The civic Zeitgeist: nationalism and liberal values in the European radical right

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Introduction

Tolerating intolerance?

«If we extend unlimited tolerance even to those who are intolerant, if we are not prepared to defend a tolerant society against the onslaught of the intolerant, then the tolerant will be destroyed and tolerance with them.»

Nobel Prize winner Karl Popper: the Open Society and its Enemies, 1945
(SVP 2011 – 2015 Party Programme: 122)

In an era where civic values are so widespread, do parties of the radical right stick to their ethnic and exclusionary ideological premises but remain marginalised, or do they adapt to the civic zeitgeist in the hope to attain legitimacy in their national political system? Increasingly in an age of globalization and European integration, the virtues and morals most valued in European countries, and identified as core to the identities of democratic nations in general, are those of tolerance, cultural diversity, liberalism and equality under the law. Paradoxical though it may seem the radical right is attempting to annex these values to its agenda progressively moving away from its exclusivist values of the past.

This article examines the relationship between nationalism and liberal values, and more specifically the redefinition of boundaries between national communities and others in the
rhetoric of radical right parties in Europe. Highlighting the inherent contradictions embedded within liberal ideology itself serves to challenge conventional wisdom regarding the ethnic-civic dichotomy in the study of nationalism which expects civic values to shield countries from radicalism and extremism. It is our position that the increased relevance of radical right parties in the political landscape of certain Western European nations is linked to the manner in which they employ civic elements of national identity in their discourse. Those radical right parties that enjoy relative success in mainstream electoral politics tend to be the ones best able to reframe their discourse in terms of these values. Instead of utilizing a rhetoric focused on ethnic and/or primordial elements of national identity such as race, creed, blood and kinship, these parties have annexed civic values in their discursive toolkit, including the notions of democracy, citizenship and respect for the rule of law.

To illustrate this argument, this article bridges two literatures, namely theories of nationalism and the radical right. Utilizing the classic ethnic-civic dichotomy in a novel manner, it associates different levels of radical right party success to the varying ability of the party to appropriate liberal values and civic elements of national identity in its rhetoric. Comparing the success of European radical right parties on a conceptual continuum ranging from the more electorally successful Swiss People’s Party (SVP), and the Dutch Pim Fortuyn List (LPF) and Party for Freedom (PVV) to the more mixed French Front National (FN), British National Party (BNP) and the National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD), we show that the parties that effectively deploy the symbolic resources of national identity through a predominantly voluntaristic prism tend to be the ones that fare better within their respective political systems.
We begin by examining the current prominence of civic values in Europe and the dilemma this poses for the radical right. We then proceed with a comparative analysis of the discourse of the above mentioned six radical right European parties. The aim is to show that their legitimacy and respectability in their respective party systems is related to the extent to which they have incorporated civic values into their rhetoric.

The civic zeitgeist and the radical right dilemma

How does a party or movement pushing what amounts to an ethnic exclusivist agenda annex the values of tolerance, liberalism and diversity in the interests of mobilizing a nation? The answer: by identifying these values as the unique patrimony of the nation, threatened by an influx of outsiders who do not share and are unable or unwilling to adopt them. In other words: ‘our’ nation is one of tolerance, liberalism and diversity; and that tradition is threatened by an influx of intolerant, reactionary and narrow-minded ‘others’.

At the core of our argument is the portrayal of the nation and national identity in the discourse of radical right parties. Smith (2010: 13) defines the nation as ‘a named human community residing in a perceived homeland, and having common myths and a shared history, a distinct public culture, and common laws and customs for all members’. Despite ambiguities surrounding the term, scholars tend to agree that whether modern or pre-modern, organic or voluntary, primordial or constructed, a nation is primarily a community of identity typically bound by such traits as language (Gellner 1983), faith (Hastings 1997), custom, social practice, myths, memories and historical experiences (Smith 1991; 2010) and state institutions (Breuilly 1993). Each nation is associated to a specific identity that distinguishes the group from the other.
This identity tends to be classified (Kohn 1945; Smith 1991) as either predominantly civic, characterized by voluntaristic features such as common institutions, territory, the economy and the law; or predominantly ethnic, defined by deterministic criteria such as language, creed, race and community of birth. These classifications can only be treated as ideal types however as all nations have both ethnic and civic elements (Smith 1991; Zimmer 2003).

