

# Politics and Governance

Open Access Journal | ISSN: 2183-2463

Volume 9, Issue 4 (2021)

## **Right-Wing Populist Party Organisation Across Europe: The Survival of the Mass-Party?**

Editors

Daniele Albertazzi and Stijn van Kessel

Politics and Governance, 2021, Volume 9, Issue 4  
Right-Wing Populist Party Organisation Across Europe: The Survival of the Mass-Party?

Published by Cogitatio Press  
Rua Fialho de Almeida 14, 2º Esq.,  
1070-129 Lisbon  
Portugal

*Academic Editors*

Daniele Albertazzi (University of Surrey, UK)  
Stijn van Kessel (Queen Mary University of London, UK)

Available online at: [www.cogitatiopress.com/politicsandgovernance](http://www.cogitatiopress.com/politicsandgovernance)

This issue is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).  
Articles may be reproduced provided that credit is given to the original and *Politics and Governance*  
is acknowledged as the original venue of publication.

---

## Table of Contents

<b>Right-Wing Populist Party Organisation Across Europe: The Survival of the Mass-Party? Introduction to the Thematic Issue</b> Daniele Albertazzi and Stijn van Kessel	224–227
<b>The League of Matteo Salvini: Fostering and Exporting a Modern Mass-Party Grounded on “Phygital” Activism</b> Mattia Zulianello	228–239
<b>VOX Spain: The Organisational Challenges of a New Radical Right Party</b> Astrid Barrio, Sonia Alonso Sáenz de Oger and Bonnie N. Field	240–251
<b>Rootedness, Activism, and Centralization: The Case of the Swiss People’s Party</b> Adrian Favero	252–262
<b>No Strong Leaders Needed? AfD Party Organisation Between Collective Leadership, Internal Democracy, and “Movement-Party” Strategy</b> Anna-Sophie Heinze and Manès Weisskircher	263–274
<b>The Vlaams Belang: A Mass Party of the 21st Century</b> Judith Sijstermans	275–285
<b>Is the (Mass) Party Really Over? The Case of the Dutch Forum for Democracy</b> Léonie de Jonge	286–295
<b>Between Horizontality and Centralisation: Organisational Form and Practice in the Finns Party</b> Niko Hatakka	296–306
<b>Walking the Walk or Just Talking the Talk? VMRO-BND’s Efforts to Become a Mass Party</b> Petar Bankov, Sergiu Gherghina and Nanuli Silagadze	307–316
<b>“Mass,” “Movement,” “Personal,” or “Cartel” Party? Fidesz’s Hybrid Organisational Strategy</b> Rudolf Metz and Réka Várnagy	317–328
<b>Leading the Way, but Also Following the Trend: The Slovak National Party</b> Tim Haughton, Marek Rybář and Kevin Deegan-Krause	329–339

---

## Table of Contents

<b>Party Organisation of PiS in Poland: Between Electoral Rhetoric and Absolutist Practice</b>	
Bartek Pytlas	340–353
<b>When a Right-Wing Populist Party Inherits a Mass Party Organisation: The Case of EKRE</b>	
Tõnis Saarts, Mari-Liis Jakobson and Leif Kalev	354–364
<b>Right-Wing Populist Party Organisation Across Europe: The Survival of the Mass-Party? Conclusion to the Thematic Issue</b>	
Stijn van Kessel and Daniele Albertazzi	365–370

---

Editorial

## Right-Wing Populist Party Organisation Across Europe: The Survival of the Mass-Party? Introduction to the Thematic Issue

Daniele Albertazzi <sup>1,\*</sup> and Stijn van Kessel <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Politics, University of Surrey, UK; E-Mail: [d.albertazzi@surrey.ac.uk](mailto:d.albertazzi@surrey.ac.uk)

<sup>2</sup> School of Politics and International Relations, Queen Mary University of London, UK; E-Mail: [s.vankessel@qmul.ac.uk](mailto:s.vankessel@qmul.ac.uk)

\* Corresponding author

Submitted: 27 October 2021 | Published: 24 November 2021

### Abstract

This thematic issue assesses the organisational forms of a broad range of right-wing populist parties (RWPPs) across Europe (12 in total). It interrogates received wisdom about the supposed leader-centeredness of such parties and investigates, in particular, the extent to which the mass party, as an organisational model, remains popular among RWPPs. This introduction presents the aims, research questions, and analytical framework of the issue and justifies its selection of cases. The resilience of the mass party model highlighted in many articles challenges the dominant trend that party organisation literature has identified: a unidirectional shift towards “catch-all,” “electoral-professional,” or “cartel” organisations.

### Keywords

mass party; party membership; party organisation; populism; radical right

### Issue

This editorial is part of the issue “Right-Wing Populist Party Organisation Across Europe: The Survival of the Mass-Party?” edited by Daniele Albertazzi (University of Surrey, UK) and Stijn van Kessel (Queen Mary University of London, UK).

© 2021 by the authors; licensee Cogitatio (Lisbon, Portugal). This editorial is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

### 1. Introduction

Across Europe, traditionally dominant parties of the centre-right and centre-left have faced increasing electoral pressure from right-wing populist parties (RWPPs). These latter parties claim that they constitute the only alternative to political and other elites bent on imposing cultural change and uncontrolled migration on their populations. Whilst ample attention has gone out to RWPPs’ ideological features, electoral performance, and broader impact (e.g., Mudde, 2007), the way they have organised themselves remains understudied. Although RWPPs are often still associated with centralised and “charismatic” leadership (e.g., Eatwell, 2018)—and some indeed adhere to this party model—many in fact aimed to establish complex and rooted organisations on the ground, and to foster an activist membership (Art, 2011; Heinisch & Mazzoleni, 2016).

This observation has broader theoretical implications. It is often claimed that political parties are losing

their traditional function of bridging the gap between citizens and the political elites. Whereas the first half of the 20th century saw the rise of parties that socialised citizens to politics, it is now widely assumed that the era of these so-called “mass parties” is over. Whilst the mass parties of yesteryear invested in recruiting activist members and building collective identities, the party organisation literature has since long identified trends towards alternative models, such as professional “catch-all” (Kirchheimer, 1966), “electoral-professional” (Panebianco, 1988) or “cartel” (Katz & Mair, 1995) organisations. What these models have in common is a more diffuse ideological message and a weakening reliance on grassroots members. Our starting assumption is that RWPPs tend to conceive the relationship between citizens and party elites differently from most of their competitors: Their populist message challenges “the political elites” precisely for disengaging with ordinary citizens. This, we argue, provides them with an incentive to invest in an organisational model that relies on

societal rootedness and the active shaping of members' political identities: the mass party model. In our thematic issue, we seek to empirically assess whether the mass party model is indeed still popular among RWPPs across Europe.

We identify the following key features of the mass party organisational model from the literature: (a) the drive to recruit a large activist membership as a way to reach out to the public through canvassing, campaigning and other means; (b) rootedness on the ground and the provision of a variety of activities to members; and (c) the preservation of "collective identities through ideology" (Panebianco, 1988, p. 268), by creating closed political communities of activists, promoting social integration among them and actively shaping their interpretations of political developments (Albertazzi, 2016). Following this interpretation, absolute membership numbers are not key to determining whether or not an organisation can be considered a "mass party." Just like the "cartel party" is defined by its relationship with the state (Katz & Mair, 1995), the mass party should be defined via the relationship between its party elites and grassroots.

Ultimately, we seek to uncover the ideological aspects behind organisational choices (i.e., whether the mass party model appears to suit parties that explicitly claim to represent "the people"). We ask if, and to what extent, RWPPs tend to show mass party characteristics, and whether this also means grassroots members have meaningful influence over the parties' decisions. In order to increase representativeness in terms of case selection, the issue presents 12 studies of European RWPPs that vary in terms of socio-political context, age, electoral success, and governing experience. In the issue's concluding article, we consider whether general patterns can be observed regarding the organisation and centralisation of RWPPs, and whether meaningful variation can be identified.

In the remainder of this introductory article we present the research questions that guide the individual contributions, and thus form the analytical framework for this thematic issue. The final section introduces the parties selected for our research.

## 2. Research Questions and Analytical Framework

Contributors were asked to address the two main questions and related subquestions with reference to the current organisation of the party they covered. If important organisational developments had occurred over the years, authors were nevertheless invited to discuss those, too. The first question was geared at assessing whether the selected parties showed features of the mass party organisational model; the second focused on whether any mass party structures in fact allowed members to exercise meaningful influence over the party's internal procedures and decisions.

The questions were as follows:

1. To what extent, and how, do RWPPs invest in developing the "mass party" organisational model?

Systematic analysis was achieved by asking contributors to address four subquestions:

- 1.1. To what extent is the party characterised by a considerable degree of organisation?
- 1.2. How does the party try to attract members and activists?
- 1.3. What is the role of the internet and social media in party organisation and activism?
- 1.4. What are (probable) reasons for the decision to grow an active base of members and activists, or refraining from doing so?

As far as 1.1 is concerned, we follow Janda (1970, pp. 106–107, 1980, p. 98) in defining "degree of organisation" as "the complexity of regularized procedures for mobilizing and coordinating the efforts of party supporters in executing the party's strategy and tactics." Our contributors considered whether the party functions through a relatively complex set of party organs (e.g., executive committee, member assembly, etc.), or whether it is managed through a simple structure and by a relatively small group of people. Furthermore, we were interested in whether the parties developed a network of regional and local branches through which grassroots members are involved.

1.2 deals with the way the party reaches out to potential members (e.g., via street stalls, social media advertising, etc.), and whether it offers any particular incentives (material or otherwise) for joining. By answering 1.3, we take new forms of communication into account, assuming that these are imperative to understanding present-day party organisations. Here we ask how online means of communication (particularly social media) are used to attract support more generally. Finally, 1.4 deals with the motivations of the party leadership in adopting a particular type of organisation.

The second main question concerns the extent to which the selected parties allow members to exercise meaningful influence within their organisations:

2. To what extent do RWPPs remain centralised in terms of key decision-making areas such as ideological direction, campaigning, and internal procedures?

As alluded to above, we believe it is important to make a distinction between the complexity of a party organisation, on the one hand, and internal democracy, on the other. The two do not necessarily go together, as could be observed in the mass parties of the 20th century, in which party elites were ultimately in charge (Duverger, 1951; Michels, 1962). We therefore asked contributors to reflect on formal decision-making rules, but also on the actual informal powers leaders

exercise within organisations, by answering two interrelated subquestions:

- 2.1. To what extent is decision-making power concentrated in the hands of the leader or a small circle of party elites?
- 2.2. To what extent, and in which ways, do RWPPs facilitate internal democracy?

2.1 relates to the “centralisation” of the party; following Janda (1980, p. 108), “a centralized party is one which features the concentration of effective decision-making authority in the national party organs, with a premium placed on a smaller number of individuals participating in the decision.” Related to this, 2.2 focuses specifically on the extent to which ordinary party members have a say (via party bodies) in important decisions, pertaining to leadership and candidate selection, policy formulation, and more.

### 3. Selected Right-Wing Populist Parties

The parties we selected for our collaborative project all espouse populist discourses and culturally conservative positions. There exist a variety of labels for such parties, including Mudde’s (2007) “populist radical right.” Most of our cases fall into this category, given that their appeal is based on a combination of nativism, authoritarianism, and populism. Yet, given that we sought to include cases in Central and Eastern Europe which range more widely between centrism and extremism (e.g., Stanley, 2017), we opted for a concept at a slightly higher level of abstraction: “right-wing populism.” For the purpose of the thematic issue, this is defined as an ideology “which pits a virtuous and homogeneous people against a set of elites and dangerous ‘others’ who are together depicted as depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice” (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2015, p. 5).

Regarding our case selection, the thematic issue presents the first results of our comparative research project “Populist Parties in Action” which studies four long-established RWPPs in Western Europe: the Lega per Salvini Premier (LSP, League for Salvini Premier) in Italy, the Vlaams Belang (VB, Flemish Interest) in Belgium, the Schweizerische Volkspartei/Union Démocratique du Centre (SVP/UDC, Swiss People’s Party) in Switzerland, and the Perussuomalaiset (PS, the Finns Party) in Finland. In this thematic issue we compare these established parties with relative RWPP newcomers in Western Europe, including the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD, Alternative for Germany), Forum voor Democratie (FvD, Forum for Democracy) in the Netherlands, and Vox in Spain. In addition, we broaden our comparative scope to post-communist Europe, by selecting parties with varying lifespans, organisational origins, electoral support and experience in office: the VMRO-Balgarsko Natsionalno Dvizhenie

(VMRO-BND, IMRO—Bulgarian National Movement), the Eesti Konservatiivne Rahvaerakond (EKRE, Estonian Conservative People’s Party), Fidesz-Magyar Polgári Szövetség (FIDESZ, Fidesz-Hungarian Civic Alliance), Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS, Law and Justice) in Poland, and the Slovenská Národná Strana (SNS, The Slovak National Party).

By showing how a fuller understanding of RWPPs’ organisational models challenges conventional scholarly wisdom on party evolution, we ultimately aim to provide other researchers with a robust and nuanced conceptual framework for assessing differential party development in other contexts and party families, too.

### Acknowledgments

The support of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) is gratefully acknowledged (Grant Ref: ES/R011540/1). The authors would also like to thank the contributors of the thematic issue for their work and feedback, as well as Petra Guasti and Andrej Zaslove for their valuable comments on the project and individual case studies.

### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

### References

- Albertazzi, D. (2016). Going, going....not quite gone yet? “Bossi’s Lega” and the survival of the mass party. *Contemporary Italian Politics*, 8(2), 1–16.
- Albertazzi, D., & McDonnell, A. (2015). *Populists in power*. Routledge.
- Art, D. (2011). *Inside the radical right: The development of anti-immigrant parties in Western Europe*. Cambridge University Press.
- Duverger, M. (1951). *Les partis politiques* [The political parties]. Armand Colin.
- Eatwell, R. (2018). Charisma and the radical right. In J. Rydgren (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of the radical right* (pp. 251–268). Oxford University Press.
- Heinisch, R., & Mazzoleni, O. (Eds.). (2016). *Understanding populist party organisation. The radical right in Western Europe*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Janda, K. (1970). *A conceptual framework for the comparative analysis of political parties*. Sage.
- Janda, K. (1980). *Political parties: A cross-national survey*. Free Press.
- Katz, R., & Mair, P. (1995). Changing models of party organization and party democracy: The emergence of the cartel party. *Party Politics*, 1(1), 5–28.
- Kirchheimer, O. (1966). The transformation of the Western European party systems. In J. LaPalombara & M. Weiner (Eds.), *Political parties and political development* (pp. 177–200). Princeton University Press.
- Michels, R. (1962). *Political parties: A sociological study*

*of the oligarchical tendencies of modern democracies.*

The Free Press. (Original work published 1911)

Mudde, C. (2007). *Populist radical right parties in Europe*.  
Cambridge University Press.

Panebianco, A. (1988). *Political parties: Organisation and*

*power*. Cambridge University Press.

Stanley, B. (2017). Populism in Central and Eastern Europe. In C. Rovira Kaltwasser, P. Taggart, P. Ochoa Espejo, & P. Ostiguy (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of populism* (pp. 140–160). Oxford University Press.

### About the Authors



**Daniele Albertazzi** is professor of politics at the Department of Politics of the University of Surrey. The major strands of his work have been about populism in Western Europe, party organisation, Italian politics, Swiss politics, and the communication strategies and mass media use of political parties. Daniele's most recent books are *Populism and New Patterns of Political Competition in Western Europe* (Routledge, 2021), co-edited with Davide Vampa, and *Populism in Europe—Lessons from Umberto Bossi's Northern League* (Manchester University Press, 2021), co-written with Davide Vampa.



**Stijn van Kessel** is senior lecturer in European politics at Queen Mary University of London. His main research interests are populism and populist parties, as well as the politics of European integration. He is the author of *Populist Parties in Europe: Agents of Discontent?* (Palgrave, 2015) and of articles in journals including *European Journal of Political Research*, *West European Politics*, and *Government & Opposition*. He is joint editor of the Routledge book series on *Extremism & Democracy*.



Article

## The League of Matteo Salvini: Fostering and Exporting a Modern Mass-Party Grounded on “Phygital” Activism

Mattia Zulianello

Department of Political and Social Sciences, University of Trieste, Italy; E-Mail: [mattia.zulianello@dispes.units.it](mailto:mattia.zulianello@dispes.units.it)

Submitted: 29 May 2021 | Accepted: 31 August 2021 | Published: 24 November 2021

### Abstract

The Lega Nord (LN) has undergone a profound process of transformation since 2013, by replacing its historical regionalist populism with a new state-wide populist radical right outlook. However, very little is known about how such transformation impacted its organizational model, particularly the mass-party features that characterized it under its founding leader, Umberto Bossi. This article explores the organizational evolution of the party under Matteo Salvini by means of a qualitative in-depth analysis of 41 semi-structured interviews with representatives of the LN from four regions (Calabria, Emilia-Romagna, Lombardy, and Veneto) and primary documents. It underlines that the LN was turned into a disempowered and politically inactive “bad company,” charged with the task of paying the debts of the old party, while its structure, resources, and personnel were poured into a new state-wide organization called Lega per Salvini Premier (LSP). The LSP has not simply maintained the key features of the mass-party in the LN’s historical strongholds, but also pioneered a modern form of this organizational model grounded on the continuous interaction between digital and physical activism, i.e., “phygital activism,” which boosts the party’s ability to reach out to the electorate by delivering the image that the League is constantly on the ground. The LSP has sought to export this modern interpretation of the mass-party in the South; however, in that area its organizational development remains at an embryonic stage, and the party’s nationalization strategy has so far produced a “quasi-colonial” structure dominated by, and dependent on, the Northern elite.

### Keywords

centralization; Lega Nord; Matteo Salvini; mass-party; party nationalization; party organization; phygital activism; populist radical right

### Issue

This article is part of the issue “Right-Wing Populist Party Organisation Across Europe: The Survival of the Mass-Party?” edited by Daniele Albertazzi (University of Surrey, UK) and Stijn van Kessel (Queen Mary University of London, UK).

© 2021 by the author; licensee Cogitatio (Lisbon, Portugal). This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

### 1. Introduction

For much of its existence, the Lega Nord (LN) was led by a Lombard elite dominated by its founding leader, Umberto Bossi, who concentrated his efforts on building a mass-party inspired by the organizational principles and practices of Leninist parties. While the existing literature has provided excellent analyses of the mass-party features of the “old” LN (e.g., Albertazzi, 2016; Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2015; McDonnell & Vampa, 2016), very little is known about how the disempowerment of the old LN in favour of a new, state-wide, organization called

Lega per Salvini Premier (LSP) impacted on its long-standing organizational model.

This article fills this gap by relying on the qualitative in-depth analysis of 41 semi-structured interviews with representatives of the LSP in Calabria, Emilia-Romagna, Lombardy, and Veneto, along with primary documents. In line with the analytical framework outlined in the introduction to this thematic issue on right-wing populist parties (Albertazzi & van Kessel, 2021), this article explores the organizational structure of the new LSP, shedding light on how it attracts new members and activists, the role of the internet and social media in party organization

and activism, the reasons to grow an active base of activists, and the degree of centralization of power and internal democracy.

This article is structured as follows: After a section presenting the research design and methods adopted, an outline of the historical evolution of the LN follows, explaining how the latter was transformed into a disempowered “bad company” in favour of the new LSP. Then, it explains how LSP has sought to foster and modernize the mass-party organizational model inherited from the old LN in the historical strongholds in the North, while seeking to export its key features to the whole country. The article subsequently discusses the hyper-centralized nature of the LSP and the virtual lack of internal democracy—features that are interlinked with the long-standing imperative of democratic centralism that characterized Bossi’s LN since its origins.

This article shows that the LSP has successfully developed a modern conception of the mass-party grounded on the key principle of “phygital” activism, which combines *physical* activism on the ground and *digital* activism, suggesting that a traditional organizational model can be updated by taking advantage of new technologies. Phygital activism is well-oiled and fostered in Northern regions, where it enables the LSP to perform the traditional functions of the mass-party model in a faster, more efficient, and immediate way.

This modern conception of the mass-party model is consolidated in the North and has been exported to the South. However, the strategy of organizational nationalization of the LSP is still in its infancy, and territorial penetration in the South is being pursued in a “quasi-colonial” way by Salvini and his most loyal collaborators, raising doubts about its future sustainability.

## 2. Research Design and Methods

By adopting the analytical framework outlined in the introduction to this thematic issue, this article tackles two major points. First, it assesses whether the new LSP has maintained key features of the mass-party organizational model, which were evident during Bossi’s era, despite the profound change of its ideology and geographic scope under the leadership of Matteo Salvini. Second, the article explores the strategy of organizational nationalization of a (formerly) regionalist party which, for much of its history, had found its *raison d’être* in a delimited geographic area (i.e., Northern Italy). Hence, the LSP as a case-study can substantially enhance our understanding of how parties implement “strategic decisions of adopting organizational changes in order to pursue their goals” (Borz & Janda, 2020, p. 3) as well as that of party nationalization strategies (e.g., Borz & De Miguel, 2019).

In this respect, it is worth recalling that Stockemer et al. (2018) argued that the study of the demand-side of populist radical right politics can be greatly improved through in-depth analyses, providing room for voices

from within the party. This article maintains that focusing on the attitudes, views, and perspectives from within the party is even more pressing when it comes to the study of party organization, an essential feature of the supply-side of populist politics (see Heinisch & Mazzoleni, 2016).

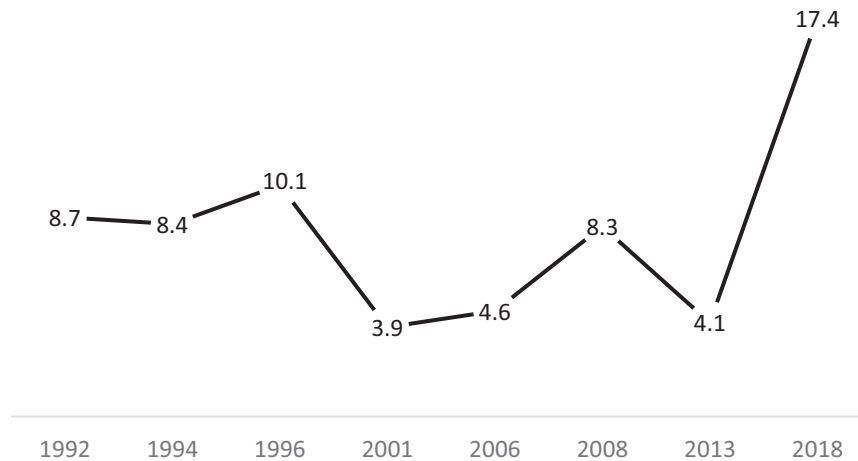
Hence, methodologically speaking, this article focuses on the detailed analysis of party statutes (LN, 2015, 2021; LSP, 2018) and regulations (LSP, 2021) and, in particular, on the qualitative in-depth analysis of 41 semi-structured interviews with representatives and former representatives of the LN and/or LSP in Calabria, Emilia-Romagna, Lombardy, and Veneto, conducted between November 2019 and June 2021. These regions were chosen to maximize variation in terms of party history, strength, and organizational development: the historical power centre of the LN/LSP (Lombardy), its current electoral stronghold (Veneto), an area in which the left has historically been dominant (Emilia-Romagna), and a Southern region where the party has attempted to export its organizational model (Calabria).

Interviewees were purposefully sampled: Snowball chains developed with those who agreed to be interviewed as well as with the help of the party, and participants were sought until theoretical saturation was reached (Kvale, 1996). All interviewees matched the criteria for purposive sampling as they are in a privileged position to shed light on the research questions mentioned above. All the interviewees occupy or occupied different roles within the LN/LSP at the various territorial levels of the party organization and/or represent(ed) the LN/LSP in local, regional, or national institutions (for details see the Supplementary Material).

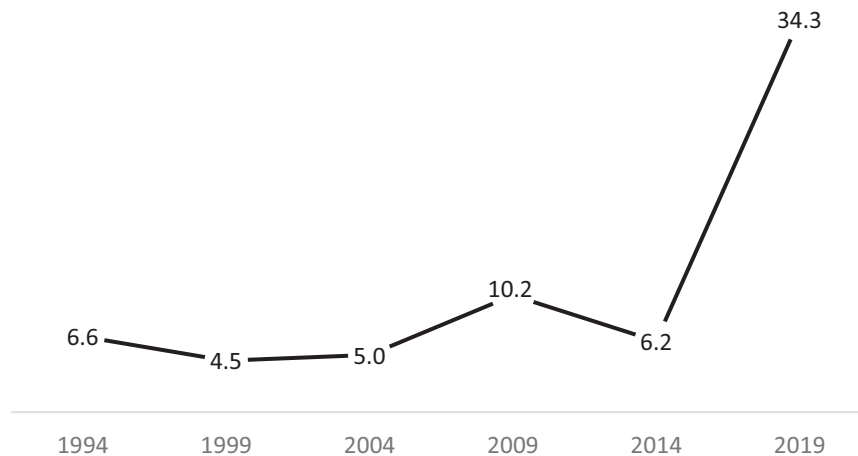
## 3. From Lega Nord to the Division of Labour Between Two Leagues: The “Good” and the “Bad” Company

The LN finds its roots in the mobilization of regionalist parties in Northern Italy since the late 1970s, which eventually merged in 1991 under the undisputed leadership of Bossi. Since then, LN has enjoyed uninterrupted parliamentary presence, making it the oldest parliamentary actor in the country. Even though its electoral performance has fluctuated over time (Figures 1 and 2), the impact of LN on Italian politics has been remarkable, as shown by its key role in coalition dynamics (Zulianello, 2019) and by its repeated participation in national governments (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2015).

LN played a critical role in the collapse of the party system that dominated Italian politics in the post-war period by bringing to the fore the so-called “Northern question.” The LN successfully activated a dormant centre-periphery cleavage counterpoising the interest and values of the “hard-working” Northerners against those of the “vexatious” central state and the “lazy” Southerners: Thanks to such features, the ideational profile of the party was constituted, for much of its history, by a populist form of regionalism (Newth, 2019; also cf. Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2015).



**Figure 1.** Vote share (in %) in general elections (1992–2018, Chamber of Deputies). Source: Electoral Archive of the Italian Interior Ministry (2021).



**Figure 2.** Vote share (in %) in European elections (1994–2019). Source: Electoral Archive of the Italian Interior Ministry (2021).

Bossi was the uncontested leader of LN until 2012, when a scandal regarding the misappropriation of party funds led to his resignation. Following the short-lived leadership of Roberto Maroni, Matteo Salvini became the new Federal Secretary in 2013 and his election represented a key discontinuity in comparison with the past, since he did not belong to the founding group of the party. As Albertazzi et al. (2018, p. 662) underline, under Salvini “the regionalist cause was dropped... thus transforming in a most profound way one of the key components of the LN’s ideology.” Even though there are good reasons to identify populism and nativism as elements of continuity between the “old” and the “new” LN (Newth, 2019), the ideological trajectory undertaken by Salvini has made the party a fully-fledged populist radical right actor (Albertazzi et al., 2018; cf. Mudde, 2007, pp. 56–57). Before the 2018 general elections, the adjective “Northern” was even dropped from the electoral symbol of the party: On that occasion, LN made considerable inroads across the peninsula, including in the South (Albertazzi & Zulianello, 2021), establishing itself as the

leading force within the centre-right, with 17.4% of the votes and outpolling Forza Italia for the first time (14.0%). Subsequently, it even became the most voted-for party in the country (34.3% in the 2019 EU elections).

The abandonment of regionalist populism has been accompanied by the effort to export an organizational model tailored to a territorially defined area (the so-called Padania) to the whole Italian territory. The first steps in developing a state-wide organization were undertaken shortly after Salvini’s election as party secretary of the LN, as in 2014 he launched a sister party called *Noi con Salvini* (NcS; literally “Us with Salvini”) to contest sub-national elections in Southern Italy.

Meanwhile, the LN was facing increasing pressures from Italian authorities, who were investigating the scandal related to the misappropriation of party funds for private purposes that had led to Bossi’s resignation in 2012. The amount of the fraud was estimated in EUR 49 million by judicial authorities; to prevent the risk of bankruptcy, Roberto Calderoli exited the parliamentary group of the LN in the senate in 2017 and deposited the statute of

the new political actor LSP, which was published in the *Official Gazette of the Italian Republic*. This move, orchestrated by the Federal Council of the LN together with Calderoli, enabled the new LSP to be entitled to receive indirect public funding as well as private contributions, hence providing a “plan B” in case of an eventual freezing and confiscation of LN funds by judicial authorities.

The establishment of the LSP resulted in a unique organizational parallelism: In the North, its structures, resources, and personnel de facto coincided with those of the old LN; in the South, the sister party NcS de facto dissolved into the new LSP. Nevertheless, such a parallelism had left unsolved the issue of protecting the LSP from the burden of the EUR 49 million debt—which the party had told prosecutors they would pay back in seven decades, in yearly instalments of EUR 600,000 a year—as well as formally transferring the members and structures of the LN into the new political actor. These issues were tackled in an extraordinary Federal Congress of the LN (held 21 December 2019), which unanimously approved a number of major changes to the federal statute, including the possibility of dual membership (i.e., in both LN and LSP). Such changes established a division of labour between two distinct entities: on the one hand, a “good company,” the new LSP that is the only political and electoral actor left; on the other, a “bad company,” the LN, which was “frozen” and continued to exist only to repay the already mentioned debt, mostly through “the voluntary contributions of its parliamentarians” (interview 4).

The final steps in the restructuring of the old LN occurred in early 2020. Salvini “froze” all the federal bodies of the disempowered LN, while appointing one of his most loyal collaborators (Igor Iezzi) as its federal commissioner to prevent any potential resurgence of the “old” guard. Subsequently, through a series of notarial acts, the regional branches of the old LN were re-founded as regional branches of the new League, led by commissioners directly appointed by Salvini and loyal to him.

#### **4. A Modern Mass-Party in the North, a Wannabe Mass-Party in the South**

The overall organizational logic of the LSP remains shaped by Bossi’s very specific interpretation of the mass-party model: that of “a party with a Marxist mould” (interview 31). While inviting the reader to the abundant and rich literature on Bossi’s LN for details (e.g., Albertazzi, 2016; Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2015; Cento Bull & Gilbert, 2001; McDonnell & Vampa, 2016), for the present purposes it suffices to highlight that Bossi focused his efforts on developing an organization characterized by the essential features of mass-parties, that is, one characterised by a grassroots activist base, widespread territorial presence, and wide-ranging activities for party members, the latter encapsulated into a political community shaped by ideology. Bossi’s LN was characterized by the paramount importance of physical and territorial activism, rigid screening mechanisms for

activists’ recruitment, and the formation of representatives through cadre schools, as well as by the development of a centralized party machine built upon the organizational imperative of democratic centralism.

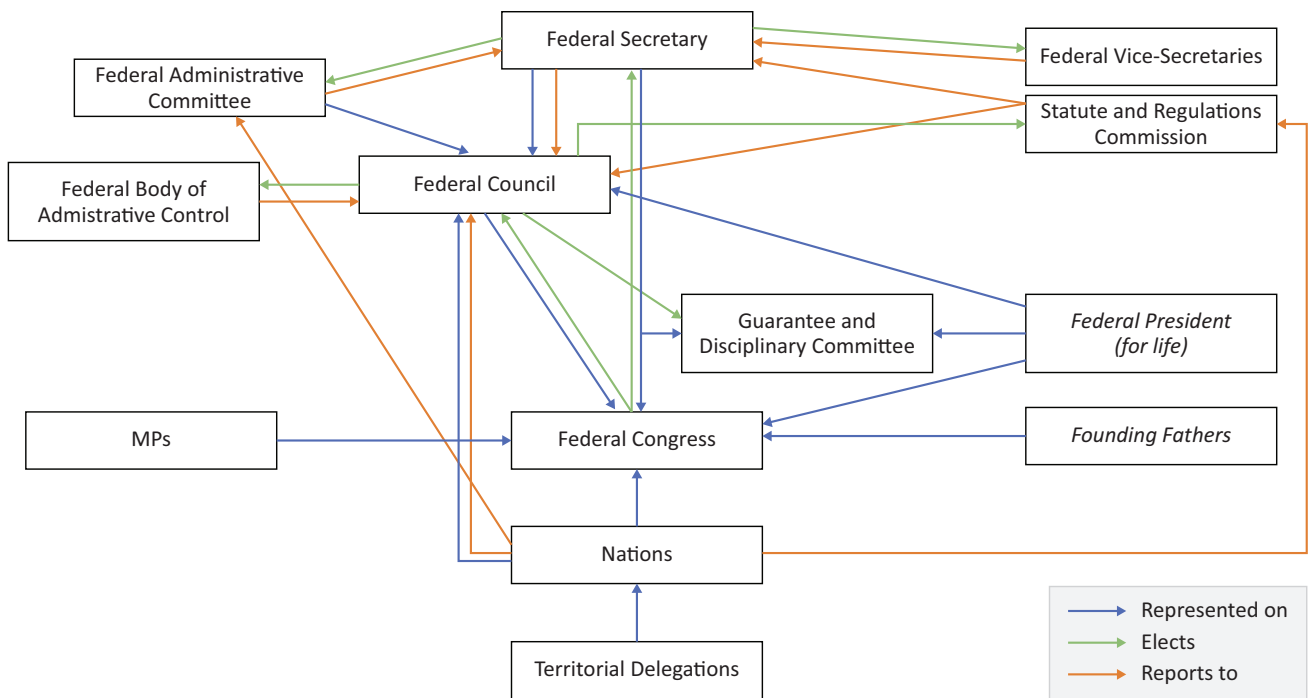
In the North, the LSP inherited the organizational legacy of the LN and still carries out the traditional functions and activities characterizing the mass-party model by reinterpreting it in a modern way. In the South, the LSP is better understood as a “wannabe” mass-party at an embryonic stage of development, as it is trying to replicate the organizational features and practices it has consolidated in the North, but not without difficulties.

##### *4.1. Degree of Organization*

The LSP is characterized by a considerable “degree of organization,” to use Janda’s (1980) terminology, for two key reasons. First, the structures, resources and (the vast majority of) members of the old LN were poured into the new state-wide organization. Second, as the statute of the LSP (2018) is very similar to the LN’s statute before its transformation into a bad company (LN, 2015), it is evident that the party has attempted to export its organizational model across the whole peninsula.

A comparison between the organizational chart of the LN (Figure 3) and that of the new LSP (Figure 4) highlights the disempowerment of the former in favour of the latter. In fact, crucial bodies and territorial levels of the party organization that are essential for conducting political activities do exist only in the new League (indicated in bold in Figure 4). Instead, the LN was “frozen,” meaning that “there will be no secretaries, there will be no branches. It will be de-structured” (interview 4).

Differently from the LN, the new LSP maintains a high degree of organization and structural articulation, as well as vertical linkages (Figure 4), all of them key features of mass-parties (Panebianco, 1988). At the federal level, the key bodies of the LSP are the Federal Secretary, the Federal Council, the Federal Congress, and the Organizational and Territorial Federal Officer. The Federal Secretary coordinates and superintends all of the LSP’s bodies and is granted extensive powers that virtually shape every aspect of party life. The Federal Congress convenes every three years: It is formally granted the power to elect the Federal Secretary, and its functions include setting the political and programmatic line and approving changes to the federal statute. The Federal Council is chaired and summoned by the Federal Secretary and includes, inter alia, the secretaries and representatives of the LSP’s regional branches. It convenes every three months, and among its extensive prerogatives is the ability to determine the party’s general course of action and to decide on a wide range of topics. A clear indication of the new LSP’s efforts to maintain and replicate a mass-party organization across the peninsula is provided by the existence of an Organizational and Territorial Federal Officer, who is appointed by the Federal Secretary.



**Figure 3.** Organizational chart of the LN, “the bad company.” Bodies in italics do exist in the LN but do not exist in the new LSP. Source: Own elaboration based on LN (2021).

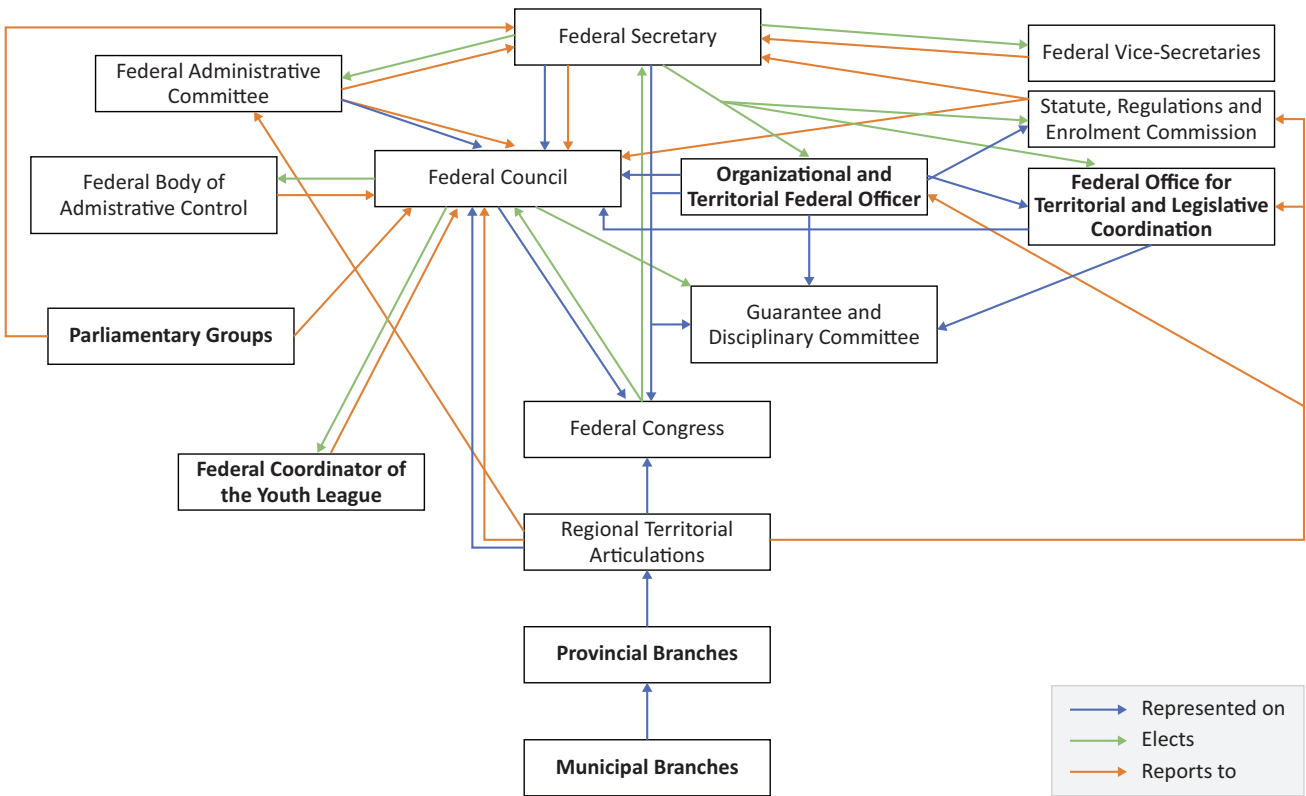
The LSP is structured into different territorial levels: federal (i.e., state-wide), regional, provincial, and municipal. These are connected by a delegated structure. Each sub-national level of the organization almost perfectly mirrors the bodies of the federal party at smaller scale, thus resembling a matryoshka doll. While the old LN was structured in thirteen regional units called “nations,” in the North and Centre of the peninsula, the LSP is constituted by twenty-two regional territorial articulations covering the entire Italian territory, which are formally bestowed with organizational, administrative, patrimonial and financial autonomy. The word “nation,” which was previously used to refer to each of the individual regions and was so important in the federalist imaginary of the old LN, is never used in the federal statute of the LSP, suggesting a dramatic ideological and symbolic rupture with the past.

The LSP is further structured into provincial and municipal branches, called “territorial delegations.” The provincial branch coordinates the activities of municipal branches, which are based upon a network of activists, and constitute the backbone of the organizational architecture of the party. Northern party representatives highlight that local branches meet on a regular basis (usually at least once a month, and on a weekly basis in some areas) and emphasize their decisive role in achieving territorial rootedness. This network is also essential for the recruitment, screening, socialization, value-infusion, and control of activists.

However, there are important differences between Bossi’s LN and the Salvini’s LSP in terms of their relative degree of organization. First, various representatives

underline that, even in the North, it is no longer possible to ensure the physical existence of local branches in small towns where there are few activists, which consequently need to be aggregated in super-municipal branches (interview 22). Second, while the LN featured a plethora of ancillary organizations, this universe was already gone before the election of Salvini as party leader (interview 4). However, today’s LSP still features the most important and energetic of its ancillary organizations of the past: the Lega Giovani (Youth League), the direct heir of the old Movimento dei Giovani Padani (MGP, Young Padanians Movement), which is essential to carry out activities on the ground and serves as a privileged channel for the recruitment of (future) party representatives, at least in the North (interview 37).

In the light of the discussion above, there are good reasons to consider the League as the “most structured political party in Italy” (interview 17), at least as long as the historical strongholds of the LN are concerned. However, party representatives underline that despite the party’s efforts, organizational structuration and territorial rootedness in the South are still in an embryonic phase. Interviewees argue that the LSP has the “willingness to take root” and to “be present on the ground” in Calabria as well as in the broader South, where it “imported a model from the North” (interview 37). However, the LSP’s organizational presence is so far “patchy” (interview 27) and only a few areas have a “well-structured group” (interview 40). Interestingly, differently from Northern regions where the local branches are mostly self-financed by local activists, sympathizers and representatives (e.g., interviews 11, 15, 29), the



**Figure 4.** Organizational chart of the LSP, “the good company.” Bodies indicated in bold do exist in the LSP but do not exist in the LN. Source: Own elaboration based on LSP (2018).

five physical branches of the LSP in Calabria are directly financed by the national party (interview 40), a feature showing the commitment of the national party to develop an organizational structure in the region.

**4.2. How Does the Party Try to Attract Members and Activists?**

The LN experienced a dramatic collapse in its membership figures following the scandal that led to Bossi’s resignation (McDonnell & Vampa, 2016), and while party officials did not provide me with updated figures on party membership, it is important to recall that the mass-party model *is not* defined by numbers per se. Rather, inter alia, it is defined by the drive to recruit new members, especially with the goal of developing an activist grassroots base to improve the party’s ability to reach out to the wider electorate (see Albertazzi & van Kessel, 2021).

To understand how the LSP pursues this objective and what incentives it offers to prospective members and activists it is essential to underline that, similarly to the “old” LN, the LSP (2021) distinguishes between *soci sostenitori* (supporter members) and *soci ordinari militanti* (activist members). Supporter members are important because they provide some funding by paying EUR 10 every year, while activist members constitute the organizational backbone of the party, as they are entitled to active and passive voting rights and have a duty to participate in its activities on a continuous and regu-

lar basis. For the purposes of this analysis, I adopt the re-categorization of Clark and Wilson’s (1961) incentives proposed by Albertazzi (2016). According to this scholar, purposive incentives relate to the “importance of party programmatic goals and ideology”; personal incentives evoke a “sense of identity being shaped by activism,” which provides a sense of “fulfilment,” “satisfaction,” or even “a reason to live” to members, while communitarian incentives refer to “the party’s ability to create and foster communities of like-minded individuals”; finally, material incentives refer to personal gain or reward acquired by the activist (Albertazzi, 2016, pp. 121–122).

Interviews reveal that potential supporter members are reached “through gazebos, word of mouth, and social media campaigns” (interview 24), and a key role is played by purposive incentives that do not evoke simply the core of the League’s message but also its perceived embodiment in Salvini’s persona, as suggested in interview 31: “[Salvini] says the things I would say, he says them as I would....To demonstrate my affinity I take the party card.” Salvini’s alleged capacity to speak on behalf of the ordinary people is perfectly consistent with the self-professed populist nature of the party and is strikingly similar to what occurred within Bossi’s LN (see Cento Bull & Gilbert, 2001, p. 21).

Purposive incentives play a crucial role in the recruitment of new supporter members in both the North and the South, while Northern party representatives argue that a key role in becoming an activist member

is played by “self-motivation” (e.g., interviews 1, 14, 21, 30). Northern representatives also underline that activist members’ recruitment is fostered by purposive incentives related to the desire to actively contribute to the achievement of party goals and by the provision of communitarian incentives. Significantly, communitarian incentives are also essential to maintaining activist members over time, because being a *leghista* (i.e. a member or sympathizer of the League) often has negative repercussions on private life, social relationships, and even personal finance. Most notably, in the North, these costs are compensated by the development of a “microcosm, where the affections, in some cases even colleagues, friends... the personal world is built within the boundaries of *leghismo*” (interview 9). This microcosm corresponds to a community of true “believers” (Panebianco, 1988, p. 26), a key feature of mass-parties, and helps to protect the party from careerists and infiltrators.

Finally, some representatives consider the possibility of becoming a candidate in elections a further reason to become an activist member of the League. However, given the demanding nature of activism within the party, the importance of this material incentive appears subordinate and secondary in comparison to purposive and communitarian ones, at least in the North. In the South, instead, given the newness of the party organization, activist members are still few and, most importantly, the LSP is often blamed for choosing candidates with little or no previous experience of activism in the party (interviews 38, 39, 40).

#### 4.3. *The Role of the Internet and Social Media in Party Organization and Activism*

The LSP has taken advantage of the cost-effectiveness and immediacy of new technologies to perform the typical functions of mass-parties in a modern way, a necessity following the abolition of direct public funding to political parties in Italy. WhatsApp and Facebook groups are now essential to coordinate party activities and to foster activism more generally. Indeed, they are crucial to organize and advertise, in a cost-effective and immediate way, a wide range of political and non-political activities on the ground, as well as to ensure a continuous flow of communication, which results in a sort of internal party broadcasting that favours value-infusion and member encapsulation.

The LSP has its own website and is active on all the major social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube); virtually all municipal branches of the party have a Facebook page. Salvini himself is very active on social media and has personal profiles on Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, and YouTube. Salvini is not only the Italian politician with the largest number of followers on all the social media platforms, but his success is remarkable even in a comparative perspective: In early 2020 he became the first political leader in Europe to reach 4 million followers on Facebook.

However, Salvini’s popularity and the unprecedented personalization of the party message and public image under its leader should not lead to the conclusion that today’s LSP has abandoned the mass-party model, nor that it has become a property of its leader. Indeed, the LSP is far from being a “personal party” (cf. Kefford & McDonnell, 2018). Of course, Salvini has the “brand, which today is personified in the persona of the leader” (interview 10), and interviewees commonly underline the vital importance of personalization for the electoral rise of the party (e.g., interview 19). However, personalization does not mean that the expectation of the LSP’s lifespan is perceived to be dependent on the political lifespan of its current leader, something that, instead, is typical of personal parties (Kefford & McDonnell, 2018). In fact, Northern representatives do acknowledge a potential scenario “after Salvini” (interview 20): “We feel *leghisti*, and we feel to be the party. So, whether the leader of the party is called Bianchi, Neri, Rossi, Verdi, or whatever the name, one is always a *leghista*” (interview 19). Of course, this applies to the North, while whether the party has a future in the South in a “post-Salvini” era is open to debate.

Having clarified why Salvini’s party should not be considered a personal party, it can be underlined that the new LSP is fostering a modern interpretation of the mass-party model through the systematic usage of the TRT formula (TV, *rete*, *territorio*, that is, television, network, territory) developed by Salvini’s strategist, Luca Morisi. The TRT formula informs party workings at all levels and can be understood as a powerful way of bridging physical and digital activism; this principle is clearly inspired by marketing, in which the blend of the physical and digital worlds is commonly referred to by the term “phygital.” The TRT formula implies the continuous interaction and coordination of party activities and messages between traditional media, social media and activism on the ground (interview 18), hence “multiply[ing] the message... hundreds, thousands of times” (interview 17). This formula is taught in cadre schools and regularly adopted by party representatives at all levels, as explained in interviewe 18:

I’m a small cog in a big machine, but tonight I’ll be on local TV, I’ll put my banner on the social networks...The next day I’ll broadcast the video of my interview on TV using a new media...In the morning I’ll be doing a gazebo, so: TV-network-territory in a continuous way.

The TRT formula delivers the image that the League and its key representatives are present “on the ground,” differently from the other parties that have long abandoned their societal roots and linkages with the “ordinary man.” Thanks to the pervasive adoption of the TRT formula, the LSP has pioneered a modern form of mass-party built upon phygital activism, through which it is capable of performing key functions and activities of the

traditional mass-party in a more efficient and immediate way. Physical and digital activism reinforce each other, producing an amplifying effect that boosts the visibility of the party at the mass-level, delivering the image that the LSP, its representatives, and activists are constantly on the ground.

It is important to underline that the success of the TRT formula requires the presence of local committed activists for reasons related to both logistics (e.g., the concrete organization of a gazebo) and credibility (e.g., leafleting is more effective when made by locals), because “no communication agency nor no amount of money would give you the same result” (interview 18). Also in Calabria, people get closer to the LSP if they see representatives or activists “on the ground and social media, making an effort to solve a problem” (interview 40). However, given the uneven and spotty organizational development of the LSP in Calabria (interview 27), in many areas of the region (and of the South more generally), the TRT formula is still disproportionately focused on the persona of Matteo Salvini, who aims to compensate for the lack of territorial presence. Following the principles of the TRT formula, Salvini regularly travels across the peninsula to take part in various events, and his visibility is amplified through the usage of traditional and social media. While this strategy is functional to gathering votes and public attention, with Salvini being often seen as “the only leader who comes to visit these areas” in the South (interview 32), this is also criticized by some interviewees who complain that it hinders organizational development and political activism:

[Activists] only speak about going to eat pizza, about going to rallies and saying “hooray for Salvini!” “go Salvini!” After which [activism] fades into agony and oblivion. (Interview 38)

Salvini has come to Calabria at times, made a three-minute speech saying the same things, and this was followed by an hour and a half posing for selfies. This is not politics. (Interview 39)

#### 4.4. *Reasons to Grow an Active Base of Members and Activists*

Coherently with its long-standing vocation as a mass-party, the League actively seeks to foster an activist grassroots base, which is essential to fulfil disparate internal and external goals, as well as to carry out practical and symbolical functions. Party representatives explain that activists organize a wide range of activities, which include, among others, leafleting, gazebos, local festivals, rallies, protest actions, convivial events, and book presentations. Activism and ideology encapsulate members in what is usually perceived as a “family” or a “team,” which make the grassroots activist base a competitive weapon that can be mobilized at any time, at least in Northern regions. The presence of an activist grass-

roots base is considered as “what saves you politically” (interview 18), an organizational asset making the LSP “much more resistant when is losing support” and helping it “grow much faster” when conditions are favourable (interview 24). Furthermore, an activist grassroots base is also functional to providing an aura of credibility and authenticity to the LSP’s (self-declared) populist nature. Activists are essential to ensure that gazebos and leafleting activities are regularly carried out throughout the year, but also to deliver the idea that the party is always present on the ground to hear citizens’ concerns and grievances. This is crucial to differentiate it from the other parties, which, according to many party representatives, show up only during election campaigns.

The long and continuous effort by the League to invest in grassroots activism since the early Bossi years has produced in Northern regions what a representative (interview 9) acutely defined as the “*leghista* of proximity.” As he explains:

In the North is easy to meet someone who is a member of the League, and [this] gives the party a human dimension, in which people can identify, not just because there is Salvini on the television, but also because there is Roberto who is a tobacconist.

Therefore, the *leghista* of proximity fulfils both practical and symbolical functions: He or she is not only essential to carry out key activities typical of the mass-party for free, but also to provide an aura of authenticity to the LSP. The goal of delivering an image of authenticity is also being pursued in Calabria: “For us it’s very important at a communicative level to make people understand that it is us who make the League....Salvini can give indications, but politics is made on the ground” (interview 40).

## 5. Centralization and Internal Democracy

The LSP is a hyper-centralized party following Janda’s (1980, p. 108) criteria. It is characterized by very little space for internal democracy (even more so than during Bossi’s era), and in line with its Leninist imprinting, the organizational imperative of the LSP remains democratic centralism, a feature enabling the party to deliver an image of unity and cohesiveness at the mass-level.

### 5.1. *Centralization*

The LSP is characterized by the disproportionate concentration of power in three federal bodies, which can be defined as the trident of power: the Federal Secretary, the Federal Council, and the Organizational and Territorial Federal Officer. Whereas the Federal Secretary holds a dominant position, an important concurrent role is played by the other two components of the trident of power, which, directly or indirectly, impact and steer the activities and workings of the LSP at both the federal and sub-national levels (see



Figure 4). The overall functioning of the party machine is informed by the principle of “democratic centralism” (interview 18), the core organizational imperative of traditional Marxist-Leninist parties. As an influential representative (interview 30) explains:

We discuss, then the secretary makes the synthesis....The Federal Council of the League is compact, united, there are no different souls....There is internal debate, but as soon as the meeting ends we are all compact and united.

Significantly, the LSP’s course of action in political and programmatic terms (including party manifestos and electoral alliances, both at the national and sub-national levels), its internal rule-making, its administrative, economic and financial management, as well as the management and enforcement of internal discipline are dominated, directly or indirectly, by the Federal Secretary and the Federal Council, and often register a concurrent role of the Organizational and Territorial Federal Officer. The latter is essential as “it cascades the directives down” to the other levels of the organization (interview 15) and ensures the multi-level coordination of party activities on the ground. Power is also centralized at the federal level in terms of candidate and personnel selection. The Federal Secretary expresses an opinion on the candidatures to elective positions at the various levels, while the Federal Council determines the candidate lists for general and European elections and ratifies the regional branches’ proposed candidacies for the positions of regional governor and regional capitals’ mayors, as well as their respective candidate lists.

In the historical strongholds of the party, the organizational Leninist mould still de facto survives, aiming at bringing within institutions representatives socialized to party values and hierarchy, trained in party cadre schools, and selected following a strict *cursus honorum*. However, even though such a *cursus honorum* is widely valued by representatives (e.g., interviews 3, 10, 11, 24), who underline the importance of “paying your dues,” the new party regulation (LSP, 2021, Art. 17), maintains that “the Federal Council can establish, for each single electoral session of any level, the criteria of seniority of membership necessary to propose candidates or to be candidates.” This provision seems particularly relevant for the South and suggests a further centralization of power in the hands of the federal party. More generally, candidate lists and alliances at the sub-national level require approval from the hierarchically superior level. It is also worth stressing that the League’s communication is also hyper-centralized, through a cascade pattern from the federal level down to the municipal one, a feature that favours a coordinated implementation of the previously mentioned TRT formula.

Broadly speaking, the federal level dominates the sub-national levels through the so-called *sistema di controllo e garanzia* (system of control and guarantee),

which makes sure that the various levels of the party organization are checked, monitored and held accountable to those that are hierarchically superior. This mechanism ensures organizational coordination and coherence. Deviations from the federal party line are regulated by means of *commissariamenti*, that is, the replacement of a given monocratic or collegial body with commissioners, who are granted full powers in a given territorial area.

The instrument of *commissariamenti* played a decisive role in the disempowerment of the old LN in favour of the new LSP. In the North, by taking advantage of the impossibility of having sub-national congresses given the formal preclusion of dual membership in the “old” and “new” League, Salvini used the instrument of *commissariamenti* to replace various elected secretaries and collegial bodies of the “old” LN. This strategy has served a double function: on the one hand, maintaining the consolidated structure that the LN had established in its historical strongholds; on the other, ensuring that key positions within the party were held by individuals loyal to the leadership and to the party’s new ideological course.

In the South, the loose approach that initially characterized NcS was supplanted by a top-down and centralized approach to party building dominated by the Northern elite and commissioners from the North. Commissioners were granted full powers in the area of their competence and given the task of exporting the key features and internal mechanisms that characterized the old LN to the South, while attempting to protect the process of party building from infiltrators and careerists. Interestingly, most of the commissioners have been Lombards, in line with the historical dominance of this regional branch in the old LN, and have been given the explicit task of exporting its organizational model and even its “mentality” (interview 40). For instance, Cristian Invernizzi, an MP from the Northern city of Bergamo, was regional commissioner in Calabria between May 2019 and January 2021: He was “Salvini’s emanation in Calabria,” and his task was “to organize, structure the party, even dictate the political line” (interview 25), as well as to trying “to foster the leghista mentality” in the area (interview 40). Unsurprisingly, this Northern commissioner was often criticized by the Calabrian grassroots for his top-down management of the party (interviews 38, 39).

More generally, the party in the central office seeks, in the South, “to protect the brand, in a way. If you get a criminal elected because you have not checked before... the main damage is suffered by the brand,” to the point of being “even paranoid at times” (interview 31), but this results in the LSP being perceived as “detached from the real needs of the territory” (interview 38). The difficult task of also protecting the brand from individuals using the party as a “train” just to pursue a political career (interview 40) is pursued in particular thanks to the action of commissioners who oversee candidature lists and control appointments to internal party positions (interviews 15, 25, 27, 31, 32, 39).

All in all, the League's organization looks:

A bit military....We make clear that there is a hierarchy and that this hierarchy cannot be questioned in any way [but] we have some difficulties in building the structure in the South, because we try to convey... the concept of hierarchy... but there they all want to be protagonists. (Interview 31)

Finally, it is worth underlining that exporting the organization model of the League into the South is further complicated by the electoral rise of Fratelli d'Italia (Fdi), a populist radical right party (Zulianello, 2020) led by Giorgia Meloni that has a great appeal in the area. Interviewee 38 underlines that "[Fdi] is the nightmare of the League," and interviewees from the South explain that Meloni's party is attracting not simply former LSP voters, but also former party members (interviews 25, 37, 39, 40).

### 5.2. Internal Democracy

The imperative of democratic centralism leaves very little space for dissenting voices and internal democracy. Supporter members have virtually no rights at all, while activist members are closely scrutinized in terms of loyalty and dedication to the party, subject to disciplinary sanctions ranging from written reprimands to expulsion. All in all, while the duties of activist members are extensive, their prospects to have a say are poor in all the key dimensions of party life and workings.

Northern party representatives underline that local party meetings are important to ensure internal debate and the involvement of activists. However, democratic centralism leaves "the last word" to party secretaries at all territorial levels (interview 12), and this does not commit only activists to the party line, but elected representatives as well. For instance, the LSP's representatives (including MPs) have a duty to regularly report their activities not only to the federal level of the party but also to the sub-national levels of the party organization, such as the municipal branch and the regional branch they belong to. Hence, as it was in Bossi's era, party members can discuss and meet at the various levels of the party organization, often with the participation of elective representatives, but their ability to influence decision-making, the political line and candidatures is close to zero.

While interviewees from the North usually mention the fact that it is possible to easily get in touch with party representatives of the League to ask for information, help or advice, and they interpret this as a form of democracy, just like participating in local party meetings, interviewees from the South tell a different story. They lament the absence of coordination between the party in public office and the party in central office, so that "you don't know where to turn because no one answers you," while internal debate seems poor also during local party

meetings because of the extreme centralization of power in the hands of the (federal) party (interview 39).

All in all, the only tool that can be used by members to influence the general course of the League is the election of party leaders at various territorial levels, but this chance has also remained a dead letter in the last few years because of the widespread usage of *commisariamenti*. Although party congresses at all levels were initially frozen because of the transition from the old LN to the new League, the Covid-19 pandemic has contributed to postpone them sine die, raising profound concerns among many interviewees in both the North and the South.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that an important innovation in terms of internal democracy was the extension of the electorate for federal leadership elections in both 2013 and 2017—from congress delegates to activist members with at least one-year seniority, as a derogation from the formal statutory provisions. However, rather than actually democratizing the party, primary elections resembled plebiscitarian coronations for Salvini, who obtained crushing victories against his rivals. These translated into a "surplus" legitimacy that Salvini exploited to both abandon the regionalist ideological *raison d'être* of the LN and to transform it into a politically inactive bad company.

## 6. Conclusion

Today's LSP is characterized by a kind of "territorial dyscrasia." In the North, the LSP inherited the organizational capital of the old LN and exploits it to carry out the traditional functions and activities of the mass-party model in a modern way. In the South, the LSP is better understood as a "wannabe" mass-party, as it actively tries to replicate the organizational features and practices it has consolidated in the North. However, exporting, instilling and routinizing the organizational imperatives of loyalty, activism, and dedication will be a very demanding and time-consuming enterprise. Organizational development in the South remains at an embryonic stage, and the LSP's strategy for nationalization has so far produced a "quasi-colonial" structure dominated by, and dependent on, the Northern elite.

This article has crucial implications for our understanding of the mass-party organizational model in the contemporary world. While Bossi's LN was a mass-party in a traditional sense, the case of the LSP suggests that new technologies can be successfully exploited to develop a modern form of mass-party. As previously mentioned, a key feature of mass-parties is the development of an activist grassroots base to improve the party's ability to reach out to the wider electorate (Albertazzi & van Kessel, 2021).

In this respect, this article has suggested that LSP is characterized by the desire to act and be perceived as a mass-party; however, it has pioneered an innovative interpretation of the latter organizational model.

Indeed, the LSP can be understood as a modern mass-party whose key feature is ceaseless phygital activism, which is a blend of digital and physical activism that is far from being limited to election times. Phygital activism is sought on a continuous basis and aims at boosting the visibility of the party at the mass-level, thanks to a synergy between traditional in-person and face-to-face activism, performed by a grassroots base, and modern online activism, carried out through social media and instant messaging systems.

A modern mass-party grounded on phygital activism aims to deliver the image that the party is constantly on the ground to collect citizens' concerns, and the continuous interaction between physical and digital activism also fosters the development of a political community that encapsulates members through ideology. Most notably, these are key functions performed by mass-parties: The case of the LSP suggests that phygital activism enables the reinterpretation of a traditional organizational model in a modern, more efficient, immediate, and less bureaucratic way, making it an asset capable of meeting the challenges of the twenty-first century.

### Acknowledgments

The support of the Economic and Social Research Council (UK) is gratefully acknowledged (Grant Ref: ES/R011540/1).

### Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

### Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

### References

- Albertazzi, D. (2016). Going, going... not quite gone yet? "Bossi's Lega" and the survival of the mass party. *Contemporary Italian Politics*, 8(2), 115–130.
- Albertazzi, D., Giovannini, A., & Seddone, A. (2018). "No regionalism please, we are Leghisti!" The transformation of the Italian Lega Nord under the leadership of Matteo Salvini. *Regional & Federal Studies*, 28(5), 645–671.
- Albertazzi, D., & McDonnell, D. (2015). *Populists in power*. Routledge.
- Albertazzi, D., & van Kessel, S. (2021). Right-wing populist party organisation across Europe: The survival of the mass party? Introduction to the thematic issue. *Politics and Governance*, 9(4), 224–227.
- Albertazzi, D., & Zulianello, M. (2021). Populist electoral competition in Italy: The impact of sub-national contextual factors. *Contemporary Italian Politics*, 13(1), 4–30.
- Borz, G., & De Miguel, C. (2019). Organizational and ideological strategies for nationalization: Evidence from European parties. *British Journal of Political Science*, 49(4), 1499–1526.
- Borz, G., & Janda, K. (2020). Contemporary trends in party organization: Revisiting intra-party democracy. *Party Politics*, 26(1), 3–8.
- Centò Bull, A., & Gilbert, M. (2001). *The Lega Nord and the northern question in Italian politics*. Palgrave.
- Clark, P. B., & Wilson, J. Q. (1961). Incentive systems: A theory of organizations. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 6, 129–166.
- Electoral Archive of the Italian Interior Ministry. (2021). *L'Archivio* [The archive; Data set]. <https://elezionistorico.interno.gov.it>
- Heinisch, R., & Mazzoleni, O. (Eds.). (2016). *Understanding populist party organisation*. Palgrave.
- Janda, K. (1980). *Political parties: A cross-national survey*. Free Press.
- Kefford, G., & McDonnell, D. (2018). Inside the personal party: Leader-owners, light organizations and limited lifespans. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 20(2), 379–394.
- Kvale, S. (1996). *InterViews: An introduction to qualitative research interviewing*. SAGE.
- Lega Nord. (2015). *Statuto della Lega Nord per l'Indipendenza della Padania* [Statute of the Northern League for the independence of Padania]. [www.leganord.org/phocadownload/ilmovimento/statuto/Statuto.pdf](http://www.leganord.org/phocadownload/ilmovimento/statuto/Statuto.pdf)
- Lega Nord. (2021). *Statuto della Lega Nord per l'Indipendenza della Padania* [Statute of the Northern League for the independence of Padania]. [https://www.leganord.org/phocadownload/ilmovimento/statuto/LN\\_Statuto\\_2021.pdf](https://www.leganord.org/phocadownload/ilmovimento/statuto/LN_Statuto_2021.pdf)
- Lega per Salvini Premier. (2018). *Statuto* [Statute]. [https://static.legapersalvinipremier.it/files/Lega\\_per\\_Salvini\\_Premier\\_Pubbl\\_Statuto\\_GU\\_n.272\\_del\\_22\\_11\\_2018.pdf](https://static.legapersalvinipremier.it/files/Lega_per_Salvini_Premier_Pubbl_Statuto_GU_n.272_del_22_11_2018.pdf)
- Lega per Salvini Premier. (2021). *Regolamento* [Regulation]. <https://static.legapersalvinipremier.it/files/2021-05-15%20Regolamento%20LPSP.pdf>
- McDonnell, D., & Vampa, D. (2016). The Italian Lega Nord. In R. Heinisch & O. Mazzoleni (Eds.), *Understanding populist party organisation* (pp. 105–129). Palgrave.
- Mudde, C. (2007). *Populist radical right parties in Europe*. Cambridge University Press.
- Newth, G. (2019). The roots of the Lega Nord's populist regionalism. *Patterns of Prejudice*, 53(4), 384–406.
- Panbianco, A. (1988). *Political parties: Organization and power*. Cambridge University Press.
- Stockemer, D., Lentz, T., & Mayer, D. (2018). Individual predictors of the radical right-wing vote in Europe: A meta-analysis of articles in peer-reviewed journals (1995–2016). *Government and Opposition*, 53(3), 569–593.

