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Published online: 16 Aug 2023.

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Multiscalar strategies in right-wing populism: a comparison of West European parties in borderlands

Cecilia Biancalana [a], Christian Lamour [b], Oscar Mazzoleni [c], Grégoire Yerly [c] and Paul Carls [b]

ABSTRACT
This paper demonstrates the heuristic value of using a multiscalar perspective to analyse right-wing populist discourse, especially in borderland regions. While it is commonly posited that right-wing populist ideology implies a Manichean dichotomy between in- and out-groups, this study reveals that right-wing populist discursive strategies can thrive in multiscalar contexts. To substantiate this claim, the article conducts a comparative analysis of the discourses employed by a set of right-wing populist parties in borderland regions of Western Europe during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings highlight that although these parties' discourse predominantly revolves around the national scale, there is a complex interplay among subnational, national, cross-border and supranational scales. By advocating for the reinstatement of border controls during the crisis, European right-wing parties engage in scalar reconfiguration.

KEYWORDS
right-wing populist parties; populism; borderlands; COVID-19; scale; discourse

1. INTRODUCTION

The literature on the rise of right-wing populist parties (RWPPs) in Europe is extensive and covers various political, socio-economic and cultural aspects. In spite of the diverse analytical perspectives, approaches that focus on states or nations have been prevalent, especially in political science. When populists advocate for the 'people' and the 'community', these entities are generally perceived to be confined within national boundaries. European RWPPs are typically conceived as political parties that oppose the flow of people across nation-state borders. They emphasise law-and-order issues and show varying degrees of Euroscepticism in the pursuit of national sovereignty (Rheindorf & Wodak, 2018; Schain, 2019; Vasilopoulou, 2011). RWPPs view nation-states as the 'locus of the populist performance of "taking back control"' (Kallis, 2018, p. 285). From this perspective, RWPPs exploit immigration and socio-economic crises to demand the restoration of nation-state sovereignty.

However, an emerging body of literature in geography, border studies and certain branches of political science examines the linkage between populism and the 'territoriality of the demos' (Lizotte, 2019) and challenges national 'reductionism' (Lamour, 2020; Richardson, 2020;

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Yerly, 2022). According to this stream of literature, populist discourse adapts to subnational, national and supranational scales by incorporating different definitions of in- and out-groups (Biancalana & Mazzoleni, 2020; Lamour & Carls, 2022). At the same time, however, the concept of scale in populist literature has been relatively untheorised, and its heuristic strengths have not been systematically emphasised.

This article aims to achieve two complementary goals. First, it argues that scales are crucial for understanding right-wing populism in contemporary Western democracies. Second, it demonstrates how several RWPPs in four cross-border regions in Western Europe constructed a multiscalar discourse during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, when border issues gained significant relevance (Casaglia et al., 2020; Murphy, 2022).

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. The next section develops our theoretical perspective by linking populism with the notion of scale, which encompasses both symbolic and material dimensions. We then present our empirical comparative study, which focuses on the pandemic crisis in four integrated cross-border regions of Switzerland and Luxembourg. Finally, we discuss the findings of our analysis.

2. POPULISM AND THE POLITICS OF SCALES

The manifestations of RWPPs in Western Europe exhibit a variety that challenges the assumptions of 'methodological nationalism' (Wimmer & Glick-Schiller, 2003), which assumes that the 'natural' scale on which RWPPs are based is the national one. Instead, electoral support for RWPPs is often concentrated in specific regions within nation-states (Agnew, 2020; Beecham et al., 2020; Bloise et al., 2021; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). RWPPs operating on a national scale adapt their discourse depending on the regional contexts in which they compete in order to increase localised support (Heinisch et al., 2020; Ivaldi & Dutozia, 2018; Van Kessel, 2016). Some parties usually categorised as RWPPs have strong regional roots and employ a regionalist discourse: for instance, the *Lega dei Ticinesi* and the *Mouvement des citoyens genevois* in Switzerland and the *Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie* (N-VA) in Flanders (Albertazzi et al., 2018; Bernhard, 2017; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Mazzoleni & Mueller, 2017; Verbeek & Zaslove, 2017).

Such empirical evidence shows the relevance of scales in relation to RWPPs. However, the connection between populism and the concept of scale remains an underrepresented issue. Moreover, both populism and scales lack an unambiguous meaning. On the one hand, there is persistent controversy about the definition of populism within political science and political sociology scholarship (e.g., De la Torre, 2019). Scholars who view populism as an ideology often exclude populism as a logic, a discursive strategy or a frame, and vice versa (Aslanidis, 2016; Laclau, 2005; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013). However, according to some scholars, populism can be seen as both a logic of antagonism and a discursive construction of positively defined in-groups (i.e., people) in opposition to negatively defined out-groups – including both the elite and, in the case of RWPPs, 'others' such as minorities or migrants who are blamed for jeopardising national sovereignty (e.g., De Cleen, 2019; Woods, 2014). One could argue that ideology and discourse are not necessarily mutually exclusive. While the former focuses on the actor's 'core' message, the latter concerns how the actor strategically spreads its message in a specific moment and context. One relates to the 'content', while the other concerns the 'form' (Ballacci & Goodman, 2023). Such a perspective represents a way to move beyond the limitations of the 'methodological nationalism' approach. For instance, the *ideological* defence of national sovereignty by RWPPs does not preclude their *strategic* uses of alternative scales in their public discourse.

