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Demonisation of political discourses? How mainstream parties talk about the populist radical right

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ABSTRACT

Academic research focuses on political communication of populist radical right parties and on their discourses about the political mainstream. Yet, we know less about how the political mainstream talks about radical right populists. Scholars assume a demonisation of populist radical right parties by the mainstream, which portrays the far-right outsiders as Nazis or fascists. This study assesses whether demonising discourses are indeed a common communicative element of Western European mainstream parties by analysing parties' messages on Twitter in ten Western European countries during election campaigns. The findings indicate that demonising discourses are not as widespread as assumed in the literature but occur exclusively among some centre-left parties. In the article it is argued that historical contexts (experiences with fascist rule) and electoral breakthrough of radical right parties might explain why certain centre-lefts demonise their far-right competitors while others do not.

KEYWORDS Content analysis; populism; radical right; mainstream parties; demonisation

Populist radical right parties increasingly gain attention among academics, who focus on their electorate, their communication and discourses, as well as on their influence on the media, public opinion and political systems (Albertazzi and Mueller 2013; Ernst *et al.* 2019; Huber and Schimpf 2016; Manucci and Weber 2017; Rooduijn 2014, 2018). Populist parties divide society in a vertical dimension: on the one hand, there is the corrupt or immoral political elite not respecting the will of the people and on the other the people themselves whose will should guide politics (Mudde 2004). Moreover, most Western European populist parties are further characterised as nativist, dividing society in a horizontal dimension into

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non-native out-groups (immigrants; cultural or religious groups) and native in-groups (the national people; Christians) (Mudde 2007).

Especially communicative practices of the populist radical right towards mainstream parties have been the subject of investigation in recent years (Ernst *et al.* 2019; Rooduijn *et al.* 2014). Scholars and political observers agree that the populist radical right delegitimises or demonises political opponents by portraying them as evil and as not acting in the interest of the people (Mudde 2015; Müller 2016).

However, while we know much about how radical right populists (RRP) try to delegitimise the political mainstream, we know very little about how mainstream parties talk about the populist radical right. Several academics claim that mainstream parties themselves use demonising and delegitimising discourses when talking about RRP in order to deal with these challengers (Hagelund 2003; Mouffe 2005) but besides single case studies no systematic comparative analyses exist so far (Van Heerden and Van der Brug 2017). This study attempts to provide empirical data regarding the question whether mainstream parties indeed demonise RRP by analysing messages on Twitter of centre-right and centre-left parties in ten Western European countries. We thereby focus on the salience of demonising discourses and test hypotheses partially derived from negative campaigning literature and rational choice approaches.

The study proceeds by first defining the term demonisation as portraying political opponents as fascists and extremists and collects assumptions regarding demonising discourses of mainstream parties towards RRP. After illustrating the research design and methodological approach, we proceed with the analysis. In sum, in only a few countries do centre-left parties portray the radical right as close to extremism or fascism. In order to validate the findings of the national parties' communication on Twitter, we further analyse *European* mainstream parties' Twitter profiles as well as speeches from German party conferences as an alternative type of text source. In sum, centre-right parties are far less engaged in demonising discourses than the centre-left. In order to explain the heterogeneous tendencies among the latter, we rely on a variety of potential explanations.

The concept of demonisation

How do mainstream parties demonise the populist right? First it needs to be clarified what demonisation means. Although this term is frequently used by a number of scholars, some of them do not provide a definition or refer to other terms for the same purpose (Mouffe 2005; Saveljeff 2011). Mouffe (2005) for example talks about an 'increasing moralisation of political discourse' (58) and 'a strategy of moral denunciation' (67) of

mainstream parties towards RRP. Her use of the term 'moralisation' is very close to what others define as demonisation: portraying competing political actors as inherently *evil* in order to delegitimise them (Kling 2019; Van Heerden 2014; Van Praag 2005). Yet, as mentioned by Van Heerden and Van der Brug (2017) this is an insufficient definition regarding the operationalisation of the concept for empirical measurements. What does 'evilness' mean and how can it be measured? We agree with Van Heerden (2014: 10) that demonisation means 'more than mere evil, it encompasses *absolute* evil'. But how can RRP be portrayed in that way? For the purpose of this study, we rely on one specific form of demonisation in line with previous studies (Van Heerden 2014; Van Spanje and Azrout 2019): portraying political actors as close to Nazism, fascism and extremism.

Several academics argue that mainstream parties and the media attempt to link the populist right to right-wing extremism (Mouffe 2005), racism and National Socialism (Hellström and Nilsson 2010; Van Spanje and Azrout 2019). National Socialism or fascism is responsible for Genocide, World War and related evils (Van Heerden 2014; Van Praag 2005). This is common sense not only in Western European countries but also in the whole of Europe and international politics (Adler-Nissen 2014; Van Heerden 2014). Speaking with Van Spanje and Azrout (2019: 291), 'if a party is labelled "neo-Nazi" or "fascist," its viability as an option in a democracy is clearly in question' (see also, Linden and Klandermans 2006: 173). Nazism and the Nazi regime are not only condemned by all types of political actors (with the exception of neo-Nazi groups perhaps) but it is seen as an exceptional *moral* disaster in human history. As mentioned by Van Heerden (2014: 10), in the case of National Socialism morality is no matter of interpretation: 'The Holocaust has such a moral magnitude that it is unparalleled'. In this context, she cites Robert Braun (1994: 181) who claimed, 'survivors and humanists alike argue that the Holocaust possesses an explicit moral meaning that should be represented in all historical narratives'. Accordingly, it does not seem surprising that some scholars found that portraying RRP as close to Nazism or fascism lowers vote shares for these parties – at least during specific periods or under certain conditions (Van Heerden and Van der Brug 2017; Van Spanje and Azrout 2019). As Rooduijn and Akkerman (2017: 195) argue, extremist parties lack legitimacy and have therefore not fared well after World War II. RRP have tried to overcome the stigma of being associated with Nazism, fascism or extremism by adopting a 'winning formula' that combines nativism and populism. In this regard, the demonisation campaigns carried out by mainstream parties could be interpreted as an attempt to undermine this 'moderation' strategy of RRP.

