CARR CENTER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS POLICY
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Introduction

Right-wing populist movements, which incorporate right-wing political theory and populist modalities, have become increasingly prominent and mainstream over the past decade, both in the Global North and Global South.[1,2,3,4] European far-right populism shares many commonalities with other regional populist movements, but also has its own set of distinct methods, risks, and uncertainties. This discussion paper will outline the unique characteristics of European far-right populist movements, the ways in which countries' 20th century histories have influenced current day populist politics, and the online and offline organizational strategies that have helped right-wing movements influence the successes of right-wing political parties in recent years. It will also examine the rise of Germany's far-right populist movement and the social factors that may have led to it.

The populist right is well-suited to employ nonviolent demonstrations and online organization as a means of conveying messages and rallying support. Right-wing populist movements privilege "the people," who position themselves in opposition to mainstream "elite" politicians and their protracted legislative processes, which are interpreted as privileging the interests of "elites." Rallying support in the street allows populist groups to bypass these processes and take direct action. By speaking at protest events, charismatic populist leaders are able to spread their message and further galvanize crowds. These factors have propelled many right-wing movements to what may be called a protest cascade, whereby protest entrepreneurs and leaders initiate demonstrations, which grow in scale until thousands of more moderate supporters join and propel the movement forward. Seeming progress in one country then inspires and motivates right-wing movements elsewhere to emulate them.[5]

Characteristics of 21st Century European Populism

Right-wing populism, or right-wing nationalism, is distinct in its combination of conservative and reactionary right-wing ideas with populist ideology, which positions "the people" against elites, intellectuals, and outsiders. For European right-wing populists, "the people" typically refers to white Christian Europeans with traditional values. European right-wing populism is distinctly xenophobic, Islamophobic, and Eurosceptic, opposing neoliberal institutions like the European Union, which is perceived to infringe on national and individual sovereignty.[6] The rise of right-wing populist movements is strongly correlated with and viewed as a reaction to the European Debt Crisis and so-called Refugee Crisis, when Southern European states experienced a five-fold temporary annual increase of refugees seeking asylum, 80% of whom were fleeing conflicts in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. [7,8]

Populist parties and movements are typically led by charismatic leaders, and in Europe, those leaders and the parties they represent have experienced rapid electoral success over the past decade. Matteo Salvini of Italy, Marine Le Pen of France, Jimmie Akesson of Sweden, Victor Orban of Hungary, and Janez Hansa of Slovenia are examples of prominent right-wing populist elected officials who have risen to prominence over the last five years.[9]

[1] Cammaerts, Bart. "The Mainstreaming of Extreme Right-Wing Populism in the Low Countries: What Is to Be Done?" *Communication, Culture and Critique*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2018, pp. 7–20., doi:10.1093/ccc/tcx002.

[2] Brown, Katy, and Aurelien Mondon. "Populism, the Media, and the Mainstreaming of the Far Right: The Guardian's Coverage of Populism as a Case Study." *Politics*, 2020, p. 026339572095503., doi:10.1177/0263395720955036.

[3] Royandoyan, Ramon, and Mario Braga. "Right-Wing Populism Outside the Global North." *Political Research Associates*, 10 July 2020, www.politicalresearch.org/2020/07/09/right-wing-populism-outside-global-north

[4] "Right-Wing Populism." *European Center for Populism Studies*, 28 Dec. 2020, www.populismstudies.org/Vocabulary/right-wing-populism/

[5] Hussain, Muzammil M., and Philip N. Howard. "What Best Explains Successful Protest Cascades? ICTs and the Fuzzy Causes of the Arab Spring." *International Studies Review*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2013, pp. 48–66., doi:10.1111/misr.12020.

[6] Kende, Anna, and Péter Krekó. "Xenophobia, Prejudice, and Right-Wing Populism in East-Central Europe." Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences, vol. 34, 2020, pp. 29–33., doi:10.1016/j.cobeha.2019.11.011.

[7] "Why Is EU Struggling with Migrants and Asylum?" *BBC News*, BBC, 3 Mar. 2016, www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-24583286.

