

Back to the National Roots? The Role and Impact of the Radical Right in Eastern Europe Today

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Summary

Many signs point to a significant right-ward shift in East European politics. In the 1990s, the regime change led to a rush to democracy among the mainstream left and right and the radical right's ultranationalist agenda appeared rather marginal. However, the constant calls for a strong nation did not subside with democratic consolidation; rather they traveled across the political board and reached the mainstream – long before the current “refugee crisis” and nationalist reactions. It is therefore important to take a closer look at the role, and possible impact, of the radical right in Eastern Europe. If those parties and movements stabilize their position and gain even more traction in the region, the EU and its institutions, along with the respective democratic order, will face major problems.

The project's central research question is: How and to what degree did the radical right in East European countries negatively affect their democratic quality? Is there a direct relationship between electoral strength and impact, or do other parties' strategies, such as maintaining or abandoning a *cordon sanitaire* between them and the radical right, play a more crucial role? In the literature, democratic quality is understood in many different ways, from a certain set of institutional guarantees such as free elections and checks and balances, to the provision of rights and democratic governance. Following the theories of multicultural democracy, democratic quality in the project is understood and measured by the status and rights of minorities, refugees and immigrants. This is what the radical right (defined as populist and antiliberal, if not by its antidemocratic ultranationalism) fundamentally contests, and this constitutes the focus of the project which links radical right activities and impact to the level of democratic quality in Eastern Europe in a novel way.

Addressing these issues requires a closer comparative look at the interaction patterns between the radical right, most importantly but not exclusively in its manifestation as political parties, and other actors such as mainstream parties, civil society and the state. Applying an analytical model of the radical right's interaction and impact on policies developed earlier by the principal investigator, the project concentrates on a comparison of three groups of countries in Eastern Europe, i.e. (1) Czech Republic and Estonia; (2) Bulgaria and Slovakia; (3) Hungary, Poland, and Romania, which are distinct in terms of the strength and relevance of radical right parties and the strategic reactions of mainstream parties to these radical right challengers. By focused comparison of these three country groups and analytical tracing of the political processes of interaction between mainstream and radical right parties the project hopes to shed light on how and under what circumstances radical

right mobilization becomes problematic for the democratic quality, as measured here by policies aimed at curtailing the rights and status of national minorities, migrants and refugees.

The project hypothesizes that right-ward shifts in public policy, particularly with regard to minority inclusion and migrant and refugee rights, are more likely to occur if mainstream parties pursue a strategy of positive engagement (e.g. do not uphold a *cordon sanitaire*), and that once a right-ward shift occurs, the disappearance of the radical right from parliament or the electoral arena does not automatically lead to a “return to the center” (transformation of mainstream party/parties).

To investigate these and related questions, the project depends on a large amount of data collection and analysis in the above-mentioned countries, mainly in a qualitative way. The most important data collection is done with help by the experts. Key legislative proposals and draft bills in the field of national minorities, migrants and refugees will be identified and coded according to content and the party sponsors, in cooperation with the network of country experts in the region which the PI had built up over the past years. Those experts will also fill out the online survey on party positions, counter-mobilization and state response. Also, archival research and interviews will be conducted to gather complementary material on interaction patterns between major actors. Particularly with regard to “blackmail potential” of radical right parties it is important to reconstruct this potential by reading internal party documents and speaking to key party figures in order to find out to what degree the radical right was perceived as a threat to other parties.

Altogether, the project contributes to both further theory development on radical right actors in the political process and empirical comparative research across the entire region. We expect that our results are not only relevant to the literature on democratic transformation and radical right parties but also to a larger audience interested in understanding the latest developments in the region.