At this point, the difference between 'demonisation' and the related and frequently used term 'stigmatisation' needs to be clarified. Stigmatisation concerns societal groups, such as homeless, unemployed people or religious, cultural and ethnic minorities, which are shunned by the stigmatiser (Van Heerden 2014). According to Linden and Klandermans (2006: 172), 'stigmatization implies that a characteristic of a person is taken as evidence that this person is flawed, devalued and less human' (see also Crocker *et al.* 1998). Moreover, stigmatisation is a sociological concept and rejects individuals based on certain characteristics while demonisation is a political concept that rejects groups and actors because they are perceived of being a *threat* and a *danger* to society (Van Heerden 2014).

Demonisation of the populist radical right?

Several scholars argue that mainstream parties use demonising accusations and refer to anti-pluralist arguments when confronted with RRP. According to Chantal Mouffe, mainstream parties portray RRP as a threat: 'So, to draw the frontier between the "good democrats" and the "evil extreme right" is very convenient, since the "them" can now be considered as a sort of moral disease which need to be condemned morally, not fought politically' (Mouffe 2005: 57). Regarding the Swedish case, Saveljeff (2011: 44) agrees that mainstream parties use the strategy of demonisation claiming to stand 'for a morally right political position that is far removed from the (immoral) position held by the Sweden Democrats' (Saveljeff 2011). According to Hellström and Nilsson (2010), the media as well as the centre-left accuse the Sweden Democrats of being undemocratic, close to fascism and racist.

Besides assumptions and anecdotal evidence, only few studies systematically measure demonising discourses – however, without taking a comparative perspective. Van Spanje and Azrout (2019) examine news media coverage of the Dutch party PVV in order to trace articles containing respective 'demonising' keywords. However, the main aim of this study is to measure the effect of such articles on voting behaviour which also explains the exclusionary focus on the Netherlands. In addition, Van Heerden and Van der Brug (2017) conduct a content analysis of Dutch national newspapers and opinion weeklies in order to estimate the effect of demonising discourses on voting behaviour. Van Spanje (2010) offers a comparative analysis of mainstream parties' exclusionary strategies towards the radical right, however, without measuring *demonising* strategies of mainstream parties. Yet, his study offers useful hypotheses which partially can be adopted for the purpose of this study.

Concluding, there is a multiple lack of research on demonising discourses against the populist right in Western Europe. First, research has so far mostly focussed on the media and not on political parties. Second, existing studies on demonisation only focussed on the Netherlands while comparative studies did not consider this concept. Accordingly, we know little about mainstream parties' demonising discourses about the RRP and whether they are as widespread in Western European parties systems as it is widely assumed in the academic literature.

Hypotheses

How should we expect mainstream parties to behave towards RRP? In this study, we mainly refer to rational choice approaches and literature on negative campaigning, concerned with 'attacks' towards political opponents (Geer 2006; Haselmayer 2019): 'negativity is any criticism levelled by one candidate against another during a campaign' (Geer 2006: 23). While *demonising* should only be considered as *one* particularly delegitimising form of negative campaigning – among many others[1] – assumptions from this strand of literature are also useful for the purpose of this study. Parties use negative campaigning in order to persuade 'risk-averse voters "not to vote" for a party or candidate and to mobilise own supporters' (Haselmayer 2019: 361). While research on negative campaigning does not clearly indicate that parties benefit from it in terms of votes, 'political practitioners typically assume that negative campaigning "works"' (Haselmayer 2019: 365). Moreover, psychological approaches suggest that individuals 'give greater weight to negative entities' (Rozin and Royzman 2001). Negative campaigning might therefore have a larger public appeal than positive campaigning (Baumeister *et al.* 2001). Negative (demonising) campaigning towards the *radical right* should be even 'easier' to conduct by the mainstream parties than towards other parties since the exclusionist nativist ideology of the far-right can indeed be considered a threat for liberal democracy (Akkerman 2017; Rydgren 2017).

First, a more general hypothesis is formulated assuming that there is a cross-national trend among western European mainstream parties to demonise RRP in order to get rid of them. Demonising discourses – as one specific form of negative campaigning – have been identified within single countries (Hellström and Nilsson 2010; Saveljeff 2011) but also as a general pattern of Western mainstream parties (Mouffe 2005). Thus, at least in countries where RRP exist and have chances to enter the national parliament, the political mainstream should attempt to demonise them. In this sense, the first hypothesis is as follows:

H1: Demonising the radical right is a common discursive feature of Western European mainstream parties.

Second, the ideological features of parties might determine demonising discourses about the populist radical right. According to Van Spanje, the ideological distance between the radical right and respective competing parties might explain why the former is ostracised. He (2010: 358) refers to rational choice arguments, claiming 'the closer two parties are in ideological terms, the greater the chances of cooperation between them – at least in terms of government coalition formation'. One could further argue that issues RRP and voters emphasise – especially anti-immigration standpoints – are closer to centre-right voters and parties than to Social Democrats (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2015; Hinnfors *et al.* 2012: 589; Walgrave and De Swert 2007). Thus, it could be assumed that the centre-right does not mainly address the nativist orientation of the radical right (excluding out-groups) as much as Social Democrats do. This may be reflected in a lower number of discourses portraying them as xenophobic, close to Nazism and fascism. Hypothesis 2 is therefore as follows:

H2: The centre-left demonises the radical right more frequently than the centre-right.

