

The Austrian Parliamentary Elections 2019: Are Austrians Anti-immigrant?

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Austrians go to the polls this week to elect a new Parliament. Immigration has been a key theme in recent Austrian and EU politics. In this policy brief, Lenka Drazanova from the Observatory of Public Attitudes to Migration analyses attitudes to migration in Austria to show that it is immigration's issue salience that explains the electoral success of Austrian anti-immigration political parties rather than overall opposition to immigration among the Austrian population.

Since the 1990 general election, immigration has been a key electoral issue in Austria. The issue has remained high on the political agenda ever since. In the wake of the 'migration crisis' immigration had become the defining issue, and surpassed the previous most significant concern of the Austrian public: the economy. Immigration was also the major issue in the past 2017 general election (SORA 2017, AUTNES 2017). Two parties, the Austrian Peoples Party (ÖVP) and the Freedom Party (FPÖ) that took relatively restrictive positions and campaigned on the issue in the 2017 elections gained the majority of the votes (57%). Does this suggest that the Austrian electorate is anti-immigration?

Data from the EU's Eurobarometer surveys shows that in Austria, as in many other EU member states, attitudes to immigration are actually highly stable and, if anything, are becoming slightly more positive. How, then, to explain the increased support for anti-immigration parties, which are again expected to poll strongly in September 2019? The answer to this question is the importance that people attribute to the immigration issue, in other words its salience.

To make this point, this policy brief provides a short overview of current attitudes to immigration in Austria and shows:

- an overall increase in positive attitudes to immigration, particularly from within but also from outside the EU;
- the relatively high issue salience of immigration;
- socio-demographic differences among those who view immigration as highly salient;
- the positions on immigration held by the supporters of main Austrian political parties.



Attitudes to immigration in Austria – current trends

Attitudes to immigrants are becoming more positive in recent years

Figures 1 and 2 show that attitudes held by Austrians to migrants from both within and outside the EU are quite stable and, if anything, becoming more positive over the years.

This is especially true for attitudes regarding immigration from other EU Member States (see Figure 1). We can see an approximate 14 percentage points increase in (very and fairly) positive feelings towards EU citizens from 2014 to 2019, compared to a 13 percentage points decline of (very and fairly) negative feelings from 2014 to 2019.

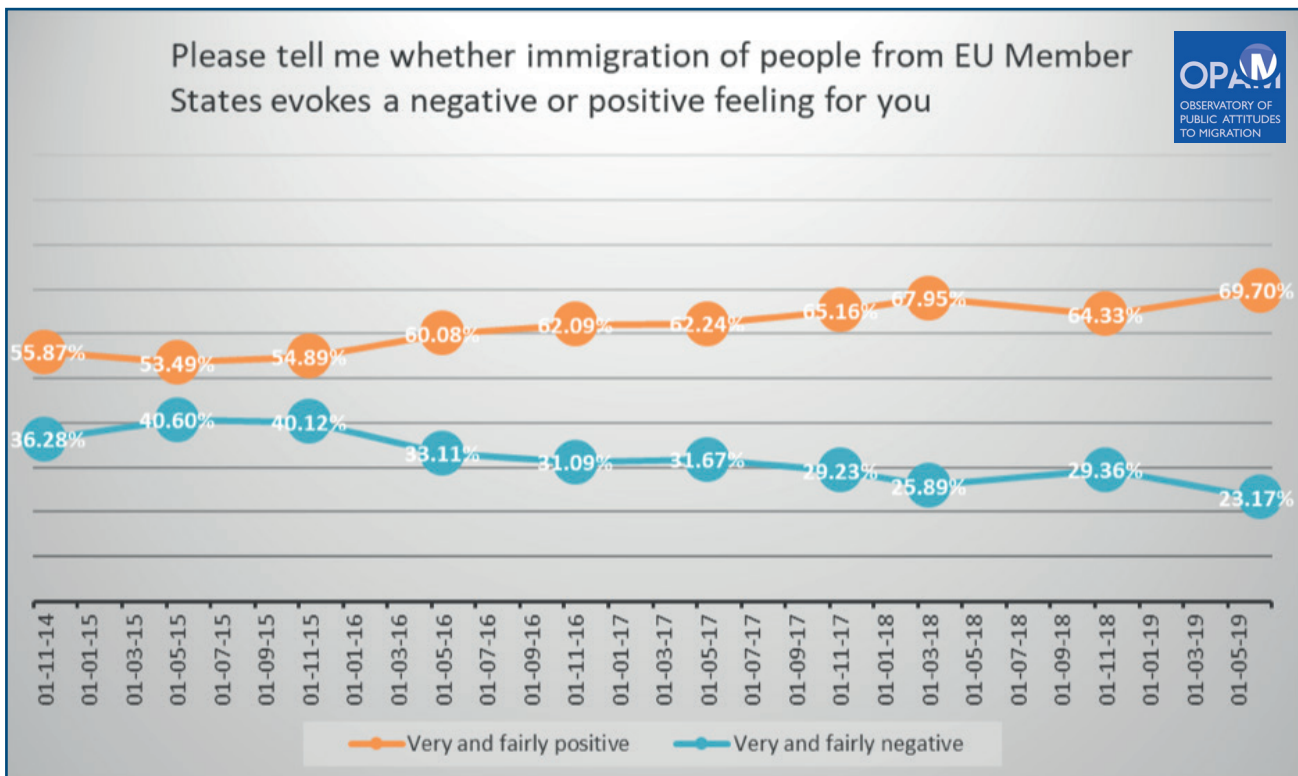
In contrast, around half of Austrian respondents has prevalently negative feelings towards immigrants from non-EU Member States (see Figure 2). Even so, the gap between positive and negative feelings fell between 2014 and 2019. In 2019, 46.23% of respondents felt (very and fairly) positive regarding immigration from non-EU countries com-