Increasingly in an age of globalization and European integration, the symbolic resources that mobilize even those nations with the most openly ethnic or ascriptive of boundaries tend to be those relating to civic inclusiveness: tolerance, cultural diversity, universal rights and equality under the law. Though not universal principles, given the legacy of 1945 and subsequent processes of political integration including an emphasis on human rights as well as the increasing fluidity of borders brought about by increasing cosmopolitanism and a post national conception of citizenship (Soysal 1994), civic values have become increasingly prominent in the European context. Since Europe is composed by different nations with different languages as well as cultural and historical traditions, the development of the European polity lies in the ‘recognition of cultural pluralism and a set of shared democratic values among culturally diverse publics’ (Chrysochoou 2009: 121). The best way to unite the European states under the European Union would be through the celebration of inclusiveness; indeed the European Union’s official moto is ‘unity in diversity’. A civic rather than an ethnically-based European identity therefore ‘offers a better opportunity for building an open, postmodern, Euro-polity’ (Van Ham 2001: 72). It is this current towards tolerance, diversity and rights that we call the ‘civic zeitgeist’.
Theoretically speaking, this ‘civic zeitgeist’ runs counter to the ideology of radical right parties which are exclusionary by nature. The radical right appeals to an idealized conception of the nation and emphasizes its supremacy. Nationalism in its ethnic form is a core element of radical right ideology, providing ‘a sense of solidarity and belonging that binds supporters to their vision of the nation and society’ (Hainsworth 2008: 67). Radical right nationalism is exclusive and ethnocentric perceiving outsiders as threats to the integrity of the nation, which is defined in cultural terms, in an effort to ‘condense the idea of nation into an image of extreme collective homogeneity’ (Minkenberg 2002: 337). For these parties, the nationalistic myth entails the congruence of state and nation; that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group (the nation) and that non-native elements (the other) are threatening to the homogeneous nation-state (Mudde 2007). As the task of the radical right is to preserve and safeguard the nation, these parties tend to adopt a tough stance on immigration promoting a discourse of racism, xenophobia, exclusion and intolerance. They often emphasize the incompatibility of the national community with the ‘ethnic’ values of outsiders, premised on ethnic criteria of exclusion. Immigration control serves as a matrix in which many other policies run, for example education, law and order, welfare, and public spending (Hainsworth 2008).

What engenders the relative rise of a radical right party in a particular political context? To date, explanations have been divided across a spectrum of ‘demand-’ and ‘supply-side’ theories. The demand-side (Lipset 1960; Bell 1964; Ramet 1999) approach posits that the rise of the radical right is the product of systemic crisis. In other words, the rise of the radical right constitutes a pathology in Western society and its success can only be explained by extreme conditions. This crisis may be the result of ‘the psychological strain associated with uncertainties
produced by large-scale socioeconomic and sociocultural changes’ (Betz 1998: 8). More broadly speaking the rise of the radical right is explained by structurally determined pathologies such as extreme conditions created by modernization and industrialization (Klingemann 1968). Rapid social change, pressures and an increasing anxiety transform society in fundamental ways, rapidly leading to a division between winners and losers (Mudde 2010: 1172). The latter express their anger through protest in their support for the radical right. This is especially true where the political system does not allow space for popular grievances to be voiced through existing mainstream parties. Demand-side theories examine issues such as increasing levels of immigration and their correlation with high levels of support for radical right parties. But while the existence of such a political condition may facilitate the rise of a radical right party, it often fails ‘to account for significant differences between and within countries’ (Mudde 2010: 1168). Indeed support for such parties is not always related to indicators of ethnic diversity or immigration (Norris 2005; Mudde 2010).

Supply-side theories are top down. They may be distinguished between external, i.e. Political Opportunity Structures (e.g. Kitschelt and McGann 1995; Kriesi et al. 1995) and internal, i.e. Discursive Opportunity Structures (e.g. Koopmans and Statham 1999) which incorporate framing into political opportunity structures. External supply can be determined by factors such as the institutional, the political and the cultural context of a given society. Such theories have been criticized as unable ‘to deal adequately with the discursive context of social movement mobilization’ (Koopmans and Statham 1999: 227) essentially because they fail to provide an analysis of the content within which mobilization occurs. They tend to treat party objectives, ideological principles and rhetoric as constant, failing to address their dynamic
nature. Addressing these limitations, internal supply theories focus on the actual parties and issues such as party ideology, leadership and organization. Our study seeks to further an understanding of the internal supply-side factors and more specifically the manner in which parties shape their strategy and discourse to create a political space for themselves. In other words, we treat radical right parties not just as ‘dependent variables, passively moulded by structural factors, but... also as independent variables, actively shaping part of their own destiny’ (Mudde 2007: 293). Our aim is to analyse the ways in which radical right parties frame the symbolic resources of the nation in order to advance their objectives within the political system.

Voters are more likely to support a radical right party if they perceive it as ‘normal’ or ‘legitimate’, which at least in part means democratic, effective and in line with baseline national values (Van der Brug, Fennema and Tillie 2005). In a stable democratic system, voters tend to presume that most parties, even those with which they might ideologically disagree, are legitimate in this sense. However, this is not always the case with radical right parties, given the association of their ideologies with fascist, anti-democratic and anti-constitutional legacies. Even where a significant proportion of voters might be sympathetic to their policies, particularly over immigration, most are not willing to support a party that they perceive as a threat to the democratic system (Golder 2003; Carter 2005; Van der Brug et al. 2005). The success of these parties therefore depends on their ability to walk a delicate rhetorical balance: one that is explicitly critical of, but nonetheless operates within, the system. The centrality of the nation and of nationalism to the programme of the radical right therefore presents a dilemma for radical right parties: should they retain an agenda premised on exclusive ethnic factors such as race,
blood and creed but risk marginalization, or should they adapt to the civic zeitgeist in the hope of competitively entering the political arena?

