

## **Radical Right Parties in Central and Eastern Europe. Mainstream Party Competition and Electoral Fortune**

Data opublikowania: 02.06.2017

Zrecenzował(a) dr Filip Tereszkiwicz      Redakcja naukowa mgr Andrzej Klimczuk

Bartek Pytlas' book is a revised version of his dissertation, which he defended at the European University Viadrina in 2014. His PhD supervisor was Michael Minkenberg, who is one of the most well respected researchers of radical right parties in Europe and the United States. [1] The book is also part of the Routledge Studies in Extremism and Democracy series. [2] Pytlas' work gives us a broad view of radical right parties in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) with respect to two areas. The first is an analysis of in-party competition narratives between the radical right and their mainstream competitors, which helps explain why mainstream political parties of that region adopt radical right ideologies much more easily than in Western Europe (pp. 3, 73). This analysis adds a lot of new information about the radicalisation of political discourse in CEE countries. The second area focuses on an analytical method that is popular among social scientists, a framing approach using computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) (p. 71). [3] However, this method is rarely applied in common studies on radical right parties, especially within CEE countries, thus distinguishing Pytlas' research efforts.

The analysis conducted in this book is based on two observations. The first is that radical parties in CEE countries do not experience stable and high levels of electoral support, meaning that they "come and go" (p. 2). The second is that the diffusion of the radical right ideology in public discourse is clearly and continuously visible (p. 2). Thus, the question posed by the author is: why, despite a high influence of the radical right on public debates and mainstream policy agendas, do radical right parties in CEE not achieve stable and high electoral success? (p. 3). To answer this question, Pytlas analyses "three mechanisms within party systems and their corresponding shifts: alerting party strategies (spatial shifts); adjusting issue salience (salience shifts); and altering frame ownership (narrative shifts)" (pp. 73, 75-76).

The research process (and thereby this book) is divided into eight parts, analysed here in three separate sections. The first three chapters describe the theoretical background of the research. After an introductory chapter, the second chapter could be interesting for people outside the CEE as it presents basic information about radical right parties in this region and their respective roots. The third chapter describes the research methodology and is of interest for scholars and scientists, whilst remaining completely unintelligible for people

without an academic background (frankly, the reader could skip this chapter without any detriments to understanding the rest of this book).

The content of the next four chapters is composed of case studies from selected CEE countries, describing the examples of Poland and the rivalry between the parties Law and Justice (PiS) and League of Polish Families (LPR), each claiming to rightfully represent "Roman Catholic Morality"; Slovakia and the competition between Smer and the Slovak National Party (SNS) concerning "minority rights"; Hungary and the rivalry between Fidesz and Jobbik, based on two examples: (1) the "*nemzapolitica* debates" with regards to the "trauma of Trianon", and (2) the anti-Roma discourse.

In the last part of his book, Pytlas changes perspective; he does not just point out similarities between the specific cases, but he also sheds light on "patterns of interdependence between particular influencing factors of radical right electoral fortunes" (p. 211) using another approach: lowering the salience of radical right issues by countering or refusing to acknowledge them as significant, thereby restricting party competition and chances for electoral success (p. 220). However, the author warns that, "while radical right parties as such might be gone and no longer active at a parliamentary level, the frames and the attitudes of their voters remain" and that "the refusal to acknowledge radical right frames as part of a legitimate political discourse (...) might disarm radical right parties both in regard to legitimacy and mobilization," concluding that this strategy "seems to pose much less risk not only for the quality of liberal democracy and public discourse, but also for the party system itself" (p. 222).

This observation is crucial today, especially in the light of Donald Trump's ascendance to the office of president of the United States, increasing support for populist parties in Western European societies, and the growth of authoritarian tendencies in the CEE region. Pytlas shows that ownership strategies such as "accommodate strategies" or frame takeover as applied by mainstream parties are often ineffective and, more importantly, eventually lead to adverse consequences for democracy. Victory in the competition with radical right parties could prove to be a Pyrrhic victory for mainstream parties. As shown in the Polish example, the mainstream conservative party (PiS) shifted to a radical right narrative, thereby moving itself into ideological territory claimed by their radical competitors (LPR) (p. 120).

Besides the above-mentioned merits, the book also has some methodological weaknesses. It is unclear why Pytlas chose only three CEE countries (Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary), while there are other just as interesting examples, such as the Lithuanian competition between the radical right Party Order and Justice (PTT) and the conservative Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats (TS-LKD), or the rivalry in Bulgaria between the radical right Ataka and the conservative Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB). [4] The author has the obvious right to choose examples, but a more thorough explanation as to what topics, countries, and entities have not been selected for analysis and why would have been helpful (p. 12). The decision to include two examples from Hungary (national politics (*nemzetpolitika*) on the one hand, anti-Roma debates on the other) at the expense of another CEE state undermines the book's intent to provide a broad outlook on right-leaning politics in the entire region.