Zulianello, M. (2019). *Anti-system parties: From parliamentary breakthrough to government*. Routledge.

Zulianello, M. (2020). Varieties of populist parties and party systems in Europe: From state-of-the-art to the

application of a novel classification scheme to 66 parties in 33 countries. *Government and Opposition*, 55(2), 327–347.

#### About the Author



**Mattia Zulianello** is assistant professor of political science (tenure-track) at the Department of Political and Social Sciences at the University of Trieste, Italy, and previously was research fellow at the Department of Political Science and International Studies of the University of Birmingham, UK. He is the author of *Anti-System Parties: From Parliamentary Breakthrough to Government* (Routledge, 2019) and his research interests include anti-system parties, populism, party systems, and mixed-method approaches.

Article

## VOX Spain: The Organisational Challenges of a New Radical Right Party

Astrid Barrio <sup>1,\*</sup>, Sonia Alonso Sáenz de Oger <sup>2</sup> and Bonnie N. Field <sup>3</sup><sup>1</sup> Department of Constitutional Law and Political Science, University of Valencia, Spain; E-Mail: [astrid.barrio@uv.es](mailto:astrid.barrio@uv.es)<sup>2</sup> International Politics, Georgetown University in Qatar, Qatar; E-Mail: [sa1197@georgetown.edu](mailto:sa1197@georgetown.edu)<sup>3</sup> Department of Global Studies, Bentley University, USA; E-Mail: [bfield@bentley.edu](mailto:bfield@bentley.edu)

\* Corresponding author

Submitted: 22 April 2021 | Accepted: 2 August 2021 | Published: 24 November 2021

### Abstract

This article examines the organisation of VOX, a new radical right party in Spain. It shows that the party has taken early and uneven steps to build a mass organisation and initially opted for open membership recruitment with participatory organisational elements. Also, the party's rapid growth and quick entrance into political institutions at different state levels led the party leadership to establish more centralised control and limit members' prerogatives, though recruitment continued. Centralisation in part responds to organisational needs given the party's quickly acquired political relevance, but also to the desire of the central party leadership to forestall the articulation of territorial interests, or prevent them from escaping their control. Today, VOX exhibits elements of mass party organisation and highly centralised decision-making in the hands of national party leaders.

### Keywords

party organisation; political parties; radical right; Spain; Vox

### Issue

This article is part of the issue "Right-Wing Populist Party Organisation Across Europe: The Survival of the Mass-Party?" edited by Daniele Albertazzi (University of Surrey, UK) and Stijn van Kessel (Queen Mary University of London, UK).

© 2021 by the authors; licensee Cogitatio (Lisbon, Portugal). This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

## 1. Introduction

For several decades, Spain was one of the countries that stood out from European trends due to the absence of a relevant radical right party (Alonso & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2015). However, between late 2018 and 2019, the radical right VOX (which means "voice" in Latin) very rapidly gained a significant electoral and institutional presence. Its organisational development has struggled to keep pace.

Because the radical right parties that first drew the attention of scholars, such as the French National Front, had charismatic leadership, some have considered them charismatic parties (Eatwell, 2018). In order to guarantee internal cohesion, charismatic parties tend to have weak organisation, a skeletal bureaucratic apparatus, and highly centralised decision-making that leads to low levels of institutionalization (Panebianco, 1988).

However, not all radical right parties have a charismatic origin (Eatwell, 2018).

Nonetheless, Panebianco's genetic model is a useful framework for analysing organisational development. This article examines VOX, a party that has developed through territorial penetration, directed by the central party leadership, and without external institutional sponsorship (such as from a union or confessional group) or charismatic leadership (Eliassen & Svaasand, 1975; Panebianco, 1988). We refer to VOX simply as a radical right party, without the populist descriptor, which we explain below.

This article examines the extent to which VOX is striving to develop a mass party organization. According to the definition used in this thematic issue, a mass party organization is characterized by (a) the drive to recruit a large activist membership, (b) rootedness on the ground and the provision of a variety of activities to members

(Albertazzi & van Kessel, 2021), and (c) the preservation of “collective identities through ideology” (Panebianco, 1988, p. 268) by creating closed political communities of activists, by promoting social integration among them and by shaping their interpretations of political developments (Albertazzi, 2016). We pay particular attention to VOX’s territorial penetration, membership recruitment, the role of social media in creating collective identity and activists, and the degree to which decision-making in the party is centralised.

Many new parties have a political renewal agenda that encourages them to adopt a more participatory organisational model (Müller-Rommel, 1990), although this is not necessarily the case for populist radical right parties (Heinisch & Mazzoleni, 2016). Yet, according to the notion of party lifespan (Pedersen, 1982), gaining political relevance often goes along with organisational change to guarantee centralised control in new parties (Bolloyer, 2013).

This article shows that VOX has taken early and uneven steps to build a mass organisation and initially opted for open membership recruitment with participatory organisational elements. Also, its rapid growth and quick entrance into political institutions at different state levels led the party leadership to establish more centralised control and limit members’ prerogatives, though recruitment continued. Centralisation relates to organisational needs—given the party’s quickly acquired political relevance—but also to the desire of the central party leadership to forestall the articulation of territorial interests or check them. The party’s staunchly Spanish nationalist and state centralist ideology thus also affected its organisational choices. Today, VOX exhibits elements of mass party organisation and highly centralised decision-making in the hands of national party leaders in Madrid.

The article is organised as follows: The next section provides a brief history of the party. The third examines the steps it has taken to build a mass organisation. The fourth section analyses the progressive centralisation of decision-making and related internal conflict. A final section briefly concludes. The article draws on party documents, media coverage, interviews with five VOX leaders at the regional and national level (see Supplementary File), and the secondary literature.

## 2. VOX: A Brief History

This section outlines the origins of VOX, its ideology, and the rapid electoral rise that shaped its development.

VOX can be considered a radical right split from the Partido Popular (PP), Spain’s main conservative party since the 1980s, in terms of its voter base and many of its founding leaders (Alonso & Field, 2021; Barrio, 2020; Rama et al., 2021; Sangiao, 2018). VOX was founded in December 2013, in the midst of a severe economic and political crisis, which included far-reaching corruption scandals, particularly affecting the PP, and rising ten-

sions surrounding Catalonia’s political status. The party presented itself as the answer to the multiple overlapping crises. VOX denigrated the PP, under the leadership of Mariano Rajoy, for what it considered a feeble response to challenges to Spain’s national identity and territorial integrity. Santiago Abascal, VOX’s leader since 2014, refers to the PP as the “cowardly right” (*derechita cobarde*). The party took off electorally in the aftermath of the independence push in Catalonia, which culminated in a unilateral declaration of independence in October 2017 and the suspension of Catalonia’s autonomy by the Rajoy government. The party has been relevant in Spanish politics since 2018.

VOX has much in common with populist radical right parties in Europe (Mudde, 2007, pp. 13–26), with national specificities. Yet, it is foremost a Spanish nationalist party that espouses and defends the unity of a single Spanish nation, patriotism, and Spanish symbols and cultural practices, such as bullfighting. It advocates for political re-centralisation of the Spanish state and shows particular disdain for Spain’s own peripheral national identities and leaders in Catalonia, the Basque Country, and elsewhere. Thus, VOX’s primary antagonists are “those ‘threatening’ their idea of Spain from the inside” (Marcos-Marne et al., 2021, p. 4). The first 10 measures in its 2018 manifesto, *VOX’s 100 Urgent Measures for Spain*, come under the heading “Spain, Unity & Sovereignty” (VOX, 2018), including the suspension of Catalonia’s autonomy (measure no. 1), the banning of parties, associations, and nongovernmental organizations that seek to “destroy the territorial unity of the nation” (no. 2), the protection of national symbols (no. 3), and the establishment of a unitary state (no. 6). Indeed, support for the party in its 2018 electoral breakthrough in the region of Andalusia is linked to voter preferences on territorial issues (Turnbull-Dugarte, 2019a).

VOX also identifies external enemies and, similar to European populist radical right parties, is nativist and hostile toward Islam. The party explicitly links immigration to problems of law and order, and has accused unaccompanied migrant minors of being thieves and responsible for a wave of violence (VOX, 2020a). In the 2021 election for the Madrid regional parliament, the party hung a poster in the commuter train station that displayed an elderly, white woman and a hooded, masked, dark-skinned youth, with the false statement: “A MENA [a depreciative acronym for unaccompanied foreign minors] 4,700 Euros a month. Your grandmother 426-euro pension/month. VOX. Protect Madrid. Vote safe” (Blanco, 2021; authors’ translation). VOX is less hostile to, and has at times shown support for, Latin American immigrants, whom the party portrays as more apt to assimilate because of linguistic and cultural ties (Sosa, 2018). While the party is clearly nativist, immigration has not been the party’s core issue. In its 2018 manifesto of 100 urgent measures, those related to “Spain, Unity & Sovereignty” appear before immigration measures (VOX, 2018).

The party champions traditional, highly conservative values. It is resolutely antifeminist, putting centre-stage its opposition to “gender ideology” and the dismantling of what it refers to as feminist, LGBTQ, and other leftist “lobbies” (Bernardez-Rodal et al., 2020; Olivas Osuna & Rama, 2021). In this way, it shares traits with Poland’s Law and Justice Party. One of its signature policy priorities is to allow parents to require schools to ask for their express consent (*pin parental*/parental veto) before any school activity related to gender, feminism or sexual orientation. In contrast to some radical right parties that have moved to the centre on socio-economic issues (de Lange, 2007), VOX is neoliberal on socio-economic issues, stressing the reduction of taxes and the role of the state in the economy and social programs.

While there is wide scholarly consensus that VOX is a radical right party, disagreement remains about the degree to which the party was or is populist (e.g., Anduiza, 2018; Ferreira, 2019; Marcos-Marne et al., 2021; Olivas Osuna & Rama, 2021). Using Mudde’s (2007, p. 23) definition, populism is:

A thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite,” and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.

Populism, while present, was initially not prominent in the party’s discourse (Anduiza, 2018; Ferreira, 2019; Marcos-Marne et al., 2021), though it may be on the rise (Olivas Osuna & Rama, 2021).

Nonetheless, as a new, challenger party, political renewal and opposition to political insiders is clearly present (Barrio, in press). For example, in its 2018 manifesto, the party called for the reform of the electoral system, the elimination of candidate quotas (gender or otherwise) for elections, and the strengthening of legislation regarding incompatibilities for public officials once they leave office (VOX, 2018). The party’s leaders frequently divide society into true Spaniards and traitors to Spain, or anti-Spaniards, harkening back to the rhetoric of the Franco dictatorship. However, this division does not neatly align with a corrupt elite/pure people distinction prominent in populism (see also Marcos-Marne et al., 2021). Given the ongoing scholarly debate, and because we do not independently measure populism, we refer to the party simply as radical right.

VOX does not explicitly advocate for an undemocratic political regime (Acha, 2019; Ferreira, 2019). However, it has attracted members with clear ties to organisations that are openly Francoist (Ramsay & Provost, 2019) and it employs dog whistles in its discourse. For example, in 2020, Abascal accused the Sánchez government of being “the worst government in 80 years” (García, 2020), a timeframe that includes the Franco dictatorship. At the same time, it infuses its discourse with references to lib-

eralism and freedom. It is staunchly authoritarian in its values, stressing law, order, and respect for authority.

VOX first presented candidates in the 2014 European parliament elections, winning only 1.6% of the vote and no seats. It performed poorly in national parliamentary elections in 2015 and 2016 (0.2% in each). This was when Podemos and Ciudadanos (Cs) broke the dominance of the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE) and PP in Spain’s national party system.

In December 2018, VOX achieved a surprise breakthrough in the regional elections in Andalusia, Spain’s most populous region (Turnbull-Dugarte, 2019a). This was the first election outside of Catalonia since the independence push there. VOX won nearly 11% of the vote and seats in the fragmented parliament. Subsequently, it supported a right-wing minority government of the PP and Cs. A few months later, in April 2019, VOX won 10% of the vote in Spain’s parliamentary elections and entered parliament with 7% of the seats.

Parliament failed to form a government. In new elections in November 2019, VOX won 15% of the vote, making it the third largest party in parliament with 15% of the seats. The party closed in on the PP (21%) and surpassed previous newcomers Cs (7%) and Unidas Podemos (UP; 13%).

In between, in May 2019, Spain held European, local, and regional elections in 12 regions, with VOX winning seats in seven regional parliaments (the party had also won representation in the region of Valencia back in April). In this period, VOX supported PP-Cs governments in the Madrid and Murcia regions and in the City of Madrid, won 529 seats in local parliaments, and entered the European parliament with three seats. In the 2020 Basque and Galician elections, where peripheral national identities are more prominent, it only gained one seat in the Basque parliament. Yet, in 2021, it entered the Catalan parliament with 8% of the seats, overtaking PP and Cs.

Based on the April 2019 national elections, VOX supporters tended to be at the higher end of the income and education scales and urban residents, unlike many European populist radical right voters (Turnbull-Dugarte et al., 2020). Men, right wing political ideology, church attendance, and dissatisfaction with democracy are positively associated with voting for VOX. The most important predictor of a vote for VOX was a strong attachment to Spanish national identity combined with a negative evaluation of the existing political situation.

Having provided this short history, we examine the party’s efforts to build a mass organisation between 2014 and 2020.

### 3. Steps Toward Building a Mass-Party Organisation

Despite being a new party, VOX is not innovative in its organisation. It has adopted a model, in nascent form, comparable to that of mass parties. As conceptualized in the introduction to this thematic issue, mass

parties exhibit the drive to recruit a large activist membership, rootedness on the ground and the provision of a variety of activities to members, and the preservation of collective identities through ideology (Albertazzi & van Kessel, 2021).

Uneven recruitment and weak organisation characterized VOX's initial years. While the party made efforts to develop its organisation, electoral growth outpaced organisational development. This section examines (a) the degree of party organisation, paying particular attention to territorial penetration, (b) membership recruitment, and (c) the role of social media in creating collective identity and activists.

### *3.1. Territorial Penetration and Rootedness on the Ground*

From its founding, VOX aspired to develop a full-fledged party organisation and organised according to the branch model with a clear predominance of vertical links between branches and the central party. The party established local, provincial, and national branches. It has been extending its reach throughout the territory, especially since accessing Spain's political institutions in late 2018–2019. It is present in all provinces, though unevenly. In accordance with the territorial penetration model (Eliassen & Svaasand, 1975), the centre directed its development—to the point that the national leadership has often appointed the subnational executives. Provincial branches only have a right to designate their own leadership if they have over 500 members. Candidates to the provincial executive posts need the formal backing of at least 10% of the provincial fee-paying party members to be able to register as candidates.

Contrary to Duverger's (1954) expectation, the party's territorial articulation does not reflect the administrative structure of the state in that there are no regional (autonomous community) branches. Instead, the party has national, provincial, and local branches. Provinces are administrative units that are typically smaller and less powerful than the autonomous communities are. This is, in large part, because of VOX's ideological opposition to political decentralisation. The two main state-wide parties, PP and PSOE, adjust policy positions and salience to the regional context, thereby generating a certain level of cross-regional variation. VOX, by contrast, insists that its message is uniform. According to one VOX leader: "Even the internal organisation of the party is designed so that the same is said throughout Spain" (Interview no. 5).

This is an anomaly in multilevel political systems including Spain, where all state-wide parties have regional branches. The existence of regional branches favours the development of territorial interests within parties, a source of tension between the centre and the periphery. At the same time, it forces parties to balance regional power within them. Thus, VOX's decision is also a deliberate attempt to build a highly centralised

organisation with a unitary model of vertical integration (Thorlakson, 2009), and to block incentives for articulating regional interests.

The highest executive body is the National Executive Committee (NEC). The General Assembly elects the NEC using a closed list ballot(s). It has only 12 members (including the president, three vice presidents, general secretary, and treasurer), assisted by 13 vice secretariats, who are not part of it. The founders' territorial concerns are also reflected in its design

The provincial presidents are not on the [National] Executive Committee because we do not want the provincial presidents to influence a decision in favour of their provinces....We very much insist on that; we do not want to be a federal party like other parties. (Interview no. 3)

The main individual offices are the President, who has the highest executive and representative powers, and the Secretary General, who carries out organisational functions. The NEC is clearly the dominant party body. According to one VOX leader:

In VOX, the truth is that we are very close because we are also all good friends; no, but there is an Executive Committee that we call the centre. Any decision on an agreement, any decision on the program, any decision on territorial organisation goes to the executive committee, which sometimes meets once a week, sometimes every fifteen days. (Interview no. 3)

The General Assembly is, formally, the highest body of the party. It comprises all party members. There is no broader decision-making body than the NEC between General Assemblies, since the Political Council that the General Assembly elects only has advisory functions. Party staff remained at a bare minimum of five or six until 2018 ("VOX refuerza su estructura," 2019). In 2018, VOX employed 16 people, which increased to 34 in 2019 (Torres, 2020).

Along with building structures on the ground, the party has sought to recruit an activist membership, to which we turn.

### *3.2. Member Recruitment*

The day of its public debut in January 2014, VOX called on Spanish voters to join the party's ranks. The intention to build a mass party becomes apparent when one considers how simple joining the party was, according to its 2014 statutes. It only required paying a monthly fee and signing the party's foundational manifesto. Recruitment led to ideological heterogeneity, as it afforded little control to party leaders over whom joined the party, and for what purpose. Like many new parties, VOX also initially offered members participation in internal decisions, in particular the selection of internal officers



and candidates for public office through party elections. However, formally and in practice, internal democracy would decline over time.

In the early years, volunteers carried out everyday party functions. Party members held several organisational positions simultaneously and even provided funds to organise party events (Seguro, 2014). When its big electoral leap took place in 2018–2019, these party members added elected office to their other posts. This contributed to a *de facto*, if not *de jure*, concentration of power around some individuals across all organisational levels. One reason for recruiting members was to help finance the party's operations, since the party had no access to public funds. Public funding after 2018 would also facilitate organisational development. The party received EUR 4,160,056 in public funding in 2019 and EUR 9,865,450 in 2020 (VOX, 2021), though the party supports ending public subsidies for political parties and unions (VOX, 2020b). The proportion of public funding increased from zero in 2018 to 61% in 2019 and 66% in 2020.

VOX's membership and electoral growth had more to do with political events than specific party actions. By 2016, the party had approximately 3,000 members. This increased significantly in the aftermath of the failed secession attempt by the Catalan independence movement in the fall of 2017 (Barrio, 2020). The second leap occurred after the censure motion in June 2018 against the PP government of Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy that brought Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez and PSOE to government. According to VOX's data, it reached more than 20,000 members in 2018 (see Table 1). Another jump occurred after VOX's electoral success in December 2018 in Andalusia. The party reported exceeding 36,000 members in March 2019, and 52,000 after the November 2019 general elections. After the failed censure motion in October 2020, lodged by VOX against Prime Minister Sánchez and the PSOE-UP coalition, the party claimed it had more than 60,000 members (Barrio, *in press*).

**Table 1.** VOX party members.

Year	Members
2017	4,951
2018	20,500
2019	56,786
2020	62,347

Source: Data for 2017 from Ballesteros (2018); data for 2018 from Valls (2018); data for 2019 from Valls (2020); data for 2020 from "VOX recibió" (2021).

In its March 2020 statutes, and due to the organisation's rapid growth, VOX made some changes concerning new joiners. For instance, it established a provisional period of nine months during which new affiliates would have limited rights (new members were allowed to vote in internal processes but not eligible to be candidates for office). The NEC can also deny full membership to

people—also an indication of progressive centralisation of decision-making. At the same time, the party introduced the status of "sympathizer" to bring in those who collaborate with the party's activities or contribute financially without being members: This offers a laxer connection to the party that many other parties also use to promote societal penetration.

Recruitment has been geographically uneven from the beginning. Party building gathered momentum in the aftermath of the first party primaries to elect the national leadership in July 2014. In September and October 2014, the party established Provincial Executive Committees (PECs), also through internal elections. PECs formed in only 15 out of 52 Spanish provinces, since VOX had few members and no grass-roots territorial organisations on which to rely. At the end of 2014, Madrid and Valencia were strongholds in terms of members and structure. Six years later, Murcia and Andalusia have also become organisational bastions.

VOX's initial open recruitment model attracted a heterogeneous group of people to the party. Two elements were however common to most new members: they had no previous political experience and volunteered their free time to the party (Interviews no. 2 and no. 4). When presenting a plan for party reorganisation at the 2019 General Assembly, Javier Ortega Smith, the party's General Secretary, admitted that pre-2019 VOX was an "amateur" party and that its cadres lacked "training" ("VOX refuerza su estructura," 2019).

VOX's model for organising members is exclusively territorial and, unlike many new parties, it does not have virtual groups, though it makes extensive use of social networks. Formally, it does not have a sectoral structure and has not developed affiliated mass organisations. The only exception is Solidaridad, the union formed in 2020.

Nonetheless, it has close relationships with some organised interests, including pro Hunting, Fishing and Bullfighting groups, such as the Asociación Internacional de Tauromaquia (International Bullfighting Association), and ultra-conservative, anti-abortion rights, anti-feminist and other groups that feel aggrieved by progressive gender and LGBTQ policies. For example, during the March 2021 regional election campaign in Madrid, VOX committed to a 6-point set of demands of the ultra-conservative Catholic organisation Hazte Oír (which translates to "make yourself be heard"). The demands included "promoting the right to life from conception to natural death," the legalization of the parental veto, the repeal of progressive LGBTQ and Transgender Laws, and the defence of Christian symbols (González, 2021; Hazte Oír, 2021).

The origins of the party are closely linked to ETA (Basque Homeland and Freedom) victims' associations and other organisations active in the fight against ETA. ETA is a now disbanded Basque independence terrorist organisation. Two of VOX's founders were victims of ETA. These associations include the Asociación

de Víctimas del Terrorismo (Association of Victims of Terrorism), Fundación Valores y Sociedad (Values and Society Foundation), and Fundación Villacisneros (Villacisneros Foundation). In September 2020, VOX established its own think-tank, Fundación Disenso (Dissent Foundation).

Given the party’s nascent organisational development, social media has played an important role in building the party, to which we now turn.

### 3.3. Social Media and Party Building

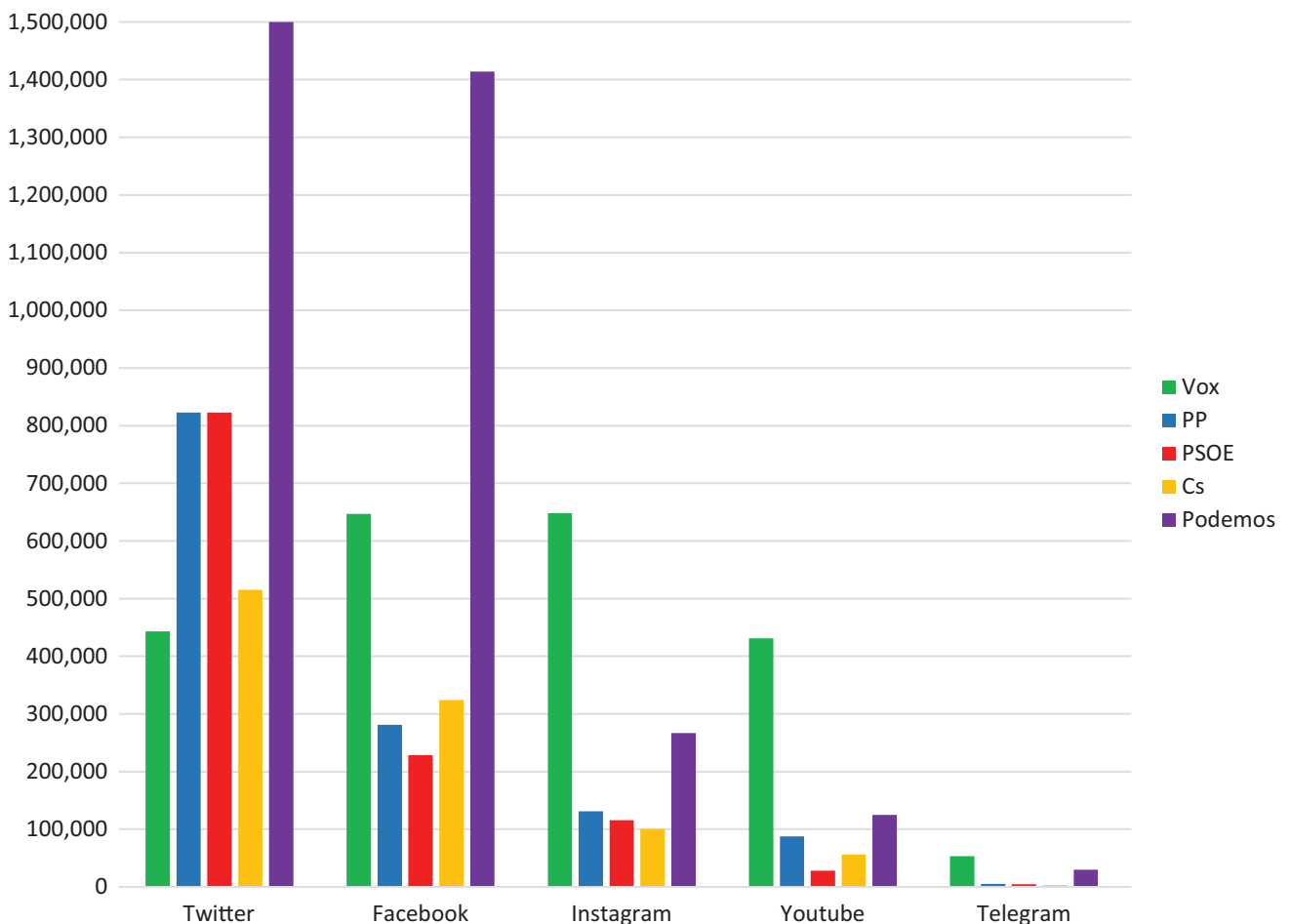
Once an obscure party desperate for attention from the mainstream media, VOX learned to make a direct connection to potential supporters. The internet, social media, and applications such as Whatsapp and Telegram have been essential for forging a collective identity and recruiting and mobilising activists.

The party attributes some of its initial success to social media (Ballesteros, 2020). For example, during the electoral campaign in Andalusia, the party disseminated a video of Abascal riding a horse in the countryside with other men and captioned it: “The re-conquest will begin in Andalusian territory.” It was shared over a million

times. After experiencing electoral success in Andalusia, the party learned that sharp criticism of, and an adversarial relationship with, the mainstream media (in Trump-like fashion) would generate additional attention for its activities (Ramírez, 2020). According to VOX’s communication director: “We don’t need big media. They give you prestige, but to reach the public that interests us and that lives on their mobile phone, [internet] networks are enough for us. In the US, Trump won without the support of the traditional media” (Negre, 2018).

In mid-2021 (see Figure 1), VOX had the most followers of Spain’s national parties on Instagram, which the party strategically prioritized alongside Facebook. VOX took interest in Instagram because of the youth of its users (Bernardez-Rodal et al., 2020, p. 3). VOX also has the most subscribers on YouTube (431,000 compared to Podemos’ 125,000) and members on Telegram (53,500 compared to Podemos’ 29,752). However, the left wing Podemos leads, by far, on Twitter and Facebook.

VOX had “greater visibility and impact on social networks” than Spain’s other national parties in a study in late 2019, a non-electoral period (Cea Esteruelas, 2019, p. 41). It achieved greater interaction and engagement on the four most used social networks (Facebook, Twitter,



**Figure 1.** Social media followers. Notes: Followers (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram), subscribers (YouTube), and members (Telegram); rounded, as some platforms only list rounded numbers.

YouTube, and Instagram). Additionally, by the end of the April 2019 election campaign, VOX had attained the greatest “share of voice,” a metric for visibility (Dusster, 2019). This is perhaps not surprising given VOX’s new party status. A prior study found that previous newcomers, Podemos and Cs, received more likes and higher engagement on Instagram in the 2015 and 2016 elections (Turnbull-Dugarte, 2019b).

A study of the content of VOX’s Instagram posts prior to the April 2019 general elections shows that 56% relate to a “danger-enemy dimension,” which includes the left, separatist nationalism, feminism, and Islam, immigration and women (Aladro Vico & Requeijo Rey, 2020, p. 211). Another study of Instagram posts finds that VOX employs “Manichean-type contrasts such as ‘us/them,’ ‘good/evil...’” (Bernardez-Rodal et al., 2020, p. 9). The first study concludes that VOX’s posts aim to recruit activists: “The discourse is that of a civil resistance movement” (Aladro Vico & Requeijo Rey, 2020, p. 221). According to Bernardez-Rodal et al. (2020, p. 3), VOX’s social media strategy was designed, in part, by Trump associate Steve Bannon, who appeals to basic emotions and seeks to construct a “closed group identity built around the feeling of loss of traditional values.”

On Facebook, VOX pays for its content to reach potential supporters and its opponents on the left and extreme left, in hopes of provoking them to maximize diffusion (Méndez & Villarino, 2018). Social media is also key to their mobilisation strategy. According to VOX’s social media guru, now vice secretary of communication: “We are a machine for mobilizing people for our events” (Negre, 2018).

The degree to which social media brings VOX electoral and other dividends remains to be determined, especially because the party also now receives a great deal of attention from traditional media and more coverage than a comparable party prior to the 2019 Andalusian election, its electoral breakthrough (Olalla et al., 2019). However, studies of the 15M *indignados* movement of 2011 in Spain demonstrate social media’s ability to mobilize massive protests and bring out new participants, in that case without the attention of traditional media or organisations such as political parties and unions (Anduiza et al., 2014). Furthermore, comparative studies indicate that online contact via social networks is important for mobilizing younger voters (Aldrich et al., 2016).

### 3.4. Why Grow an Active Base of Members?

Initially, the party sought to recruit members to fund and organize party activities at a time when the party attracted little attention from the media and had no public funding. Members staffed and at times paid for party events (Seguro, 2014), and they helped get the word out. With growing public attention, the party also had to field candidates across the Spanish territory. Its adversarial relationship with the media likely reinforces the

recruitment of an activist membership base, though, once it entered Spain’s political institutions, VOX became more careful about whom it recruited (Interview no. 5). A larger pool of activists also allowed VOX to organize rallies across the Spanish territory. These events bring the party attention and the opportunity to claim to represent the “real” Spain. As Casals (2021) suggests, VOX carries the “re-conquest” narrative to the streets, where, like on social media, it can make the symbolic and emotional appeals it prefers.

Thus, VOX has taken the first steps toward the development of a mass-party-like organisation by expanding its territorial presence, recruiting members and activists and creating collective identity. This has gone along with the centralisation of power, which we now discuss.

## 4. Internal Democracy, Centralisation, and Territorial Conflict

While challenges related to and limits on internal democracy were present from the start, VOX has experienced progressive centralisation of decision-making authority by and in the hands of the national leadership, particularly since entering the political institutions in 2018–2019. Organisational change in this direction is in accord with Pedersen’s (1982) notion of party lifespan. When parties gain relevance, they reduce internal democracy. Additionally, it is due to the party’s opposition to Spain’s political regions.

The party’s initial open recruitment model and rapid growth produced internal heterogeneity. The leadership’s efforts to centralise have both responded to and provoked internal disputes and factionalism. As we discuss below, many conflicts resulted from limits the party national executive imposed on territorial branch autonomy. Despite the fact that regional branches do not formally exist, once there is a regional political arena and representation is obtained, regional interests arise that may conflict with the national leadership.

Unlike some radical right parties, VOX is not synonymous with a charismatic leader. Its leadership is best characterised as oligarchic. One can easily imagine the survival of VOX without Abascal. He is, of course, a powerful and significant person among the leaders (formally and informally) participating in the making the most important decisions—including Javier Ortega Smith, Iván Espinosa de los Monteros, and Rocío Monasterio (illustrating the closeness of the leadership, the latter two are a couple). Some belong to the NEC, while others, like Espinosa and Monasterio, do not. In March 2020, the party also established a new body, called the Political and Institutional Strategy Committee, on which they all serve, along with two additional members.

Like many new parties, VOX initially allowed some member participation in internal decisions. In part, this was spurred by Spanish legislation. Spain’s party legislation requires political parties to have internal party democracy. VOX’s first attempt to register the party in

late 2013 with the Ministry of Interior was rejected because some clauses in the party's proposed statutes did not allow for sufficient internal discussion and participation by the rank-and-file. The party had to modify the statutes, in particular regarding the functioning of its General Assembly (López-Fonseca, 2014). Thus, VOX's first draft statutes were also designed to give the national leadership some control over internal processes.

The party's statutes, approved by the first General Assembly in July 2014, established the bi-annual party congresses, opened to all party members. They also stipulated the selection of internal party positions and candidates for public office via party elections, which is not a legal requirement. However, there was one caveat. Provincial and municipal party organisations with fewer than 500 party affiliates could select the candidates without an electoral process, if the candidate or list had the support of a simple majority of party members and was vetted by the national leadership.

Electoral success in the December 2018 Andalusian elections marked a milestone in VOX's development, and a reduction in internal party democracy followed. The General Assembly held in February 2019 limited the use of party elections to internal party positions. The selection of candidates for public office came to depend on the subnational executives, who were responsible for bringing their proposals to the NEC for approval, except for the general and European elections. For these, the NEC chooses the candidates and only needs to "consult" with the PECs.

In the context of Covid-19 pandemic restrictions, critics of VOX's national leadership, organized as the group VoxHabla, were not permitted to participate in the March 2020 General Assembly, which was only open to party and public office holders. The Assembly elected Abascal and his team for another four years. The party's Electoral Committee rejected the candidacy of Carmelo González, leader of VoxHabla, and his alternative list because they lacked sufficient formal backing. The Assembly approved several changes to the party statutes, which further reduced internal democracy. For example, the NEC can now send compulsory instructions to other party bodies and disband subnational executives that do not abide by them and replace them with interim managing committees (*gestoras*), with agreement of two-thirds of the NEC. According to the previous statutes, the NEC could only dissolve the subnational committees if its president or a majority of its members stepped down.

These changes give the NEC more control over the selection of party cadres at the provincial and local levels. The central party leadership is thus attempting to retain control of a party that experienced rapid growth and relevance with a heterogeneous and largely inexperienced membership. Begoña Conde, vice secretary of member training stated that the party should work like an "orchestra: discipline, training and the same score" ("Abascal sale reforzado," 2020). Tomás Fernández, vice secretary

of organisation, summarized the changes as "integration and homogenization" ("Abascal sale reforzado," 2020).

The leadership's efforts to centralise provoked internal disputes about the lack of transparency and internal democracy, such as with VoxHabla. Several splits from the party have also occurred that criticise the centralisation of power in the hands of Abascal and the ruling clique, including TúPatria, España Suma, and Valores.

As a consequence of VOX's remarkable growth between 2018 and 2020, a series of crises emerged at all levels of the party organisation. The national leadership and different groups within the provincial—and to a lesser degree—local executives vied for control over (a) finances, (b) the vetting of electoral lists, (c) organic positions inside the party, and (d) government-formation negotiations. In the years 2019 and 2020, we identified 15 such major provincial crises (Albacete, Asturias, Almería, Baleares, Cádiz, Cantabria, Granada, Jaén, León, Murcia, Sevilla, Toledo, Valencia, Valladolid, and Zamora) and five municipal crises (Algeciras, Badajoz, Málaga, Toledo, Melilla). Exceptionally, the crises erupted over disagreements encompassing all four elements, as in the case of Murcia beginning in the spring of 2019. The attempt by party founders to forestall the entrenchment of regional interests by skipping the autonomous communities (regions) in the party's structure only moved the focus one level down, to the PECs. Several conflicts gained media attention and an avalanche of denunciations ended up in Spanish courts.

Since 2019, candidate selection for party lists for regional and local elections is, in theory, the prerogative of the provincial and municipal executives. However, the lists made by PECs must go to the NEC for vetting and approval. This has generated conflict between the national leadership who wants to have the final say on the lists and the provincial leadership who resents this, and between the provincial leadership and adversarial provincial groups who want to take the reins of the party organisation. Examples of this type of conflict occurred across the whole country. The NEC and, more concretely, Abascal and Ortega Smith (president and general secretary, respectively), used the infighting within the subnational organisations to force the dissolution of provincial and municipal executives and set up interim caretaker executives (*gestoras*), controlled from Madrid.

Internal party elections have been another major source of conflict. Procedural irregularities tainted many provincial and national party elections. For example, incumbent candidates were able to use the party apparatus to their advantage and alternative candidacies were discouraged. Several of the party's internal elections between 2018 and 2020 were challenged in court by disgruntled rank-and-file party members or by unsuccessful candidates, such as in Granada, Seville, and Valencia in 2020. The critical platform VoxHabla was established precisely with the objective of denouncing the irregularities of internal party elections in 2020. The national leadership agreed to repeat party elections in Malaga,

Alicante, and Jaen due to irregularities. Revealing the concerns of the party leadership, Abascal expressed that he is “worried” party elections “have generated divisions and conflict in some provinces” and wondered if it would not be better to “suspend this type of provincial elections because they generate a lot of uncertainty and infighting” (González, 2020).

Party finance has been the third major arena of infighting. Provincial party organisations have their own bank accounts, where they receive public funds and members’ fees and donations. But these accounts are managed by the national leadership, leaving no financial autonomy to provincial leaders. In some cases, this pushed provincial leaders to create parallel accounts, a practice which members of the provincial leadership or rank-and-file have challenged legally, for example in Murcia and Valencia.

Thus, the central leadership’s efforts to centralise have both responded to and provoked internal disputes and factionalism. The end result of this tug of war between the national leadership and the provincial and local branches has been the weakening of the party’s internal democracy and the concentration of power in the hands of the NEC.

## 5. Conclusion

A young party that first gained representation in late 2018, VOX rapidly became politically relevant at all state levels. Despite being a new party, VOX did not choose a novel organisational format. It adopted the structure of mass parties albeit in embryonic form. VOX strove to achieve rootedness on the ground via territorial penetration, to recruit a large activist membership base, and to create collective identity, including through the use of social networks, with significant control retained by the central party leadership.

VOX initially adopted an open recruitment model and provided members with input into the selection of party officers and candidates. Also, the national leadership has progressively concentrated decision-making authority in its hands, particularly since entering the political institutions. Centralisation in part responds to organisational needs, as Michels (1962) discovered. VOX is not unusual in doing so—new parties commonly confront a tension between the desire of the founding core to maintain its position and influence, and the need to develop a viable organisational structure (Bolleyer, 2013). Nevertheless, organisational choices were also the result of the central party leadership’s desire to forestall the articulation of territorial interests, given the party’s Spanish nationalist and state centralist ideology. Efforts to centralise have both resulted from, and in turn provoked, several internal disputes.

A few aspects of the party stand out. The first is the degree to which it articulates its nationalism in opposition to Spain’s own peripheral national identities and in favour of a centralised state. This has led to a party struc-

ture, which, unusually, does not conform to the structure of the state. This organisational mismatch is likely to continue to present challenges to the party, given the reality of Spain’s autonomous communities. Relatedly, the party may face the dilemma of whether to adapt its pitch, including in which language, to Spain’s distinct historical communities in order to grow in places such as Catalonia and Galicia. VOX also stands out due to its staunch neoliberal economic positions. It remains to be seen whether the party will adapt its economic positions in an attempt to appeal to more voters. Finally, the party is ultra conservative, with strong ties to anti-feminist and anti-LGBTQ groups.

Much remains unknown about VOX’s organisation, particularly about its members and activists. Future research that draws on participant observation techniques and/or surveys of activists, providing windows into the party, would be particularly beneficial.

## Acknowledgments

This research was partly funded by the Qatar Foundation/GUQ-sponsored Faculty Research Grant. All authors contributed equally to the study. Authors are listed in reverse academic rank order.

## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

## Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

## References

- Abascal sale reforzado como líder indiscutible de Vox en su “Vistalegre III” [Abascal is reinforced as the undisputed leader of VOX in its “Vistalegre III”]. (2020, March 7). *RTVE*. <https://www.rtve.es/noticias/20200307/vox-pide-funcionar-como-orquesta-para-lograr-objetivo-gobernar-para-transformar-espana/2006780.shtml>
- Acha, B. (2019, January 6). No, no es un partido (neo)fascista [No, it is not a (neo)fascist party]. *Agenda Pública*. <https://agendapublica.es/no-no-es-un-partido-neofascista>
- Aladro Vico, E., & Requeijo Rey, P. (2020). Discurso, estrategias e interacciones de VOX en su cuenta oficial de Instagram en las elecciones del 28-A. Derecha radical y redes sociales [VOX’s speech, strategies, and interactions on its official Instagram account in the 28-A elections. Radical right and social networks]. *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*, 77, 203–229.
- Albertazzi, D. (2016). Going, going, ... not quite gone yet? ‘Bossi’s Lega’ and the survival of the mass party. *Contemporary Italian Politics*, 8(2), 115–130. <https://>

- [doi.org/ 10.1080/23248823.2016.1193349](https://doi.org/10.1080/23248823.2016.1193349)
- Albertazzi, D., & van Kessel, S. (2021). Right-wing populist party organisation across Europe: The survival of the mass party? Introduction to the thematic issue. *Politics and Governance*, 9(4), 224–227.
- Aldrich, J. H., Gibson, R. K., Cantijoch, M., & Konitzer, T. (2016). Getting out the vote in the social media era. Are digital tools changing the extent, nature and impact of party contacting in elections? *Party Politics*, 22(2), 165–178.
- Alonso, S., & Field, B. N. (2021). Spain. The development and decline of the Popular Party. In T. Bale & C. Rovira Kaltwasser (Eds.), *Riding the populist wave: Europe's mainstream right in crisis* (pp. 216–245). Cambridge University Press.
- Alonso, S., & Rovira Kaltwasser, C. (2015). Spain: No country for the populist radical right? *South European Society and Politics*, 20(1), 21–45.
- Anduiza, E. (2018, December 6). El discurso de VOX [VOX's discourse]. *Agenda Pública*. <https://agenda publica.es/el-discurso-de-vox>
- Anduiza, E., Cristancho, C., & Sabucedo, J. M. (2014). Mobilization through online social networks: The Political protest of the indignados in Spain. *Information, Communication & Society*, 17(6), 750–764.
- Ballesteros, R. (2018, December 15). De 4.951 a 20.706: VOX cuadruplica su número de afiliados en solo un año [VOX quadruples its number of affiliates in just one year]. *El Confidencial*. [https://www.elconfidencial.com/espana/2018-12-15/de-4-951-a-20-706-vox-cuadruplica-su-numero-de-afiliados-en-solo-un-ano\\_1704750](https://www.elconfidencial.com/espana/2018-12-15/de-4-951-a-20-706-vox-cuadruplica-su-numero-de-afiliados-en-solo-un-ano_1704750)
- Ballesteros, R. (2020, February 8). Twitter, Instagram, YouTube... VOX arrasa en las redes tras el 10N y la crisis catalana [Twitter, Instagram, YouTube... VOX sweeps the networks after 10N and the Catalan crisis]. *El Confidencial*. [https://www.elconfidencial.com/espana/2020-02-08/twitter-instagram-afiliacion-la-subida-mas-fuerte-de-vox-desde-su-nacimiento\\_2411623](https://www.elconfidencial.com/espana/2020-02-08/twitter-instagram-afiliacion-la-subida-mas-fuerte-de-vox-desde-su-nacimiento_2411623)
- Barrio, A. (2020). VOX, la fin de l'exception espagnole [VOX, the end of the Spanish exception]. In *Innovation Politique 2019* (Tome 1, pp. 169–194). Fondation pour l'Innovation Politique.
- Barrio, A. (in press). VOX and the irruption of the radical right in Spain. In O. Barberà (Ed.), *The new radical right in Southern Europe*. Coppieters Foundation.
- Bernardez-Rodal, A., Requeijo Rey, P., & Franco, Y. G. (2020). Radical right parties and anti-feminist speech on Instagram: VOX and the 2019 Spanish general election. *Party Politics*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1354068820968839>
- Blanco, P. R. (2021, April 21). VOX miente sobre los 4.700 euros que Madrid paga por menor extranjero no acompañado [Vox lies about the 4,700 euros Madrid pays per unaccompanied foreign minor]. *El País*. [https://elpais.com/elpais/2021/04/21/hechos/1619007080\\_623729.html](https://elpais.com/elpais/2021/04/21/hechos/1619007080_623729.html)
- Bolleyer, N. (2013). *New parties in old party systems: Persistence and decline in seventeen democracies*. Oxford University Press.
- Casals, X. (2021, April 12). VOX entra en campaña [VOX enters the campaign]. *Agenda Pública*. <https://agendapublica.es/vox-entra-en-campana-la-recuperacion-de-la-plaza-roja>
- Cea Esteruelas, M. N. (2019). Nivel de interacción de la comunicación de los partidos políticos españoles en redes sociales [Level of interaction of the communication of Spanish political parties in social networks]. *Marco*, 5, 41–57.
- de Lange, S. L. (2007). A new winning formula? The programmatic appeal of the radical right. *Party Politics*, 13(4), 411–435.
- Dusster, D. (2019, May 8). Más 'likes' que votos para VOX [More 'likes' than votes for VOX]. *La Vanguardia*. <https://www.lavanguardia.com/politica/20190508/462114377282/vox-impacto-redes-sociales-resultados-electorales.html>
- Duverger, M. (1954). *Political parties: Their organization and activity in the modern state*. Meuthen.
- Eatwell, R. (2018). Charisma and the radical right. In J. Rydgren (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of the radical right* (pp. 251–268). Oxford University Press.
- Eliassen, K. A., & Svasand, L. (1975). The formation of mass political organizations: An analytical framework. *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 10(A10), 95–121.
- Ferreira, C. (2019). VOX como representante de la derecha radical en España: Un estudio sobre su ideología [VOX as a representative of the radical right in Spain: A study about its ideology]. *Revista Española de Ciencia Política*, 51, 73–98.
- García, L. B. (2020, September 10). Abascal en TVE: "Estamos ante el peor gobierno en 80 años y ustedes actúan como el NODO" [Abascal on TVE: "We are facing the worst government in 80 years and you act as the NODO"]. *La Vanguardia*. <https://www.lavanguardia.com/politica/20200910/483392790109/santiago-abascal-tve-peor-gobierno-90-anos-nodo.html>
- González, M. (2020, October 5). VOX se plantea suprimir las elecciones internas ante las denuncias de fraude [VOX plans to suppress internal elections due to fraud complaints]. *El País*. <https://elpais.com/espana/2020-10-05/vox-se-plantea-suprimir-las-elecciones-internas-ante-las-denuncias-de-fraude.html>
- González, M. (2021, April 29). Far right Vox commits to blocking access to abortion and euthanasia in Madrid. *El País*. <https://english.elpais.com/politics/2021-04-29/far-right-vox-commits-to-blocking-access-to-abortion-and-euthanasia-in-madrid.html>
- Hazte Oír. (2021, April 19). *Seis cuestiones decisivas para el 4-M* [Six decisive questions for 4-M].
- Heinisch, R., & Mazzoleni, O. (2016). *Understanding populist party organization*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- López-Fonseca, Ó. (2014, January 22). Interior retrasó

- un mes la legalización de VOX porque no cumplía la Ley de Partidos [Interior delayed the legalization of VOX for a month because it did not comply with the Party Law]. *Vozpópuli*. [https://www.vozpopuli.com/espana/Vox-Ministerio\\_del\\_Interior-Ley\\_de\\_Partidos\\_0\\_663533674.html](https://www.vozpopuli.com/espana/Vox-Ministerio_del_Interior-Ley_de_Partidos_0_663533674.html)
- Marcos-Marne, H., Plaza-Colodro, C., & O'Flynn, C. (2021). Populism and new radical-right parties: The case of VOX. *Politics*. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F026339572111019587>
- Méndez, M. Á., & Villarino, Á. (2018, December 20). La maquinaria de VOX en Facebook: Así pagan para indignar a la izquierda y viralizarse [The VOX machinery on Facebook: This is how they pay to outrage the left and go viral]. *El Confidencial*. [https://www.elconfidencial.com/tecnologia/2018-12-20/vox-facebook-redes-sociales-pablo-iglesias-477\\_1713790](https://www.elconfidencial.com/tecnologia/2018-12-20/vox-facebook-redes-sociales-pablo-iglesias-477_1713790)
- Michels, R. (1962). *Political parties: A sociological study of the oligarchical tendencies of modern democracy*. The Free Press.
- Mudde, C. (2007). *Populist radical right parties in Europe*. Cambridge University Press.
- Müller-Rommel, F. (1990). New political movements and 'new politics' parties in Western Europe. In R. J. Dalton & M. Kuechler (Eds.), *Challenging political order: New social and political movements in Western Democracies* (pp. 209–31). Polity Press.
- Negre, J. (2018, December 9). El joven propagandista de VOX que montó a Abascal en un caballo [The young VOX propagandist who rode Abascal on a horse]. *El Mundo*. <https://www.elmundo.es/cronica/2018/12/09/5c0a9d12fdddff0e388b4606.html>
- Olalla, S., Chueca, E., & Padilla, J. (2019, January 10). Spain is no longer exceptional: Mainstream media and the far-right party VOX. *LSE: Euro Crisis in the Press*. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/eurocrisispress/2019/01/10/spain-is-no-longer-exceptional-mainstream-media-and-the-far-right-party-vox>
- Olivas Osuna, J. J., & Rama, J. (2021). Covid-19: A political virus? VOX's populist discourse in times of crisis. *Frontiers in Political Science*, 3. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2021.678526>
- Panebianco, A. (1988). *Political parties: Organization and power*. Cambridge University Press.
- Pedersen, M. N. (1982). Towards a new typology of party lifespans and minor parties. *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 1(5), 1–16.
- Rama, J., Zanotti, L., Turnbull-Dugarte, S., & Santana, A. (2021). *VOX: The rise of the Spanish populist radical right*. Routledge.
- Ramírez, D. (2020, April 19). "Nos funciona, enardece a los nuestros": La calculada estrategia de VOX en su guerra con los medios ["It works for us, it fires up our own": VOX's calculated strategy in its war with the media]. *El Español*. [https://www.elespanol.com/espana/politica/20200419/funciona-enardece-calculada-estrategia-vox-guerra-medios/483203061\\_0.html](https://www.elespanol.com/espana/politica/20200419/funciona-enardece-calculada-estrategia-vox-guerra-medios/483203061_0.html)
- Ramsay, A., & Provost, C. (2019, April 25). Revealed: The Trump-linked 'super pac' working behind the scenes to drive Europe's voters to the far right. *OpenDemocracy*. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/revealed-the-trump-linked-super-pac-working-behind-the-scenes-to-drive-europes-voters-to-the-far-right>
- Sangiao, S. (2018, November 28). Los orígenes de VOX: El Aznarato y la lucha contra ETA [The origins of VOX: The Aznarato and the fight against ETA]. *Contexto y Acción*. <https://ctxt.es/es/20181129/Politica/23127/vox-aznar-eta-esperanza-aguirre-sergio-sangiao.htm>
- Seguro, M. (2014, August 23). VOX investigará las facturas de su presidente, González Quirós [VOX will investigate the invoices of its president, González Quirós]. *El Mundo*. <https://www.elmundo.es/espana/2014/08/23/53f7ba46ca4741f40e8b456b.html>
- Sosa, C. (2018, April 17). Abascal (VOX): "No es lo mismo un inmigrante hispanoamericano que la inmigración de los países islámicos" [Abascal (VOX): "A Hispanic American immigrant is not the same as immigration from Islamic countries"]. *El Diario*. [https://www.eldiario.es/canariasahora/sociedad/video-abascal-vox-hispanoamericano-inmigracion\\_1\\_2166996.html](https://www.eldiario.es/canariasahora/sociedad/video-abascal-vox-hispanoamericano-inmigracion_1_2166996.html)
- Thorlakson, L. (2009). Patterns of party integration, influence and autonomy in seven federations. *Party Politics*, 15(2), 157–177.
- Torres, J. (2020, March 5). VOX recibió unos 10 millones en dinero público en 2019 pese a su discurso "antichiringuitos" [VOX received about 10 million in public money in 2019 despite its "anti-beach bar (gravy train)" speech]. *Cadena Ser*. [https://cadenaser.com/ser/2020/03/05/politica/1583393147\\_007666.html](https://cadenaser.com/ser/2020/03/05/politica/1583393147_007666.html)
- Turnbull-Dugarte, S., Rama, J., & Santana, A. (2020). The Baskerville's dog suddenly started barking: Voting for VOX in the 2019 Spanish general elections. *Political Research Exchange*, 2(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/2474736X.2020.1781543>
- Turnbull-Dugarte, S. J. (2019a). Explaining the end of Spanish exceptionalism and electoral support for VOX. *Research & Politics*, 6(2), 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F2053168019851680>
- Turnbull-Dugarte, S. J. (2019b). Selfies, policies, or votes? Political party use of Instagram in the 2015 and 2016 Spanish general elections. *Social Media + Society*, 5(2), 1–15.
- Valls, F. H. (2018, December 10). VOX hace caja tras las andaluzas: Dispara la afiliación en un 25% y las donaciones [VOX makes cash after the Andalusian elections: It increases membership by 25% and donations]. *La Información*. <https://www.lainformacion.com/espana/vox-ingresos-afiliados-donaciones-andalucia/6459199/?autoref=true>

Valls, F. H. (2020, January 4). El año de VOX: 56.786 afiliados, ficha una firma de cazatalentos y se profesionaliza [The year of VOX: 56,786 affiliates, signs a headhunter firm and professionalizes]. *La Información*. <https://www.lainformacion.com/espana/vox-investigacion-abascal-afiliados/6532902/?autoref=true>

VOX recibió el 66% de sus ingresos de fondos públicos en 2020 [VOX received 66% of its revenue from public funds in 2020]. (2021, April 10). *Heraldo*. <https://www.heraldo.es/noticias/nacional/2021/04/10/vox-recibio-de-fondos-publicos-el-66-de-sus-ingresos-en-2020-1483978.html?autoref=true>

VOX refuerza su estructura y anuncia: “El Vox actual no tiene nada que ver con el que habrá” [VOX reinforces its structure and announces: “The current VOX has nothing to do with the one that will be”]. (2019, August 11). *Infolibre*. [https://www.infolibre.es/noticias/politica/2019/08/11/vox\\_refuerza\\_estructura\\_anuncia\\_vox\\_actual\\_no\\_tiene\\_nada\\_que\\_ver\\_con\\_que\\_habra\\_97829\\_1012.html](https://www.infolibre.es/noticias/politica/2019/08/11/vox_refuerza_estructura_anuncia_vox_actual_no_tiene_nada_que_ver_con_que_habra_97829_1012.html)

VOX. (2018). *100 medidas urgentes de VOX para*

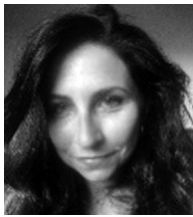
*España [VOX’s 100 urgent measures for Spain]*. <https://www.voxespana.es/noticias/100-medidas-urgentes-de-vox-para-espana-20181006>

VOX. (2020a). *Menas, bandas latinas y ajustes de cuentas: La violencia que soportan los barrios* [Menas, Latino gangs and settling of scores: The violence that neighborhoods endure]. <https://www.voxespana.es/actualidad/menas-bandas-latinas-y-ajustes-de-cuentas-la-violencia-que-soportan-los-barrios-20200629>

VOX. (2020b). *VOX, único partido que defiende el fin de las subvenciones públicas a partidos políticos y sindicatos* [VOX, the only party that defends the end of public subsidies to political parties and unions]. <https://www.voxespana.es/actualidad/vox-unico-partido-que-defiende-el-fin-de-las-subsenciones-publicas-a-partidos-politicos-y-sindicatos-20200403>

VOX. (2021). *Cuentas anuales del ejercicio 2020, junto con el informe de auditoría* [Annual accounts for the financial year 2020, together with the audit report]. <https://www.voxespana.es/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/CCAA-2020-Informe-audit-firmados.pdf>

#### About the Authors



**Astrid Barrio** is associate professor of political science at University of Valencia in Spain. Her main fields of research are political parties, populism, Spanish politics, and Catalan nationalism. ORCID iD: 0000-0002-6193-5884



**Sonia Alonso Sáenz de Oger** is associate professor of political science at Georgetown University in Qatar. Her research focuses on comparative European politics, with special attention to political parties and electoral competition, centre-periphery conflict, institutions, and the political consequences of the euro crisis. She has authored articles in journals such as *Party Politics*, *European Journal of Political Research*, *West European Politics*, *Southern European Society and Politics*, *Comparative European Politics*, and *Regional and Federal Studies*. ORCID iD: 0000-0002-5094-6078



**Bonnie N. Field** is professor of political science in the Global Studies Department at Bentley University in Massachusetts, USA. Her research interests include governance in parliamentary regimes, political parties, legislative politics, territorial politics, and gender and politics. ORCID iD: 0000-0002-0096-4008.



Article

## Rootedness, Activism, and Centralization: The Case of the Swiss People’s Party

Adrian Favero

Department of Political Science and International Studies, University of Birmingham, UK; E-Mail: [a.v.favero@bham.ac.uk](mailto:a.v.favero@bham.ac.uk)

Submitted: 9 May 2021 | Accepted: 2 August 2021 | Published: 24 November 2021

### Abstract

The Swiss People’s Party (Schweizerische Volkspartei [SVP]) has increased its territorial extensiveness and organizational intensity in recent years, and has professionalised its strategies of communication. This article analyses the dynamics characterising the SVP’s organization. It shows that with its locally rooted presence and its effort to generate ideological coherence, the party has embraced the “mass party” organizational model. It additionally assesses the extent to which the SVP’s centralised power at the federal level is conducive to the party’s further electoral success. Having considered both the party at national level and three of its most important cantonal branches, the article argues that the organizational dominance of the SVP’s central leadership was beneficial for the party’s electoral strength but will lead to tensions with cantonal and local branches, which are largely in charge, to build and maintain an active base.

### Keywords

activism; centralization; mass parties; Swiss People’s Party

### Issue

This article is part of the issue “Right-Wing Populist Party Organisation Across Europe: The Survival of the Mass-Party?” edited by Daniele Albertazzi (University of Surrey, UK) and Stijn van Kessel (Queen Mary University of London, UK).

© 2021 by the author; licensee Cogitatio (Lisbon, Portugal). This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

### 1. Introduction

Current academic literature describes the Swiss People’s Party (Schweizerische Volkspartei [SVP], also known as Union démocratique du centre [UDC]) as one of the largest and most successful populist radical right parties (PRRPs) in Western Europe (Stockemer, 2018). The party has benefited from organizational and ideological changes implemented by the charismatic leader of its Zurich branch, Christoph Blocher, throughout the 1980s and 1990s. In subsequent years these were adopted by cantonal party branches in other areas of the country. Like many successful PRRPs, the party now relies on a centralized organization that allows the national leadership to exercise considerable influence (Mazzoleni & Rossini, 2016, p. 100). Moreover, given the party’s reliance on a strong central bureaucracy and around 80,000 party members, as well as its ability to socialize its members into politics and shape their views, it can legitimately be assumed to feature certain aspects of

a “mass party” in the sense embraced by this thematic issue. These aspects include a centralized organization, the recruitment of a large activist membership base, a broad presence on the ground, and a wide range of activities provided to the grassroots, as well as the creation of a collective identity based on a shared ideological view.

Following this introduction and a brief section covering the recent history of the party, this article will discuss the features of the SVP’s organization, as well as the party’s focus on developing an active membership base (Section 3). Here, and in line with the objectives of this thematic issue, I explain which features the SVP adopted from the mass party model. Following on from this, I consider the extent to which power has been centralized within its organization, and how much influence members may be said to exercise today on its strategies and ideology. The article argues that members have limited power to influence key decision-making processes initiated by leadership at cantonal and federal levels, and that the current highly centralized organization could

lead to problems between the party's national organization and its sub-national branches. Such problems may include a lack of influence of cantonal branches at the national level (see representatives 14, 15, and 18, in the Supplementary Material), top-down decisions on topics that do not resonate with local needs or new members (see representatives 3, 6, and 19, in the Supplementary Material), or campaigns that are seen as too controversial among potential voters (representative 11) or in certain regions (representative 27). As a representative (15) from rural Bern outlined:

For us here in the country side, the Zurich wing is extreme and difficult. The [Zurich branch's ideology] is not our ideology but the leadership is from there....We need a leadership who is not stubborn and has a narrow view, but can work with others. I think that is the way to win more members.

In terms of its methodology, this study benefits from a series of 32 structured interviews (see Supplementary Material for the list of interviewees) with SVP national and cantonal representatives (the latter from the cantons of Zurich, Bern, and Geneva). The representatives occupy different roles and responsibilities within the SVP, ranging from presidents of local sections to members of the national parliament. The answers provided by these representatives offer a comprehensive insight into the SVP's attempts to create a mass party and the party's organizational structure. This research also draws on the study of party documentation, such as party statutes (SVP Bern, 2019; SVP Schweiz, 2018; SVP Zürich, 2019; UDC Genève, 2018), and the party programme (SVP Schweiz, 2019a).

The choice of these cantonal branches is justified by the distinct role they played for the SVP's political development. Bern represents the "old SVP," which dominated the party until the 1980s and has been a rather centrist governmental party (Mudde, 2007). In Zurich, the "new SVP" (Mazzoleni, 2008) has developed a more oppositional and conservative profile and took over the national SVP during the 1990s. Geneva is important as an example of a French-speaking area into which the SVP only expanded recently. I consider the nature of the party's organization in some detail once its history has been briefly summarized in the next section.

## 2. The Swiss People's Party: A Historic Overview

According to Ladner (2006), Swiss national parties have a relatively weak position within the state and the society. The reasons for their weak standing are the characteristic idiosyncrasies of Switzerland and its political system, such as the social and culturally heterogeneous structure, the existence of four different language groups, strong federalism, the small size of the country, and a political system with predominantly non-professional representatives (militia system). Within this system, it is

difficult to build a centralized national party organization, and Swiss parties adapted to this system by creating relatively autonomous cantonal branches.