pared to 35.11% in 2014. The number of respondents feeling (very and fairly) negative about non-EU immigration has declined by around 9 percentage points. In 2019 we can observe almost a balance between respondents with positive and negative feelings.

Strikingly, this period of 2014-19 when attitudes to migration from both within and outside the EU became generally more favourable coincides with the intense focus on migration during the ‘migration crisis’.

There is debate within the empirical research literature about whether higher immigration rates lead to increased support for far-right parties. Halla et al. (2017) find that in Austria the inflow of immigrants into the community had a significant impact on the increase of FPÖ vote share in recent years. In contrast Steinmayr (2016) argues that hosting refugees in accommodations reduced support for the far-right in Austrian communities. Thus, surveys of attitudes to immigration conducted in Austria might be telling a more complicated story than initially thought.

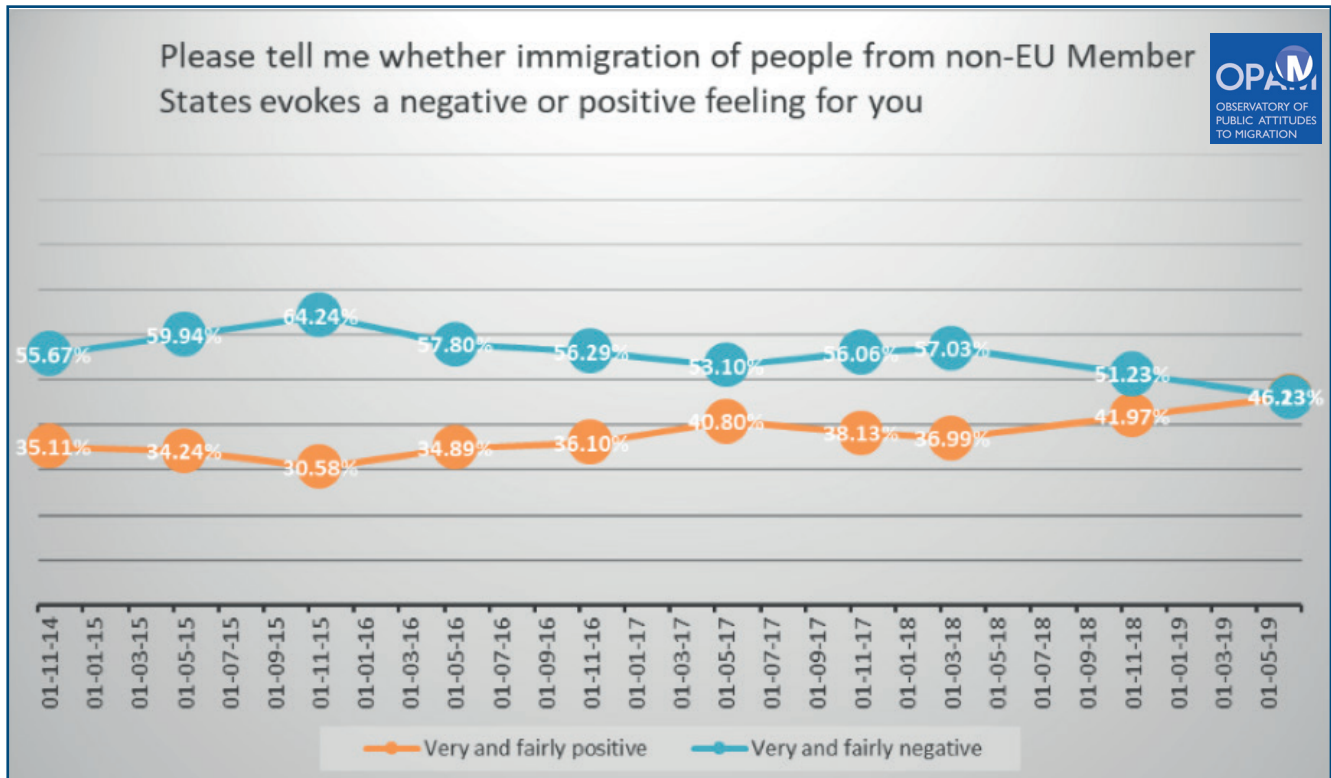
Figures 1. Attitudes towards people from EU Member states in Austria in the years 2014-2019.