Third, it is assumed that incumbent parties are less likely to place emphasis on negative campaigning than the opposition (Haselmayer 2019). Elmelund-Praestekaer (2010: 152) concludes his study about the tone of the Danish parties' election campaigns claiming, 'incumbent parties are less negative than both their direct challengers and supporting parties with no desires of gaining office' (see also: Walter and Van der Brug 2013). The logic behind this assumption is that governing parties are able to emphasise their record in government and therefore focus on positive campaigning in both two and multiparty systems (Haselmayer 2019). Parties in opposition or 'challengers' might use negative campaigning also in order to increase media attention on their own campaign, even though this argument is mostly based on observation in two-party and presidential systems (Druckman *et al.* 2009). It therefore seems likely that especially mainstream parties in opposition demonise the radical right while governing parties rather focus on positive campaigning. Thus, the third hypothesis is as follows:

H3: Mainstream parties in opposition are more likely to demonise the radical right than incumbent parties.

Fourth, literature suggests a trend among western European mainstream parties to demonise RRP as a consequence of the electoral advances of the latter in the last years (Mouffe 2005). Thus, we could expect that demonisation strategies are positively correlated to the electoral

success of RRP, which constitute a threatening competitor for mainstream parties. Nevertheless, we also find convincing arguments from rational choice literature that contradict the previous reasoning. As Van Spanje (2010: 358) argues, 'parties have an interest in excluding every other party from competition unless they need to cooperate with it in order to reach their goals'. In a similar vein, negative campaigning literature suggests that 'a strong need for future collaboration may suppress the use of negative campaigns' (Elmelund-Praestekaer, 2010: 139). Thus, we could expect that RRP are less likely to be demonised the greater their electoral success since mainstream parties might depend on RRP for potential coalitions (Laver and Schofield 1998). This is particularly true for the cases examined in this study, since all countries are considered multiparty systems that require coalition governments (except the UK maybe). However, as mentioned in Hypothesis 2, ideological proximity is a factor that must be taken into account: only the centre-right might refrain from demonising RRP for office seeking purposes while it is unlikely that the centre-left is willing to cooperate with the radical right due to its ideological distance. Considering these mixed arguments about the electoral strength of RRP and mainstream parties' demonising discourses, we analyse the relationship between RRP's electoral strength and the probability of being a target of a demonisation campaign using two conflicting hypotheses:

H4a: The greater the electoral success of radical right parties, the more they are demonised by mainstream parties.

H4b: The greater the electoral success of radical right parties, the less they are demonised by mainstream parties.

Research design and method

This study examines one type of discursive reaction of mainstream parties towards RRP, namely demonising communicative content. We focus on Western Europe since academics assume demonising discourses especially in that world region. RRP gained considerable electoral success in Western Europe in the last decades (Lewis *et al.* 2018). In particular, 10 countries have been selected where RRP are represented in national parliaments or entered them after the selected election campaign: Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Italy, Spain, France, the Netherlands, Sweden, Norway and the United Kingdom (2015). Belgium and Denmark have not been included in the sample since data was not available. In order to identify countries with far-right parties, we rely on the evaluations from the 'Populist' (Rooduijn *et al.* 2019). We restrict the analysis of communication practices to *mainstream parties*. Mostly in line with Meguid (2005:

348), mainstream parties are defined 'as the electorally dominant actors in the centre-left, centre, and centre-right blocs on the Left–Right political spectrum'. We therefore focus on Social Democratic and conservative/Christian democratic parties in these countries (for an overview see Online Appendix 1). In order to confirm or question the meaningfulness of the results from the *national* parties, we further analyse discourses of the *European* mainstream party families, namely, the European People's Party (EPP) and the Party of European Socialists (PES).

Since we are interested in communicative content or discourses about political competitors and not in policy positions or issues, we analyse public statements from mainstream parties instead of traditional text sources such as election manifestos. In this regard, posts on Twitter are selected, which comment on political developments and opponents. In contrast to news media, the selection of Twitter allows the analysis of the communicative activity of the parties without any mediation. Compared to Facebook, competing RRP are much more often addressed by the political mainstream on Twitter.[2] In order to assess whether mainstream parties use Twitter for campaigning, we traced references to all relevant parties within the national party systems.[3] As we illustrate in the following section, most mainstream parties are highly engaged in Twitter campaigns.

Posts are collected using the integrated search tool from Twitter and messages are analysed during the most recent national election campaigns (as of March 2020) except for the British case, which is examined during the 2015 campaign.[4] In order to gather a considerable number of statements from mainstream parties, six months before the respective elections are considered. For the European mainstream parties, we analysed six months before the European elections in May 2019. While we do not count the references to other European non-radical right parties – due to time constraints – we were able to trace the *total amount of Tweets* from the European mainstream party families using the *twitteR* package. This allows us to assess whether Twitter is indeed used regularly as a communication platform by European mainstream parties.

Despite the fact that Twitter seems to be an important campaigning tool for most mainstream parties, we further observed discourses towards the radical right on national party conventions for the German case in order to evaluate whether parties might talk differently (or more/less frequently) about the radical right on other platforms. Party congresses in Germany are collegial bodies of functionaries and members of a political party. They 'decide on matters of the statutes, programme and political line' (Rudzio 2019: 124). Numerous leading party politicians give speeches at party conferences and explicitly talk about political competitors. Hence, including an additional German case study about speeches at party

conferences broadens the perspective on party communication and reveals whether the main findings from the Twitter analysis can be validated. Regarding the CDU, we analyse all speeches and contributions of the 29th, 30th and 31st party conferences in 2016 and 2018, respectively. For the SPD we examine conferences from June and December 2017 as well as the conventions held in January and April 2018.

