

A Demographic Emergency: How Are Population Threats Made Credible and Legitimate by Radical-Right Voters?

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Abstract

This article examines how demographic threat narratives propagated by radical-right parties are made credible in the accounts of radical-right voters (RRVs) in rapidly diversifying non-metropolitan towns. While radical-right parties have cultivated and normalised demographic threat narratives, such as the “great replacement” theory, little is known about how RRVs reproduce these narratives and make them meaningful in their justifications. Drawing on 30 interviews with RRVs in the Dender region (Belgium), we address this gap by revealing three distinct but interrelated “grammars” through which demographic threat narratives are legitimised. Firstly, RRVs frame demographic replacement through a grammar of numbers, presenting it not as a matter of perception but as fact. Secondly, they legitimise these narratives through a grammar of “emergency,” dramatising the speed and scale of ethno-racial diversification. Thirdly, they mobilise a politicised grammar that presents demographic change as a direct threat to the welfare state and democracy. By revealing these three interrelated grammars, our research contributes to the emerging field of population politics and shows how demographic threat narratives are not only disseminated by radical-right parties, but also reproduced, normalised, and legitimised by their voters.

Keywords

demographic threat narratives; great replacement theory; legitimization work; population politics; radical-right voters

1. Introduction

This article explores how demographic threat narratives propagated by radical-right parties in rapidly diversifying non-metropolitan towns are made credible and legitimate in the accounts of radical-right voters

(RRVs). In recent decades, politically charged claims about “white demographic stagnation” and the growth of “non-white” populations have prompted extensive media coverage and political debate (Bracke & Hernandez Aguilar, 2024; De Koning & Vollebergh, 2019; Krzyżanowski, 2020; Rodríguez-Muñoz, 2020; Sohoni, 2017). While demographic anxieties among white populations are often treated as natural or inevitable reactions to demographic change, this article instead stresses their political cultivation: the strategic ways in which radical-right parties exploit demographic trends to advance their agendas, instil fear, and (re)shape how voters perceive their social environment. More specifically, we argue that radical-right parties cultivate a particular demographic imagination: a future-oriented way of imagining the population composition of the nation and its local communities. Rather than merely describing demographic change, these narratives project anticipated futures of decline, replacement, and dispossession, thereby shaping how voters interpret both present realities and future possibilities.

A central theme in the “population politics” (Rodríguez-Muñoz, 2020) of radical-right parties is the idea that ethnically homogeneous European populations are being demographically “replaced” by non-European “migrants” (Ekman, 2022; Sedgwick, 2024; Sohoni, 2017). We theorise these narratives as “demographic threat narratives,” which claim that migration is altering the socio-demographic composition of the nation in harmful ways. Such narratives use fear as a central lens through which populations give meaning to their surroundings and intensify boundary-making between “us” and “them” (Nieswand, 2025). While such demographic threat narratives have been politically cultivated and made acceptable by the global upsurge of radical right-wing parties (Krzyżanowski, 2020), they remain highly controversial and contested (Feola, 2024). This raises important questions about how their voters justify, legitimise, and rationalise such contested narratives when asked to account for their views (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006).

Despite the increasing political legitimacy, normalisation and mainstreaming of demographic threat narratives in political, public and media debates (Brown et al., 2023; Nettelbladt, 2026; Völker & Saldivia Gonzatti, 2024), little research has examined how this normalisation is reproduced and made meaningful in RRVs’ accounts and justifications. While previous research on demographic threat narratives has mostly focused on their historical origin (e.g., Bracke & Hernandez Aguilar, 2024) and online dissemination (e.g., Ekman, 2022; Krzyżanowski, 2020; Obaidi et al., 2022; Völker & Saldivia Gonzatti, 2024), less is known about how these narratives are (re)produced and legitimised by RRVs and grounded in evolving cultural grammars. Therefore, this study aims to contribute to the understudied field of population politics in Western Europe (Rodríguez-Muñoz, 2020).

This article focuses on the Dender region, a predominantly Dutch-speaking area in the periphery of Brussels (the capital of Belgium), which has witnessed rapid ethno-racial diversification patterns in recent years (Vandekerckhove et al., 2022), to understand how RRVs render narratives of demographic threat credible and legitimate. In the Dender region, local radical-right parties have capitalised on these rapid demographic changes by portraying the increasing ethno-racial diversity of Brussels as a demographic threat that will spread into the surrounding smaller towns (Schyvens et al., 2026).

2. Demographic Threat Narratives

As is well known, radical-right parties mobilise communication based on threats to influence voters’ understanding of their social environment, partly because threats can reinforce feelings of in-group solidarity against a common enemy (Illouz, 2023). These threat narratives refer to dangers that have not yet

materialised and emphasise the urgency of political intervention. Often projecting into the future, threat narratives construct a forward-looking sense of crisis, mobilising fear as a central lens through which local residents give meaning to ongoing social transformations in their local environment. As Nieswand (2025, p. 1883) argues, threat narratives also intensify “boundary-making between ‘us’ and ‘them’ and imply that those who threaten ‘us’ are people of lesser moral value. Threats charge social boundaries with emotions and moralities.” Threat is not objective but perceptual, as “it involves what people think is the outgroup proportion and thus can be easily manipulated by political leaders” (Pettigrew et al., 2010, p. 635). For instance, De Koning and Vollebergh (2019) show how iconic figures, such as the “drug-selling immigrant,” are mobilised by radical-right parties to create threat projections about the demographic future of the nation.