Source: Eurobarometer.



Figure 2. Attitudes towards people from non-EU Member States in Austria in the years 2014-2019.



Source: Eurobarometer.

Saliency of immigration

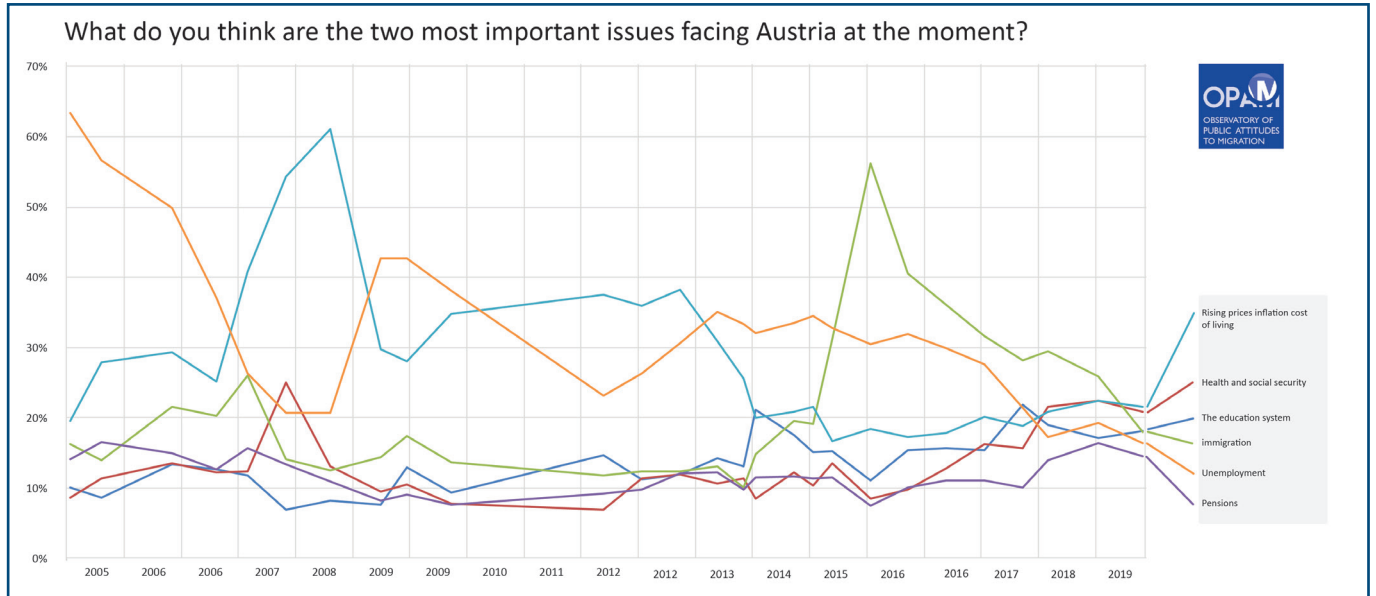
A puzzle remains: how can we explain this increased favourability in general attitudes to immigration in light of the recent electoral successes of anti-immigration parties?