Additionally, Kriesi et al. (2005) describe the Swiss party system as "frozen," with the four biggest parties—the Liberals (FDP.Die Liberalen [FDP]), the Social Democratic Party (Sozialdemokratische Partei der Schweiz [SP]), the Christian Democratic People's Party (Christlichdemokratische Volkspartei der Schweiz [CVP]), and the SVP—sharing governmental responsibility among the seven members of the Federal Council according to the magic formula, established in 1959, in which the four major parties have two (FDP, CVP, SP) or one (SVP) seat in accordance with their share of the vote. This formula (that changed after 2003, with the SVP gaining an additional seat and the CVP losing its second seat) and the collegiality system based on consensus in the Federal Council prevented the development of a real opposition party:

"The Federal Council reaches its decisions as a collegial body" states the Federal Constitution. Decisions are taken jointly. All Federal Council members must stand by the decisions in their external dealings, even if a decision may not accord with their personal views or the policy of their party. (Federal Council, 2020)

Therefore, the governing structure was instrumental to Switzerland's political stability and consensual system (Mazzoleni & Skenderovic, 2007). Moreover, the vote shares of these four largest governing parties did not change substantially between 1919 and 1995 (Ladner, 2006). However, this stable system was about to change fundamentally: With the arrival of a new party leadership in 1990s, the SVP developed a distinct vote-seeking strategy, and experienced organizational growth and electoral success (Mazzoleni & Rossini, 2016).

The origins of the SVP can be traced back to 1917, when the so-called Farmers' Party was founded in the canton of Zurich. Only a few years later, in 1936, the national party was founded under its new name: Farmers, Artisans and Citizens Party. The purpose of the party was the defense of rural interests against the urban-dominated liberals (Kriesi et al., 2005; Mazzoleni & Skenderovic, 2007). In 1971, the SVP was founded when the Farmers, Artisans and Citizens Party merged with the Democratic Party from the cantons of Grisons and Glarus (Mazzoleni & Rossini, 2016). Under the lead of the SVP's Zurich branch, the party then managed to establish a nationwide presence. Yet the political dominance of SVP Zurich also led to internal conflicts between cantonal branches.

While both the Zurich and Bern branches have deep agrarian roots, ideological differences between the two have become very noticeable. Bern stuck to a more moderate, conservative line, while Zurich developed a more radical profile as a populist radical right organization. Contrary to the well-established branches from Bern and

Zurich, in Geneva the SVP could not rely on an established organizational structure (representative 8) and, to date, remains relatively small. As for its ideology, in contrast to SVP Bern, the SVP branch in Zurich took an aggressive opposition course advocating for more law and order, and restricting integration into international communities. This course was also joined by SVP Geneva, which had initially taken a more liberal stance (Kriesi et al., 2005).

Scholars who have discussed the radicalization of the party (e.g., Skenderovic, 2009) highlight the crucial role played by Christoph Blocher. Elected president of the party's Zurich branch in 1977 (a position he held until 2003), Blocher turned a formerly conservative party rooted in rural areas into a successful PRRP able to target urban voters. As a strong, charismatic leader of an initially weak organization (Mudde, 2007), Blocher "achieved a sort of 'godfather' status" (Bernhard, 2017, p. 515). The party also paved the way for Blocher to return to the national leadership after he lost his seat in the Federal Council (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2015). In 2008, President Toni Brunner approached Blocher and urged him to become one of the vice-presidents in the Head Office, for which the party had to expand its leadership committee (Mazzoleni & Rossini, 2016).

Blocher himself is aware of his firm authority within the party organization despite never serving as party president. In an interview held in October 2020, he claimed: "On certain issues, I had more influence than the president... because [referring to himself] there simply was a politician with great charisma, well, from the viewpoint of others." Indeed, Blocher was widely assumed to play an important role in the appointment of party presidents, while he also made final decisions and dominated the party organization from his residence in Herrliberg. However, several representatives emphasized that although Blocher was crucial to the party in the past when he was more active, at present the SVP is no longer dictated to by his strong influence (see representatives 5 and 33).

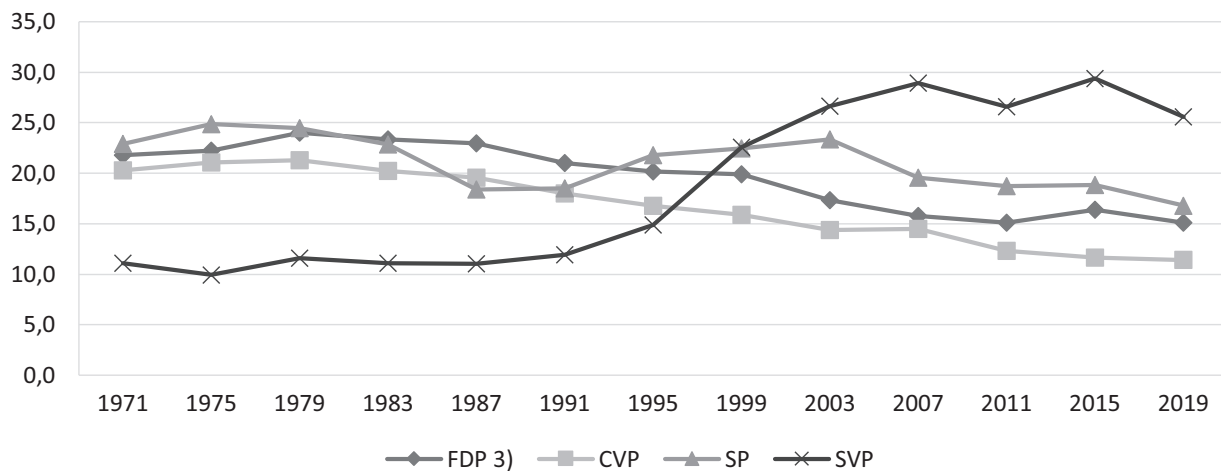
By creating the new SVP in the 1990s, Blocher's organizational strategy was fourfold (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2015, pp. 55–56), and aimed to make the party more centralized, efficient, and electorally appealing. Firstly, Blocher pushed for territorial expansion and facilitated the establishment of party branches in areas the party had not reached before. These, in turn, followed the example of the Zurich branch, as they aimed to run their organizations professionally and bought into Blocher's populist radical right ideology (Skenderovic, 2009). Secondly, Blocher supported the idea of changing the party's statute so that more power (for instance within the Delegate Assembly) would be given to the most electorally successful cantons. Such a system is like those employed by the other large parties who assign cantonal delegates according to seats in the national parliament (FDP), number of members in cantonal branches (SP), or a mix of voter turnout and members (CVP).

In the case of the SVP, this system allowed party representatives from Zurich to ultimately gain control of the party's main ruling body. Thirdly, in 2004 the party strived for greater centralization and vertical integration by strengthening the role of the Central Committee and the National Central Office (Mazzoleni & Rossini, 2016). In the meantime, its campaigns were professionalized (for example, by hiring external companies to help with them), while benefiting from Blocher's own financial support as a wealthy businessman.

Besides renewing its organization to make it more efficient and centralized, the SVP also strove to achieve more coherence in ideological terms. Hence, by the 1990s, the party was said to have devised a new "winning formula" (Mazzoleni & Skenderovic, 2007), which combined an emphasis on nationalism and "traditional values" with market-friendly proposals on the economy and taxation. In pure populist style, the party also positioned itself as the lone opponent of a *classe politique* (political establishment; Hildebrand, 2017) allegedly composed of all other parties in the country, regardless of their ideological orientation. Adding nativism to a newly adopted populist agenda, the SVP also focused on issues having to do with migration, asylum seeking, and European integration.

The democratic tools available in the Swiss political system allowed the SVP to use referendums and initiatives as an effective instrument to promote its own agenda during the 1990s and 2000s. Most notably, the SVP, together with Blocher's AUNS (the Campaign for an Independent and Neutral Switzerland; Blocher was one of its founders and its president from 1986 until 2004) employed substantial financial and ideological resources to oppose the country's participation in the European Economic Area, which resulted in a narrow win (50.3% against entry; Albertazzi, 2008). The SVP continued to launch campaigns, often with the goal of showing its anti-establishment attitude and pushing the party's key topics. One example is the popular initiative on a nationwide ban on the construction of minarets, which the party won in November 2009. The question on minarets fitted well into the SVP's strategy to emphasize symbolic nativism and Swiss traditional values (Betz, 2013).

The organizational strategies mentioned above, as well as the party's focus on new themes, helped it become more efficient and ideologically coherent. As a result, the SVP enjoyed continuous electoral gains from the mid-1990s to 2007 and remains the largest political party in the country today in terms of vote share. Furthermore, with its strategy, the SVP managed to win over considerable parts of the working class that traditionally voted for the SP (Rennwald & Zimmermann, 2016). As Figure 1 shows, since 2003, the party has enjoyed the support of over 25% of voters in federal elections, from a low point of 10% during the pre-Blocher era (Swiss Federal Statistical Office, 2019). Because of this success, in 2003 the party increased its representation in the seven-strong Federal Council—i.e.,



**Figure 1.** The voters share of the four biggest parties in the National Council, 1971–2019. Source: Swiss Federal Statistical Office (2019).

the country’s executive—and Blocher himself became a Federal Councillor.

Despite the party’s electoral and governmental successes, a “third phase in the SVP’s evolution” (Mazzoleni & Rossini, 2016, p. 92) started in 2007 that posed new challenges to the party’s cohesion. In December of that year, the Parliament decided not to reappoint Blocher as Federal Councillor and replaced him with a more moderate SVP member, Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf, against the wishes of their party. Blocher’s ejection—justified by the other parties with reference to his alleged unwillingness to compromise and support the executive in public—led to a split in the SVP. As some moderate cantonal branches were expelled by the national organization for supporting Widmer-Schlumpf, they proceeded to found a new conservative party, The Conservative Democratic Party of Switzerland (Bürgerlich-Demokratische Partei Schweiz; Bernhard, 2015), which both SVP government representatives decided to join. Hence, for a brief period, the SVP found itself in opposition, something unprecedented in a country in which all the largest political parties always share government responsibilities. While the SVP was able to return to government after a few months, it responded to the risks of experiencing more internal factionalism by centralizing its organization further and by holding on to a radical ideological profile.

The SVP’s ability to adapt its organizational structures and refocus its message to respond to internal challenges may be tested again soon. Following some electoral losses in 2019, the party’s leadership has identified insufficient mobilization of its members and internal disputes between cantonal branches as problems to be urgently addressed. A solution proposed by the leadership has been to better connect the leaders with the grassroots (SRF, 2019a), suggesting that the party will invest even more in what has widely been seen as a key feature of the mass party: rootedness on the ground, the existence of vibrant local party branches and activities, and the deployment of mechanisms of value-infusion

and socialization of members, such as the ones described in the next section.

### 3. Building and Maintaining the Mass Party

To evaluate the extent to which the SVP fits the mass party model, I now explore the party’s organization (including the power of different bodies and offices within the party), and how it attracts members and fosters activism (including the role played by social media).

The four largest Swiss parties are not organizationally structured in the same way. Their bodies differ in name, size, tasks, and responsibilities, as well as the influence of their members. For example, the SP and the SVP grant only representatives from the largest cantonal branches direct access to their national party committees, whereas the FDP and the CVP invite the presidents of all cantonal branches. Nevertheless, all parties have in common that they describe their respective Delegate Assembly as the party’s supreme body (CVP Schweiz, 2020; FDP Schweiz, 2020; SP Schweiz, 2020a; SVP Schweiz, 2018).

According to their statutes (SVP Schweiz, 2018) the SVP maintains a rather complex organization. Since 2016, the main bodies have been the Delegate Assembly (*Delegiertenversammlung*), the Party Committee (*Partei Vorstand*), the Head Office (*Parteileitung*), and the Party Executive Committee (*Parteileitungsausschuss*). At the national level, the Party Executive Committee consists of nine people and acts as a central body taking care of day-to-day business and communication. The Head Office consists of 29 members. The six cantons with the largest electorate and one representative from the French-speaking, from the Italian-speaking, and Romansh-speaking parts of Switzerland have a seat on this body, among other representatives. It advises on current political issues and coordinates the work of various offices and bodies within the party. Moreover, this body is also responsible for the development of programmatic

proposals, which are subsequently discussed (and eventually approved) by the Party Committee. While this structure should ensure broader cantonal support for strategic party work, in practice it also guarantees that the largest cantons continue to exercise considerable influence on the party's strategies and proposals. The Party Committee is made up of 128 members who pass resolutions on launching referendums, approve the annual report, and elect members of the Head Office. Finally, the Delegate Assembly is regarded as the supreme party body and consists of 840 delegates from the cantonal sections. This body retains the power to elect party leaders, decides on the position the party should take on the (frequent) referendums held in the country, and approves any changes to its statute.

Moving down to the sub-national level, I find that the cantonal branches' organizations are characterized by many similarities in the way that they are structured (SVP Bern, 2019; SVP Schweiz, 2018; SVP Zürich, 2019; UDC Genève, 2018). Like the national level, the organizational backbone of each cantonal branch consists of a small Head Office, a Party Committee, and a Delegate Assembly. Importantly, these entities possess a certain degree of autonomy vis-à-vis the centre, as far as the setting of political strategies and the coordination of party members are concerned (Mazzoleni & Rossini, 2016). The Head Offices hence discuss and shape the strategy and day-to-day business of the party, ultimately exercising considerable influence in developing cantonal strategies and positions before any other organ gets involved in their discussion. Party Committees often deal with organizational matters, such as preparing the Delegate Assembly, and managing the memberships. Finally, delegate assemblies make the final decisions on launching referendums or initiatives, approving manifestos and statutes, and electing members of organizational bodies. Although they are defined as the supreme party organ able to shape the party's programme and statutes, the members' delegate assemblies are in fact only marginally involved in preliminary decision-making processes and policy formulation. Delegates sometimes disagree with representatives and they may use the opportunity to provide their opinion publicly during the assembly, but eventually, they often approve of the party leadership's suggestions.

The SVP's smallest units are known as "local parties" (*Ortspartei*) or "local sections" (*Sektionen/Sections communales*). They are necessary to achieve rootedness on the ground and allow party representatives to become aware of local issues. The size of local branches varies widely, from a few members to several hundreds, depending on their location. Like all parties in Switzerland, the SVP has a network of local sections available. There are over a thousand local sections, but the party has yet to tap its full potential in French-speaking Switzerland (see representatives 2, 14, and 21), where branches tend to be smaller. However, the number of the SVP's local sections is larger than those of the SP (805)

but smaller than those of the FDP (1500). All numbers were obtained from party secretariats in 2020. No numbers were available for the CVP.

In sum, the SVP has increased the complexity and strength of its organization at the national level to ensure efficiency in executing the party's strategy. With its strongly centralized organization, the party preserves an extensive structure with an institutionalized local presence aiming to develop active grassroots following that resembles the mass party organizational model (Mazzoleni & Rossini, 2016). Nevertheless, the networks of cantonal and local branches have retained some considerable powers, especially regarding the mobilization and coordination of party supporters. In the next section, I explore how the SVP attempts to utilize its rooted organization and means of communication to recruit more members.

### 3.1. *Attracting New Members and Reaching Out to the Public*

A key aim of any mass party is to grow a large active membership. This allows the party to shape the views of those who have joined the organization through a variety of means to then draw resources (e.g., membership fees, time and/or expertise) from large numbers of people. With 80,000 official members, the SVP is the third largest party in Switzerland in terms of membership. The FDP with 120,000 members and sympathizers, and the CVP with around 100,000 members are both larger in size, whereas the SP is significantly smaller with 33,000 official party members (all numbers directly obtained from party secretariats in 2020). This section considers the incentives offered by the SVP to those who may be thinking of joining, how the party reaches out to potential members, and the extent to which its activities may be said to follow the logic of the mass party.

To attract members and voters, the SVP has focused on several issues in its communication and campaigns: EU integration and "uncontrolled" immigration (both of which it opposes), the market economy, and helping the middle class (see representatives 2, 13, 14, and 26). Moreover, the party strives to protect alleged "Swiss values," such as self-determination, independence, and freedom (SVP Schweiz, 2019a)—values apparently forgotten by the *classe politique* in Bern. Since radicalizing its ideology in the 1980s/1990s, the SVP has been able to offer a very clear message and distinctive values to voters that interviewed representatives see as an important reason why people join it today. However, some representatives mentioned that while these topics are important, the national leadership's aggressive style is sometimes seen as too provocative and disturbing by the grassroots (see representatives 3, 25, and 27).

In addition to this, the party also provides "communitarian" (Albertazzi, 2016) incentives to its members, as it is able to create close communities of like-minded individuals who end up feeling "at home" in the party.

Party branches organise a wide range of events for their members to bind them to the organization, while claiming that, as a community, they are under attack, particularly from media organizations and left-wing parties. With these events, the party also creates opportunities for the celebration of “Swissness.” Having focused much on identity matters in recent years, the SVP thus uses social events, such as the well-known Albisgüetli convention (Albisgüetli-Tagung) organized every year by its Zurich branch, to celebrate what it sees as traditional Swiss values (Hildebrand, 2017). Moreover, to reach out to the public and be seen as approachable, the party also organizes activities called SVP With the People (*SVP bi de Lüt*). Here, constituents can speak to SVP representatives about local issues. In the words of most party representatives, personal contacts are invaluable to turn sympathizers into actual members, by showing that the party is willing to listen to and be approachable for ordinary folks. However, many interviewees mentioned that recruiting activists and members remains difficult (see representatives 10, 16, 27, 28, and 30). As a local representative from Zurich explained (16): “There is a large group who supports us, but they would probably never become members. This is the Zeitgeist. As it is in all associations, there is often no commitment.”

As shown in this section, the local branches of the SVP provide the most direct linkage between the party and potential supporters, and the best way to connect with the public at large. By relying predominantly on social activities, canvassing, and personal communications, these branches aim to mobilize voters by offering them a clear message and ideology, as well as the opportunity to become part of a close community of activists. This is not to say that the party refrains from using new technologies (and particularly social media) to reach out to the public, and the next section will show how these are deployed both internally and externally. However, it certainly still believes in the importance of face-to-face communication too, for reasons that will be explored below.

### 3.2. Online Communication and Social Media

Online communication (and particularly social media) provides SVP representatives with means to convey their ideology as they see fit and without constraints (Engesser

et al., 2017; Gerbaudo, 2018), hence allowing them to bypass the gatekeepers working for media organizations. This section investigates the SVP’s deployment of online communication and how it is used to publicize the party’s core message and maximize attention for its initiatives.

The SVP is active on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, yet with varying degrees of success compared to other governing parties (see Table 1). Except for the CVP, all parties have two official accounts, one for the German-speaking part of Switzerland and one for the French-speaking part. The numbers show that the party’s strongest social media presence is on Facebook. Despite being only the third largest party in terms of members, the SVP has many more followers than parties with a larger membership base, such as the CVP or the FDP. On Twitter, the SVP ranks only third among the governing parties, with notably fewer followers than the social democrats. Generally, the numbers illustrate that the four governing Swiss parties are not (yet) exploiting social media’s full potential and instead focus predominately on traditional messaging and canvassing with face-to-face interactions at the local level (Klinger & Russmann, 2017).

One of the main purposes of the SVP’s social media use is to clarify the party’s position and distribute campaign messages prior to elections or federal referendums, with Facebook playing the most important role. As mentioned by representatives in interviews, the reasons for this are the platform’s popularity and the fact that it has now achieved penetration even among older cohorts (representative 7). However, due to the number of older voters and members who still cannot be assumed to be familiar with any social media, emails and regular mail remain the most common means of direct communication with members and activists.

Overall, social media does not appear to play a crucial role yet for the SVP in recruiting members and creating communities of activists. Digital communication channels are mainly used to react to political developments and convey party ideology, but not very effectively to mobilize activists, as party representatives themselves readily admit (see representatives 4, 5, 17, and 19). Hence, personal contacts at the local level remain far more important for the purpose of recruiting new members and mobilizing them. These remain key aims of the SVP, for reasons explored in more detail in the next section.

**Table 1.** Number of social media followers of the four governing parties.

Party	Twitter	Facebook	Instagram
SVP/UDC CH	17,249/2,685	30,937/12,041	10,600/148
FDP/PLR CH	18,779/4,718	14,536/8,063	4,889/1,229
SP/PS CH	42,350/4,868	28,700/6,490	12,600/1,874
CVP CH	16,463	14,534	2,932

Source: Data collected by author, 24 November 2020.

### 3.3. Reasons to Grow an Active Base

Mass parties rely on active supporters and a large membership base, and the SVP is no exception. Firstly, active members can be counted upon at election time (Scarrow, 2015)—a boost to any party in a country in which turnout tends to be low and people tend to either vote for the party they feel is very close to their views or abstain (SRF, 2019b). For instance, lack of mobilization was the main problem in the federal election of 2019, when the SVP lost 3.8 percentage points. After the election, representatives felt, the party needs to do better in terms of mobilizing its members; an active base was seen as a means to partially mitigate demobilization, particularly when debates do not revolve around the SVP's core topics (SRF, 2019a).

According to several interviewed representatives (see representatives 1, 2, 3, 12, 21, and 31), active members and sympathizers are also essential to distribute the party's message and ideology. As a member (19) of the Cantonal Leadership Committee in Bern emphasized when asked about the main advantages of having active members: "The main reason is that we have more manpower and are more powerful. You can better convey your messages, you can campaign better, you can do better referendum battles." Another representative (31) specified that at the local level "we try to motivate members to convince other people that the SVP is needed. We try to motivate people to become messengers for our little section."

As is typical for a mass party, these grassroots-level activities of face-to-face "micro-campaigning" help disseminate the SVP's arguments and can arguably be more effective than the campaigns planned and executed from the top. However, this system also requires the identification of a set of topics with which members and sympathizers can identify (representative 1), and these need to be anchored in the *Lebenswelt* (life world) of party supporters for people to feel compelled to engage with them. In other words, local sections need to conduct "local politics," as I was told by a party representative (3). Indeed, some representatives told me that a lack of communication and linkage between the centre and the cantons, alongside an excessive focus on topics that do not necessarily resonate at the local level, have hampered the growth of a more active base in their local communities in recent years (see representatives 5, 6, 7, and 15).

While it aims to use members to campaign and connect to local people throughout the country, the national SVP does not particularly need them as a revenue source. The SVP's financial structure is unlike the classic mass-based parties that gather small donations from a large group of members. According to the SVP's 2019 budget, only 3.7% of its income (170,000 CHF) originates from membership fees from cantonal branches. (With the exception of Geneva, Neuchâtel, Ticino, Fribourg, and Schwyz, cantonal political parties are not required to disclose the sources or amounts of donations [OSCE,

2019]). The largest sources of income are donations, which make up 41.7% (1,900,000 CHF) of its projected income, and state contributions from the parliamentary group (46.73%, 2,127,700 CHF; SVP Schweiz, 2019b). These findings are in line with Scarrow (2015), who argues that party members often have a comparatively small role in funding their parties. Unfortunately, comparisons with other parties are difficult as budget plans are not usually publicly available. The SP is the only other of the four governing national parties that published its budget. The largest sources of income are donations and fundraising (49%, 3,229,211 CHF), and membership and solidarity fees (32.5%, 2,144,512 CHF). The numbers show that the party relied more on membership fees in 2019 than the SVP (SP Schweiz, 2020b).

In sum, the SVP invests in creating an active base of supporters who are socialized into the party's key values and support it in a variety of ways, although recruiting new members—especially young people (see representatives 3, 13, and 16)—and motivating existing members to become more active are challenges the party needs to address (see representatives 5, 6, 13, 19, and 32). As representative 13 said: "It is always the same few people who do something, who organize, who help." The next section considers the party's internal democratic processes and considers whether the SVP's focus on its members translates into the latter's empowerment. To what extent are members able to contribute to setting the strategy and message of the organization they belong to?

## 4. Centralization of Power and Internal Functioning

In a decentralized political system such as Switzerland, the extent to which national leaders can concentrate power into their hands vis-à-vis the party's cantonal branches remains a matter of contention (Mazzoleni & Rossini, 2016). Below I consider the extent to which the SVP has centralized decision-making since 2016, and the extent to which members can influence decisions taken by their party.

As I have mentioned above, Blocher is widely acknowledged to have reinvented the SVP, turning it into a PRRP. The Blocher-inspired radicalization of the party's message in the 1990s went hand in hand with the increasing centralization of power in the hands of the national leadership. The Central Committee acquired more responsibilities, and the electorally more successful cantonal branches were granted more delegates in the National Delegate Assembly, as well as seats in the Head Office. In this period, the party's message was also made more coherent and directed from the centre with the help of professional communicators. From 2016 onwards, the SVP went through a process of further centralization by creating a Party Executive Committee (*Parteileitungsausschuss*) responsible for the party's daily business and organizing national campaigns. The new organizational structure allowed for

more efficient management of the party and centralized control of its communication, as the Party Executive Committee speaks on behalf of the party at national level. A representative from the national leadership emphasized that this structure ensures that “the party speaks with one voice” (representative 2).

However, the party’s cantonal leaders maintain a crucial role, insofar as cantonal branches still possess full legal and organizational autonomy within the framework of the national statute. Yet this level of autonomy does not mean that they can necessarily exercise the same influence at the national level. Cantonal branches are considered the “organizational foundation of the SVP Switzerland” (SVP Schweiz, 2018), yet some cantons are visibly more influential than others on national matters (representative 14). As a case in point, since the 1990s, the presidents of the six electorally most successful cantonal branches of the party enjoy membership of the national Head Office. This gives them an opportunity to contribute to setting the strategy of the party. In this respect, leadership and organization of the cantonal branches are of specific importance to fostering an active base because they grant leverage at the national level and direct access to prior deliberations.

Notwithstanding this imbalance, the recent tendency towards the concentration of power in the hands of a restricted party elite has thus been mitigated by the features of Swiss political culture and the country’s institutions. The party’s cantonal and local branches have retained some degree of autonomy due to the highly decentralized political system, which means that complete internal and external coherence and absolute dominance of federal party organs over cantonal branches remain out of reach. Indeed, programmatic differences between national and cantonal branches of the party are common (Storz & Bernauer, 2018), and cantonal branches sometimes deviate from national voting recommendations, depending on intra-cantonal cleavages, to meet the preferences of their core electoral clientele (Giger et al., 2011; Mueller & Bernauer, 2018).

The final issue I cover is how this dynamic of increasing national centralization, constrained, to an extent, by partially autonomous cantonal branches, has impacted on members on the ground. Given this changing context, it is legitimate to ask what rights individual members have to shape what the party does and its choice of candidates and leaders. This will be the topic of the next section, which will focus on internal democracy within the SVP.

#### *4.1. Internal Democracy: Do Ordinary Party Members Have a Say?*

The members’ Delegate Assembly is defined as the supreme party organ by the SVP’s (2018) statute. The assembly approves the party programme and statutes, makes final decisions on launching referendums, and elects party leaders. However, it is only

marginally involved in the decision-making processes and discussions that precede the act of voting on these matters. In other words, the role of the Delegate Assembly is ambiguous. Several representatives mentioned that they are happy when delegates engage because it fosters the SVP’s proclaimed bottom-up process (see representatives 13, 18, 19, and 29). Certain matters, such as the development of the party’s strategy or programme, are often decided by leadership committees and subsequently approved by the delegates. However, similar decision-making structures apply to other parties as well. According to some SVP interviewees, this procedure avoids long discussions, facilitates consolidated proposals, and “reduces reaction time” (see representatives 2 and 11). Therefore, ordinary members do have a say in certain areas, but their power is limited.

Another aspect is the cantonal representation at the National Delegate Assembly. Members of larger cantonal branches have a bigger influence in the national assembly because these cantons can send more delegates (SVP Schweiz, 2018). This procedure points towards a territorial concentration of power within stronger cantons and potentially undermines equal influence of all cantonal branches. All four parties represented in the national government award such prerogatives to larger and powerful cantonal branches. Unfortunately, it is almost impossible to verify the extent to which cantons exercise their advantageous influence, because detailed protocols of delegate assemblies are not publicly available for every party.

At the cantonal level, a similar mechanism applies to all parties represented in the national government. In the cantons of Bern and Zurich, larger districts or sections send more delegates to the cantonal delegate assemblies, which disproportionately increases their influence. However, in Geneva, the situation is different. Whereas the SP, FDP, and CVP in Geneva employ a similar proportional model as their cantonal branches in Zurich and Bern, the SVP invites all members to attend the cantonal Delegate Assembly and grants them a right to speak. However, this more inclusive approach may be partially grounded in the small number of SVP members in Geneva (300).

At the local level, representatives from all parties endeavour to listen to ordinary members. Within the SVP, several representatives emphasized that they attempt to include party members in decision-making processes during local assemblies (see representatives 10, 13, 15, and 16). They are also personally accessible to members but do not always possess the resources to set up formal debates or roundtables with constituents.

Generally, the SVP highlights the importance of its Delegate Assembly (SVP Schweiz, 2018) but a closer look reveals that the influence of ordinary members within the party is somewhat limited in certain cantonal branches. Interviews with representatives illustrate, however, that ordinary members may also not necessarily be very keen to engage in the party’s decision-



making procedures. As a representative (1) from Zurich described it:

It is difficult to find enough members who want to be delegates and want to go to the Delegate Assembly. It depends on the topic, location, time, and how early the assembly was announced. But it is not easy to motivate and find members who actually attend the assemblies.

## 5. Conclusion

Switzerland is a country with strong social and cultural cleavages and relatively weak national parties (Ladner, 2006). Despite the country's small size, it is characterized by different language regions, varying degrees of urbanization, and a history of religious strife. The polity is kept together by a federalist political structure with predominantly autonomous sub-national entities. Not surprisingly, therefore, decentralization has been a common feature of the organization of Swiss political parties. Yet despite all this, in recent years the SVP has become more centralized, by strengthening the role of national party organs at the expense of cantonal branches and delegate assemblies. The SVP also managed to establish its organization in all cantons across Switzerland and draws on certain aspects close to the mass party model to strengthen its political competitiveness (Mazzoleni & Rossini, 2016).

Mass parties seek to preserve collective identities through ideology (Panebianco, 1988). In this sense, the shift towards more centralization, as well as the radicalization of the party's ideology in the 1990s, were both inspired by Blocher and his allies. The party achieved a high level of coherence and efficiency under his de facto leadership and did not sustain much damage after the split of 2007. The largest party in the country for many years, the SVP presents itself as the only party willing to stand up to the *classe politique* made up of the same parties with which it shares power in the federal executive. Today, its clearly defined populist radical right ideology and professional campaigns help foster a strong identity within the party, binding members to it as a community of like-minded people sharing political aims. Focusing relentlessly on its key topics of anti-immigration, the market economy, and anti-EU integration, the SVP shapes a collective identity based on a common ideology that provides the foundation for the community of its members.

Another important feature of mass parties is the development of an active grassroots following and strong organizational centralization (Mazzoleni & Rossini, 2016). The interaction of the centralized national organization with the network of local sections is important to grow an active base that helps achieve electoral success, by reaching out to the electorate at large. As we have seen, the SVP's executive committee and the Head Office occupy central positions and have far-reaching powers. Moreover, and like other parties, the largest cantonal

branches are particularly influential within national bodies when compared to the smallest ones. In this context, the SVP's centralization appears to restrict vertical links with local branches and inputs from ordinary members but, according to representatives' statements, grassroots at the local level still matter (Mazzoleni & Rossini, 2016). There is now room for further research into the extent to which ordinary members feel underrepresented (if they do) and how powerful cantonal branches exert their influence during national assemblies at the expense of the smallest ones.

Overall, the provision of a clearly articulated ideology and communitarian incentives helps the party attract activists, but further centralization of decision-making processes may lead to an erosion of vertical ties between the national leadership and cantonal branches. In other words, while the SVP comes across as an efficient and well-organized machine that benefits greatly from investing in the structures of the mass party, it also needs to be careful not to alienate its sub-national branches (which are at the forefront of member recruitment and mobilization), and make sure members feel they have ways to influence the message and direction of the party.

## Acknowledgments

The support of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) is gratefully acknowledged (Grant Ref: ES/R011540/1). Where international publication takes place, the attribution should be to the Economic and Social Research Council (UK).

## Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

## Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

## References

- Albertazzi, D. (2008). Switzerland: Yet another populist paradise. In D. Albertazzi & D. McDonnell (Eds.), *Twenty-first century populism* (pp. 100–118). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Albertazzi, D. (2016). Going, going,... not quite gone yet? "Bossi's Lega" and the survival of the mass party. *Contemporary Italian Politics*, 8(2), 1–16.
- Albertazzi, D., & McDonnell, D. (2015). *Populists in power*. Routledge.
- Bernhard, L. (2015). The 2015 Swiss federal elections: The radical right strikes back. *West European Politics*, 39(4), 879–889.
- Bernhard, L. (2017). Three faces of populism in current Switzerland: Comparing the populist communication of the Swiss People's Party, the Ticino League, and

- the Geneva Citizens' Movement. *Swiss Political Science Review*, 23(4), 509–525.
- Betz, H. H. (2013). Mosques, minarets, burqas and other essential threats: The populist right's campaign against Islam in Western Europe. In R. Wodak, M. KhosraviNik, & B. Mral (Eds.), *Right-wing populism in Europe: Politics and discourse* (pp. 71–89). Bloomsbury.
- CVP Schweiz. (2020). *Die Statuten der CVP Schweiz*. [https://www.cvp.ch/sites/default/files/Statuten\\_2013-d.pdf](https://www.cvp.ch/sites/default/files/Statuten_2013-d.pdf)
- Engesser, S., Ernst, N., Esser, F., & Büchel, F. (2017). Populism and social media: How politicians spread a fragmented ideology. *Information, Communication & Society*, 20(8), 1109–1126.
- FDP Schweiz. (2020). *Statuten*. [https://www.fdp.ch/fileadmin/documents/fdp.ch/pdf/DE/Partei/Statuten/2021\\_Statuten\\_FDP\\_Die\\_Liberalen.pdf](https://www.fdp.ch/fileadmin/documents/fdp.ch/pdf/DE/Partei/Statuten/2021_Statuten_FDP_Die_Liberalen.pdf)
- Federal Council. (2020). *Decision-taking at meetings of the Federal Council*. <https://www.admin.ch/gov/en/start/federal-council/tasks/decision-making.html>
- Gerbaudo, P. (2018). Social media and populism: An elective affinity? *Media, Culture & Society*, 40(5), 745–753.
- Giger, N., Müller, J., & Debus, M. (2011). Die Bedeutung des regionalen Kontexts für die programmatische Positionierung von Schweizer Kantonalparteien [The importance of the regional context for the programmatic positioning of Swiss cantonal parties]. *Swiss Political Science Review*, 17(3), 259–285.
- Hildebrand, M. (2017). *Rechtspopulismus und Hegemonie. Der Aufstieg der SVP und die diskursive Transformation der politischen Schweiz* [Right-wing populism and hegemony: The rise of the SVP and the discursive transformation of Swiss politics]. Transcript Verlag.
- Klinger, U., & Russmann, U. (2017). “Beer is more efficient than social media”—Political parties and strategic communication in Austrian and Swiss national elections. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, 14(4), 299–313.
- Kriesi, H., Lachat, R., Selb, P., Bornschie, S., & Helbling, M. (2005). *Der Aufstieg der SVP. Acht Kantone im Vergleich* [The rise of the SVP. Eight cantons in comparison]. NZZ Libro.
- Ladner, A. (2006). Politische Parteien [Political parties]. In U. Klöt, P. Knoepfel, H. Kriesi, W. Linder, Y. Papadopoulus, & P. Sciarini (Eds.), *Handbuch der Schweizer Politik* [Handbook of Swiss politics] (Vol. 4, pp 317–343). NZZ Verlag.
- Mazzoleni, O. (2008). *Nationalisme et populisme en Suisse: La radicalisation de la “nouvelle” UDC* [Nationalism and populism in Switzerland: The radicalisation of the “new” UDC]. Presses Polytechniques et Universitaires.
- Mazzoleni, O., & Rossini, C. (2016). The Swiss People's Party: Converting and enhancing organization by a new leadership. In R. Heinisch & O. Mazzoleni (Eds.), *Understanding populist party organization: The radical right in Western Europe* (pp. 79–103). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Mazzoleni, O., & Skenderovic, D. (2007). The rise and impact of the Swiss People's Party: Challenging the rules of governance in Switzerland. In P. Delwit & P. Poirier (Eds.), *Extrême droite et pouvoir en Europe* [The extreme right parties and power in Europe] (pp. 85–116). Éditions de l'Université de Bruxelles.
- Mudde, C. (2007). *Populist radical right parties in Europe*. Cambridge University Press.
- Mueller, S., & Bernauer, J. (2018). Party unity in federal disunity: Determinants of decentralised policy-seeking in Switzerland. *West European Politics*, 41(3), 565–593.
- OSCE. (2019). *Swiss Confederation Federal Assembly Elections 2019*. <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/9/1/425009.pdf>
- Panbianco, A. (1988). *Political parties: Organisation and power*. Cambridge University Press.
- Rennwald, L., & Zimmermann, A. (2016). The workers' vote in Switzerland, 1971–2011. *Social Change in Switzerland*, 4, 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.22019/SC-2016-00001>
- Scarrow, S. E. (2015). *Beyond party members: Changing approaches to partisan mobilization*. Oxford University Press.
- Skenderovic, D. (2009). *The radical right in Switzerland: Continuity and change, 1945–2000*. Berghahn Books.
- SP Schweiz. (2020a). *Statuten der SP Schweiz* [Statutes SP Switzerland]. <https://www.sp-ps.ch/de/partei/organisation/delegiertenversammlung/statuten>
- SP Schweiz. (2020b). *Schlussdokumentation Digitale Delegiertenversammlung 27. Juni 2020* [Final documentation digital delegates assembly 27 June 2020]. <https://www.sp-ps.ch/de/partei/organisation/delegiertenversammlung/digitale-delegiertenversammlung>
- SRF. (2019a). *Delegiertenversammlung der SVP-Albert Rösti: “SVP braucht keine Wertediskussion”* [SVP delegate assembly Albert Rösti: “The SVP does not need a discussion on values.”]. <https://www.srf.ch/news/schweiz/delegiertenversammlung-der-svp-albert-roesti-svp-braucht-keine-wertediskussion>
- SRF. (2019b). *Am Schluss gewinnt, wer mobilisieren kann* [In the end, the winner is the one who can mobilise]. <https://www.srf.ch/news/schweiz/wahlen-2019/wahlbarometer/die-waehlerwanderungen-am-schluss-gewinnt-wer-mobilisieren-kann>
- Stockemer, D. (2018). The rising tide: Local structural determinants of the radical right-wing vote in Switzerland. *Comparative European Politics*, 16, 602–619.
- Storz, A., & Bernauer, J. (2018). Supply and demand of populism: A quantitative text analysis of cantonal SVP manifestos. *Swiss Political Science Review*, 24(4), 525–544.
- SVP Bern. (2019). *Statuten SVP Kanton Bern* [Statutes SVP Canton of Bern]. <https://www.svp-bern.ch/wp>

[content/uploads/sites/18/Statuten-2019-01-15.pdf](#)  
SVP Schweiz. (2018). *Die Statuten der SVP Schweiz* [Statutes SVP Switzerland]. [https://www.svp.ch/wp-content/uploads/Statuten\\_2018\\_DE-mit-Unterschriften.pdf](https://www.svp.ch/wp-content/uploads/Statuten_2018_DE-mit-Unterschriften.pdf)

SVP Schweiz. (2019a). *Neues Parteiprogramm der SVP: Frei und sicher für unsere Schweiz* [New SVP party programme: Free and secure for our Switzerland]. <https://www.svp.ch/news/artikel/medienmitteilungen/neues-partieprogramm-der-svpfrei-und-sicher-fuer-unsere-schweiz>

SVP Schweiz. (2019b). *Rechnung 2018/Budget 2019* [Account 2018/Budget 2019]. [https://www.svp.ch/wp-content/uploads/Rechnung\\_2018\\_Budget2019\\_](https://www.svp.ch/wp-content/uploads/Rechnung_2018_Budget2019_)

[PLA.pdf](#)

SVP Zürich. (2019). *Schweizerische Volkspartei des Kantons Zürich; Statuten* [Swiss People's Party Canton of Zurich; Statutes]. <https://www.svp-zuerich.ch/wp-content/uploads/sites/23/statuten-kantonalpartei-zuerich.pdf>

Swiss Federal Statistical Office. (2019). *Nationalratswahlen* [National council elections] <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/de/home/statistiken/politik/wahlen/nationalratswahlen.html>

UDC Genève. (2018). *Statuts de l'Union Démocratique du Centre—Genève* [Statutes SVP Geneva]. <https://www.udc-ge.ch/parti/statuts-de-lunion-democratique-du-centre-geneve>

### About the Author



**Adrian Favero** is a research fellow at the University of Birmingham. He is currently working on an ESRC funded project “The Survival of the Mass Party: Evaluating Activism and Participation Among Populist Radical Right Parties (PRRPs) in Europe” (aka “Populism in Action”; ES/R011540/1). He received his PhD in Politics from the University of Edinburgh. His research explores themes of European integration, party politics, and intra-EU migration.

Article

## No Strong Leaders Needed? AfD Party Organisation Between Collective Leadership, Internal Democracy, and “Movement-Party” Strategy

Anna-Sophie Heinze<sup>1</sup> and Manès Weisskircher<sup>2,3,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Trier Institute for Democracy and Party Research (TIDUP), Faculty of Political Science, University of Trier, Germany; E-Mail: [heinzea@uni-trier.de](mailto:heinzea@uni-trier.de)

<sup>2</sup> Department of Sociology and Human Geography, University of Oslo, Norway; E-Mail: [manes.weisskircher@sosgeo.uio.no](mailto:manes.weisskircher@sosgeo.uio.no)

<sup>3</sup> Center for Research on Extremism (C-REX), University of Oslo, Norway

\* Corresponding author

Submitted: 17 May 2021 | Accepted: 17 August 2021 | Published: 24 November 2021

### Abstract

This article analyses the formal and lived organisation of the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD, Alternative for Germany). We show that the party is exceptional among what is usually understood as the populist radical right (PRR) party family, at least from an organisational perspective: The AfD sharply contradicts the “standard model” of PRR party organisation, which emphasises “charismatic” leadership and the centralisation of power as key features. Instead, studying the AfD’s efforts to adopt some elements of a mass-party organisation and its relatively decentralised decision-making underlines the importance of “movement-party” strategy, collective leadership, and internal democracy—concepts that are usually associated with Green and left-wing parties. Our analysis shows how the party’s organisation is essential for understanding its development more broadly as it reflects and reinforces sharp intra-party conflict. From this perspective, the case of the AfD sheds new light on the relationship between PRR party organisation and electoral success, indicating the importance of strong ties to parts of society over effective internal management as long as demand for anti-immigration parties is high. We conclude that even though AfD quickly built up a relatively inclusive organisational structure, the role of both its leadership and its rank-and-file is still a matter of controversy.

### Keywords

AfD; intra-party democracy; leadership; movement-party; party organisation; populism; radical right

### Issue

This article is part of the issue “Right-Wing Populist Party Organisation Across Europe: The Survival of the Mass-Party?” edited by Daniele Albertazzi (University of Surrey, UK) and Stijn van Kessel (Queen Mary University of London, UK).

© 2021 by the authors; licensee Cogitatio (Lisbon, Portugal). This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

### 1. Introduction

This article analyses the formal and lived organisation of the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD, Alternative for Germany). Since its foundation in 2013, the party has received ample academic attention. Still, despite the party-centrism of political science, the AfD’s internal organisation has largely been neglected (e.g., in the otherwise comprehensive volumes by Häusler, 2016; see also Schroeder & Wessels, 2019). In line with the goals of this thematic issue (Albertazzi & van Kessel, 2021),

our article investigates the extent to which the AfD has adopted a mass party-type organisation, defined by “the drive to recruit a large activist membership,” “rootedness on the ground and the provision of a variety of activities to members,” and “the preservation of collective identities through ideology.” In addition, it will reflect on the extent to which the party decentralised its decision-making procedures.

We show that the AfD is exceptional among what is usually understood as the populist radical right (PRR) party family, at least from an organisational perspective,

as it sharply contradicts the “standard model” of PRR party organisation, which emphasises “charismatic” leadership and the centralisation of power as key features (Betz, 1998; Heinisch & Mazzoleni, 2016). Instead, studying the AfD’s efforts to adopt some elements of a mass-party organisation and its relatively decentralised decision-making underlines the importance of “movement-party” strategy, collective leadership, and internal democracy—concepts that are usually associated with Green and left-wing parties (della Porta et al., 2017; Rüdig & Sajuria, 2020; Sanches et al., 2018). We call for a renewed focus on these dimensions, not only because these concepts have received too little attention in the study of the PRR (with only movement-parties receiving some consideration; see Caiani & Císař, 2019; Pirro & Castelli Gattinara, 2018), but also because they have remained important omissions in recent research on party organisation more generally (e.g., Scarrow et al., 2017; but see also Kitschelt, 2006; Martin et al., 2020).

Our analysis of the AfD shows how its organisation is essential for understanding the party’s development more broadly as it reflects and reinforces sharp intra-party conflict. The absence of a charismatic leader and the lack of strong centralisation indicates that no single faction has managed to dominate the party. Moreover, the absence of strong leadership has provided plenty of opportunities for the public expression of internal disagreement. From this perspective, the case of the AfD sheds new light on the relationship between PRR party organisation and electoral success, indicating the importance of strong ties to parts of society (Dinas et al., 2016) over effective internal management (Art, 2011; Bolleyer & Bytzeck, 2017; Carter, 2005) as long as demand for anti-immigration parties is high.

Methodologically, the AfD constitutes a “least-likely case” (e.g., Bennett & Elman, 2006, p. 462) of an inclusive party organisation, i.e., it focuses on mass recruitment and relies on decentralisation of power despite its party family membership. For this study, we draw on numerous sources: AfD statutes and other official documents and publications, party communication (e.g., websites of federal and state branches, social media channels, AfD media productions), data on AfD members and their regional distribution, as well as media articles.

The next section provides an overview of the history of the AfD, highlighting its stark internal conflicts and its significant electoral success. After that, we analyse the AfD’s formal and informal organisation, underlining the party’s adoption of some elements of a mass-party organisation, not only due to significant membership but also its outreach to far-right social movement groups, subcultural milieus, and the online sphere. We then discuss to what extent power is decentralised within the AfD and how its instruments of internal democracy operate in practice. In the conclusion, we stress the need for further research on the practices and perceptions of intra-party democracy within PRR parties and their relationship towards social movements.

## 2. A Brief History of the AfD: Internal Conflict and Electoral Success

For a long time, Germany was known for lacking an established party right of the centre-right. Parties such as Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands (NPD, National Democratic Party), Die Republikaner (REP, The Republicans), and Deutsche Volksunion (DVU, German People’s Union) failed to break through (Backes & Mudde, 2000; Decker, 2000). Therefore, the AfD counts among the youngest electorally successful PRR parties in Europe. So far, its history has been shaped by considerable electoral support despite stark internal conflict (for an overview see Arzheimer, 2019).

Party foundation in early 2013 was primarily initiated by neoliberal economists, former low-profile members of Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands (CDU, Christian Democratic Union of Germany) and Freie Demokratische Partei (FDP, Free Democratic Party), and Christian-conservative activists. It was a response to the German government’s Eurozone policies, which chancellor Angela Merkel described as being “without alternative,” and reflected the long-term dissatisfaction with the CDU’s “shift to the left” among parts of Germany’s organised (centre-)right, dating back to the 1990s (Biebricher, 2018). In September 2013, only a few months after its foundation, the AfD narrowly failed to pass the five percent threshold in the federal election (4.7 percent) and the state election in Hesse (4.1 percent). After this reasonably strong showing, the party entered the European Parliament in 2014, gaining 7.1 percent. Since then, the AfD not only managed to enter all state legislatures but also became Germany’s third-strongest party when it eventually entered the Bundestag in 2017 (12.6 percent; see Heinze, 2020b). In 2021, the AfD re-entered parliament with 10.3 percent, losing some of its support (–2.3 percent) and its position as strongest opposition party. Importantly, the party’s stronghold has been eastern Germany, the former territory of the German Democratic Republic, where it is about twice as strong as in the west, regularly attracting over 20 percent of the vote (Weisskircher, 2020b). In the 2017 federal election, the AfD was the most popular party in the eastern state of Saxony. Four years later, it attracted the highest number of votes in both Saxony and Thuringia.

So far, deep internal divides have not hampered the party’s success at the ballots. In its early days, the AfD was not yet described as populist or even radical right, but essentially constituted a neoliberal party (Arzheimer, 2015; Berbuir et al., 2015). However, PRR forces quickly made a name for themselves, especially in AfD’s eastern state branches. Their growing strength was indicated by the rise of groups such as the Patriotic Platform (Patriotic Platform) in 2014 and the publication of documents such as the 2015 *Erfurter Resolution*, which portrayed the party as a “resistance movement against the further erosion of Germany’s sovereignty and identity” (Höcke & Poggenburg, 2015, p. 1). The party conference

in Essen in July 2015, even before the intensification of the “refugee crisis” in Europe, finally marked the AfD’s turn to the PRR: AfD Saxon leader Frauke Petry was elected co-spokesperson, replacing co-founder Bernd Lucke, who left the party together with about 2,000 to 3,000 rather moderate members (about 10 to 15 percent of the membership at that time according to Steffen, 2015; then winner Petry speaks even of those “ultimately over twenty percent” that left; see Petry, 2021, p. 151).

The party’s turn to the PRR on the eve of the “refugee crisis” brought further electoral success, yet no internal harmony. Since 2015, conflicts have mainly revolved around strategy and the distribution of posts. Notably, Petry soon faced opposition against her plans to prepare the party for a coalition with the CDU and to keep a distance from the far-right *Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes* (PEGIDA, *Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the Occident*) protestors (Weisskircher & Berntzen, 2019, p. 121). As a result, she did not become the party’s top candidate in the 2017 federal election. Only a day after the national vote, i.e., the AfD’s biggest success, Petry resigned as co-spokesperson and left the party. However, her departure did not prevent further conflict. While many of those western neoliberals who had remained inside the party—including co-spokesperson Jörg Meuthen—were quick to adopt stark anti-immigrant rhetoric, they still clashed with members in the east. In contrast to Meuthen and others, many easterners felt little need for a “bourgeois” party image and had strong personal and organisational ties to far-right groups. This perspective was exemplified by *Der Flügel* (The Wing), an informal party group that “dissolved” in 2020, having faced scrutiny from the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution.

Internal struggles subsequently peaked: Meuthen successfully pushed for the revocation of key *The Wing* organiser Andreas Kalbitz’s party membership on the grounds that he had failed to provide information on his extreme right activist past when joining the AfD. The executive committee’s decision on Kalbitz’s removal was remarkably close: seven to five, with one abstention. All supporters of Kalbitz’s removal were politically based in western Germany or Berlin. However, this outcome was everything but a decisive victory for Meuthen, who continued to face sharp criticism from his opponents.

To some extent, the party’s internal disputes still relate to policy conflicts. The party is divided over socio-economic policies. While western German AfD politicians, in line with many of the party’s founders, typically promote neoliberal policies, many easterners propose an expansion of the welfare state, at least for German citizens. The party’s pension policy has long been a key bone of contention—with diverging proposals such as the expansion of private pension schemes or higher state pensions for German citizens, which have been met with harsh criticism from their respective opponents. Even after the AfD adopted its first comprehen-

sive party manifesto in 2016, internal disagreement over many key issues remained. Most recently, the party was divided over how to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic and whether to cooperate with anti-lockdown protestors (Heinze & Weisskircher, in press).

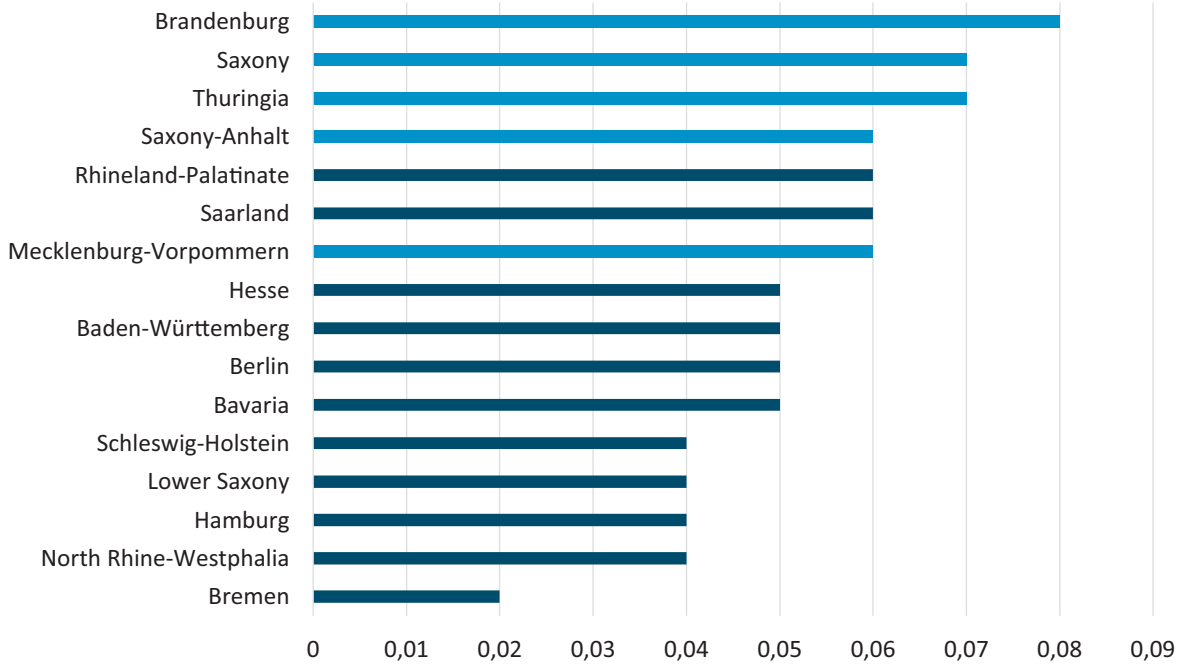
In sum, Alexander Gauland’s well-known, if slightly unusual, comparison of the AfD to a *gäriger Haufen* (“fermenting heap”) is a pointed description of the heterogeneity, or rather constant tensions, inside the party. The formal and informal organisation of the AfD reflects, not necessarily intentionally, the inclusion of a diversity of German far-right actors, which also contributes to internal disputes.

### 3. The AfD’s Adoption of Elements of a Mass Party-Type Organisation

#### 3.1. A Considerable Degree of Formal and Informal Organisation

While the AfD is clearly not a textbook example of a mass party, it has managed to adopt some elements of such an organisational model, i.e., the successful recruitment of a significant membership and a degree of rootedness in parts of society—especially so in eastern Germany. Unlike previous far-right parties, the AfD has quickly managed to build an organisation relying on a relatively large membership in all 16 federal states (Niedermayer, 2020, p. 19). While it already had 17,687 members in its founding year, by 2019 it had almost twice as many (34,751; Niedermayer, 2020, p. 6). The party has about half as many members as the FDP (65,479) or *Die Linke* (The Left; 60,862), which have existed for much longer. In 2020, the number dropped for the first time—to about 32,000 members. AfD says that it terminated some memberships due to non-payment of fees. Moreover, internal disputes may also partially explain the decline in numbers (“*Mitgliederschwund bei der AfD*,” 2021). Still, the AfD has been able to build a significant membership base, especially in the eastern states (see Figure 1), where citizens’ ties to mainstream parties have been weak since German unification. Importantly, though, the population size of eastern Germany is substantially smaller than in the west. This is why, in absolute terms, the AfD recruits most of its members in the most populous states (see Figure 2), especially in North Rhine-Westphalia (5,552), Bavaria (5,094), and Baden-Württemberg (4,836). In comparison, the absolute membership of AfD Thuringia—an electorally successful eastern branch particularly prominent for its radicalism and for leader Björn Höcke—is much smaller (1,225). This fundamental asymmetry (broader appeal in the east but more absolute party members in the west) is crucial to understanding the internal power struggle within the party and its collective leadership (see below).

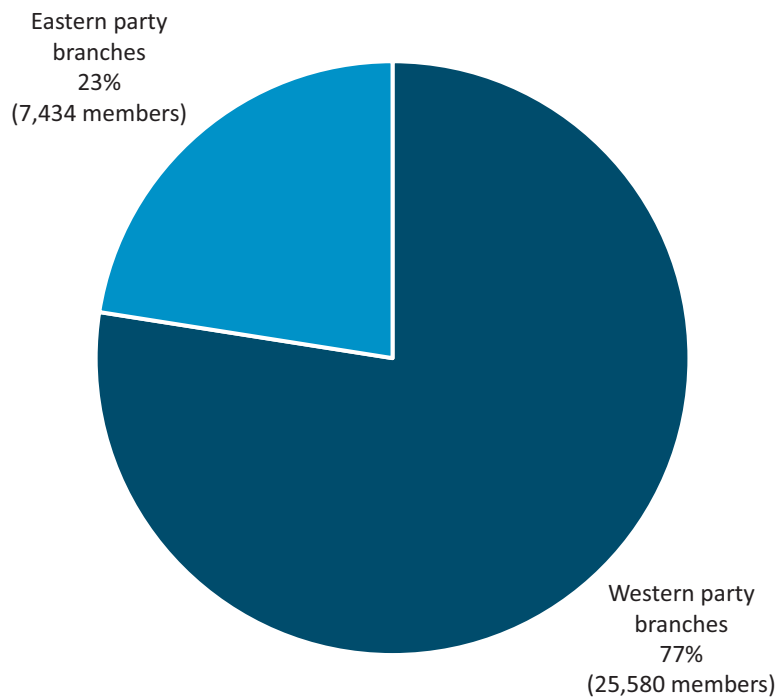
The AfD’s relatively high degree of organisation is also reflected in its complex set of party organs at the national, regional, and local levels. The most



**Figure 1.** AfD recruitment capacity by federal states 2019. Notes: Recruitment capacity equals party members as a share of those eligible to join; light blue columns are eastern German states. Source: Based on data from Niedermayer (2020, pp. 19, 69).

important national party organs are the party conference (*Bundesparteitag*), the convention (*Konvent*), and the executive committee (*Bundesvorstand*). Formally, the highest organ is the party conference: It takes place at least once a year and is now usually made up of 600 delegates sent by the state branches and the members of the executive committee (until 2016, however,

member and not delegate conferences were the typical format; see Section 4.2). The party conference decides on fundamental organisational and programmatic issues (e.g., manifesto and statutes). The convention can be interpreted as a “small” party conference: It consists of 50 delegates of the state branches and five executive committee members. It decides primarily on the



**Figure 2.** AfD membership by region. Note: Berlin (1,571 members) and members abroad (166) excluded. Source: Based on data from Niedermayer (2020, p. 19).

use of state party funds, the budget, and financial planning, but also on the foundation of intra-party groups and the rules of procedure for party bodies and member decisions. The executive committee's formal tasks include implementing the decisions of the party conference and the convention. In practice, it plays an important role in matters related to policy, strategy, and personnel. It consists of two or three formally equally powerful spokespersons (*Bundessprecher*), three deputy spokespersons, the treasurer and his deputy, the secretary, and six other members. Its members are elected for two-year tenures by the party conference. Since 2017, the influence of the spokespersons—the party leadership—has not only been matched but often been overshadowed by the (dual) leadership of the Bundestag group (see Section 4.1).

Beyond its official organisation, the AfD has always consisted of several formal and informal groups, organising the interests of its diverse members and reflecting ideological divisions within the party. The first important example was Christen in der AfD (Christians in the AfD), founded in 2013. Its key aims were opposing abortion and equal marriage, but the group exerted only limited influence on the federal party (Jentsch, 2016). An early and key interest group of far-right forces inside the party was the Patriotic Platform, established in 2014. It was dissolved four years later when facing threat of observation from the Office for the Protection of the Constitution. The Wing suffered a similar fate: The informal group existed from 2015 to 2020, when the party executive demanded its “dissolution” to avoid scrutiny from the intelligence services. Despite these steps, the respective informal networks have continued to exist. In opposition to the growing strength of the wing, rather “moderate” groups were also established, such as the Alternative Mitte (Alternative Centre). By now, however, it has become dysfunctional due to its relatively small circle of remaining supporters.

### 3.2. Recruitment and Mobilisation: A Movement-Party Strategy

The AfD's significant membership points to its quite effective recruitment and mobilisation efforts for which it uses “classical” approaches such as local offices and events, information booths, regular mail, and online ads. Most interestingly, parts of the party have actively tried to expand its activist base by reaching out to conservative and far-right social movement players in an attempt to connect to organised protests from the right. Strong ties with, for example, the Civil Coalition of Beatrix von Storch, which advocates neoliberal economic and conservative family policies, have been crucial from the outset. However, it is the far-right wing of the AfD which has controversially pursued a more general strategic aim of cooperation with street protestors. In January 2017, AfD Thuringia chairman Höcke propagated “the path of a fundamental-oppositional movement-party [on the

streets] and a fundamental-oppositional movement-faction [in parliament]”:

And in order not to betray its historical mission, AfD has to remain a movement party; that is, it has to be present on the street again and again, and it has to be in close contact with friendly citizen movements. (Höcke, 2017)

In a similar vein, Gauland refers to the AfD as a “movement-party, which should cultivate contacts to certain protest groups” (as quoted in “Gauland will AfD,” 2020).

However, the strategic establishment of links to far-right groups, first and foremost PEGIDA, have remained highly disputed within the party (Weisskircher & Berntzen, 2019). In general, eastern German AfD branches were much more open to cooperation with PEGIDA than western ones—corresponding to the geographical distribution of far-right activism, which is more frequent in the east (Backes & Kailitz, 2020). In 2016, several local politicians evaded the decision of the party's federal executive committee to ban cooperation with the Dresden-based protestors: They organised formally independent protest events that were held on the same day and at the same location as PEGIDA events. In March 2018, the party convention eventually reversed the decision, in line with the reality on the ground: With the decline of the “moderates” inside the party, cooperation with PEGIDA has become increasingly acceptable.

There have been many other examples of leading AfD figures strategically focusing on street politics. In 2015, Hans-Christoph Berndt founded Zukunft Heimat (Future Homeland) in Brandenburg. Later, Berndt managed to become a key AfD politician in the region. Prominent guest speakers at his protest events included Gauland and former member Kalbitz. Beyond anti-immigration protests, Stefan Möller, leading politician in Thuringia, even refers to the AfD as the “legislative arm of the anti-wind-energy movement” (Radau, 2019). Reflecting the party's stark opposition to policies on global warming (Otteni & Weisskircher, 2021), some AfD politicians have tried to cooperate with protest groups that mobilise against the construction of wind turbines. Many AfD politicians have also been supportive of protests against the Covid-19 pandemic policies, organising their own demonstrations during “lockdowns” or cooperating with *Querdenken* (lateral thinking) protestors, for example, by serving as guest speakers—to the strong dismay of AfD politicians such as Meuthen (Heinze & Weisskircher, in press). In addition, the party's youth organisation Junge Alternative (JA) has strong links with the far-right subcultural milieu, including student fraternities (Herkenhoff, 2016). In 2018, the German Office for the Protection of the Constitution and some of its regional branches started observing the JA because of its ties to the Identitarian Movement. In November 2018, the Lower-Saxon branch of the JA, the first one



to be observed by the German intelligence service, was even dissolved by the federal JA. Moreover, individuals such as Hans-Thomas Tillschneider, a key figure of the Patriotic Platform, have also had close ties to the far-right Identitarians.

Given its relations to the far-right scene, it is unsurprising that the AfD attracted some undesired formal members, i.e., right-wing extremists who harmed the party's public image. As a response to both public pressure and internal pressure by "moderates," the party has constantly added ever-more groups to its "list of incompatible organisations" (*Unvereinbarkeitsliste*). By December 2020, this list consisted of twelve pages and included not only the category of "right-wing extremism," but also that of "foreign extremism," "left-wing extremism," "Islamism/Islamist terrorism," and "scientology" (it is quite unlikely that members of the latter four groups have actually applied to AfD). Among the extreme right groups listed are the Identitarian Movement, the NPD, some Bavarian PEGIDA spinoffs, skinhead groups, and white supremacists. The recruitment of new AfD members and activists is therefore strongly constrained by the organisational past of some of its sympathisers—and has even caused the fall of established AfD politicians, such as Kalbitz. Sometimes, however, "creative" solutions secure cooperation, especially through the hiring of former members of "incompatible organisations" as employees of legislative deputies—without them becoming formal members.