One subcategory of threat communication are the “demographic threat narratives,” focusing on particular interpretations of demographic change, presenting migration and population diversification as harmful developments that threaten the nation’s future composition. Sohoni (2017) shows how radical-right parties used the internet to spread demographic threat narratives about population change, undocumented immigration, and white minoritisation. One of the most well-known demographic threat narratives is the “great replacement” theory put forward by Camus (2018, p. 135), which presents population replacement not simply as demographic change but as a “monstrous crime against humanity.” Although the great replacement is part of a broader family of population-replacement narratives, including “Eurabia,” “white genocide,” and the “Kalgari plan” (Bracke & Hernandez Aguilar, 2024), we focus on the great replacement as the dominant replacement narrative in our empirical material and the one most directly expressed by our respondents. The reach and normalisation of such narratives in public debate is reflected in the growing number of mass-media figures invoking the great replacement to raise fears about migration (Feola, 2024; Krzyżanowski, 2020). While some scholarship has interpreted replacement narratives primarily as conspiracy theories, Sedgwick (2024) argues that their appeal stems precisely from the fact that many supporters do not experience them as conspiratorial claims. Rather than invoking hidden actors or secret plots, such narratives can also be grounded in publicly available demographic statistics, migration figures, declining birth rates among the non-immigrant population, and differential fertility rates. Concerns about population decline can thus become intertwined with fears of demographic replacement, linking declining fertility to increasing migration in a broader narrative of population threat (Bracke & Hernandez Aguilar, 2024). Their persuasiveness also lies in their apparent reliance on numerical evidence and projections of future demographic change.

A defining feature of threat narratives is their temporal structure. They typically begin with observations about the present but derive their political force from projections into the future. Contemporary demographic developments are interpreted not simply as present realities but as indicators of future trajectories, allowing actors to transform uncertainty into seemingly predictable and inevitable demographic futures. Demographic threat narratives do not merely describe social change; they project particular migration futures and mobilise political action by presenting these futures as urgent, plausible and consequential (Rodríguez-Muñoz, 2020).

3. Legitimation Work

In Belgium, demographic threat narratives are mainly disseminated by Vlaams Belang, the Flemish radical-right party. Following its electoral success and xenophobic discourse, other parties agreed in 1989 to

exclude the party from government formation through the *cordon sanitaire* (Abts et al., 2018). Despite their growing electoral success, many RRVs continue to perceive themselves as members of a “silent majority” confronting uncomfortable truths about migration. This perceived marginalisation is part of the context in which respondents seek to justify and legitimise their views.

This tendency to legitimise controversial ideas aligns closely with the theoretical framework of legitimation work developed by Boltanski and Thévenot (2006). This theory assumes that legitimation must be actively constructed by actors, especially when this legitimacy is socially or politically contested. In moments of controversy, actors engage in what the authors call “justification work”: the process of defending their views by appealing to shared moral frameworks and framing them in ways that resonate with culturally recognised values (Snow & Benford, 1988). As Boltanski and Thévenot (2006, p. 15) put it, persons engage in justification when they “criticize, challenge institutions, argue with one another, or converge toward agreement.” In certain fields, some people are more powerful and have louder voices due to their relative legitimacy. This uneven distribution of legitimacy means that not all justifications are heard equally, which pushes (perceived) marginalised voices to justify their views.

Although demographic threat narratives disseminated by radical-right parties have become increasingly normalised in public discourse (Brown et al., 2023; Krzyżanowski, 2020; Nettelbladt, 2026; Völker & Saldivia Gonzatti, 2024), RRVs remain aware of their contested nature (Feola, 2024). This awareness compels RRVs to actively legitimise their views, making this framework particularly useful for analysing how they (re)produce and give meaning to demographic threat narratives. To analyse these processes of legitimation, we identify what we call “justificatory grammars.” We use the notion of “grammar” here as an analytical extension of Boltanski and Thévenot’s framework of justification, rather than as a separate theoretical model. By justificatory grammars, we refer to recurring conventions through which actors connect particular observations to culturally recognisable moral and political claims when contested issues require justification. We identify three such grammars: a grammar of numbers, a grammar of emergency, and a politicised grammar.

4. Method

4.1. Research Context

The research focuses on the Dender region (Ninove, Denderleeuw, Geraardsbergen and the surrounding towns), historically known for its textile and match industries, which suffered economic decline in the 1970s. Over the last two decades, the Dender region has witnessed a rapid increase in the share of residents with a migration background coming from Brussels. For instance, the population with a migration background in Ninove has nearly doubled in the last ten years, increasing from 14.4% to 24.6% between 2015 and 2025 (Provincie in Cijfers, 2026). While the region is marked by rapid ethno-racial diversification, the proportion of residents with a migration background in the region remains below the Flemish average (27.8%) and much lower than in large cities such as Brussels (78%) and Antwerp (63%), as well as mid-sized cities such as Genk (58.8%), in 2025. Nevertheless, the Dender region has witnessed rising success of local radical-right parties. For instance, in the 2018 local elections, the local radical-right party of Ninove received 40% of the votes, increasing to 47.4% in 2024 (Table 1). These local radical-right parties have increasingly used the superdiverse reality of Brussels—which is widely recognised as a majority-minority city, meaning that there is no longer an ethno-racial majority group that is dominant based on its numerical position—as a

“demographic threat” to the region’s supposedly “white” and “rural” character. In subtle and not-so-subtle ways, these local radical-right parties warn of “mass replacement” and project a demographic future in which native, white and Dutch-speaking people are no longer the majority, portraying this as a cultural, religious and linguistic transformation. In the narratives of local radical-right actors, Brussels frequently represents what the Dender region might become, operating as a demographic horizon against which present-day local developments are interpreted and future demographic transformations imagined (Schyvens et al., 2026).