On the other hand, the meaning of 'scales' in human geography is also a matter of ongoing controversy. Literature focused on political economy, for example, tends to emphasise scales as material devices. Jessop, among others, argues that a process of multiplying scales and undermining the nation-state emerged and developed in the last decades of the 20th century (Jessop, 2000,

2003). This relativisation of scales led to uneven developments (Brenner, 2019) and changing processes 'through which multiple spatial units are established, differentiated, hierarchized and, under certain conditions, rejigged, reorganized and recalibrated in relation to one another' (Brenner, 2001, p. 600). In this context, scales are used to construct material life through contested social processes (Smith, 1995). While European states with strong subnational autonomies, in which the state and the nation do not completely overlap, transform and consolidate their legacies, many other European states are reallocating political power at the regional scale (Cole, 2011; Cole & Pasquier, 2017; Dumont et al., 2011; Keating, 2013, 2021; Ladner, 2011; Paasi, 2004; Piattoni & Brunazzo, 2011).

Meanwhile, post-structuralist and culturalist approaches tend to highlight the symbolic, relational and controversial significance of scales (e.g., Jones, 1998; Moore, 2008), with a focus on how discourses shape and reshape them. As suggested by Swyngedouw (1997, p. 141), 'scales and their nested articulations become produced as temporary standoffs in a perpetual transformative socio-spatial power struggle'. According to Howitt (2002, p. 304), a geographical scale can be conceived 'as an event, a process, a relationship of movement and interaction rather than a discrete thing'. Geographers focused on politics underline the concept of 'politics of scale', emphasising how social and political forces shape and transform scalar relations (Delaney & Leitner, 1997; MacKinnon, 2011; Smith et al., 2000). In this regard, Cox has contributed to conceptualising the politics of scale by distinguishing between 'spaces of dependence', which refer to localised 'place-specific conditions' and 'spaces of engagement', in which political actors develop cross-local networking characterised by a more flexible interplay and connection between the local and the global scales to defend their local interests (Cox, 1998, p. 2).

Building on these reflections, we argue that scales are both symbolic and material constructs. In seeking to understand the role of scales in the politics of RWPPs, we contend that political parties are deeply rooted in specific spaces of dependence. They are grounded in their local, regional, and/or national electoral constituencies, which are moulded within differentiated and complex territorial scales. This complexity arises as a result of shifting patterns of mobility and governance driven by globalisation, supranational integration, and subnational and cross-regional powers (Burridge et al., 2017; Jessop, 2003; Maier, 2016; Perkmann, 2007; Perkmann & Sum, 2002). Spatial spaces of engagement encompass a diverse and variable set of scales, not only in terms of networking but also in terms of a discursive strategy (Lamour, 2023; Mazzoleni, 2005). While networking practices for local or regional branches of nationwide party organisations encompass local, regional, and national dimensions due to vertical internal party relations, for region-wide and particularly regionalist parties, networking is primarily focused on the regional scale (Detterbeck, 2012).

However, RWPPs' discursive strategies, which are shaped and disseminated by actors, might frame a diverse set of scales ranging from the local to the global, depending on the scale that parties deem crucial for ensuring success in a specific constituency. For instance, in local elections, local branches of a national party may also address national or supranational issues. Conversely, European MPs of RWPPs may have strong links to national and regional constituencies, as they compete electorally on these scales. Although all parties can 'jump' between scales, populist discourse is known for being highly adaptative and fluid (e.g., Taggart, 2000). Simultaneously, as Anssi Paasi suggests, 'scale should be continually conceptualized in context rather than chasing an omnipotent essentialist definition' (Paasi, 2004, p. 542).

Given the significance of multiscalar configurations in RWPPs' discursive strategies, each (institutional) context shapes different opportunities and constraints. First, each country has its own socio-economic and institutional legacy. For instance, the mobilisation of RWPPs differs in centralised states compared with decentralised ones. Second, while every European country faces the transfer of power to regional governments and metropolitan governance networks in the age of globalisation, the growing emphasis on regional identities and communities, along

with the centralisation of urban and regional scales in capitalist accumulation, results in a hetero-geneous political impact of territorial rescaling (Antonsich, 2010; Brenner, 2019; Keating, 1998, 2014). For instance, certain regions exhibit a strong regionalist legacy (Keating, 2014), such as Flanders in Belgium and some cantons in Switzerland (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Mazzoleni, 2005), while other regions are weaker in terms of regionalism (Lamour, 2022). Third, scales cover not only institutional but also functional spaces, in particular on the urban-regional cross-border scale, which has emerged as a result of globalisation and European integration. Cross-border urban regions represent a key scale for new economy-driven regionalist policies and territorial rescaling (Blatter, 2004; Jessop, 2003; Nugent, 2018; O'Dowd, 2002; Paasi, 1999; Paasi et al., 2022; Perkmann, 2007; Perrier Bruslé, 2013).