### 3.3. The Role of the Internet for Mobilisation

To recruit popular support, the online sphere has always been important to the AfD. As far back as 2014 and 2015, the party's Facebook activity substantially overshadowed those of established political parties, peaking in autumn 2015, at the height of the "refugee crisis" (Schelter et al., 2016). The party was quick to adopt various social media platforms, and its accounts have often attracted more followers than the profiles of other Bundestag parties (Medina Serrano et al., 2019). Ahead of the federal election 2017, AfD candidates significantly increased their social media activity, posting mainly negative content with a particular focus on immigration (Melcher, 2019). Importantly, the AfD also takes advantage of YouTube by promoting Bundestag speeches of its MPs (e.g., via its own channel, AfD TV).

Still, despite the party's focus on the online sphere, none of its politicians is as prominent as PRR leaders such as Matteo Salvini or Heinz-Christian Strache, not to mention Donald Trump. AfD's most prominent face, long-term chairperson Gauland, born in 1941, has been known for his lack of interest in and refusal to adopt social media. Nevertheless, many AfD politicians make active use of their personal social media profiles. This includes Höcke, who, like many of his fellows, increasingly uses Telegram, criticising "censorship" on his popular Facebook account.

Importantly, the AfD also cooperates with "alternative media" platforms, which have become an increasingly relevant instrument of far-right mobilisation (Rone, 2021). Such platforms have flourished in the German-speaking online sphere, with Politically Incorrect News as the main example (Weisskircher, 2020a). Some AfD politicians contribute to this and other platforms as authors. Moreover, the AfD has placed advertisements on such sites. In May 2019, its Bundestag group even invited individuals in charge of these platforms to a "first conference on free media."

### 3.4. Reasons for the Adoption of Elements of a Mass Party-Type Organisation

The AfD has managed to build a relatively dense net of branches across Germany while also reaching out beyond its formal party organisation in an attempt to become the key actor of the self-proclaimed *Mosaikrechte* (mosaic right), i.e., the diverse set of far-right players in Germany. Apart from recruitment and rootedness, however, the AfD is unable to fulfil other tasks usually associated with the mass-party model, including the organisation of several activities for members, shaping their identities, and providing services to them "from the cradle to the grave." Its efforts to build membership and develop strong ties to other actors can be attributed to factors specific to the German political system on the one hand and to the role of the AfD on the other.

First, the AfD's complex set of party organs corresponds to the requirements of German law. According to the Basic Law (Article 21(1)), the parties' internal organisation must comply with democratic principles. The party law specifies these requirements, such as that the supreme decision-making body for central policy and personnel decisions is the general meeting of members or representatives (party conference) and that the executive committee must consist of at least three members. The electoral law requires a democratic nomination of candidates (party lists). Moreover, with its frequent state and municipal elections, German federalism provides strong incentives for the AfD to build structures across the country: Successful electoral showings provide offices and public funding. In addition, if a party does not participate in either a federal or state election for six years, it loses its legal status as a party.

Second, factors specific to the AfD's role in the political system explain why many of its politicians have reached out beyond the formal party organisation. While the AfD was soon excluded by established parties (Heinze, 2020a) and left-wing and liberal civil society actors (Schroeder et al., in press), parts of the party have tried to expand their base by pursuing a 'movement-party' approach. There are several reasons for such a strategy. First, strong connections to civil society contribute to the electoral stability of political parties (Martin et al., 2020). Second, attempts to

reach out beyond the electoral arena correspond to the metapolitics-strategies of ‘new right’ ideology, which emphasises the importance of being embedded into broader society to be able to achieve lasting political change. This ideology arose from French far-right intellectuals’ adoption of the Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci, which was subsequently employed by their German counterparts who also wanted to promote efforts to achieve political influence beyond electoral politics and state institutions (Ravndal, 2021). Third, and not to be underestimated, cooperation with activists is also important for individual AfD politicians trying to increase their personal standing inside the party. In addition, the AfD’s focus on online activism and its embrace of “alternative media” can also be attributed to the difficult relationship between PRR parties and the mainstream media (de Jonge, 2021).

#### 4. Decision-Making and Internal Democracy Within the AfD

##### 4.1. Decentralisation of Power

Unlike other PRR parties, so far the AfD has relied on collective leadership. Despite attempts at centralisation, power within the party has never been concentrated in one (charismatic) leader alone but has been divided among different top politicians. These play a crucial role in the party’s policy and strategic decisions. Again, the practice of collective leadership reflects great internal differences.

Most importantly, following the AfD’s entry into the Bundestag in 2017, the party opted for a dual leadership of its parliamentary group. From 2017 to 2021, its leaders were Alexander Gauland and Alice Weidel, the two AfD top candidates for the election. After the 2021 election, the top candidates—Tino Chrupalla and Weidel—again became leaders of the Bundestag group. There, they have an important leadership and steering function, organise internal majorities, ensure the group’s cohesion, prepare meetings (including the selection of speak-

ers for Bundestag debates), and represent their group in public (including giving key speeches in the Bundestag). In practice, the leaders of the Bundestag group are the most visible AfD politicians in charge of everyday affairs. However, Gauland and Weidel sometimes struggled to control their own parliamentary group, as underlined by strong internal criticism of the group’s organisation. Correspondingly, AfD MPs are also those that most frequently deviate from the party line in their voting behaviour (Kuchlmayr & Pauly, 2019).

The second power centre is the executive committee, i.e., the leadership of the national party. As stipulated in the statute, it has always been led by two or three spokespersons. A January 2015 statute change to reduce the number of spokespersons to one from December 2015 onwards, driven by Lucke, did not survive his downfall half a year before the scheduled date. Also, until 2021, putting aside the exceptional circumstances of Gauland’s reign as spokesperson (2017–2019), AfD spokespersons have been different from its Bundestag leadership. So far, speaker positions have changed hands several times, underlining the AfD’s lack of stable leadership (see Table 1). None of the initial spokespersons is still a member of the party. Current spokespersons are Tino Chrupalla and the outgoing Jörg Meuthen. Meuthen, the longest-lasting chairperson, is a Member of the European Parliament and, therefore, often not at the forefront of the German political scene. Chrupalla was only narrowly elected at the 2019 party conference. Unlike the neoliberal Meuthen, based in the west, the Saxon Chrupalla was supported by The Wing and by Gauland. The federal executive committee is quite heterogeneous: Its decision to remove Kalbitz was narrow and involved hostile debates with Meuthen and Chrupalla on opposite sides.

Subnationally, party and parliamentary leadership focus primarily on the respective federal state, but some actors have a significant informal impact beyond that. For example, Thuringian spokesman and parliamentary co-leader Höcke has influenced the policy and strategic direction of the entire AfD. Together with André

**Table 1.** Overview of the previous federal spokespersons of the AfD.

Years in office	Name	Gender	Year and region of birth	Occupation	Former political affiliation
2013–2015	Bernd Lucke	Male	1962, West	Professor of economics	CDU
2013–2015	Konrad Adam	Male	1942, West	Journalist	CDU
2013–2017	Frauke Petry	Female	1975, East	Entrepreneur	None
Since 2015	Jörg Meuthen	Male	1961, West	Professor of economics	Short-time member of CDU youth
2017–2019	Alexander Gauland	Male	1941, East	Top-level bureaucrat and newspaper editor	CDU
Since 2019	Tino Chrupalla	Male	1975, East	House painter and entrepreneur	Short-time member of CDU youth

Poggenburg, then chairman in Saxony-Anhalt, he initiated the *Erfurter Resolution* in 2015, which was supported by 18 other initial signers (Höcke & Poggenburg, 2015). Höcke's influence is based on his strong networking of the mainly eastern far-right inside the party, his focus on party-movement interactions, large media attention for provocative and extremist public statements, and significant electoral success in Thuringia.

The offices of parliamentary and party spokesperson at the state level are usually separated—only in a few states is decision-making more concentrated. Depending on the statutes of the respective AfD state branches, regulations for state executive committees vary. Some statutes call for exactly one chairperson (or “spokesperson”), others for “at least one,” “one or two,” or “up to three.” In practice, most AfD state associations are led by one person. Dual leadership in state legislatures is also less common.

#### 4.2. Internal Democracy

The AfD has always tried to present itself as a party cherishing internal democracy, reflecting the party's anti-elitist ideology of representing the interests of “the people” against those of the “corrupt elites” (Mudde, 2007), in line with other parties typically labelled as “populist” (Caramani, 2017; Vittori, 2020). In its 2013 statute, for example, the AfD described itself as the only real “alternative” to the non-transparent, remote and undemocratic “old parties” (Alternative für Deutschland, 2013, p. 1). Some observers compare party members' desire for widespread participation to the anti-elitist origins of the German Die Grünen (The Greens; Bender, 2017). In fact, the AfD introduced various instruments of intra-party participation early on, such as member party conferences and internal referenda. However, the practice of intra-party democracy has always remained controversial, as we illustrate in the following.

Importantly, party conferences, as the AfD's formally highest organ, were initially held as member party conferences (*Mitgliederparteitage*). The first statute

required them and only allowed for optional delegate party conferences (*Delegiertenparteitage*) after acquiring 10,000 members. Consequently, all members were initially allowed to participate in, discuss, and vote on central party issues. Over time, the AfD moved away from this practice and increasingly held delegate party conferences (see Table 2). Organisational and strategic reasons were decisive. For instance, in 2014, it took hours until members passed the conference's agenda alone. The large meetings were also costly, putting a strain on the party's budget (Petry, 2021, pp. 130, 132). After Petry toppled Lucke at the party conference in Essen (with about 3,000 members present), the practice of member party conferences was finally changed. The November 2015 party statute enshrined delegate party conferences as the default model. After that, only one more member party conference was held at the national level. In general, this development cannot only be seen as a concentration of power but also as a typical professionalisation process (Bolleyer & Bytzek, 2017; Tronconi, 2018) in the context of a surging membership. Still, delegate conferences sometimes vote against the will of the party leadership, even on crucial matters: In April 2021, the party conference decided to include the call for an end of Germany's EU membership (Dexit) in its electoral manifesto.

Further evidence points to the relative inclusiveness of AfD's party organisation: Of all parties entering the Bundestag in 2017, it was the AfD that involved the highest share of members in the selection of candidates for the election. The AfD also had the strongest internal competition: Almost every place was contested. While still only 42 percent of its members were very satisfied with the opportunities for participation, this was more than for any other parties and about twice as high as for CDU and SPD (all data from Höhne, 2021).

Moreover, the party statute provides for the opportunity of binding member decisions (*Mitgliederentscheide*) and non-binding member surveys (*Mitgliederbefragungen*). Member decisions may concern policy and organisational questions that are not the responsibility of the

**Table 2.** Overview of the federal party conferences.

No.	Date	Location	Central topics	Participants
1	April 2013	Berlin	Foundation, party statute, manifesto (Bundestag election)	Members
2	March 2014	Erfurt	Manifesto (EP election)	Members
3	Jan.–February 2015	Bremen	New statute	Members
4	July 2015	Essen	Election of executive committee	Members
5	November 2015	Hannover	Change of statute	Delegates
6	April–May 2016	Stuttgart	Party manifesto	Members
7	April 2017	Cologne	Manifesto (Bundestag election)	Delegates
8	December 2017	Hannover	Election of executive committee	Delegates
9	June–July 2018	Augsburg	Vote on political foundation	Delegates
10	Nov.–December 2019	Braunschweig	Election of executive committee	Delegates
11	November 2020	Kalkar	Pension concept	Delegates
12	April 2021	Dresden	Manifesto (Bundestag election)	Delegates

federal party conference. Depending on the issue, most decisions require a simple majority for approval, with the threshold being at least one-fifth of all members in favour. Voting is by postal vote or the ballot box. In contrast, member surveys can also cover AfD's manifesto, statutes, and top candidates. Voting takes place online. According to the party statute, members must be involved in the development of manifestos through member surveys. However, their results are merely recommendations to the federal programme commission (*Bundesprogrammkommission*). Both member decisions and member surveys can be requested by the federal executive committee, the federal conference, the federal convention, three state executive committees, 25 district executive committees, or three percent of all AfD members.

Despite all these possibilities for top-down initiation and the low threshold for bottom-up initiation, neither instrument is part of the party's daily routine. In January 2020, the first and only member decision was initiated from the bottom-up. It demanded that the next party conference be held as a member party conference, i.e., in theory, with all (> 30,000) members. The federal executive committee opposed this initiative for organisational and financial reasons. In the end, despite a clear majority for the proposal, the 20 percent quorum was not reached. Still, it revealed the ongoing intra-party conflict over the representativeness of delegate party conferences. The initiator of the member decision, Hansjörg Müller (MP in the Bundestag and deputy chairman of AfD Bavaria), notably criticised a "tendency towards oligarchisation," stating that:

To be fully honest: also we distanced ourselves already too much from grassroots democratic principles. We could have spared ourselves the troubles of building a party and instead have entered an *Altpartei* [old party] right away. (Müller, 2019)

The non-binding member survey has been used more often, e.g., for the establishment of the first party manifesto in 2016, as well as the manifestos for the European Parliament elections in 2014 and 2019, and the 2017 Bundestag election. Some results have been implemented, others not at all, whilst yet others have been intensively discussed and altered at party conferences. Some questions have been framed in a highly biased way, already pointing to the desired responses (e.g., on state rent control, described as an instance of "planned economy").

An important recent membership survey shows how intra-party democracy and leadership struggles may interact: Ahead of the 2021 federal elections, 87 percent opted for choosing the top candidates through another membership survey and not at a party conference (about a quarter of all members participated). This result was not binding. Yet, at the following party conference, a narrow majority of delegates then also formally decided

on such a membership vote, referring to the need to respect the outcome of the member survey. Beyond the will of the party's rank-and-file, however, it was co-chairman Meuthen who campaigned for members to decide about the top candidates—in a vain attempt to weaken the chances of his archenemy Weidel becoming one of these frontrunners.

## 5. Conclusion

Our article has comprehensively analysed AfD's party organisation, especially its adoption of elements of a mass party and its decentralised decision-making. The AfD is not a mass party, but, especially in eastern Germany, it has managed to recruit a significant membership and has achieved a degree of rootedness in parts of society. However, the party is not in a position to provide activities and services for its members or to shape their identities on an everyday basis. Importantly, the party clearly deviates from the "classic" model of PRR party organisation, i.e., the combination of "charismatic" leadership and centralisation of power. Instead, so far it has shared power within collective leadership structures, especially at the federal level. Moreover, the party provides for instruments of internal democracy, i.e., binding and non-binding referenda. Party conferences have often included not only delegates but all members—especially at the subnational level. When deciding on electoral lists, party members have been strongly involved. Finally, parts of the party have also actively reached out to mainly far-right social movements, propagating a "party-movement" strategy and creating strong ties to non-party actors. To some extent, these dimensions of the AfD's formal and informal organisation are reminiscent of Green and left-wing parties and less of PRR parties.

However, as with other parties, the AfD's lived organisation departs from what is written in its statutes with actual decision-making being more concentrated than formal rules would suggest. Most obviously, direct-democratic instruments have not been part of the party's daily routine. In practice, the Bundestag co-leadership and the federal executive committee, which includes representatives of the party's strong internal factions, are driving forces inside the party. Also, the controversy surrounding the organisation of delegate party conferences indicates that many top party officials prefer not to hold inclusive member party conferences. Still, the party rank-and-file has regularly influenced the party's direction, sometimes against the will of (parts of) the party leadership.

Consequently, collective leadership and decentralisation also reflect the substantial internal conflict within the AfD. At the same time, these organisational features have failed to bring about appeasement. Instead, the frequently visible internal turmoil serves as the best evidence for the lack of effective leadership at the top of the AfD. To be sure, this has not prevented the party from

establishing itself in the Bundestag, given the substantial demand-side changes in German politics over the course of the “refugee crisis” (Mader & Schoen, 2018). Effective internal management is not key in understanding the AfD’s electoral success. Whether strong leadership and centralisation would have increased the party’s appeal even more must remain an exercise in counterfactual history. So far, calls for a centralisation of power, such as relying only on one chairperson, have not gained traction yet, but are not off the table either—several leading and quite different AfD politicians such as Lucke, Petry, or Höcke have at times supported such a step. The future will show to what extent the “iron law of oligarchy” (Michels, 1915/1962) also applies to the AfD.

Our analysis has shown that PRR parties are able to build strong organisations with opportunities for intra-party participation. Future research should examine the extent to which PRR claims that they have a beneficial impact on the quality of democracy stand up to scrutiny, how decision-making is perceived by members and non-members, and whether support for intra-party democracy is instrumental or principled. Such a perspective may increase our knowledge about the relationship between the PRR and democratic participation. Moreover, comparative research needs to investigate how and to what extent PRR parties strategically pursue cooperation with non-party actors and whether this helps them become embedded into society beyond the parliamentary arena. This could also help us understand why the PRR is here to stay—both from an ideological and an organisational perspective.

### Acknowledgments

We thank Uwe Backes, three anonymous reviewers, and the academic editors, Daniele Albertazzi and Stijn van Kessel, for their valuable feedback.

### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

### References

- Albertazzi, D., & van Kessel, S. (2021). Right-wing populist party organisation across Europe: The survival of the mass party? Introduction to the thematic issue. *Politics and Governance*, 9(4), 224–227.
- Alternative für Deutschland. (2013, April 14). *Bundessatzung der Alternative für Deutschland* [Federal Statute of the Alternative for Germany]. [https://www.politicalpartydb.org/wp-content/uploads/Statutes/Germany/Germany\\_AfD\\_2013.pdf](https://www.politicalpartydb.org/wp-content/uploads/Statutes/Germany/Germany_AfD_2013.pdf)
- Art, D. (2011). *Inside the radical right: The development of anti-immigrant parties in Western Europe*. Cambridge University Press.
- Arzheimer, K. (2015). The AfD: Finally a successful right-wing populist Eurosceptic party for Germany? *West European Politics*, 38(3), 535–556.
- Arzheimer, K. (2019). “Don’t mention the war!” How populist right-wing radicalism became (almost) normal in Germany. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 57(S1), 90–102.
- Backes, U., & Kailitz, S. (Eds.). (2020). *Sachsen—eine Hochburg des Rechtsextremismus?* [Saxony—a stronghold of right-wing extremism?]. Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Backes, U., & Mudde, C. (2000). Germany. Extremism without successful parties. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 53(3), 457–468.
- Bender, J. (2017). *Was will die AfD? Eine Partei verändert Deutschland* [What does the AfD want? A party changes Germany]. Pantheon.
- Bennett, A., & Elman, C. (2006). Qualitative research: Recent developments in case study methods. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 9, 455–476.
- Berbuir, N., Lewandowsky, M., & Siri, J. (2015). The AfD and its sympathisers: Finally a right-wing populist movement in Germany? *German Politics*, 24(2), 154–178.
- Betz, H. (1998). Introduction. In H. Betz & S. Immerfall (Eds.), *The new politics of the right: Neo populist parties and movements in established democracies* (pp. 1–10). St. Martin’s Press.
- Biebricher, T. (2018). *Geistig-moralische Wende. Die Erschöpfung des deutschen Konservatismus* [Spiritual-moral turn. The exhaustion of German conservatism]. Matthes & Seitz Berlin.
- Bolleyer, N., & Bytsek, E. (2017). New party performance after breakthrough: Party origin, building and leadership. *Party Politics*, 23(6), 772–782.
- Caiani, M., & Císař, O. (Eds.). (2019). *Radical right movement parties in Europe*. Routledge.
- Caramani, D. (2017). Will vs. reason: The populist and technocratic forms of political representation and their critique to party government. *American Political Science Review*, 111(1), 54–67.
- Carter, E. (2005). *The extreme right in Western Europe: Success or failure?* Manchester University Press.
- de Jonge, L. (2021). *The success and failure of right-wing populist parties in the Benelux countries*. Routledge.
- Decker, F. (2000). Über das Scheitern des neuen Rechtspopulismus in Deutschland: Republikaner, Statt-Partei und der Bund Freier Bürger [On the failure of the new right-wing populism in Germany: Republicans, Statt Party and the Free Citizens League]. *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft*, 29(2), 237–256.
- della Porta, D., Fernández, J., Kouki, H., & Mosca, L. (2017). *Movement parties against austerity*. Polity Press.
- Dinas, E., Georgiadou, V., Konstantinidis, I., & Rori, L. (2016). From dusk to dawn: Local party organisation and party success of right-wing extremism. *Party Politics*, 22(1), 80–92.
- Gauland will AfD als „Bewegungspartei“ erhalten

- [Gauland wants to maintain AfD as a „movement-party“]. (2020, December 20). *Der Tagesspiegel*. <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/streit-mit-partechef-meuthen-gauland-will-afd-als-bewegungspartei-erhalten/26736652.html>
- Häusler, A. (Ed.). (2016). *Die Alternative für Deutschland: Programmatik, Entwicklung und politische Verortung* [The Alternative for Germany: Programme, development, and political direction]. Springer.
- Heinisch, R., & Mazzoleni, O. (2016). Comparing populist organisations. In R. Heinisch & O. Mazzoleni (Eds.), *Understanding populist party organisation. The radical right in Western Europe* (pp. 221–246). Palgrave.
- Heinze, A. S. (2020a). *Strategien gegen Rechtspopulismus? Der Umgang mit der AfD in Landesparlamenten* [Strategies against right-wing populism? Dealing with the AfD in state parliaments]. Nomos.
- Heinze, A. S. (2020b). Zum schwierigen Umgang mit der AfD in den Parlamenten: Arbeitsweise, Reaktionen, Effekte [Dealing with AfD in parliament: Legislative behaviour, responses, effects]. *Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft*, 31(1), 133–150.
- Heinze, A. S., & Weisskircher, M. (in press). How political parties respond to pariah street protest: The case of anti-corona mobilization in Germany. *German Politics*.
- Herkenhoff, A. (2016). Rechter Nachwuchs für die AfD—Die Junge Alternative (JA) [Right-wing offspring for the AfD—The Young Alternative]. In A. Häusler (Ed.), *Die Alternative für Deutschland: Programmatik, Entwicklung und politische Verortung* [The Alternative for Germany: Programme, development and political direction] (pp. 201–217). Springer.
- Höcke, B. (2017, January 19). „Gemütszustand eines total besiegten Volkes.“ Höcke-Rede im Wortlaut [“Emotional state of a totally defeated people.“ Speech transcript]. *Der Tagesspiegel*. <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/hoecke-rede-im-wortlaut-gemuetszustand-eines-total-besiegten-volkes/19273518-all.html>
- Höcke, B., & Poggenburg, A. (2015). *Erfurter Resolution*. Der Flügel. <https://gei-ge.de/node/157127040041474/erfurterresolution.pdf>
- Höhne, B. (2021). How democracy works within a populist party: Candidate selection in the Alternative for Germany. *Government and Opposition*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2021.33>
- Jentsch, U. (2016). Die „Lebensschutz“-Bewegung und die AfD. Nur ein Teil der Bewegung ergreift Partei [The “pro-life” movement and the AfD. Only a part of the movement takes sides]. In A. Häusler (Ed.), *Die Alternative für Deutschland: Programmatik, Entwicklung und politische Verortung* [The Alternative for Germany: Programme, development and political positioning] (pp. 99–107). Springer.
- Kitschelt, H. (2006). Movement parties. In R. Katz & W. Crotty (Eds.), *Handbook of party politics* (pp. 278–290). SAGE.
- Kuchlmayr, F., & Pauly, M. (2019, August 4). Abweichler im Bundestag. Parlamentarischer Ungehorsam [Dissenters in the Bundestag. Parliamentary disobedience]. *Spiegel*. <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/bundestag-diese-abgeordneten-stimmen-oft-gegen-die-eigene-fraktion-a-1279893.html>
- Mader, M., & Schoen, H. (2018). The European refugee crisis, party competition, and voters’ responses in Germany. *West European Politics*, 42(1), 67–90.
- Martin, N., de Lange, S., & van der Brug, W. (2020). Holding on to voters in volatile times: Bonding voters through party links with civil society. *Party Politics*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1354068820980304>
- Medina Serrano, J. C., Shahrezaye, M., Papakyriakopoulos, O., & Hegelich, S. (2019). *The rise of Germany’s AfD: A social media analysis* [Paper presentation]. 10th International Conference on Social Media and Society, Canada.
- Melcher, R. (2019). Alternativer Wahlkampf? Social Media und individuelle Kandidat\*innenkampagnen [Alternative Election Campaign? Social media and individual candidate campaigns]. In W. Schroeder & B. Wessels (Eds.), *Smarte Spalter. Die AfD zwischen Bewegung und Parlament* [Smart dividers. The AfD between movement and parliament] (pp. 203–225). Dietz.
- Michels, R. (1962). *Political parties: A sociological study of the oligarchical tendencies of modern democracy*. Dover. (Original work published 1915)
- Mitgliederschwund bei der AfD [AfD membership decline]. (2021, January 1). *Tagesschau*. <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/afd-parteimitglieder-rueckgang-101.html>
- Mudde, C. (2007). *Populist radical right parties in Europe*. Cambridge University Press.
- Müller, H. (2019). *Für Mitgliederparteitage spricht* [What speaks in favour of member party conferences]. [Mitgliederparteitag.de](https://www.mitgliederparteitag.de/was-spricht-dafuer). <https://www.mitgliederparteitag.de/was-spricht-dafuer>
- Niedermayer, O. (2020). *Parteimitglieder in Deutschland: Version 2020* [Party members in Germany: Version 2020] (Workbooks from the Otto Stammer Center No. 31). Freie Universität Berlin.
- Otteni, C., & Weisskircher, M. (2021). Global warming and polarization. Wind turbines and the electoral success of the greens and the populist radical right. *European Journal of Political Research*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12487>
- Petry, F. (2021). *Requiem für die AfD* [Requiem for the AfD]. Stadtluft.
- Pirro, A., & Castelli Gattinara, P. (2018). Movement parties of the far right: The organization and strategies of nativist collective actors. *Mobilisation*, 23(3), 367–383.

- Radau, L. (2019, October 25). Wo die AfD gegen Windmühlen kämpft [Where the AfD tilts at windmills]. *Die Zeit*. <https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2019-10/windkraft-thueringen-wahlkampf-afd-buergerinitiative>
- Ravndal, J. (2021). From bombs to books, and back again? Mapping strategies of right-wing revolutionary resistance. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2021.1907897>
- Rone, J. (2021). Far right alternative news media as ‘indignation mobilisation mechanisms’: How the far right opposed the global compact for migration. *Information, Communication & Society*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2020.1864001>
- Rüdig, W., & Sajuria, J. (2020). Green party members and grass-roots democracy: A comparative analysis. *Party Politics*, 26(1), 21–31.
- Sanches, E. R., Lisi, M., Razzuoli, I., & Santo, P. (2018). Intra-party democracy from members’ viewpoint: The case of left-wing parties in Portugal. *Acta Politica*, 53, 391–408.
- Scarrow, S., Webb, P., & Poguntke, T. (2017). *Organising political parties: Representation, participation, and power*. Oxford University Press.
- Schelter, S., Biessmann, F., Zobel, M., & Teneva, N. (2016). *Structural patterns in the rise of Germany’s new right on Facebook* [Paper presentation]. IEEE 16th International Conference on Data Mining Workshops (ICDMW), Spain.
- Schroeder, W., Greef, S., Ten Elsen, J., & Heller, L. (in press). Interventions by the populist radical right in German civil society and the search for counterstrategies. *German Politics*.
- Schroeder, W., & Wessels, B. (Eds.). (2019). *Smarte Spalter. Die AfD zwischen Bewegung und Parlament* [Smart dividers. The AfD between movement and parliament]. Dietz.
- Steffen, T. (2015, July 10). Petry spricht von Sabotage [Petry speaks about sabotage]. *Die Zeit*. <https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2015-07/frauke-petry-bernd-lucke-afd-austritte>
- Tronconi, F. (2018). The Italian five star movement during the crisis: Towards normalisation? *South European Society and Politics*, 23(1), 163–180.
- Vittori, D. (2020). The impact of populism on party organisation? A study of four Southern European ‘populist’ parties. *European Politics and Society*, 21(1), 53–71.
- Weisskircher, M. (2020a). Neue Wahrheiten von rechts außen? Alternative Nachrichten und der „Rechtspopulismus“ in Deutschland [New truths from the far right? Alternative news and “right-wing populism” in Germany]. *Forschungsjournal Soziale Bewegungen*, 33(2), 474–490.
- Weisskircher, M. (2020b). The strength of far-right AfD in Eastern Germany: The east–west divide and the multiple causes behind “populism.” *The Political Quarterly*, 91(3), 614–622.
- Weisskircher, M., & Berntzen, L. (2019). Remaining on the streets: Anti-Islamic PEGIDA mobilization and its relationship to far right party politics. In M. Caiani & O. Cisař (Eds.), *Radical right movement parties in Europe* (pp. 114–130). Routledge.

### About the Authors

**Anna-Sophie Heinze** is a political scientist at the Trier Institute for Democracy and Party Research (TIDUP), University of Trier. In 2019, she defended her PhD thesis at the Friedrich Schiller University, Jena. Her research focuses on political parties, democracy, populism, and the far right. She is the author of *Strategien gegen Rechtspopulismus? Der Umgang mit der AfD in Landesparlamenten* and has published in journals such as *West European Politics* and *Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft*.

**Manès Weisskircher** is a political scientist at the Department of Sociology and Human Geography and the Center for Research on Extremism (C-REX), University of Oslo. In 2019, he defended his PhD thesis at the European University Institute. His research interests are social movements, political parties, democracy, and the far right. He has published in journals such as *European Journal of Political Research*, *Political Studies*, *Government and Opposition*, *Social Movement Studies*, *The Political Quarterly*, and *Sociological Perspectives*.

Article

## The Vlaams Belang: A Mass Party of the 21st Century

Judith Sijstermans

Department of Political Science and International Studies, University of Birmingham, UK; E-Mail: [j.sijstermans@bham.ac.uk](mailto:j.sijstermans@bham.ac.uk)

Submitted: 26 May 2021 | Accepted: 11 August 2021 | Published: 24 November 2021

### Abstract

Throughout its 40-year history, the Vlaams Belang (VB, Flemish Interest) has established itself as an important player within the Belgian party system, albeit with significant electoral fluctuations. In 2019, it became the second largest party in Flanders. The party developed and maintained a mass-party organisation by investing significantly in local party branches and in a rigid vertically articulated structure. It relies heavily on social media, particularly Facebook, to communicate to supporters beyond the more limited group of party members. Using both modern and traditional tools, VB representatives aim to create communities of supporters bonded to the party, facilitating dissemination of the party's messages. Despite this investment in a grassroots organisation, the VB's decision-making remains highly centralised. Social media and local branches allow informal consideration of members' views, but the party has not created significant mechanisms for internal democracy. While it is often claimed that political parties have moved away from the "mass-party" model, this article demonstrates that the VB still maintains characteristics of the mass party, albeit with a modern twist. New social media tools facilitate attempts to foster communities and disseminate party messages among a wider group of supporters, both formal members and more informal sympathisers.

### Keywords

mass parties; party membership; political communication; populism; Vlaams Belang

### Issue

This article is part of the issue "Right-Wing Populist Party Organisation Across Europe: The Survival of the Mass-Party?" edited by Daniele Albertazzi (University of Surrey, UK) and Stijn van Kessel (Queen Mary University of London, UK).

© 2021 by the author; licensee Cogitatio (Lisbon, Portugal). This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

### 1. Introduction

The time is ripe to re-examine the organisational structures of the Vlaams Belang (VB, Flemish Interest). The party made a comeback in the October 2018 municipal elections and came second place in the May 2019 European, federal, and Flemish elections. This article provides an update to previous work on the VB's organisational evolution (Art, 2008; Swyngedouw & Van Craen, 2002; Van Haute & Pauwels, 2016). Furthermore, I argue that the contemporary VB displays key organisational elements of the mass-party model. The party also enthusiastically adopts social media tools to remain connected to the party's grassroots, modernising traditional mass-party structures.

As discussed in the introduction to this thematic issue, the mass-party model is characterised by a large, active membership that keeps the party rooted on the ground (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2015). The party cre-

ates closed communities of activists that develop collective identities (Panebianco, 1988). These communities allow the party to mobilise voters and activists and can facilitate the spread of information through party membership (Katz & Mair, 1995, p. 18).

The VB's organisational structures follow this model and display these characteristics. In particular, the VB invests in growing locally-rooted organisational structures and seeks to connect with party supporters on and offline. Strong links to the grassroots allow the party leadership to create a community of party supporters who campaign on the party's behalf. Through social media platforms, the VB speaks to a broad community of party supporters, not only formal members. While the party's formal membership numbers remain modest, the VB's investment in its wider grassroots base remains crucial to its political strategy.

In the first section of this article, I introduce the VB as a party. Then I review the characteristics of the



mass-party model and note how these characteristics might be updated in light of modern technology and means of communication. In the third section of this article, I describe how the VB fits the mass-party model based on its organisational structures and outreach to members and supporters. In the fourth section, I consider whether those members and supporters have influence in the party. To do so, I explore the level of party centralisation and intra-party democracy, concluding that, while the VB displays many characteristics of the mass party, party members are neither formally nor informally empowered within the party’s decision-making processes.

This article is based on an analysis of 32 interviews with party representatives at supranational, national, and local level. I also draw on secondary literature and party documents, particularly the party’s statutes and its 2019 manifesto, to triangulate findings. Interviews were conducted in 2019 and 2020, both in person and using video conferencing platforms, due to the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic. Interviewees’ roles and regions are detailed in the Supplementary File. Of the 32 representatives interviewed, 14 were national or supranational parliamentarians. Interviewees played both institutional roles in political institutions, as local councillors or parliamentarians, and party roles, as members of the VB’s governing boards at branch, regional, or national level. Interviews were conducted across three areas of Flanders (West Flanders, East Flanders, and Antwerp) in which the VB achieves various levels of electoral success. Within the first two areas, representatives from urban areas (Bruges and Ghent respectively) and smaller towns were interviewed.

## 2. The Evolution of the Vlaams Belang

The VB is a continuation of the Vlaams Blok. The party’s name was changed in 2004, when a Belgian court ruled associations related to the party to be in breach of a

racism law. Despite this change in name, the VB and Vlaams Blok are functionally equivalent: Few changes were made in response to the ruling, beyond a symbolic moderation of policies (Erk, 2005). The Vlaams Blok formed in 1978 as an electoral cartel between the VNP and the VVP, two parties formed due to dissatisfaction with the Volksunie’s stance on state reform. These two parts ultimately merged into one after the elections of 1978. The Vlaams Blok struggled in its early years, but it maintained an MP in its traditional electoral stronghold of Antwerp.

After 1987, the party consistently won seats, albeit with a sharp downturn in 2010 and 2014. The party has been blocked from entering government by a strong *cordon sanitaire*, agreed from 1989 onwards between all other Belgian parties to rule out coalitions with the VB. The party managed to continue its growth, with a significant peak in the 2004 Flemish parliament elections. However, this peak was followed by subsequent decline until the 2018 local elections showed a resurgence of the party’s popularity. Figure 1 illustrates the VB’s recent electoral fluctuations in Flemish parliamentary elections; similar patterns were followed in Belgian federal and local elections. The party’s electoral decline after 2004 led to frequent leadership turnover in 2008 (Bruno Valkeniers), 2012 (Gerolf Annemans), and 2014 (Tom van Grieken).

In 2014, Tom van Grieken, at the age of 28, was elected as Belgium’s youngest-ever party leader at the time. The party’s website notes that 2014 was the year of “rejuvenation and renewal.” In the wake of its 2019 electoral success and other Belgian parties’ struggles to form a coalition, the VB announced the “Mission 2024” campaign that aimed to make it the largest party in the next Flemish elections. This, they argued, would make the *cordon sanitaire* untenable and give the VB the right to lead the government-formation process (Vlaams Belang, 2019a).

Flemish autonomy was initially most central to the VB’s policy platform, but the party’s ideology has shifted

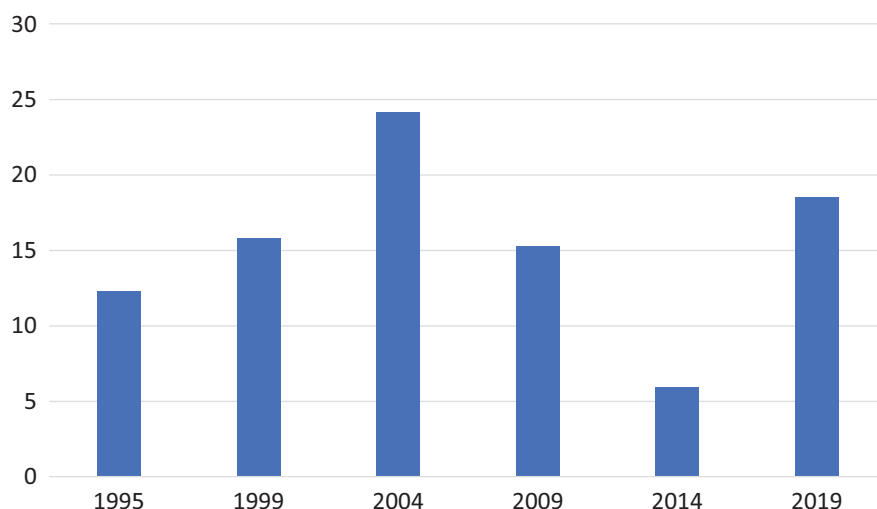


Figure 1. VB vote share over time in Flemish elections (1995–2019).

towards nativist stances over time. In the 1980s, a period called “Operation Rejuvenation” initiated by party founder and leader Karel Dillen included popular new leaders Gerolf Annemans and Filip Dewinter and shifted the party platform towards opposition to immigration (Van Haute & Pauwels, 2016, p. 51). In the party’s 2019 manifesto and magazines leading up to the 2019 election, nativism remained the dominant theme. Nativist statements were included throughout other policy areas such as economic and welfare policies, whereas claims for more Flemish autonomy were more contained.

The VB’s socio-economic policies retain elements of small government and low taxation but have begun to focus on providing social security for “deserving” Flemish citizens (Coffé, 2008; Fenger, 2018). The 2019 manifesto promoted limiting access to social security based on people’s length of stay and work performance (Vlaams Belang, 2019b, pp. 60–61). The emphasis on deservingness criteria, such as identity and reciprocity, allows the VB to forefront the populist “us” versus “them” rhetoric through their economic policies (Van Oorschot, 2000).

Recently, the VB has moderated its discourse. Lucardie et al. (2016) described the attempt to “detoxify” the party and noted the shift in imagery from boxing gloves (associated with a campaign and political style typified by Dewinter) to images of families and children. The party has distanced itself from members’ controversial, more hard-line behaviour (for example Dewinter’s visit to Golden Dawn in Greece; see “Vlaams Belang supremos,” 2016). However, as youth leader in 2012, Van Grieken himself took part in a controversial action at a school barbecue, protesting halal meat (“Vlaams Belang voert actie,” 2012). Moderation is predominantly a change in style rather than in core ideology.

Given the VB’s push to break through Belgium’s 30-year *cordon sanitaire* and its recent electoral successes, this is a useful time to reconsider how the party organises itself and relates to its grassroots, and how this grassroots base fits into the party’s strategy. In the following section, I consider how the mass-party model can help us understand the modern VB.

### 3. Conceptualising the Modern Mass Party

This thematic issue starts from the fundamental claim that the mass-party model persists, despite the increasingly close relationship between the state and political parties which led scholars to develop the cartel party model (Katz & Mair, 1995). An analysis of party cartelisation in Belgium and Italy found that Flemish parties were moderately cartelised, more so than Belgian Francophone or Italian parties. However, the VB resisted cartelisation (Sandri & Pauwels, 2010).

The mass-party model persists in some right-wing populist parties. Scholars have argued that these parties may challenge the cartelisation of party politics due to their claims to represent the “ordinary” citizen and challenge the “cosy arrangements” between the

party and the state (Van Biezen, 2014, p. 181). Heinisch and Mazzoleni (2016, p. 241) concluded that many right-wing populist parties adopt “a mass party related organisation” with a focus on locally rooted organisational structures and building a “grassroots following.” Three key characteristics of mass-party organisations should be emphasised: (1) the drive to recruit a large activist membership; (2) rootedness through local activities and structures; and (3) preserving “collective identities through ideology.”

In this article, I specifically explore how mass-party structures have been adapted through the use of modern digital tools. The effect of new technologies (social media, online communications, campaigning apps, among others) on political party organisations has been the subject of recent scholarly discussion with a focus on how they affect campaigns and party membership (Dommett et al., 2021; Kefford, 2018; McSwiney, 2020). Gerbaudo (2018) developed the concept of the “digital party” and Margetts (2006) explored the “cyber party.” These types of party are “profoundly” digital; online organising and communications are inherent and fundamental to them. However, many parties use these technologies within traditional, established organisational structures. The VB is one such party.

Digital tools affect one key element of the mass party: party membership. Members are crucial to the mass party since they provide political resources and ideas and better relationships with voters. The cartel party, on the other hand, becomes less dependent on members due to increased state support (Gauja, 2015, pp. 234–235; Katz & Mair, 2009). Across Europe, the size of party membership in relation to the total electorate has shrunk from approximately 15% to 4.7% in 2008 (Van Biezen et al., 2012). In response to this shift and newly available digital tools, parties developed new forms of engagement with citizens and created new forms of partisan affiliation, such as supporter or friendship networks (Gauja, 2015; Scarrow, 2014, p. 3). Online partisan affiliation has diverse faces, from “friend” to “audience” to “digital activist,” and some online followers, such as the “digital activist,” are also often formal members (Gibson et al., 2017).

Relationships between parties and supporters may be mediated less by formal membership cards or contacts and more through social media networking. However, these developments are not antithetical to the mass-party model. Rather, in a modern mass party, the “masses” of a party may be both formal members and more informal supporters, and parties may make use of new, increasingly important digital tools of communication alongside a traditional “ground game.”

### 4. The Vlaams Belang and the Modern Mass-Party Organisation

The VB seeks to have an active and large grassroots base (formal members and informal supporters), organised through clearly articulated local, regional, and provincial

executive boards. Local branches play a key role in organising social and political activities which maintain regular connection with active supporters and recruit new supporters. Recruitment occurs through a mixture of digital and traditional tools. Party representatives' motivations behind maintaining these structures highlight the importance of party communities in spreading party information to voters.

Within the mass-party structure, the party has invested in social media tools. Social media support recruitment by helping to identify informally affiliated supporters and engage them in local activities. The move towards social media forms of organising has also engendered more ambivalence towards the importance of the formal party member. Party activities and communications seek to be open to both formal members and informal supporters.

#### 4.1. Organisational Structures

The VB has a high degree of organisation (“the extent of regularised procedures for mobilising and coordinating the efforts of party supporters”) which allows the party to maintain close links to its grassroots base (Janda, 1970, p. 106). Vertical organisational linkages, which structure the relationships between the grassroots and elites, are one of the key characteristics of the mass party (Panebianco, 1988, p. 264). In this section, I illustrate how the VB follows a mass-party model by considering the party's locally rooted organisational structures.

The party is characterised by a series of formal executive bodies, at various geographical levels: local branches, regions, provinces, and a national-level party council. As described in the party statutes, these levels are linked through delegates from lower levels to upper levels—i.e., local branch members are selected to represent the branch at regional level; representatives from the region are delegated to the provincial executive; and members of regional and provincial boards represent their areas at the party's national council. A key function of delegated members is to transmit information from the national level to the local branches (Interview 1). They also provide direct linkage between the local branch and the national party; local respondents often discussed feeling that they had a “direct line” to the party's Brussels headquarters.

The VB has approximately 160 branches across Flanders' 300 (previously 308) municipalities. This is fewer than the largest Flemish party, the N-VA, which in 2012 had 306 branches (Beyens et al., 2017, p. 396). The third-largest party in Flanders, the CD&V, lists 288 branches on its website. While the VB falls behind in absolute number of branches, the party has targeted increasing this number as part of its current growth strategy. The investment in branches is what leader Van Grieken calls “local anchoring” and is part of the party's plan for gaining power nationally (“Horizon 2024,” 2020).

Since the electoral successes of May 2019, VB representatives report newfound interest in starting or rejuvenating branches (Interview 4). The extent of this rejuvenation or increase in branches is not possible to measure concretely. However, the party's funding to support party branches is clearer. The party has set up a system of mentorship between national representatives and new branches in their area in which parliamentarians act as “godparents” for new branches. Since 2019, the party has allowed branches to retain all their local area's membership fees rather than asking them to share 30% of membership fees with the national level, as was previously mandated. The party recently expanded its staff from 30 to 100. This included newly hired provincial staff members that provide support to existing and prospective branches, for both in-person and digital activities (Interviews 4, 30, 31).

The VB's local anchoring strategy and delegated vertical strategy is consistent with the mass-party model, which entails organising a broad group of grassroots supporters and developing a “locally rooted, complex and durable organisation” (Heinisch & Mazzoleni, 2016, p. 241).

#### 4.2. Membership and Member Recruitment

Local anchoring requires having active members to sit on local executive boards, organise activities, run on local electoral lists, and campaign across Flanders. The party seeks to identify new members and to engage existing members. Identifying voters is also the focus of local party organising, and this is set to become more important as the legal requirement to vote has been lifted for local elections in Flanders. A key parliamentarian and member of the party's executive structures noted that the party would engage in more voter-mobilisation activities as a result of this change (Interview 32). In this section, I explore the party's efforts to recruit supporters/members and argue that this core feature of the mass party remains a crucial element of the party's strategy. I then consider, drawing on previous literature on the evolving nature of party membership, how informal forms of partisan support are incorporated in the VB.

Traditional mainstream parties (socialists, Christian Democrats, and liberals) in Flanders and Wallonia saw their membership numbers peak by 1991 and decrease throughout the 1990s and early 2000s (Van Haute et al., 2013). The VB grew its membership through the 1990s and early 2000s, alongside Flemish nationalist competitors the N-VA and radical left PvdA/PtB. However, as can be seen in Table 1, the party's current membership has fallen below its peak in the mid-2000s. Representatives suggested that this membership stagnation was part of a wider trend of disengagement from political party membership. However, decreases in party membership corresponded with electoral defeat as the party underwent internal turmoil, leadership turnover, and defections

to the N-VA and short-lived populist competitor LDD (Pauwels, 2011; Van Haute & Pauwels, 2016, p. 54).

**Table 1.** Membership numbers over time (1984–2018).

Year	Members
1984	3,269
1988	2,485
1992	4,682
1996	10,039
2000	17,167
2003	16,860
2007	25,000
2009	22,500
2012	17,063
2018	18,153
2021	22,194

Notes: Data until 2000 was taken from Swyngedouw and Van Craen (2002, p. 15); data from 2003–2009 was taken from Van Haute et al. (2013); data for 2018 was taken from Vlaeminck (2018); data for 2021 was taken from “Vlaams Belang ziet ledenaantal stevig stijgen” (2021).

Recruitment of new members and member engagement occurs both through local branch activities and through social media. One staffer estimated that about half of members join through local branches and half through online tools (Interview 30). Most respondents noted that online and in-person contacts were complementary. Social activities organised locally, such as new year’s receptions, or political talks by big names such as Van Grieken or Dewinter, are open to non-members and provide recruitment opportunities (Interviews 10, 14). Prospective members can also request a “trial membership” for three months, during which time a local representative or branch member will visit the trial member’s home.

One party staff member working closely with local branches explained: “In terms of the local... personal contact is still the best. For example, what’s being said to us, also in relation to the 2024 campaigns, is that we have to concentrate on house-to-house visits.” In Ninove, where the party achieved 40% of the vote in the last local elections, the local VB organisation does extensive house-to-house canvassing to seek out supporters (Interview 18). This is now being tried in other municipalities such as Brasschaat (near Antwerp) and Ghent (Interviews 6, 8).

House-to-house recruitment is supported by digital tools. The party’s recent face mask campaign provides an example of this. On social media, the party heavily advertised its offer of free VB face masks for those who “registered as VB voters.” These contact details were collated, and the party created a mobile app to facilitate visits to these contacts by offering locations of houses and walking directions between them. Figure 2 shows one of the graphics used on Facebook for this campaign. Recruitment required both capital investment into social and digital media and party activists’ labour. This echoes

successful political movements elsewhere, where social media campaigning is paired with labour-intensive supporter mobilisation (Kefford, 2018, p. 659). Party elites referred to Donald Trump’s campaign social media and rallies as an inspiration (Interviews 14, 30, 32).



**Figure 2.** VB Facebook graphic advertising free face masks. Source: Vlaams Belang Geraardsbergen (2020).

In terms of online engagement, respondents noted that new party members also regularly join “spontaneously” through the party’s national website (Interviews 6, 22, 23). The VB spent more than any other party on online advertising during the May 2019 election, and this investment has continued after the campaign (Vandeputte & De Smedt, 2019). Maly (2020) analyses the party’s social media posts and highlights that the VB used both ads and provocative “organic” viral content to grow its following over time.

The party has 611,000 Facebook likes as of August 2021, just under 200,000 more than its closest competitor, the N-VA. This does not necessarily indicate the size of absolute support for the VB, as the number will include non-VB voters and some fake “bot” accounts. However, the Facebook page provides a way for the party to keep in touch with its grassroots support and often provides access to those in the party’s “audience” or “friends” group alongside party members. One representative explained: “Not everyone [who follows the party on Facebook] is, of course, a member, maybe not everyone supports all of what we do, but they do follow us” (Interview 6). A DEMOS survey in 2011, which included the VB, found that 67% of Facebook followers voted for the party at the most recent national election (Bartlett et al., 2011). The party’s Facebook thus brings together a significantly wider pool of the party’s supporters than formal membership.

Social media allow the party to identify and recruit some non-member sympathisers to formal membership. Dewinter, in an interview, noted: “Through social media we get a lot of contact details from people who have sympathy for the party but then also aren’t members. If you can engage those people and recruit them and create a bigger engagement, that’s important.” Another MP explained:

Specialised staff members in Brussels post Facebook advertisements....For example, if there are problems with an asylum centre in Koksijde then Facebook posts or advertisements are sent to the people of Koksijde and then we get responses. Staff members in West Flanders collect those, with addresses, and that's how you get addresses and make contact. (Interview 14)

The VB invests both in membership recruitment and more diffuse engagement of its informal supporter base online. Party elites emphasise that the audience for its online communications is not only members but a more diffuse group of supporters. The party's campaign asking these followers to "register as VB voters," discussed above, shows how the VB is seeking to capitalise on new forms of partisan affiliation. Scarrow (2014) has emphasised that affiliation with political parties takes many forms. She identifies relationships with members using electronic media as the most common new form of party affiliation. Parties may offer "cyber membership" or engage with social media "followers" or an online "news audience." No form of affiliation is necessarily more important than the other and each provides parties with different opportunities. Social media followers, for example, may receive significant amounts of information from the party and participate in two-way exchange (Scarrow, 2014, pp. 33–35).

Registration as a voter requires no monetary commitment, unlike party membership, but benefits the party by providing clear voter identification and contact details. Non-member sympathisers are also encouraged through social media to become involved in local party life. All party events are advertised on Facebook, and local events are almost always open to non-members. Like registering as a voter, an open approach to party events and communications offers a "low level" way of becoming involved in the party (Interview 10). Social media support is seen as a corrective to the overall societal trend of falling party membership numbers. A Flemish MP with key executive roles in the party explained: "I think that membership [of all organisations] is declining... but that doesn't take away from the fact that they support us—for example, on Facebook or social media" (Interview 4).

The VB thus displays key characteristics of the mass party, investing in and seeking to expand its supporter base. However, the party adopts a more modern and flexible concept of the mass party. In the following section, I show that the motivations for investing in an activist base echo the motivations of the mass party: creating a sense of collective identity and mobilising the grassroots to reach voters.

#### 4.3. Motivations for the Mass-Party Structure

In the mass party, identity was a crucial driver of party membership and members were "actively recruited and encapsulated" within close communities (Katz & Mair,

1995, p. 18). When exploring the motivations for the VB's investment in local activities and members, elites pointed to the creation of community and the mobilisation of that community to reach out to voters.

The VB invests in social activities at a local level, such as yearly festive meals, barbecues, wine and cheese evenings, brunches, and book launches. Local activities create small, close communities. The purpose of activities, one provincial councillor explains, is to bring people together in a pleasant and sociable way (Interview 20). Dewinter explained: "Cultivating camaraderie is important. It has to be a friendship group. You have to bind them to each other." Social media also play a part in developing community. The VB's social media coordinator and MP Bart Claes explained to *De Morgen*: "In 2014, VB was nowhere to be found. Not in the media, nor in people's minds. That is why we have put a lot of effort into building a community, a digital community" (Kelepouris, 2019).

The sense of community in the VB is not rooted in being part of the same union or church, as may have traditionally been the case for the mass party. The community feeling is instead rooted in members' feeling of exclusion from mainstream Belgian politics. The *cordon sanitaire*, one West Flemish provincial councillor explained, "ensures that we have the bond of 'us' versus the rest....All the attacks that we receive ensure that we have a very high 'Robin Hood' feeling" (Interview 16). Friendships are more meaningful because "you are in the same boat; you don't have anyone else" (Interview 13). As such, the VB as a modern mass party builds upon socially integrated communities.

These communities spread party propaganda to voters. One MP and local councillor explained: "The word-of-mouth effect is still very important. If you have friends who are Vlaams Belangers, and who do well and are engaged, then you are very quickly inclined to come along or maybe to vote for our party" (Interview 13). Activists also provide publicity by speaking with friends, delivering leaflets, putting up posters, and distributing materials at local events (Interview 6). One local staff member explained: "You can say that you do everything online now, but you still need to put up posters, deliver leaflets, and there it's very good to trigger those active members, to hold them to you" (Interview 22).

Information sharing also occurs online. One MP elaborated: "Over the last few years we have seen that people are informed much easier through social media" (Interview 5). The nature of social media (retweeting or sharing on Facebook) allows the central party to control local messaging, because central messages can easily be replicated (Interview 13). Strong digital communities ensure that the party's information gets shared through supporters as well as advertisements. The party has focused on hiring strong social media staff and has developed party messages that are "clearly constructed for online engagement" and "ready-made for uptake" (Maly, 2020, p. 9).

The VB's emphasis on informing supporters directly rather than through the mass media could be interpreted as a sign of its adoption of the mass-party model. The traditional mass party used "a party press and other party-related channels of communication [to make up] for what it lacked in access to the commercial press" (Katz & Mair, 1995, p. 10). De Jonge (2019) notes that Flemish media have generally been more open to the VB than media counterparts in Wallonia. However, respondents perceived that the party and Van Grieken received less attention than mainstream parties in Flemish media. Increasingly throughout 2020 and 2021, they made claims of "censorship" on social media platforms. Suspensions or threats of suspension by these platforms against Van Grieken were widely publicised by the party. VB representatives argued that their use of social media and direct communication style were necessitated by what they perceived as a lack of access to the traditional mass media. While they may have access to the mass media, it is clear that the party uses narratives of exclusion to drive community building and promote information sharing through these party communities.

The VB remains committed to the fundamental motivations underpinning the mass-party structure, using an activist base and sense of community between members to spread information. In the next section I show that, despite investment in a mass-party structure, the grassroots of the party do not play a significant role in VB decision-making processes.

## 5. Centralisation of Power and Internal Democracy

Scholars have documented how political parties introduced new forms of participation to incentivise party membership (Faucher, 2015; Gauja, 2015; Poguntke et al., 2016). A review of recent party research suggests that intra-party democracy is part of parties' "efforts to repair the broken links with the electorate and party members and activists," although evaluations suggest that the effect may not have actually revitalised political parties (Borz & Janda, 2020; Ignazi, 2020). Digital media, which can facilitate intra-party democracy, has also been seen as an opportunity to open parties up to rejuvenation from below. In some cases, these new ways of communicating within the party mean that "citizens are breathing new life into the party form, remaking parties in their own changed participatory image" (Chadwick & Stromer-Galley, 2016, p. 285).

However, while social media provide new opportunities for two-way communication, members' influence on party decision-making is not necessarily increased. While the VB invests in growing a grassroots base and in social media, it maintains highly centralised decision-making processes. The VB's enthusiastic adoption of social media and informal types of party affiliation have not altered members' power in the party. The party invests in communicating central decisions to supporters, but these

supporters are not empowered to contribute to party decision-making.

### 5.1. Highly Centralised Decision-Making

As noted previously, the VB has a vertically articulated series of executive boards from which members are delegated upwards. Statutorily, the VB's highest organisational body is the Party Council. However, in this section I show that the party leader and executive (selected by the leader) still make most of the important decisions in the party. They wield influence on policy, strategy, discipline, and candidate selection. Given this party centralisation, ordinary party members, or those only active in local politics, have very little influence on party decision-making. One MP noted: "Our Party Council was once powerful. It has even rejected proposals from the Party Executive, but that was some time ago now. It can happen but it's not self-evident" (Interview 11). A local councillor also emphasised: "The Party Executive is omnipotent; it is the daily leadership" (Interview 7).

The party leader is responsible for the party's overall policy and political direction and disciplinary matters. The Party Executive comprises twelve to fifteen members: leaders of the parliamentary groups, deputy leader(s), party treasurer, chairman of the Party Council, and additional members selected by the leader. The leader appoints all these positions, further consolidating their power (Wauters & Pittoors, 2019). The Executive determines urgent political questions and daily management of the party. This small group of party elites is instrumental in the party's policy, campaign, and disciplinary decisions.

However, policymaking requires a diverse range of contributors, given the range of topics covered. The party's manifesto is developed by a working group comprised of party and parliamentary staff, elected members, and members of the Party Executive. The manifesto then undergoes a process of revisions by the Party Council. The Party Executive's "day-to-day" role gives it the power to make short-term policy and strategy decisions which are rarely or never challenged by the Party Council (Interview 21). Party staff and the Executive are also the most important actors in campaigns. During campaigns, the party provides leaflet templates and coordinates printing centrally (Interview 1). Party branding and campaign strategies are thus centralised. Social media also "ensures that a small group centrally sends a message, and it then gets spread" (Interview 14).

Another way to shape the behaviour of its local members on social media is through social media training and guidance provided by party staffers. However, controversial statements are sometimes made by party members and raised with the party, often by the media. In these cases, and other cases of internal conflict, the party leader and the Executive are also crucial in conducting disciplinary procedures. Each level of the party (local, regional, provincial) can mediate an emerging

disciplinary issue. If this does not generate a resolution, the party leader and the Executive get involved directly and can sanction members. According to the party's statutes, all sections of the party are responsible for reporting "facts that jeopardize the proper functioning or reputation of the party" to the party leader (VB statutes [party statutes are not publicly available but were provided to the author by the party]). Disciplinary procedures are thus favourable to the interests of the party rather than those of the complainant.

Finally, candidate selection is centred on the wishes of the Party Executive. Multiple interview respondents described the process as "complicated," and selection procedures are not clearly set out in the party statutes. Respondents explained that the Party Executive, in discussion with provincial executive members, determines list leaders and electable list places. The list leader and provincial executive then fill out the rest of the candidates. All lists are ratified by the Party Council. Across the decision-making procedures, we can see that the Party Council's role is one of ratification rather than decision. This highlights the way that the VB's leader and the Executive, supported by staff, maintain central control, and make most decisions directly.

The nature of the Belgian system allows for some internal "balance of power" between elite members. Belgium's divided legislative institutions ensure that no one individual is in complete control. In Belgium, the role of party leader has traditionally not overlapped with the role of government or parliamentary leader. Tom van Grieken is not the leader of the VB group in the Belgian Chamber of Representatives, for example. By decentralising power internally, representatives can build a profile locally. Several representatives noted how that, as group leaders in city councils and parliamentarians, they could act as the figurehead in their specific city.

The VB also distributes power internally by "matching up key party officials with political issue areas" (Van Haute & Pauwels, 2016, p. 67). Under Van Grieken's leadership, significant staffing resource has been focused on the party's parliamentary staff. In a process of professionalisation, the party's parliamentarians have thus begun to specialise in different policy areas and to develop more substantive knowledge (Interviews 9, 32). Rhetorically, some leaders like Dewinter and Dries van Langenhove take more "hard-line" stances while others use more moderate language. Although a balance is found *between* elites, those who take the lead in decision-making on policy, campaigns and discipline are still a relatively small group of people.

## 5.2. Limited Internal Democracy

Including members in decision-making can occur through assembly (exchange of arguments in party organs, inclusiveness of forums) and plebiscitary methods (on a one member, one vote basis; see Poguntke et al., 2016). In the VB, the only case in which members

vote is for leadership selection. To elect a VB leader, an internal vote occurs within the Party Council. Once this process is completed, the Party Council puts forth one candidate to party members, who convene at a national congress. All individuals who have been a member for at least one year can cast their ballot to support (or not) that candidate. The only contested leadership selection at the stage of the Party Council vote was during the election of Gerolf Annemans (elected 2012). All other leaders were elected unopposed. In fact, until 2008, party leaders were not elected at all. After almost 20 years of leadership, founder Karel Dillen appointed his successor, Frank Van Hecke. The lack of competition and newness of this procedure means it is not robust and is generally seen as a formality by representatives.

In terms of the exchange of ideas in assemblies, the VB has numerous levels of executive boards. Ordinary members can get involved by joining local executive boards and becoming delegates to regional, provincial, and national bodies. There is a low barrier to entry, with most interested members accepted onto local executive boards (which seem to have no limit on membership numbers). However, regional and provincial levels are not empowered to make many decisions. One MP explained: "We have provincial structures, but those rarely come together, and regional structures, but they are more about passing on information top to bottom" (Interview 18). In fact, the regional level is likely to be removed after a reorganisation of Flemish electoral boundaries.

Social media provide another way for ordinary members to provide input. The VB can test policies, using reactions as a sounding board. One Flemish MP explained:

We have a team, in the Vlaams Belang that is concerned with social media and mostly with the reactions we get. We take those reactions into account, and it's not always members who [respond online] but also normal citizens, who are not members. (Interview 9)

This substantiates the expansion of the concept of a grassroots base in the VB, as the party considers input not only from members but from a wider group of online supporters. However, responding to supporters' concerns on social media should not be conflated with internal party democracy. While eliciting opinions on social media allows a party to gauge supporters' positions and presents an image of two-way exchange with supporters, there is no obligatory inclusion or deliberation in this process.

The concept of intra-party democracy is often fuzzy. Intra-party democracy could include plebiscitary and assembly methods, and various elements of democracy, such as representation, responsiveness, and competition (Borz & Janda, 2020). The VB has very limited voting rights for party members. Furthermore, the party's most important assembly for exchange of ideas, the Party

Council, tends to take a ratifying rather than deliberative function. Given these limitations, despite an interest in fostering a wide supporter base, it is the Party Executive and leader that make key policy and strategy decisions.

## 6. Conclusion

The VB maintains a mass-party model which includes a vertically delegated and strongly articulated set of local, regional and provincial bodies. The party's leader Tom van Grieken has emphasised the importance of local anchoring in branches, and party representatives at all levels emphasised the need for and existence of a sense of community between members. Local branches thus seek to bring existing members together and to recruit new members and activists. Local activities and social media can mobilise these party communities to disseminate information. In fact, the party's "Mission 2024" electoral strategy is highly reliant on mobilising and growing a grassroots base, highlighting the importance of the mass-party model.

In this article, I have focused on the VB's investment in new technologies such as social media networks and digital campaign tools such as Facebook advertisements and mobile apps. Through these tools, the mass-party model can take on a more modern form. This modern form is typified by a more expansive understanding of parties' grassroots bases. While the VB seeks to build a formal membership, it also uses social media to identify more informal "friends" of the party. In the modern mass party, then, party affiliation is truly "multi-speed," as Scarrow (2014) argued. The masses that the VB seeks to identify, assemble, and influence do not all carry the party's formal membership card. Rather, some may simply be followers while others may seek affiliation by registering as voters or ordering party materials such as face masks. Regardless of which form of affiliation is chosen, the party seeks to communicate with these people and encourage a sense of collective identity. That collective identity is based not on traditional affiliations such as churches or unions, but rather in a feeling of exclusion from mainstream Belgian politics.