Table 1. Electoral scores of radical-right parties in the 2018 and 2024 local elections.

	Ninove	Denderleeuw	Geraardsbergen
% votes radical-right party in local election 2018	40.0%	26.2%	8.9%
% votes radical-right party in local election 2024	47.4%	38.3%	20.2%

Source: Vlaanderen kiest (2024), consulted on 16 September 2026.

While radical right-wing voting in Flanders was first concentrated in large cities—particularly in Antwerp’s inner-city neighbourhoods—recent elections (2019 and 2024) reveal a different geographical pattern. Vlaams Belang received between 20% and almost 50% of the votes in several non-metropolitan towns, with the most notable increase in the Dender region. The Dender region combines strong and recent support for local radical-right parties with rapid ethno-racial diversification, while the proportion of residents with a migration background remains below the Flemish average. This combination makes the region a useful case for examining how RRVs justify claims about population threats.

4.2. Data Collection and Analysis

To understand how RRVs legitimise demographic threat narratives, 30 interviews (one to three hours) were conducted by the first author. Initial contacts were established through local gatekeepers and Facebook groups of the non-metropolitan towns. Snowball sampling allowed the initial group of interviewees to refer us to other RRVs. The sample was heterogeneous in terms of age (between 20 and 70 years old) and socioeconomic and occupational background, including self-employed participants, students, civil servants, teachers, working-class participants, and people who were long-term unemployed. The majority were male ($n = 23$), had completed secondary education ($n = 16$), and were homeowners ($n = 21$). The gender imbalance was not intentional but emerged from the recruitment and snowball-sampling process. All participants were pseudonymised, and identifying details were removed or altered where necessary. Due to the hyper-local nature of the research setting, the possibility of re-identification cannot be entirely excluded. Given the central role played by the demographic dynamics and imaginaries of Brussels for our analysis of demographic threat narratives, and the very specific profile of the Dender region and its towns in the Brussels metropolitan region, we decided not to pseudonymise the regions and towns referred to, despite the risk of further stigmatisation of the area. We also included (in interview quotes) two references to specific places, which we named to support our claims about the link between demographic threats and migration from Brussels. We consider these references unlikely to expose respondents’ identities.

The questionnaire covered three themes: (a) living in the Dender region, (b) perception of their own as well as other groups and demographic changes in the region, and (c) vignettes. Vignettes are methodological tools to prompt self-reflection and to facilitate discussions on complex or sensitive topics, such as identity, ethno-racial diversification, and race. To minimise the risk of imposing our own analytical framework, the vignettes were

derived from earlier interview excerpts or were fictional representations of “real-life” characters drawn from earlier interviews. Some central research questions were: Has the Dender region changed over the past years? How do you see the future of the region? What was it like in the past? Participants were invited to compare their own experiences and views with the vignette characters and to reflect on demographic change and the future of the region.

Interviews, data analysis, and construction of interview questions followed a cyclical and iterative process. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analysed in NVivo using an abductive-interpretivist approach. Codes such as “too rapid migration,” “separate communities,” “replacement,” “facts,” “social welfare,” and “getting priority” emerged from the data. The coding was conducted by the first author, with emerging codes and interpretations discussed iteratively with the co-authors. The analysis revealed three distinct but interrelated “grammars” through which demographic threat narratives are made credible. First, we reveal that RRVs frame demographic threat through a grammar of numbers, presenting it as a “fact.” Second, they legitimise these narratives through a grammar of “emergency,” emphasising the excessive speed and scale of ethno-racial diversification. Third, we show how RRVs mobilise a politicised grammar that presents demographic ethno-racial change as a direct threat to the “welfare state” and “democratic representation.” To illustrate the political repertoire available to RRVs, we purposively selected a limited sample of Vlaams Belang political communication from its website and campaign materials over the past ten years, including brochures. Selected for their relevance to themes prominent in the interviews, this material serves as contextual and illustrative material rather than as a separate corpus (see Supplementary File, Figures 4–9).

Because RRVs often perceive their views as marginalised in public debate, interviews frequently became occasions for justification and persuasion. We analysed these interview accounts and justifications without claiming direct access to participants’ practices outside the interviews. The interviews were conducted and transcribed in Dutch and translated into English by the first author. As a white, female, university-educated researcher who does not identify with radical-right politics, she recognises that her positionality may have shaped how participants presented and justified their views. Following de Coning (2023), the analysis adopts a stance of “critical empathy”: seeking to understand participants’ perspectives on their own terms while maintaining analytical distance and critically examining the assumptions underlying their accounts.

5. Results

5.1. *It’s “a Fact”: The Use of Data in Legitimising Demographic Threats as “Factual” Truths*

A first way in which RRVs legitimise demographic threat narratives is by basing them on numbers, statistics, and seemingly “objective” demographic categories, presenting them as “factual truths” or “just reality” rather than matters of perception (e.g., Sedgwick, 2024).

