

Hungary, Poland and Slovakia show the risks associated with mainstream parties co-opting the platforms of the radical right

The rise of the radical right has presented a challenge to mainstream parties in a number of European countries. As [Bartek Pytlas](#) writes, one of the strategies mainstream parties have adopted in several cases has been to co-opt the platforms of radical right parties in the hope of colonising their support. Based on an analysis of Hungary, Poland and Slovakia, he argues that adopting the policies of the radical right can prove counterproductive as it legitimises the underlying narrative used by radical right parties. Mainstream parties can see off this challenge to their electoral support only by simultaneously taking ownership of the broader narrative of the radical right. He notes that this strategy nevertheless poses a challenge for the quality of democratic discourse in Central and Eastern Europe.



In recent years, exclusionary nationalist narratives traditionally limited to Europe's radical right parties have made their way into public discourse and mainstream party rhetoric in a more or less moderated form. This “[pathological normalcy](#)” of competition between radical right and mainstream parties, while not limited to Central and Eastern Europe, is particularly visible in this region.

A prominent case is Viktor Orbán's [Fidesz](#) in Hungary, but similar developments have also taken place elsewhere. In Poland, at least since 2005, the conservative [Law and Justice](#) party, which decisively won Poland's latest election on 25 October 2015, engaged in competition with the radical right [LPR](#) and embraced its national-Catholic ideology. In Slovakia between 2006 and 2010, the social-democratic [Smer](#) shifted time and again towards exclusionary nationalist stances on ethnic minorities of their then coalition partner, the radical right [SNS](#).

Yet, in spite of this discursive influence, radical right parties in Central and Eastern Europe experience subsequent periods of success and failure at the polls. Viewed from a long-term perspective, their election results vary fairly independently of economic conditions or the state of party system consolidation. In the aforementioned context of “[pathological normalcy](#)”, this begs the question of how mainstream party competition influences the electoral fortune of radical right parties.

In a recent [book](#), I analyse this mechanism and extend the analysis from spatial competition over issues towards the hitherto mostly overlooked dimension of narrative contest over the meaning of these issues. As laid out in the seminal work of [Bonnie Meguid](#), mainstream parties can engage in competition with niche actors by choosing an accommodative, adversarial or dismissive strategy towards niche issues. Still, previous studies offer no unanimous answer to the question of the exact electoral effect of each particular approach.

This is evident especially with regard to the most popular strategy of issue accommodation. A frequent argument is that a shift to the right by a mainstream competitor contributes to radical right parties losing support. Yet [several cases](#), including Hungary, Austria and the UK, show that mainstream co-optation also legitimises radical right issues and establishes them in the midst of the democratic discourse, facilitating the success of niche parties. The timing of the shift to the right is often mentioned as a cause of these varying effects. Nonetheless, even late mainstream re-positioning can lead to failure for radical right parties (Poland), whereas early co-optation does not always hamper radical right success (Hungary).

If the result of accommodative strategies is not fixed, what then accounts for their varying effects? I suggest that a shift of spatial positions regarding an issue is not the sole dimension of party competition. Instead, we must look not

only at *whether*, or *which* radical right issues are accommodated by mainstream parties, but also *how* they are accommodated, or in regard to which legitimising narratives within an issue does co-optation take place.

Next to spatial shifts, I therefore identify a discursive dimension of party competition that I describe as ‘narrative shifts’: do mainstream parties adopt more restrictive or exclusionary positions on, for example, minority or immigration issues, but remain within their own frame? Or do they also shift towards the underlying radical right frame on this issue? I argue that the influence of an accommodative strategy by mainstream parties on radical right electoral fortunes depends not only on whether mainstream competitors successfully co-opt salient issues central to the radical right, but also on whether they manage to obtain ‘frame ownership’ over important radical right narratives that legitimise these issues.

To account for the interaction between the discursive influence of radical right frames and narrative party competition, I look at key debates on collective identity (nationalising, minority and morality policy) in Hungary, Poland and Slovakia. The results of my analysis (a full account of the methodology is available in the [book](#)) suggest that narrative party competition over frames does influence radical right electoral fortunes, all else being equal.

When mainstream parties co-opt issues such as minority rights or immigration that are central to the radical right, it hampers the success of radical right parties if their mainstream competitors not only adopt the issue, but also the underlying narrative of the radical right that legitimises it. In Poland and Slovakia, mainstream parties managed to successfully adopt the resonant narrative of the radical right and thereby also colonised radical right voters. However, where this ‘frame takeover’ fails despite mainstream parties shifting their actual positions to the right, as was the case in Hungary, radical right parties profit from their distinctive approach due to the rising salience of the issue.



Hungary, government supporters and opponents alike hit the streets during the annual March 15 demonstration. Credit: [habeeb](#) (CY BA-SA 2.0)

Co-opting the approach of the radical right is therefore a double-edged sword for mainstream parties. While in some circumstances it can impede the success of radical right parties, it also influences the broader democratic discourse within a country and legitimises the wider narrative of the radical right. My analysis further suggests that simply ignoring newly emerging narratives is an ineffective approach. Should new salient issues arise, as in the case of Jobbik’s anti-Roma discourse in Hungary, both strategies provide favourable opportunities for niche parties and their narratives to enter a country’s party system.

A better strategy would be to decrease the resonance of radical right narratives by presenting comprehensive, non-exclusionary, pluralist counter-narratives, rather than simply co-opting or ignoring the platform of radical right parties. Admittedly the effectiveness of this approach depends on the extent to which nearby competitors resist the temptation to seek new voters on the far right.

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