This rhetorical balance is particularly difficult to achieve given that radical right parties are by default exclusionary. Conformity to liberal democratic principles and mainstream national values increasingly means invoking civic ideals such as multiculturalism and toleration that are by definition contrary to the ideological positions of radical right parties. Parties that continue to emphasize the ethnic elements of national identity tend to be branded as xenophobic and explicitly racist. In order to avoid this negative label and survive in the political system, radical right parties tend to increasingly adopt a civic rhetoric utilizing the liberal elements of their respective national identities in their discourse. Formally integral elements of radical right rhetoric such as explicit references to race and ethnicity are being gradually substituted by a language of inclusion, democratic rights and liberties, stemming from the core principle of national self-determination. Parties that might once have restricted national membership to those who shared a common race, culture, creed or community of birth will instead emphasize the superiority of the nation’s institutional structure and its right to emancipation from the advances of other ‘inferior’ nations whose political systems are portrayed as undeveloped, undemocratic and unrepresentative. The balance is therefore achieved through the framing of ethnic values - which can be perceived as violent, irrational and hence anti-systemic- in civic terms, which are perceived as inclusive, tolerant and democratic.

Although radical right parties are exclusionary by nature, this exclusion need not be, and is no longer justified solely in ethnic terms, but rather is targeted at those who do not share ‘our’
liberal values such as democracy, multiculturalism and the rule of law. This highlights the inherent contradictions within liberal ideology, namely the boundaries of toleration and the fine line between what is liberal and what is illiberal. The central question is whether tolerance should be perceived as unconditional along the lines of the Millian tradition; or whether it should be conditioned upon the tolerance of others in accordance to Lockean liberalism: in other words, should we tolerate regardless or we should only tolerate those who are in return tolerant to us? Tolerance as inclusion may become intolerance as exclusion although still in the name of tolerance and liberal values, depending on where these boundaries are set, i.e. on the interpretation of liberal language, especially under circumstances of major socioeconomic transformations. Perhaps the best illustration of this ambiguity is the recent controversy over the publication of cartoons depicting the prophet Muhammed in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*. The framing of this exercise in terms of freedom of expression, which is a fundamental liberal value, served to exclude specific social groups based on a civic and liberal justification.

This demonstrates that liberal values based on civicness do not necessarily shield countries from the presence of the radical right. Radical right parties escape the label of ethnic exclusivity by portraying immigration as a negative force not because it opens up national membership to those of an ‘inferior race’ but because it hampers ‘our’ nation’s liberal institutions, or because it opens up membership to those who do not value, or who would seek to undermine ‘our’ democracy. The varying ability to plausibly frame their discourse in such a way correlates with a party’s relative success at the domestic level. Those parties that do not successfully appropriate civic elements of national identity in their narrative are perceived as alien to the system and therefore risk electoral and political marginalization. Our contribution
challenges existing perspectives on the ethnic/civic dichotomy, as conventionally ‘civic’ nationalism tends to be associated with liberal ideals and is contrasted to its illiberal ‘ethnic’ counterpart (Kohn 1945). However this dichotomy does not capture the inherent contradictions within liberalism and the delicate balance between tolerance, inclusion and exclusion that these entail.

**Framing an ethnic discourse in civic terms: the transformation of the European radical right**

What constitutes a party’s relative success? This can be interpreted in either electoral or political terms (Mudde 2007), the former denoting an electoral breakthrough and/or persistence and the latter entailing a potential for governance, an impact on policy and/or changing the dynamics of the domestic political debates on various issues notably immigration. Since few radical right parties have entered government and usually as junior partners in a coalition, it is difficult to establish their direct policy impact. As a result, this article focuses on electoral success, whether breakthrough or persistence, at various electoral levels.

Examining radical right parties in Europe we observe variation in levels of success. Some parties such as the SVP, the LPF and the PVV have performed comparatively well often forming part of a government coalition. Over the past two decades, the SVP was transformed from the
smallest of the four parties in the governing coalition of Switzerland’s National Council to the largest, driving other right-wing parties into insignificance. In the Netherlands, the recent progress of the radical right to the electoral mainstream was not the story of the rise or transformation of a particular party, but the appearance, rise and fall of several new political movements. It began with the phenomenon of Pim Fortuyn who was assassinated days before the 2002 national election. Between Fortuyn’s populist appeal and the shock of the assassination, his list won seventeen per cent of the seats in the House of Representatives, an unprecedented number for a new party, and became part of the governing coalition. Though the LPF did not long outlive its founder, by successfully taking the curse of intolerance off of radical right rhetoric, Fortuyn activated a new constituency of disgruntled voters open to alternatives to the traditional parties, and other populist figures attempted to step into this newly formed political space. The most successful of these was Geert Wilders whose PVV won nine seats in the 2006 elections and twenty four in 2010.