Kevin, a working-class man in his twenties, refers to demographic data in the campaign books of Vlaams Belang:

We are already there [witnessing the “great replacement”]. You’ll see, please order those books from Vlaams Belang [with data about migration patterns in Flanders]. You’re going to go crazy. You’ll see what percentage is really Belgian, right? You’ll also see the religion of each person, right? And of the

social housing, how many percent are white people and how many percent are foreigners of colour, what percentage has rights to everything. Then you'll see that, unfortunately, white people are really being pushed back. That's unfortunate, that's bad. That's a disgrace....You have to read it. [Vlaams Belang] recently published a new booklet. It shows exactly how much all this costs us. It drives you absolutely mad.

Kevin treats the party's campaign books as a source of "objective proof," linking demographic statistics on nationality, religion, and social housing to the claim that "white people are being pushed back." His account illustrates how demographic threat narratives are presented as objective claims by linking contested interpretations to seemingly objective numbers and categories.

Peter, a middle-class man in his thirties, argues that the "great replacement" is not a "crazy conspiracy theory," but an "established fact":

R: I also support that idea [the great replacement]. It's simply an established fact, not some crazy conspiracy theory, that a very large demographic change is happening at a very fast pace, not only here, but throughout Europe, especially Western Europe. If this trend continues, and it's exponential, one could speak of a "great replacement."

I: Can you explain how that happens?

R: Through mass migration and then there's family reunification. Also, the birth rates.

Peter's account illustrates how demographic change is rendered as an objective and seemingly measurable process rather than a matter of political interpretation. Similarly, when asked about the Dender region's demographic future, Mick, a middle-class man in his forties, describes "total population replacement" as "just reality":

R: Total population replacement. It will become like Molenbeek and Anderlecht [majority-minority neighbourhoods in Brussels]....If you look at the global population explosion, the earth isn't getting any bigger.

I: So, you really see what's happening as a kind of population replacement?

R: Yes, and I know that you, or the media, consider that racist. I don't see it as racist at all; I think it's just reality. You can say: "That's how it is; it's always been that way." You can say: "I think that's beautiful." Or you can say: "I don't like it." I belong to the category that doesn't like it. But it's just a fact: We are being replaced.

I: And how do you feel about being replaced?

R: I think it's negative because it takes away my identity and my feeling of being at home....You no longer feel at home in your own street, in your own town, in your own municipality because they speak another language, or they simply have fewer common interests....I think more and more Flemings will move away in the future.

By saying “I know that you, or the media, consider that racist,” Mick positions himself as a “truth teller” whose views are silenced by moralised accusations. His account also shows how claims presented as factual can carry strong affective and experiential meanings: Being “replaced” is associated with losing one’s identity and not feeling “at home.” Together, these accounts show how RRVs present themselves as ordinary citizens who are “facing the facts” about migration, relying on what they regard as “objective data” that they believe are wilfully ignored or dismissed by multicultural academics or the leftist media.

This appeal to official “data” is not confined to voters’ accounts but also features in the political strategies of radical-right parties, who are increasingly using official demographic data as a political tool (Supplementary File, Figure 4). Figure 1, for example, draws on data on people with a “migration background”—the official category of population statistics in Flanders—to visually distinguish “natives” from “foreigners” and construct a narrative of demographic threat about the nation’s future. As Will (2024) shows, the use of the category “persons with a migration background,” which includes non-Belgian nationals and first and second generations, obscures the connections of certain descendants to the nation and ties in with imaginaries of a “white nation,” in which white residents are seen as the rightful citizens.

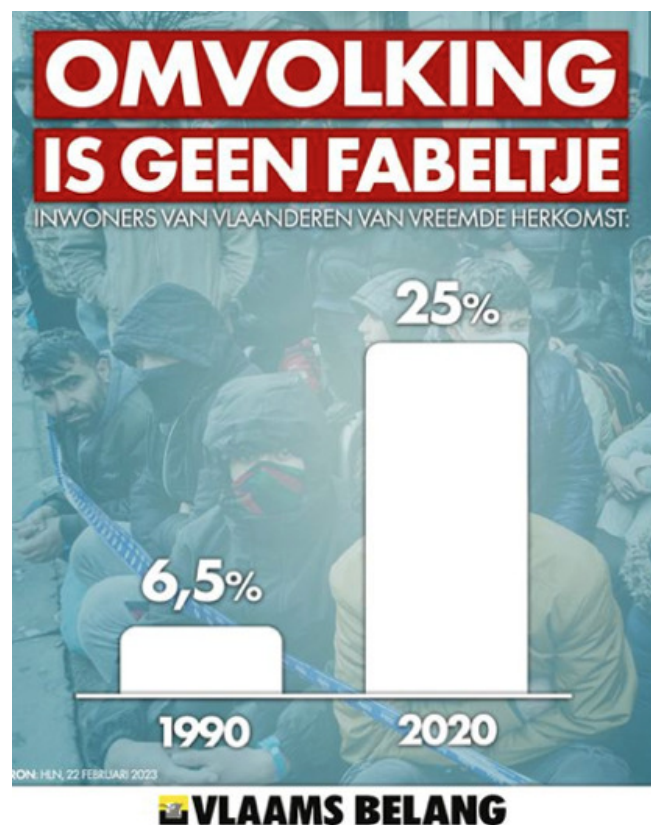


Figure 1. Campaign poster: “Population replacement is no myth. Residents of foreign origin in Flanders: 6.5% in 1990 up to 25% in 2025.”