Another weakness of this book lies in the Polish example. The choice of *Gazeta Wyborcza* (one of the largest Polish daily newspapers) as the main source of discursive statements on abortion and the LGBT community is a methodological problem. This newspaper has a pronounced social-liberal orientation, which may in turn reflect itself in the extracted results. With the existence of an equally large and influential conservative paper as *Rzeczpospolita*, this choice remains unjustified. [5] Moreover, *Rzeczpospolita* (or a similarly oriented paper) would have been an understandable choice, especially in comparison to the analysed newspaper from Hungary (*Magyar Nemzet*), which has a more conservative profile, or the two Slovakian dailies *SME* (centre-right oriented) and *Pravda* (centre-left oriented).

To summarise, this book is noteworthy mostly because of the new perspectives on the rivalry between mainstream parties and their competitors from the radical right. The author applies popular tools in order to create a new approach to this field of research. The results of Pytlas' studies could be very useful for mainstream parties, especially if they intend to counteract the shift of European societies in the direction of the radical right. Those parties use two strategies to hold back the electoral outflow to radical right competitors: issue co-optation and frame takeover. In the short term, these strategies are effective. However, as Pytlas notes, "[c]ontinuing socio-cultural 'value wars' with the use of radicalised narratives or policies, as well as co-optation of resonant radical right frames, open new political and discursive opportunities for an agency of radical right actors and ideology. Without stepping back from this mode of political contestation, a democratically sustainable response from the political system towards the challenges of right-wing radicalism will be hard to achieve, if not impossible" (p. 224). That is, in my opinion, the most important lesson to gain from Pytlas' research.

[1] M. Minkenberg, *The Radical Right in Eastern Europe: Democracy under Siege?*, Palgrave Macmillan, London – New York 2017; M. Minkenberg, *From Pariah to Policy-Maker? The Radical Right in Europe, West and East: Between Margin and Mainstream*, „Journal of Contemporary European Studies”, 2013, vol. 21, nr 1; M. Minkenberg, *The Radical Right in Europe: An Overview*, Bertrlsmann Stiftung, Gütersloh 2008; M. Minkenberg, *Demokratie und Desintegration: Der politikwissenschaftliche Forschungsstand zu Rechtsradikalismus, Fremdenfeindlichkeit und Gewalt*, Pro Business, Berlin 2005; M. Minkenberg, *The West European Radical Right as a Collective Actor: Modelling the Impact of Cultural and Structural Variables on Party Formation and Movement Mobilization*, "Comparative European Politics" 2003, vol. 1, nr 2.

[2] For example, C. Mudde, *On Extremism and Democracy in Europe*, Routledge, London 2017; A. Widfeld, *Extreme Right Parties in Scandinavia*; Routledge, Abingdon 2014, R. Pankowski, *The Populist Radical Right in Poland: The Patriots*, Routledge, London-New York 2010; C. Ruzza, S. Fella, *Reinventing the Italian Right: Territorial politics, populism and `post-Fascism`*, Routledge, London 2009; B. Klandermans, N. Mayer (eds.), *Extreme Right Activists in Europe: Through the magnifying glass*, Routledge, London 2006; R. Eatwell, C. Mudde (eds.), *Western Democracies and the New Extreme Right Challenge*, Routledge, London 2003;

[3] For example, J. Zienkowski, *Articulations of Self and Politics in Activist Discourse. A Discourse Analysis of Critical Subjectivities in Minority Debates*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2016; B. Pytas, O. Kossack, *Lighting the fuse: the impact of radical right parties on party competition in Central and Eastern Europe*

, [in] *Transforming the Transformation? The East European radical right in the political process*, (ed.) M. Minkenberg, Routledge, London–New York 2015, pp. 105–136; L. Hooghe, G. Marks, C. J. Wilson, *Does Left/Right Structure Party Positions on European Integration?*, "Comparative Political Studies" 2002, vol. 35, issue 8, pp. 965–989.

[4] This lack of focus could be an effect of this book series' focus, but this is not explicitly discussed by the author. See A. L. P. Pirro, *The Populist Radical Right in Central and Eastern Europe: Ideology, Impact and electoral performance*, Routledge, London–New York 2015; M. Minkenberg (ed.), *Transforming the Transformation? The East European radical right in the political process*, Routledge, London–New York 2015.

[5] Uchwała nr 62/2012 z dnia 8 listopada 2012 roku, Komunikat zarządu Związku Kontroli Dystrybucji Prasy o wysokości nakładów i dystrybucji tytułów kontrolowanych przez ZKDP w 2011 roku [*Resolution No. 62/2012 of 8 November 2012. Communication from the Management Board of the Press Distribution Control Board on the amount of outlays and distribution of titles controlled by the Press Distribution Control Board in 2011*].



**Sposób cytowania:**

dr Filip Tereszkievicz: Recenzja: Bartek Pytlas: *Radical Right Parties in Central and Eastern Europe. Mainstream Party Competition and Electoral Fortune*, 2016, w: <https://www.pol-int.org/pl/node/5100#r6002>.

<https://www.pol-int.org/pl/node/5100?j5Q6rewycZ5HtUDXTWpx7UZE=1&r=6002>