For other radical right European parties the results have been more mixed, sometimes entailing electoral breakthrough or persistence but not actual governmental success. Although the French FN has enjoyed some electoral support, it has not managed to turn this into parliamentary representation. Since 1988 the party has not held more than one seat in the National Assembly, though its charismatic leader Jean-Marie Le Pen received a significant percentage in the national Presidential elections, reaching a peak in 2002. The BNP is also an example of varied success. Although the party did not fare well in the 2011 local elections and gained no seats in the 2010 general election, it has enjoyed a relative rise over the past decade with more BNP members now sitting in both the European Parliament (EP) and the London Assembly. Finally, while the
German NPD attracts a fair amount of media attention, it has not been successful in either the national or EP levels though it has achieved representation in two of Germany’s sixteen state parliaments.

In addition to the obvious institutional-electoral arrangements that may impact on success in terms of translating votes cast into seats, the actual votes cast in different electoral arenas is largely associated with the extent to which a given party is stigmatized or perceived as ‘illegitimate’ in its respective political arena. The latter is linked to the discourse it represents and, more specifically in the case of the radical right, to the extent to which it can distance itself from exclusionary ethnic narratives and frame its rhetoric in civic terms. Therefore the centrality of the nation to the ideology of the radical right is both a common element, and an explanation for the diversity of radical right movements. It is important to note here that we are not putting forward a deterministic argument which links changing party discourse to electoral success. We do not expect all radical right parties to adopt civic narratives. Nor do we expect all radical right parties that adopt some elements of ‘civicness’ in their rhetoric to become legitimized in their system. Party discursive shifts are necessary but not (always) sufficient conditions for radical right party transformation and political acceptance. Effective use of the civic elements of national identity can be seen as associated with transformation and modernization, enabling radical right parties to avoid the label of extremism and finally enter the mainstream. Those parties that are better able to do so are more likely to be successful within their system, institutional and contextual issues notwithstanding.
We understand this as taking place on a conceptual continuum. Different levels of appropriation of liberal values in radical right discourse tend to correspond to varying electoral success. Parties that clearly appropriate a civic narrative emitting straightforward signals to the electorate such as the SVP have successfully transformed and entered the mainstream. This has triggered a process of imitation whereby other European radical right parties such as the French FN, the British BNP and the German NPD are increasingly adopting civic values in their discourse. These are only partially successful, however, because imitation in each case is constrained by the need to conform to those elements of identity deemed distinct to each national group and because these pre-existing national narratives with which the parties must contend vary in the extent to which they are amenable to such a reframing.

We illustrate this dynamic through a comparison of party frames of the ‘nation’ and the ‘other’ during electoral campaigns. We choose to briefly examine a number of cases as opposed to exploring a specific case study in depth with a view to providing a broader analysis of radical right discursive shifts across Europe and illustrate the wider applicability of our argument. We carry out qualitative analysis of party literature such as manifestos, speeches and other campaign materials since the turn of the century as a time that marks a shift in the discourse of the European radical right. We do so in order to examine the ways in which radical right parties change their rhetoric to redefine the boundaries between national communities and others. Our analysis focuses on three comparatively most successful cases namely the SVP, LPF and PVV juxtaposing the remaining parties (FN, BNP, and NPD) to illustrate the different levels of incorporation of civic values in their narratives\(^1\). We choose these parties because although they

\(^1\) We take all the above parties to belong to the radical right party family. We justify our selection on the basis of other literature in the field (among others Mudde 2007; Arzheimer & Carter 2009; Art 2011; Ennser forthcoming).
operate in different political and institutional systems, they adhere to a wider pattern of different
degrees of radical right party transformation. More to the point, the parties of the radical right
best able to capitalize on this success are those best able to decouple their anti-immigrant
message from an abject extremist fringe, associating it instead with civic, democratic signifiers
of the nation.