We rely on a quantitative content analysis combining dictionary-based with manual approaches (Rooduijn and Pauwels 2011). We first run a computer-based analysis using a dictionary including keywords, which refer to the respective RRP.[5] In a second step, all posts including at least one of the keywords are analysed manually in order to trace the concrete content and references to the RRP. While Van Heerden and Van der Brug (2017) only consider Nazism and fascism as demonising attributes, we broaden the range of 'evil' allegations relating to National Socialism. We agree with Van Spanje and Azrout (2019) that besides fascism and Nazism also racism, (right-wing) extremism and anti-Semitism can be considered as undisputed 'evils' mostly related to the Nazi past. Yet we do not concur with the opinion that portraying the radical right as 'discriminating' and 'radical' has the same demonising quality. We further decided to measure anti-democratic attributions even when not explicitly linked to *right-wing* extremism (e.g. 'dictator' or 'anti-democrat'). Democracy 'enjoys the support of public opinion and even a universal allure' and no one – neither autocratic leaders – 'dares to declare himself or herself a non-democrat or an anti-democratic' (Urbinati 2014). Therefore, accusing political competitors of being anti democrats questions the legitimacy of the respective actor.

Table 1 illustrates the respective category system. For the sake of inter-coder reliability, we calculated Cohen's Kappa based on results from a student who was instructed to code Tweets from the Spanish PSOE.[6] Cohen's Kappa lies at 0.882 and is statistically significant, meaning that inter-coder reliability can be seen as almost perfectly consistent (Landis and Koch 1977).

The final results of the analysis reflect the percentage of demonising discourses on the total number of posts, which refer to the respective RRP. Accordingly, the unit of measurement is the single post while the unit of analysis consists of all messages that address the competing RRP during an election campaign. For the analysis of the speeches in German party conferences, we select the single sentence as the unit of measurement. The score of each conference reflects the percentage of sentences directed towards the AfD on the total amount of sentences. The 'main' score illustrates the amount of demonising discourses on the number of sentences, which contain a reference to the AfD.

Table 1. Category system for measures of demonising discourses.

Type of demonisation	Operationalisation	Example sentences
Direct naming	Party, leading politician or their actions are named right-wing extremists; fascist; anti-democratic etc. Party, leading politician or their actions are equated with extremists from the National Socialist past. No differentiation between different groups within the party	#Gauland talks like a Nazi. The #AfD is a disgrace to Germany.[a] (SPD) Vienna is the most liveable city in the world. Why is that so? There are no right-wing extremists in the government here. And therefore there will be no coalition with this FPÖ in Vienna. (SPÖ) It is very painful to see that #Vox, an extreme right-wing party, is complaining against President #Zapatero. (PSOE)
Indirect naming	Only specific parts of the party are named (right-wing) extremists or anti-democrats; fascists etc. and politicians are accused of having ties to extremist groups (but not as being extremists themselves). Party is portrayed as close to right-wing extremism without explicitly framing the whole party in that way. Party is accused of not rejecting right-wing extremism Party is portrayed as opposing anti-extremist or antifascist policies and traditions.	Strache's relevant connections with the neo-Nazi scene are frightening. Strache is massively under pressure and under obligation: He must clarify and disclose the #Küssel case -or resign immediately. We'll sign the anti-fascist register mocked in these hours by Salvini. (PD) No, Madame Le Pen, the Veld'Hiv is not just a detail of history. (PS)

[a]For the original quotations see Online Appendix 3.

Findings

First, we control for the suitability of our Twitter corpus for the purpose of this study. Therefore, we need to ensure that parties use Twitter for political campaigning and for messages about their party competitors. Table 2 shows the total number of Tweets about political competitors for each party as well as the percentage of Tweets dedicated to each competitor. First, the image that emerges indicates that parties do use Twitter for messages about their competitors. It is true that Norwegian parties hardly refer to party competitors on Twitter (centre-right = 16; centre-left = 9) and Swiss parties do so only slightly more often (centre-right = 18; centre-left = 21) as well as the Italian centre-right (n = 24). However, beside these outliers, even parties whose scores appear to be rather low address political competitors at least every six days (on average). The table further suggests that not only the centre-left but also the centre-right is active on Twitter. While the centre-right refers to party competitors less often than the centre-left, these differences are not statistically significant.[7] In order to get a more comprehensive picture of the direction of party competition, Table 2 shows how often mainstream parties refer to

Table 2. Shares of references to parties from different families.

Party	Total Tweets	Mainstream (left/right)	Radical right	Other centre-right	Liberal	Green	Left
SPÖ	215	89,77	75,35	X	6,98	6,98	X
ÖVP	41	46,34	63,42	X	9,76	4,88	X
SPD	178	80,34	17,98	X	6,74	5,62	0
CDU	223	95,96	2,24	X	4,93	9,87	4,48
CSU	54	74,07	3,70	X	0	20,37	5,56
SP	21	9,52	52,38	X	42,86	33,33	X
CVP	18	16,67	72,22	X	55,56	27,78	X
PD	133	42,86	57,9	X	X	0	X
FI[a]	24	50	12,5	X	X	0	X
PvdA	50	32	18	8	26	18	20
VVD	30	6,67	63,33	3,33	10	3,33	16,67
PSOE	660	43,03	9,4	X	28,79	X	51,52
PP	1053	92,97	3,32	X	8,45	X	5,89
PS	262	20,61	33,59	X	42,37	X	14,12
LR	88	27,27	13,64	X	70,46	X	3,41
S	169	41,42	60,95	3,55	4,73	0,59	0
M	100	75	15	1	1	11	8
Ap	9	88,89	88,89	X	11,11	0	0
H	16	43,75	0	37,5	18,75	0	0
Labour	453	90,51	13,02	X	10,38	X	X
Cons	249	99,2	1,21	X	0,80	X	X

[a]Not mentioned are references to the Italian Five-Star-Movement.