[8] Kneuer, Marianne. "The Tandem of Populism and Euroscepticism: a Comparative Perspective in the Light of the European Crises." *Contemporary Social Science*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2018, pp. 26–42., doi:10.1080/21582041.2018.1426874.

[9] "Europe and Right-Wing Nationalism: A Country-by-Country Guide." *BBC News*, BBC, 13 Nov. 2019, www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-36130006.

PEGIDA: A German Right-Wing Populist Movement

Nonviolent demonstrations are a key strategy of European right-wing populists, as they can garner media attention, mobilize support for far-right parties and leaders, and serve as a visible recruiting mechanism. For example, Germany's PEGIDA (Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes, or Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the Occident) movement originated with a handful of protesters demonstrating in the streets of Dresden each Monday in late 2014 and evolved into a gathering of 25,000 weekly protesters in January 2015.[10,11] The initial demonstrations opposed a Dresden city plan to build housing for refugees and ballooned into a far-right movement against mainstream media, Angela Merkel, asylum seekers, and the European Union. PEGIDA is an interesting case, as many assumed that, due to Germany's Nazi past and subsequent educational efforts, Germany would be the last place where a popular right-wing movement might emerge. PEGIDA's sudden success proved otherwise.

The PEGIDA movement lost steam in mid-2015, but Germany's most prominent right-wing party, Alternative for Germany (AfD), has only increased in popularity and extremism since its origins in 2013.[12] AfD is not Germany's first or only far-right political party, but it has become the most popular, perhaps providing an outlet for people who participated in earlier populist mobilization. Despite distancing itself from PEGIDA early on, many leading AfD politicians have participated in PEGIDA events and other far-right rallies over the past three years, including Björn Höcke, Andreas Kalbitz, and Jörg Urban.[13]

Ideological and Economic Divides in East vs. West Germany

The AfD is most popular in formerly socialist East Germany. Likewise, PEGIDA protests centered in the eastern city of Dresden, where small weekly PEGIDA demonstrations continue to this day. Germany's division from 1945-1989 makes it a unique case study to examine differing attitudes toward right-wing populism in areas formerly controlled by the Soviet Union compared to areas controlled by democratic Western European powers.

The Washington Post's 2014 analysis of data provided by the German Statistical Office reveals that formerly-East Germany is not only the most right-leaning region of Germany, but as of 2011, it also had the lowest population of migrants and foreigners and the least amount of disposable income in Germany. In 2013, this region also had the highest unemployment rates in Germany.[14] These data, in addition to reports of PEGIDA protests peaking at the height of the 2015 Refugee Crisis, suggest a correlation among economic disenfranchisement, perceived increases in asylum-seeking immigration, and increased support for xenophobic far-right ideologies.

Recruiting and Radicalizing Right-wing Populists

Though often presented as natural or even reasonable, there is no self-explanatory reason for this immigration-driven demographic shift in East Germany to cause increased nationalism and xenophobia. Social psychologist and self-described political centrist Jonathan Haidt argues that:

> "People don't hate others just because they have darker skin or differently shaped noses; they hate people whom they perceive as having values that are incompatible with their own, or who (they believe) engage in behaviors they find abhorrent, or whom they perceive to be a threat to something they hold dear."[15]

The myth of incompatible values between nationalists and immigrants is amplified by right-wing populist leaders like AfD lawmaker Beatrix von Storch, who said in 2016:

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[10] Staff, SPIEGEL. "Anti-Muslim PEGIDA Movement Rattles Germany." *DER SPIEGEL*, DER SPIEGEL, 21 Dec. 2014, www.spiegel.de/international/germany/anti-muslim-pegida-movement-rattles-germany-a-1009245.html.

[11] "Thousands Gather in Dresden for Anniversary of Pegida Movement." The Guardian, Guardian News and Media, 19 Oct. 2015, www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/19/thousands-gather-dresden-anniversary-pegida-movement.

[12] Volk, Sabine. "'Pegida' Turns Three: What Is the State of Right-Wing Populism in Europe?" *The Natolin Blog - Widen Your Perspective on Europe*, 23 Nov. 2017, natolinblog.com/2017/11/pegida-turns-three-state-right-wing-populism-europe/.