The redefinition of boundaries between national communities and others

Framing is to some degree contingent upon political culture. For while every radical right party
will represent itself as defending the essential character of the nation, each European nation still
defines itself according to a different set of myths, traits and principles, and the rhetoric of the
radical right within each nation will tailor to this specificity. Switzerland is typically perceived
by its citizenry and described by scholars of nationalism as a ‘voluntary nation’, inherently
democratic and multi-ethnic, with scant historical association with fascism and a non-participant
in the Second World War. The union of four distinct ethno-linguistic regions is considered to be
one of the four pillars of Swiss national identity, the others being neutrality, federalism and
direct democracy (Skenderovic 2009: 47). Contrary to the general principle that radical right
parties will either moderate or disintegrate when they access power, the SVP under Christoph
Blocher radicalized as its share of governing power increased, continuously instigating
controversial campaigns and launching referenda often at odds with the policies of the
government of which they were ostensibly a part, particularly over issues of law and order,
foreign policy, and immigration (Albertazzi 2009: 3).
However, despite this radicalization, Blocher never disputed the civic and democratic values of Swiss national identity. On the contrary, the party represented itself as the only authentic defender of these principles. The official party program of the cantonal SVP of Zurich in 2002 specified that the national identity of the country that stood threatened was one ‘which brings together four languages and is characterized by direct democracy and federalism, and to the balanced relationship between the Swiss population and the population of foreign residents. The roots of Western and occidental culture are in danger. This is why Switzerland needs a restrictive policy regarding foreigners in order for it to become less attractive as an immigration country’ (SVP 2002: 13). In the rhetoric of the SVP, ‘multi-ethnicity’ comes across as meaning a particular balance between German, French, Italian and Romansch cultural elements that is distinctly Swiss and therefore must not be upset. Immigration issues had not been high on the SVP’s priorities prior to the 1990s, but they played an increasing role in the discourse of identity politics that accompanied its subsequent growth. The SVP’s position on migration assumed immutable cultural differences that would lead to an inevitable clash, especially with regards to Muslim immigrants who were deemed unable to integrate into Swiss society, with Islam characterized as an obstacle to integration. This was especially pronounced in Blocher’s Zurich chapter, where the stance was taken that ‘left-wing and liberal people, who had traditionally fought and struggled in the name of emancipation and religious freedom, were now supporting a migration policy which actually represented a threat to the basic values of the occident’ (Skenderovic 2009: 164). Much of the rhetoric framed the desire to exclude foreigners in terms of respect for the difference in their cultural and national identity, best served by maintaining separation between differing cultures.
This adoption of civic values in their rhetoric is apparent in the party’s campaigning during the past decade. An example of this was the highly controversial and provocative ‘black sheep’ campaign in support of the ‘Popular Initiative for the Extradition of Criminal Foreigners’ (Ausschaffungsinitiative) that would mandate the automatic deportation of non-citizens convicted of crimes, along with their families. Posters appeared throughout the country with the caption ‘Sicherheit schaffen’ (establish security) (see image 1 below). Above this, the frame was split in two halves, with one side in the red of the Swiss flag with the white cross tilted diagonally as an ‘x’ to suggest voting. Standing on that side are two innocent if naïve-looking white sheep representing a wholesome rustic ideal, as well as a pun on the word schaffen (establish) in its similarity to schaf (sheep). A third white sheep is seen kicking a black sheep outside the boundaries of this Swiss space with its hind legs.

[Image 1 about here]

To many, this appeared as straightforward racist message: kick out the black one, the one that is palpably different. But the subtleties of it are worth exploring, as they were not lost on SVP supporters. The expression ‘black sheep’ has the same idiomatic connotation in German as in English, and that was how the message was received by those sympathetic to the initiative: kick out the one who does not fit in, who is unable to accept the norms of our society. As Bruno Walliser, an SVP candidate from Zurich put it during a rally, ‘the black sheep is not any black sheep that does not fit into the family. It is the foreign criminal who does not belong here, the one that does not obey Swiss law. We do not want him.’

The theme was so visually arresting that it was soon after borrowed by the NPD’s Hessen branch. But while the imagery of the NPD poster was identical (including the black, white and red color scheme which has a different connotation in Germany than in Switzerland), the contextual differences are indicative of how the SVP was able to mainstream their message whereas the NPD continued to be perceived as an extremist fringe. To begin with, the NPD changed the slogan from ‘establish security’ to ‘we are cleaning up’ (see image 2 below). This suggested an aggressive rather than defensive posture, reinforced by the lack of a specific issue. Though the SVP’s poster campaign coincided with the October 2007 election campaign, the Ausschaffungsinitiative provided an important fig-leaf, transforming the message from an arbitrary exclusion of foreigners to one about the rule of law and voluntary submission to the norms of the society.

[Image 2 about here]