Although the party invests in growing its grassroots base, when it comes to internal decision-making, grassroots supporters are not empowered to make decisions. The party leader and the Executive have decisive roles in most aspects of party life. The party's ordinary members have limited input. While party representatives argue that consultation with party supporters occurs through feedback on social media and through local executives, this feedback is ultimately informal. As such, it cannot be conflated with internal party democracy.

The VB is a *modern* mass party that has enthusiastically adopted new technologies. These new technologies have facilitated the party's relationship with a wide grassroots supporter group. The VB is thus a useful case of a party which incorporates digital tools into traditional forms of political party organisation. Combining

new technologies with local organising may rejuvenate the mass-party model which was thought by some (prematurely) to be an organisational model of the past.

## Acknowledgments

The support of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) is gratefully acknowledged (Grant Ref: ES/R011540/1). I acknowledge the helpful and constructive feedback of the anonymous reviewers and the editors. I also thank Dr Adrian Favero, Dr Niko Hatakka, and Dr Mattia Zulianello for their feedback and support.

## Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

## Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

## References

- Albertazzi, D., & McDonnell, D. (2015). *Populists in power*. Routledge.
- Art, D. (2008). The organizational origins of the contemporary radical right: The case of Belgium. *Comparative Politics*, 40(4), 421–440.
- Bartlett, J., Birdwell, J., & Littler, M. (2011). *The new face of digital populism*. Demos.
- Beyens, S., Deschouwer, K., Van Haute, E., & Verthé, T. (2017). Born again, or born anew: Assessing the newness of the Belgian New-Flemish Alliance (N-VA). *Party Politics*, 23(4), 389–399.
- Borz, G., & Janda, K. (2020). Contemporary trends in party organization: Revisiting intra-party democracy. *Party Politics*, 26(1), 3–8.
- Chadwick, A., & Stromer-Galley, J. (2016). Digital media, power, and democracy in parties and election campaigns: Party decline or party renewal? *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 21(3), 283–293.
- Coffé, H. (2008). (Small) Entrepreneurs first! Analysis of the economic discourse of the Vlaams Belang. *Journal of Language and Politics*, 7(1), 31–52.
- de Jonge, L. (2019). The populist radical right and the media in the Benelux: Friend or foe? *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 24(2), 189–209.
- Dommett, K., Fitzpatrick, J., Mosca, L., & Gerbaudo, P. (2021). Are digital parties the future of party organization? A symposium on the digital party: Political organisation and online democracy by Paolo Gerbaudo. *Italian Political Science Review/Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica*, 51(1), 136–149.
- Erk, J. (2005). From Vlaams Blok to Vlaams Belang: The Belgian far-right renames itself. *West European Politics*, 28(3), 493–502.
- Faucher, F. (2015). New forms of political participation:



- Changing demands or changing opportunities to participate in political parties? *Comparative European Politics*, 13(4), 405–429.
- Fenger, M. (2018). The social policy agendas of populist radical right parties in comparative perspective. *Journal of International and Comparative Social Policy*, 34(3), 188–209.
- Gauja, A. (2015). The construction of party membership. *European Journal of Political Research*, 54(2), 232–248.
- Gerbaudo, P. (2018). *The digital party: Political organisation and online democracy*. Pluto Press.
- Gibson, R., Greffet, F., & Cantijoch, M. (2017). Friend or foe? Digital technologies and the changing nature of party membership. *Political Communication*, 34(1), 89–111.
- Heinisch, R., & Mazzoleni, O. (Eds.). (2016). *Understanding populist party organisation*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Horizon 2024: Hoe Vlaams Belang Vlaanderen wil veroveren [Horizon 2024: How Vlaams Belang wants to conquer Flanders]. (2020, February 25). *Knack*. [https://www.knack.be/nieuws/belgie/horizon-2024-hoe-vlaams-belang-vlaanderen-wil-veroveren/article-normal-1568817.html?cookie\\_check=1589186850](https://www.knack.be/nieuws/belgie/horizon-2024-hoe-vlaams-belang-vlaanderen-wil-veroveren/article-normal-1568817.html?cookie_check=1589186850)
- Ignazi, P. (2020). The four knights of intra-party democracy: A rescue for party delegitimation. *Party Politics*, 26(1), 9–20.
- Janda, K. (1970). *A conceptual framework for the comparative analysis of political parties*. SAGE.
- Katz, R. S., & Mair, P. (1995). Changing models of party organization and party democracy: The emergence of the cartel party. *Party Politics*, 1(1), 5–28.
- Katz, R. S., & Mair, P. (2009). The cartel party thesis: A restatement. *Perspectives on Politics*, 7(4), 753–766.
- Kefford, G. (2018). Digital media, ground wars and party organisation: Does Stratarchy explain how parties organise election campaigns? *Parliamentary Affairs*, 71(3), 656–673.
- Kelepouris, S. (2019, May 28). Hoe Vlaams Belang via Facebook de verkiezingen won [How the Vlaams Belang won the elections]. *De Morgen*. <https://www.demorgen.be/politiek/hoe-vlaams-belang-via-facebook-de-verkiezingen-won~b2958a3f>
- Lucardie, P., Akkerman, T., & Pauwels, T. (2016). It is still a long way from Madou Square to Law Street: The evolution of the Vlaams Belang. In T. Akkerman, S. de Lange, & M. Rooduijn (Eds.), *Radical right-wing populist parties in Western Europe: Into the mainstream?* (pp. 226–242). Routledge.
- Maly, I. (2020). *Flemish Interest in an attention-based hybrid media system* (Tilburg Papers in Culture Studies No. 240). Tilburg University. <https://research.tilburguniversity.edu/en/publications/flemish-interest-in-an-attention-based-hybrid-media-system>
- Margetts, H. (2006). The cyber party. In R. S. Katz & W. Crotty (Eds.), *Handbook of party politics* (pp. 528–535). SAGE.
- McSwiney, J. (2020). Social networks and digital organisation: Far right parties at the 2019 Australian federal election. *Information, Communication & Society*, 24(10), 1401–1418.
- Panebianco, A. (1988). *Political parties: Organisation and power*. Cambridge University Press.
- Pauwels, T. (2011). Explaining the strange decline of the populist radical right Vlaams Belang in Belgium: The impact of permanent opposition. *Acta Politica*, 46(1), 60–82.
- Poguntke, T., Scarrow, S. E., Webb, P. D., Allern, E. H., Aylott, N., Van Biezen, I., Calossi, E., Costa Lobo, M., Cross, W. P., Deschouwer, K., Enyedi, Z., Fabre, E., Farrell, D., Guaja, A., Pizzimenti, E., Kopecky, P., Koole, R., Muller, W. C., Kosiara-Pederson, K., . . . Verge, T. (2016). Party rules, party resources and the politics of parliamentary democracies: How parties organize in the 21st century. *Party Politics*, 22(6), 661–678.
- Sandri, G., & Pauwels, T. (2010). Party membership role and party cartelization in Belgium and Italy: Two faces of the same medal? *Politics & Policy*, 38(6), 1237–1266.
- Scarrow, S. (2014). *Beyond party members: Changing approaches to partisan mobilization*. Oxford University Press.
- Swyngedouw, M., & Van Craen, M. (2002). *Het Vlaams Blok: Een Overzichtsstudie* [The Vlaams Belang: An overview study]. Instituut voor Sociaal en Politiek Opinieonderzoek, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven.
- Van Biezen, I. (2014). The end of party democracy as we know it? A tribute to Peter Mair. *Irish Political Studies*, 29(2), 177–193.
- Van Biezen, I., Mair, P., & Poguntke, T. (2012). Going, going... gone? The decline of party membership in contemporary Europe. *European Journal of Political Research*, 51(1), 24–56.
- Van Haute, E., & Pauwels, T. (2016). The Vlaams Belang: Party organization and party dynamics. In R. Heinisch & O. Mazzoleni (Eds.), *Understanding populist party organisation* (pp. 49–77). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Van Haute, E., Amjahad, A., Borriello, A., Close, C., & Sandri, G. (2013). Party members in a pillarised party-tocracy. An empirical overview of party membership figures and profiles in Belgium. *Acta Politica*, 48(1), 68–91.
- Van Oorschot, W. (2000). Who should get what, and why? On deservingness criteria and the conditionality of solidarity among the public. *Policy & Politics*, 28(1), 33–48.
- andeputte, B., & De Smedt, P. (2019, November 15). Vlaams Belang gaf sinds maart al 1,2 miljoen euro uit aan advertenties op Facebook, veel meer dan de andere partijen [Vlaams Belang spent 1.2 million euro on Facebook advertisements since March, much more than other parties]. *VRT*. <https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2019/11/15/politieke-partijen-blijven-campagne-voeren>

- Vlaams Belang. (2019a, September 28). *Missie 2024* [Mission 2024]. <https://www.vlaamsbelang.org/missie-2024>
- Vlaams Belang. (2019b). *Eerst Onze Mensen: Verkiezingsprogramma 2019* [Our people first: Election programme 2019]. <https://www.vlaamsbelang.org/programma>
- Vlaams Belang Geraardsbergen. (2020, October 25). *DOE MEE! Registreer u als VB-kiezer en krijg van ons een gratis mondmasker opgestuurd via www.vlaamsbelang.org/doemee* [TAKE PART! Register yourself as a VB-voter and get a free facemask sent to you via [www.vlaamsbelang.org/doemee](http://www.vlaamsbelang.org/doemee)] [Facebook status update]. <https://www.facebook.com/251314822084953/posts/doe-mee-registreer-u-als-vb-kiezer-en-krijg-van-ons-een-gratis-mondmasker-opgest/774881656394931>
- Vlaams Belang supremos censured following Golden Dawn outing. (2016, November 21). *VRT*. [https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/en/2016/11/21/vlaams\\_belang\\_supremoscensuredfollowinggoldendawnouting-1-2824252](https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/en/2016/11/21/vlaams_belang_supremoscensuredfollowinggoldendawnouting-1-2824252)
- Vlaams Belang voert actie tijdens ‘halalbarbecue’ [Vlaams Belang takes action during ‘hallal-barbecue’]. (2012, June 14). *Knack*. <https://www.knack.be/nieuws/belgie/vlaams-belang-voert-actie-tijdens-halalbarbecue/article-normal-58594.html>
- Vlaams Belang ziet ledenaantal stevig stijgen [Vlaams Belang sees membership numbers increase substantially]. (2021, June 18). *HLN*. <https://www.hln.be/nieuws/vlaams-belang-ziet-ledenaantal-stevig-stijgen~a81ad01d>
- Vlaeminck, N. (2018, January 23). Ondanks hoeraberichten: Steeds minder partijleden [Despite celebratory messages: Still fewer party members]. *VRT*. <https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2018/01/23/steeds-minder-politieke-partijleden>
- Wauters, B., & Pittoors, G. (2019). Populist party leaders in Belgium: An analysis of VB and PVDA-PTB. *Polish Political Science Review*, 7(1), 1–23.

### About the Author

**Judith Sijstermans** (PhD) is a research fellow at the University of Birmingham on the Survival of the Mass Party project, funded by the ESRC, where she focuses on the Flemish case of the Vlaams Belang. She has previously worked on territorial politics and completed her PhD at the University of Edinburgh.

Article

## Is the (Mass) Party Really Over? The Case of the Dutch Forum for Democracy

Léonie de Jonge

European Politics and Society, University of Groningen, The Netherlands; E-Mail: [leonie.de.jonge@rug.nl](mailto:leonie.de.jonge@rug.nl)

Submitted: 15 May 2021 | Accepted: 11 August 2021 | Published: 24 November 2021

### Abstract

Over the past decades, the Netherlands has witnessed the rise of several influential populist radical right parties, including the Pim Fortuyn List (Lijst Pim Fortuyn), Geert Wilders's Party for Freedom (Partij voor de Vrijheid) and, more recently, the Forum for Democracy (Forum voor Democratie [FvD]). By analyzing the party's organizational structures, this article seeks to determine whether the FvD may be considered a new "mass party" and to what extent ordinary members can exert influence over the party's internal procedures. The party's efforts to establish a large membership base suggest that the FvD set out to build a relatively complex mass organization. Through targeted advertising campaigns, the party made strategic use of social media platforms to rally support. Thus, while the means may have changed with the advent of the internet, the FvD invested in creating some organizational features that are commonly associated with the "mass party" model. At the same time, however, the party did not really seek to foster a community of loyal partisan activists among its membership base but instead treated its members as donors. The party is clearly characterized by centralized leadership in the sense that the party's spearhead, Thierry Baudet, maintains full control over key decision-making areas such as ideological direction, campaigning, and internal procedures. At first sight, the party appears to have departed from Wilders's leader-centered party model. However, a closer look at the party apparatus demonstrates that the FvD is, in fact, very hierarchical, suggesting that the party's internal democracy is much weaker than the party's name might suggest.

### Keywords

Forum for Democracy; mass parties; party organization; populist radical right; the Netherlands

### Issue

This article is part of the issue "Right-Wing Populist Party Organisation Across Europe: The Survival of the Mass-Party?" edited by Daniele Albertazzi (University of Surrey, UK) and Stijn van Kessel (Queen Mary University of London, UK).

© 2021 by the author; licensee Cogitatio (Lisbon, Portugal). This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

### 1. Introduction

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, the Netherlands has witnessed the rise of several influential populist radical right parties (PRRPs), including the Pim Fortuyn List (Lijst Pim Fortuyn [LPF]); Geert Wilders's Party for Freedom (Partij voor de Vrijheid [PVV]); and more recently, the Forum for Democracy (Forum voor Democratie [FvD]), led by far-right political newcomer, Thierry Baudet. The electoral rise of the FvD was remarkable by any measure. Founded as a Eurosceptic think tank in 2015, the FvD entered parliament for the first time after garnering 1.8% of the vote in the 2017 general election, thereby winning two of the 150 seats in the Dutch House of Representatives.

In March 2019, the FvD became the largest party in the Dutch Senate after winning nearly 15% of the vote in the Dutch provincial elections. In January 2020, the FvD announced that it had become "the biggest party in the Netherlands by membership" (FvD, 2020a), thereby surpassing traditional "mass parties," including the social-democratic Labor Party (Partij van de Arbeid [PvdA]), the Christian-democratic Christian Democratic Appeal (Christen-Democratisch Appèl [CDA]), and the liberal People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie [VVD]).

The FvD's "success story" was momentarily offset in November 2020, when renewed allegations surfaced over right-wing extremist tendencies within the party's youth wing Youth Organization Forum for Democracy

(Jongerenorganisatie Forum voor Democratie [Jfvd]). In the run-up to the 2021 general election, these accusations resulted in mounting public pressure on the party leadership to distance itself from these extremist messages. When Baudet refused to give in to demands to take more drastic measures (e.g., by dissolving the youth wing), underlying tension between the more moderate and radical factions within the party erupted into an open dispute, which resulted in an exodus of prominent party members. Despite the party's episodic decline in the opinion polls, the FvD became the largest "net winner" in the 2021 general election; by garnering 5% of the vote, the party managed to quadruple its parliamentary seats from two to eight. However, in May 2021—just eight weeks after the said election—three FvD representatives split off and set up a new party called Interest of the Netherlands (Belang van Nederland), thereby reducing the FvD's number of seats in the Dutch House of Representatives from eight to five.

The advent of the FvD initiated a new phase in the history of right-wing populism in the Netherlands, characterized by competition within the PRRP family. Indeed, since May 2021, the country has had four PRRPs with parliamentary representation: the PVV; the FvD; and two FvD breakaway-parties, i.e., the Right Answer 2021 (Juiste Antwoord 2021), led by Joost Eerdmans, and Interest of the Netherlands, run by Wybren van Haga. Despite obvious ideological similarities, there are noteworthy differences between these parties—not least in terms of party organization. This contribution particularly focuses on the FvD's party apparatus. While Wilders's PVV is known for its extremely leader-centered party model that does not accept any members other than Wilders himself (see Vossen, 2013), the FvD set out to build a more complex mass organization. Given the costs associated with maintaining large organizations (de Lange & Art, 2011), it is worth asking why the FvD has committed itself to such an endeavor. Moreover, while we have witnessed the decline of traditional "mass parties," as evidenced by falling membership numbers and shrinking electoral support (Mair, 2013), we have also seen the rise of populist parties that criticize their mainstream competitors for being out of touch with voters (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2015; van Kessel, 2015). This begs the question of whether PRRPs "represent the nail in the coffin for the age of party politics or whether they may be able to revitalize the latter" (de Jonge, 2021, p. 196). Specifically, can the FvD be considered a new mass party, thereby challenging claims about the alleged disappearance of such parties (e.g., Young, 2013)?

To answer this question, it is necessary to delineate the key features of the mass party organizational model. Drawing on the academic literature (e.g., Duverger, 1951; Katz & Mair, 1995), three core characteristics can be discerned, as detailed in the introduction of this thematic issue (see Albertazzi & van Kessel, 2021). First, mass parties strive to recruit a large, activist membership through which they seek to reach out to the wider public, for

instance, by campaigning and canvassing. Second, unlike cartel parties, mass parties are firmly rooted on the ground and provide a variety of activities for their members (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2015). Third, mass parties promote social integration among their members and seek to establish "collective identities through ideology" (Panebianco, 1988, p. 268), notably by fostering closed political communities of partisan activists (Albertazzi, 2016). However, this is not to say that intra-party democracy is necessarily well-developed within mass parties (see Panebianco, 1988).

The aim of this article is twofold. First, it examines whether and to what extent the FvD can be considered a new mass party. Second, it analyzes the extent to which power has remained centralized in terms of key decision-making areas such as ideological direction, campaigning, and internal procedures. The article is empirical in nature. Methodologically, it employs a qualitative case study analysis. Given the novelty of the FvD, scholarly accounts of the party remain relatively scarce. As a result, empirical support is drawn from a range of primary and secondary sources, including official party documentation (i.e., programmes, manifestos, statutes, web content, and social media posts) as well as journalistic accounts (i.e., newspaper articles, media interviews, chronicles, and books). Where appropriate, direct and indirect quotations and references to works originally in Dutch have been translated into English by the author.

In a nutshell, the findings indicate that although the FvD showed considerable effort to develop a rather complex, mass party-type organization, the party eventually turned into a textbook case of a "personal party" (McDonnell, 2013) that came to be strongly associated with and dependent on its founder-leader, Baudet. The argument proceeds as follows. The next section provides a brief overview of the party's history, ideology, and electoral evolution. The third section analyzes the FvD's initial efforts to build a mass-party organization. The fourth section shows that the party organization is, in fact, deeply hierarchical, thereby indicating that the party's internal democracy is much weaker than the party's name might suggest. The conclusion reflects on the wider implications of the findings by discussing PRRP organization and placing the evolution of the FvD in the context of the history of the Dutch far-right.

## 2. The Rise, Fall, and Revival of the Forum for Democracy

The FvD was registered as a political party in September 2016 to improve the general state of democracy in the Netherlands by "breaking through the party cartel" and giving Dutch voters a greater say in the decision-making process through binding referendums, popular initiatives, directly elected mayors, and e-democracy (FvD, 2016, p. 1). Accordingly, the FvD's 2017 party manifesto focused primarily on democratic reform as well as Dutch

sovereignty and independence from the European Union (FvD, 2017).

Ideologically, the FvD can broadly be classified as a PRRP, characterized by nativism, authoritarianism, and populism (Otjes, 2020). However, it is useful to differentiate between the comparatively “moderate” official party manifesto and the more radical and, at times, extremist messages voiced by the party leader, Baudet. In 2015, for instance, Baudet expressed his wish for a “predominantly white Europe” (Oudenampsen, 2020, p. 208). In 2017, he warned about the alleged “homoeopathic dilution of the Dutch population” with people from other cultures, thereby popularizing the extreme-right Great Replacement conspiracy theory (Couperus & Tortola, 2019, p. 113).

As mentioned earlier, the electoral rise of the FvD was truly spectacular. The party first entered parliament in the 2017 general election with just under 2% of the vote but gained substantially more votes in the 2019 regional and European elections, in which it won nearly 15% and 11%, respectively. While the FvD’s objectives and programme initially seemed fairly consistent, tensions soon emerged between the moderate and radical factions within the party. In February 2018, the Executive Board first expelled internal party critics (Aalberts, 2020, p. 115). In July 2019, co-founder and FvD Senator Henk Otten was ousted over allegations of fraud after having publicly accused Baudet of “pulling the party too far to the right” (as cited in de Koning & de Witt Wijnen, 2019). Following Otten’s departure, support for the party plummeted in the opinion polls from approximately 14% in July 2019 to about 8% in September 2019 (Louwerse, 2020). The downward spiral continued in 2020 when the FvD lost some of its credibility as a “more reasonable” alternative to the PVV when Baudet (who had initially pushed for stricter lockdown measures) became a vocal ally of anti-lockdown protests and voiced support for Covid-19 conspiracy theories (Korteweg & Mebius, 2020).

In November 2020, the Amsterdam-based newspaper *Het Parool* published an article containing evidence of anti-Semitic, homophobic, and racist messages being spread on the JFvD’s internal message boards, including Instagram and WhatsApp (Botje & Cohen, 2020). This was not the first time that the party’s youth branch had been accused of harboring right-wing extremist sympathies: In April 2020, the Dutch monthly magazine *HP/De Tijd* already reported that JFvD members were sharing “expressions that correspond to authoritarian, fascist and/or National Socialist ideas, including anti-Semitism, homophobia and racist imperialism” (van Dijk, 2020). In an attempt to ward off mounting pressure and to distance himself from these renewed allegations of extremism, Baudet renounced his position as lead candidate (*lijsttrekker*) for the 2021 general election but subsequently backtracked on his decision to resign. After seizing control of the FvD’s official social media channels, Baudet announced that he would be organizing a

“binding referendum,” asking members to decide on his fate as party leader. In response to this move, several prominent party representatives, including elected officials and election candidates, renounced their membership. On 4 December 2020, the FvD announced that only 9,000 members had voted against Baudet, while 76% of the approximately 37,000 participating members supported his reign, thereby ending the leadership struggle (FvD, 2020b).

In the run-up to the 2021 general election, FvD launched a Trump-like campaign by touring through Dutch towns in a “freedom caravan,” with which it claimed to “set the Netherlands free” from what it perceived to be oppressive lockdown measures, thereby mobilizing anti-lockdown supporters from across the political spectrum. This strategy proved fairly effective; according to a post-electoral survey conducted by Ipsos, 73% of FvD voters stated that the Covid-19 measures played an important role in determining their vote (“Welke rol speelde,” 2021). While the party managed to make a comeback in the 2021 general election by winning 5% of the vote, it was unable to return to its glory days of 2019.

Having traced the party’s origins and electoral trajectory, the following section examines the FvD’s party organization in the run-up to the 2021 general election. By studying the party’s organizational structures, recruitment strategies, and use of social media, and by reflecting on the party’s motivations for cultivating a large membership, it ultimately seeks to determine whether and to what extent the FvD can be considered a new mass party.

### 3. Efforts to Build a Mass Party

#### 3.1. Party Organization

According to the party statutes, the FvD is formally composed of two party organs: the General Assembly (*Algemene Vergadering*), which is accessible to all members, and the Executive Board (*Partijbestuur*), consisting of a minimum of three people (FvD, 2016). When the party was set up in 2016, the Executive Board was composed of Baudet, who assumed the role of party chairman; Otten, who served as treasurer; and Rob Rooker, who became the party secretary. According to Chris Aalberts, who chronicled the FvD’s rise from its inception, Rooker’s role remained limited to maintaining the party website (Aalberts, 2020, p. 105), while Baudet served as “poster boy,” and Otten became the “organizational motor” behind the party (Aalberts, 2020, p. 50). It was under Otten’s impetus that the FvD set out to build a functioning party apparatus.

Having been a member of various political parties in the past, Otten was not interested in building a traditional party with conferences, regional branches, and membership councils; instead, he preferred an agile “lean and mean” organization built around a small team and operated according to “business principles”

(Aalberts, 2020, p. 103). Indeed, in its early days, the FvD resembled a company rather than a political party. According to Aalberts (2020, p. 104), the FvD was set up like a start-up: “as small, efficient and agile as possible.” As such, the party’s initial goal was to develop a marketing plan and create a sustainable budget.

After entering parliament in 2017, the FvD set up three auxiliary organizations: a youth wing (JFvD), a think tank (Renaissance Institute), and a foundation (Forum for Democracy International). Between 2018 and 2019, the party was also represented at the municipal, provincial, and European levels. At the same time, the party started to recruit a large membership. In January 2018, the party had already attracted nearly 23,000 members, and by 2020 that number had nearly doubled to almost 44,000 members (Documentatiecentrum Nederlandse Politieke Partijen [DNPP], 2021a), as it overtook traditional mass parties and became the largest party by membership in the Netherlands (see Figure 1). In 2021, the party reported that total membership numbers had increased to 45,322. It is worth mentioning, however, that the accuracy of this figure is questionable. As mentioned earlier, nearly 9,000 members had voted against Baudet in an internal referendum on his party leadership in December 2020, and it is likely that some of these members subsequently left the party (DNPP, 2021b).

After winning the provincial elections in March 2019, the FvD transitioned from its “start-up” period to a “scale-up” phase, during which it sought to build on its initial electoral breakthrough by growing into a stable organization (Aalberts, 2020, p. 213). However, tensions in the party leadership started to mount, particularly between Baudet and Otten. In the battle over the ideological and organizational course of the party, Baudet emerged victorious. Three weeks after winning

the 2019 provincial elections, the party’s Executive Board was expanded with trustees of Baudet (Aalberts, 2020, p. 165). One of them, Paul Frentrop, was charged with the organizational development of the party, thereby effectively side-lining Otten, who renounced his board functions several days later and was formally expelled in July 2019. During the internal turmoil in 2020, the party witnessed a series of internal reshuffles and personnel changes. In the run-up to the 2021 general election, a new five-member Executive Board was installed with Baudet as party Chairman (FvD, 2021).

Given the party’s drive to recruit a large membership, it may be tempting to conclude that the FvD assumed a key feature of the traditional mass-party model. However, as shown below, most of these members never assumed an activist role; in fact, they primarily served as donors rather than actual party members. More generally, in terms of party organization, it seems fair to state that the FvD is managed through a relatively simple structure and by a small group of people.

### 3.2. Recruitment Strategies

The party’s rapid growth can largely be attributed to its recruitment strategies, which formed part of Otten’s “business plan.” In an interview with *de Volkskrant* in 2018, Otten famously described the FvD as a “media company with a political branch” (as cited in Hendrickx & Mebius, 2018). As such, the FvD sought to maintain a strong media presence, which, in turn, can largely be attributed to the party’s flamboyant leader, Baudet, who repeatedly managed to draw considerable attention through scandalous social media posts and controversial comments and actions (see de Jonge, 2021, p. 191). In 2018, for instance, he made the national

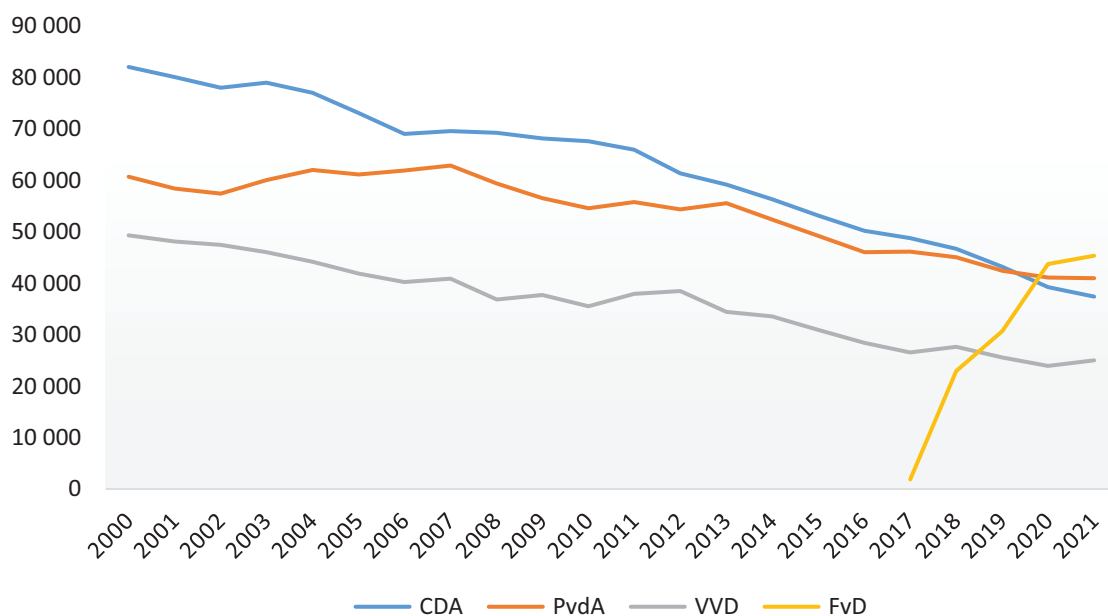


Figure 1. Party membership in the Netherlands between 2000–2021. Source: DNPP (2021a).

news after sharing a picture on Instagram in which he posed naked at the edge of a swimming pool (“Vakantiefoto van naakte,” 2018). Having crossed the threshold of parliamentary representation, Baudet continued to make headlines with his “unconventional” behavior, for instance, by giving his maiden speech in Latin, or participating in a parliamentary debate while wearing a dysfunctional military vest to illustrate the alleged lack of funding for the armed forces. In the aftermath of the 2019 provincial elections, his victory speech was dubbed “the most remarkable victory speech in Dutch political history” (Tempelman, 2019). Through scandals and ambivalent messages, Baudet also managed to attract considerable media attention in the run-up to the 2021 election (see Aaldering & van der Pas, 2021). This media strategy partly helps explain the meteoric rise of the FvD, as it allowed the party to make a name for itself and attract a wider audience.

Apart from its vast media presence, the FvD also has a strong track record in organizing physical events in every corner of the country to recruit new supporters. In its pre-partisan days, when the FvD was still a think tank, it regularly hosted discussion evenings with lectures and drinks (the so-called *borrellezingen*) in the basement of a canal house in Amsterdam. From 2017 onwards, the FvD sought to reach a wider audience. To this end, the FvD rented out fancy conference locations such as the RAI Amsterdam Convention Centre or large theatre buildings for so-called “members’ days,” campaign evenings, and party conferences. For these show-like events, the FvD hired hostesses through hospitality agencies to surround the all-male party leadership and give the event “the right look” (Aalberts, 2020, p. 16). These large-scale events were primarily geared at self-promotion as well as attracting new members and funding. According to Aalberts (2020, p. 98), the FvD party conferences were mostly about “product presentation” as opposed to members’ participation. Indeed, it appears that during this early phase, the party was not particularly interested in recruiting partisan activists because the Executive Board (notably Otten) felt that they might pose a potential risk to the strict party hierarchy. In fact, when it came to canvassing, Otten preferred working with freelancers instead of volunteers because they could be hired and fired as needed (Aalberts, 2020, p. 106).

The recruitment of loyal partisan activists was largely left in the hands of the Renaissance Institute. From its inception, the FvD’s in-house think tank took charge of organizing lectures as well as summer and winter schools for young, ambitious, and ideologically like-minded followers. During these academic retreats, a selective group of young FvD supporters are invited to “delve into Western tradition, philosophy, political theory and practice” (Renaissance Instituut, 2020). It is here that we can observe some effort to create a closed, political community of activists and foster some form of collective identity through ideology. Besides lectures and discussions, participants also engage in sports, singing, workshops,

and lavish dinner parties. On the one hand, these educational activities form part of the party’s wider metapolitical struggle to influence politics through culture and ideas. On the other hand, they can be seen as a means for the party to recruit qualified personnel and train loyal activists.

Given the rapid growth of the party, the FvD was soon confronted with staffing shortages. To this end, the Executive Board launched a nationwide “speed-dating” operation. Using social media, Baudet called on members interested in becoming activists to sign up to their regional chapter (Baudet, 2018). The idea behind the speed-dating activities was to recruit and screen potential candidates to fill the regional lists. Candidates were also asked to take a personality test. The aim was to set up diverse teams to avoid internal turmoil—a strategy that initially appeared to bear fruit (Aalberts, 2020, p. 152).

In the scale-up phase, FvD events became more frequent and widespread throughout the country. The party announced that it would provide regular “members drinks” (*ledenborrels*) in all provinces, as well as regular discussion evenings, meetings, and courses (Aalberts, 2020, pp. 213–214). Following Otten’s departure, the party also increasingly started to rely on the help of volunteers. For instance, the FvD website started to invite visitors to become active, notably by distributing flyers, posters, and party newspapers, and by assisting on market stalls or amplifying online content.

Overall, it can be stated that from its inception, the FvD relied on the media to gain national visibility and recruit a large membership base. However, in its early phases (particularly under Otten), the party was very reluctant to accept partisan activists into its ranks for fear that they might challenge the party hierarchy. Therefore, the recruitment of loyal activists and qualified personnel was outsourced to the partisan think tank, which offered a contained and controlled environment for the careful cultivation of loyal activists. When faced with staffing shortages, however, the party began to rely more on the support of activist members. Thus, particularly after Otten’s departure, the FvD started to bear more resemblance to a traditional “mass party,” characterized by a large, activist membership, rootedness on the ground, and the cultivation of a shared identity through ideology.

### 3.3. Use of Social Media

To mobilize members and activists, the party also heavily relied on social media. In 2017, the FvD spent 77% (904,569 euros) of its budget on campaigning and membership recruitment (FvD, 2018). A substantial portion of that money (240,468 euros) was invested in advertisement on social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, for which the party spent about three times as much as any other political party (Beune & Davidson, 2020). In 2019, the FvD launched one of the largest social media campaigns in the history of Dutch

politics (Snelderwaard & van den Berg, 2020). By micro-targeting potential supporters, the party managed to build a large membership base from scratch. Moreover, in the run-up to the 2019 European elections, the FvD announced its plans to build its own television studio, and in January 2020, Baudet started presenting a weekly “news show” on YouTube entitled *FvD Journaal*, which regularly attracts more than 60,000 viewers. On the one hand, this initiative reflects the party’s deep mistrust of traditional media outlets, which it seeks to bypass through social media. On the other hand, it can be seen as a way of recruiting new members to generate income. As shown below, there was a clear financial incentive behind growing a large membership base.

### 3.4. Reasons for Cultivating a Large Membership

When drawing up the party statutes, Otten sought inspiration from other parties, notably the center-right CDA and VVD. He also added his own input based on his experience with the LPF. After the murder of Pim Fortuyn in 2002, Otten briefly joined the LPF, which succumbed to infighting soon after having crossed the threshold of parliamentary representation. The implosion of the LPF was partly due to the lack of a functioning party apparatus (de Lange & Art, 2011). When setting up the FvD, Otten sought to avoid the weak organizational features of the LPF, notably by designing a simple and hierarchical party structure in which the party leadership would keep tight control over the organization to avoid internal dissension.

At the same time, however, Otten drew lessons from the structural limitations of the PVV. To avoid some of the organizational weaknesses of the LPF, Wilders deliberately designed a political party that would not accept any members other than Wilders himself (de Lange & Art, 2011). While this allowed Wilders to maintain a certain degree of cohesion and unity in his party, it prevented him from tapping into substantive amounts of funding. Dutch party financing law stipulates that political parties only qualify for subsidies if they have at least 1,000 members who have voting rights and pay a contribution fee of at least 12 euros per year (Overheid, 2013). Therefore, the PVV cannot apply for state subsidies or receive any funding through membership contributions. Otten purposely sought to overcome these financial shortcomings by expanding the FvD membership base.

Prospective FvD members are offered a choice of three payment options (i.e., 25, 50, or 100 euros), which they can choose to pay on a monthly or yearly basis. In 2017, FvD members paid an average of 30 euros for a membership card, so with approximately 20,000 members the party managed to raise over half a million euros through membership fees (den Hartog, 2019). In 2020, FvD members paid approximately 31 euros on average, resulting in 1,335,173 euros of income (l’Ami & Wijnen, 2020). Membership contributions are subsequently matched with state subsidies. The amount of

state subsidies varies every year, but in 2017, the FvD received a subsidy of 7 euros per member (den Hartog, 2019), resulting in an additional income of approximately 140,000 euros. The FvD received further subsidies for holding seats in parliament and for setting up a think tank and youth wing—although it is worth noting here that the party had to pay back some of these subsidies because of its faulty administration (see l’Ami et al., 2020).

While it is difficult to gauge the exact reasons behind the FvD’s organization model, it seems fairly obvious that Otten’s decision to adopt certain elements of a mass party-type organization (notably a large membership base) was primarily driven by financial considerations. In an interview with *Het Parool* in 2019, Otten spoke openly about his financial strategy for the FvD and the party’s ambition to recruit a large membership base:

As far as members are concerned, it’s a zero-sum game....It’s one pot, one pizza. And your pizza slice gets bigger with a larger membership. Plus, the amount that we receive is at the expense of established political parties. So for the FvD, the knife cuts both ways. The cartel parties receive less money and the FvD more. A very healthy dynamic for us. (as cited in den Hartog, 2019)

In other words, by attracting members and acquiring state subsidies, the FvD sought to strengthen its own (financial) position whilst at the same time working towards its main goal to “breakthrough the party cartel.” By doing so, the FvD adopted some features of the mass-party model, notably the drive to recruit a large membership (albeit a largely non-activist one), the provision of a variety of activities for these members (e.g., drinks and debates), and the creation of a closed, activist community through its proxy organizations (i.e., the Renaissance Institute). This enabled the FvD to grow from a newcomer to an influential political movement in less than four years. Following Otten’s departure, the organizational development of the party was effectively put on hold and power was centralized in the hands of Baudet.

Having discerned the key features of the FvD’s party apparatus, the following section analyzes whether and to what extent FvD members can exert influence over key decision-making areas.

## 4. Centralization of Power and (Lack of) Internal Democracy

The FvD is managed through a relatively simple structure, with power concentrated in the hands of the party leadership. In its early days, the FvD was entirely run by the self-proclaimed “cockpit,” composed of co-founders Baudet and Otten, alongside Otten’s right-hand man Jeroen de Vries and Theo Hiddema, a popular lawyer and media personality who long represented the FvD in parliament. It was this core group that leased a



Jaguar to drive to every corner of the country to campaign. Apparently, all key decisions were taken in the car (Aalberts, 2020, pp. 15, 104). A closer look at the party statutes confirms that all power resides with the Executive Board. For instance, the board is authorized to direct all activities within the party, including drawing up the agenda, preparing and implementing the decisions taken during the general assembly, and changing the party statutes (FvD, 2016, p. 7). Crucially, the Executive Board is also in charge of nominating and appointing its own members, including the party chairman, treasurer, and secretary (FvD, 2016, p. 8).

Furthermore, the Executive Board decides over party policies at the European, national, regional, and local levels. In other words, European, regional, and local subdivisions are kept on a very short leash and they are not recognized as independent party organs. This became evident in the run-up to the communal elections in 2018, when the FvD decided against setting up local branches; instead, the party announced its plans to forge alliances with existing local parties. The idea behind the alliance model was to set up “franchises,” notably by lending the FvD’s “brand” to local party structures, hence giving it a presence at the sub-national level. Accordingly, the party set up loose ties with *Livable Rotterdam* (*Leefbaar Rotterdam*) which had won the municipal elections in 2002 under the leadership of Pim Fortuyn. Apart from some joint campaigning, however, the association between the FvD and *Livable Rotterdam* was never formalized, and the “alliance model” subsided soon after the 2018 election (Aalberts, 2020, p. 128).

In the run-up to the 2019 provincial elections, the FvD eventually found sufficient candidates to participate in all twelve provinces; yet, unlike most other parties, the FvD ran a national campaign. In other words, the Executive Board remained fully in charge of selecting and appointing loyal FvD candidates, and subsequently instructed them not to participate in debates, talk to the press, campaign, or make any political statements whatsoever (Aalberts, 2020, p. 148). Incidentally, the party’s youth wing also adheres to the strict party hierarchy; instead of criticizing or challenging the FvD’s course, the JFvD seems to have adopted a support role, notably by helping the party organize events and campaign online.

Based on these observations, it seems fair to state that all decision-making power is concentrated in the hands of a small circle of party elites. As such, party members do not have a say over key decision-making areas such as ideological direction, campaigning, or internal procedures. As mentioned in the previous section, the FvD is officially composed of two organs: the General Assembly and the Executive Board. Given the party’s focus on direct democracy, it is not surprising that the party statutes officially state that the General Assembly is “the highest organ of the party” (FvD, 2016, p. 5). Accordingly, members can formally decide on the party’s political line during the general assembly. In practice, however, the influence of FvD members remains limited.

As Aalberts (2020, p. 90) has observed, members generally assume the role of donors in the sense that they provide the party with financial support without necessarily being willing or able to affect the decision-making process. In fact, it is very difficult for FvD members to exert influence over the agenda. Members can send in suggestions four weeks before the general assembly, but there are no transparent procedures in place to make such suggestions; ultimately, the board decides which items will be discussed. Moreover, members cannot appoint or nominate board members or candidates for local, national, or European elections; they can only vote for candidates that the Executive Board has nominated. Similarly, members can only suspend or expel board members by a two-thirds majority, and only if at least two thirds of all members are present to take part in the vote (FvD, 2016, p. 7). With current membership numbers, some 30,000 members would need to be present at the general assembly to take any sort of action against the board. For the members to exert more influence, the party statutes would have to be altered. However, this would be very difficult to achieve given the limitations listed above. To propose an amendment, the suggested alterations would need to be put on the agenda for the general assembly, and a two-thirds majority would subsequently be needed to formalize the amendment.

Thus, contrary to what the party’s name might suggest, the FvD does not facilitate any internal democracy whatsoever. In fact, Baudet rules by decree. This became even more obvious in November 2020, when Baudet effectively made use of the rigid party hierarchy to stifle internal criticism. After fellow board members had renounced Baudet’s party membership, the latter hijacked the party’s social media channels to announce that he would be organizing a “binding referendum” on his fate as party leader—an instrument that is not enshrined in the party statutes. The referendum was completely untransparent but ultimately settled the leadership question, thereby cementing Baudet’s autocratic powers within the FvD. Organizationally as well as ideologically, the FvD eventually became what Baudet wanted it to be. Considering these observations, we can conclude that the FvD’s party organization is deeply hierarchical and completely undemocratic.

## 5. Conclusion

This article set out to determine whether the FvD has assumed any features of the traditional mass party, and to what extent ordinary members have been able to exert influence on the party’s internal procedures. The findings indicate that, at least initially, the FvD strategically assumed some organizational features typically associated with the mass party. Specifically, the FvD sought to attract a large membership base. Through targeted advertising campaigns, the party made deliberate use of social media platforms including Facebook

and Twitter to rally support and communicate with their voter base. At the same time, however, the party did not really seek to establish a large community of loyal partisan activists among its membership base. In other words, most individuals who joined the FvD served as donors rather than active participants in a movement. Thus, although the party has maintained a relatively large organization, it was never particularly well-rooted on the ground. While the party did make some attempts to foster a collective identity, notably by hosting events and courses through its auxiliary organizations, it only appeared to target a highly selective group of like-minded supporters. By doing so, the party apparently sought to consciously restrict members' influence over party strategy, candidate selection, and formulation of policy, thereby effectively maximizing Baudet's freedom to maneuver. Furthermore, the findings highlight that the FvD is managed through a simple structure and by a very small group of people. In fact, over the course of 2020, Baudet's power within the party became absolute. Contrary to what the party's name might suggest, the FvD never facilitated any internal democracy; instead, it became both centrally and vertically controlled by Baudet. In conclusion, the analysis presented above suggests that, in contrast to the traditional mass party, the FvD was never interested in actively engaging and socializing party members in long-term political associations (let alone enabling members to make their voices heard). Thus, if the FvD is a harbinger of the modern mass party, then the future of party politics looks rather bleak.

While the meteoric rise of the FvD was extraordinary, the internal dissension that befell the party in the run-up to the 2021 general election (and again shortly after that) was far from unique. New parties often run the risk of losing momentum after crossing the threshold of parliamentary representation, and there are countless examples of flash-in-the-pan PRRPs succumbing to infighting after their initial electoral breakthrough. The LPF in the Netherlands is a case in point. As de Lange and Art (2011, p. 1245) have observed, to achieve electoral persistence:

Radical right parties need to have more than just an appealing programme and a charismatic leader. They need to develop a party organization that is properly structured, and that is populated with competent people who support the goals of the party.

It is questionable whether the FvD has fully achieved this.

From a comparative point of view, the FvD stands out in the sense that it was conceived as a classical PRRP that combined organizational elements of the personal party (with Baudet acting as a quasi-authoritarian leader) with a fairly strong level of institutionalization (courtesy of Otten) from the start. Specifically, the party appears to have merged organizational elements from both of its predecessors, notably the LPF and the PVV. To avert the internal dissension that caused the demise of the LPF, the FvD opted for a hierarchical party model with

limited to no internal democracy. Indeed, in this respect, the FvD bears much resemblance to Wilders's "personal party" where power is entirely centralized in the hands of the founder-leader (see McDonnell, 2013). At the same time, however, the FvD drew lessons from the structural and financial limitations of the PVV, notably by creating a large membership base, which enabled the party to tap into considerable funding opportunities. At least in the short run, the combination of strong, centralized leadership with a solid institutional foundation and a large donor membership base serving as a "cash cow" has proven to be a fairly sustainable organizational model. To date, the party has been able to withstand setbacks and adapt to new political circumstances. As such, it managed to cut its losses and make a comeback just in time for the 2021 general election. However, whether the FvD can survive beyond the political lifespan of the founder-leader and whether the FvD's organizational model can stand the test of time remains to be seen.

### Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Niklas Abel for his excellent research assistance. I am also grateful to Daniele Albertazzi, Stijn van Kessel, and the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful feedback and comments.

### Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

### References

- Aalberts, C. (2020). *De partij dat ben ik: De politieke beweging van Thierry Baudet* [The party that is me: The political movement of Thierry Baudet]. Uitgeverij Jurgen Maas.
- Aaldering, L., & van der Pas, D. (2021, March 15). *Media-aandacht voor vrouwelijke lijsttrekkers* [Media attention for female party leaders]. *Stuk Rood Vlees*. <https://stukroodvlees.nl/media-aandacht-voor-vrouwelijke-lijsttrekkers>
- Albertazzi, D. (2016). Going, going,... not quite gone yet? 'Bossi's Lega' and the survival of the mass party. *Contemporary Italian Politics*, 8(2), 1–16.
- Albertazzi, D., & McDonnell, D. (2015). *Populists in power*. Routledge.
- Albertazzi, D., & van Kessel, S. (2021). Right-wing populist party organisation across Europe: The survival of the mass party? Introduction to the thematic issue. *Politics and Governance*, 9(4), 224–227.
- Baudet, T. [@thierrybaudet]. (2018, February 1). *Forum voor Democratie gaat een nieuwe fase in* [Forum for Democracy enters a new phase] [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/thierrybaudet/status/959175308963401729>
- Beune, C., & Davidson, D. (2020, March 26). Online jagen op de kiezer in tijden van corona, FvD voorop

- [Online hunting for the voter in times of corona, FvD first]. *VPRO*. <https://www.vpro.nl/argos/lees/nieuws/2020/online-jagen-op-de-kiezer.html>
- Botje, H. E., & Cohen, M. (2020, November 21). Nazi foto's geen bezwaar bij de jongeren van Forum voor Democratie [Nazi photos no objection to the youth of Forum for Democracy]. *Het Parool*. <https://www.parool.nl/nederland/nazifoto-s-geen-bezwaar-bij-de-jongeren-van-forum-voor-democratie~b634560c>
- Couperus, S., & Tortola, P. D. (2019). Right-wing populism's (ab)use of the past in Italy and the Netherlands. *Debats. Journal on Culture, Power and Society*, 4(2), 105–118. <https://doi.org/doi:10.28939/iam.debats-en.2019-9>
- de Jonge, L. (2021). *The success and failure of right-wing populist parties in the Benelux countries*. Routledge.
- de Koning, P., & de Witt Wijnen, P. (2019, April 20). Tweede man van Forum Henk Otten: 'Baudet trekt de partij te veel naar rechts' [Second man of Forum Henk Otten: 'Baudet pulls the party too much to the right']. *NRC Handelsblad*. <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2019/04/19/tweede-man-van-forum-henk-otten-baudet-trekt-de-partij-te-veel-naar-rechts>
- de Lange, S., & Art, D. (2011). Fortuyn versus Wilders: An agency-based approach to radical right party building. *West European Politics*, 34(6), 1229–1249.
- den Hartog, T. (2019, April 13). FvD maakt slimme keuzes om geld binnen te halen [FvD makes smart choices to bring in money]. *Het Parool*. <https://www.parool.nl/nieuws/fvd-maakt-slimme-keuzes-om-geld-binnen-te-halen~bb105947>
- Documentatiecentrum Nederlandse Politieke Partijen. (2021a). *Ledentallen per jaar* [Membership numbers per year]. [https://dnpp.nl/themas/lt/per\\_jaar](https://dnpp.nl/themas/lt/per_jaar)
- Documentatiecentrum Nederlandse Politieke Partijen. (2021b, February 18). *Persbericht ledentallen Nederlandse politieke partijen per 1 januari 2021* [Press release membership numbers of Dutch political parties as of 1 January 2021] [Press Release]. [https://dnpprepo.ub.rug.nl/86263/1/pers\\_lt\\_per01012021.pdf](https://dnpprepo.ub.rug.nl/86263/1/pers_lt_per01012021.pdf)
- Duverger, M. (1951). *Les partis politiques* [Political parties]. Armand Colin.
- FvD. (2016). *Statuten* [Statutes]. DNPP. <https://dnpprepo.ub.rug.nl/11144/1/FvD%20Statuten%202016.pdf>
- FvD. (2017). *Verkiezingsprogramma FvD* [Election programme FvD]. DNPP. [https://dnpprepo.ub.rug.nl/10938/1/FvD\\_verkprogTK2017.pdf](https://dnpprepo.ub.rug.nl/10938/1/FvD_verkprogTK2017.pdf)
- FvD. (2018, June 28). *FVD publiceert jaarrekening 2017* [FVD publishes annual accounts 2017] [Video]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sXeLhAYIEM8>
- FvD. (2020a). *Het is gelukt! Forum voor Democratie is de grootste ledenpartij van Nederland!* [It worked! Forum for Democracy is the largest member party in the Netherlands!]. FvD. <https://www.fvd.nl/fvd-forum-voor-democratie-grootste-ledenpartij-nederland>
- FvD. [@fvdemocratie]. (2020b, December 4). *De UITSLAG van het bindend referendum is binnen* [The results of the binding referendum are in] [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/fvdemocratie/status/1334907741123567617>
- FvD. (2021). *Partijbestuur* [Party board]. FvD. <https://www.fvd.nl/partij>
- Hendrickx, F., & Mebius, D. (2018, November 30). Henk Otten, grote man achter FvD: 'We zijn eigenlijk een mediabedrijf met een politieke tak' [Henk Otten, big man behind FvD: 'We are actually a media company with a political branch']. *de Volkskrant*. <https://www.volkskrant.nl/mensen/henk-otten-grote-man-achter-fvd-we-zijn-eigenlijk-een-mediabedrijf-met-een-politieke-tak~be6b6f42>
- Katz, R. S., & Mair, P. (1995). Changing models of party organization and party democracy: The emergence of the cartel party. *Party Politics*, 1(1), 5–28.
- Korteweg, A., & Mebius, D. (2020, October 30). Een dubbele aardverschuiving op radicaal rechts: waarom doet Wilders het opeens weer (veel) beter dan Baudet? [A double landslide on the radical right: why is Wilders suddenly again doing (much) better than Baudet?]. *de Volkskrant*. <https://www.volkskrant.nl/nieuws-achtergrond/een-dubbele-aardverschuiving-op-radicaal-rechts-waarom-doet-wilders-het-opeens-weer-veel-beter-dan-baudet~ba11555b>
- l'Ami, D., & Wijnen, J. (2020, October 14). Het financiële fundament onder Forum voor Democratie: Zuidas, vastgoed en orthodoxe christenen [The financial foundation under Forum for Democracy: Zuidas, real estate and Orthodox Christians]. *Follow the Money*. <https://www.ftm.nl/artikelen/het-financiele-fundament-onder-forum-voor-democratie>
- l'Ami, D., Wijnen, J., & Botje, H. E. (2020, December 17). Na jaren van laks boekhouden moet Forum voor Democratie ruim een ton subsidie terugbetalen, en dreigt een boete [After years of lax accounting, Forum for Democracy has to repay more than €100.000 of subsidy, and is threatened to be fined]. *Follow the Money*. <https://www.ftm.nl/artikelen/laks-boekhouden-boete-dreigt-forum-voor-democratie>
- Louwerse, T. (2020, December 1). Laatste cijfers [Latest figures]. *Peilingwijzer*. <https://peilingwijzer.tomlouwerse.nl/p/laatste-cijfers.html>
- Mair, P. (2013). *Ruling the void: The hollowing of Western democracy*. Verso.
- McDonnell, D. (2013). Silvio Berlusconi's personal parties: From Forza Italia to the Popolo della Libertà. *Political Studies*, 61(1), 217–233.
- Otjes, S. (2020). The fight on the right: What drives voting for the Dutch Freedom Party and for the Forum for Democracy? *Acta Politica*, 56, 130–162.
- Oudenampsen, M. (2020). *The rise of the Dutch new right: An intellectual history of the rightward shift in Dutch politics*. Routledge.

- Overheid. (2013, March 7). *Wet financiering politieke partijen* [Financing Political Parties Act]. <https://wetten.overheid.nl/BWBR0033004/2020-06-24>
- Panebianco, A. (1988). *Political parties: Organization and power*. Cambridge University Press.
- Renaissance Instituut. (2020). *Terugblik op de winterscholen van 2020!* [Looking back at the winter schools of 2020!]. [https://www.renaissanceinstituut.nl/terugblik\\_winterschool\\_2020](https://www.renaissanceinstituut.nl/terugblik_winterschool_2020)
- Snelderwaard, T., & van den Berg, E. (2020, April 8). Zo werd FvD de grootste partij van Nederland [This is how FvD became the largest party in the Netherlands]. *NPO3 Brandpunt+*. <https://www.npo3.nl/brandpuntplus/fvd-ledenwerving-facebook>
- Tempelman, O. (2019, March 21). De opmerkelijkste overwinningsspeech in de Nederlandse politieke geschiedenis ontleed [The most remarkable victory speech in Dutch political history dissected]. *de Volkskrant*. <https://www.volkskrant.nl/kijkverder/v/2019/minervas-uil-en-de-wedergeboorte-van-nederland-de-opmerkelijke-speech-van-thierry-baudet-ontleed>
- Vakantiefoto van naakte Thierry Baudet krijgt complimenten en kritiek [Holiday photo of naked Thierry Baudet gets compliments and criticism]. (2018, July 7). *NOS*. <https://nos.nl/artikel/2243931-vakantiefoto-van-naakte-thierry-baudet-krijgt-complimenten-en-kritiek.html>
- van Dijk, T. F. (2020, April 28). FVD-jongeren ‘fascistisch’ en ‘antisemitisch’ in appgroepen [FVD young people ‘fascist’ and ‘anti-Semitic’ in app groups]. *HP/De Tijd*. <https://www.hpdetijd.nl/2020-04-28/forum-voor-democratie-jongeren-fascistisch-en-antisemitisch-in-app-groep>
- van Kessel, S. (2015). *Populist parties in Western Europe: Agents of discontent?* Palgrave Macmillan.
- Vossen, K. (2013). *Rondom Wilders: Portret van de PVV* [About Wilders: Portrait of the PVV]. Boom.
- Welke rol speelde corona in het stemgedrag? [What role did corona play in voting behaviour?]. (2021, March 18). *NOS*. <https://nos.nl/collectie/13860/artikel/2373141-welke-rol-speelde-corona-in-het-stemgedrag>
- Young, L. (2013). Party members and intra-party democracy. In W. P. Cross & R. S. Katz (Eds.), *Political parties in advanced industrial democracies*. Oxford University Press.

#### About the Author



**Léonie de Jonge** is assistant professor in European politics and society at the University of Groningen. She holds a PhD in politics and international studies from the University of Cambridge. Her research focuses on populist radical right parties in Western Europe, with a particular focus on the Benelux region.

Article

## Between Horizontality and Centralisation: Organisational Form and Practice in the Finns Party

Niko Hatakka

Department of Political Science and International Studies, University of Birmingham, UK; E-Mail: [n.t.hatakka@bham.ac.uk](mailto:n.t.hatakka@bham.ac.uk)

Submitted: 28 May 2021 | Accepted: 31 August 2021 | Published: 24 November 2021

### Abstract

This article provides the first comprehensive analysis of the Finns Party's (Perussuomalaiset [PS]) formal organisation and how it operates in practice. Following the framework of this thematic issue, to what extent does the PS's organisation follow the mass-party model and how centralised is the party in its internal decision-making? Analysis of party documents, association registries, and in-depth interviews with 24 party elite representatives reveal that the PS has developed a complex organisational structure and internal democracy since 2008. However, the power of members in regard to the party's internal decision-making remains limited, despite the party's leadership having facilitated a more horizontal and inclusionary organisational culture after 2017. The study reveals how the party combines radically democratic elements of its leadership selection and programme development with a very high level of centralisation of formal power in the party executive, and how the party organisationally relies on a vast and autonomous but heterogeneous network of municipal associations. The article also discusses how PS elites perceive the advantages of having a wide and active organisation characterised by low entry and participation requirements, and how party-adjacent online activism both complements and complicates the functioning of the formal party organisation.

### Keywords

activism; Finns Party; party democracy; party organisation; populist radical right; social media

### Issue

This article is part of the issue "Right-Wing Populist Party Organisation Across Europe: The Survival of the Mass-Party?" edited by Daniele Albertazzi (University of Surrey, UK) and Stijn van Kessel (Queen Mary University of London, UK).

© 2021 by the author; licensee Cogitatio (Lisbon, Portugal). This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

### 1. Introduction

Various scholars have argued that European mainstream political parties have lost their connection with their grassroots and ceased to engage in actively fostering party activism (Katz & Mair, 1995; Mair, 2013). As mainstream parties have become less reliant on mass-membership organisations as a means to reach out to the public and to foster collective identities (Mair, 1989, pp. 176–179), they are witnessing falling membership numbers (van Biezen et al., 2012). As part of becoming so-called "cartel parties," mainstream parties' internal representative organs and "the party on the ground" have ostensibly diminished in their political relevance (Katz, 2002; Katz & Mair, 1995). Simultaneously, right-wing populist parties (RWPPs) have actively started to challenge mainstream political parties' claim to

power (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2015; van Kessel, 2015). In terms of their organisation, RWPPs have often been regarded as relying on centralised and charismatic leadership whilst remaining organisationally underdeveloped (Betz, 1998; Taggart, 2000). However, more recent empirical evidence suggests that several European RWPPs have developed enduring and complex mass-membership organisations through which they aim to foster loyal communities of activists—in other words, they have been argued to have adopted characteristics of the mass-party model (Albertazzi, 2016; Heinisch & Mazzoleni, 2016). These findings challenge the view that all right-wing populist mobilisations are fickle, highly personalised, and organisationally lean.

The task undertaken by this thematic issue is to analyse to what extent European RWPPs have invested in building organisations that rely heavily on the

involvement of activists on the ground, and to what extent the parties also grant members the opportunity to exercise meaningful influence over the party's internal decision-making. Utilising the analytical framework proposed by Albertazzi and van Kessel (2021), this article focuses on the Finns Party (Perussuomalaiset [PS]). Whereas the organisation of RWPPs in other Nordic countries has been studied (e.g., Jungar, 2016; Jupskås, 2016), little research has been done on the PS's current organisational structure or the party organisation's relationship with its members. Arter (2012, 2016) researched the early years of the PS, focusing especially on party-building as a project led by the long-term party leader, Timo Soini. Arter and Kestilä-Kekkonen (2014) described elements of the party's organisation in the early 2010s as part of their evaluation of the degree of the PS's electoral, internal, and legislative institutionalisation. Koiranen et al. (2017) conducted a survey with PS members providing analysis of the members' sociodemographic background and networks. Therefore, no previous study has made the PS's organisation and intra-party power relations the primary target of research.

This article provides the first comprehensive description and analysis of how the PS is formally structured and how informal organisational practices affect the functioning and centralisation of power within the party organisation. Via the analysis of party documents, association registries, and research interviews conducted with 24 members of the party's elite (see appendices 1 and 2 in the Supplementary File), this study addresses two core research questions. First, to what extent, how, and with what kind of success has the PS built a well-rooted party on the ground, sustained a significant base of members and activists, and attempted to preserve and to further ideological coherence within the party via its formal organisation? Second, how do the PS's organisational form and informal organisational practices affect the degree of centralisation in terms of the party's decision-making and internal democracy?

Methodologically, the study relies on qualitative analysis of a large number of semi-structured thematic party elite interviews. The interviews were conducted to gain insight into the PS's internal politics and communication structures, party elites' narratives regarding the methods and reasons for investing in and socialising activists on the ground, and informal practices that might advance or hinder the power of ordinary members. The interviews were also used to interrogate to what extent the party's formal structure and power relations institutionalised in the party's rules hold true in practice, requiring separate analysis of party documents (PS, 2009, 2013, 2021). All of the interviewed individuals have or had held one or several leading positions at different levels of the party organisation. The interviewees included two members of the party leadership, three current or former party secretaries, four members of the parliamentary group, a member of the party office staff, a member of the party executive, and seven regional leaders and six local leaders from

Central Finland and Southwest Finland. To complement the analysis of the research interviews and party documents, a quantitative description of the development of the party's member base and its network of associations was produced using data gathered from the archive of the Finnish Patent and Registry Office (Finnish Patent and Registry Office, 2021) and secondary sources (see appendix 4 in the Supplementary File).

### *1.1. Short History of the Finns Party*

The PS (commonly known internationally as the True Finns until 2011) was founded in October 1995 by politicians and activists from the Finnish Rural Party (Suomen Maaseudun Puolue [SMP]). The first decade of the PS was ideologically marked by the SMP's centre-leftist anti-establishment populism that targeted the "corrupt old parties" on behalf of the "forgotten people" of the Finnish periphery (Arter, 2012). As party leader, Timo Soini (1997–2017) built on the SMP's heritage to combine centre-leftist economic policies with social-conservative values, and a nostalgic patriotic longing for a Finnish heartland where one prioritises "home, religion, and the fatherland" (Vares, 2011, p. 33). In its first parliamentary elections in 1999, the PS proclaimed to be "the right-wing party of the poor," but ever since, the party leadership has downplayed ideological connections to both the left and right (Arter, 2016). Under the leadership of Jussi Halla-aho, the party has programmatically shifted economically to the right, heavily fortified its nativism and toned down its Christian and centre-left heritage, and can now be classified as a populist radical right party (Hatakka, 2021).

The PS's rise to power was long and arduous, but in the 2011 elections the party won 39 seats in the Finnish parliament. In 2015, the party lost only one seat and joined a coalition government for two years. Despite the party having appeared stable in its internal composition during the first electoral cycle after becoming a major party (Arter & Kestilä-Kekkonen, 2014), internal factionalism revolved around the personas of Timo Soini and Jussi Halla-aho. This eventually led to the split of the parliamentary group in 2017 after Halla-aho was elected as party leader (e.g., Nurmi, 2017). Despite initially losing half of its polled support after taking part in government, the party matched its representation in the 2019 parliamentary elections as the second-largest party in Finland. After that, the party's support has continued to grow. Thus, in terms of electoral institutionalisation, the PS has not only been able to create a stable position for itself in the Finnish party system (Arter & Kestilä-Kekkonen, 2014) but has also managed to strengthen its support and consolidate its ideological direction after a severe internal crisis. Following victorious municipal elections in 2021, the party's recently institutionalised populist radical right alignment was continued as the party's members elected Riikka Purra as Jussi Halla-aho's successor at the party's helm. An explanation for the party's quick

recovery and apparent stability in the face of internal turmoil and leadership change can be found in the party's rootedness on the ground.