Note: Illustrated are the percentages of Tweets referring to different parties on the total amount of references to other parties; X = No existing party.

Abbreviations: SPÖ=Social Democratic Party of Austria; ÖVP = Austrian People's Party; CDU = Christian Democratic Union of Germany; CSU = Christian Social Union in Bavaria; SPD = Social Democratic Party of Germany; CVP = Christian Democratic People's Party; SP = Social Democratic Party; PD = Democratic Party; FI = Forza Italia; VVD = People's Party for Freedom and Democracy; PvdA = Labour Party; PP = People's Party; PSOE = Spanish Socialist Workers' Party; PS = Socialist Party; LR = The Republicans; M = Moderate Party; S = Social Democratic Workers' Party of Sweden; H = Conservative Party; Ap = Labour Party (Norway); Labour = Labour Party (UK); Cons = Conservatives (UK).

the radical right compared to other parties. The percentages of Tweets dedicated to the individual party types reveal that only in Switzerland and the Netherlands does the centre-right (CVP; VVD) refer more often to the radical right than Social Democrats.

In sum, these first findings leave space for at least two different interpretations. First, it could be argued that the right-wing mainstream does not consider the far-right as its main ideological competitor. Second, it might consider it as a competitor and as a potential threat to democracy but may follow a different strategy than the centre-left trying to ignore it. Since we found the same patterns in nearly all countries, we think that the first explanation is more appropriate. It would be rather a coincidence if centre-right parties in nearly all countries under examination had decided to follow a strategy of ignorance towards the far-right. Last, it should be emphasised again that the lack of references to the radical right among the centre-right mainstream is not due to the fact that the latter is

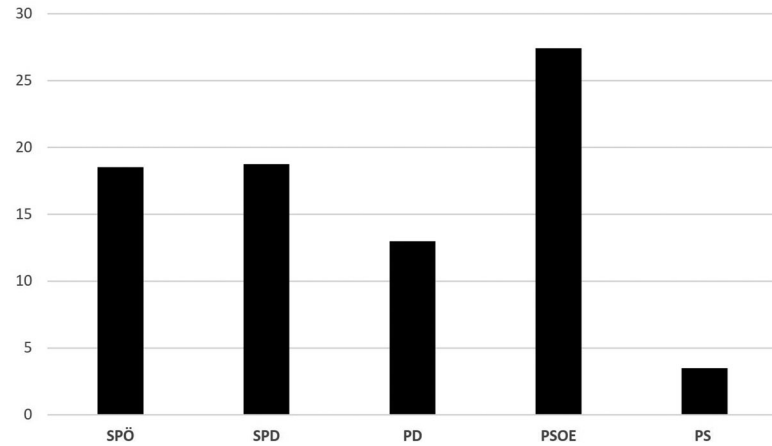

Figure 1. Percentage of demonising discourses about the radical right.

not engaged on Twitter: Conservatives and Christian Democrats refer to their political competitors but mostly to those from the centre-left.

Moving on to the content of messages directed at the radical right, Figure 1 illustrates the percentage of demonising discourses for the single parties. Only those parties are illustrated, which portray the radical right as close to (right-wing) extremism or fascism (5 out of 21). This finding rejects the first hypothesis that demonising the radical right is a common feature of Western European mainstream parties. It rather seems to be a common feature of Central and Southern European centre-left parties, while British and Scandinavian mainstream parties attack the far-right in a less hostile way. The latter is also true for Switzerland.

Interestingly, all parties mentioned in Figure 1 are centre-left parties. There is no single conservative party which demonises RRP. As mentioned above, this can be partially explained by the fact that the centre-right in general tends to ignore its far-right competitor on Twitter, emphasising messages about its centre-left competitors. Nevertheless, the fact that in over 140 messages regarding the radical right we found no single demonising discourse – while the centre-left demonises the radical right in more than every tenth tweet (on average) – also indicates that the centre-right's main concern is not the far-right's nativist ideology. Thus, the findings provide support for Hypothesis 2, that the centre-left is more prone to use demonising discourses than the centre-right, which is ideologically closer to the radical right. The party demonising the radical right most frequently is the Spanish PSOE, which portrays Vox particularly often as right-wing extremist. It is true that some centre-right parties criticise the far-right but they do not accuse them of being fascist or extremist. For example, the ÖVP portrays the FPÖ as corrupt and

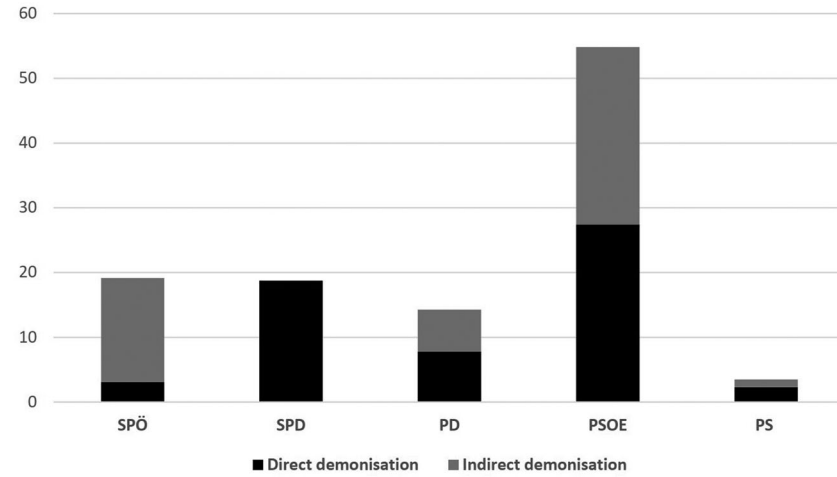

Figure 2. Composition of demonising discourses about the radical right.