The adoption of this image by the NPD proved disturbing to the SVP, to the point where they publicly threatened legal action (though nothing came of it). This was in part an anxiety over being associated with a right-wing party perceived as more extreme, but also an anxiety about being associated with a right-wing party outside of Switzerland. To be seen as part of a pan-European right-wing movement would have violated the image they were endeavoring to cultivate of being a distinctly national phenomenon, defenders of uniquely Swiss principles and institutions.
The SVP’s most striking recent success was at the forefront of a referendum initiative to ban the construction of minarets on mosques in Switzerland. This referendum passed by 57.5 per cent in November 2009.\(^3\) The visual imagery of this campaign was similarly provocative, with minarets shaped like missiles obscuring a map of Switzerland, alongside a silhouette of a woman in a burka suggesting the intrusion of restrictive foreign norms. These themes were developed further on the campaign’s official website, which argued that the minaret cannot be considered a religious symbol as it is not mentioned in the Quran (that being the litmus test for what makes a religious symbol), and that it is therefore not subject to the protections of freedom of religion, but rather, ‘the minaret is more a symbol of a religious-political claim to power and authority, which denies the fundamental rights of others in the name of a supposed freedom of religion – in particular the equality of all before the law – making such a claim in contradiction to the constitution and legal system of Switzerland.’\(^4\) Importantly, this campaign focused on the rule of law, rather than on cultural difference serving to justify the position in civic rather than ethnic terms. The way the party framed its campaign was to emphasise that Muslim immigrants are a threat to Switzerland’s freedom of worship, ‘liberty of thought, writing, speech and religion’ essentially because they ‘bring with them ideas of law and order that are incompatible with our legal system and democratic rules’ (SVP 2011: 121). By portraying minarets as symbols of aggression, they are reframed as obstacles to religious freedom and equality for all citizens, rather than as expressions of it.

Also successful have been the Dutch LPF and PVV. As with Switzerland, the Netherlands also tends to be perceived as a liberal and tolerant European nation. What is

\(^3\) [http://www.admin.ch/ch/d/pore/va/20091129/det547.html](http://www.admin.ch/ch/d/pore/va/20091129/det547.html)
important here is not whether this can be justifiably challenged as an accurate depiction of Dutch attitudes but rather the notion, that tolerance is an aspect of the national character distinguishing this society from others. And, as with Switzerland, this would appear on the surface to be a reputation unconducive to a movement to exclude foreigners. But Fortuyn was able to portray this reputation as under threat. Expressing pride in the open and often flamboyant expression of his homosexuality, he linked this to pride in his nation that protected and guaranteed him freedom of that expression, contrasting it to the principles of Islam, carried into the nation by Muslim immigrants, which would deny them. This juxtaposition was made explicit in the interview with *Volkskrant* that led in part to his expulsion from Livable Netherlands, when he was asked by the interviewer whether he hated Islam:

> I do not hate Islam. I consider it a backward culture. I have travelled much in the world. And wherever Islam rules, it is just terrible. All the hypocrisy. It is a bit like those old reformed (Protestants). The Reformed lie all the time. And why is that? Because they have standards and values that are so high that you cannot humanly maintain them. You also see that in that Muslim culture. Then look at the Netherlands. In what country could an electoral leader of such a large movement as mine be openly homosexual? How wonderful that that is possible. That is something that one can be proud of. And I would like to keep it that way, thank you very much.\(^5\)

His reference to Reformed Protestants served to stress his even-handedness. It was not a question of race or ethnic culture. The Reformed Church was an integral part of Dutch culture, yet he was no less critical of its intolerance than he was that of Islam. That said, it was not the rights of Dutch Reformed Protestants as citizens and immigrants that were at stake in the discourse. The point is that the core national value with which he associated himself was tolerance, and he portrayed both himself and these national values as simultaneously vulnerable

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to the threat posed by an influx of immigrants who, possessed of an intolerant culture, were unable to share these values. Fortuyn did not represent himself, nor was he widely perceived, as a right-wing radical. His party adopted liberal positions on other social and economic issues. But the centrality of his leadership to the maintenance of this perception is illustrated by the way the LPF quickly lost cohesion after his assassination, collapsing into infighting and bringing the governing coalition down with it. Without Fortuyn’s personal presence, there was little to distinguish the rhetoric of the movement’s surviving leadership from that of any radical right party. The LPF was reduced to eight seats in the next set of elections, and broke up into factions and vanished from political relevance by the elections of 2006.

Enter the PVV, whose platform has been described as characteristic of right-wing radicalism in the Netherlands, as ‘a post-modern mix of conservative values, disgust with the left, xenophobia and liberal values, such as the protection of gay marriage, a strong emphasis on freedom of speech and women’s rights’ (Becker and Cuperus 2010: 8). Echoing Fortuyn, Wilders has denied that his position against Muslim immigration is driven by racism, but his explanation adopts a different emphasis. ‘Not out of hatred, but out of pride and self-preservation of our Dutch identity and western values I am against allowing immigrants coming out of Muslim countries into the country. The ideology of Islam is despicable, fascist and wrong.’\(^6\) What Wilders purported to oppose was not a race or culture, but rather an ideology, even if the policies that this rhetoric aimed to support would ultimately affect broad racial or cultural categories of people irrespective of what ideology they might hold. The ideology he opposes is one of intolerance, which is again juxtaposed against the ideology of tolerance underlying ‘Dutch identity’. But the term ‘fascist’ is employed in this discourse as more than an

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\(^6\) Het Nieuwsblad (Flanders), 9 February 2008.
epithet. It reflects an intention to decouple European anti-immigrant discourse from its traditional association with the far right. Instead, he reframes his movement as being in continuity with the historical struggle against fascism, now manifest in Islamic extremism of which Muslim immigrants are the carriers; a realignment further reinforced by his vehement support for Israel.