[13] Weisskircher, Manès. "PEGIDA Turns 4 – Will AfD Be among the Well-Wishers?" *OpenDemocracy*, 16 Oct. 2018, www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it-pegida-turns-4-will-afd-be-among-well-wishers/.

[14] Noack, Rick. "The Berlin Wall Fell 25 Years Ago, but Germany Is Still Divided." *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 2 May 2019, www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2014/10/31/the-berlin-wall-fell-25-years-ago-but-germany-is-still-divided/.

[15] Haidt, Jonathan. "When and Why Nationalism Beats Globalism." *The American Interest*, 8 Aug. 2017, www.the-american-interest.com/2016/07/10/when-and-why-nationalism-beats-globalism/.

"people who won't accept 'stop' at our borders are attackers, and we have to defend ourselves against attackers."[16] Another AfD leader, Frauke Petry, publicly stated, "German border police should shoot at refugees trying to enter the country illegally."[17]

Other right-wing populist leaders have made countless similar racist, xenophobic, and Islamophobic comments in interviews and speeches. It seems clear that the rise in popularity of right-wing populist parties and far-right ideologies has more to do with its leaders perpetuating anti-immigrant ideas than the rise in immigration itself. Many Europeans are searching for something upon which to blame Europe's economic challenges, and right-wing populist leaders have a simple answer, however misguided and factually incorrect it may be.

Social media is also an incredibly effective tool for recruiting, radicalizing, and mobilizing members for mass movements.[18,19,20,21] Facebook not only allows groups to share information and coordinate logistics, but also provides a platform for transnational disinformation campaigns to sponsor targeted content that can achieve political goals. For example, in 2018, a sponsored anti-immigrant video called "Time to Shake Up Brussels!" was circulated among Facebook users in Greece, or users who had recently visited Greece. "It depicted images

of violence, painted refugees and Muslims as a threat to the continent, and laid blame with a Belgian politician who has consistently been seen by both his supporters and his critics as a proponent of migration and liberalism," said a reporter from The Atlantic who had seen the ad in his news feed.[22] The video was captioned and narrated in English and sponsored by the Hungarian government, and as of June 2021 it has captured over 9.2 million views—a reach that would not have been possible without a platform like Facebook.[23]

Those who post and perpetuate more radical content that violates Facebook's community guidelines have found a safe haven in encrypted messaging apps like Telegram.[24] Initially, Telegram was designed to help pro-democracy organizers, but its lax guidelines have allowed right-wing extremists to thrive and multiply on the platform. A 2020 Wiesenthal report found that "far-right channels on Telegram glorify terrorist actors and movements, including murderers of Jews and Muslims at prayer... [and] this content leads to incitement and inspires lone wolf violence."[25] More highly regulated apps, like Facebook, often serve as an entry point for right-wing populists, and messaging apps like Telegram are available for more radicalized followers to share information and disinformation with one another.

[16] Breitenbach, Dagmar. 2018. "AfD leaders and their most offensive remarks." *Deutsche Welle*. 4 June 2018. https://www.dw.com/overlay/media/en/afd-leaders-and-theirmost-offensive-remarks/37651099/40610988

[17] Beale, Charlotte. "Refugees Should Be Shot 'If Necessary', Says Party Leader in Germany." *The Independent*, Independent Digital News and Media, 1 Feb. 2016, www.independent.co.uk/news/world/german-police-should-shoot-refugees-says-german-party-leader-a6844611.html.

[18] Winter, Aaron. "Online Hate: From the Far-Right to the 'Alt-Right' and from the Margins to the Mainstream." *Online Othering*, 2019, pp. 39–63., doi:10.1007/978-3-030-12633-9_2.