abusive (e.g. 28 August 2019). The German CDU seems to trivialise the AfD by equating it with the German Left Party (Die Linke) and by excluding coalition options with both actors (e.g. 15 and 17 September 2017). Forza Italia in Italy even refers positively to the League by emphasising their own will to form a centre-right coalition after the elections (e.g. 15 November 2017). Also the Spanish centre-right refers to Vox more as an ally than as a political opponent (e.g. 2 June 2019).

In order to provide a more fine-grained analysis, demonising discourses are classified in two different categories. First, direct demonisation: the respective party or its politicians are directly named (right-wing) extremists, fascists, Nazis, racists or anti-Semites. Second, the far-right is sometimes portrayed as *close to* (right-wing) extremism for example by criticising that *some* of its members are Nazis or anti-democrats (but not the party as a whole or its leading figures), by stating that its positions and narratives *resemble* those of fascists and anti-democrats or by claiming that the far-right is not distancing itself from right-wing extremist groups. Figure 2 shows that direct demonisation is dominant among the centre-left, except for the Austrian SPÖ.

The fact that only the centre-left uses demonising discourses towards the radical right suggests that ideology is a necessary factor when explaining the differences in the use of this type of negative campaigning among mainstream parties. However, one still might question this conclusion, claiming that parties in some countries do not communicate extensively on Twitter. Even though most national parties do, we further examined the European mainstream parties' Twitter accounts in order to take this objection seriously. The findings from the analysis of the EPP's and PES's

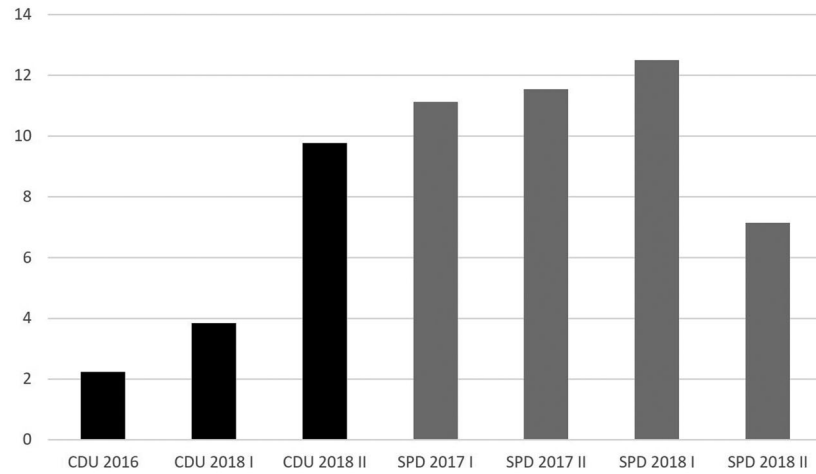

Figure 3. Share of demonising discourses in party conventions on the total amount of references to the AfD.

profiles clearly confirm the results from the national parties. Both EPP and PES use Twitter extensively: the centre-right published 761 and the centre-left 1,348 Tweets in the six months before the European elections. As observed for the national parties, it is mostly the centre-left referring to the radical right (n = 55) while the centre-right hardly mentions it (n = 3). Again, it is only the centre-left demonising the radical right. 16 Tweets out of 55 referring to RRP or leaders demonise them, equating to 29.09%. In contrast, none of the three Tweets from the EPP towards RRP demonises the latter.

Yet, one still might claim that these results only account for communication on Twitter. In order to assess whether we find different tendencies among the centre-right and centre-left on other communication channels, we analysed a different type of political text for one specific case, namely, discourses from German party conferences. First, unlike on Twitter, the centre-right addresses the AfD more often than the SPD. On average, CDU politicians refer in 0.76% of their sentences (n = 112) in their conventions to the AfD (SD = 0.2) – the SPD only in 0.56% (SD = 0.11; n = 82). However, despite the fact that the AfD is mentioned more frequently by CDU politicians, it is hardly demonised, which rather validates the findings from the Twitter analysis. Figure 3 illustrates the share of demonising discourses on the total amounts of references to the AfD. In total, the CDU demonises the AfD in 5.36% of its sentences about the party, among the SPD it is about 10.99%. Even the rather high score of the convention in December 2018 (II) only consists of four demonising statements (at the two preceding conventions only one such statement is

made). Moreover, we only found two *directly* demonising statements among the CDU – none of them in December 2018 – but six among the SPD. Delving a bit deeper into the demonising discourses of the German centre-right reveals that they are sometimes not as demonising as one would expect, for example when the CDU equates the left party Die Linke with the AfD – as we already observed on Twitter. In 2016, Elmar Brok frames both parties as threats for democracy: 'The kinship of Frauke Petry [AfD] and Sahra Wagenknecht [Die Linke] must be declassified; we must make it clear that these are the enemies of democracy, equally so'. While this statement is coded as *direct* demonising according to our category system, the fact that Die Linke – a left-wing party, which can hardly be considered anti-pluralist or extremist[8] (Akkerman 2017) – is framed as an equal threat to democracy as the AfD rather trivialises the latter. At least it suggests that the radical right is not a unique threat to liberal democracy. We only found one statement within our sample of about 16,000 sentences of the German centre-right, which directly demonises the AfD without referring to other parties (February 2018: 'We want to clearly distinguish ourselves from those who as functionaries, as members of the AfD are moving with resentments, with racism, with denial of the Holocaust and bring this into our parliaments').