## 2. The Finns Party on the Ground

To evaluate the extent to which the PS has adopted the mass-party model, in the next sections I will analyse the party's organisational extensiveness, practices of member recruitment and socialisation, the role of social media for party activism, and perceived advantages and disadvantages of maintaining a mass-membership organisation.

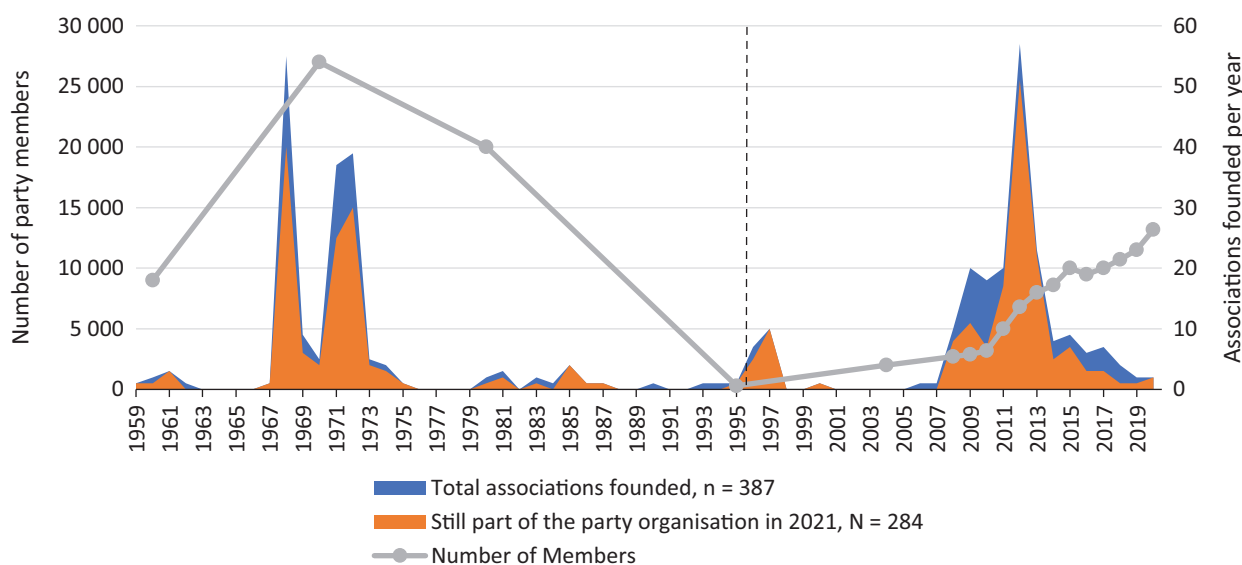
The PS is an officially registered party (Perussuomalaiset rp). The official organs of the registered party at the national level are: (1) party congress (*puoluekokous*), (2) party executive (*puoluehallitus*), (3) party council (*puoluevaltuusto*), (4) advisory assembly (*puolueneuvosto*), and (5) parliamentary group (*eduskuntaryhmä*). They facilitate intra-party decision-making and create and implement the party's programmes at the national level. However, to describe the party's organisational form, one cannot just focus on the registered party and its organisational bodies; the key role played by numerous party associations also needs to be recognised. The only official member associations of the PS are the 16 regional associations that each hosts between four and 28 municipal associations. In January 2021, the PS's regional associations hosted a total of 242 municipal associations. Additionally, there were 23 special interest associations that (like the municipal associations) are not officially member associations of the party. Lastly, there were two support associations: the Suomen Perusta think tank and the Pekasus centre for intra-party training. Therefore, in early 2021, the PS's organisation consisted of 284 officially recognised associations with their own rules and organisational bodies (Table 1).

**Table 1.** List of organisations recognised as part of the PS (January 2021).

1	Registered party
16	Regional associations
242	Municipal associations
20	Women's associations
1	Youth association
1	Men's association
1	Entrepreneurs' association
1	Think tank
1	Training centre
<hr/>	
TOTAL:	284 organisational entities

The PS's organisation has significantly widened since the late 2000s in terms of the numbers of members and party associations and their territorial coverage. This has happened mainly via the founding of new municipal and special interest associations and the reactivation of defunct regional and local SMP associations. Figure 1 presents a timeline of when PS associations were founded and how large a share of associations that at some point have been part of the party still remain party associations in the early 2020s. The timeline reveals three core findings: (1) The core of the PS's network of municipal associations was inherited from the SMP; (2) the current organisational width of the party organisation was established between 2008 and 2013; and (3) even though the party organisation's territorial expansion has nearly ceased during the current leadership, the party's membership numbers remain on the rise.

During 1995–2007, the PS relied organisationally mostly on the extant network of the SMP's local associations. After the SMP's demise, 117 SMP associations were appropriated as PS associations, at least



**Figure 1.** Number of SMP and PS associations founded annually and number of party members 1959–2020 (regarding the sources and method of data collection, see appendices 3 and 4 in the Supplementary File).

temporarily, and nearly half of the current PS associations date back to the SMP era. In 2008, the PS started a coordinated horizontal expansion (Representative 5) that peaked in 2012, supported by the party securing approximately €6M of annual state funding by obtaining 39 seats in parliament in 2011. In the years 2008–2013 the PS expanded more than the SMP had ever done, founding 148 new associations. This expansion increased the PS's organisational presence to a respectable 82% of Finnish municipalities by the elections of 2017. In the 2021 municipal elections, the party had candidates in 98% of the municipalities and got representation on 284 municipal councils, thus lacking a council seat in only nine municipalities.

The number of PS members remained very low until the beginning of the party's expansion in 2008. Whereas the SMP had a membership of 20,000–27,000 in the 1970s and 1980s, the PS had only a couple of thousand members in 2004, nine years after the party was founded. Overall, it took 13 years for the party's membership numbers to start to increase, but there has been an upward trend ever since. Despite the number of PS members having almost tripled in a decade since early 2011, the number of members remains relatively low when compared to the three other large parties in Finland. However, when evaluating the scale of membership, one must take into account that political party membership is relative rare and has been in decline in Finland since 1980 (Borg et al., 2013, p. 28; Mickelsson, 2021). Thus, the PS—together with the Green League and the Left Alliance—remains an exception as its membership numbers have almost consistently risen throughout the 2010s, whereas the traditional parties' membership numbers have decreased (Borg et al., 2016; Mickelsson, 2021). After the splitting of the parliamentary group in 2017, the party initially lost approximately 400 members, but due to renewed interest in party membership, the party soon recovered and exceeded its previous membership numbers. According to current party elites, the split of the parliamentary group did not affect the functioning of the party organisation detrimentally, except for individual associations that suffered from defections by prominent local leaders (Representatives 4, 8, 12, and 16). Therefore, the party has built an extensive and territorially comprehensive network of local associations with growing membership, and the party's degree of organisation is high.

### *2.1. Member Recruitment, Mobilisation, and Socialisation*

Despite membership in the PS having risen since the late 2000s and party elites increasingly viewing members as vital assets for the party, there has been no clear centralised strategic investment in member recruitment from the party's national level (Representatives 3 and 4). The obtaining of new members and the activation of the member base takes place in the municipal associations

that are the party's primary organisational presence on the ground. Recruitment activity between associations ranges from passive to very active. All local associations organise so-called "tent events," where local activists set up a stand usually at a marketplace to offer passers-by coffee and a chance to chat with local and touring national party representatives. According to all interviewed party elites, such events are the most important source for new members in addition to recruitment via personal contacts. Another universally common route for entry into the party barely involves the formal party organisation, as nearly half of the new members apply for membership on their own initiative, without any prior contact with local party associations or party members (Representatives 1 and 2). Therefore, the motivation for joining the party can arise irrespective of the mobilisation efforts by the formal party organisation.

The national level of the party communicates directly with the party members via the party's paper, online news website, YouTube channel, Facebook page, and regular e-letters from the party office and the parliamentary group. Direct instructions, strategic considerations, and educational materials are disseminated to members mostly via the regional and local associations by using the local leadership as messengers. The municipal associations keep in touch with local members via mass-emails, phone calls, WhatsApp groups, Facebook pages, and varyingly frequent face-to-face meetings. However, the municipal associations' communication practices are heterogeneous. While in the most active associations the leadership and core activists try to establish a constant connection even with passive party members, in some associations local members barely keep in touch with each other beyond formal routine meetings. According to the interviews, the level of commitment and sense of community among members vary according to the local organisational cultures and styles of leadership. The most active associations organise social events, such as Christmas parties, bowling, and sauna nights, which are described as serving the organisational goal of social bonding between activists. Active municipal and regional associations also organise lectures, seminars, and city hall meetings, most of which are also open to non-members (e.g., Representatives 17 and 20).

The only official requirements for membership in the PS are that members must be 18 years of age and "of good reputation," and they cannot be a member in any other political party (PS, 2009, 2021). Party membership is granted by the party executive, not by local chapters like in most other Finnish parties. Therefore, PS members must separately apply for membership in a local association, but it is not mandatory. According to party elites, an adequate quality of members is ensured via requiring applicants to have local recommenders, or if they have none, the applicant's closest local association is contacted via email to query whether the local leadership has anything against an applicant's membership (Representative 24). Before the meeting of the party



executive, unknown applicants may also be googled to screen for activities that could prove harmful for the party. In this context, the interviewees specifically mention the monitoring of overt links to the extreme right. But as the party executive may have to process dozens, sometimes even hundreds, of applications during one meeting, “unwanted people” are unavoidably granted memberships (Representatives 4 and 24). The procedures for ensuring quality of members at the local level vary from non-existent to structured interviewing, but in all cases, membership in a municipal association is granted by the municipal board (Representative 22; PS, 2013).

There are few material benefits provided by membership in the PS. Members get a subscription to the party’s magazine, *Perussuomalainen*, and access to the party’s online portal, *Suomen Uutiset*. The only other tangible benefits are the food and refreshments served at events and meetings. The advantage of getting employment is not an important reason for activism at the local and regional levels, as the relatively few jobs within the party organisation are fully centralised in the party office or in the parliamentary office. However, especially for young people, the prospect of advancing in the party’s ranks to become, for example, a municipal councillor or an aide to a Member of Parliament can incentivise activism (e.g., Representative 1). The party also provides its activists with training on, for example, municipal administration, association procedures, and social media communications. Intra-party training is organised either directly by local and regional associations, often carried out by the most experienced local party activists and politicians, or it may be provided by the party’s national Pekasus training centre (Representatives 1 and 3). There are also financial and social reasons for individuals to not join the party, as according to most of the interviewed party elites, potential members may be discouraged by the prospect of harming their career or business or becoming socially stigmatised. The insignificant material advantages of PS membership are confirmed by a survey study, according to which, of all party members in Finland, PS members were least likely to answer that they benefited financially or professionally from their party membership (Koiranen et al., 2017, p. 75).

According to party elites, activism in the PS is motivated especially by the prospect of making a difference and the personal and social gratification provided by being part of a movement. The most prominent narrative is that the key reason for joining and staying in the party is to have a platform to advance the issues on and beyond the party’s political agenda both locally and nationally. Activists are also said to be significantly motivated by social interaction, a sense of group membership, and a sense of worth and recognition. According to the interviews, for many activists the social circles found in local party branches and at party congresses are important for acquiring like-minded close friends and acquaintances, which intensifies the activists’ commitment. The most

committed activists for whom “the party is everything” (Representative 18) voluntarily spend several hours per day on party business. According to party elite narratives, the high level of motivation among activists is the result of the party’s attempts to foster a sense of community among its members. However, as the local associations are heterogeneous in their levels of activity, so too do the commitment, motivation, and sense of belonging among activists vary significantly between associations.

According to the party elites, there is a clear organised attempt from the party to ideologically inform and to educate the members participating in the municipal associations. But many of the party’s members, let alone supporters, have a very thin or non-existent connection to the party organisation itself. According to the interviews, furthermore, there is often little interest towards the party’s communications, even among members. Even though most of the party’s formal activism takes place in local associations, almost half of the party members are not members of a municipal association (Representatives 4 and 24). This means that a large share of the party’s official members are out of the loop of most of the party’s communications to members, face-to-face socialisation, and the formal practices that facilitate the party’s internal democracy between party congresses. Additionally, according to party elites’ estimates, only a third of the members with membership of a local party association regularly participate in any formal party activities (Representative 8). However, activists who physically volunteer in the party’s events and associations predominantly have membership both of the party and a municipal association.

## 2.2. Internet and Social Media in Party Organisation and Activism

As many PS members and sympathisers identify with the party via mainstream or online media, the political activism relevant for the party’s performance partly takes place outside of the participatory framework provided by the party’s formal organisation. Social media especially provide alternative platforms for party-adjacent networking and advocacy, particularly for party members and supporters who are not involved in any of the party associations and for members of inactive, poorly organised, or infighting local associations (Representatives 1 and 3). According to interviewed party elites, members are especially active on Facebook, discussion forums, news platforms’ comment sections, and blog platforms. However, more recently YouTube and Twitter, in particular, have become key platforms for both national and local party politicians and activists to voice their opinions. In addition to being viewed as organisational tools that aid activists in their work in party associations, party elites stress the importance of social media as means for activists to promote and to inform the party about political topics they are personally passionate about (Representatives 8, 10, 16, and 19).

Thus, in addition to its formal network of associations, the party benefits from an online grassroots base comprising networks of members and sympathisers who participate on social media to advance what they perceive as the party's cause. Based on the conducted interviews, however, the formal party organisation has little control, institutionalised strategy, or even understanding of what its online grassroots and local politicians are doing on the internet, as party elites do not view online communications as "official" party communications (e.g., Representatives 3 and 8). Still, most party elites view social media and party supporters' online actions as essential for the dissemination and sharpening of the party's message. Whilst, in general, party elites do not regard the organisation's general online strategy particularly developed when compared to other parliamentary parties (Representatives 6 and 8), the party has repeatedly ranked high in metrics that measure online engagement and following (e.g., Tervo, 2021). Previous research has shown that the party's ability to tap into controversial ideational and stylistic resources, while retaining an appearance of normalcy, has been facilitated by the overlapping of two spheres of activism: one of institutionalised party activism carried out within the formal party organisation and one of party-adjacent online activism (see Hatakka, 2019; Ylä-Anttila, 2020). This is likely to have fed into the prevailing organisational practice according to which the PS tries to avoid publicly intervening in members' online conduct and mostly leaves the style and contents of online communications to the members' own discretion. However, in cases where party secrets have been disclosed or the party's public image has been blatantly or intentionally jeopardised online, both informal and formal disciplinary measures have been conducted at the local and national levels (Representatives 3, 12, 16, and 23).

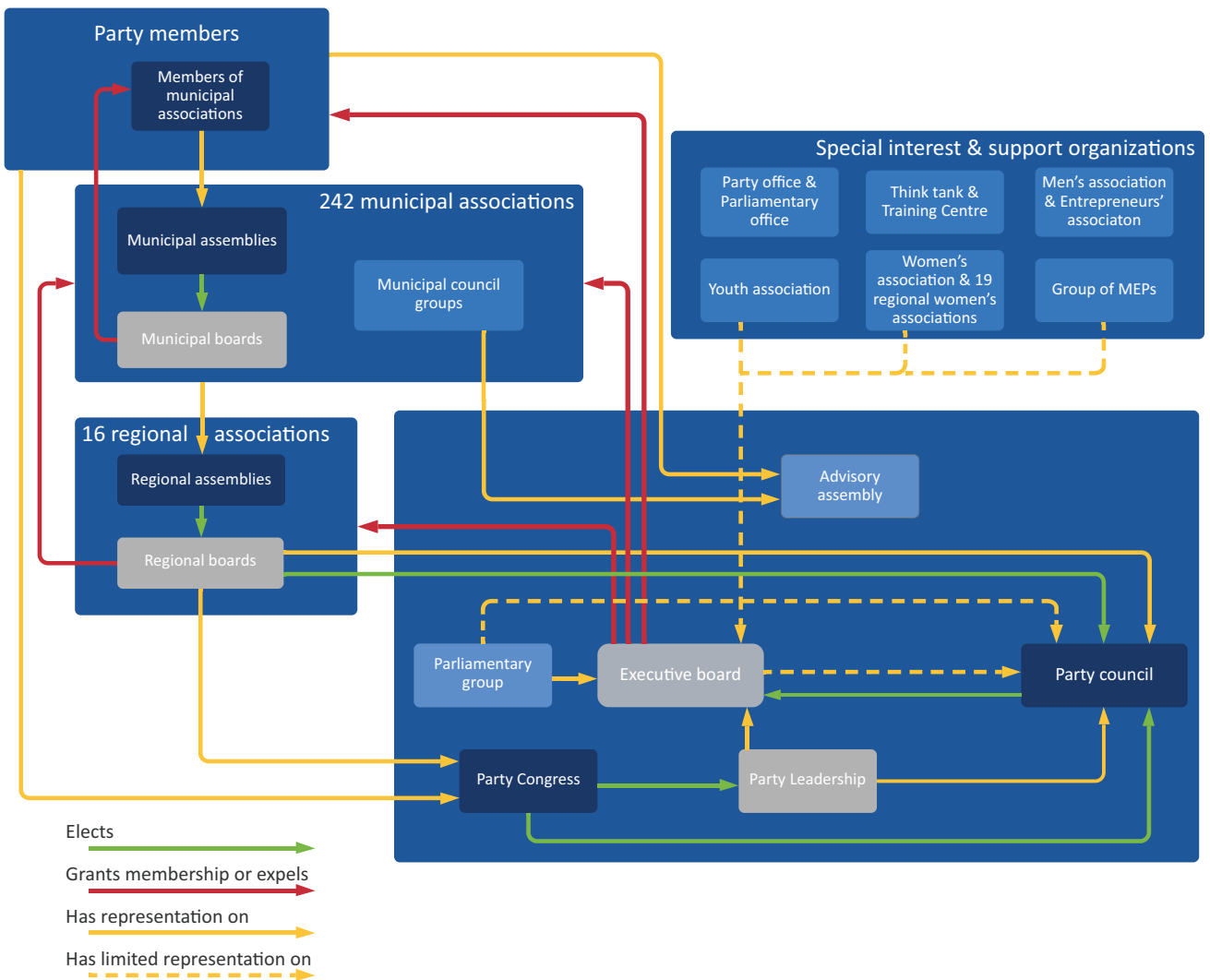
### *2.3. Perceived Advantages and Disadvantages of Fostering an Active Base of Finns Party Activists*

According to party elites, the municipal associations are essential to the PS for conducting on-the-ground campaigning, for establishing and maintaining a presence in local governance, for increasing the party's legitimacy locally and regionally, and for recruiting candidates and party officials. Party members are insignificant for the party as a source of income both nationally and locally (National Audit Office, 2020), and due to the generosity of state funding, the party would be financially viable even with free membership. Taking into consideration that the party organisation consists of 284 officially recognised organisational entities but has only 23 members of staff, the party organisation relies almost entirely on volunteering. Thus, the party organisation's level of professionalisation is very low. Not surprisingly, according to the party elites, the party would not be able to function without activists, especially in municipal elections.

Due to its reliance on volunteers, the PS intentionally keeps the threshold for participating as low as possible. The party does not require long-term membership or prior participation in the party organisation before members can run as candidates or serve in a position of responsibility within the organisation. As individuals can advance very quickly in the party's ranks, this can also cause problems for the party's cohesion and functioning. According to several interviewees, municipal associations are often plagued with conflicts that can arise especially due to the inexperience, incompetence, and mismatched chemistries of local activists. According to local leaders, a single individual may be enough to create a toxic environment in an association, which has led not only to infighting but also to the expelling of members and entire local and regional associations (Representatives 4, 20, and 22). Many interviewed party elites consider the increasing lack of communication control as detrimental to the party's functioning. The problem was especially prominent during the party's organisational expansion in the years 2008–2013, when thousands of people with little knowledge and experience joined in as party activists in newly founded associations. According to a senior Member of Parliament, "during that time anybody could get a position on some executive board" (Representative 1). As after 2017 a good number of the party's most experienced activists have been replaced by newcomers, and the party's membership numbers keep increasing, the party has tried to provide more training and direct guidance to its associations and members (Representative 4).

### **3. Centralisation vs. Horizontality in the Finns Party**

The PS having achieved a high degree of organisation and complex procedures for facilitating intra-party democracy does not mean that it empowers its members and party on the ground in terms of internal decision-making. The next sections analyse the formal and informal distribution of power within the PS. Figure 2 illustrates the relationships between the PS's institutions: who elects whom and thus to whom the elected bodies are accountable, who grants membership or expels whom, and where each organisational body of the party has representation. There are three levels in the party: the national, the regional, and the municipal level. The national level consists of the different institutional bodies of the registered party: the party congress, party executive board, party council, parliamentary group, and advisory assembly. The national level is linked to the regional levels via institutionalised representation of regional executives on the party council. In turn, the regional level is attached to the municipal level either via municipal executives or assemblies. All other party organs, including municipal council groups, special interest associations, the group of Members of the European Parliament, and the additional support organisations, have little or no institutionalised power in the party.



**Figure 2.** The PS's organisational chart (August 2021).

Unlike most other Finnish parties, in which internal democracy functions via a system of regional delegates, the PS's internal democracy is organised in a dual-pronged manner, with two formal routes for party members to influence the national level of the party. The first route goes through party congress, in which party members directly elect the party leadership (in a biennial two-stage direct election) and accept changes to the party's rules (PS, 2009, 2021). The second route for influencing the national level goes via the municipal associations, which elect regional representatives, who then can become members of the regional boards, of the party council, and even of the party executive. So, on the face of it, the PS appears to give a considerable amount of power to its members. However, when analysed closely, both the party's formal structure and several informally institutionalised practices severely curtail the members' influence.

The party executive has the power to affect nearly everything that goes on in the party. It wields power over the party's programmes, approval of national-level election candidates, budget allocation, and hiring of staff.

Most importantly, the party executive controls all individual and institutional party memberships and possesses both formal and informal leverage on the lower party levels. Even though the party executive is accountable to the annual meeting of the party council, this accountability is diminished by two factors. First, the party council has more of a symbolic than an actual role in the party's strategic and programmatic decisions and day-to-day operations. Second, despite the party council being powerful in terms of electing most of the party executive, it has few other significant powers, and its representational legitimacy is limited by how it is elected.

Even though previous statute dictated that the party congress was supposed to elect the non-institutionally assigned seats of the council (PS, 2009), this has not happened in practice due to an originally informal but recently institutionalised organisational norm. In reality, party council seats have been negotiated in advance between regional boards and rubber-stamped by the party congress (Representatives 3 and 4). This long-standing informal practice that was formalised in the party's new rules in 2021 (PS, 2021) makes the party

executive resilient against takeovers via the party congress. Additionally, as representation on the party council, which elects the majority of the members of the party executive, is ensured via membership at the local level, the fact that relatively few party members have local membership undermines the legitimacy of the oversight of the party's executive organ. Also, despite there being 16 regional associations, there are only seven seats for regional representatives in the party executive, meaning less than half of the regional associations have representation. Even though several of the interviewed party elites were concerned about the overt contention this creates in the regions (e.g., Representatives 4, 5, and 20), the party's rule change of 2021 did not include expansion of the party executive to strengthen regional representation (PS, 2021).

Although the PS's municipal associations operate autonomously in their day-to-day activities, their statutes state specifically that the associations "must follow the party's and the party organs' decisions and instructions" (PS, 2013). The conducted interviews suggest that, in practice, local party officials tend to adhere closely to the decisions and instructions provided by the party office, the party leadership, and the regional boards (e.g., Representatives 4, 22, and 24). Due to the party executive's capacity to exert centralised control over problematic associations, it is theoretically possible for the party board to suppress factionalism that might arise locally or regionally. However, party elites describe attempts of controlling the lower levels purely as providing "guidance" and "assistance," and local leaders specifically state that the national level very rarely intervenes in the actions of the local associations. Therefore, as long as the local and regional associations do not cause harm to other party associations or to the party, they are usually able to—and are even expected to—act autonomously. The party executive or the party office intervenes in the local or regional levels only in highly unusual circumstances, as local infighting is handled by prioritising informal means and by following the principle of subsidiarity, meaning local problems should be solved locally. And generally, there is little need for formal interventions, as the party's network of municipal associations is, according to party elites, ideologically rather uniform (Representatives 1, 2, 12, and 16).

### *3.1. Formal and Informal Member Power in the Finns Party*

The PS's current organisational form centralises power in the party executive to the extent that most of the key internal decisions can theoretically be made by a small circle of just seven people. However, the interviewed party elites observe that the party's organisational culture has taken a turn towards decentralisation. Even though the party's current formal structure has not significantly changed since 2009, the interviewed party elites stress that, during Jussi Halla-aho's leader-

ship, the party developed more of an open and approachable organisational culture, in which activists were welcome to express their concerns and to act on their own ideas regarding the improving of the party's organisation and activities. In addition to the municipal associations having allegedly more room to manoeuvre, members' views regarding the party and its functioning are claimed to be listened to by national leadership and the party office, and the party has also developed institutionalised procedures for consulting its member base in developing the party's programmes and rules (Representatives 6, 12, and 17). However, the extent to which local organisational cultures facilitate horizontal participation depends heavily on the leadership style of local leaders (Representatives 4 and 5). Furthermore, considering that the party executive, after years of intra-party discussion, proposed only minute changes to the party's rules in 2021 (PS, 2021), centralisation of formal power persists in the PS regardless of any increase in informal member power.

In terms of national leadership selection, the PS members have a lot of power. The party leader, the three vice party leaders, and the party secretary are selected in a direct election in party congress where all attending party members have one vote (PS, 2009, 2021). The power of members in candidate selection depends on the type of elections, and there are differences between the regional and municipal associations. In the municipal elections, the local associations draft candidate lists autonomously, but different associations use different means of drafting and approving the lists. In parliamentary elections, where candidacies are in shorter supply, the candidate selection processes tend to be more systematic, partially due to Finnish election legislation. But still, there are notable differences in how the lists are drafted between the regional associations. For example, in the Southwest Finland regional association, some of the names on the list are picked by the regional board based purely on electoral-strategic considerations, but a share of the candidacies is selected via a member vote organised by the region's municipal associations. However, in the end, the party executive may change one fourth of the names on the lists suggested by the regional associations (PS, 2009, 2021)—but this power is used sparingly (Representatives 12, 13, and 16). In European Parliament elections, according to the party's 2009 rules, the candidates were supposed to be selected via a member vote, but in practice, the candidates have been directly selected by the party executive. This informal practice was institutionalised into the party's official rules in 2021 (PS, 2021).

For most Finnish parties, the party congress is the institution in which programmatic policy positions are drafted, revised, and ratified. In the PS, it is up to working groups led formally by the party executive to devise programmatic drafts, which are then discussed by the advisory assembly, who make suggestions for revisions. Besides revising and (originally) formally ratifying the

party's programmatic outputs (PS, 2009), the advisory assembly also serves as an intra-party socialising and networking event (Representatives 3 and 22). Some of the interviewed party elites consider the advisory assembly essential to getting suggestions for revising the party programmes (Representatives 2, 9 and 22), but several interviewees were also sceptical of whether the suggested revisions end up in the final programmes. The sheer logistics of getting feedback and suggestions for revisions from a crowd of hundreds of people during a one-day event reduces the advisory assembly's role as a functional means to ensure horizontal and inclusive formulation of party programmes (Representatives 4 and 8).

Overall, the drafting of the party's national programmes is not transparent, as the working groups operate behind closed doors and include only one or a few high-ranking party politicians, aides, or party office staff (Representatives 2 and 9). However, the process is not entirely centralised, as the working groups use crowdsourcing as a means of accumulating contents for the programme drafts via the local associations (Representatives 17 and 20). In addition to gathering programmatic feedback from the members, proactive expert activists, in particular, are sometimes able to influence the drafting of the programmes. This occurs when they take the initiative to gain access to the working groups or when they are asked directly to contribute (Representatives 9 and 12). After the meeting of the advisory assembly, the working group or the head writer produces the revised final programme, which has thus far invariably been accepted by the party executive. Thus, despite the party going to lengths to facilitate the hearing of its members in the formulation of party policies, the final form of the programmes is ultimately determined by the party's top elite. As party elites view this kind of centralisation as a direct safeguard against the potential radicalisation of party platforms (e.g., Representative 4), it was not surprising that in the party's new rules the power to make programmatic decisions was reserved ultimately for the party executive (PS, 2021). Though the rule change further diminishes formal member power in the PS, it has to be noted that the powers of the advisory assembly were already restricted by several informal practices and the general format of the assembly.

#### **4. Conclusions: The Finns Party as an Unknowingly Modern Mass-Party**

The PS has a complex and extensive organisational structure and procedures facilitating internal democracy. However, the extent to which it allows its activists to affect the party's internal decision-making in practice remains formally limited. The party developed a comprehensive network of (mostly) autonomous municipal associations during the late 2000s and early 2010s, but in some regions, and especially smaller rural towns, the levels of activity and experience characterising local associ-

ations and core activists remain low. Even though the PS provides no material benefits and few exclusive events to its members, the party's communities of activists are characterised by strong collective identities and a high level of ideological coherence that, according to party elites, are fuelled mainly by a sense of purpose and community. However, there are noticeable differences between the cultures, communities, and organisational practices of local associations. In terms of power distribution, the PS is organisationally a Frankenstein's monster combining radically democratic elements of the party congress and the advisory assembly with a weak and incoherently elected party council and an extreme level of centralisation of power in the party executive, whose representativeness and oversight remains limited.

The PS has many formal characteristics of a mass-party, as understood by Albertazzi and van Kessel (2021). The party should be regarded as one of the European populist radical right parties that have constructed and maintained a locally rooted, highly articulated, and extensive organisation that aims to foster party activists' commitment and mobilisation (Heinisch & Mazzoleni, 2016). Even though the party arguably values and needs its activists, both the party's rules and its informal practices severely limit the power of members in the PS—a characteristic not atypical of mass-parties, including other populist radical right parties that adopt this organisational model (e.g., Jungar, 2016). However, the current party leadership has avoided using their powers to intervene in the actions of the sub-national levels. This suggests that even a formally centralised party can allow relative autonomy and agency for its associations and individual members. If given a generous reading, centralisation of power in the current PS could be interpreted more as a safeguard against radicalisation than actual lived organisational reality. The PS's post-Soini organisation is showing clear signs of the shedding of its leader-centric legacy (see Arter, 2016) and the development of a more participatory and inclusive organisational culture. Yet the party still clings on to the elite-driven party form of his era. This exemplifies how decentralisation can take place informally within a mass-party-type party organisation even if the top elite is reluctant to share formal power.

The empirical findings presented in this article suggest that the PS can be viewed as an (unknowingly) modern mass-party that utilises not only one but several complementary modes of organisation. Despite activists playing a key role in the party's functioning, the party can be argued to be (nearly) as reliant on state funding and the mediated leadership of its upper party echelons as are the parties that Katz and Mair (1995) would describe as cartel parties. In addition to benefiting from financial state support, the PS has also found synergies between its mass-membership organisation and less organised online movements. It has been able to enjoy the benefits of the stability of having a formal party organisation, while being boosted by the agility of online activists

and sympathisers. This has aided the party, for example, in fostering a sense of community and purpose among activists in regions where formal organisational cultures remain underdeveloped. However, cooperation with online movements can also pose challenges for a party's legitimacy, image, and future direction (Hatakka, 2019). For example, while the PS's formal organisational structure was being extended to its current width between 2008 and 2013, the party became an organisational vehicle for overtly radical right demands articulated in movements that were originally parallel to the formal party organisation (Pyrhönen, 2015; Ylä-Anttila, 2020). When combined with the truly decentralised nature of the party's national leadership selection and the low threshold for activists to advance in the party's ranks, this arguably hastened the widespread organisational entrenchment and mainstreaming of the current radical right party regime. At present, the party's official line pertaining to the Covid-19 pandemic and vaccinations is being actively undermined online not only by party sympathisers but also by party activists. Considering that social media are rapidly changing the environment in which party organisations operate, retaining some organisational safeguards can be necessary for sustaining electoral and governmental viability.

Therefore, in the current media environment, even centralised and ideologically coherent mass-parties such as the PS might not be entirely successful in socialising especially locally disengaged or party-adjacent activists into sharing a uniform ideology and disseminating it fully in accordance with the party elites' and the organisation's interest. If a party's activist core drifts too far from the formal organisation and its centralised powers that allow structured policing and fostering of internal ideological cohesion (Albertazzi, 2016; Panebianco, 1988), the party's legitimacy could be jeopardised by radicalisation and marginalisation. This highlights that parties similar to the PS must find a balance between reaping the rewards of providing autonomy for their formal and informal activists and the challenge of knowing when, where, and how to rein them in. The case of the PS reveals that despite online activism manifesting itself seemingly parallel to political parties' membership, institutions, events, and campaigns, it remains noticeably and needlessly overlooked in the party organisation literature—perhaps due to being viewed as external to the functioning of parties.

### Acknowledgments

The support of the Economic and Social Research Council (UK) is gratefully acknowledged (Grant Ref: ES/R011540/1).

### Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

### Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

### References

- Albertazzi, D. (2016). Going, going,...not quite gone yet? "Bossi's Lega" and the survival of the mass party. *Contemporary Italian Politics*, 8(2), 115–130.
- Albertazzi, D., & McDonnell, D. (2015). *Populists in power*. Routledge.
- Albertazzi, D., & van Kessel, S. (2021). Right-wing populist party organisation across Europe: The survival of the mass party? Introduction to the thematic issue. *Politics and Governance*, 9(4), 224–227.
- Arter, D. (2012). Analysing successor parties: The case of the True Finns. *West European Politics*, 35(4), 803–825.
- Arter, D. (2016). When new party X has the "X factor": On resilient entrepreneurial parties. *Party Politics*, 22(1), 15–26.
- Arter, D., & Kestilä-Kekkonen, E. (2014). Measuring the extent of party institutionalisation: The case of a populist entrepreneur party. *West European Politics*, 37(5), 932–956.
- Betz, H.-G. (1998). Introduction. In H. G. Betz & S. Immerfall (Eds.), *The new politics of the right: Neo populist parties and movements in established democracies*. St. Martin's Press.
- Borg, S., Kiillakoski, T., Mykkänen, J., Myllyniemi, S., Pekola-Sjöblom, M., Piipponen, S.-L., & Pikkala, S. (2013). *Demokratiaindikaattorit 2013* [Democracy indicators 2013]. Finnish Ministry of Justice.
- Borg, S., Kestilä-Kekkonen, E., & Westinen, J. (2015). *Demokratiaindikaattorit 2015* [Democracy indicators 2015]. Finnish Ministry of Justice. [https://www.vaalitutkimus.fi/fi/kiinnittyminen/puolueiden\\_jasenmaarien\\_kehitys.html](https://www.vaalitutkimus.fi/fi/kiinnittyminen/puolueiden_jasenmaarien_kehitys.html)
- Finnish Patent and Registry Office. (2021). *Registry of associations*. <https://yhdistysrekisteri.prh.fi>
- Hatakka, N. (2019). *Populism in the hybrid media system: Populist radical right online counterpublics interacting with journalism, party politics, and citizen activism*. University of Turku Press.
- Hatakka, N. (2021). *Officially populist radical right: The Finns Party's ideological positions and key policies since 2017*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Heinisch, R., & Mazzoleni, O. (2016). Comparing populist organizations. In R. Heinisch & O. Mazzoleni (Eds.), *Understanding populist party organisation: The radical right in Western Europe* (pp. 221–246). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Jungar, A.-C. (2016). The Sweden Democrats. In R. Heinisch & O. Mazzoleni (Eds.), *Understanding populist party organisation: The radical right in Western Europe* (pp. 189–219). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Jupskås, A. (2016). The Norwegian Progress Party:

- Between a business firm and a mass party. In R. Heinisch & O. Mazzoleni (Eds.), *Understanding populist party organisation: The radical right in Western Europe* (pp. 159–187). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Katz, R. (2002). The internal life of parties. In K. R. Luther & F. Müller-Rommel (Eds.), *Political parties in the new Europe* (pp. 87–118). Oxford University Press.
- Katz, R., & Mair, P. (1995). Changing models of party organization and party democracy: The emergence of the cartel party. *Party Politics*, 1(5), 5–28.
- Koiranen, I., Koivula, A., Saarinen, A., & Räsänen, P. (2017). *Puolueiden rakenteet ja verkostot* [Party structures and networks]. Kaks.
- Mair, P. (1989). Continuity, change and the vulnerability of the party. *West European Politics*, 12(4), 169–188.
- Mair, P. (2013). *Ruling the void: The hollowing of Western democracy*. Verso.
- Mickelsson, R. (2021). *Suomen puolueet—Vapauden ajasta maailmantuskaan* [Parties of Finland—From the age of freedom to Weltschmerz]. Vastapaino.
- National Audit Office. (2020). *Finns Party's financial statements 2009–2018*. <https://www.vaalirahoitusvalvonta.fi/fi/index/puoluetukiilmoituksia/ilmoituslistaus/tilinpaatostiedot>
- Nurmi, L. (2017). *Perussuomalaisten hajoamisen historia* [The history of the breaking up of the Finns Party]. Into.
- Panebianco, A. (1988). *Political parties: Organisation and power*. Cambridge University Press.
- PS. (2009). *Perussuomalaiset rp:n säännöt* [Rules of the PS]. [https://www.perussuomalaiset.fi/tietoa-meista/perussuomalaiset-rpn-saannot/?doing\\_wp\\_cron=1587637569.2313420772552490234375](https://www.perussuomalaiset.fi/tietoa-meista/perussuomalaiset-rpn-saannot/?doing_wp_cron=1587637569.2313420772552490234375)
- PS. (2013). *Perussuomalaiset rp:n paikallisyhdistyksen säännöt* [Rules of the PS's municipal associations]. [https://www.perussuomalaiset.fi/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/ps\\_paikallisyhdistyksen\\_saannot.pdf](https://www.perussuomalaiset.fi/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/ps_paikallisyhdistyksen_saannot.pdf)
- PS. (2021). *Sääntömuutosesitys* [Proposition for revising the PS's rules]. <https://www.perussuomalaiset.fi/tutustu-saantomuutosesitykseen>
- Pyrhönen, N. (2015). *The true colors of welfare nationalism: Consolidation of neo-populist advocacy as a resonant collective identity through mobilization of exclusionary narratives of blue-and-white solidarity*. University of Helsinki.
- Taggart, P. (2000). *Populism*. Open University Press.
- Tervo, E. (2021, May 13). Sanna Marinin somevalta on niin suuri, että hän lyö yksin muut puolueet [Sanna Marin's social media power alone beats other parties]. *Yle*. <https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-11909662>
- van Biezen, I., Mair, P., & Poguntke, T. (2012). Going, going,....gone? The decline of party membership in contemporary Europe. *European Journal of Political Research*, 51(1), 24–56.
- van Kessel, S. (2015). *Populist parties in Europe: Agents of discontent?* Palgrave Macmillan.
- Vares, V. (2011). *Oikeistopopulismien monet kasvot* [Many faces of right-wing populism]. Toivo.
- Ylä-Anttila, T. (2020). Social media and the emergence, establishment and transformation of the right-wing populist Finns Party. *Populism*, 3(1), 121–139.

### About the Author



**Niko Hatakka** (PhD) is a research fellow at the Department of Politics and International Studies (POLSIS) at the University of Birmingham. His research focuses on the populist radical right, party organisation, the relationship of populism and media, online activism, political communication, and media platforms. He is also a visiting fellow at the Centre for Parliamentary Studies at the University of Turku.

Article

## Walking the Walk or Just Talking the Talk? VMRO-BND's Efforts to Become a Mass Party

Petar Bankov<sup>1</sup>, Sergiu Gherghina<sup>1</sup> and Nanuli Silagadze<sup>2,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Social and Political Studies, University of Glasgow, UK; E-Mails: petar.bankov@glasgow.ac.uk (P.B.), sergiu.gherghina@glasgow.ac.uk (S.G.)

<sup>2</sup> Faculty of Social Sciences, Business and Economics, Åbo Akademi University, Finland; E-Mail: nanuli.silagadze@abo.fi

\* Corresponding author

Submitted: 28 May 2021 | Accepted: 9 September 2021 | Published: 24 November 2021

### Abstract

Many populist radical right parties compete on a regular basis in the Bulgarian legislative elections. Among these, the VMRO–Balgarsko Natsionalno Dvizhenie (VMRO-BND, IMRO–Bulgarian National Movement) enjoys the greatest organizational stability and maintains a regular presence in politics and society despite volatile electoral performance. Using qualitative content analysis of official party documents (programs, statutes, and policy papers) and media reports, this article argues that the organizational stability of the VMRO-BND stems from its grassroots efforts to establish deep links in society. While its membership is limited, the local activities of the party between and during elections, and its network of loosely-affiliated organizations create a grandiose impression of presence across Bulgaria. Through this presence, VMRO-BND fosters a sense of belonging for its members which in turn supports the party's goal of achieving a so-called “national cultural unity” and the preservation of Bulgarian traditions. Internally, VMRO-BND provides room for non-member participation and bottom-up initiatives from local activists, while remaining strongly centralized at the top around its leader, Krasimir Karakachanov. Overall, VMRO-BND reveals the importance populist radical right parties place on social presence, even when membership numbers are low.

### Keywords

Bulgaria; grassroots activities; mass party; organizational centralization; VMRO-BND

### Issue

This article is part of the issue “Right-Wing Populist Party Organisation Across Europe: The Survival of the Mass-Party?” edited by Daniele Albertazzi (University of Surrey, UK) and Stijn van Kessel (Queen Mary University of London, UK).

© 2021 by the authors; licensee Cogitatio (Lisbon, Portugal). This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

### 1. Introduction

Populist radical right parties (PRRPs) continue to have a significant presence in Bulgarian politics. Since the breakthrough of Ataka (Attack) in the 2005 parliamentary elections, PRRPs have continued to gain seats in the National Assembly, including in the April and July elections of 2021. Following the legislative elections in 2017, a five-party electoral alliance called Obedineni Patrioti (OP, United Patriots) served as a minor partner in a coalition government with the center-right Grazhdani za Evropeysko Razvitie na Bulgaria (GERB, Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria) after gaining 9.3% of the vote (Central Electoral Commission, 2017). The cen-

tral role in this alliance belongs to the VMRO-Balgarsko Natsionalno Dvizhenie (VMRO-BND, IMRO-Bulgarian National Movement). Founded in 1990, the VMRO-BND struggled electorally but has gained parliamentary seats in most elections since 1994. Currently, party finds itself as the main force within the populist radical right spectrum in Bulgaria. In the 2019 European Parliament elections, the party received 7.4% of the votes, winning two seats. Its main partners in the OP alliance, Ataka and Natsionalen Front za Spasenie na Bulgaria (NFSB, National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria), received around 1% each (Central Electoral Commission, 2019).

As part of a thematic issue on the organization of PRRPs, this article analyzes the contemporary state of



the organization of VMRO-BND. We analyze this party because of its dominant role and organizational longevity in relation to the other main actors within the radical right milieu in Bulgaria, such as Ataka and NFSB, which emerged after VMRO-BND in the mid-2000s and mid-2010s. VMRO-BND has made several attempts to become a mass party through drives to recruit activists, grassroots efforts on the ground, and through advocating the preservation of collective identities through ideology. The insights gained from this case are useful for understanding the development of a PRRP from Central and Eastern Europe and the behavior of a party with an extensive organizational tradition. Previous research has paid little attention to VMRO-BND and its organization, instead giving greater attention to the case of Ataka and its ideological profile when examining the policies, activities, and electoral development of the radical right scene in Bulgaria (Avramov, 2015; Ibroscheva, 2020; A. Krasteva, 2016; Sygkelos, 2015; Todorov, 2013; Werkmann & Gherghina, 2018; Zankina, 2017). These studies echo the overall focus on topics around the ideology and political positions and actions of PRRPs in Central and Eastern Europe (Gherghina et al., 2017; Kopecký & Mudde, 2003; Mesežnikov et al., 2008; Minkenberg, 2015, 2017; Pirro, 2015; Pytlas, 2016), yet they also present a significant gap in our understanding of the organizations of PRRPs.

VMRO-BND has the potential to become a mass party organization given its active membership (Ivanov & Ilieva, 2005; Spirova, 2005). By taking a closer look at its organization, this article shows that VMRO-BND creates the impression that it is a mass party mainly due to its relentless grassroots work, close affiliations with the radical and extreme-right subcultures, and strong online presence. The party organization provides opportunities for activists to engage in local initiatives and communicate with larger society through the nomination of ordinary voters (non-members) on electoral lists. This openness, however, cannot hide VMRO-BND's declining and diffuse membership, as well as its strong centralization around the party leader and his close affiliates. In such circumstances, the efforts of VMRO-BND to present itself as a mass party relate to three main elements: its origins as a cultural organization striving to reach out to communities and spread nationalist messages; its aim to maintain strong links with local communities to draw support and recruit new members; and its goal to advocate nationalist ideas and gain widespread social acceptance. Ultimately, by keeping an active but small party organization, VMRO-BND creates a sense of belonging for its members while simultaneously mainstreaming its nationalist ideology.

We provide evidence for our argument using qualitative content analysis of official party documents (program, statute, policy papers) and media reports about the party's activities. Our choice of methodology reflects the framework of the thematic issue, which focuses on the extent to which right-wing populist parties have

adopted the mass party model. The analysis derives from a systematic study of the party activities using reports in traditional media (mainly national and regional newspapers, including *Trud*, *24 Chasa*, *Dnevnik*, *Kapital*, *Mediapool*), as well as the party's self-reported actions on its website. Very helpful in this respect was the Wayback Machine website that kept a relatively comprehensive archive of the VMRO-BND website dating back to the early 2000s. This data has been analyzed inductively through a two-step process where each report was initially coded according to the particular activity, followed by a subsequent coding where the already coded reports were re-coded according to a broader theme, such as *political rally*, *commemoration*, *members' inauguration*, among others. We have purposefully not looked for patterns related to the frequency or place where such activities occur, as this is beyond the scope of this article. Rather, we were focusing on what the party does so that we could establish whether VMRO-BND is capable and willing to mobilize activists and reach out to wider society. Our timeframe has been constrained by the availability of media reports. We have looked into the party's activities mainly in the past decade (2010–2021) in order to provide a contemporary picture of its organization.

In terms of online activities, an important aspect identified in the theoretical framework of this thematic issue, we analyzed the social media and other online channels maintained by the party and its main cadre (members of its executive committee, MPs, and MEPs). More specifically, we were interested in how often these channels post new content and what the nature of that content was (original posts or re-posts, article links or video/audio content, pictures, etc.). Our starting point was an existing argument in the literature according to which established channels of communication, be that social media, forums, newsletters, or emails, allow parties to better connect with the electorate and members (Werkmann & Gherghina, 2018). Regarding internal party life, we relied on party statutes to provide a picture of the official state of internal party democracy. We used media reports covering party congresses and the candidate selection for national elections to understand the internal party dynamics in practice.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows: The next section outlines the organizational and electoral history of the VMRO-BND, as well as its ideological profile; the third section discusses the formal organizational structures and rules of VMRO-BND, followed by a discussion on its internal democracy in practice. The conclusion discusses the broader relevance of the organizational experiences of VMRO-BND for the study of PRRP organizations in Europe.

## 2. The History, Ideology, and Electoral Evolution of VMRO-BND

According to the party website (VMRO, 2012a), VMRO-BND was founded on 5 January 1990. Until 1999

it existed as a nationalist cultural organization called VMRO–Sayuz na Makedonskite Druzhestva (VMRO-SMD, IMRO–Union of Macedonian Societies). The organization advocated for the Bulgarian character of Macedonia and promoted Bulgarian interests in North Macedonia and among Macedonian emigrant organizations. In this respect, the party claims to be a descendant of Vatrishna Makedonska Revolyutsionna Organizatsiya (VMRO, Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization), the main organization of the Macedonian liberation movement from the late 19th and the first half of the 20th century (VMRO, 2020b). Nevertheless, VMRO is used solely as an abbreviation and is never included in the party name in its entirety. Despite not being a political party per se, VMRO-SMD gained two parliamentary seats in 1994 and 1997 through participating in the electoral lists of the Union of Democratic Forces, the main center-right party in Bulgaria during the 1990s and early 2000s. In 1997, VMRO-SMD elected Krasimir Karakachanov as its president, who in 1999 transformed it into a political party and changed the name to VMRO-BND.

Ideologically, VMRO-BND is socially conservative and economically protectionist. In its current party program passed in 2012, VMRO-BND claimed that the main challenge for Bulgaria would be the “demographic catastrophe” (VMRO, 2020d). The party promotes a local version of the Great Replacement conspiracy theory, claiming that by 2050 ethnic Bulgarians will become a minority at the expense of the Roma community (VMRO, 2020a). In order to turn this trend around, VMRO-BND demands radical social and educational reform. The party has closely interlinked the replacement narrative with populism. This is particularly visible in its continued activism in opposition to what it calls “the Gypsy question.” Here, VMRO-BND claims that all major social ills, such as declining education levels, rising poverty, and criminality, stem from the Roma community in Bulgaria and are tolerated by the political elites at the expense of Bulgarian citizens. In more recent years, the party has expanded this narrative and its policy demands by positioning itself as a protector of the “traditional Bulgarian family,” thus projecting an image that all social minorities pose a threat to Bulgarian society (VMRO, 2021).

VMRO-BND calls for a radical conservative transformation of the country: It demands a new constitution that increases the powers of the Bulgarian president and declares Orthodox Christianity as the official national religion. In terms of foreign policy, VMRO-BND maintains the conservative idea of a “Europe of nations” and opposes the “federalization of the EU and its transformation into a superstate” (VMRO, 2020d). Consistent with the party’s populism, the EU is regularly depicted by VMRO-BND activists and cadre as an organization that pursues a progressive agenda aimed at undermining the ethnic foundations of societies and states across Europe (Contrera, 2019). The party is also openly xenophobic, as it declares the EU accession of Turkey as “a serious threat to the existence of Bulgaria” (VMRO, 2020d). While its

early programs paid considerable attention to irredentist claims toward North Macedonia, its current position has toned down these demands. The program instead notably includes a section on green politics, declaring the party support for “green nationalism,” defined as “the idea that without nature, there is no Bulgaria” (VMRO, 2020d). Economically, VMRO-BND has changed its views significantly. While originally the party called for limited public expenses and a flat tax in the past (VMRO, 2008), its current program is noticeably more protectionist, with the aim of “support[ing]... the Bulgarian entrepreneurship against the challenges of the European and world markets” (VMRO, 2020d).

The party regularly participates in conservative and right-wing electoral alliances with a clear trend toward more ideologically compatible partners in recent years. During the 2000s and early 2010s, VMRO-BND joined seemingly unusual coalitions, including collaboration with moderately nationalist anti-system parties (Dvizhenie Gergiovdan, St. George Movement), right-wing agrarians (Balgarski Zemedelski Narodni Sayuz–Narodni Sayuz, Bulgarian Agrarian People’s Union–People’s Union), and free-market conservatives (Sayuz na Svobodnite Demokrati/Union of Free Democrats, Partiya Lider/Leader Party, Edinna Narodna Partiya/United People’s Party). Since 2014, VMRO-BND has joined the list of populist (Bulgaria bez Tsenzura/Bulgaria Without Censorship) and PRRPs (NFSB, Ataka), thus strengthening its profile as a PRRP. The party gained parliamentary representation both before and after this strategic shift. In 2005, as part of the agrarian-conservative alliance Balgarski Narodni Sayuz (BNS, Bulgarian National Union), the party won 5.2% of the vote and had six out of the alliance’s 13 MPs. In 2014 it joined the populist radical right NFSB in the Patriotichen Front (Patriotic Front) alliance, winning 7.3% and eight seats out of the Patriotichen Front’s 19. Then, in 2017, the Patriotichen Front was accompanied by the populist radical right Attack (and two minor parties), creating the OP alliance and gaining 9.3%, with 11 of 27 MPs belonging to VMRO-BND. Its 2017 electoral performance allowed the party to enter government, with Karakachanov becoming vice-prime minister and minister of defense. Additionally, the party won seats in the European Parliament in 2014 and 2019, while also participating in presidential elections since 2011 and providing support for conservative and center-right candidates. In 2011, Karakachanov won less than 1% of the vote, but in 2016 he was the OP joint candidate and came third with 15% on an anti-immigration and rule-of-law platform. Having risen electorally by 2019, VMRO-BND strived to present itself as a mass party. On the one hand, the party is very active locally and maintains strong links to an extreme and radical right subculture. On the other hand, its limited membership and formal centralization raise the question of whether it lives up to its mass party image.

### 3. The Alleged Mass Character of the VMRO-BND Organization

#### 3.1. Formal Centralization and a Lightweight Organization

The party has remained ambiguous on its formal organizational size and scope. In its early years, VMRO-BND claimed to have around 30,000 members (VMRO, 2001), although it has reported a declining membership of about 20,000 in more recent years (K. Krasteva et al., 2018). A much lower figure of 12,000 members is likely to be a more realistic assessment as indicated by independent reports (Spirova, 2005). Most of the party members are male, with higher education and relatively young, drawn predominantly from educational circles (usually historians), lawyers, as well as from the security forces like army and police (Ivanov & Ilieva, 2005). These numbers, even if taken at face value, pale in comparison to VMRO-BND's political opponents. For example, the main center-right (GERB) and center-left (Balgarska Sotsialisticheska Partiya/Bulgarian Socialist Party) parties in Bulgaria claim to have around 100,000 members each (K. Krasteva et al., 2018), whereas the Dvizhenie za Prava i Svobodi (Movement for Rights and Freedoms), representing the sizeable Turkish minority in the country, claims to have about 40,000 active members in about 2,500 local organizations (K. Krasteva et al., 2018). Given its comparatively low membership numbers, VMRO-BND struggles to establish a strong organizational presence across Bulgaria. According to the party website (VMRO, 2020c), it currently does not have regional coordinators in six of the 28 provinces in the country, which suggests strong imbalances in its territorial outreach. This is further confirmed by data on its local organizations: The party currently claims to have 476 local party cells (i.e., structures with at least seven members as required by the party statutes) within the 282 municipalities of the country (K. Krasteva et al., 2018).

VMRO-BND has a lightweight organizational structure. The main body of the party is its congress, which convenes every three years. This body has the right to elect the main party institutions, including its party president, and to change the statutes. It cannot, however, pass the party program or manifesto (VMRO, 2020f). The party is led by the party president and the Natsionalen Izpalnitelen Komitet (NIK, National Executive Committee), the party executive organ that currently includes 16 members (VMRO, 2020e). Its members are also part of the larger Organizatsionen Savet (OS, Organizational Council), the main deliberative body between congresses that also includes local and regional leaders, and some of the official party-affiliated organizations, such as its youth and women's leagues (VMRO, 2020f). The latest data on the number of the members of the OS dates from 2012, with 66 members at the time (VMRO, 2012b). A final institution at the national level is the Natsionalna Kontrolna Komisiya (NKK, National

Control Commission), which handles disciplinary cases. Below these national structures, the party has a regional committee and a regional control commission for each of the 28 regions in Bulgaria and uses similar executive and deliberative structures at municipal and district levels (VMRO, 2020f).

The party statutes grant significant powers to the NIK, which is the institution that schedules the congress and the OS meetings and determines the agenda and outlines draft decisions. It has the right to decide on all matters that are not addressed in the statutes propose the territorial organization of the party and dictate rules on the legitimacy of any of its sub-national institutions (VMRO, 2020f). Beyond the NIK, only the OS could potentially exercise some substantial decision-making powers. The OS is the body responsible for confirming the party program, electoral manifestos, and electoral lists. It also gives the NIK the mandate to establish electoral alliances. Yet, given that all members of the NIK belong to the OS as well, the NIK has strong control over key party decisions even though the statutes nominally give these prerogatives to the party deliberative body (OS).

The informal affiliations of the party compensate for its centralized but lightweight formal structure and limited territorial outreach. VMRO-BND has a very active youth organization, as well as a women's association, both of which are the main providers of feet on the ground for party activities. The party also maintains a comprehensive network of loosely-affiliated organizations that promote the party or closely align with its views. This network creates the impression that VMRO-BND has strong roots in Bulgarian society, but nevertheless these organizations have limited social outreach and influence. Among these associations, the publishing house of VMRO-BND, Macedonia Press, which publishes historical and popular scientific literature, warrants particular attention. In the past, the party invested heavily in media publications, including a monthly conservative current affairs and history magazine, *Nie (We)*, as well as a party newspaper, *Bulgaria*. VMRO-BND is further affiliated with the Makedonski Nauchen Institute (Macedonian Scientific Institute), which publishes historical and political analysis related to Macedonia with a nationalist slant. The party's increasing emphasis of socially conservative views and membership in the European Conservatives and Reformists group in the European Parliament more recently also allowed VMRO-BND to establish close relations with several independent organizations. Two of these organizations deserve particular attention. First, VMRO-BND has close ties to the Mladezhki Konservativen Klub (MKK, Young Conservatives Club), a student-led organization which regularly organizes events and publishes materials with conservative views. MKK serves as a pool of activists for VMRO-BND. For example, its former president, Krystian Szkwarek, was one of the most active party candidates during the 2019 European Parliament elections. Second, the party recently established close cooperation with

ROD International (ROD standing for Roditeli Obedineni za Detsata/Parents United for the Children), a conservative think tank that supplies VMRO-BND with expertise on social questions.

### 3.2. Promoting Nationalism Online and Offline

Despite the limited membership numbers and centralized organizational structure, VMRO-BND remains very active during and between election periods, offering a broad variety of activities to its members and, by extension, the public at large. The party's significant degree of activism contrasts starkly with other parties in Bulgaria, which remain relatively inactive outside the electoral period and typically refrain from organizing activities for members and supporters. There are three main sets of activities that VMRO-BND uses to foster a sense of belonging and to "mainstream" nationalism in wider society. Firstly, the party hosts regular events that are usually attended by hundreds of people. These events are crucial and are mainly annual celebrations of figures and other events related to the Macedonian liberation movement, as well as key events in Bulgarian national history. Since its founding, the party has held mass torch rallies across the country on 27 November, commemorating the signing of the 1919 Treaty of Neuilly-sur-Seine which confirmed the Bulgarian defeat in World War I. In the past, VMRO-BND was also involved in the organization of the Lukov March, a neo-Nazi torch rally held each February in remembrance of Hristo Lukov, a Bulgarian army general and Nazi collaborator. However, more recently the party has distanced itself from that event (Angelov, 2020).

Secondly, VMRO-BND regularly organizes local activities and events on the streets. VMRO-BND mobilizes protests addressing ongoing local issues or joins larger protests where it displays its flags. Usually, VMRO-BND is one of the main organizers of local action against ethnic or religious minorities, particularly the Turkish and Roma communities. These protests often result in violence (Stoykova, 2011), which was the case in 2011 following the murder of a local young person by an affiliate of one of the local Romani crime bosses in the village of Katunitsa. Further local actions include protests in front of places where religious minorities hold meetings, branding them as "sects," or attempts to block and intimidate the participants of the annual Sofia Pride march. VMRO-BND also regularly stages local protests against public service providers, such as the local electricity or water company, usually in opposition to high bills and charges.

Thirdly, apart from organizing commemorations and protests, VMRO-BND also regularly gathers signatures for local or national initiatives, such as a referendum on Turkish accession to the EU. These increase the party's visibility through street stalls and give party activists the feeling that they engage with the local community. All such activities are strengthened by leafleting to spread the party message.

These political actions are enhanced by activities that have a seemingly non-partisan character, yet in fact promote the party's views among the wider public and particularly to the Bulgarian youth. Party activists and members tend to join the work of local clubs to study and discuss Bulgarian history, usually from a nationalist perspective. Such clubs also stage reenactments of historical events, such as the Bulgarian Unification in Plovdiv every 6 September, which are well-attended by locals. The party's youth organization is quite active in university circles, where it holds regular talks and panels on topics related to Bulgarian history and politics. Within this, it organizes local essay or art competitions on nationalist topics. In the past it also did an annual amateur football tournament together with the local section of Blood & Honor, an international neo-Nazi network that does not engage publicly in many activities throughout Bulgaria but remains known for its racist beliefs. Furthermore, VMRO-BND regularly organizes the cleanup and restoration of local areas, such as parks or playgrounds, under the banner of its campaign "Green is love of your country."

Beyond its sizable activities across the country, the party also maintains an online presence. Since its inception, VMRO-BND recognized the importance of media, as demonstrated above with its numerous publications. Online, the party maintains a website where it regularly reports its activities, while in 2014 it also created a party-affiliated television channel, Bulgaria 24, which is freely accessible online. Additionally, most of VMRO-BND's members of parliament and its local party structures, as well as its youth and women's organizations, maintain Facebook pages with rich content, including statements, articles, pictures, and videos related to their activities. The party also has an up-to-date YouTube account with videos posted by its leading figures. Overall, VMRO-BND has an active online presence, which stands in noticeable contrast to its populist radical right partners from the OP alliance, Ataka and NFSB.

In terms of web presence, particular attention should be paid to major individuals in the party, specifically Angel Dzhambazki, party vice-president and current member of the European Parliament. Dzhambazki has long led the party youth organization and has developed a recognizable media profile as an articulate nationalist. This image is further enhanced by his social media presence. His controversial opinions, shared on his Facebook page, regularly attract a significant number of responses by party sympathizers and opponents. For example, following the murder of a student, he declared: "Tell me something about integration...I will tell you how to use a rope" (Zhelev, 2017). His behavior has been well-emulated by other major figures from VMRO-BND, such as Aleksandar Sidi and Carlos Contrera, who are also very active online, particularly on Facebook, despite not having a comparable impact to Dzhambazki. Generally, the online communication between the party and its supporters remains top-down, with the latter mainly

commenting or sharing posts rather than being proactive (e.g., messaging for the party, posting comments in its support, quoting posts, or creating their own content). For example, Dzhambazki regularly holds a Facebook live session called *Everything About Macedonia*, where he comments on current affairs and responds to questions from the audience.

### 3.3. Reasons for Growing an Active Community

VMRO-BND and its leader have not spoken openly about any particular motivations to grow their base beyond providing generic statements about the importance of having party members. Nevertheless, the place of the party in Bulgarian society allows us to make an informed assumption on the potential reasons for growing its base. A look at the party's electoral performance suggests that an active membership has purposes other than electoral mobilization. VMRO-BND struggled until very recently to transform its membership into strong electoral support. Prior to its successful participation in the 2019 European Parliament elections and strong performance in the April 2021 parliamentary elections, the only other time the party participated in an election on its own was in 2013. In those elections it attracted only twice as many votes as the total number of its members. Under such circumstances, growing the membership seems to serve mainly social rather than electoral purposes.

Given the major commitment of the party to being active, growing its party base arguably serves three main aims. First, through its activities, VMRO-BND aims to create a sense of belonging among its (potential) members and activists, allowing them to jointly express their values and beliefs. This is enshrined in party documents, which emphasize that "loving one's country is [measured] even by the smallest acts; by any means one can be useful for its community" (VMRO, 2020b). The main reason for this emphasis of belonging lies in the party's origin as a cultural organization. The party statutes and party program list ambitious cultural and educational aims, such as to "preserve and develop traditional Bulgarian values, rites, and beliefs for the future generations" and to achieve "the spiritual unity of the Bulgarian people in Moesia, Thrace, Macedonia, the Western Outlands, and all other Bulgarian communities abroad" (VMRO, 2020f). This has been something that the party has worked toward even during its existence as VMRO-SMD, and it is these aims of cultural unity and preservation of cultural values that motivate the party to be active across communities.

Second, an active party organization demonstrates the party's roots within communities. For example, VMRO-BND regularly stages mass inaugurations for its new members, usually held at a church or a similarly symbolic building. Despite relying on rituals, including the kissing of a gun and a knife crossed over a bible as a form of inauguration, the party demonstrates a practical approach to growing its membership. The main aim of

these mass inaugurations is to show the local significance and presence of VMRO-BND. Regularly those inaugurations are combined with local community work, through which the party spreads its message ("VMRO-BND razdava kurban i priema novi chlenove," 2011). Dated reports from the late 1990s suggest that such mass inaugurations were also used as a warning to political opponents, given that they were organized particularly at times of heightened tensions, such as when the Obedinena Makedonska Organizatsiya Ilinden-Pirin (United Macedonian Organization Ilinden–Pirin), a small Macedonian minority party, started its efforts to expand its party structures and register officially as a party in Bulgaria (Stoyanova, 1999).