We can do this by looking at the saliency of immigration. In short, latent individual anti-immigration attitudes might be “activated” by specific situations such as the ‘migration crisis’ and intense media coverage of the issue. In times when immigration is not salient, voters make their electoral choices according to other (often economic) issues. This means that individuals’ attitudes on immigration do not determine their electoral choices. When immigration becomes salient, individuals who already hold negative attitudes to immigration make their electoral choices according to parties’ stances on immigration. Similar explanations have been proposed for other European countries as well (Talò 2017).

Figures 3 and 4 look more closely at the saliency of the immigration issue. Before the ‘crisis’, most Austrians considered immigration to be much less important than economic issues such as rising prices and unemployment (Figure 3). However, due to the recent ‘migration crisis’, the saliency of immigration has risen sharply in 2015. More than half of Austrian respondents considered immigration to be the most important issue facing Austria in the years 2015-2016. The peak in immigration saliency coincided with the date of the last parliamentary elections in 2017.

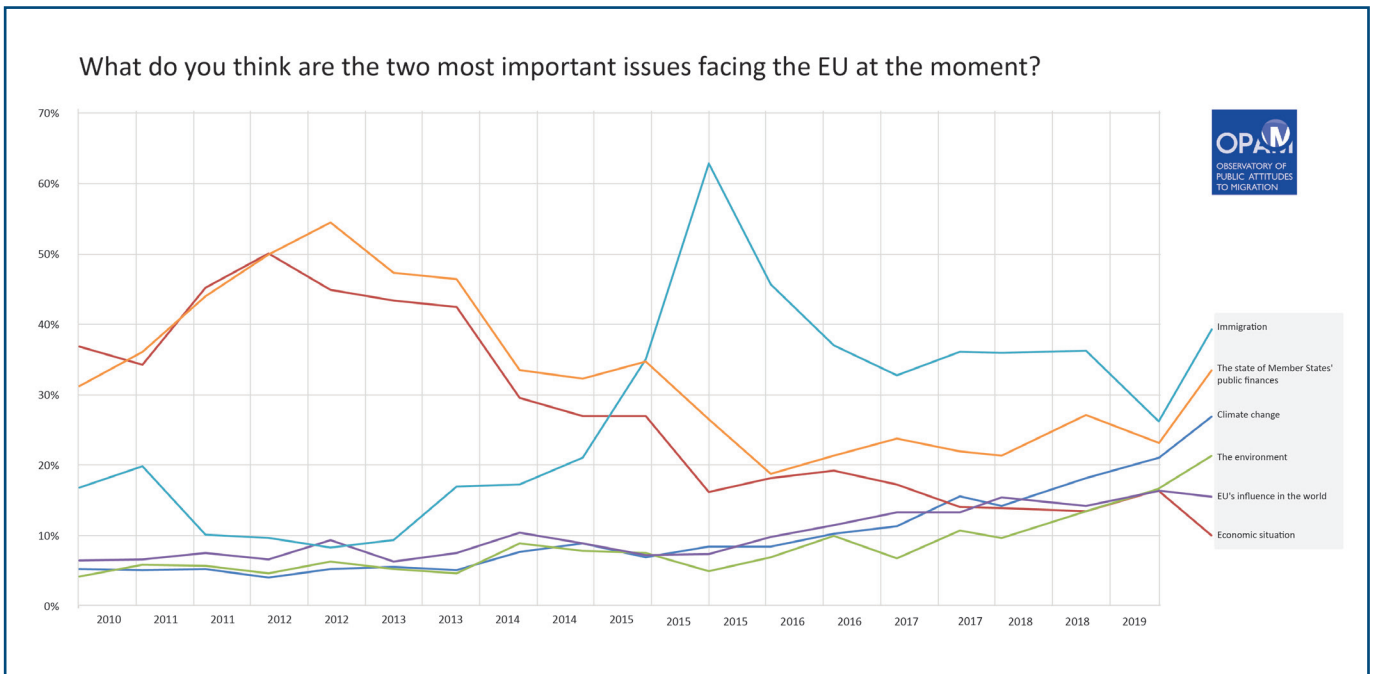


Figure 3. Salience of issues facing Austria in the years 2010-2019.