[19] Archetti, C. (2015). Terrorism, Communication and New Media: Explaining Radicalization in the Digital Age. Perspectives on Terrorism, 9(1). Retrieved from http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/401

[20] Cohen, K., Johansson, F., Kaati, L., & Mork, J. C. (2014). Detecting Linguistic Markers for Radical Violence in Social Media. Terrorism and Political Violence, 26(1), 246–256. https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2014.849948

[21] Farwell, J. P. (2014). The Media Strategy of ISIS. Survival, 56(6), 49–55. https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2014.985436

[22] Baboulias, Yiannis. "Europe's Far-Right Leaders Are Using Facebook to Transcend Borders." *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 23 May 2019, www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/05/europe-far-right-facebook-spread-disinfo/589879/.

[23] Facebook. Magyarország Kormánya. Video titled "Time to shake up Brussels!" Facebook, 13 October 2018, https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1724947814301363. Accessed 14 June 2021.

[24] Squire, Megan, and Hannah Gais. "How an Encrypted Messaging Platform Is Changing Extremist Movements." *Southern Poverty Law Center*, 16 Feb. 2021, www.splcenter.org/news/2021/02/16/how-encrypted-messaging-platform-changing-extremist-movements.

[25] "Telegram: The Online Weapon of Choice for Violent Far-Right ." *Simon Wiesenthal Center* , 14 July 2020, www.wiesenthal.com/about/news/telegram-1.html.

The long-term goal should be to educate people on how to safely use social media and interpret news sources.

Economic Origins of Populism in the Former East Germany

In the case of Germany, there is a clear regional economic and political division between the political right and left. After the Soviet Union-backed East German regime abruptly dissolved in 1989, other states behind the Iron Curtain also began opening and liberalizing. The US and most Western European allies adhered to transition theory, the belief that former Soviet states would naturally progress to liberal democracy and capitalism.[26] This transition toward market liberalization has been slow and arduous, and has taken on differing characteristics in each nation. According to economists Daniel Münich and Jan Svejnar, the transformation has been particularly challenging for East Germany:

> "The eastern part of Germany appears to be a special case because the merger of East and West Germany was accompanied by a rapidly rising labor cost and very active labor market policies in the East. This in turn resulted in dramatically rising inflows and greater hysteresis in the East German economy."[27]

Inflow rates and market conditions vary before and after liberalization, but the transition has not been smooth for any Eastern European country. Political scientists Stephen Holmes and Ivan Krastev argue that the rise of right-wing populism in former socialist republics is a direct reaction to this failed promise of liberalization and integration with the West.[28]

Soviet-era socialism failed in 1989 and globalization is failing many people today; far-right nationalism models itself as the antithesis of both.

The Effects of European Right-Wing Populist Movements

How effective have right-wing populist movements been in attracting broader support and helping right-wing populist parties win key electoral victories? In Europe, these protest-driven right-wing populist movements carry unique risks and uncertainties to liberal democracies. We are only beginning to observe the realization of these risks. For one, there is considerable uncertainty associated with electoral successes of right-wing populist movements. For decades, these movements have positioned themselves against those in power, and this positioning has, in part, increased their popularity in the streets and on social media. However, in some regions, formalized right-wing populist parties are gaining dominance.

For example, Brothers of Italy and Lega are currently the two most popular parties in Italy. Both are right-wing populist parties, and polls show that both parties combined shared 41% of public support.[29] Finland's Finn party, described commonly as an "extreme-right" populist movement, is predicted to win the votes of 22% of constituents in the next parliamentary election—the largest predicted share of votes.[30,31] Belgium's anti-immigrant Flemish Interest Party is leading polls by an

[26] Papava, Vladimer. "On the Theory of Post-Communist Economic Transition to Market." *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 1 Jan. 2005, doi:10.2139/ssrn.2181867.

[27] Münich, Daniel, and Jan Svejnar. "Unemployment in East and West Europe." *University of Michigan Library*, University of Michigan, Apr. 2007, deepblue.lib.umich.edu/bitstream/handle/2027.42/51562/Labour%2004-13-07_whole.pdf;sequence=1.

[28] Krastev, Ivan, and Stephen Holmes. *The Light That Failed: Why the West Is Losing the Fight for Democracy*. Pegasus Books, 2019.

[29] "POLITICO Poll of Polls - Italian Polls, Trends and Election News for Italy." POLITICO, 12 June 2021, www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/italy/.