The rise of the urban-regional cross-border scale offers an intriguing basis for comparative analysis across Western Europe. In fact, some territorial constituencies where RWPPs compete are situated within cross-border regions characterised by strong functional interdependences. When border-related issues (e.g., immigration) come into play, RWPPs operate across multiple scales – not only at national, regional and EU levels but also at the cross-border level, especially when party organisations (e.g., subnational branches of nationwide populist parties) are located in border regions (e.g., Yerly, 2022). For RWPPs, border regions can be seen as symbolic resources, but they are also crucial spaces for shaping their definition of in-/out-group (Lamour, 2023). For RWPPs in these regions, the border represents a safeguard against perceived threats (Richardson, 2020), and border control can be considered a proxy for reclaiming national sover-eignty, regardless of the nature of the crisis (Casaglia et al., 2020). At the same time, it raises the question of how RWPPs execute their multiscalar discursive strategies in specific geographical contexts, especially during times of crisis.

3. THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND THE RWPPs

In the past few decades, despite the notion of a 'borderless world' being a myth, territorial borders have continued to structure political mobilisation in Western democracies. The tension between open and closed borders is one of the most critical and politicised issues in policymaking (Schain, 2019). Immigration, criminality, trade, and the free movement of persons are some of the issues generating border controversies. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought borders to the forefront in a new manner (Coletti & Filippetti, 2022; Radil et al., 2021). During the pandemic, unlike previous global trends, there was a shift toward favouring border closures, at least in the initial stages of the pandemic. This change also impacted Europe, a region where 'common mar-ket' de-bordering strategies and rules have prevailed in recent decades. For instance, before the COVID-19 pandemic, the rules of free movement within EU member states and neighbouring countries such as Switzerland had never been interrupted for such an extended period (Opiłowska, 2021).

The border closures have particularly affected cross-border functional regions that came out of the European integration process. State authorities have implemented a series of agreements to address the impact of the pandemic on these cross-border regions (Medeiros et al., 2021). How-ever, it remains unclear how RWPPs, whose constituents reside in these cross-border regions, have reacted to the pandemic. Exploring their attitude in different cross-border regions can pro-vide insights into how RWPPs approach the multiscalar organisation of Europe and their pol-itical positioning in relation to it.

Research on populism and COVID-19 shows that RWPPs' attitudes can depend on various factors, including government policymaking, their position in government or opposition, and the opportunities and constraints within each political system (Bobba & Hubé, 2021; Mudde, 2020; Walker, 2021). In parallel, one can observe that these parties tend to employ antagonistic rheto-ric, thereby transforming politics into a perpetual electoral campaign (Magri, 2018). Regardless

of whether they are in the ruling government or in opposition, their discursive strategies consistently portray them as defenders of the people. RWPPs have presented border control and closure as a shared solution to protect the 'people' from external threats ranging from mass migration to viruses (Bieber, 2022; Casaglia & Coletti, 2021; Jenne, 2022; Klein, 2020).

Against this backdrop, our inquiry centres on whether RWPPs located in different European cross-border regions, and on different sides of cross-border regions, develop similar multiscalar discourses to address the pandemic.

4. PARTIES, CONTEXTS, HYPOTHESES

To address this question, we focus on six RWPPs whose constituents are located in four different states and cross-border urban regions characterised by major economic interdependences in Western Europe: (1) the National Rally (RN) on the French side of the Greater Geneva, Greater Basel and Greater Luxembourg regions, specifically Ain/Haute-Savoie, Haut-Rhin and Lorraine, respectively; (2) the cantonal branch of the Swiss People's Party (SVP) in the Greater Geneva, Greater Basel and Regio Insubrica regions; (3) the Geneva Citizens' Movement (MCG) on the Swiss side of the Greater Geneva region; (4) the *Lega* in the Italian province of Como (Lombardy) located in the Regio Insubrica; (5) the Ticino League (LdT) in Ticino within the Regio Insubrica; and (6) the Alternative Democratic Reform Party (ADR) in Luxembourg. We have not considered RWPPs located on the German and Belgian sides of the selected cross-border regions because they have limited strength in these areas. Some of these cross-border regions were particularly affected by the initial wave of COVID-19. This includes the French Grand Est region, encompassing Lorraine and Haut-Rhin, where COVID-19 patients were transferred to Luxembourg, as well as the northern provinces of Italy, with the city of Bergamo being the epicentre.

The selection of these parties is based on three additional criteria: diversity in terms of their orientation toward nationalism or regionalism; variation in their spaces of dependency and engagement in terms of networking; and variation in their positions in government or opposition.

- The French NR, the Luxembourg ADR and the Italian *Lega* are national parties, even though the Italian *Lega*'s stronghold is the provinces of the Regio Insubrica, which were once fortresses of the 'old' *Lega Nord* (Albertazzi et al., 2018). The SVP is also a party settled in all Swiss cantons. However, because of Swiss federal arrangements, it grants strong autonomy to its cantonal branches, despite a recent trend of centralisation (Mazzoleni & Rossini, 2016). By contrast, the Swiss MCG and LdT are parties rooted only in the cantons of Geneva and Ticino, respectively, and can be considered regionalist parties. Nevertheless, they do have a certain national reach as well (Bernhard, 2017). Unlike the others, the ADR is not directly associated with European radical right-wing parties. However, it promotes a 'Europe of nations' discourse, supports Viktor Orbán and would belong to the Eurosceptic European Conservatives Reformists Group in the European Parliament if it had MEPs. This political group includes, for instance, the Polish 'Law and Justice' Party (PiS) (Carls, 2023; Lamour & Carls, 2022).
- Regarding the position in government or status as opposition, we know this is an important feature for populist parties in general (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2015), particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Bobba & Hubé, 2021). Considering the four cross-border areas, we encounter a multiplicity of political systems in which the parties could be in government or opposition. At the national level, the parties were in opposition in France, Italy and Luxembourg. In all the regions considered, except for the Italian region of Lombardy, where the *Lega* was in government, the parties were in opposition. In the consensual Swiss system, the SVP participates in the government at the national level and to some extent at the local level. For example, the Basel-County SVP was part of the local government,