Source: Eurobarometer.

Figure 4. Salience of issues facing the EU in the years 2010-2019.



Source: Eurobarometer.



Notably, since 2016, the importance of immigration for Austrian politics started to decline. In the most recent Eurobarometer poll conducted in March 2019, Austrian respondents once again considered economic issues such as pensions together with health and social security to be more important problems facing Austria than immigration.

That said, Figure 4 also reveals that, even after salience peaked in 2015-2016, Austrian respondents continue to consider immigration as the most important issue facing the European Union. The most recent Eurobarometer polling from June 2019 shows that immigration was viewed as the most important issue facing the EU by 27.62% of Austrian respondents. Immigration appears more important for the Austrian public than the state of other Member States' public finances (24.06% of respondents) or climate change (21.85% of respondents).

A socio-demographic analysis of those who consider immigration highly salient

Table 1 presents the percentage of Austrian respondents expressing that immigration is the most important issue facing Austria or the EU in 2019 by socio-demographic characteristic. We can see:

- A slight majority of women among those who consider immigration highly salient. Women are 57% of those considering immigration as an important issue facing Austria and they are 52% among those considering immigration the most important issue for the EU.
- Almost half of Austrian respondents considering immigration highly salient are over 55 years old (46.86% country, 41.84% EU) and have done between 16-19 years of studies (49.76% country, 51.42% EU).
- Most of those considering immigration highly salient within Austria respondents are either manual workers or retired.
- There is not a strong distinction in socio-demographic characteristics between those who consider immigration important for the EU and those considering it important for Austria.

Table 1. Percentage of those considering immigration as the most important issue facing Austria/the EU at the moment by socio-demographic characteristics across Austria (fielded March 2019).

Immigration as most important issue for:	country	EU
Gender		
Men	43	47.52
Women	57	52.48
Age		
15 – 24	6.28	8.16
25 – 39	20.77	20.92
40 – 54	26.09	29.08
55 +	46.86	41.84
Education (age when ended)		
15 -	18.84	17.02
16 – 19	49.76	51.42
20 +	27.54	24.47
still studying	3.38	5.67
Professional category		
Self employed	6.76	7.8
Managers	14.98	11.7
Other white collars	11.11	10.28
Manual workers	29.47	28.72
House persons	1.93	4.26
Unemployed	1.93	1.42
Retired	30.43	30.14
Students	3.38	5.67

Source: Eurobarometer.