[30] Dite, Chris. "The Resistible Rise of the Finns Party." Jacobin, 13 Feb. 2020, jacobinmag.com/2020/02/finland-election-finns-party-far-right/.

[31] "POLITICO Poll of Polls - Finnish Polls, Trends and Election News for Finland." POLITICO, 13 June 2021, www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/finland/.

even wider margin, with candidates expected to win 25% of parliamentary seats in upcoming elections.[32][33] Spain's far-right nationalist Vox party, which originated in 2018, won 9.1% of regional electoral votes in 2021 (up from 8.9% in 2019). [34]

This is only a small sampling of the many right-wing populist electoral successes in Europe. Since these parliamentary wins are so recent, we have yet to see whether populists' messaging and strategies will change. As they become the establishment, it is to be determined whether protesting the establishment will remain a facet of the right-wing populist's toolkit.

One trap avoided by the initial proponents who laid the groundwork for today's right-wing nationalist movements and political parties was their association with Europe's right-wing authoritarian past—particularly in countries like Spain, Italy, and Germany. However, through successful mainstreaming of right-wing nationalist ideologies, particularly by weaponizing perceived disenfranchisement stemming from the recent economic, migration, and COVID crises, negative association with past injustices and modern-day extremists does not seem to be of great concern to today's right-wing populists.

The messaging of these movements can appeal to economically disenfranchised moderates and far-right neo-Nazis alike. The participation of these far-right fringe figures can tarnish the reputation of a populist movement and disincentivize collaboration from other parties and movements. On the other hand, if the broader movement does not reject these figures, their participation can lead to the normalization of far-right views, which can validate and perpetuate racist, xenophobic, and even violent ideas and acts.[35]

When photos were leaked of PEGIDA's founder, Lutz Bachmann, dressed as Adolf Hitler, his organization forced him to step down. However, he was later reinstated, and he continues to use Nazi slogans and call for his political opponents to be killed in speeches at Dresden's weekly PEGIDA rallies.[36] Though Bachmann was initially viewed as a liability, PEGIDA's decision to reinstate him as their leader (and AfD leaders' participation in PEGIDA rallies afterwards) shows that extremist views are becoming increasingly mainstream in right-wing populist circles.

One final uncertainty for right-wing populist demonstrators is the possibility that their demonstrations elevate counter-protesters more than they elevate right-wing messages. In February 2015, the UK held its first anti-Islam PEGIDA rally in Newcastle, England. Police reported that the 375 PEGIDA protesters were overshadowed by the 2,000 Newcastle Unites counter-protesters who attended.[37] This is not an uncommon occurrence for right-wing demonstrations, particularly in left-leaning cities. A 2017 far-right "Free Speech Rally" in Boston was reportedly attended by a few dozen far-right protesters, who were vastly outnumbered by the fifteen thousand counter-protesters who attended.

> **Regulating political leaders online will help decrease the spread of misinformation and dangerous speech.**

[32] "POLITICO Poll of Polls - Belgian Polls, Trends and Election News for Belgium." POLITICO, 13 June 2021, www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/belgium/.

[33] Barker, Laura. "Immigration and Belgium's Far-Right Parties." Migrationpolicy.org, 12 June 2007, www.migrationpolicy.org/article/immigration-and-belgiums-far-right-parties.

[34] "POLITICO Poll of Polls - Spanish Polls, Trends and Election News for Spain." POLITICO, 2021, www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/spain/.

[35] "German Society 'Brutalised' as Far-Right Crimes Hit Record Levels." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 4 May 2021, www.theguardian.com/world/2021/may/04/rightwing-extremism-germany-stability-interior-minister-says.

[36] "German Police Investigating Far-Right PEGIDA Leader for Incitement to Violence." DW.COM, 9 Oct. 2019, www.dw.com/en/german-police-investigating-far-right-pegida-leader-for-incitement-to-violence/a-50760818.

[37] "Newcastle Pegida Marchers Vastly Outnumbered by Counter-Protests." The Guardian, Guardian News and Media, 28 Feb. 2015, www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/28/newcastle-pegida-marchers-vastly-outnumbered-by-counter-protests.