Thus, ideology is a crucial factor determining whether mainstream parties demonise the radical right. Yet, it does not explain why certain centre-left parties do so while others refrain from portraying the far-right as fascists and close to Nazism. Hypothesis 3 suggests that opposition status determines whether mainstream parties demonise the radical right. However, parties in opposition cannot be considered as being more prone to accuse the far-right of being close to fascism. Within the period of examination, only the SPÖ was in opposition while the SPD, PD, PS and PSOE were in government – yet all of them demonise their radical right competitors. Other centre-left opposition parties did not demonise the radical right (Labour parties in UK and Norway).

But what about vote shares (H4a/b)? Does the electoral success of far-right parties impact demonising discourses of the centre-left? In this regard, we refer to data provided by populism tracker,[9] illustrating vote shares for RRP four times a year based on national opinion polls.[10] We calculated the mean between RRP's vote share shortly before the beginning and once or twice during the election campaign. The electoral predictions varied between 9.5% (Vox) and 28% (SVP) of the votes. However, we neither find support for H4a nor for H4b: the electoral strength of RRP does not explain why some mainstream parties demonise them and others do not. Some centre-left parties demonise RRP with a higher vote share (>15%; e.g. FPÖ and RN) and others those who had

lower predictions (<15%; e.g. Vox, AfD, and Lega). Also among the negative cases we find countries with higher (Sweden; Switzerland) and lower electoral expectations for RRP (UK, Norway). A better explanation of the differences among the centre-left seems to be the *electoral irruption* of the radical right. Centre-left parties were more prone to demonise RRP in those countries where the latter experienced an electoral breakthrough (since the last national elections). For instance, Vox, AfD, and Lega went from having less than 5% of the votes in the previous elections to exceeding 12% in the elections under study. In the case of the National Rally, opinion polls predicted considerable electoral gains in the first quarter of 2017 and the presidential candidate Marine le Pen even passed to the second round of the presidential elections. The only exceptions are UKIP, which also experienced an electoral breakthrough in 2015 but was not demonised by the Labour party, and the FPÖ, a consolidated RRP without increased vote shares in 2019, which nevertheless was demonised by the SPÖ.

Yet, there might be further explanations for our findings, rooted in historical causes and in the specific nature of the single RRP. In this regard, we find that centre-left parties in countries which experienced fascist rule (or occupation) – Germany and Italy, but also Austria, Spain and France (the latter occupied by Nazi-Germany) – demonise the radical right while in the UK, Switzerland and Sweden it does not. Hence, one could argue that a fascist past makes Social Democrats more sensible to respective tendencies among RRP. On the other hand, this does not explain why Norwegian and Dutch centre-left parties do not demonise the radical right since Norway and the Netherlands were occupied by Nazi Germany as well. In this respect, the *combination* of both factors (fascist government and electoral breakthrough) offers a better explanation: the centre-left might be more sensitive to the electoral irruption of the radical right in those countries which experienced fascist rule.

But what about the nature of RRP? Some parties from the radical right are considered more radical or extremist than others, which might explain why they are (or why they are not) demonised. Data from the Chapel Hill expert survey[11] shows that RRP in Sweden, Norway and Switzerland are less extreme in their overall political ideology (0 = Extreme left; 5 = Centre; 10 = Extreme right) compared to RRP from other countries in our sample. These parties are indeed not demonised by the respective centre-left mainstream party. Yet, the fact that the Italian League is considered less extreme rather contradicts the assumption that the degree of 'extremism' accounts for mainstream parties' discourses (Figure 4). However, others argue the League under Salvini is at least as radical and nativist as other European RRP, contradicting estimations from the

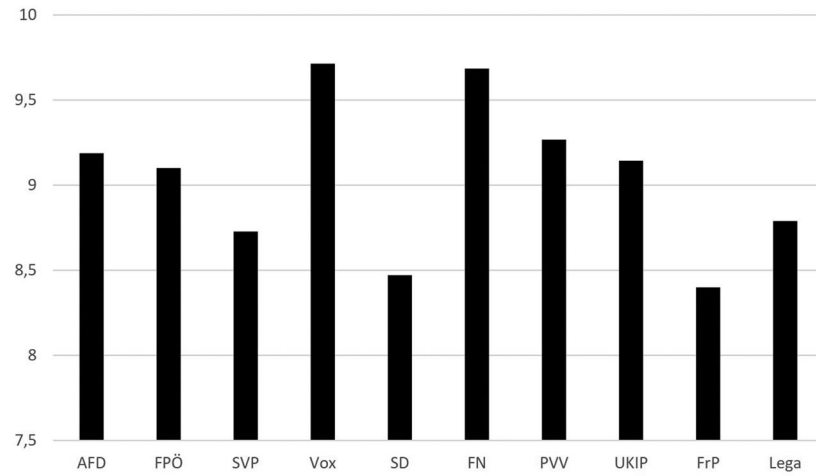

Figure 4. Overall ideology of RRP.

Chapel Hill experts (Albertazzi *et al.* 2018). The fact that UKIP and PVV – considered as extremist as the FPÖ and AfD – are not demonised might be explained by the majority system in the UK – where UKIP gained about 13% of the votes but only received one seat – and the electoral decline of the Dutch Social Democrats (losing almost 20% compared to the previous elections), which compete with smaller left, liberal and green parties as Table 2 suggests. Table 3 summarises the different explanations for demonising discourses from centre-left parties.