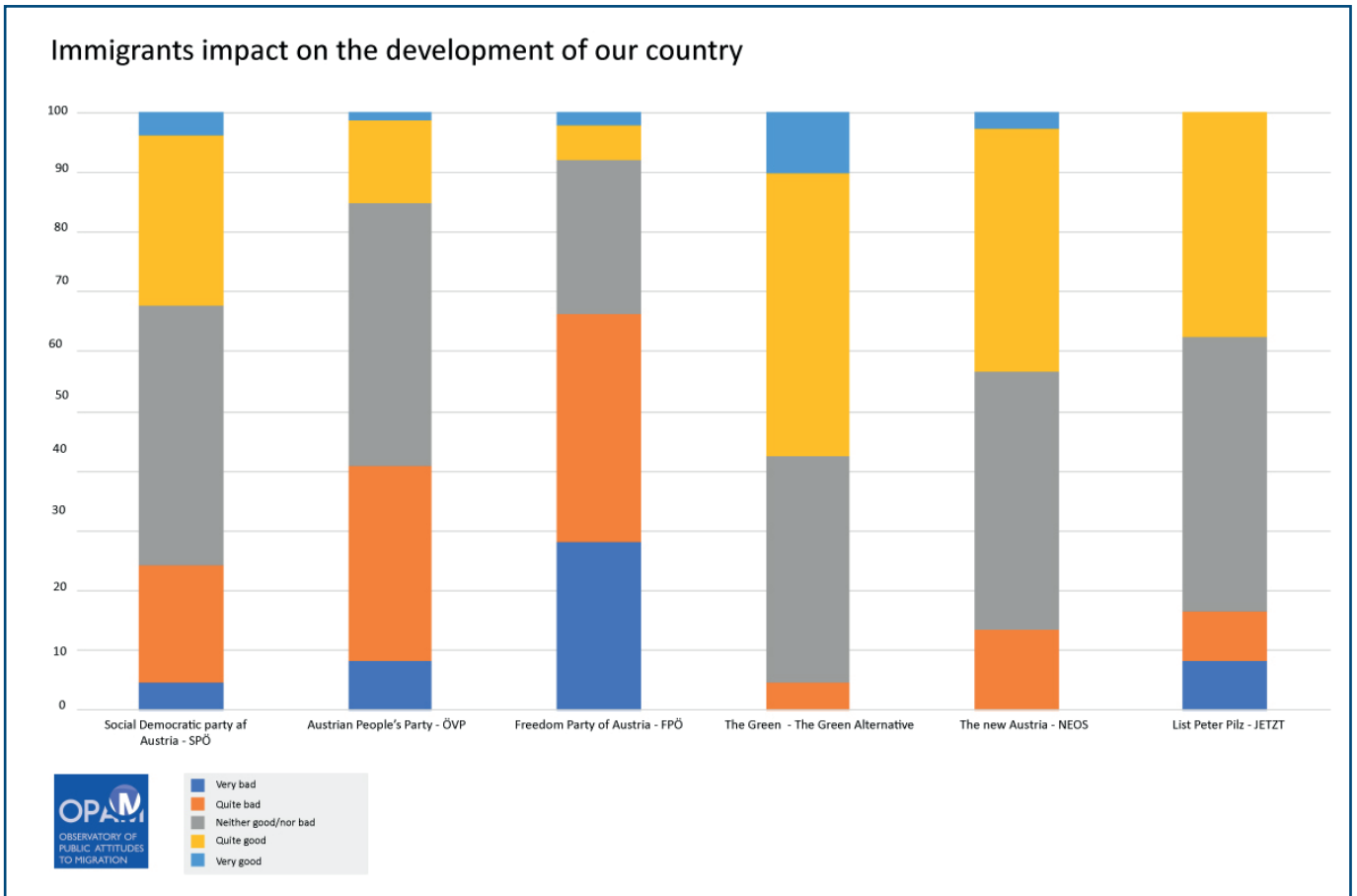


Views of immigrants according to political affiliation

Attitudes to immigrants vary greatly according to political affiliation. In Figure 5 we use data from the European Values Survey fielded in 2018 to show attitudes regarding the impact of immigrants on the development of Austria according to political party preferences. We see that:

- The most negative views are held by potential FPÖ voters amongst whom more than 65% sees the impact as either very bad or quite bad. This is in line with academic research (see for example Aichholzer et al. 2017) arguing that FPÖ voters have distinct views on newer issues such as immigration, which lead to FPÖ's weakening of Austria's previously highly stable system of socio-structural and ideological divisions (as expressed by the two mainstream parties, the People's Party and the Social Democrats).
- Immigrants' impact is seen as (very and quite) bad by fewer than half (around 40%) of potential voters of the ÖVP.
- Proponents of the Social Democratic party of Austria (SPÖ) and of List Peter Pilz (JETZT) appear to be prevalently neutral in their opinion regarding immigrants' impact.
- The most positive views can be found among the potential voters of the Greens and to a lesser extent among those who feel politically close to The New Austria (NEOS).

Figure 5. Impact of immigrants according to the potential voters of several Austrian political parties.



Source: European Values Survey 2018.



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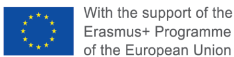
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With the support of the
 Erasmus+ Programme
 of the European Union

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doi:10.2870/356627
 ISBN:978-92-9084-735-9
 ISSN:2467-4540