The poster appears to present demographic change as an objectively measurable fact. Yet this appearance of objectivity rests on a selective and politically consequential use of statistics, in which distinct categories (e.g., nationality, migration status, and race) are conflated and mobilised as interchangeable indicators of “population replacement.” More broadly, the production and interpretation of migration statistics are

complicated by differences in methods of counting and categorising, the uncertainty surrounding long-term projections and the difficulty of counting undocumented populations. These conditions can enable radical-right parties to cherry-pick figures that lend support to their claims (Sohoni, 2017). Our focus, however, is not primarily on whether radical-right parties misrepresent demographic data, but on how they instrumentalise these data to make claims of “population threat” or “population replacement” seem plausible and legitimate.

These examples also highlight the broader sociological significance of numbers in legitimising demographic threat narratives. Social statistics can help political actors garner support for particular interpretations of social problems (Best, 2001), particularly in a broader context in which numerical evidence is expected to be “objective” and trustworthy. This resonates with Porter’s (1995) argument that, in contexts marked by polarisation and distrust, such as migration, numbers can acquire a privileged form of authority, trusted more than human judgment or experiential claims (Boswell, 2009). At the same time, critical scholarship in demography and migration studies (e.g., Amelung et al., 2024) shows that migration data are intertwined with state power, national imaginaries, and migration-control priorities. This creates a significant tension: RRVs and radical-right parties may distrust the institutions that produce official statistics while selectively invoking those same statistics and categories as authoritative evidence for claims of “population replacement.” The persuasive power of these narratives thus rests not only on the empirical claims made with numbers, but also on the authority attributed to numerical evidence and state-produced knowledge.

5.2. Constructing a Domestic Emergency: Dramatising the Speed and Scale of Ethno-Racial Diversification

Anxious discourses about migration in Europe rely not only on the selective use of official statistics, but also on dramatised notions of the speed and scale of migration. As the Dender region has experienced relatively recent and rapid ethno-racial diversification—especially compared to larger cities with longer histories of diversity (Vandekerckhove et al., 2022)—many RRVs state that these changes happened “too fast” and on “too large a scale,” supposedly exceeding the “breaking point” of how much these towns can handle. Evert, a working-class man in his thirties, describes how the ethno-racial changes feel “overwhelming” because they are happening “too quickly” for the small town where he was born and with which he identifies:

These aren’t just concerns, right? These [aspects related to the “great replacement”] are actual things that are happening right now. It’s not like: “I’m worried this might happen someday.” No, it’s already in full swing....It’s going so fast that newcomers don’t even need to integrate anymore. In a rural village like ours, it suddenly becomes overwhelming, like: “What’s going on here?”

Evert points out that the issue is not the presence of residents with a migration background per se, but rather the perceived impossibility of integration at this speed and scale:

If you have your own hairdressers and your own grocery stores, then they don’t have to leave their “cocoon” of their community for anything. Then you’ll never get integration. Do I want those people to “become Flemish”? That sounds so stupid, I don’t mean that....But if you have one or two families moving into your village, then they’ll become part of your village quickly. Now they just become villages in themselves in certain streets and neighbourhoods.

Johan, a working-class man in his fifties, states that ethno-racial changes are happening on “too large a scale.” He references a book called *The Great Replacement* by a politician from the Vlaams Belang party, to show how the small town where he lives is “flooded” with “foreigners”:

Take 40 years ago, when I was a young guy, I had never even seen a foreigner. That didn't exist here. Now it's arriving gradually; well, you can't even call it gradual anymore. They're coming in by bus and by plane....If you go a few generations further, which is already the case in Antwerp, then you can no longer speak of a Western civilisation. That is the population replacement. I read that book by Filip Dewinter [a Vlaams Belang politician]. There are things in there you just can't deny.

In temporal terms, both Evert's and Johan's stories are based on a “retrotopia” (Bauman, 2017): the ideal social community is not found in a “utopian” future, but in a half-real, half-imagined past. Although Flanders is one of the most urbanised regions in Europe (de Olde & Oosterlynck, 2022), and the Dender region consists of a mix of smaller towns located very close to large cities such as Brussels (20–30 km) and Antwerp (60–65 km), they express nostalgia for a rural and seemingly “white” community where “foreigners” are not visibly present. This “nostalgia” creates a stark temporal contrast between an imagined homogeneous past and a present framed as destabilised by migration (Bonikowski & Stuhler, 2022). Although the current ethno-racial diversity in the Dender region is much lower than in larger cities and below the Flemish average, references to cities such as Antwerp or Brussels enable respondents to view current changes as harbingers of a demographic future in which “whites” will soon be in the minority (Schyvens et al., 2026).

Joris, a working-class man in his sixties, states that those who do not “become Flemish” remain unassimilated and are seen to coalesce in their own ethnic enclaves:

I find that there are too many of them in a short period of time....The fact is, when the pace is too fast, the social fabric doesn't have time to adapt. When things change that quickly, newcomers themselves no longer feel the need to integrate. Suddenly, a whole street becomes African, so why would they change anything? They just continue their lives as they did in the Matongé neighbourhoods [neighbourhood in Brussels]....If, in fifteen years, you go from zero to thirty percent, that's simply too fast.