Third, an active and mass organization shows public acceptance of party ideas. In this respect, the party's range of activities allow it to engage its current members, provide opportunities for its activists to demonstrate their abilities and grow within the party ranks, as well as to reach out to potential new members. Engagement with non-members is also important. The party's close links to several external organizations are an important source for the recruitment of new faces that are untarnished by party politics and can spread the party's views as independent figures. By doing so, VMRO-BND can claim that its ideas find wide acceptance beyond its party ranks. Such a strategy has been particularly prevalent in more recent years. For example, for the 2019 European Parliament elections, the party purposefully placed Andrey Slabakov, a non-member, second on its list. During the 2021 parliamentary elections in April and July, some of the most active figures of the party campaign were Kuzman Iliev, a former TV anchor, as well as Ernestina Shinova, a popular actress and Slabakov's wife.

### 4. The Internal Centralization of VMRO-BND

Despite the emphasis on presence and belonging when it comes to membership, VMRO-BND remains very centralized in its decision-making. The main reason for this centralization is Krasimir Karakachanov and his close affiliates' concentration of power and dominance in the party.

The leadership of VMRO-BND makes good use of its extensive formal rights. Throughout the years, Karakachanov and his clique in the party executive NIK single-handedly decided the electoral lists for national and European Parliament elections. They also forged electoral alliances and post-electoral coalitions, which were then rubber-stamped by the OS, although the OS formally holds the power to make such decisions. Nevertheless, the party leadership is very eager to present VMRO-BND as an organization open to wider society by providing space for non-members to engage with the party, particularly through participating in its electoral lists. In the 2013 parliamentary elections, VMRO-BND declared its aim to have more than half of its candidates selected from the so called "civic quota"

i.e., placing non-members in its electoral lists (VMRO, 2013b). This allowed the party to demonstrate its close links to the wider radical right and extreme right sub-cultures. For example, in 2013 VMRO-BND placed two autonomous nationalists from Sandanski on its electoral lists. Given that electoral candidates had immunity from judicial prosecution at that time, this choice by the party served its efforts to release these two nationalists from police custody following their arrest for bombing the local party office of Evroroma (Euroroma), a small Romani minority party (VMRO, 2013a). At the local level, VMRO-BND demonstrates openness and reports document the party organizing local consultations with non-members, discussing who their local candidates should be and what issues they should address (VMRO, 2015).

Despite the significant room given to non-members, internal party democracy is severely limited. According to the party statutes, rank-and-file members have the right to propose decisions solely to the local party cells but not to any level above that (VMRO, 2020f). VMRO-BND remains dominated by the party leader and his close affiliates in the party executive. In office since 1997, Karakachanov survived several splits and challenges to his leadership through a heavy hand, using the strong formal powers of the party leadership. In each case where Karakachanov's leadership was under scrutiny, the outcome was often that the dissenters left the party or were expelled, while Karakachanov stayed on. In 1998, Karakachanov's choice to transform the then-cultural organization into a party led to a significant portion of members leaving in disagreement with this decision. The members who left founded a new cultural organization called VMRO–Sayuz na Makedonskite Organizatsii (VMRO-SMO, VMRO–Union of Macedonian Organizations). In 2000 another alternative VMRO organization was founded, claiming to be the true heir of the historic VMRO. Karakachanov managed to dismiss these challenges, accusing both alternative VMRO organizations of trying to steal the party's properties (“VMRO—Malkiyat David sreshtu golemite partii,” 2000). In 2001, the Sofia youth organization of the party criticized Karakachanov during the party congress, saying that VMRO-BND had lost its direction and directly accused Karakachanov of using the party for personal gain. The outcome of this criticism was the immediate removal of the VMRO member who read the declaration and the dissolution of the Sofia youth organization (“Ima li pochva u nas kauzata VMRO,” 2001).

The main evidence of the limited internal democracy and heavy concentration of power within the party also comes from the outcome of the internal challenges to Karakachanov's leadership. There have been two major examples in recent times: In 2009 the then-Plovdiv mayor, Slavcho Atanasov, lost marginally on the final delegate vote (“Slavcho Atanasov: Bitka do dupka za VMRO,” 2009), while in 2012 Kostadin Kostadinov, the leader of the Varna branch and party vice-president, lost by a landslide (Kostadinova, 2020). On both occasions, the results

were openly disputed by the challengers, who accused Karakachanov of vote manipulation. Furthermore, both cases were challenges to Karakachanov's leadership from his own inner circle, suggesting the absence of any alternative sources of power in VMRO-BND. A potential successor to the party presidency is currently Angel Dzhambazki, but there is no indication that he developed an internal opposition to Karakachanov. Instead, it seems that he will inherit the position if he does not do anything to contradict Karakachanov. Overall, with no alternative sources of power, limited dissent, heavy crackdown when such dissent occurs, and strong formal and actual centralization around the party leadership, VMRO-BND has limited internal party democracy despite its effort to present itself as a party open to wider society.

## 5. Conclusion

VMRO-BND is a clear case of a PRRP that invests considerable effort in building a mass party organization. Despite having a rather limited membership, the party has an active organization across local communities, strong online presence, and a good network of loosely-affiliated organizations. Its activities across communities attract members and activists as they create a sense of belonging to the organization, showcase the party's roots within society and present party ideas as having broad social acceptance. The role of the internet and the social media is important for the party as VMRO-BND maintains multiple channels to interact with activists, members, and supporters (including a TV channel owned by the party, multiple Facebook accounts, and an up-to-date YouTube channel). Organizationally, the party remains centralized with limited internal democracy, despite its attempts to offer some room to non-members and local activists.

The experiences of VMRO-BND lead to three major lessons about the contemporary state of the organization of a PRRP, particularly from Central and Eastern Europe. First, PRRPs from the region seem to acknowledge the importance of local presence and activities, and, generally, of organizational strength. In the case of VMRO-BND, it allowed the party to keep its activists and members engaged and to tap into popular nationalist sentiments. In addition to the creation of a sense of belonging, the cultural and educational emphasis of these activities is particularly attractive to younger members. This echoes the experiences of Jobbik in Hungary, for example, where the party grew a significant youth base (Pirro & Róna, 2019). Second, PRRPs in Central and Eastern Europe can create the impression of being mass organizations, even if formally they may have limited membership numbers. This relates to the thick network of loosely-affiliated organizations and joint actions with other representatives of the radical and extreme-right milieus that VMRO-BND managed to forge throughout the years. The VMRO-BND affiliates can often provide feet on the ground for the party activities or supply it with nominally independent candidates on its electoral

lists—a finding that has been highlighted in previous work on radical right parties and their subcultures in Central and Eastern Europe (Minkenberg, 2017). Third, we need to acknowledge the importance of local party activists who provide the key link between the party, the radical and extreme-right subcultures, and the wider society. In the case of VMRO-BND, it is the activities of local activists and members that really allowed the party to engage with communities and establish a certain profile. This confirms the importance of party organization rather than leadership control for the sustainable organizational and electoral development of challenger parties in Central and Eastern Europe, as indicated in existing studies (Gherghina & Soare, 2021).

Based on these discussions, future works may wish to explore three important topics. First, more attention to the party's grassroots efforts is needed. Given the importance of local activists and their work in local communities, we may need to shift our focus from PRRPs at the national level and explore local strategies, i.e., the role and place of local activists, their freedom to act as they see fit in promoting the party message, etc. Second, we also need to turn our focus to the main reservoir for PRRPs: the radical right subculture. Rather than studying openly right-wing organizations, we may need to pay a closer attention to the work of nominally non-partisan organizations that essentially “mainstream” the views of PRRPs, offline and online. Finally, while we looked mainly at the offline activities of PRRPs, further research could focus on its online activities. We noticed that VMRO-BND has increasingly utilized social media and other online channels, so a greater understanding of the party's online behavior would add to the growing academic interest in the relationship between internet and PRRPs in Europe (Karl, 2017; Schumann et al., 2021). It is important to explore how parties use these channels particularly to mobilize their members and communicate with sympathizers and voters.

### Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the editors of this thematic issue, Daniele Albertazzi and Stijn van Kessel, for their support in preparing the article, as well as the participants of the workshop “Central and Eastern Europe in Post-Communism: Understanding the Political, Social and Historical Developments” for their helpful feedback on an earlier version of the article.

### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

### References

Angelov, G. (2020, September 9). VMRO se otreche ot Lukov marsh, sled kato DPS gi posochiha za organizatori [VMRO renounced Lukov March after DPS

- declared them as organizers]. *Dnevnik*. [https://www.dnevnik.bg/bulgaria/2018/02/09/3126888\\_vmro\\_se\\_otreche\\_ot\\_lukov\\_marsh\\_sled\\_kato\\_dps\\_gi](https://www.dnevnik.bg/bulgaria/2018/02/09/3126888_vmro_se_otreche_ot_lukov_marsh_sled_kato_dps_gi)
- Avramov, K. (2015). The Bulgarian radical right: Marching up from the margins. In M. Minkenberg (Ed.), *Transforming the transformation? The East European radical right in the political process* (pp. 299–318). Routledge.
- Central Electoral Commission. (2017). *Parlamentarni Izbori 2017* [Parliamentary elections 2017]. <https://results.cik.bg/pi2017/rezultati>
- Central Electoral Commission. (2019). *Izbori za Evropeyski parlament 2019* [European Parliament elections 2019]. <https://results.cik.bg/ep2019/rezultati>
- Contrera, C. (2019, April 3). *Krizata na elitite* [The crisis of the elites]. VMRO. <https://vmro.bg/кризата-на-ELITИТЕ>
- Gherghina, S., Miscoiu, S., & Soare, S. (2017). How far does nationalism go? An overview of populist parties in Central and Eastern Europe. In R. C. Heinisch, C. Holtz-Bacha, & O. Mazzoleni (Eds.), *Political populism: A handbook* (pp. 193–208). Nomos.
- Gherghina, S., & Soare, S. (2021). Electoral performance beyond leaders? The organization of populist parties in postcommunist Europe. *Party Politics*, 27(1), 58–68.
- Ibroscheva, E. (2020). The world according to Siderov: The rise of the far-right celebrity politician in Bulgaria. *Celebrity Studies*, 11(3), 305–319.
- Ima li pochva u nas kauzata VMRO [Is there any ground for the VMRO cause]. (2001, December 22). *Banker Weekly*. <https://www.banker.bg/obshtestvo-i-politika/read/ima-li-pochva-u-nas-kauzata-vmro>
- Ivanov, C., & Ilieva, M. (2005). Bulgaria. In C. Mudde (Ed.), *Racist extremism in Central and Eastern Europe* (pp. 1–28). Routledge.
- Karl, P. (2017). Hungary's radical right 2.0. *Nationalities Papers*, 45(3), 345–355.
- Kopecký, P., & Mudde, C. (Eds.). (2003). *Uncivil society? Contentious politics in post-Communist Europe*. Routledge.
- Kostadinova, S. (2020, February 5). Kostadin Kostadinov “Kopeykin”—Noviyat Siderov [Kostadin “Kopeykin” Kostadinov—The new Siderov]. *Mediapool*. <https://www.mediapool.bg/kostadin-kostadinov-kopeikin-noviyat-siderov-news303086.html>
- Krasteva, A. (2016). The post-Communist rise of national populism: Bulgarian paradoxes. In G. Lazaridis, G. Campani, & A. Benveniste (Eds.), *The rise of the far right in Europe: Populist shifts and “othering”* (pp. 161–200). Springer.
- Krasteva, K., Klisurova, L., & Dimitrova, R. (2018, August 6). BSP i GERB veche pochti ravni po broj chlenove [BSP and GERB almost equal in membership numbers]. *24 Chasa*. <https://www.24chasa.bg/novini/article/6996938>
- Mesežnikov, G., Gyárfásová, O., & Smilov, D. (2008). *Pop-*

- ulist politics and liberal democracy in Central and Eastern Europe. Institute for Public Affairs.
- Minkenberg, M. (2015). *Transforming the transformation? The East European radical right in the political process*. Routledge.
- Minkenberg, M. (2017). *The radical right in Eastern Europe. Democracy under siege?* Palgrave Macmillan.
- Pirro, A. (2015). *The populist radical right in Central and Eastern Europe*. Routledge.
- Pirro, A., & Róna, D. (2019). Far-right activism in Hungary: Youth participation in Jobbik and its network. *European Societies*, 21(4), 603–626.
- Pytlas, B. (2016). *Radical right parties in Central and Eastern Europe: Mainstream party competition and electoral fortune*. Routledge.
- Schumann, S., Boer, D., Hanke, K., & Liu, J. (2021). Social media use and support for populist radical right parties: Assessing exposure and selection effects in a two-wave panel study. *Information, Communication & Society*, 24(7), 921–940.
- Slavcho Atanasov: Bitka do dupka za VMRO [Slavcho Atanasov: Fight until the end for VMRO]. (2009, October 19). *Maritsa*. <https://www.marica.bg/balgariq/slavcho-atanasov-bitka-do-dupka-za-vmro>
- Spirova, M. (2005). Political parties in Bulgaria: Organizational trends in comparative perspective. *Party Politics*, 11(5), 601–622.
- Stoyanova, G. (1999, February 20). Dalgijat pat na VMRO kam vlastta [The long path of VMRO to power]. *Kapital*. [https://www.capital.bg/politika\\_i\\_ikonomika/bulgaria/1999/02/20/248969\\_dulgiat\\_pohod\\_na\\_vmro\\_kum\\_vlastta](https://www.capital.bg/politika_i_ikonomika/bulgaria/1999/02/20/248969_dulgiat_pohod_na_vmro_kum_vlastta)
- Stoykova, A. (2011, April 18). VMRO i svideteli na Jehova se bili v Burgas [VMRO and Jehova’s Witness fought in Burgas]. *BNT*. [https://bntnews.bg/bg/a/51251-vmro\\_i\\_svideteli\\_na\\_jehova\\_se\\_bili\\_v\\_burgas](https://bntnews.bg/bg/a/51251-vmro_i_svideteli_na_jehova_se_bili_v_burgas)
- Sygelos, Y. (2015). Nationalism versus European integration: The case of ATAKA. *East European Quarterly*, 43(2/3), 163–188.
- Todorov, A. (2013). *The extreme right wing in Bulgaria*. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.
- VMRO. (2001). *Napredak za Bulgaria* [Progress for Bulgaria]. VMRO. <http://www.vmro.bg/napredak.htm>
- VMRO. (2008). *Zadachi i programa* [Tasks and program]. VMRO. <http://vmro.bg/modules.php?name=Programa>
- VMRO. (2012a). *22 godini ot vazstanovyavaneto na VMRO sled demokratichnite promeni v Bulgaria* [22 years since the restoration of VMRO after the democratic changes in Bulgaria]. VMRO. <https://vmro.bg/22-godini-ot-vzstanoviavaneto-na-vmro-sled-demokra>
- VMRO. (2012b). *Rakovodni organi* [Governing bodies]. VMRO. [http://www.vmro.bg/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=64&Itemid=30](http://www.vmro.bg/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=64&Itemid=30)
- VMRO. (2013a). *Momchetata ot Sandanski vлизат v listite na VMRO* [The boys from Sandanski enter the VMRO lists]. VMRO. <https://vmro.bg/momchetata-ot-sandanski-vlizat-v-listite-na-vmro>
- VMRO. (2013b). *VMRO s yasno litse na izborite i shiroka grazhdanska lista* [VMRO with a clear face on the elections and wide civic list]. VMRO. <https://vmro.bg/vmro-s-iasno-litse-na-izborite-i-shiroka-grazhdans>
- VMRO. (2015). *Troyan nominira kandidati za izborite sled obshtestveno dopitvane* [Troyan nominates candidates for the elections following public consultation]. VMRO. <https://vmro.bg/vmro-troyan-nominira-kandidati-za-izborite-sled-obshchestveno-dopitvane>
- VMRO. (2020a). *Demografska programa “Bulgaria 2050”* [Demographic program “Bulgaria 2050”]. VMRO. <https://vmro.bg/българия-2050>
- VMRO. (2020b). *Koi sme nie* [Who are we]. VMRO. <https://vmro.bg/кои-сме-ние>
- VMRO. (2020c). *Kontakti* [Contacts]. VMRO. <https://vmro.bg/контакти>
- VMRO. (2020d). *Programa* [Program]. VMRO. <https://vmro.bg/програма>
- VMRO. (2020e). *Rakovodni organi* [Governing bodies]. VMRO. <https://vmro.bg/ръководни-органи>
- VMRO. (2020f). *Ustav* [Statutes]. VMRO. <https://vmro.bg/устав>
- VMRO. (2021). *Dohodi, semeystvo, sigurnost* [Income, family, security]. VMRO. <https://vmro.bg/предизборна-програма-на-vmro-2021-г>
- VMRO-BND razdava kurban i priema novi chlenove [VMRO-BND provides gifts and accepts new members]. (2011, July 19). *Darik Radio*. <https://dariknews.bg/regioni/plovdiv/vmro-bnd-razdava-kurban-i-priema-novi-chlenove-750200>
- VMRO—Malkiyat David sreshtu golemite partii [VMRO—The small David against the giant parties]. (2000, June 20). *Standart*. <http://paper.standartnews.com/archive/2000/06/20/society/analiz3.htm>
- Werkmann, C., & Gherghina, S. (2018). Organized for parliament? Explaining the electoral success of radical right parties in post-Communist Europe. *Government and Opposition*, 53(3), 461–485.
- Zankina, E. (2017). Populism, voters and cleavages in Bulgarian politics. *Politologický Časopis*, 24(1), 56–71.
- Zhelev, Z. (2017). *Dzhambazki kam roma, ubil Aleks: Shte vi razkazha kak se polzva vazhe* [Dzhambazki to the Romani who killed Aleks: I will tell you how to you use a rope]. *Dnes.bg*. <https://www.dnes.bg/obshtestvo/2017/07/17/djambazki-kym-roma-ubil-aleks-shte-vi-razkaja-kak-se-izpolzva-vyje.347509>



### About the Authors



**Petar Bankov** is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Glasgow. His research interests are in comparative party politics, particularly in the local dynamics between party organizations and local communities. His previous work studied the electoral geography of the European radical left since 1990.



**Sergiu Gherghina** is an associate professor in comparative politics at the Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Glasgow. His research interests lie in party politics, elite and voting behavior, democratization, and the use of direct democracy.



**Nanuli Silagadze** is a postdoctoral researcher at Åbo Akademi University, Finland. Her main areas of research include democratic innovations with a particular focus on the instrument of direct democracy, political parties, and voting behavior.

Article

## “Mass,” “Movement,” “Personal,” or “Cartel” Party? Fidesz’s Hybrid Organisational Strategy

Rudolf Metz<sup>1,2,\*</sup> and Réka Várnagy<sup>2</sup><sup>1</sup> Institute for Political Science, Centre for Social Sciences, Hungary; E-Mail: metz.rudolf@tk.hu<sup>2</sup> Department of Political Science, Institute of International, Political and Regional Studies, Corvinus University of Budapest, Hungary; E-Mail: reka.varnagy@uni-corvinus.hu

\* Corresponding author

Submitted: 28 April 2021 | Accepted: 2 August 2021 | Published: 24 November 2021

### Abstract

In the last decade, Fidesz has dominated the Hungarian political landscape, becoming the most extensive Hungarian party organisation in terms of party members, structuration, resources, and influence. The party’s organisational development has been determined by a constant strategic adaptation to new circumstances of political reality and new demands of the electorate. The article argues that in three phases of its development, Fidesz adopted different party organisation guidelines. As a result, a hybrid party architecture was formed involving various characteristics and strategies of mass parties (e.g., relatively large membership and ideological communication), movement parties (i.e., top-down generation of mass rallies and protest activities), personal parties (i.e., personalisation, centralisation of party leadership), and cartel parties (i.e., use of state resources, control over party competition). Instead of switching from one strategy to another, the party often used these strategies simultaneously. This flexible party organisation can balance among the different needs of effective governance, constant mobilisation, and popular sovereignty. The article aims to dissect these building blocks of Fidesz to gain insight into the emergence of the hybrid party model.

### Keywords

cartel parties; Fidesz; hybrid party strategies; mass parties; movement parties; personal parties

### Issue

This article is part of the issue “Right-Wing Populist Party Organisation Across Europe: The Survival of the Mass-Party?” edited by Daniele Albertazzi (University of Surrey, UK) and Stijn van Kessel (Queen Mary University of London, UK).

© 2021 by the authors; licensee Cogitatio (Lisbon, Portugal). This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

### 1. Introduction

The Fidesz–Magyar Polgári Szövetség (Fidesz or Fidesz–Hungarian Civic Alliance) stands out not just from Hungarian but also Central-Eastern European parties for its longevity and organisational, political, and ideological adaptability. Founded by a group of politically active students in 1988, it has evolved from a small liberal movement party to the leading actor of the centre-right, conservative camp as well as the government coalition of 1998. After losing two elections in 2002 and 2006, it re-emerged as the dominant party of the political landscape, winning a two-thirds majority three times in a row from 2010 to 2018. Unlike many of its peers, the party

avoided any major intraparty conflicts and schisms and established itself as the most extensive Hungarian party organisation in terms of party members, structuration resources, and influence. Thus, Fidesz is a prime example of Enyedi’s (2014) theory that adaptation to new circumstances of political reality and new demands of the electorate can be considered to be critical for a party’s survival and success.

Fidesz’s organisational, ideological, and political development has not followed a unidirectional trajectory. Like many parties, Fidesz has adopted diverse guidelines of party organisation to pursue different goals at different times. However, instead of switching from one strategy to another, we picture these strategies as

layers of change that often simultaneously persist. This opportunistic conversion (cf. Mahoney & Thelen, 2009) was concentrated on the party's external relations with voters and the state, leaving its internal rules largely untouched. Due to the concentration of party leadership and the collapse of support for other right-wing parties (after the 2000s) and the major left-wing parties (after 2006), the party was able to experiment and refine strategies without significant barriers or interference. Moreover, after its landslide victory in 2010, the party took advantage of the government position to further expand the scope of the party beyond the formal institutional frames. This development trajectory is rather peculiar given that Fidesz is one of the few mainstream political actors in Europe which has radicalised and become more populist in its politics. As a result, Fidesz has built a hybrid party organisation which demonstrates selected characteristics of mass parties, personal parties, movement parties, and even cartel parties. In other words, the party provides a perfect example of organisational innovation by applying a new combination of existing practices and different forms of party organisation (cf. Schumpeter, 2006, p. 132).

The mixture of different organisational practices has helped the party to simultaneously strengthen and maintain its various linkages to voters (charismatic, clientelist, and programmatic; cf. Kitschelt, 2000). The concentration of power and the informal emergence of the leader (presidentialisation; Hloušek, 2015) lie at the heart of party development and have resulted in a personal or personalised party (Musella, 2018). Phrased differently, party organisational politics are largely determined by Viktor Orbán's charismatic leadership (charismatic linkage). This strong, personalised leadership has also prevented intraparty conflicts within different organisational layers as the concentration of power allows for the control of all levels of the party. At the same time, mass party organisational strategy (see Albertazzi & van Kessel, 2021) has been reflected in the recruitment of activist support for (offline or online) campaigning. Fidesz's identity politics have strengthened this strategy, as the envisioned Christian, national, and conservative community can be mobilised by specific political messages (programmatic linkages). In governing position, the party has been able to strengthen its embeddedness in society by radically reforming certain areas of social life (culture, sports, etc.) in order to further promote this identity.

However, conscious and unhindered development has sometimes led to extreme organisational forms. Fidesz's cartel party characteristics show critical deviation from the ideal type (Katz & Mair, 1995). The domestic political crisis triggered by the former socialist Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány's "lying speech" in 2006 (which was accompanied by enduring anti-government demonstrations and street violence) permanently broke the former party cartel of major governing parties (Ilonszki & Várnagy, 2014b; cf. Enyedi, 2006). After 2010, Fidesz gained a dominant position in Hungarian

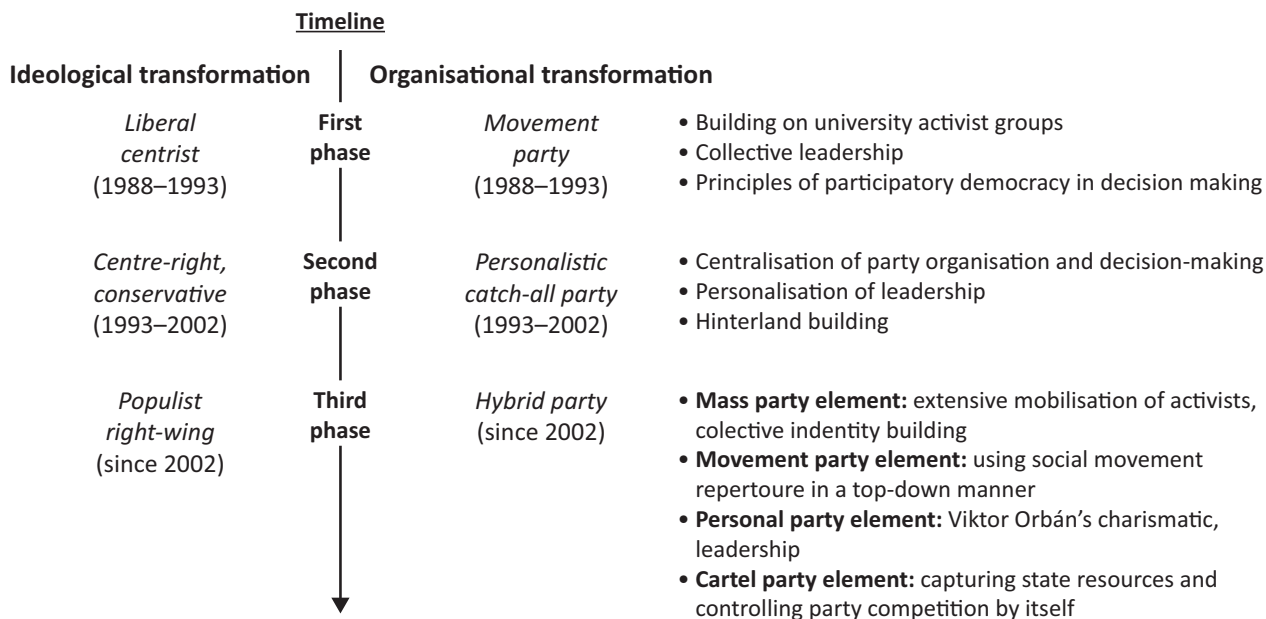
politics with its non-autonomous coalition partner Kereszténydemokrata Néppárt (KDNP or Christian Democratic People's Party). This meant that there was no longer a need to cooperate with other parties. Fidesz's dominant position made it possible for it to occupy the state and to control party competition by itself to ensure its own electoral success. In other words, Fidesz is able to act as the sole agent of the state, capable of creating and maintaining clientelist networks at all levels of Hungarian society (Körösényi et al., 2020, pp. 93–115; Mares & Young, 2018).

In order to support charismatic leadership and counterbalance the cartel-like behaviour, Fidesz applies "the organisational and strategic practices of social movements in the arena of party competition" (Kitschelt, 2006, p. 280; see also Almeida, 2010, p. 174). However, the movements that directly support the party (the Civic Circles and the Civil Cooperation Forum) were created in a top-down manner with no autonomy compared to other radical right-wing movement parties (Gunther & Diamond, 2003, p. 189) or left-wing party-driven movements (Muldoon & Rye, 2020). Thus, the movement party characteristics have manifested in an extreme way as the party uses this strategy as a tool for constant mobilisation. Overall, these new organisational practices accompanied by populist rhetoric blur the line between intra-parliamentary, extra-parliamentary, and government politics.

The article aims to explore this hybrid organisational strategy of Fidesz. The analysis is structured as follows. First, we describe the organisational and ideological evolution of the party in its three developmental phases. Second, the analysis addresses current organisational development, including the evolution of activists' networks and recruitment processes. Third, we consider centralised and personalised party leadership and party cartelisation.

## 2. The Ideological and Organisational Evolution of Fidesz

At the ideological and organisational level, the historical development of Fidesz can be divided into three main phases (see Figure 1): (a) the early movement party phase (1988–1993) characterised by collective leadership and liberal centrist ideology; (b) the personalised catch-all party phase (1993–2002) which presented professionalisation and an ideological transition to a right-wing, conservative ideological position; and (c) from 2002 onwards which reveals how the party's current ideological and organisational profile gradually developed into what we call a "hybrid party." Recently, the party has shown a mix of characteristics: Some of its features, such as the massive membership and organisational expansion, recall mass party strategy, while other strategic elements (creating affiliated organisations, mass rallies, and protest activities in a top-down manner) are similar to that of movement parties and Viktor Orbán's charismatic



**Figure 1.** Ideological and organisational transformation phases of Fidesz.

leadership is a trait of personal parties. At the same time, the monopolisation of state resources and the dominance in public office remind us of cartel parties. The biggest change perceived is the “populist turn” of the party, both in terms of communication and strategy (cf. Enyedi & Róna, 2018).

*2.1. First Phase: The Movement Party*

Fidesz was not born as a party per se during the emergence of new parties in the transition period but rather as a university activist group. The group promoted radically liberal political ideas and was set on introducing a new generation of politicians. At the time of its foundation, the party only accepted members under the age of 35 under the name of the Alliance of Young Democrats (Fidesz was originally the abbreviation for this name). The party showed several traits of movement parties (Kitschelt, 2006, pp. 280–281): It gained popularity through its involvement in protests and mass demonstrations and relied on the principles of participatory democracy. As van Biezen (2003, p. 123) has emphasised, party members played a crucial role: “The delegates to the national council were elected directly by the local groups, and their votes were weighed in accordance with the number of members they represented.” There was also no centralised leadership; instead, the party was managed collectively—a trait shared by Western Green parties (M. Balázs & Enyedi, 1996)—until Orbán was elected as leader of the parliamentary party group in 1990 and as president of the party in 1993.

*2.2. Second Phase: The Personalistic Catch-All Party*

After the 1993 party congress, Fidesz launched a new political and organisational strategy to mobilise more

voters, increase governing potential and become more professional. Members lost their potential to directly influence party decisions at the party congress. Local party groups became territorially organised (allowing for one group in each municipality). They were subordinated to the higher levels of decision making, resulting in a higher level of centralisation and power concentration. The role of the party president was strengthened, which was a clear step towards personalisation. In order to reach out more, the party needed to establish stronger ties to society. As Enyedi (2005, p. 708) wrote, “the leadership realised that the party needed a Hinterland, a network of organisations, media forums and elite groups that could bring social legitimacy, expertise, and various other resources.” Thus, the party started to build coalitions with right-wing elites as well as with the clergy.

An ideological turn accompanied the organisational reform as the party shifted its profile from liberal to a more conservative, centre-right party. The party offered a “coming of age” narrative which basically conveyed the message that as the founding politicians became more mature, they recognised the importance of conservative values. As a result, the party in 1995 abolished the age limit of 35 for membership and reinvented the party’s brand by renaming it Fidesz–Hungarian Civic Party. The transformation was rewarded by the success of the 1998 elections.

*2.3. Third Phase: The Hybrid Party*

The electoral defeat of 2002 came as a surprise to the party as Fidesz was hoping to capitalise on its governmental role and the results of the 1998–2002 period. Confident in its achievements, the party attributed the electoral loss to a lack of ability to mobilise voters in time for the elections. Thus, Fidesz engaged in a

new organisational strategy of building a network called Citizens' Alliance. This strategy established a cultural and social community which relied on civic initiatives to mobilise its voter base (Greskovits, 2020; Metz, 2015; Szabó, 2011).

Along with the mobilisation strategy, the party adjusted its political message to amplify its appeal. Despite the growing polarisation between the left and right, Fidesz decided to reach out to an even broader base of voters by innovating its economic profile. The new set of messages integrated traditionally left-wing economic policies, nationalism and populist demands (Enyedi & Róna, 2018, pp. 255–256). After 2010, the populist style and strategy based on the us–them dichotomy, the use of referendums, and the so-called national consultation, which takes the form of a national survey sponsored by the government, gradually became the primary mode of government politics. Within the framework of consultation, the national survey sends around eight million questionnaires to voters and includes rather manipulative questions, such as: “Do you agree with the Hungarian government that support should be focused more on Hungarian families and the children they can have, rather than on immigration?” The rise of participatory methods allowed the government to frame its decisions to respond to voters' expectations and let the party overrun its ideological boundaries by selling a responsive image to the electorate.

In the following sections, we detail the developments of the third phase, focusing on the different elements of the hybrid party, that is, party organisation, recruitment mechanisms, social movement repertoire, party leadership, and cartelisation of the party.

### **3. Between Mass and Movement Party**

In order to increase organisational stability and social embeddedness, Fidesz combined the elements of mass parties with movement party strategies. While the party could establish a considerable degree of organisation (at least in the Hungarian context), these strategies go far beyond the institutional framework of the party. We now present these two interrelated mobilisation and recruitment strategies of the party. We focus on how the party makes great efforts both online and offline to attract new members and activists. We also take into account its (probable) reasons for building an activist base.

#### *3.1. Offline Mobilisation Through Networks of Affiliated Organisations and Activists*

Although its core structure has remained relatively stable since 1993, Fidesz has selectively applied elements of the mass party strategy to create a well-established organisation, membership base, and culturally and ideologically homogenous community of supporters (Hinterland). The present-day structure of party organisation is thus

the result of considerable previous recruitment work.

The basic organisational unit is the municipal-level party group, and its functions are mainly focussed on organising the local life of the party. Fidesz today has the most developed organisational network in Hungary, with 1.220 municipal-level party groups in 2015, which is extensive compared to the other two major parties of the time: Jobbik Magyarországért Mozgalom (Jobbik, Movement for a Better Hungary) with 834 groups and the Magyar Szocialista Párt (MSZP or Hungarian Socialist Party) with 463 groups (Horváth & Soós, 2015, p. 255). As the next step on the party ladder, the electoral district-based units are led by a loyal party member who is often the candidate running for the respective single-member district at the national elections. Above them, there are regional committees that only bear a minimum level of responsibility within the party. In the territorial hierarchy, the next step is the National Board, which consists of the National Presidium members, the regional committee leaders, the delegates from district-based units, the party's European Parliament delegation leader and the leaders of the partner organisations. The National Board manages the operative issues of the party between party congresses. The two most important central bodies are the Congress, which has the right to make and/or approve all decisions, and the National Presidium, which acts as the executive within the party.

Regarding party membership, according to data collected by Kovarek and Soós (2016), only 1% of the Hungarian population belongs to any party. While Fidesz has devoted a critical level of resources to increasing party membership, it nonetheless stays below 38,000 members, which is still higher than any other party's (e.g., the MSZP had 20,000 members in 2015, Jobbik had 15,000; see Kovarek & Soós, 2016). Compared to other parties in Hungary (Kovarek, 2020), the requirements to become a party member are not as strict, yet they reflect the party's lack of openness: The applicant must have three recommendation letters from members who have been members of the party for at least one year. In addition, as a reflection of the relationship between KDNP and Fidesz, members are encouraged to have dual party membership.

While holding governmental power, Fidesz needed a strategy to uphold its mobilisation potential, which relied on protest sentiments prior to 2010. Borrowing from the toolbox of movements and movement parties, the party launched a series of rallies (e.g., peace marches) that were initiated by organisations close to the party elite (predominantly by the former Civic Circles). These demonstrations revitalised the party's civil network and renewed its ties to society. In order to ensure central party control over these events, the party decided in approximately the late 2000s to integrate these initiatives into the party organisations by annexing these organisations. The expansion of the party organisation allowed for greater control and direct outreach to supporters on the ground.

The networks of affiliated organisations benefited the party on two levels. At the organisational level, it strengthened the party by increasing the number of local party groups and membership. The first network, called the Civic Circles Movement, founded by Orbán, was aimed at reuniting the right by integrating politicians, activists, and voters of other right-wing parties that had been weakened or disintegrated after the loss of the 2002 elections. The movement consisted of more than 11,000 civic circles and engaged approximately 163,000 members and was also connected to numerous church-bound, patriotic, professional, cultural, and local organisations. These local circles often became the focal point for local party organisations and offered a recruitment platform which resulted in a sevenfold increase in the party's membership. However, the decentralised nature of the Civic Circles contradicted the party's development strategy, and soon this movement was reformed under a non-governmental organisation, the Civil Cooperation Forum.

At the ideological level, this organisational network helped to re-establish and revitalise the bond between voters, supporters, and members by building a community that, in the party's rhetoric, embodies the nation and the people. One of the most significant challenges was overcoming ideological diversity since the network brought together voters and supporters with different political backgrounds. However, the routinisation of populist politics and mobilisation (from small gatherings to mass rallies) have broken down the substantial ideological barriers in the right-wing camp. Such regular events—Tranzit Festival, Tusványos Festival, and the party's annual private meeting at Kötcse—serve this goal by providing an opportunity for the political, administrative, and cultural elites associated with the party to come together. The culmination of events is usually Viktor Orbán's speech, which sets out the main political direction and topics for the near future. The Civil Cooperation Forum has also orchestrated several mass events since 2012 to express support for government politics. Among these events, the most notable is the peace march organised each year, which displays a curious mix of characteristics. The event itself is shaped as a demonstration closely linked to the party (through the use of party symbols) and bears a strong resemblance to official state events with the prime minister addressing "the People," "the nation." This mix of characteristics clearly shows how the party and its leaders have blurred the lines between state politics and party politics, with Orbán as the official leader of both the party and the country. This personalisation strategy presented Orbán as not only the official party leader and the elected leader of the country but also as the ideological leader of the political right.

As a continuation of its focus on increasing its mobilisation potential, Fidesz from 2004 onwards compiled a list of supporters, voters, and activists. The list became the central element of supporter and activist mobilisation. It was known as the "Kubatov list" in public dis-

course, named after Gábor Kubatov, the party director, central campaign manager, and vice-president. While canvassing has long been part of the parties' mobilisation toolbox and has often been used for accumulating systematic databases about voters with their consent, opposition parties have continuously challenged the party's methods of data collection. Based on a video made by opposition activists, the Curia (Supreme Court) of Hungary issued a decision stating that Fidesz activists had violated the rules of political data collection by misleading voters as to the use of their data (Kúria, 2019).

The need for coordinated mobilisation also led Fidesz to establish a formalised network of activists. In 2014, the "Hungarian Team" was formed, engaging more than 100,000 supporters as activists in the election campaign (Szalai, 2014). Later similar but hidden task forces followed, often engaging young activists, such as paid high school students among others (Magyari, 2015). These activists are on the borderline of the party structure: While many only temporarily engage in political activism, some devoted and loyal supporters find their way into the party organisation and even launch careers.

The recruitment of political, administrative and cultural elite also became a burning issue within the party, as the direct and indirect influence of Fidesz became more extensive and expansive in the various level of politics (media, government, party competition). Three recruitment paths emerged. The first path leads through the party where the entry-level is local politics or the party's youth organisation Fidelitas. It serves as a recruitment, training, and socialising camp for wannabe politicians. Indeed, many members of the new elite jump-started their career at Fidelitas, forming the nucleus of the National Cooperation System, which can be regarded as the elite network system behind Fidesz's and Viktor Orbán's regime.

The second path represents the party's narrower governmental and political Hinterland. The central government and pro-government think-tanks offer scholarships or/and jobs to undergraduate and graduate students with relevant knowledge and expertise. The internship programme of the Fidesz's party foundation, the Foundation for Civic Hungary, which is aimed at university students, is an excellent example of this practice. This programme is designed to engage politically committed and active students in the party's professional background work.

The third path goes through less political or ideological networks of knowledge centres and educational institutions, such as the Matthias Corvinus Collegium (MCC), which is a "quasi-college for advanced studies" financed directly by the government. While colleges for advanced studies have a long tradition in Hungary, and many of them are centres of academic excellence, MCC has not only a strong ideological profile but maintains clear and strong ties to the government. The institution is led by a prominent member of government, Balázs Orbán, deputy minister of the Hungarian prime minister's office.

Its extensive programme that reaches out to students from all over Hungary and to those beyond the border is financed by government grants, as MCC has been awarded billions of forints from the state budget and has received a transfer of shares and real estate from the government. According to its vision, the college offers educational programmes from elementary school onwards for future leaders who are committed to working for the nation.

### 3.2. Online Mobilisation Through Virtual Networks

Along with the efforts going into offline canvassing and mass organisation, Fidesz's online political presence has been strengthened since 2010. In order to increase its online presence, Fidesz politicians have been prompted to increase their posting frequency. For example, the minister of foreign affairs, Péter Szijjártó, who only launched his official Facebook profile at the end of 2019, gained 143,000 likes last year. Other prominent Fidesz politicians, like Judit Varga (95,000 likes), Máté Kocsis (94,000 likes), and Katalin Novák (79,000 likes) are far less visible online. Viktor Orbán's outreach, however, is enormous compared to other politicians and parties (see data on likes received in Table 1) and it witnessed a recent upsurge generated by the Prime Minister's strategic use of Facebook to introduce the government's decisions about the pandemic. The pandemic news and the need to be informed might allure site users not invested in politics to the politician's Facebook page.

While the accounts of politicians are more popular than the official party accounts, they do not enjoy autonomy from the party as their online presence is con-

trolled by the party centre both in terms of content (campaign slogans and messages) and funding (Facebook ads). According to a recent analysis of an interview series with Hungarian politicians (Oross & Tap, 2021), Fidesz has established top-down control its of social media presence, making it mandatory for its politicians (from government members to mayors and local faction leaders) to join Facebook. In 2017, one year before the election, the party centrally requested candidates to nominate a virtual staff member to manage Facebook communication and then provided them with specialised training. Their responsibilities included managing the candidate's page, building the candidate's online image, developing a separate account from the official ones devoted to negative campaigns, and involving online activists and delegating tasks to them (Haszán, 2018). By the 2018 elections, the virtual activist networks showed a highly centralised structure in which the control of campaign activity was extensive. Part of this network came under media scrutiny when anonymous sources unveiled that many of its online activities, including posting, sharing and commenting, were not voluntary but required within the network (Haszán, 2018), which undercut their authenticity and pointed towards the manipulative nature of online communication. Central party communications also create the content (e.g., memes, pictures, core messages, and slogans) for Facebook and disseminate it through the personal accounts of party members, politicians and activists. This centralisation is also reflected in the fact that Fidesz completely lacks any online platform for deliberation, candidate selection, policy formation, and voting, unlike smaller parties in the country (Oross & Tap, 2021, p. 15).

**Table 1.** Hungarian parties and their leaders' presence on Facebook.

	Likes (rounded numbers)	Change from 20 March to 21 March
Fidesz	320,800	+23,500 (+8%)
Viktor Orbán	1,120,000	+146,200 (+15%)
Jobbik	534,500	+32,800 (+7%)
Péter Jakab	296,300	+156,400 (+112%)
Demokratikus Koalíció (DK, Democratic Coalition)	167,500	+24,500 (+17%)
Ferenc Gyurcsány	298,500	+37,100 (+14%)
MSZP	216,300	+7,400 (+4%)
Bertalan Tóth	36,600	+12,700 (53%)
Ágnes Kunhalmi	42,500	+1,900 (+5%)
Párbeszéd (P, Dialogue)	132,000	+7,300 (+6%)
Tímea Szabó	152,700	+36,400 (+21%)
Gergely Karácsony	274,100	+47,000 (+21%)
Momentum	117,700	+6,200 (+6%)
András Fekete-Győr	46,700	+17,700 (+61%)
Lehet Más a Politika (LMP, Politics Can Be Different)	74,800	+914 (+8%)
Erzsébet Schmuck	34,600	+18,300 (+113%)
Máté Kanász-Nagy	5,400	+4,300 (+367%)

Note: Self-collected from CrowdTangle (3 March 2021).

In addition, the government and Fidesz are the most significant Facebook advertisers in Hungary. The former spent HUF 283.8 million and the latter HUF 141.6 million on advertising between 2019 and 2021 (Hanula, 2021a). It is also worth mentioning that the party was the most generous in spending money on YouTube ads (HUF 65 million) compared to other parties (Hanula, 2021b). The government and the party's online activities are difficult to distinguish (Hanula, 2021a). On the government's Facebook profile, the prime minister and some prominent members of the government (most notably Péter Szijjártó, Judit Varga, and Katalin Novák) regularly appear, but their messages are rarely directly connected to party politics. However, the issues they raise (e.g., promoting Coronavirus vaccinations) often feed into the political narrative of the party (e.g., Fidesz politicians are pro-vaccine while opposition politicians are anti-vaccine).

Despite the strengthening of its online strategy, the most recent elections in 2018 revealed that the party had lost touch with youngsters and intellectuals in urban areas. Megaphone Centre, a new pro-government initiative, explicitly undertakes to address like-minded young online activists, sponsors well-known senior opinion leaders (e.g., Philip Rákay and Zsolt Bayer), and offers training and content for them to face this challenge. Another digital platform called Axioma, founded by circles close to Fidesz, operates along similar lines, producing online content that echoes conservative values, and often features high-ranking government officials.

Overall, due to the applied elements of mass and movement party strategies, Fidesz could have established a broad and extensive party organisation (at least compared to other Hungarian parties). The party made great efforts to attract members and activists in offline and online space by mobilising them in a top-down manner, creating controlled recruitment paths and centralising the online presence of the party. The activist network based on offline linkages (Civic Circles, lists of party activists, and supporters) proved to be strong enough for a long time to mobilise enough people to win elections. While supporters can grow tired of the continuous campaign, the party devotes considerable efforts to promote and sustain these networks. At the same time, it provides innovations like online activism and specialised elite recruitment through party channels, adapting to the changing environment and new challenges.

#### **4. Between Personal and Cartel Party**

The organisational evolution showed intense centralisation both in terms of leadership, which translated to personalisation/presidentialisation, and in terms of state capture and domination of political competition, which manifested as a radical form of cartelisation.

Although the party was not born as a personal enterprise, after 1994, under Viktor Orbán's autonomous charismatic leadership, it "became the most centralised,

most homogeneous and most disciplined party in the country" (Enyedi, 2005, p. 708). The party's organisational and ideological transformation culminated in a symbolic re-foundation after the lost elections of 2002. It was symbolised by changing the party name from Fidesz–Hungarian Civic Party to Fidesz–Hungarian Civic Alliance, integrating the right-wing political spectrum. Orbán's leadership was also crucial to create, develop and stabilise Fidesz on organisational and ideological levels (Metz & Oross, 2020). This transformation presented the most evident shifts in the process of personalisation and presidentialisation in Hungary and East-Central Europe (Hloušek, 2015). Let's examine the main proof for formal and informal power concentration.

In light of the formal rules, all power is concentrated in the party's National Presidium (Z. Balázs & Hajdú, 2017; Kovarek & Soós, 2016). This role can be interpreted as the only real political forum for debates on crucial issues. The party leadership dominates the relationship between national and local bodies by appointing electoral district presidents who enjoy considerable power within specific areas. This centralisation helps to bypass the party on the ground (local and middle-level leaders) and prevent the emergence of independent power centres. Moreover, the National Board can dissolve its local units for working against the party programme or offending "the national interest of the party." While there are other central bodies, these are relatively weak: Congress almost has only a legitimating function, and the National Board's power is also limited and dependent on party leadership.

The National Presidium has formal control over key internal direction fields. One of its most essential prerogatives is the exclusive right to initiate amendments to basic party statutes; however, statutes can only be modified by the National Board and must be approved by Congress (Kertész, 2013). Due to this prerogative, the party leadership can fully control the party organisation's development and the separation of power.

Another crucial question is how parliamentary candidates (local, national, and European) are selected. Formally, the nomination is managed by a national body, the Electoral Coordinating Committee (ECC; Kertész, 2013), which is controlled and dominated by the National Presidency and the party leader due to personnel overlaps. The ECC can propose names for individual districts, country lists, and European Parliament lists. The room for modification is very limited: Local party units can only make comments on the proposed names. The National Board can only approve or reject the list but cannot suggest any modifications. Even in a case of rejection (which has never yet happened), the party leader has the right to override the decision and go forward with the original list. The National Board's independence from the party leadership is questionable in any case: Its members are not delegated by local organisations but are public officials elected under the Fidesz party brand who are, as a result, very dependent on the party leadership. It is



also a telling fact that the nomination process for public offices like Prime ministership and presidency is not regulated in the party procedures, leaving more autonomy for the party leader to promote its favoured candidate (or themselves). The process of local government nomination is very similar: Based on local units' proposals, only a narrow county leadership (namely local governments ECCs) decides on the matter. Moreover, the party centre can override this decision.

The selection of party leaders is also closed (Ilonszki & Várnagy, 2014a; Kertész, 2013). Congress elects the party president or renews the mandate biannually, but the nomination belongs to the National Presidium or a nomination committee. The nomination procedure is also not clearly regulated, which strengthens the position of the incumbent party leader. Looking beyond the rules reveals that Orbán's role has only once been challenged in practice. Following the 1994 election defeat, he resigned from the party presidency to take responsibility for the result, but he regained his power in the next party leadership election. In 2000, as prime minister, he renounced the party leadership to create the image of a responsible statesman who stands above partisan conflicts and politics. But since his informal influence over the party has remained strong, he has passed the formal title to his comrades or "close" allies (László Kövér, Zoltán Pokorni, and János Áder). The defeat of 2002 provided an important lesson for Orbán: He recognised that political success in Hungarian politics requires strong leadership and absolute control over the party. He formally regained the position of party leader. Since then, he more closely controls party-related patronage and surrounds himself with disciplined and loyal allies who are dependent on him. Those who have created autonomous power centres, or have repeatedly formulated opposite or alternative opinions, are neutralised or marginalised. For instance, former ministers Tibor Navracsics and János Lázár had to give up their portfolios in exchange for low-profile political positions.

Consequently, Fidesz doesn't provide much room for internal democracy, formally or informally. The party's particular characteristic is that the real debates are only encouraged among the party elite in some closed forums (e.g., Kötcse party meetings, informal gatherings) or through lobbying; expressing a critique publicly is unacceptable since it is considered as a sign of weakness. The party substitutes internal democracy with a symbolic and quasi-direct relationship between members and leader. The leader's direct and active interaction with its sympathisers, activists, and members creates the pretence that the party is governed democratically. However, even if the party organisation is extensive, it is also relatively weak (Z. Balázs & Hajdú, 2017; Enyedi & Linek, 2008) and highly dependent on Orbán's leadership. As a result, the National Presidium, which has decisive power on paper, has become weightless in a political sense. There is no open competition for National Presidium membership, similar to the uncontested party

leader selection (Ilonszki & Várnagy, 2014a). Members are hand-picked by Orbán, who typically rewards his strongest and most loyal allies. Interestingly, the list of office holders' names is not available on the party's website, which also gives the impression that they are not important. Moreover, in contrast to the party statute, major political decisions, such as leaving the European People's Party, are made by Orbán with the advice of influential groups around him.

Since 2010, the party's cartelisation has not only become personalised but also conspicuous. This process can be tracked through various developments inside the party (i.e., the growing dominance of the party in public office) and even outside the party (i.e., state capture through patronage and clientelism, controlling party competition) that exploit tools and resources of the state. Expressed differently, the party can freely employ the state's resources to limit political competition and ensure its own electoral success.

Concerning the intraparty changes at the organisational level, we can observe a strong centralisation and the consequent emergence of a small party elite. The "party in the public office" saw its role strengthened in comparison with the party in the central office and party organisation and membership (party on the ground). The growing dominance of the party in the public office made it much harder to separate the different faces of Fidesz's organisation (Enyedi & Linek, 2008). As a result, the government function became dominant within the party, subordinating the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary functions. Party members holding public office dominate the party's highest bodies and internal decision making. Currently, everyone from the eight-member National Presidium has high-level positions in government or legislation (as Prime minister, president of parliament, minister, secretary of state, leader or members of the parliamentary faction).

Regarding state capture, Meyer-Sahling and Jáger (2012) documented extended party patronage beyond the realm of business. Patronage practices are applied in sectors such as the media, economics, and even, to a certain extent, the judiciary. The most intriguing practice is the capture of the government, which often promotes party interest. One striking example is outsourcing campaign activities to the government (and partly to pro-government NGOs). The party's communication activities are now indistinguishable from official government communication, effectively creating a legal loophole for campaign finance rules. Although national consultations and related campaigns, which have become a permanent political tool since 2010, are initiated and funded by the government, the aim is to maintain and broaden support for the party and Orbán's leadership. By 2021, the government had organised ten national consultations during which suggestive political questionnaires were sent to each household with a letter from the prime minister focussed on a particular topic (e.g., pensions, constitution-making,

social issues, economic issues, immigration, terrorism, the Soros Plan, family entitlements, and the crisis management of the coronavirus pandemic). Without formal regulation, transparency and obligations of the referendums, this plebiscitary maintains a direct relationship with Orbán's constituents and legitimates decisions.

Capture of the media was also critical to fostering the dominance of the political agenda (as well as the political competition). New regulations facilitated media capture (e.g., new media law and media authority, channel allocations, restriction of press presence in parliament, and selective advertisement tax), established Fidesz-related media networks (TV, print, and internet press) and reorganised and monopolised state-funded public broadcasting (Z. Balázs & Hajdú, 2017, pp. 99–100; Körösenyi et al., 2020, pp. 103–106). News editing practices of party-friendly public and private media show the party and the government in a positive light. At the same time, in the pro-government media, representation of the opposition is lacking except for its negative portrayal.

The result of personalisation and cartelisation is clear: The government, the party, and the leader are ultimately inseparable. Moreover, as suggested by Z. Balázs and Hajdú (2017), the party's centrality and organisational autonomy can be questioned: Is Fidesz only an "electoral machinery" in the party leader's hands? It seems that the party's purpose is only to maintain electoral legitimacy, coordinate election campaigns, and manage and reconcile the complex personal and political interests and ambitions of the political elite. Many of the crucial political functions are managed outside of the party framework: Political communication is defined as government communication channelled through the pro-government media, while interest and preference aggregation are conducted via national consultations. Meanwhile, mobilisation is driven by external actors who make up Fidesz's political Hinterland. In this sense, it is the government or the prime minister that has a party and not the other way around.

## 5. Conclusion

In many respects, Fidesz is clearly an extreme case as it has shown an unprecedented organisational transformation by adapting to the changing political demands. As a result, the party has been able to take root in civil society and occupy the state at the same time.

Through dissection of the building blocks of the party, the article is aimed to gain insight into Fidesz's hybrid party structure. On the one hand, we argue that the party combines the characteristics of mass and movement parties in building organisation and activist networks. Based on an ideologically integrated community and collective identity, the party operates extensive offline and online networks. On the other hand, Fidesz also adapts components of personal and cartel parties. Party leadership has not just become more personalised and centralised than ever before; the party in public office, that

is, the government, has also cut itself adrift from the rest of the party and established a dominant position in many realms of the public sphere through occupying the state (e.g., patronage, clientelism) and the reconfiguration of institutions, such as the electoral system. To counterbalance its dominant elite position, it has become essential to facilitate and maintain a quasi-direct relationship between party leaders and supporters through participatory practices, fulfilling the populist appeal. It is critical to note that Fidesz did not only transform its own practices and strategies, and thus the party itself, but also successfully modified the surrounding political framework: party competition (Enyedi, 2016), the party system (by establishing a "predominant party system"; see Horváth & Soós, 2015), and the political regime (Körösenyi et al., 2020).

The case of Fidesz, although special, holds two general lessons for us. First, modern political parties often simultaneously use different organisational strategies in an eclectic way to achieve their goals. Personalisation (Musella, 2018) and cartelisation (Katz & Mair, 1995) are well-known, but there are multiplying signs of a renaissance in mass-party practices (cf. Heinisch & Mazzoleni, 2016) and the movement activity used by the parties (Muldoon & Rye, 2020). Second, loosening institutional and political barriers can lead to extraordinary organisational forms. For example, the introduction of the practices of movements and movement parties is not new for mainstream parties (see the Labour Party in the UK with the upsurge of the pro-Corbyn Momentum). However, the highly centralised, presidentialised, and personalised leadership of Fidesz, which lacks internal organisational constraints, has been able to generate movement activity in a top-down manner. Perhaps the biggest distortions were caused by the lack of external constraints which disappeared because of the victory series from 2010. These developments show the cartel thesis from a new angle. What happens when a party does not have to cooperate with other actors to allocate state resources and control the political market? One of the major features of the cartel thesis is seemingly missing, that is, elite cooperation, but the cartel is created within the party and its Hinterland.

As a result, the party's boundaries became blurred, as many actors ranging from activists to government organisations act in Fidesz's interest. Paradoxically, hybridisation did not strengthen the party itself since its dominance is ensured through the embeddedness of the party elite in economic, social, and political networks. The window of opportunity presented itself when Fidesz came into a government position with a qualified majority, allowing it to conquer not only positions but institutions outside of Fidesz (such as the MCC or pro-government civil organisations). In our assessment, this process does not create a new party type. It just provides a new strategy combining the advantages of the existing organisation and mobilisation strategies to overcome challenges a party could face in the electoral and governmental

arena of party politics. This has become particularly spectacular in the extreme case presented by Fidesz, which was able to apply this strategy at will under particularly favourable conditions.

### Acknowledgments

We wish to thank the editors of this issue and the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions. Rudolf Metz's research was financed by the National Research, Development and Innovation Fund (grant number PD 134685). Réka Várnagy's research was financed by the National Research, Development and Innovation Fund (grant number K 128833). The usual disclaimer applies.

### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### References

- Albertazzi, D., & van Kessel, S. (2021). Right-wing populist party organisation across Europe: The survival of the mass party? Introduction to the thematic issue. *Politics and Governance*, 9(3), 224–227.
- Almeida, P. (2010). Social movement partyism: Collective action and political parties. In N. Van Dyke & H. McCammon (Eds.), *Strategic alliances: New studies of social movement coalitions* (pp. 170–196). University of Minnesota Press.
- Balázs, M., & Enyedi, Z. (1996). Hungarian case studies: The Alliance of Free Democrats and the Alliance of Young Democrats. In P. Lewis (Ed.), *Party structure and organization in East-Central Europe* (pp. 43–65). Edward Elgar.
- Balázs, Z., & Hajdú, A. (2017). A Fidesz–Magyar Polgári Szövetség a magyar politikában [The Fidesz–Hungarian Civic Alliance in Hungarian politics]. In Z. Boda & A. Szabó (Eds.), *Trendek a magyar politikában: 2 A Fidesz és a többiek: Pártok, mozgalmak, politikák* [Trends in Hungarian politics: 2 Fidesz and the others: Parties, movements, policies] (pp. 83–109). Napvilág Kiadó, MTA Társadalomtudományi Kutatóközpont Politikatudományi Intézete.
- Enyedi, Z. (2005). The role of agency in cleavage formation. *European Journal of Political Research*, 44(5), 697–720. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6765.2005.00244.x>
- Enyedi, Z. (2006). The survival of the fittest: Party system concentration in Hungary. In S. Jungerstam-Mulders (Ed.), *Post-communist EU member states* (pp. 177–201). Routledge.
- Enyedi, Z. (2014). The discreet charm of political parties. *Party Politics*, 20(2), 194–204. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068813519959>
- Enyedi, Z. (2016). Populist polarisation and party system institutionalization: The role of party politics in de-democratization. *Problems of Post-Communism*, 63(4), 210–220. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2015.1113883>
- Enyedi, Z., & Linek, L. (2008). Searching for the right organisation: Ideology and party structure in East-Central Europe. *Party Politics*, 14(4), 455–477. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068808090255>
- Enyedi, Z., & Róna, D. (2018). Governmental and oppositional populism: Competition and division of labour. In S. Wolinetz & A. Zaslove (Eds.), *Absorbing the blow: The impact of populist parties on European party systems* (pp. 251–272). ECPR Press.
- Greskovits, B. (2020). Rebuilding the Hungarian right through conquering civil society: The Civic Circles Movement. *East European Politics*, 36(2), 247–266. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2020.1718657>
- Gunther, R., & Diamond, L. (2003). Species of political parties: A new typology. *Party Politics*, 9(2), 167–199. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13540688030092003>
- Hanula, Z. (2021a, May 27). Milliárdokat önt a magyar politika Facebook-reklámokba, megnéztük, kik a legnagyobb játékosok [Hungarian politics pours billions into Facebook ads, we looked at who the biggest players are]. *telex*. <https://telex.hu/belfold/2021/05/27/ketmilliard-forintot-ontott-a-magyar-politika-facebook-reklamokba>
- Hanula, Z. (2021b, July 1). Gyurcsány Show: Egész Európa legdrágább politikai YouTube-kampányát futtatja a Fidesz másfél hónapja. [Gyurcsány Show: Fidesz has been running the most expensive political YouTube campaign in Europe for a month and a half]. *telex*. <https://telex.hu/belfold/2021/07/01/egesz-europa-legdragabb-politikai-youtube-kampanyat-futtatja-a-fidesz-masfel-honapja>
- Haszán, Z. (2018, January 30). A Fidesz egyik Facebook-katonája elmesélte, milyen virtuális hadsereget hozott létre a part [One of Fidesz's Facebook soldiers told us what a virtual army the party had created]. *444.Hu*. <https://444.hu/2018/01/30/a-fidesz-egyik-facebook-katonaja-elmeselte-milyen-virtualis-hadsereget-hozott-letre-a-part>
- Heinisch, R., & Mazzoleni, O. (Eds.). (2016). *Understanding populist organisation. The radical right-wing in Western Europe*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hloušek, V. (2015). Two types of presidentialization in the party politics of Central Eastern Europe. *Italian Political Science Review/Rivista Italiana Di Scienza Politica*, 45(3), 277–299. <https://doi.org/10.1017/ipo.2015.17>
- Horváth, A., & Soós, G. (2015). Pártok és pártrendszer [Parties and party system]. In A. Körösi (Ed.), *A magyar politikai rendszer—Negyedszázad után* [The Hungarian political system—After a quarter of a century] (pp. 249–278.). MTA TK—Osiris.
- Ilonszki, G., & Várnagy, R. (2014a). Stable leadership in the context of party change: The Hungarian case. In J.-B. Pilet & W. P. Cross (Eds.), *The selection of political party leaders in contemporary parliamentary*

- democracies: A comparative study* (pp. 156–171). Routledge.
- Ilonszki, G., & Várnagy, R. (2014b). From party cartel to one-party dominance. The case of institutional failure. *East European Politics*, 30(3), 412–427. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2014.938739>
- Katz, R. S., & Mair, P. (1995). Changing models of party organization and party democracy the emergence of the cartel party. *Party Politics*, 1(1), 5–28. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068895001001001>
- Kertész, K. (2013). A magyar pártok belső szervezeti felépítésének összehasonlítása [Comparison of the internal organizational structure of Hungarian parties]. In J. T. Karlovitz (Ed.), *Társadalomtudományi gondolatok a harmadik évezred elején* [Thoughts of social sciences at the beginning of the third millennium]. International Research Institute s.r.o.
- Kitschelt, H. (2000). Linkages between citizens and politicians in democratic polities. *Comparative Political Studies*, 33(6/7), 845–879. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001041400003300607>
- Kitschelt, H. (2006). Movement parties. In R. S. Katz & W. J. Crotty (Eds.), *Handbook of party politics* (pp. 278–288). SAGE.
- Körösnéyi, A., Illés, G., & Gyulai, A. (2020). *The Orbán regime: Plebiscitary leader democracy in the making*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429053436>
- Kovarek, D. (2020). Négy dudás, négy csárda, egy kotta? A baloldal és a közép kispártjainak összehasonlító elemzése szervezeti felépítés és párttagság tekintetében [Four pipers, four tavern, one music sheet? A comparative analysis of organizational structures and party membership of centre-left minor parties in Hungary] *Politikatudományi szemle*, 29(4), 33–54. <https://doi.org/10.30718/POLTUD.HU.2020.4.33>
- Kovarek, D., & Soós, G. (2016). Hungary: Cut from the same cloth? A comparative analysis of party organisations in Hungary. In K. Sobolewska-Mysłik, B. Kosowska-Gąstoł, & P. Borowiec (Eds.), *Organizational structures of political parties in Central and Eastern European countries* (pp. 185–208). Jagiellonian University Press.
- Kúria. (2019). *Kvk.II.37.515/2019/2. számú határozat* [Decision No. Kvk.II.37.515/2019/2]. <https://kuria-birosag.hu/hu/valhat/kvkii3751520192-szamu-hatarozat>
- Magyari, P. (2015, February 20). Kubatov Gábor ifjú gárdája óránként ezresért hozta a szoros győzelmeket [The young guard of Gábor Kubatov brought close victories for thousand forints per hour]. *444.Hu*. <https://444.hu/2015/02/20/szecs>
- Mahoney, J., & Thelen, K. (Eds.). (2009). A theory of gradual institutional change. In *Explaining institutional change: Ambiguity, agency, and power* (pp. 1–37). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511806414.003>
- Mares, I., & Young, L. E. (2018). The core voter's curse: Clientelistic threats and promises in Hungarian elections. *Comparative Political Studies*, 51(11), 1441–1471. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414018758754>
- Metz, R. (2015). Movement entrepreneurship of an incumbent party. The story of the Hungarian incumbent party Fidesz and the Civil Cooperation Forum. *Intersections. East European Journal of Society and Politics*, 1(3), 81–100. <https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v1i3.41>
- Metz, R., & Oross, D. (2020). Strong personalities' impact on Hungarian party politics: Viktor Orbán and Gábor Vona. In S. Gherghina (Ed.), *Party leaders in Eastern Europe: Personality, behavior and consequences* (pp. 145–170). Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-32025-6\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-32025-6_7)
- Meyer-Sahling, J.-H., & Jáger, K. (2012). Party patronage in Hungary: Capturing the state. In P. Kopecký, P. Mair, & M. Spirova (Eds.), *Party patronage and party government in European Democracies* (pp. 163–185). Oxford University Press.
- Muldoon, J., & Rye, D. (2020). Conceptualising party-driven movements. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 22(3), 485–504. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1369148120919744>
- Musella, F. (2018). *Political leaders beyond party politics*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Oross, D., & Tap, P. (2021). Moving online: Political parties and the internal use of digital tools in Hungary. *European Societies*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2021.1943485>
- Schumpeter, J. A. (2006). *Capitalism, socialism and democracy*. Routledge.
- Szabó, M. (2011). From a suppressed anti-communist dissident movement to a governing party: The transformations of Fidesz in Hungary. *Corvinus Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 2(2), 47–66.
- Szalai, A. (2014, February 15). Százezernél többen dolgoznak a Fidesz győzelméért [More than a hundred thousand are working for the victory of Fidesz]. *nol.hu*. [http://nol.hu/belfold/szazezernel\\_tobben\\_dolgoznak\\_a\\_fidesz\\_gyozelmeert-1444975](http://nol.hu/belfold/szazezernel_tobben_dolgoznak_a_fidesz_gyozelmeert-1444975)
- van Biezen, I. (2003). *Political parties in new democracies: Party organization in Southern and East-Central Europe*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781403937858>

### About the Authors



**Rudolf Metz** is a research fellow of the Institute for Political Sciences (IPS) at the Centre for Social Sciences, Hungary, and a senior lecturer at the Corvinus University of Budapest, presenting political leadership and governance courses. He was previously a visiting lecturer at the University of Innsbruck, Austria. His research is concentrated on political leadership supported by the IPS-specialised research group and Elite Research Centre at Corvinus University of Budapest.