while the local branches of the Geneva and Basel-City SVP were in opposition. The LdT and MCG are also part of the local cantonal governments, although they may occasionally play an oppositional role (Bernhard et al., 2021).

Despite these variations, we hypothesise that RWPPs share a convergent discourse that involves opposing an in-group to an out-group. However, we can also expect that these narratives will reveal differences in terms of multiscalar strategies. COVID-19 has affected cross-border functional regions in particular ways. Nevertheless, we anticipate that the discourse of RWPPs during this crisis consists of reproducing pre-existing in- versus out-group narratives to emphasise the securitisation of the bordered regional/national space of the people and to defend it from globalisation (Casaglia & Coletti, 2021). This discourse, in line with the chameleon-like feature of populists (Taggart, 2000), would happen regardless of the parties' position in government or opposition.

5. DATA AND METHODS

Regarding sources, we collected data from 1 January to 31 August 2020, that is, during the initial phases of the pandemic, just before the onset of the second wave. As we aimed to analyse party discourses, we decided to utilise the parties' direct communication as a source. This included official Facebook posts (and re-posts), Tweets (and re-tweets), official website communication and articles from official newspapers (Table 1). We selected texts based on two main criteria: the politicisation of the COVID-19 issue and the direct or indirect reference to the border. By politicisation, we mean the inclusion of COVID-19 in the political debate and the development of contentious narratives around it. Concerning border issues, we considered not only matters related to border control but also broader issues concerning the free movement of people and European integration. In these discourses, therefore, the border is utilised not only as a physical entity but also as a symbolic device that separates 'us' from 'the others'.

The selected texts were coded and analysed with the MAXQDA software. Our main aim in coding was to identify how 'the people' (the in-group) and 'the enemies of the people' (the out-group) were constructed and labelled in the parties' discourse. Additionally, to understand how parties and their representatives use scales to construct their discourse, we coded the scale at which the in- and out-groups were mobilised. Specifically, we considered five scales: bordered region/canton, nation-state, cross-border region, European Union and global. This allowed us to capture subnational, national and supranational scales.

Since our analysis focuses on discourses, the units of analysis are not single words but segments, which correspond to sequences of utterances and sentences, distinct propositions, topics or communicative functions within a text (Upton & Cohen, 2009). Initially, the empirical material was coded inductively to create a codebook, which was refined and improved after a pilot analysis of our data. As the documents were coded by three different coders, we also addressed issues of intercoder reliability (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). To ensure coding coherence, after an initial coding of the material by each research team, 25% of the documents were coded by the other research teams. The results were then discussed among the team members, and the codebook and coding were adapted accordingly.

6. THE DEFINITION OF IN- AND OUT-GROUPS IN DIFFERENT CROSS-BORDER REGIONS

Table 2 displays the percentage of coded segments related to the three most frequently cited in- and out-groups for each RWPP within the four cross-border regions. Concerning the in-group, there is a notable state-bordered regional anchorage for the Geneva SVP and the

Table 1. Number of documents and related sources for each right-wing populist party (RWPP).

		Number of documents (total = 274)	Sources
Greater Geneva	SVP/	59	*Edition spéciale de l'UDC Genève* (party newspaper) (7);
	MCG	*13*	Facebook posts (*UDC Genève*) (52)
			Official website articles (www.mcge.ch) (3); MCG press blog (www.tdg.ch/les-blogs) (7); Facebook posts (*MCG Officiel*) (3)
	RN	24	Tweets (*Rassemblement National – Ain*) (1); Facebook posts (*Groupe Rassemblement National Auvergne Rhône-Alpes*) (21), (*Rassemblement National Haute-Savoie*) (2)
Regio Insubrica	SVP/	22	*Il Paese* (weekly party newspaper)
	LdT	*29*	*Il Mattino della Domenica* (daily party newspaper)
	Lega	36	Facebook posts (*Lega provincial di Como*)
Greater Basel	SVP	9	Tweets (*SVP Basel-Stadt*) (1); Facebook posts (*SVP Baselland*) (8)
	RN	19	Tweets (*Groupe Rassemblement National – Région Grand Est*) (1); Facebook posts (*Rassemblement National Alsace*) (14), (*Groupe Rassemblement National – Région Alsace Champagne-Ardenne Lorraine*) (4)
Greater Luxembourg	ADR	26	Official website articles (www.adr.lu)
	RN	37	Facebook posts (*Engelmann Fabien*) (3), (*Françoise Grolet*) (14), (*Jean-François Jalkh*) (16), (*Rassemblement National 57*) (2), (*Rassemblement National de Meurthe-et-Moselle*) (2)

Note: The MCG and LdT are presented in italics due to the coexistence of both RWPPs in the cantons of Ticino and Geneva.