He portrays newcomers to the town as acceptable only in small numbers, allowing newcomers to assimilate into the dominant white Flemish culture. This closely aligns with Vlaams Belang's ideology, which assumes the cultural and ethno-racial homogeneity of the “nation” and demands assimilation into “Flemish culture” (Abts et al., 2018).

Figure 2, showing a politician speaking beneath a banner with “great replacement” written on it, illustrates how local radical-right parties emphasise cultural assimilation and actively spread the idea that the increasing presence of people of “foreign origin” could destroy the towns' “Flemish culture” (see also the Supplementary File, Figures 5 and 6). While native-born inhabitants are implicitly positioned as natural possessors of the nation, newcomers' belonging remains conditional and uncertain, as they are expected to assimilate into the Flemish identity of the towns and continue to be racialised as non-white.



Figure 2. Campaign poster: “Denderleeuw must stay Flemish: 31.2% of residents are of foreign origin.”

As many RRVs feel increasingly outnumbered amid the rapid ethno-racial diversification patterns, they often refer to specific places where they feel like “a minority in their own town.” For instance, many RRVs recall childhood school photos with only “two kids of colour,” compared to today’s classrooms where “it’s literally the other way around,” raising fears about the declining quality of the Dutch language in schools and its future loss. Stories about places that no longer feel “Flemish” recur across interviews, as in this conversation between two RRVs about the area around the station:

R1: That process of population replacement is intense. If I blindfold you and drive you from the station to under the bridge, then I take off the blindfold and ask: “Where do you think you are?” You’d never know that you’re in a Flemish municipality.

R2: That’s really true.

I: Oh yeah?

R1: Then you’d say something like: “We’re somewhere in Brussels.” You’d sooner say we [were] somewhere abroad, I’ll put it that way. You wouldn’t be able to tell that you’re in Denderleeuw anymore.

I: Do you, then, feel like a minority or something?

R2: Near the station, yes.

Interestingly, RRVs often draw on highly mediated stories of localised crime and fights happening around the station that serve to make the demographic threat feel more tangible and act as an “early warning” of being “replaced.” Anna, a working-class woman in her twenties, describes videos of people being harassed at the station, which she sees on local Facebook groups:

At the station in Denderleeuw, it's hell, I've heard that. In Ninove, I've also heard some pretty intense things about the station. I've even seen videos of girls starting to fight each other at the station, and then I think: “Okay, shit, where are we heading? Who or what is doing this, and where is it all suddenly coming from?”

I: Can you describe what happens at the station?

R: I've heard things there. Mainly about gang formations, people being harassed....I don't know a lot myself, but I read a lot in those local Facebook groups like *Ge zijt van Lierde, Aske*, that kind of stuff. That's where I see most of it. That's really all I know. But even that tells me enough.

Anna's reference to “hell” and her concern about “where we are heading” illustrate how stories of crime circulating in local online environments can transform abstract anxieties into shared assumptions about the future of a diversifying nation (De Koning & Vollebergh, 2019). Many respondents referred to localised incidents such as fights at the station, using a grammar of “emergency” and framing demographic change as an imminent danger associated with “threatening populations” (see also Supplementary File, Figure 7) (Nieswand, 2025). The grammar of emergency thus not only organises arguments about the scale and speed of demographic change, but also gives them affective force, making abstract demographic change appear immediate and personally consequential.

As RRVs often express feelings of white minoritisation, some stress the importance of “respect for the Flemings as a majority.” Jan, a thirty-year-old working-class man, comments:

I just think there are too many; there should be respect for the Flemish people as the majority....Europe is slowly collapsing. Demographically, it's ageing. I just happen to be the generation that has to experience that decline. The last generation to see a Flemish, white majority here in Flanders.

Such narratives of loss of an (imagined) ethnically homogeneous Flanders express a pervasive sense of white minoritisation and demographic emergency among our respondents. These threat narratives may feel exaggerated but reflect what Alba (2018) calls the “great demographic illusion”: The widespread belief that the nation is inevitably moving toward a “majority-minority” future in which those racialised as white have become a numerical minority, and those racialised as non-white collectively constitute a numerical majority.

In sum, demographic threat narratives are legitimised by framing ethno-racial diversification as an emergency, a swift change emerging against a background of ostensible normalcy, causing danger and demanding an urgent response. Our interviewees often emphasise the excessive speed and scale of

“migration,” which they feel destabilises local social order. RRVs present their views as reasonable limits based on integration capacity and newcomers’ obligation to assimilate—closely mirroring Vlaams Belang’s assimilation discourse. By portraying ethno-racial demographic change as an emergency that overwhelms local communities and exceeds their “capacity to integrate,” RRVs move beyond cultural anxiety toward explicitly political claims about who legitimately belongs, who has rights, and who can be represented within the nation. This framing lays the groundwork for a politicised grammar in which demographic change is rearticulated as a threat to the democratic nation-state and the welfare system itself.

5.3. Protecting “Our” System: Migration as a Threat to the Social Welfare State and Democracy

A third way in which demographic threat narratives are made plausible, reasonable, and legitimate is through framing migration as a danger to the nation’s social welfare system and democracy. Most RRVs depart from arguments that can be perceived as racist (Sohoni, 2017); instead, they stress the economic consequences of migration. For instance, Gijs, a working-class man in his forties, describes how he does not understand why the hard-working so-called “native population,” who have contributed to the welfare state for so long, are being increasingly pushed back:

I also have to work very hard and I don’t understand why they get priority over the rest of the population that has been contributing [to the Belgian welfare state] for a very long time already.