Discussion and conclusion

This study has attempted to offer a first comparative and systematic analysis of mainstream parties' demonising discourses about the radical right. Scholars assume that mainstream parties in Western Europe demonise and thereby delegitimise RRP. Our analysis revealed that demonising the radical right is not such a widespread phenomenon as widely assumed. Only 5 out of 21 parties are using such messages. Moreover, it is only the centre-left doing so, while the centre-right does not portray its far-right competitors as close to right-wing extremism. Accordingly, ideology seems to be a major factor influencing discourses about the radical right. The centre-right is ideologically closer to the radical right than the centre-left, meaning that certain ideological positions may be less offensive for this party family than for the latter. Furthermore, the examined countries (except UK) are characterised by multiparty systems and fragmented parliaments requiring collaboration and coalitions which could suppress the centre-right's use of demonisation campaigns against the

Table 3. Demonisation campaigns among the centre-left and potential explanations.

	Party in government		RRP's electoral strength		RRP's breakthrough*		Experience with fascist rule		Breakthrough AND fascist rule		"Extremist" nature of RRP	
	Yes	No	<15%	>15%	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Demonizing	SPD PSOE PD PS	SPÖ	SPD PSOE PD	SPÖ PS	SPD PSOE PD PS	SPÖ	SPD SPÖ PSOE PD PS		SPD SPÖ PSOE PD PS		SPD SPÖ PSOE PS	PD
Not demonizing	SP PvdA S	Labour Ap	Labour Ap	SP S	Labour	SP PvdA S Ap	Ap PvdA	SP S Labour		Labour SP PvdA S Ap	Labour PvdA	S AP SP

Note: *Marginal or minority parties (<5% in previous elections) that exceeded 10% in the elections under study (e.g. Vox). In the case of the National Rally, it passed to the second round of the presidential elections for the first time since 2002.

radical right. In Austria, the Netherlands, Spain, Italy, Norway and Switzerland, the centre-right has already collaborated in national and regional governments with the radical right. It is true that the findings from our German case study indicate that the centre-right might demonise the radical right via other channels than Twitter but to a much lower extent than the centre-left and mostly 'indirectly'. Nevertheless, future research should focus on comparative analyses of additional communication channels other than Twitter and not only on single case studies as we did.

Considering diverse explanations, we think that the electoral breakthrough of RRP in countries that experienced fascist rule might account for demonising discourses among the centre-left. We could reject the traditional assumption that parties in opposition are more likely to demonise RRP than incumbent parties. Yet, there might still be further explanations that account for demonising discourses, which we did not consider in our study.

What are the implications of the findings from this study? According to Mouffe (2005), demonising discourses are a serious issue since they question the legitimacy of democratically legitimated parties. It is true that some centre-left parties portray RRP as illegitimate. But what if this label, at least partially, reflects the real nature of such actors? Regarding the AfD – demonised by the SPD – it is indeed moving towards a racial ('völkisch') nationalist party (Häusler 2018), which is also partially shared by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution declaring the far-right 'wing' of the party with its approximately 7,000 members 'as a secure right-wing extremist effort against the free democratic basic order'.[12]

Accordingly, one could ask why mainstream parties should not call a spade a spade? Moreover, there is a major difference between demonising and delegitimising discourses of mainstream parties and RRP. The latter are often expected to reject *all* other political actors, claiming to be the only legitimate representative of the native people (Müller 2016; Rydgren 2017). The political mainstream accepts political pluralism and only questions the legitimacy of *specific* actors considered to be threatening pluralism and democracy. However, how mainstream parties talk about other competitors is still to be explored. In this sense, it would be particularly interesting to assess how the centre-right talks about far left parties.

Notes

1. Haselmayer (2019: 358) mentions different examples of negative campaigning. Parties might *insult*, *detest* or *dislike* political opponents or simply emphasise that they do *not agree* with them.
2. We collected Facebook posts from the Austrian mainstream parties in order to learn which social media platform parties are more prone to criticise

political opponents. The centre-right refers only twice to the FPÖ on Facebook but 18 times on Twitter. Regarding the centre-left, it does so only once on Facebook and 49 times on Twitter.

3. Towards parties with at least 5 percent according to the election results.
4. In 2019, no relevant far-right party participated in the general elections.
5. The dictionary mainly consists of the name of the respective far-right party and its abbreviation as well as the name of the party leader (see also: Van Heerden and van der Brug 2017). The list of keywords is illustrated in the Online Appendix (A2).
6. For inter-coder consistency, all sentences coded by author one were coded by the student as well as the same amount of sentences not coded by the author (random sampling).
7. The independent sample T-test (for the national parties) showed that the mean of references to competitors on Twitter is slightly higher among (215) than in the centre-right (172). However, these differences are not statistically significant (p-value > 0.05).
8. Especially in eastern Germany the party is seen more as a moderate social democratic party and has been part (sometimes as leading force) of several coalition governments, even though, some Marxist currents are still active within the party (Hough and Keith 2019).
9. https://progressivepost.eu/spotlights/populism-tracker.
10. For Switzerland, the United Kingdom and Norway we had to refer to opinion surveys collected by 'Politico' (https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/).
11. Regarding AfD, PVV and FN, we used data from the 2017 wave (since elections were held in this year). For countries where elections took place after 2017, we selected data from the 2019 wave. For the UK and UKIP (election 2015) we refer to the 2014 wave.
12. https://www.verfassungsschutz.de/de/oeffentlichkeitsarbeit/presse/pm-20200312-bfv-stuft-afd-teilorganisation-der-fluegel-als-gesichert-rechtsextremistische-bestrebung-ein.

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