Call to Action

Right-wing populist movements often combine centrist preferences for libertarianism and liberalization with intolerant and often dangerous social policies. We must differentiate the two and enact zero-tolerance policies for individuals and groups that perpetuate hate. The community-building and information-sharing capacities of Facebook and other social media apps can be extremely beneficial, but these limited fact-checking mechanisms of these platforms can allow for the rapid spread of misinformation and hateful ideas. Far-right leaders use these platforms to gain the support of those with existing right-wing sympathies, a radicalization process which can lead to real-world extremism and violence.

Moving forward, it will be crucial to regulate social media platforms in a way that not only bans hate speech, but also dangerous speech, something said by a leader or influencer that increases the likelihood of mass violence.[38] The spread of dangerous speech and disinformation is not a problem that is unique to the right, but right-wing leaders seem to have weaponized it most effectively. Two of Italy's high-ranking populist leaders, Matteo Salvini and Luigi Di Maio, have credited Facebook with promoting their divisive videos and livestreams—a strategy which massively expanded their audience and allowed them to bypass media regulations.[39] Regulating political leaders online will help decrease the spread of misinformation and dangerous speech.

The rapidly evolving social media landscape does not lend itself to regulation. Even with improved content moderation on major platforms, there will always be new, more niche apps where extremists can share information. The Carnegie Endowment argues that the long-term goal should be to educate people on how to safely use social media and interpret news sources.[40] Improving digital literacy will require a larger overhaul of education systems worldwide, so it will necessitate a long-term and ever-changing solution to an ever-evolving issue.

Effective counter-mobilization may also continue to play an important role in the moderation of right-wing populist movements. As we have seen in Boston, Newcastle, and elsewhere, counter-protests help show solidarity against far-right movements and ideas. Anti-PEGIDA protests in Germany have also helped unite parties that typically differ ideologically, as they have attracted the participation and collaboration of moderate conservatives and far-leftists alike.[41]

However, counter-mobilization also poses risks for left-wing demonstrators. In the US context, Dr. Lesley Wood's analysis of 64 protests where counter-protests occurred showed that 8% of demonstrators arrested by police were politically right-leaning, while 81% of those arrested were left-leaning. Wood also found that "events with counter-protests are more likely to be violent."[42] In Europe, there have also been allegations of police officers sympathizing with far-right movements, including multiple widely-publicized cases of German officers expressing far-right sympathies. A Dresden combined PEGIDA and AfD rally in 2018 sparked outrage when an off-duty police officer attending the rally called the police to register a complaint against a film crew from a public broadcasting station. The police detained the reporters for 45 minutes, leading to public accusations of police sympathizing with right-wing protesters and restricting freedom of the press.[43] Examples like this are anecdotal, so we cannot make systemic conclusions; however, it does seem advisable that left-wing protesters should exert caution when attending counter-demonstrations.

[38] Singer, Peter W. "Three Steps to Fight Online Disinformation and Extremism." *Defense One*, Defense One, 14 Apr. 2021, www.defenseone.com/ideas/2021/01/three-steps-fight-online-disinformation-and-extremism/171563/.

[39] "Revealed: How Italy's Populists Used Facebook to Win Power." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 17 Dec. 2018, www.theguardian.com/world/2018/dec/17/revealed-how-italy-populists-used-facebook-win-election-matteo-salvini-luigi-di-maio.

[40] "Partnership for Countering Influence Operations." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, carnegieendowment.org/specialprojects/counteringinfluenceoperations/.

[41] Volk, Sabine. "What the Pegida Movement Tells Us about Divisions within German Society." *European Politics and Policy*, 16 Nov. 2020, blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2020/11/16/what-the-pegida-movement-tells-us-about-divisions-within-german-society/.

[42] Wood, Lesley. "Policing Counter-Protest." *Sociology Compass,* vol. 14, no. 11, 2020, pp. 1–10., doi:10.1111/soc4.12833.

[43] "Dresden Protest: German Police in Pegida Far-Right Row." BBC News, BBC, 23 Aug. 2018, www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-45282065.

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