I: Do you see that in your surroundings, that they get priority?

R: Yes, of course you see that....How should I say it...unemployment benefits. Then you see all Africans going there with a big Mercedes or other fancy cars, going to the OCMW [the public centre for social welfare] to pick up an allowance, and then you think: “Well, okay, they actually don’t have a right to an allowance if you look at what kind of cars they’re driving.” I thought only poor or disadvantaged people were entitled to that.

Gijs implicitly contrasts “Africans” with the “native population” who have sustained the welfare state; however, now it is being corrupted by those “foreign to the soil.” When I ask how this made him feel, he tells me that he feels “frustrated.” Yet, this sense of unfairness and frustration is quite paradoxical, as those socially categorised as “Africans” are often Belgian citizens of Congolese descent (second or third generation), a country that experienced brutal colonisation by Belgians under King Leopold II (Bhambra & Holmwood, 2018). These residents, whose labour and resources historically contributed to the Belgian welfare state, are now seen as “undeserving recipients.” Their belonging is put forward as conditional: They are only seen as legitimate members of the local community if they contribute economically through hard work and do not rely on welfare. Leon—a working-class man in his fifties—argues that “replacement” is a growing problem because his town “is being overloaded by foreigners who don’t work, don’t speak the language, and don’t conform to the regulations.” Drawing on his experience as an employee at the Public Centre for Social Welfare, he legitimises this narrative by claiming that “those people are content with what they receive as a living allowance.”

RRVs generally describe new residents from Brussels as economically weaker, more frequently unemployed, and favoured by government transfers. As a result, many interviewees see “migration” as a legitimate threat

to the solidarity mechanisms that sustain Belgium's welfare system. In Belgium—with its broad support for the welfare state—this framing lends particular credibility to the demographic threat narratives. At the heart of this legitimisation strategy is the presumption that RRVs only really wish to share welfare resources with others like themselves. In this logic, a process of persistently adding more people, with ever more ethno-racial and cultural differences, will ultimately destroy the sense of solidarity that necessarily underpins Belgium's welfare state (Schinkel & Van Reekum, 2024). Thus, migration is constructed as a zero-sum choice between “preserving welfare for ‘our people’” or “extending it to ‘racialized Others.’”

Kevin makes this logic explicit by trying to convince me that “foreigners” are systematically prioritised by welfare institutions, presenting migration as a form of unfair redistribution from “native” taxpayers to “Others”:

R: When you go to the OCMW, what colour do you see? Do you see white or black?

I: I don't know, I've never...

R: Then, for your study, you should go. In every OCMW, please, go inside. White people go there too, but they don't get help. Not at all. Or, you have to say you have a child from another country, then you're helped immediately. But if you're purely Belgian? No, no, no....How many foreigners own property abroad? Have you looked into how many? It's not normal, right? They've been living off the OCMW for 15 years here, on welfare, and they own two houses in Morocco. That's just insane. Did you know that between 500 and 800 euros of taxes per resident in Flanders go to foreigners?...Do you think that's normal?

Thatiana, a woman in her thirties, invokes large monetary figures to show how so-called “migrants” are perceived as “cutting the line” (Hochschild, 2016):

R: How many billions was it for migration that we gave last year? I was shocked. It was a few billion, right? Helping them a bit, that is fine, but five billion for one country?...We're just going to have to work even more. We're going to have to pay more taxes....Even the OCMW says: “No, there's no more space for you, we can't give you anything.”

I: Do you feel like they're getting priority over you?

R: That's exactly what's happening! That's been decided by I-don't-know-who. It's true, they get priority. Everyone knows that....I've already heard stories; you can't imagine how angry it makes you sometimes.

These chauvinist welfare attitudes seem to particularly arise in environments where local radical-right parties construct and amplify the notion of migration as a threat (Supplementary File, Figure 8). The quotes show that radical-right threat narratives do more than simply convey political viewpoints on the Belgian welfare state; they also provoke deeply felt frustration, anger, and resentment towards other groups. Figure 3, for instance, depicts “asylum seekers” as a homogeneous group of “welfare takers.” In this legitimisation strategy, the welfare system is only defended for the “deserving” native citizens.



Figure 3. Campaign poster: “Protect our social security: OCMW support for asylum seekers in 2024: €9,277,778. An increase of 30% compared to 2023.”

Radical right-wing parties use economic threats by portraying unfair treatment of “ordinary people” and presenting these groups as victims of an unjust system. This populist reinterpretation of victimhood enables them to act with a sense of moral righteousness against those seen as living at the expense of one’s own group. These threat narratives are also based on a “racialisation” of “the people” and invoke welfare and social rights in a possessive and partial manner, detached from their universalist meaning and reimagined as privileges belonging only to the “right” people.

Besides the social welfare system, some RRVs frame migration as a threat to democratic representation, as Thatiana further states:

There are just too many foreigners. That’s what I’m afraid of, very afraid....That too many are going to come, and that we won’t be able to defend ourselves anymore. They vote for the Socialists and the Greens, and we’ll be too few to defend ourselves.

Her fear of being “too few to defend ourselves” against a growing group of foreigners who “vote for the Socialists and the Greens” aligns closely with that of radical-right parties, who portray leftist parties as “allochthonous parties” (Supplementary File, Figure 9). Similarly, Koen, a middle-class man in his sixties, argues: “It is very clear that Moroccan and Turkish communities align themselves with the left-wing parties.”