MCG (*Genevan people*), as well as the SVP and the LdT in the Regio Insubrica cross-border region (*Ticino people*). As a regionalist RWPP, the MCG strongly advocates for the local population (i.e., the *residents* and the *local businesses*), while the LdT, which follows a regionalist–nationalist ideology, focuses not only on the local level but also on the national scale with an emphasis on the *Swiss people* (Mazzoleni & Ruzza, 2018). In the Swiss cross-border region, RWPPs strongly defend the *Swiss people*, particularly the *working population*, often displaying opposition to the free movement of people and cross-border immigration, especially from France and Italy.

The Italian *Lega* primarily focuses on defending the *Italian people*. At the same time, it is the only RWPP, along with the ADR in Luxembourg, to advocate for *cross-border workers* and support keeping the border with Switzerland open during the crisis: 'The government has been inattentive to the needs of cross-border workers. … It must now commit itself to guarantee social protection and unemployment fund for cross-border workers and to reopen the border' (*Lega Provinciale di Como*, Facebook post, 24 April 2020). RWPPs in the French cross-border region mainly defend the *French people* as a national entity. Similarly, the ADR in the greater SaarLor-Lux region primarily supports the *Luxembourgish people* and the *population*. Like the Italian *Lega*, the ADR also defends *cross-border workers* and advocated for keeping the border with Germany open during the crisis. However, the RN of the greater SaarLorLux region presents a counter-intuitive discourse. While the RWPPs in the other cross-border region strongly emphasise regional or national scales when framing in-groups, this branch of the RN focuses on the *European people*, aiming to defend them against the technocracy in Brussels: 'There is a total

Table 2. Three prominent in- and out-groups framed by right-wing populist parties (RWPPs).

		In-groups	% coded segments for each category	Out-groups	% coded segments for each category
Greater Geneva	SVP/*MCG* (total of coded segments = 967)	Working population	28%	Foreign workers	22%
		Genevan people	16%	*Regional government*	20%
		Swiss people	23%	National government	19%
		Residents	16%	*Illegal migrants*	20%
		Genevan people	5%	European Union	5%
		Local businesses	11%	*Cross-border workers*	15%
	RN (total of coded segments = 499)	French people	36%	European Union	24%
		Businesses	13%	National government	16%
		Security forces	8%	Emmanuel Macron	13%
Regio Insubrica	SVP/*LdT* (total of coded segments = 1083)	Swiss people	23%	National government	17%
		Ticino people	33%	*National government*	17%
		Working population	15%	European Union	10%
		Swiss people	22%	*Cross-border workers*	15%
		Ticino people	11%	Cross-border workers	10%
		Working population	12%	*Italy*	6%
	Lega (total of coded segments = 219)	Italian people	22%	National government	42%
		Cross-border workers	20%	Illegal migrants	23%
		Families	8%	European Union	4%
Greater Basel	SVP (total of coded segments = 119)	Working population	30%	National government	15%
		Swiss people	24%	Cross-border workers	15%
		Army	5%	Migrants positive for COVID-19	15%

(*Continued*)

Table 2. Continued.

		In-groups	% coded segments for each category	Out-groups	% coded segments for each category
	RN (total of coded segments = 214)	French people	33%	National government	16%
		Health workers	8%	European Union	13%
		General de Gaulle	8%	Emmanuel Macron	11%
Greater Luxembourg	ADR (total of coded segments = 343)	Luxembourgish people	39%	National government	36%
		Population	12%	European Union	15%
		Cross-border workers	7%	Germany	11%
	RN (total of coded segments = 492)	European people	17%	European Union	33%
		French people	13%	Emmanuel Macron	12%
		Businesses	12%	National government	7%

Note: Data on the MCG and LdT are presented in italics due to the coexistence of both RWPPs in the cantons of Ticino and Geneva.

disconnect of the technocratic elite of Brussels from the real needs of the European people in terms of security, immigration and health protection' (Jean-François Jalkh, RN Lorraine, Facebook post, 14 May 2020).

Regarding out-groups, there is a general trend among RWPPs to frame the *European Union* as an out-group. The EU is portrayed as inadequate in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic and is blamed for signing free trade agreements that ruin national manufacturing (especially in relating to PPE [personal protective equipment]), promoting the free movement of people, and opening state borders during the crisis, which they often associated with neoliberal migration and economic policies. RWPPs in Swiss cross-border regions strongly focus on portraying *cross-border workers* as harmful to the economic and health well-being of the local population. Furthermore, all RWPPs consistently frame the *national government* as an out-group, highlighting its inefficiency in managing border controls, the crisis response, the lack of PPE, and permitting the entry of migrants and the virus. Specifically, they criticise its role in allowing the massive arrival of economic migrants. However, the MCG frames the *regional government* as inefficient at addressing issues related to cross-border workers and illegal migration within the canton: 'The cantonal government is financing illegal work!' (François Baertschi, MCG, Blog post, 25 July 2020).

