises a concern over the future of migration management. If liberal democratic governments ignore the challengers or policies, their disengagement from the global migration regime is likely to cause migrant suffering and foment detachment. This study acknowledges the difficulty of this dilemma yet offers two observations.

Bilateral and security policy on migration will naturally rely on less-pluralist partners to achieve objectives. Yet this reliance does not require the absence of protection for migrants and vulnerable individuals. Although this study does not analyze conditionalities within CAMs, preliminary evidence shows that humanitarian clauses, references to international law or good governance, protections for women and children, and rescue provisions are largely absent.[34] Amending these and future agreements offers a pathway to counter illiberalism and the erosion of liberal norms that Western governments often disavow. Executive discretion in diplomatic negotiations creates space to embed these provisions if governments state them clearly in migration cooperation. Second, the theory and results enable scholars of global governance to identify how such practices diffuse and reshape international cooperation across their domains of interest and where embedding similar protections can reinforce liberal norms.

The international liberal order facing populist leadership reshaping claims of sovereignty on security and issue areas signals the need to identify practices that entrench illiberal international norms in the mainstream. Practices that can shape protections for the more than 123 million forcibly displaced people worldwide, a number that continues to rise. The findings ultimately show that right-wing populist pressure enables executives to manage electoral opposition through foreign policy. This highlights the need to revisit prevailing assumptions about how domestic politics shape international migration cooperation and the international order.

Appendix is available here.

[34] Subsequent work examines this conditionality across partner regions.

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