Erwin, a working-class man in his sixties, who witnessed the transformation of his social housing neighbourhood from a “Flemish neighbourhood” to one predominantly inhabited by “people of Moroccan, Turkish, and Iranian descent,” explains how “foreigners” will politically “oppress” white people:

R: He [the Socialist mayor of the town where he lives] was elected by the large majority of foreigners. Because that's what's going to happen. If more and more keep coming, there will also be political shifts, and I'm convinced that, within 50 years, we will be oppressed. We'll all be living in poverty.

I: How will you be oppressed?

R: Everything will be taken over by people of a different colour.

Erwin envisions a future demographic landscape in which white Flemings are oppressed by people of colour (Obaidi et al., 2022). Democracy is thus reinterpreted as the rule of a morally and ethnically defined majority, rather than as a pluralistic system of representation.

In sum, RRVs legitimise demographic threat narratives by framing migration as a zero-sum struggle for welfare resources and democratic power. By invoking highly legitimate political ideas such as the welfare state, their views gain moral authority. Newcomers are symbolically flattened and racialised into a homogeneous group of “welfare-dependent” or “left-leaning outsiders.” As Alba (2018) warns, this projection of minority populations as a single, homogeneous bloc constitutes a “great demographic illusion” that distorts social realities and fuels white extremism.

6. Conclusion

This article explored how RRVs legitimise demographic threat narratives. While such narratives have been politically cultivated and normalised by radical-right parties (Bracke & Hernandez Aguilar, 2024; Nettelblatt, 2026; Rodríguez-Muñoz, 2020; Völker & Saldivia Gonzatti, 2024), they remain highly controversial (Feola, 2024), raising important questions about how such narratives are justified, rationalised, and legitimised by their voters when asked to account for their views.

We identify three distinct but interrelated “grammars” through which these narratives are made credible, reasonable and legitimate. Firstly, RRVs frame demographic replacement through a grammar of numbers, treating it not as a matter of perception or political debate but as “factual” truth. RRVs present themselves as ordinary citizens who are “facing the facts” about migration, facts they believe are wilfully ignored by multicultural academics and the leftist media. In line with scholarship on the authority of numbers in migration (Boswell, 2009; Porter, 1995), statistics become a resource for lending credibility to controversial claims. Paradoxically, the data RRVs refer to often originate from politically motivated sources (Best, 2001) and are frequently mobilised through “cherry-picking” and conflation of categories. This shows that their persuasive power rests not only on empirical accuracy, but on the authority attributed to numbers and state-based knowledge.

Secondly, RRVs legitimise demographic threat narratives through a grammar of emergency, emphasising the scale, speed, and alleged excessiveness of demographic change. They describe migration as destabilising and

having surpassed a “natural balance of diversity.” They justify this stance by referencing the town’s integration capacity, rendering demographic change as exceptional, requiring immediate political intervention before an irreversible “tipping point” is reached. The RRVs also draw on mediated stories of crime around the station, through which demographic change is framed as an imminent threat (De Koning & Vollebergh, 2019). These stories transform abstract anxieties into shared assumptions about the future of a diversifying nation.

Thirdly, RRVs mobilise a politicised grammar that frames demographic ethno-racial change as a direct threat to the welfare state and democracy, and present their concerns in domains with high societal legitimacy. Welfare resources and political rights are described in zero-sum terms, where newcomers are imagined as burdens or opportunistic voters who undermine redistribution or majority rule. This framing derives from radical-right, populist logics that racialise “the people” and transform universal social rights into possessive entitlements of an ethnically defined majority. This politicised grammar echoes the post-imperial “double accounting of migration” (Schinkel & Van Reekum, 2024). Migration is simultaneously registered as what the nation would have been without migrants and as what it supposedly costs the nation now that they are present. In this accounting logic, migration appears as a debt imposed on the native population, expressed through welfare expenditure, political concessions, and demographic change. However, this justificatory grammar is especially stark, as the majority of the new residents with a migration background in the Dender region are of Congolese descent, whose labour historically contributed to the Belgian welfare state (Bhambra & Holmwood, 2018).

By examining how RRVs justify and legitimate demographic threat narratives, this article contributes to the emerging field of population politics (Rodríguez-Muñiz, 2020). We show how demographic threat narratives are not only disseminated by radical-right parties, but are actively interpreted, reproduced, and legitimised by their voters through distinct cultural grammars. Our study thus contributes to research on the normalisation of demographic threat narratives (Bracke & Hernandez Aguilar, 2024; Brown et al., 2023; Krzyżanowski, 2020; Nettelblatt, 2026; Völker & Saldivia Gonzatti, 2024), showing how they gain credibility through numbers, emergency framings, and appeals to legitimate political institutions. Our findings further demonstrate how public understandings of ethno-racial diversification can be manipulated by political and racialised discourses of demographic change (Ekman, 2022; Obaidi et al., 2022; Sohoni, 2017). More broadly, the article demonstrates that demographic threat narratives such as the great replacement theory cannot be understood solely as political projects disseminated through formal political and media arenas. Their effectiveness also depends on the interpretive and justificatory work through which citizens make such demographic imaginaries meaningful and credible. Understanding their normalisation therefore requires attention to these interpretive and justificatory processes, alongside their political dissemination.

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The data utilised in this study are anonymous and subject to confidentiality agreements; therefore, they cannot be publicly shared.

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Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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