7. IN- AND OUT-GROUPS IN MULTISCALAR CONTEXTS

Table 2 shows the diverse approaches employed by RWPPs in framing the in- and out-groups during the pandemic crisis. A notable trend can be observed in the framing of the in-groups at the regional and national scales (i.e., the national and regional communities), with the

national one remaining dominant, while the out-groups are predominantly framed around the national scale (i.e., *national government*) and abroad, that is, the EU and global scales (*European Union*, *foreign workers*, *illegal migrants*). To provide a more detailed analysis of the RWPPs' scales of the discourse, Table 3 presents the distribution of scales for the totality of in- and out-groups.

The most mobilised scale is the *national* one, which expresses the necessity of closing national borders during the crisis. In this context, the *European* and *global* scales are also mobilised, indicating the importance of scales that extend beyond the regional and national dimensions when framing in- and out-groups. With respect to the *global* scale, the discourse typically revolves around economic globalisation and the dependence on China: 'A president should not jeopardize the national economy even though he opened his arms to swelling globalization, and generating a total dependence on China, because, for profit, anything goes!' (RN Grand Est, Twitter, 18 March 2020). The discourse considering the *European* scale typically revolves around the management of PPE and border controls by the European Union: 'What does the EU deserve for not lowering the production's prices of vital equipment?' (Françoise Grolet, RN Lorraine, Facebook post, 17 April 2020).

An exception to the relevance of the national scale is observed with the MCG and the LdT, both of which have a strong regional anchorage. As a regionalist RWPP, the MCG mainly frames in- and out-groups within the *border region/canton* scale, while the LdT strongly focuses on the *cross-border region* and *border region/canton* scales. The MCG champions the protection of the Genevan people against the free movement of people and cross-border workers: 'We are in an ideology of completely free movement. … It is a reality, there is wage dumping. … We need to protect the Genevan people with a real protection!' (MCG, Facebook post, 20 August 2020). By contrast, the LdT places significant emphasis on defending the people of Ticino against cross-border workers, citing both health and economic concerns. Cross-border workers are viewed as 'importers' of COVID-19 and being responsible for exacerbating the economic crisis and unemployment rate: 'First comes the sacred free movement of people and the interests of those who hire cross-border workers instead of Ticino people!' (Lorenzo Quadri, LdT, Party organ, 29 March 2020).

Table 3. Percentage of scales' distribution for the totality of in- and out-groups.

			Scales (% distribution for the totality of in- and out-groups)					
			Border region/ canton	Cross-border region	Nation-state	European Union	Global	Total
Greater Geneva	SVP/MCG	SVP	11%	7%	40%	30%	12%	100%
		MCG	46%	16%	1%	10%	27%	100%
	RN		–	–	45%	27%	28%	100%
Regio Insubrica	SVP/LdT	SVP	18%	12%	29%	22%	19%	100%
		LdT	27%	30%	14%	19%	10%	100%
	LN		17%	11%	34%	10%	28%	100%
Greater Basel	SVP		–	9%	47%	20%	23%	100%
	RN		9%	1%	39%	19%	32%	100%
Greater	ADR		–	16%	51%	20%	13%	100%
Luxembourg	RN		3%	1%	37%	35%	24%	100%

As each segment of text can encompass one, two or even more scales, it is possible to observe the interplay between different scales. Table 4 presents the most prevalent scale for each RWPP in the different cross-border regions and the intersections between the most frequently used scale and other scales. As shown in Table 3, some parties predominantly adopt a nation-state scale, while others, with regionalist orientations, mainly focus on subnational scales.

Three main models of multiscaling interplay configurations can be identified among the selected parties (Table 5). First, all cases present a multiscaling interplay that ranges from the local to the global level. In the case of the MCG, there is a notable overlap between the predominant scale of *border region/canton* and the *cross-border region* and *global* ones. This implies a strong defence of in-groups based on the *border region/canton* scale, as opposed to cross-border workers and global threats such as illegal migrants and foreign workers: 'It is evident that a stronger control of cross-border worker permits is necessary for the Genevan people to find a job' (MCG, Official release, 6 July 2020).

Regarding the LdT, there is a strong intersection between the most prevalent scales of *cross-border region*, the *border region/canton* and the *national* scale. As on other occasions, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the LdT discourse primarily focused on protecting the people of Ticino against cross-border workers, encompassing both national and supranational scales. The national government is blamed for not closing the border during the pandemic and allowing the free movement of people mandated by the European Union: 'Leaving the borders open allowed the infection of Ticino!' (Lorenzo Quadri, Party organ, 15 March 2020).

To a lesser extent, this is also true for the Geneva and Ticino branches of the SVP, where the RWPP discourse revolves around the *national* scale as the predominant factor, while also considering the *border region/canton* and *cross-border region* scales. This disparity could be attributed to the centralisation of the SVP (Favero, 2021; Mazzoleni & Rossini, 2016), in contrast to the regional affiliations of the MCG and the LdT. The Ticino SVP also criticises cross-border workers, viewing them as threats to the health and economic well-being of the canton during the pandemic: 'The free movement of people hurts employment in Ticino. Cheaper cross-border workers have increasingly replaced resident workers' (Roberta Soldati–Lara Filippini, SVP Ticino, Party organ, 15 May 2020). Furthermore, they mobilise the *European* and *global* scales to defend the Swiss population against the perils of the free movement of people, illegal migration and foreign workers: 'We believe that indigenous labor should be favored rather than being a storm drain for EU unemployment' (Céline Amaudruz, Geneva SVP, party organ, 31 August 2020).