Wilders’ short film, *Fitna*, underlined this point. Devoid of narration, it amounted to a montage of acts of violence and intolerance perpetrated by Muslims in the name of Islam. Defending this film during a speech in the United States in April 2009, Wilders characterized his agenda as a struggle for freedom and democracy against the ‘dangerous cocktail’ of mass immigration and the ‘cultural-relativism’ of political elites, invoking the exclusionary element of radical right rhetoric. This aspect was targeted primarily against Islam, though again it was framed as a fight between ideologies rather than cultures. ‘Let no one fool you about Islam being just a religion... in its essence Islam is a political ideology and a totalitarian ideology [...]. Islam wants to dictate every aspect of life and society and prohibits individual, political and religious rights and freedoms. Islam is not compatible with our Western civilization or democracy, nor will it ever be, because Islam does not want to coexist, it wants to submit and set the entire agenda.’ The parallel between Islam and Nazism, though never explicit, is nonetheless drawn both in the equation of Islam with ‘totalitarianism’ and in the equation of political elites with ‘appeasers like Chamberlain and Gordon Brown’ in contrast to ‘fighters like Churchill, Thatcher or Reagan’ alongside the swelling majority of ‘normal people in Europe’. ‘A growing amount of people want to stop the Islamization of our societies. A growing amount of people want to fight
for the freedom of speech and want to preserve our precious free societies, rule of law, and democracy for our children and their children. The old political elite is losing support.’

Stable boundaries and partial reframing of party rhetoric

Other European radical right parties such as the BNP and the FN have been less successful in incorporating civic values in their narratives, partially retaining references to ethnic exclusionism. Since 1999 and Nick Griffin’s election to the party leadership, the BNP has undergone a process of modernization (Copsey 2004, 2007; Cruddas et al. 2005; Goodwin 2007; John and Margetts 2009) attempting to shift its nationalist narrative as part of the wider trend to adapt its discourse in accordance with the zeitgeist (Halikiopoulou and Vasilopoulou 2010). However the party remains largely stigmatized and hence marginalized politically and electorally partly because of its inability to fully accommodate British civic values and portray itself as a legitimate party.

The post-Tyndall modernized BNP reflects an increasing emphasis on civic elements of British national identity, which were absent in the party’s predominantly race-based pre-1999 discourse. The racial element in the party’s narrative is double-sided. On the one hand the party argues that its main goal is ‘the restoration of our civil liberties’ (BNP 2010: 6), a civic and liberal claim. The title of the party’s 2010 manifesto is ‘Democracy, Freedom, Culture and Identity’, its cover featuring the British parliament. Instead of directing fury against ‘non-white’ populations, the BNP now targets Muslims, and not on the basis of creed but as a matter of

security, playing to people’s fears through an appeal to counter-terrorism. The justification of excluding Muslims from British society is based on the civic value of safeguarding ‘modern, secular, western democracy’. As they portray Islam as ‘incompatible’ with such civic ideals which are inherently British, they propose banning ‘the burka, ritual slaughter and the building of further mosques in Britain’ (BNP 2010: 4). However, racist terminology remains widespread in the party’s publications. The 2010 manifesto contains several mentions of the word ‘white’, for example comparing numbers of white and non-white populations in Britain. The party perceives crime as predominantly racially motivated citing sources that frame the perpetration of violent acts in Britain as the product of racism, specifically of non-whites against whites (BNP 2010: 8; BNP 2011).

Equally mixed is the BNP’s message on immigration (see images 3 and 4 below). On the one hand their campaign materials portray immigrants as a threat to Britain primarily because they stand against liberal values of tolerance and the rule of law; the ‘open your Eyes’ logo on a recent poster depicting a set of eyes on the background of the Union Jack denoting that Britishness (not racially defined) has so far been blind to immigration. On the other hand, another BNP poster depicts a long queue of immigrants, of different skin colors and/or religions, waiting to enter the UK border. The first in line is portrayed as a Muslim extremist carrying a machine gun. Clearly the differentiating line between ‘us’ and ‘them’ is ethnically defined in terms of ethnic descent and creed. As result of this contradictory discourse the party can be perceived as modernizing to an extent but also remains stigmatized, illegitimate and politically marginalized in the British political system.
Like the BNP, the French FN is to a degree stigmatized; but unlike the BNP it has experienced more profound electoral breakthroughs and has been a persistent force in the party system. To some extent, this is a reflection of a duality long recognized as inherent to French political culture, defined, perhaps more overtly than any other nation, by the civic values associated with the foundational moment of French Revolution and subsequent republican system, yet associated as well with a distinct language and ethno-religious history (Gildea 1996). The concept of laïcité, roughly translated as secularism, has historically been crucial to the reconciliation of these distinct national narratives, enforcing a principle of strict separation between religion and the public sphere. Traditionally, this principle has been understood as mandating equal treatment by the state of all religious groups. However, the progressive adoption of liberal, civic values by the radical right evolved around this concept as its rhetorical centerpiece, characterizing normative Islam as incompatible with this pillar of a unified French national identity, and therefore, by extension, immigrants from predominantly Muslim countries as a threat to it.