Then there is the case of the Basel SVP and the ADR. While the *national* scale predominates, with extensive connections to the *European* and *global* scales, the *cross-border region* scale is substantially engaged. It is worth noting that these two parties mobilise the *cross-border region* scale without emphasising the *border region/canton* scale. On the one hand, the ADR advocates for the rights of Luxembourgish cross-border workers employed in Germany during the pandemic: 'Luxembourgish people working in Germany were particularly affected as a work ban has been declared. How does the government intend to help these people?' (Fernand Kartheiser, ADR official website, 15 July 2020). On the other hand, cross-border workers in Basel are not criticised for being harmful specifically to the canton but rather to Switzerland as a whole: 'Migrants and cross-border workers are cheaper. It leads to more unemployment and difficulties for the young people. … It's not possible that cheap labour is displacing our people here in Switzerland and depressing wages' (SVP Baselland, Facebook post, 27 August 2020).

These parties also strongly engage with the *global* scale regarding health and economic issues: 'Fanatics of the free movement of people could hardly wait to open the borders again. As a result, infected people are entering Switzerland, and we risk a second wave!' (SVP Baselland, Facebook post, 26 June 2020).

Table 4. Intersection between the most frequently used and the other scales.

			Most prevalent scale	Intersection between the most prevalent and other scales (% distribution for each scale)					
				Border region/ canton	Cross-border region	Nation-state	European Union	Global	Total
Greater Geneva	SVP/	SVP	Nation-state	10%	9%		55%	26%	100%
	MCG	MCG	Border region/canton		33%	5%	19%	43%	100%
	RN		Nation-state	–	–		45%	55%	100%
Regio Insubrica	SVP/LdT	SVP	Nation-state	6%	13%		25%	56%	100%
		LdT	Cross-border region	52%		25%	20%	3%	100%
	Lega		Nation-state	19%	26%		10%	45%	100%
Greater Basel	SVP		Nation-state	–	17%		33%	50%	100%
	RN		Nation-state	–	–		32%	68%	100%
Greater	ADR		Nation-state	–	38%		28%	34%	100%
Luxembourg	RN		Nation-state	3%	3%		47%	47%	100%

Note: The major scale denotes the scale with the highest percentage of distribution in Table 3.

Table 5. Three models of multiscaling interplay configurations

Model	Characteristics	Parties
1	Focus on the border region/canton and cross-border scales	MCG, LdT, Geneva SVP, Ticino SVP
2	Focus on the national scale and, to some extent, on the cross-border scale	Basel SVP, ADR
3	Focus on the national scale	RN

And in the French case (RN in all cross-border regions), there is an interplay between the *national* scale as the predominant one and the *European* and *global* scales. This can be attributed to the characteristics of the party: The RN is a national party where local branches have limited autonomy in shaping their political programme (Crépon et al., 2015). In this context, the figure of Marine Le Pen remains central and influential in the party's discourse. Consequently, the RN typically emphasises issues relating to the detrimental effects of economic globalisation and the necessity to control borders to contain the COVID-19 disease: 'My dear fellows, COVID-19 highlighted the vulnerability in which the submission of our government to the logic of fierce globalisation placed our country' (RN Haut-Rhin, Facebook post, 16 June 2020).

These examples illustrate the importance of understanding the nuances of scales when RWPPs frame in- and out-groups. It is evident that the RWPPs' discourses are not confined to one scale and not necessarily limited to the nation-state. Against this backdrop, the multiscaling interplay between various scales enables RWPPs to frame in- and out-groups at different levels depending on the specific political issues they wish to focus on. Furthermore, the three-type model of multiscaling interplay configurations aims to show how RWPPs' discourses vary across different regions and how certain overarching tendencies may emerge concerning the role of national borders.

8. DISCUSSION

As expected, our analysis reveals significant variation in scalar strategies. Each party frames multiple kinds of in- and out-groups in distinct ways that appear to be influenced by both contextual factors and the party's ideological orientation (i.e., whether the party is more oriented toward nationalism or regionalism) but less by the party's position within the government system. The populist discourse frames a diverse set of in- and out-groups, as the in-group might refer to different peoples and elites at local, regional, national, or transnational levels. However, as we saw, the trends in the cross-border West European regions studied in this article allow us to identify three models of interplay configurations. Each of them relates to the parties' ideological stances, as well as their organisational patterns and the regional context in which they operate. The party's position in government or opposition seems to have less relevance in certain contexts. Although the COVID-19 pandemic marked a turning point in the history of European integration, with lockdown measures abruptly reducing cross-border mobility, the discursive strategies employed by RWPPs, as expressions of their space of engagement, reflect a regional path-dependency tied to either a strong or rather weak legacy of regionalism (Keating & Wilson, 2014).

For instance, the populist discourse of the French NR shows that the regional space of dependency in which local parties operate is irrelevant when it comes to the framing scale of the people. The party's focus on strengthening border controls is not primarily aimed at protecting the people located in the regions where NR politicians articulate their discourse. Instead, the

emphasis is on challenging the multiscalar structure of a neoliberal and multilateral Europe, involving the *national* and the *European* and *global* scales, in the pursuit of national sovereignty.

Despite their distinct historical backgrounds, political parties based in Ticino, northern Italy, and Geneva tend to capitalise on the opportunities provided by regional institutions, which can 'lock in' social and economic interests. For instance, Ticino represents a functional regional space of dependence with an employment basin that spans the Swiss–Italian state border, aligning well with its administrative boundary (OFS, 2019). This position has fostered a strong territorial identity, as Ticino is the only Italian-speaking canton situated in the southern part of Switzerland. Consequently, a centre–periphery cleavage has emerged (Mazzoleni, 2005). Similarly, Geneva embodies a region with relatively robust regionalism. As a Swiss canton, Geneva has strong institutions that safeguard social and economic interests, and it possesses a distinct cantonal territorial identity. However, its cantonal identity is less cohesive than that of Ticino, as Geneva is the main centre of a wide, urban, inter-cantonal region that also encompasses the canton of Vaud (Poschet et al., 2001). This dynamic limits the opportunities for regionalist movements to gain traction with the cantonal electorate (Bernhard, 2017).

The northern Italian region has a complex set of institutional arrangements, accompanied by a modest yet persistent regionalism. The devolution process that took place in the 1990s and 2000s resulted in Italian regional authorities becoming major beneficiaries of the redistribution of central state power in Europe (Piattoni & Brunazzo, 2011). At the same time, northern Italy is the most dynamic region in terms of economic growth and is more internationalised than central and southern Italy. Since the 1990s, these factors have facilitated the rise of radical right-wing and regionalist populist discourses that emphasise contrasts with the centre (Biorcio, 2016; Giordano, 1999).

Finally, the SVP Basel and the ADR in Luxembourg pursue strategies based on national sovereignty and do not articulate a regionalist discourse (Lamour & Carls, 2022). The case of Luxembourg can be regarded as a manifestation of populism in cosmopolitan microstates that rely on cross-border regional integration (Carls, 2023). In this scenario, the primary concern is not merely the defence of a specific cross-border in-group but rather the contribution of that group to the country's healthcare system. A corresponding complaint is that a foreign nation-state (i.e., Germany) prevents the crossing of the border at the regional scale. The ADR does not receive support from cross-border workers but opposes the actions of a European nation-state that unilaterally decides to prevent the residents of Luxembourg from entering its territory and disrupts the vital flow of cross-border workers who contribute to the economy of the Grand Duchy and serve Luxembourg voters.

9. CONCLUSIONS

RWPPs, known for their demand to restore national borders in response to globalisation and supranational powers such as the EU, are often seen as champions of nationalism at the nation or state level, at least where state and nation coincide. They actively promote the reinstatement of national sovereignty as a countermeasure against the waning importance of the national scale. As a result, RWPPs are usually regarded as defenders of in-groups at the national level against out-groups at the supranational level, even in federal states like Switzerland. Consequently, RWPPs oppose territorial rescaling driven by institutional, functional, and identity-related processes, including economic integration, urban/regional developments, and new or changing subnational and supranational institutional arrangements (Brenner, 2019; Keating, 2021).

This paper shows it is crucial to seriously consider multiscalar environments in which RWPPs mobilise and spread their discourse to understand how populism deals with scales. Populism can be understood as both an ideology and a discursive strategy. Although RWPPs demand the restoration of national sovereignty, they have to strategically adapt their message in order to succeed

in political competition. Populist discourse has to deal with a multiscalar environment characterised by different institutional arrangements, functional dynamics, and regional identities. Therefore, a specific focus on populist discourse allows us to seriously explore the notion of scale, particularly the interplay between subnational, national, and supranational scales. As scales are both symbolic and material constructs, they are not fixed entities but rather relational ones: Scales are areas of competition and mobilisation, as well as components of discursive strategies. Our contribution also shows the importance of linking the analysis of right-wing populist discourse with Cox's approach, which distinguishes between the 'space of dependence' (i.e., 'place-specific conditions') and the 'space of engagement', which is characterised by a more flexible interplay between the local and global scale (Cox, 1998, p. 2).

To support this argument, our contribution focused on the discursive strategies employed by 10 RWPPs competing in four cross-border regions during the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 crisis presented an intriguing moment characterised by a combination of local, national and European concerns and giving rise to multiscalar border controversies. In some cases, RWPPs contested European integration while advocating for open borders in cross-border regions. For instance, the SVP branch in Basel and the ADR in Luxembourg did not oppose cross-border workers in their respective borderlands. By contrast, the NR positioned the nation-state as the scale for resolving the crisis, with border control as a means to safeguard national sovereignty.

The analysis underlined significant cross-sectional trends related to political parties based in border regions. As expected, parties espousing a nationalist ideology emphasised the dominance of the national scale, although its influence was not exclusive. These parties recognised the relevance of subnational and cross-border scales, which played a role in combination with the national scale. The tension between the national and supranational scales is crucial but varies among parties. The salience of the national and supranational scales strongly depends on the relevance of regionalism and the prominence of the cross-border scale, which reflects the importance of the regional space of dependency. Moreover, parties with a prominent regionalist ideology viewed national borders as symbols of protection against the risks associated with cross-border or supranational integration. In summary, the analysis demonstrates that RWPPs do not simply oppose the relativisation of the nation-state, as their discursive strategies require a certain degree of multiscalar engagement.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

FUNDING

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