This duality between ethnic and civic narratives in the normative construction of French identity has translated into fundamentally mixed messages in the rhetoric of the radical right. This is again evident in campaign materials, which on the one hand portray immigrants as a threat to the integrity of French civic principles, even while, on the other hand, most often depicting those immigrants in an ethnic manner. For example, echoing SVP rhetoric, the text of the poster depicted in image 5 frames opposition to immigration as a position against racism.
Yet the immigrant is depicted in exaggerated cartoon stereotypical terms: non-white, culturally and religiously alien, and of low social status, reflecting an anti-immigration agenda directed almost exclusively against non-Christians and more particularly Muslims. The ‘non à l’islamisme’ poster (image 6 below) could also be intercepted as cutting both ways. On the one hand the missile-like minarets springing from a map of France on which a crescent is drawn emits a civic message: the threat is directed against all of France and the values of Republicanism that define it. On the other hand, the Muslim woman wearing a burka also serves to define the delineating line between ‘us’ and ‘them’ on ethnic terms. The recent 2011 election of Marine Le Pen as the party’s ‘new face’ is expected to broaden the party’s appeal through a far-reaching change in the party’s discursive agenda. The electoral result of this, however, remains to be seen.

[Images 5 and 6 about here]

**Conclusions**

The centrality of the nation and of nationalism to the programme of the radical right presents an important dilemma: should radical right parties retain an exclusive ethnic narrative premised on race, blood and creed and risk marginalization or should they adapt to the civic zeitgeist in order to competitively enter the political arena? Focusing on this dilemma, this article has examined
the relationship between nationalism and liberal values, and more specifically the redefinition of boundaries between national communities and others in the rhetoric of radical right parties in Europe.

More specifically we have examined the tensions between radical right party discourse and the increasing need to shape this discourse in liberal terms. In doing so we have highlighted the contradiction that radical right parties must resolve due to the fact that while they present themselves as the exemplars and defenders of the distinct culture of their nations, and hence must tailor their rhetoric to myths, symbols and values specific to the nation, increasingly these national identities are predicated on liberal, tolerant, civic and secular principles. We have argued that the importance of the nation in the ideology of the radical right is both a common element, and an explanation for the diversity of radical right movements. Those radical right parties that successfully operate within the democratic system tend to be those best able to tailor their discourse to the liberal and civic characteristics of national identity so as to present themselves and their ideologies as the true authentic defenders of democracy, diversity and tolerance. The extent to which a radical right party can be perceived as legitimate is linked to the discourse it puts forward and more specifically the extent to which it can distance itself from exclusionary ethnic narratives and frame its rhetoric in civic terms.

This article has associated different levels of radical right success to the parties’ varying ability to appropriate liberal values. We have juxtaposed parties that have effectively adopted a civic narrative e.g. the SVP, LPF and PVV to those that are imitating this process albeit retaining some ethnic elements and thus emitting mixed messages to the electorate, e.g. FN, BNP, and
NPD. In carrying out this analysis we situate ourselves in the supply-side explanations of radical right party success. This is not to deny the relevance of demand or put forward a deterministic argument that links discourse directly to success. In the era of globalization and European integration, rising immigration and ethnic diversity are cross European phenomena and could lead to systemic crises anywhere in Europe. Research has shown that there is latent demand for groups that propose solutions to problems associated with rising immigration (e.g. Golder 2003; Norris 2005; John and Margetts 2009; Mudde 2010). However radical right party performance and success vary across Europe and focusing solely on demand cannot explain this variation. A focus on supply can shed light on party-specific factors that are ignored by bottom up explanations.

Along the lines of Koopmans and Statham (1999) we focus particularly on party discourse. However the implications of our argument differ. Our contribution to the debate is that we treat the ethnic-civic dichotomy as a dynamic and not static or country specific. Indeed we argue that civicness forms the modern zeitgeist, marked by the prominence of ideals such as conceptions of universal human rights and multiculturalism, the acceleration of globalizing forces and regional integration. Because of this process radical right party success lies in part in the ability of the party to shift the boundaries of national identity presenting certain signifiers—whether ethnic or civic—in voluntaristic terms. The implications of this are imperative. Koopmans’ and Statham (1999: 249) conclude that to address the rise of radical right parties in Europe ‘an effective strategy for European policy makers would be to strengthen the civic basis of national identity and citizenship’. If our argument is correct we can disagree and suggest that the construction of a civic type identity does not ‘shelter’ a country from radical right presence.
On the contrary ‘civicness’, if effectively appropriated, may account for radical right party success.
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