**Réka Várnagy** is an associate professor in political sciences at Corvinus University of Budapest and director of the Elite Research Centre there. Her research interests include electoral and legislative studies and parties and party developments. She is currently involved in a research project analysing (mis)matching representative roles and expectations.

Article

## Leading the Way, but Also Following the Trend: The Slovak National Party

Tim Haughton<sup>1,\*</sup>, Marek Rybář<sup>2</sup> and Kevin Deegan-Krause<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Political Science and International Studies, University of Birmingham, UK;  
E-Mail: [t.j.haughton@bham.ac.uk](mailto:t.j.haughton@bham.ac.uk)

<sup>2</sup> Department of Political Science, Faculty of Social Studies, Masaryk University, Czech Republic;  
E-Mail: [107436@mail.muni.cz](mailto:107436@mail.muni.cz)

<sup>3</sup> Department of Political Science, Wayne State University, USA; E-Mail: [kdk@wayne.edu](mailto:kdk@wayne.edu)

\* Corresponding author

Submitted: 30 May 2021 | Accepted: 16 August 2021 | Published: 24 November 2021

### Abstract

Despite spells outside parliament, with its blend of nationalist and populist appeals the Slovak National Party (SNS) has been a prominent fixture on Slovakia's political scene for three decades. Unlike some of the newer parties in Slovakia and across the region, partly as a product of the point of its (re-)creation, SNS has a comparable organizational density to most established parties in the country and has invested in party branches and recruiting members. Although ordinary members exercised some power and influence during the fissiparous era of the early 2000s, SNS has been notable for the role played by its leader in decision-making and steering the party. Each leader placed their stamp on the projection, pitch and functioning of the party, both as a decision-making organization and an electoral vehicle. Ordinary members have been largely—but not exclusively—relegated to the role of cheerleaders and campaigners for the party's tribunes; a situation which has not changed significantly in the era of social media. The pre-eminent position of the leader and the limited options for "voice" has led unsuccessful contenders for top posts and their supporters to opt instead for "exit." Despite having some of the traits of the mass party and having engaged in some of the activities common for mass parties, especially in the earlier years of its existence, in more recent times in particular, SNS falls short of the mass party model both in aspiration and reality.

### Keywords

party leadership; party membership; party organization; Slovakia

### Issue

This article is part of the issue "Right-Wing Populist Party Organisation Across Europe: The Survival of the Mass-Party?" edited by Daniele Albertazzi (University of Surrey, UK) and Stijn van Kessel (Queen Mary University of London, UK).

© 2021 by the authors; licensee Cogitatio (Lisbon, Portugal). This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

### 1. Introduction

Slovenská národná strana (SNS, The Slovak National Party) has been one of the perennials of party politics in Slovakia. Even though it lost its parliamentary representation in 2002 and 2012, it managed to bounce back at the subsequent election regaining seats in parliament and go straight into government. Although never the main partner, SNS served in several coalitions in Slovakia including a junior role in the 2016–2020 government; a role that cost the party at the 2020 elections when it

again lost its representation in parliament. Yet despite its prominent role in Slovak politics, apart from one contribution to an edited volume (Hudek, 2004) and an article (Konečný & Zetocha, 2005), both published a decade and a half ago, it has not been the subject of a specific study.

Coverage of SNS is usually wrapped up in studies of parties in general (e.g., Dolný & Malová, 2016; Ondrušová, 2000; Rybář, 2011), Slovakia's political trajectory (e.g., Fisher, 2006), or the fate of the radical right across Central and Eastern Europe (e.g., Bustikova, 2020; Pirro, 2015). In contrast, the neofascist right, Ľudová

strana Naše Slovensko (ĽSNS, People's Party Our Slovakia) led by Marian Kotleba which won 8% in the 2016 and 2020 elections has attracted much more scholarly attention (e.g., Harris, 2019; Voda et al., 2021). In a party system and a region where many parties live fast and die young and where failure to cross the electoral threshold is usually a nail in a party's coffin, SNS deserves attention both for its endurance and its ability to bounce back from poor election results—a feat it has achieved twice. Moreover, in light of this thematic issue's focus on organizational structures, SNS is notable for being a strongly centralized party with its leader having almost dictatorial powers. This structure accords the party (or rather the leader) some flexibility, but it also poses a risk as the party's fortunes become highly contingent on the captain of the ship.

This article seeks to provide an examination of SNS, in particular its organizational structures. Two characteristics of the party's organization are striking. Firstly, although the party is both formally and in practice leader-driven, SNS has thrown out its leader several times, on one occasion causing a damaging split. Secondly, the party has a much more developed organizational structure than some of the newer parties in the country, but a comparable membership and organizational structure to other long-standing parties. Both of these observations highlight two themes that run through this article: The fate of the party has been inextricably linked to questions surrounding the leadership of the party; and the organizational structures of SNS and parties in general in Slovakia are best seen as products of timing. There is, therefore, a "generation effect" dependent on when a party was born (van Biezen, 2005). In line with broader findings from across Central and Eastern Europe, in terms of organization, older parties tend to resemble one another as do newer ones whatever ideological persuasion they may have. Older parties tend to have more well-developed organizational structures (larger memberships, etc.), whereas newer parties have lighter organizational structures and tend to be much more reliant on new forms of communication (Haughton & Deegan-Krause, 2020). Although the latter characteristics are no bars to success in the short-term—in fact they can even be an advantage—well-developed organizational structures cushion blows when parties lose support and accord them a better chance of being able to bounce back.

There is a significant body of literature examining party organization in Central and Eastern Europe (e.g., Casal Bértoa & Enyedi, 2021; Ibenskas, 2014; Kitschelt et al., 1999; Tavits, 2013), exploring the role organization has played in the fate of political parties highlighting the role of legacies and choices made by parties. Our study forms part of a thematic issue featuring numerous case studies focused on whether the mass party model endures in contemporary Europe, particularly among those parties which have been labelled radical right and right-wing populist parties. As the editors' close reading

of the literature shows (Albertazzi & van Kessel, 2021), the key features of the mass party organizational model include a drive to recruit a large activist membership as a way of reaching out to the public, rootedness on the ground, and the provision of a variety of activities to members.

We argue that there are some discernible traits of the mass party model present in the history of SNS. In the 1990s, in line with many of the other parties in parliament at the time, the party did invest in an organizational model which at least aimed towards the involvement of grassroots activists and the shaping of political identities akin to the mass party model, especially in its heartlands (Deegan-Krause, 2000; Heinisch & Mazzoleni, 2016). Moreover, in the 1990s the party had links to various nationalist organizations. By the time it returned to government in 2016 after its second spell without parliamentary representation, however, the party may have been more mass-like than many of the newer parties in Slovakia, but it fell well short of the mass party model. The party, for instance, had little to no ancillary organization that would or could socialize party members. Moreover, the attachment of voters and members to the party has been rather weak. Following a dramatic drop in electoral support combined with the loss of over 55% of its members, since losing its parliamentary representation for a second time in 2020, the party's focus has been primarily on survival.

Following the common framework of this thematic issue, this article begins by providing an account of the party's ideology and historical development, before turning to the questions of organizational structure and the role of the leader raised by the editors in their introduction. As the timing of SNS's formation and leadership choices is central to understanding the form, content, and dynamic of SNS, we devote more space in this contribution than others to the historical development of the party.

## 2. The Trajectory of the Slovak National Party

Although officially registered as a party on 7 March 1990, SNS has consistently claimed links to the original Slovak National Party formed in 1871 (e.g., Slovenská národná strana, 2015; Slovenská národná strana, 2019, Article II § 3 No. 2). The creation—or what some in SNS would prefer to see as the re-creation—of the party owed much to the rekindling of the debate about Slovakia's place in Czechoslovakia and the status of the Slovak language. SNS, however, was not the only entity or even political party agitating on the national question (Malová, 2003). Whereas other parties, in particular Hnutie za Demokratické Slovensko (HZDS, the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia), advocated greater autonomy, SNS pushed for independence.

The break-up of Czechoslovakia and the foundation of an independent Slovak state in January 1993 opened up a dispute within SNS between the conservative-liberal

pragmatism of Ľudovít Černák who became the party's leader in October 1992, and a more radical nationalist faction. The latter won the battle, removing Černák as chairman and propelling Ján Slota to the leadership of the party in February 1994. Slota set the ideological tone for the party for the following quarter of a century. Ethnic Hungarians (which made up around a tenth of the population of Slovakia) and their kin state were the main target for Slota's ire and boorish behaviour, but Slovakia's other significant ethnic minority, the Roma, were also subject to his coarse tongue. Under Slota, SNS was driven by a desire to defend the integrity of the Slovak state, promote Slovak culture, and ensure Slovak schools did not become breeding grounds for Hungarian interests.

SNS's nativist recipe proved appealing for a significant slice of the electorate at a succession of elections (e.g., Krivý, 1999; Linek & Gyárfášová, 2020; see Table 1). The party failed to cross the threshold in 2002 due to a split linked to the leadership role of Slota which we discuss below, but the fission was followed soon after the election by a fusion. In 2006 the party achieved its second-best result (11.73%), not only returning to parliament, but also as a junior party in government. But this was a high-water mark of popularity to which the party never returned, although the party did achieve 8.64% and again became part of the governing coalition in 2016.

SNS's electoral decline owed much to the changing context of politics, the loss of its standard-bearer status and decisions made by larger parties. Central to SNS's appeal from the early 1990s had been its anti-Hungarian sentiment, but the potency of this rhetoric waned as Slovakia's years of independence and EU membership grew. Moreover, the ethnic Hungarian vote itself had split with a new party, Most-Híd (taking the word for bridge from both Slovak and Hungarian), seeking to bridge the divide between the two ethnic groups. But by the 2016 election, in the minds of voters the perceived threat to the Slovak nation came less from an internal fifth column and more from the external threat of immigration, a fear fuelled by Europe's migration crisis (Pytlas, 2019). Nevertheless, by 2016 SNS had lost its

status as the standard-bearer of Slovak nationalism. Not only did the main ruling party Smer-sociálna demokracia (Smer-SD, Direction-Social Democracy) shift its rhetoric in the latter half of 2015 and make "We defend Slovakia" its main slogan, but the 2016 election saw the breakthrough of the neo-fascist ĽSNS.

SNS entered government in 2016, but the very configuration of the 2016–2020 coalition sat uncomfortably with a party espousing Slovak nationalism: One of SNS's coalition partners was Most-Híd, whose support base was drawn from ethnic Hungarians and liberal Slovaks (Linek & Gyárfášová, 2020). But the period was also striking for the rise in salience of the theme of governance (and more specifically corruption), particularly after the murder of journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová in 2018. Outrage at the murder and corruption in the country generated the context for Obyčajní ľudia a nezávislé osobnosti's (OĽaNO, Ordinary People and Independent Personalities) anti-corruption appeal to succeed and a drop in support for all the governing parties including SNS (Haughton et al., 2021). Nonetheless, SNS's slump also owed something to scandals surrounding Danko himself. In 2020 the party lost its seats in parliament, mustering a mere 3.16%.

### 3. More Than Many, but not Massive: Slovak National Party's Organization

Several studies of political parties in Slovakia have underlined their low levels of membership, underdeveloped territorial organizations, weak linkages with society and organized interests, and high levels of financial dependency on the state (e.g., Dolný & Malová, 2016; Rybář, 2011). Nonetheless, there are some striking variations. But these variations have less to do with parties' place on the ideological spectrum and more to do with when they were founded and how. Parties are products of their time. Generally, the older the party, the more extensive the party's organizational structure. Given the centrality of the party leadership to SNS's organizational structure we leave details of the party congress (which only elected delegates can attend) and the composition of the

**Table 1.** Election results for SNS in parliamentary elections.

Election	Votes (%)	Seats in 150-seat parliament	% of seats in parliament
1990	13.94	22	14.7%
1992	7.93	15	10.0%
1994	5.40	9	6.0%
1998	9.07	14	9.3%
2002	3.32	0	0
2006	11.73	20	13.3%
2010	5.07	9	6.0%
2012	4.55	0	0
2016	8.64	15	10.0%
2020	3.16	0	0

Source: Slovak Statistical Office (2020).



party's Presidium (which is determined significantly by the leader) until the following section.

Although we need to treat self-reported membership figures for all parties with a pinch of salt given the alleged inflation of those figures, the official figures stated in reports submitted to the Ministry of the Interior remain the most reliable guide. As Table 2 highlights, membership varies significantly. SNS and the other parties founded in the 1990s have considerably higher levels of membership. Even Smer-SD, which had begun life as the project of one man, embarked on a deliberate strategy of party building in the aftermath of its disappointing election result in 2002 and has relatively high levels of membership. In contrast, two of the parties that performed well in the 2020 elections and went into government, Sloboda a Solidarita (SaS, Freedom and Solidarity) and OĽaNO, have low levels of membership, the latter's membership limited for most of its existence to the four founding figures of the party. Both parties were formed a decade ago, born in a new era where mass organization seemed so passé, so 20th century.

The membership figures in Table 2, however, are striking not just for the stark differences in headline figures between older and newer parties, but also the trends. The two parties with the largest members, Smer-SD and the Kresťanskodemokratické hnutie (KDH, Christian Democratic Movement) have either a stable (the former) or a declining (the latter) level of membership from the mid-2000s. In contrast, there is a marked increase in SNS membership in the mid-2010s. The rise in members of SNS after 2012 owes something to an injection of additional effort into recruitment. But the greatest boost came from the departure of the controversial leader Ján Slota and his replacement by Andrej Danko who was very much seen as an asset for the party until the party entered government again in 2016. The sharp fall in party membership since the 2020 elections (down

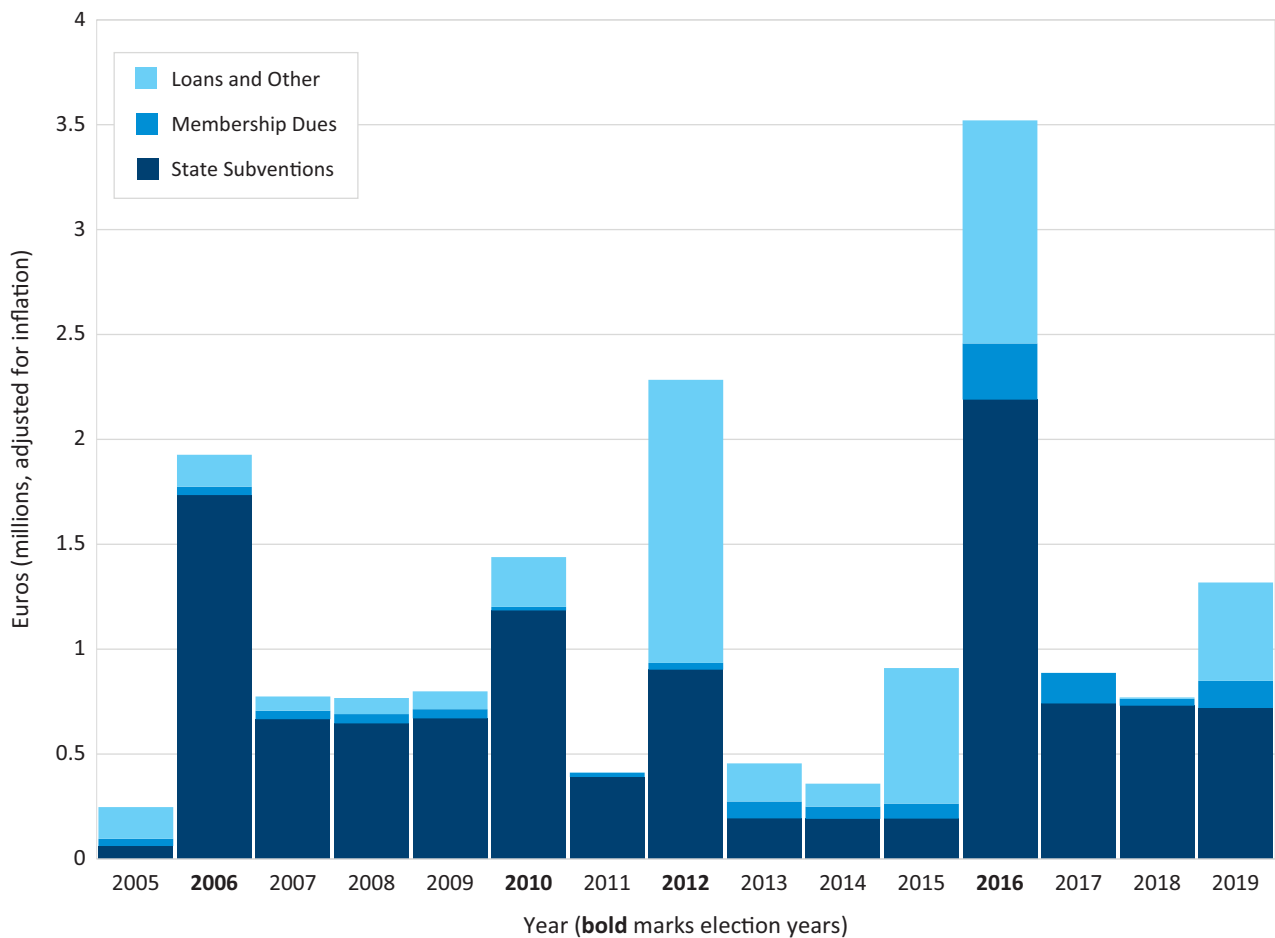
from 7,728 to 3,469) owes much to the negative reaction to Danko's decision to run again for re-election.

The decision to grow SNS's party membership was linked to two key factors. Firstly, growing membership had an important signalling function. After the years of decline under Slota, a growth in membership helped to send a signal out to the wider electorate that the party was vibrant and relevant. Secondly, Danko and the new leadership of the party were keen to emphasize the importance of members. Membership was seen as a sign not just of the party's virility, but also of its ties to the electorate. Here there is an important element not just of the mass party model, but also of what we might label a populist appeal. In contrast to several new and popular political parties that have few members, Danko was keen to project his party as one of ordinary Slovaks in contrast to parties like OĽaNO that claim to represent ordinary people, but are—in Danko's eyes at least—simply pet projects of political entrepreneurs. Although these signalling motivations mattered, another driving force at this point arguably was simply the bottom line. The party needed money. As Figure 1 illustrates, between 2006 and 2011 when the party was in parliament, state funding provided a large proportion of the party's income, but SNS's loss of seats in 2012 led to four years in which the party needed to turn to other sources of income. Membership fees became more significant for the party during SNS's second stint as an extra-parliamentary party, but those revenue streams were overshadowed by loans it took out. SNS borrowed heavily including €759,100 worth of loans in 2015 and €1,259,750 in 2016. Moreover, official reports suggest that the vast majority of the party's membership contributions actually came from a narrow group of top party officials, raising some doubt about ultimately how important ordinary members were to the generation of revenue.

**Table 2.** Membership figures.

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
SNS	<b>1,198</b>	<b>1,370</b>	<b>1,531</b>	<b>1,617</b>	<b>1,839</b>	<b>2,412</b>	<b>2,335</b>	<b>3,130</b>	<b>3,884</b>	<b>6,155</b>	<b>7,189</b>	<b>7,489</b>	<b>7,604</b>	<b>7,728</b>
Smer-SD	15,132	15,855	15,636	16,263	16,869	15,817	16,376	16,543	16,167	15,862	15,605	15,182	14,626	14,136
KDH	17,814	15,927	14,964	14,645	15,360	14,704	13,024	12,031	11,704	11,180	9,807	8,948	8,796	8,048
SMK	11,959	11,964	11,745	10,950	10,750	10,950	9,800	10,040	10,320	10,075	9,256	9,197	9,119	9,233
Most-Híd	—	—	—	1,288	4,029	4,642	4,892	5,098	5,350	5,414	5,583	5,492	5,527	5,547
ĽSNS	—	—	—	4	11	99	162	193	45	96	796	1,439	1,510	1,460
SaS	—	—	—	195	271	281	292	192	166	154	164	189	205	188
OĽaNO	—	—	—	—	—	4	4	4	4	4	13	13	4	45
Sme Rodina	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	450	638	1,338	1,684

Source: Národná rada Slovenskej republiky and Ministerstvo vnútra Slovenskej republiky (2006–2019).



**Figure 1.** SNS income. Source: Národná rada Slovenskej republiky and Ministerstvo vnútra Slovenskej republiky (2006–2019).

Although the impetus for increasing membership came from the SNS leadership, the party’s recruitment drive was largely a product of people-to-people persuasion. While we do not have robust enough data to make definitive arguments, it was striking in the 2012–2016 period how much SNS’s membership drive and general campaigning was concentrated not on political gatherings, but rather on popular and community events like municipal or regional fairs, Christmas markets, etc., where the local and regional party activists would distribute leaflets and have stalls to “sell” the party alongside craftspeople selling their goods.

Reflective of the increased connectivity of citizens of Slovakia, the use of social media and the internet became more important after 2016, but our analysis of SNS’s website and Facebook feed highlights that these modern tools were more often than not used to persuade readers and followers to attend meetings and events where formal recruitment would take place. As one of the reviewers of this manuscript suggested, two additional sources of new members may have also played a role in the increased membership. Firstly, a number of politicians associated with the once dominant party of Slovak politics, HZDS, became part of the SNS leadership and parliamentary representation after 2016, indi-

cating one source of new members was former supporters and members of HZDS. Secondly, close friends and family members of existing members may have joined SNS to help bolster the overall figures. Whilst there is anecdotal evidence of both of these phenomena, it is not possible, however, to say from existing data sources how widespread and significant these have been.

In a similar vein to membership, the extent of party organizational structures was far more developed in those parties formed in the 1990s to those in more recent times. SNS built significant local and regional structures in their early years, especially in its heartland of North and Central Slovakia, although these structures were far less developed both in terms of the number of paid employees and party branches than other parliamentary parties formed in the 1990s (Ondruchová, 2000). The regional structures played an active role in the party’s successful national election campaign in 2016 organizing dozens of meetings, but four years later there was far less activity. For the entire month of January, the sum total of the activity of regional structures appeared to be a football tournament and an event marking the handing over of a reconstructed Cultural Centre (Šnidl, 2020b). But even the role of the regional structures in SNS’s success in 2016 can be overstated. Media coverage

of Danko, especially on the TV news channel TA3, significantly contributed to the return of the party to parliament after four years in the wilderness.

The party's campaign in 2020 focused much more on social media with the party spending the second highest amount (€90,736) of any party on Facebook and Instagram in the year before polling (Zelenayová, 2020). But this was largely a centrally-organized and conducted social media campaign with a strong focus on the party leader. Since the election, social media has become an even more important tool for the party, due in part to their extra-parliamentary status, but also to the restrictions associated with the Covid-19 pandemic, which may go some way to explaining the sum total of four physical activities by SNS regional branches in the 12 months from March 2020. The leader-centric nature of the party's communication strategy was also in evidence from the videos posted on the party's website, which for the entire first year after the 2020 elections amounted to Danko's announcements and statements, even including a video of the leader stating he was running for re-election. His opponent in the election, however, was not accorded the same opportunity.

Danko himself was instrumental in initiating a new party law in 2018 laying out minimal organizational parameters of political parties running in parliamentary elections. The motivation for this law was to hamper SNS's opponents (both existing and potential) and to a lesser extent solidify Danko's position inside his own party. In terms of the former, in a clear swipe at some of the opposition parties with underdeveloped party organizations, SNS's leader argued that its aim was to prevent rich political entrepreneurs from setting up or taking over parties and making them their political tools ("Danko: Zákon o," 2019). Danko's call for "normal regular structures" was explicitly directed at OLaNO and SaS which, as Table 2 shows, only had 13 and 187 members respectively at the time, but had defeated SNS candidates in regional elections in 2017. Moreover, Danko's call for tighter control of how a party leader spends party funds helped shine more light on allegations that Kotleba had spent LSNS funds to purchase a private dwelling rather than on his party headquarters. But it was striking that the law passed in 2019 stopped short of introducing effective measures to increase intra-party democracy and hence did not impinge on the unrestrained intra-party position of the SNS leader within his own party (The National Council of the Slovak Republic, 2018).

Mass membership has not been central to SNS strategy (perhaps with the exception of the early 1990s, when most relevant parties sought ties to societal organizations and society at large via extensive membership). Because the party's electoral failures were linked to internal intra-elite fights leading to splits, defections and a loss of membership base, the party leaders who took over were concerned with cementing their own positions, and only then with repairing the basic party infrastructure. District and regional party units had to

be rebuilt as they often ceased to exist due to defections and/or expulsion of members. As various corruption cases demonstrate, SNS—a frequent junior coalition partner—has always attracted a portion of rent-seeking activists. In addition, although new party leaders tended to act as magnets in membership recruitment, there is little evidence of a sustained and deliberate effort to encapsulate and socialize party members within the party structures.

#### 4. Leading the Way: The Role of the Party Leader

At the heart of the trajectory of SNS since its foundation in the early 1990s is a paradox. The party has been one of the most leader-dominated parties in Slovakia, but has undergone no fewer than six leadership changes. The party's longest serving leader (chair), Slota, was central to two changes in the leadership. In 1999 he was successfully challenged when 237 of 403 of the party's regional delegates voted to oust him; a decision Slota reacted to by turning off the lights in the room and declaring the vote invalid. Moreover, after a prolonged period of tension he left the party along with several other senior figures and formed a breakaway, the *Pravá Slovenská národná strana* (PSNS, True Slovak National Party). The fission proved damaging for both parties as they both fell below the 5% electoral threshold, prompting them to fuse in May 2003. Slota returned to the leadership as party chair and his erstwhile nemesis, SNS leader Anna Malíková-Belousovová who had led the challenge four years earlier, became first vice-chair. The party re-unification was the single most important moment in the organizational development of the party. Before the party split, the key role of the party leader was much more a matter of informal influence and power. Since re-unification, however, the party chair's unshakable position has been enshrined in the party statutes. As chair, Slota acquired a slew of rights and powers including the right to co-opt an additional and unlimited number of members of the party Presidium, the formal right to block and veto any personnel related decisions of other SNS bodies, and the exclusive right to rank-order the candidates on the party's single national list for parliamentary elections.

Slota's ignominious departure from the leadership and his return in 2003 to both the party and its helm prompted changes to safeguard the position of leader, thereby providing to all intents and purposes SNS's old-new leader with an unconstrained control over the party. These changes, however, can be seen as continuing the general direction of travel since the early 1990s. In formal terms, the party statutes have been amended 11 times since their initial approval in 1990. Although some changes were provoked by wider political developments such as the breakup of Czechoslovakia and the creation of regional structures of government in Slovakia, the main trend has been to tighten the control of the party's central organs (Hudek, 2004).

Rather ironically for Slota, the formal power of the leader was in evidence when he stepped down in 2012 after the party's poor showing in the elections and as accusations of misuse of party funds began to escalate. Slota expressed the need to pass the baton to a new generation of politicians and recommended to the party congress that his close associate, vice-chair Andrej Danko, become leader. Although the anointed successor praised Slota and recommended the long-time leader be elevated to the post of honorary chairman, this post proved to be purely honorific without any formal powers. Once enshrined as party chair, Danko moved against his former political master and was instrumental in Slota's expulsion from the party in 2013 over mismanagement and financial irregularities ("Jána Slotu vylúčili," 2013). The formal decision to cast out SNS's long-time leader was made not by Danko alone, but by the party's Presidium. Whilst some of the Presidium members elected by the SNS congress did not support the move, the key votes in the Presidium were cast by members co-opted by Danko himself, indicating that the party chair had used his strong formal powers to impose his will against the wishes of a sizeable portion of the SNS rank-and-file.

Although the party statutes have been amended since Slota left office, they remain clear about the elevated position of the party leader. He/she may be answerable to the party's Presidium, but the party leader may select and appoint the members of his leadership team and the party general secretary without any constraints from other party bodies. Even though the party deputy chairs are elected by the party congress, the party leader has the sole right to propose to congress a candidate for the position. More broadly, he/she has the right of veto over personnel questions. He/she appoints and dismisses the central election team for national and European elections, election managers at the local and regional level, and the party official media spokesperson (Slovenská národná strana, 2019, Article VI § 17). The party chair also has the final say over who runs for office on the party ticket. In the run-up to the 2016 elections, for instance, Danko used his leadership prerogative to dismiss the deputy-chair and the number six on the party's electoral list, Vladimír Chovan. Four years later, Danko removed another deputy chair, Ján Krišanda, from the SNS list. The motivations for the two dismissals may have been different, but both underscored the powers of the leader (Šnidl, 2016).

The decisive role of the party leader over personnel questions was also in evidence when SNS agreed to be part of a coalition government in 2016. Nomination of non-party experts is not unusual in Central European politics where expertise is venerated, but it was striking that all three individuals chosen to lead the ministries allocated to SNS were non-party technocrats who had not run in the parliamentary elections. Although publicly justifying the nominations on the basis of their expertise, appointing government ministers with no formal party

affiliation had the benefit of helping forge ties of loyalty to the leader and helped insulate them from the rest of SNS's party organization; all of which further strengthened Danko. The ministers were subsequently invited to join SNS during the parliamentary term after they had demonstrated their loyalty and trustworthiness. When one of them was forced to leave following controversy surrounding the allocation of European funds, he was replaced by another non-party nominee with expertise who subsequently joined SNS.

In a similar vein, the SNS leader exercised strong control over other party nominations. By virtue of being a governing party in 2016–2020, SNS gained the right to nominate its people to several semi-state and public bodies, such as the Agricultural Paying Agency in charge of handing subsidies to farmers and state-owned companies including Agrokomplex and Horeza. Subsequently, one of Danko's critics revealed no party body ever discussed these nominations. They were simply the result of discretionary powers of the party chairman (Hlucháňová, 2020). The centrality of Danko to decision-making was also well-illustrated by his sudden decision in August 2017 to terminate the coalition agreement his party was part of (which was subsequently amended) much to the surprise of other members of the SNS leadership (Terenzani, 2017).

Given all of these examples, it was no surprise that when Danko's deputy chairman Zelník resigned after the disastrous 2020 elections, he claimed the party was fully controlled by the leader. All the important decisions were taken by Danko himself and there were no discussions allowed at the party congress ("Podpredseda SNS Zelník," 2020). Formally, however, the party congress is the most important organ of the party. The congress is the body that decides the party's fundamental direction, approves the key programmatic documents, and changes the party statutes themselves. But in reality, its power is circumscribed and various provisions in the statutes ensure the key levers of power ultimately rest in the hands of the party leader. The party congress, for instance, does have the right to vote to remove the party's leader, but only on a recommendation by the SNS Regional Council (Slovenská národná strana, 2019, Article VI § 15). The regional chairs, however, can be dismissed by the party's Presidium (Slovenská národná strana, 2019, Article VI § 16). In turn, the Presidium is very much in the grip of the party leader. Called by the party leader "according to need, but at least once every two months" (Slovenská národná strana, 2019, Article VI § 16), the Presidium makes many key decisions over the conduct and organization of the party. However, of its 24 members, one third are nominated and dismissed by the party leader. Included in the other 16 are the party leader himself/herself and the deputy chairs (currently seven) with the others made up of those elected by the party congress (Slovenská národná strana, 2019, Article VI § 16). Strikingly, fewer than half of the members of the new SNS Presidium elected/appointed in September 2020 nearly

half (11) were not Presidium members in 2019. The turnover indicates both Danko's powerful position and the primary importance of securing the leader's position before any concerted attempts to recruit members.

Timing matters not just in comedy, but also in politics. Although the party congress has significant formal powers, it meets once every four years which has meant in the past decade it has met shortly *after* parliamentary elections are held, depriving the rank-and-file of an opportunity to input into decision-making or simply vent their frustrations. There was a festive congress held in 2018, but no decisions were taken on the party's leadership or programme at that gala, although Danko did announce he would not run for the presidency of Slovakia. Deprived of voice, exit becomes the strategy open to the discontented. Hence, in the run-up to the 2020 elections, several disaffected high-profile local and regional SNS representatives defected to support other parties like *Vlasť* (Homeland) and *Sme Rodina* (We Are Family). Danko, however, shrugged off the departures by pointing to the fact that no-one had left the SNS contingent in parliament, a striking contrast to all other parliamentary parties (Šnidl, 2020a).

The role of members also highlights the gap between the formal and real picture of power. Formally, members of SNS have the right to participate in the creation and carrying out of the party's policies, propose candidates to the organs of the party, participate in party meetings, and request responses from the chairperson and other central organs of the party (Slovenská národná strana, 2019, Article IV §7 No. 1). But in reality they have limited powers. The power of the SNS leader over the organizational structures of the party, for instance, was well illustrated in July 2017 when Eduard Markovič was removed as the head of SNS in the eastern region of Prešov. Although the national party leadership had proposed its own candidate, Markovič was chosen by the regional body. However, not only was the national leadership instrumental in Markovič's recall, but also that of three other significant figures in the Prešov region, prompting Markovič to remark that all party members must accept without question what the chairman says ("Odvolaný vysoký funkcionár," 2017).

Danko was initially a popular figure. After the 2016 election he was viewed positively, but this quickly changed thanks to a series of scandals surrounding the SNS leader, including plagiarizing his university thesis and sending flirtatious messages to a woman implicated in the events surrounding the murders of Kuciak and Kušnírová. But he was also ridiculed for frequent lack of linguistic competence in his mother tongue and when the minister of defence (an SNS-nominee) promoted him to the rank of captain. After SNS's poor performance in the February 2020 elections, Danko announced he would not seek re-election as the party's leader, claiming it was a time for Slovakia to recharge its batteries. The party's poll rating continued to slide, but Danko changed his mind and ran for re-election win-

ning the support of 88 of the 126 delegates at the party congress in September 2020. His challenger, Anton Hrnko, responded by announcing his departure and was followed by dozens of other delegates.

The experience of Danko's leadership of SNS, therefore, highlights the risks of a party organizational strategy that endows the party leader with a decisive say in almost all decisions. It may provide flexibility and an ability to react swiftly to the changing public mood, but it makes the party's fortunes contingent on the captain of the ship and accords others in the party few options beyond staying silent or bailing from the boat.

## 5. Conclusion

In the early 1990s, SNS followed the trend in Slovakia and built a party organization with branches across the country and a significant membership. But the most striking aspect of the party's organizational structure was—and remains—the position of the leader. Although personnel politics and the idiosyncratic history of SNS explains much about the elevated position of the party leader, it is important to stress that a low level of intra-party democracy in parties in Slovakia is the norm, with ordinary members having minimal impact on decision-making (Dolný & Malová, 2016).

The reformulation of SNS in 2003 in particular strengthened the position of party leader, relegating almost everyone else, including ordinary party members, to the role of cheerleaders. Nonetheless, members and activists played a role in keeping the party alive during its extra-parliamentary periods, something the party leadership was aware of in 2012 as it invested efforts in recruiting members. It nearly trebled party membership during the four-year term outside parliament, highlighting the signalling function membership can have for a party keen to display its vitality and relevance. Although the party managed to hold onto these levels of membership throughout the subsequent parliamentary term, the scandals of 2016–2020 and the performance of SNS's party leader led to a noticeable drop in partisan activity, the departure of some of those activists to other parties promoting a national(ist) message, and ultimately to a disastrous election result leaving the party outside parliament again. Following the election, the party's membership fell by more than half to just 3,469. Previously, the party also had some significant presence in regional or local councils, but in 2017 it secured only 15 out of 416 seats in elections to the regional assemblies. By early 2021, therefore, SNS appeared to have lost much of the "organizational" and "ideational" resources that aid party survival (Cyr, 2017) and was still languishing in the polls. The SNS eagle had not quite transmogrified into a dead parrot by 2021, but it needed to address many challenges for it to soar once again.

Placing the experience of SNS in the wider discussion of the persistence or revival of the mass party model, SNS has shown some of the traits of a mass party seen

in other cases discussed in this thematic issue. SNS has sought to promote a large membership, but its focus seems to have been more on quantity than on the activist quality stressed in the mass party model. Furthermore, especially since losing its parliamentary representation in February 2020, SNS has struggled to provide many on-the-ground activities, although admittedly the Covid-19 pandemic has made this challenging for all parties. SNS was never able to be the sole voice—and even struggled to be the main voice—for Slovak nationalism, making the forging or preservation of a collective identity much harder. The party was more mass like in aspiration than in reality, but fell short even in its aspirations. The model of the mass party becomes less relevant as parties in decline approach the threshold of survival and seize upon any resources that might offer an escape from final collapse whether in the form of a rescuing leader, a radicalization of message, or a reliance on the few remaining vibrant regional or local organizations.

In the past decade, however, two other parties in Slovakia that have displayed characteristics of the mass party are worthy of mention. ĽSNS has been able to forge a collective identity through its extreme nationalist ideology, reinforced by activities for members and the activism of its membership. ĽSNS, however, suffered a significant split in January 2021 with several leading politicians leaving the party. In a strong echo of the SNS split in 1999, the chances of either (or both) ĽSNS and the breakaway Republika crossing the parliamentary threshold at the next election look much slimmer than if they had remained united. In contrast, one of the other perennial parties of Slovakia, KDH, which like SNS has also experienced periods outside of parliament, has managed to maintain a large activist membership, rootedness on the ground, and the preservation of a collective identity through its associated and ancillary organizations. The odds of KDH rather than SNS remaining viable by the time of the next parliamentary elections and crossing the threshold look much higher. The mass party model may be derived from the experiences of another century, but it might provide a recipe for some parties to survive in the 21st century.

### Acknowledgments

The authors express their thanks to the editors and anonymous reviewers of this thematic issue for constructive comments on earlier iterations of this article.

### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

### References

Albertazzi, D., & van Kessel, S. (2021). Right-wing populist party organisation across Europe: The survival of the mass party? Introduction to the thematic issue. *Politics and Governance*, 9(4), 224–227.

- Bustikova, L. (2020). *Extreme reactions: Radical right mobilization in Eastern Europe*. Cambridge University Press.
- Casal Bértoa, F., & Enyedi, Z. (2021). *Party system closure: Party alliances, government alternatives, and democracy in Europe*. Oxford University Press.
- Cyr, J. (2017). *The fates of political parties: Institutional crisis, continuity and change in Latin America*. Cambridge University Press.
- Danko: Zákon o politických stranách nie je proti niekomu, je za niečo [Danko: The law on political parties is not against anyone, it is for something]. (2019, June 27). *Teraz*. <https://www.teraz.sk/slovensko/danko-zakon-o-politickych-stranach-n/404107-clanok.html>
- Deegan-Krause, K. (2000). *Accountability and party competition in Slovakia and the Czech Republic* [Doctoral dissertation, Department of Government, University of Notre Dame].
- Dolný, B., & Malová, D. (2016). Organizational structures of political parties in Slovakia: Parties not for members. In K. Sobolewska-Myślik, B. Kosowska-Gastol, & P. Borowiec (Eds.), *Organizational structures of political parties in Central and Eastern European countries* (pp. 391–418). Jagiellonian University Press.
- Fisher, S. (2006). *Political change in post-communist Slovakia and Croatia: From nationalist to Europeanist*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Harris, E. (2019). Nation before democracy? Placing the rise of the Slovak extreme right into context. *East European Politics*, 35(4), 538–557.
- Haughton, T., & Deegan-Krause, K. (2020). *The new party challenge: Changing patterns of party birth and death in Central Europe and beyond*. Oxford University Press.
- Haughton, T. Rybář, M., & Deegan-Krause, K. (2021). Corruption, campaigning, and novelty: The 2020 parliamentary elections and the evolving patterns of party politics in Slovakia. *East European Politics and Societies*. Advance online publication. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/08883254211012765>
- Heinisch, R., & Mazzoleni, O. (Eds.). (2016). *Understanding populist party organisation: The radical right in Western Europe*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hlucháčová, M. (2020, July 29). Ste neskutočne zlý človek, povedal Danko do očí Hrnkovi [Danko looked into Hrnko's eyes and said you are an incredibly bad person]. *Pravda*. <https://spravy.pravda.sk/domace/clanok/558613-ste-neskutocne-zly-clovek-povedal-danko-do-oci-hrnkovi>
- Hudek, A. (2004). Slovenská národná strana [Slovak National Party]. In M. Rybář (Ed.), *Politické strany ako organizácie: prípady zo Slovenska* [Political parties as organizations: Examples from Slovakia] (pp. 110–126). Comenius University Bratislava.
- Ibenskas, R. (2014). Activists or money? Explaining the electoral success and persistence of political parties in Lithuania. *Party Politics*, 20(6), 879–889.

- Jána Slotu vylúčili zo Slovenskej národnej strany: Kšefty s majetkom? [They have thrown Jan Slota out of the Slovak National Party: Doing business with property?]. (2013, April 24). *Topky*. <https://www.topky.sk/cl/100535/1347452/Jana-Slotu-vylucili-zo-Slovenskej-narodnej-strany--Ksefty-s-majetkom>
- Kitschelt, H., Mansfeldová, Z., Markowski, R., & Tóka, G. (1999). *Post-communist party systems: Competition, representation and inter-party cooperation*. Cambridge University Press.
- Konečný, M., & Zetocha, K. (2005). Slovenská národná strana: druhá šanca [Slovak National Party: Second chance]. *Stredoevropské politické studie*, 7(2/3), 241–262.
- Krivý, V. (1999). *Čo prezrádzajú volebné výsledky? Parlamentné voľby 1992–1998* [What do the election results reveal? Parliamentary elections 1992–1998]. IVO.
- Linek, L., & Gyárfášová, O. (2020). The role of incumbency, ethnicity and new parties in electoral volatility in Slovakia. *Czech Journal of Political Science*, 27(3), 303–321.
- Malová, D. (2003). The Slovak national movement: A case of successful contention. In P. Kopecký & C. Mudde (Eds.), *Uncivil society? Contentious politics in post-communist Europe* (pp. 55–73). Routledge.
- Národná rada Slovenskej republiky, & Ministerstvo vnútra Slovenskej republiky. (2006–2019). *Výročné správy politických strán a politických hnutí* [Annual reports of political parties and political movements].
- Odvolaný vysoký funkcionár SNS prehovoril o Dankových praktikách: Toto nebolo ani za Slotu! [Recalled senior SNS official speaks out about Danko's practices: Such things didn't even happen under Slota!]. (2017, July 13). *Nový Čas*. <https://www.cas.sk/clanok/571272/odvolany-vysoky-funkcionar-sns-prehovoril-o-dankovych-praktikach-toto-nebolo-ani-za-slotu>
- Ondruchová, M. (2000). *Organizácia politických strán a hnutí na Slovensku* [Organization of political parties and movements in Slovakia]. IVO.
- Pirro, A. (2015). *The populist radical right in Central and Eastern Europe: Ideology, impact and electoral performance*. Routledge.
- Podpredseda SNS Zelník na protest proti Dankovi odchádza zo strany [SNS Vice-President Zelník leaves party in protest against Danko]. (2020, March 20). *SME*. <https://domov.sme.sk/c/22353169/zelnik-na-protest-proti-dankovi-odchadza-zo-sns.html>
- Pytlas, B. (2019). Wettstreit um Deutung: Rechtsradikale Politik und narrativer Parteienwettbewerb am Beispiel der Slowakei und Ungarn [Contest over meaning: Radical right politics and narrative party competition in Slovakia and Hungary after 2015]. *Zeitschrift für Vergleichende Politikwissenschaft*, 13, 5–31.
- Rybář, M. (2011). *Medzi štátom a spoločnosťou: Politické strany na Slovensku po 1989* [Between the state and society: Political parties in Slovakia after 1989]. DEVIN.
- Slovak Statistical Office. (2020). *Elections to the parliament*. <https://volby.statistics.sk/nrsr/nrsr2020/en/index.html>
- Slovenská národná strana. (2015). *Košické programové tézy pre Slovensko* [Kosice Programme Theses for Slovakia]. [http://sns.sk/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/kosicke\\_tezy-1.pdf](http://sns.sk/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/kosicke_tezy-1.pdf)
- Slovenská národná strana. (2019). *Stanovy politickej strany Slovenská národná strana* [Statutes of the Political Party Slovak National Party]. [https://www.sns.sk/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/STANOVY-SNS-%C3%BApln%C3%A9-znenie-po-26.-sneme\\_final.pdf](https://www.sns.sk/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/STANOVY-SNS-%C3%BApln%C3%A9-znenie-po-26.-sneme_final.pdf)
- Šnidl, V. (2016, March 3). SNS záhadne škrtla šestku na kandidátke, podpredseda Chovan mal šancu byť ministrom [SNS mysteriously removed number six on the candidate list, Vice-President Chovan had the chance to be a minister]. *Denník N*. <https://dennikn.sk/388706/sns-zahadne-skrtila-kandidatky-podpredsedu-vladimira-chovana-mal-sancu-byt-ministrom>
- Šnidl, V. (2020a, January 17). Dankov žilinský predseda chce pomáhať Harabinovi, funkcionár zo Sniny zbehol ku Kollárovi [Danko's chairman in Žilina wants to help Harabin, an official from Snina has left to join Kollár]. *Denník N*. <https://dennikn.sk/1718746/dankov-zilinsky-predseda-chce-pomahat-harabinovi-funkcionar-zo-sniny-zbehol-ku-kollarovi>
- Šnidl, V. (2020b, January 27). SNS prestala chodiť medzi ľuďmi, Danko sa spolieha na médiá a bilbordy [SNS has stopped mixing with the people, Danko is relying on the media and billboards]. *Denník N*. <https://dennikn.sk/1733024/sns-prestala-chodit-medzi-ludi-danko-sa-spolieha-na-media-a-bilbordy>
- Tavits, M. (2013). *Post-communist democracies and party organization*. Cambridge University Press.
- Terenzani, M. (2017, August 10). Danko's letter sends coalition in [to] turmoil. *Slovak Spectator*. <https://spectator.sme.sk/c/20623490/dankos-letter-sends-coalition-in-turmoil.html>
- The National Council of the Slovak Republic. (2018). *Zmena zákona o politických stranách a politických hnutiach 344/2018* [Amendment of the law on political parties and political movements 344/2018]. <https://www.aspi.sk/products/lawText/1/91098/1/2>
- van Biezen, I. (2005). On the theory and practice of party formation and adaptation in new democracies. *European Journal of Political Research*, 44, 147–174.
- Voda, P., Kluknavská, A., & Spáč, P. (2021). From trivialized neo-Nazis to parliament: Explaining the electoral success of the extreme right party ĽSNS in Slovakia. *Problems of Post-Communism*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2020.1869909>
- Zelenayová, V. (2020). *Využitie facebookovej reklamy v predvolebnej kampani v parlamentných voľbách 2020* [Use of Facebook adverts in the election campaign for the 2020 parliamentary elections] [Unpublished bachelor dissertation]. Comenius University Bratislava.

### About the Authors



**Tim Haughton** is reader (associate professor) in European politics at the University of Birmingham, where he has served as the head of the Department of Political Science and International Studies (POLISIS). His research interests encompass party politics, political campaigning, and the politics of Central and Eastern Europe. Among his most recent publications is *The New Party Challenge: Changing Cycles of Party Birth and Death in Central Europe and Beyond* (Oxford University Press, 2020), co-authored with Kevin Deegan-Krause.



**Marek Rybář** is associate professor of political science at Masaryk University in the Czech Republic. His research focuses on political parties, party competition, and political institutions in Central Europe. He has been published widely in several monographs, numerous edited volumes, and various journals including *East European Politics and Societies*, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, *Electoral Studies*, and the *Journal of European Public Policy*.



**Kevin Deegan-Krause** is professor of political science at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan. His research focuses on political parties and democracy in Europe with emphasis on Europe's newer democracies and its newer parties. His newest book, co-authored with Tim Haughton, is *The New Party Challenge: Changing Cycles of Party Birth and Death in Central Europe and Beyond* (Oxford University Press, 2020).



Article

## Party Organisation of PiS in Poland: Between Electoral Rhetoric and Absolutist Practice

Bartek Pytlas

Geschwister Scholl Institute of Political Science, LMU Munich, Germany; E-Mail: bartek.pytlas@gsi.lmu.de

Submitted: 6 May 2021 | Accepted: 7 July 2021 | Published: 24 November 2021

### Abstract

The article analyses the organisation of the Law and Justice party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość [PiS]) in Poland. The case of PiS does not only allow us to explore the organisational features of a strongly institutionalized, incumbent party which uses populist radical right (PRR) politics. PiS, we argue, is also an ideal case to contrast what such parties might rhetorically declare and substantively do about their organisational features. Using party documents, press reports, quantitative data, and insights from the secondary literature based on interviews with activists, we evaluate the extent to which PiS has developed a mass-party-related organisation, and centralized its intra-party decision-making procedures. We find that while PiS made overtures to some aspects of mass-party-like organisation for electoral mobilization, the party remained reluctant to actively expand its membership numbers and put little effort into fostering the integration and social rootedness of its members through everyday intra-party activities. Furthermore, despite attempts to enact organisational reinvigoration, in practice PiS continued to revolve around strongly centralized structures and, in particular, the absolutist leadership style of the party's long-time Chair Jarosław Kaczyński. The analysis contributes to assessing the variety and functions of organisational features and appeals within the comparative study of PRR parties. Most particularly, it invites further research into the still relatively under-researched interactions between PRR party organisation and active party communication.

### Keywords

Law and Justice; organisation; party politics; Poland; populism; radical right

### Issue

This article is part of the issue “Right-Wing Populist Party Organisation Across Europe: The Survival of the Mass-Party?” edited by Daniele Albertazzi (University of Surrey, UK) and Stijn van Kessel (Queen Mary University of London, UK).

© 2021 by the author; licensee Cogitatio (Lisbon, Portugal). This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

### 1. Introduction

The case of the Law and Justice party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość [PiS]) in Poland offers interesting insights that can further contribute to our growing understanding of the diversity across populist radical right (PRR) party organisations (Albertazzi, 2016; Bolleyer, 2013; Heinisch & Mazzoleni, 2016). Analysing the current Polish incumbent does not only allow us to explore organisational features of a strongly institutionalized, established party, which over time has internalized core elements of PRR politics. Additionally, the case of PiS, which flexibly operated between radical and conventional politics, invites us to account for and juxtapose what parties might rhetorically declare and substantively do regarding their organisational features.

Polish parties are generally characterized by particularly weak membership bases, even in comparison to other Central and Eastern European countries (GUS, 2020; van Biezen et al., 2012). Concurrently, since the onset of the democratic transition, Polish parties focused more on efforts to promote their mediatized, electoral “product” in coordination with specialist campaign agencies and political consultants rather than to build strong party-voter linkages, developing their central office organisations and internal power relations accordingly (cf. Biskup, 2011; Mazur, 2011; Sula, 2008). Hence, while in Western Europe parties have gradually shifted from mass towards electoral-professional organisations (Farrell & Webb, 2000; Panebianco, 1988), after 1989 Polish politics witnessed a much swifter emergence of instant electoral-professional parties.

In this context, we could thus expect even less attempts from established parties—and particularly those with office ambitions pursuing flexible vote-maximizing strategies—to develop mass-party-type organisations, which we characterize here by efforts to recruit a large number of active party members and to foster their intra-party social rootedness (cf. Albertazzi & van Kessel, 2021). Yet parties may actively adapt to, or try to defy, their operative contexts. Especially for parties which fundamentally contest “politics as usual,” organisational innovation and appeals to reinvigorate party-voter linkages might constitute an advantageous distinguishing trait in party competition (Barr, 2009). Indeed, Polish anti-establishment actors regularly combined their primary ideological stances with invocations of dedicated representation and efficacious governance, presenting their organizations as viable to overcome merely short-term election-oriented politics, negative campaigning, and sociotechnical “PR spin.”

Yet rhetorical strategies may not necessarily reflect substantive organisational practice. In 2015, the PiS electoral campaign simulated organisational processes of dispersing power away from its long-time Chair (*prezes*), Jarosław Kaczyński. It also portrayed the “renewed” organisation as capable of fundamentally “fixing” Polish representative politics by closing gaps between parties and citizens (Engler et al., 2019; Pytlas, in press). Nonetheless, in the Polish public debate, the party continues to stand out as a prime example of a strongly centralized, hierarchical party dominated by its Chair. Accordingly, we argue that it is relevant to evaluate party organisations by juxtaposing communicative declarations with the actual lived practices of political parties in general, and PRR actors in particular.

Following the conceptual framework proposed by Albertazzi and van Kessel (2021), in this article we focus primarily on the extent to which PiS made substantive efforts to develop a mass-party-related organisation, and to centralize its intra-party decision-making procedures. At the same time, we approach this question specifically by accounting for what parties using PRR politics might rhetorically declare and substantively do about their organisational features. To achieve these goals, we triangulate multiple data sources, including party documents, press statements, quantitative data, and insights from secondary literature based on interviews with activists.

We find that while PiS used overtures to some aspects associated with mass-party-like organisation for electoral mobilization, the party put little effort into actually recruiting a large number of engaged party members or fostering their social rootedness. Concurrently, while the party tried to enact an image of leadership renewal, its everyday organisational practice continued to revolve around strongly centralized, hierarchical structures and, in particular, an absolutist leadership style of the party’s long-time leader. The findings provide a relevant contribution to assessing the variety and functions of mass-party-related features within the com-

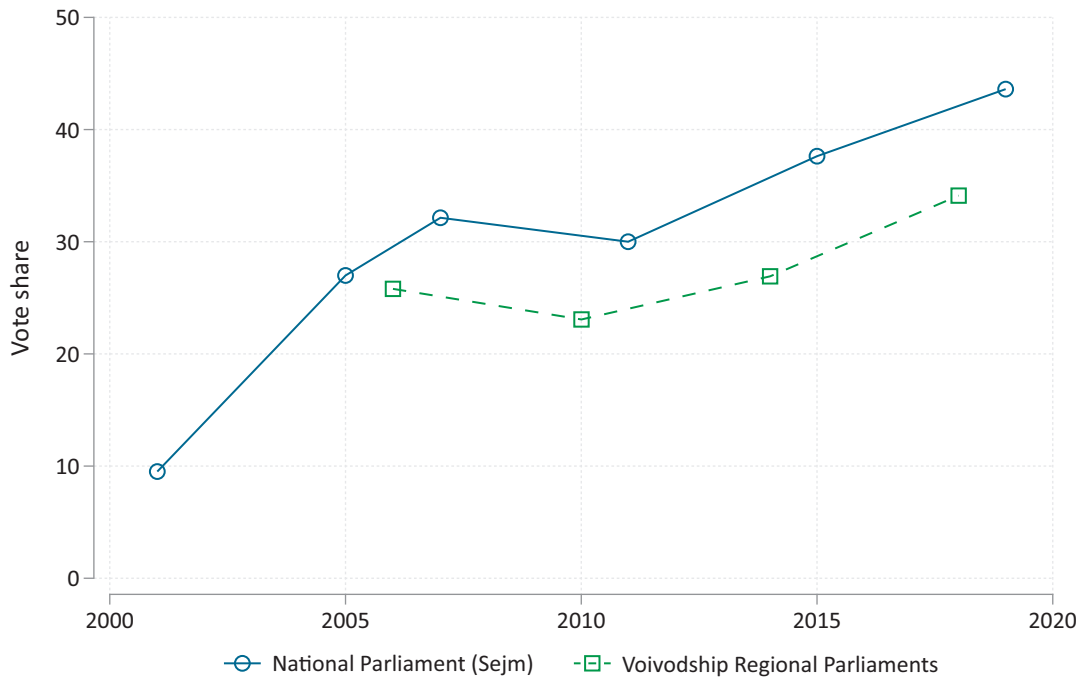
parative study of PRR party organisation. Most especially, our results invite further research on still relatively underexplored aspects in this research field: the relationship between PRR organisations and mediatisation of politics (Art, 2018), and most particularly on the interactions between PRR organisation and active party communication.

## 2. The Law and Justice Party and Populist Radical Right Politics

Since its foundation by Lech and Jarosław Kaczyński in 2001, PiS has swiftly developed into an electorally relevant and strongly institutionalized party (Figure 1). From the onset of the political activity of the Kaczyński brothers, their political projects have involved an anti-liberal and anti-establishment anger which challenged the legitimacy of the post-1989 Polish transformation (Stanley, 2016). With time, PiS also developed its ability to flexibly adapt and successively monopolize the political offer of its different populist and radical right competitors (Pytlas, 2015).

A brief look at the history of PiS allows us to trace its programmatic development and how it internalized PRR politics (cf. in detail Pytlas, in press). The first party founded by Lech and Jarosław Kaczyński in 1990, the Centre Agreement (Porozumienie Centrum [PC]) underscored legalism, tradition, as well as the importance of the Catholic Church and Catholic Social Teaching. In 1992 the PC-backed, conservative minority government lost a vote of no-confidence which led to the advent of a right-wing, anti-establishment conspiracy theory. This myth claimed that “communist-liberal pacts” worked to “steal the transition,” and PiS has subsequently internalized this narrative (cf. Pytlas, 2015). PiS itself emerged in 2001 after the collapse of the incumbent centre-right electoral coalition. The party’s name reflected the popular agenda of Lech Kaczyński, who served as Justice Minister 2000–2001. PiS accordingly expanded PC’s social-conservative platform with an increased focus on law and order, and anti-corruption issues.

Already four years after its creation, PiS won the Polish parliamentary election with 27% of the vote. PiS formed its first government, led by Jarosław Kaczyński, with the PRR League of Polish Families (Liga Polskich Rodzin [LPR]) and the agrarian-populist Self-Defence of the Republic of Poland party (Samoobrona Rzeczpospolitej Polskiej; Stanley, 2016). At least since that time, PiS has increasingly expanded its social-conservative stances with core PRR elements. These include populist appeals to a monist general will of the “pure people” directed against a “corrupt elite,” as well as nativist narratives centred on defending a homogenous “nation” allegedly threatened by socio-cultural “othered” (Mudde, 2007). PiS combined narratives of its coalition partners into an overarching, anti-liberal project of a “Fourth Republic,” creating a single divide between “liberal” and “social-solidaristic”



**Figure 1.** PiS results in national and voivodship-level parliamentary elections. Source: National Electoral Commission (2021).

Poland (Szczurbiak, 2007). Most notably, it adapted the LPR’s nativist claims regarding the alleged threats to “Polish Catholic values” and national identity coming from left-wing and liberal parties, their ideas and supporters, as well as from LGBTIQ persons (Pytlas, 2015).

As a result of internal power struggles, the government fell in 2007. PiS was succeeded in power by its arch-rival, the liberal-conservative Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska [PO]). Since the PiS leader, Lech Kaczyński, became Warsaw President in 2002 and Polish President in 2005, the party’s affairs have increasingly become the domain of his brother Jarosław. PiS’s anti-establishment conspiracy myths reignited after a 2010 plane accident over Smolensk led to the tragic death of 96 passengers, including Lech Kaczyński and several top-level public officials.

While PiS continuously delegitimized Polish politics, after two consecutive failures to secure a governmental majority the party adjusted its electoral tactics. During the 2015 presidential and *Sejm* electoral campaigns, PiS “hid” Jarosław Kaczyński, as his radicalism and authoritative leadership style were deemed hurtful to the party’s appeal (Engler et al., 2019). The presidential election was surprisingly won by the less well-known PiS Member of the European Parliament (MEP), Andrzej Duda. Duda tactically downplayed intra-Polish socio-cultural divisions and promised a humble presidency, open to the concerns and active initiatives of citizens. Directed by Duda’s campaign manager Beata Szydło, PiS repeated these euphemising tactics during the subsequent parliamentary election. In addition to redistributive policies, PiS promised to fundamentally fix Polish politics by bring-

ing about a “good change” towards new, efficacious, and attentive political elites. These tactics allowed PiS to flexibly shape its image between a radical outsider and a conventional established party (cf. Pytlas, in press).

Immediately after the victorious 2015 election, PiS returned to its radical mode, aggrandising political power to the detriment of democratic principles and constitutional norms. The party swiftly seized control over the public media and captured main institutions of the independent judiciary (Pytlas, 2018; Sadurski, 2019). This has nonetheless not halted the party’s repeated victories in 2019. At least since 2016, when confronting increased competition from the elitist radical right Confederation (Konfederacja) in 2016, PiS reactivated its nativist demonization of LGBTIQ persons (cf. “Kaczyński o patriotyzmie,” 2019; OSCE, 2020; Tilles, 2020). Since October 2020, the government has faced mass protests sparked by the decision of the PiS-captured Constitutional Tribunal to further restrict pro-choice rights, leading to their de facto ban (Walker, 2020). Jarosław Kaczyński characterized civic protests as an attack by evil forces on the Polish “nation” (cf. Onet Wiadomosci, 2020). Thus, already shortly after its successful 2015 electoral campaign, PiS has further consolidated its anti-liberalism around core radical right ideology.

### 3. Did the Law and Justice Party Pursue a Mass-Party-Type Organisation?

Having introduced the party’s electoral and ideological development, we begin the main analysis by assessing whether PiS attempted to develop a mass-party-style

organisation. We follow Albertazzi and van Kessel (2021), focusing first on the party’s organisational complexity, as well as how (if at all) PiS tried to attract active members and supporters while also facilitating their social rootedness within the party.

### 3.1. Organisational Complexity

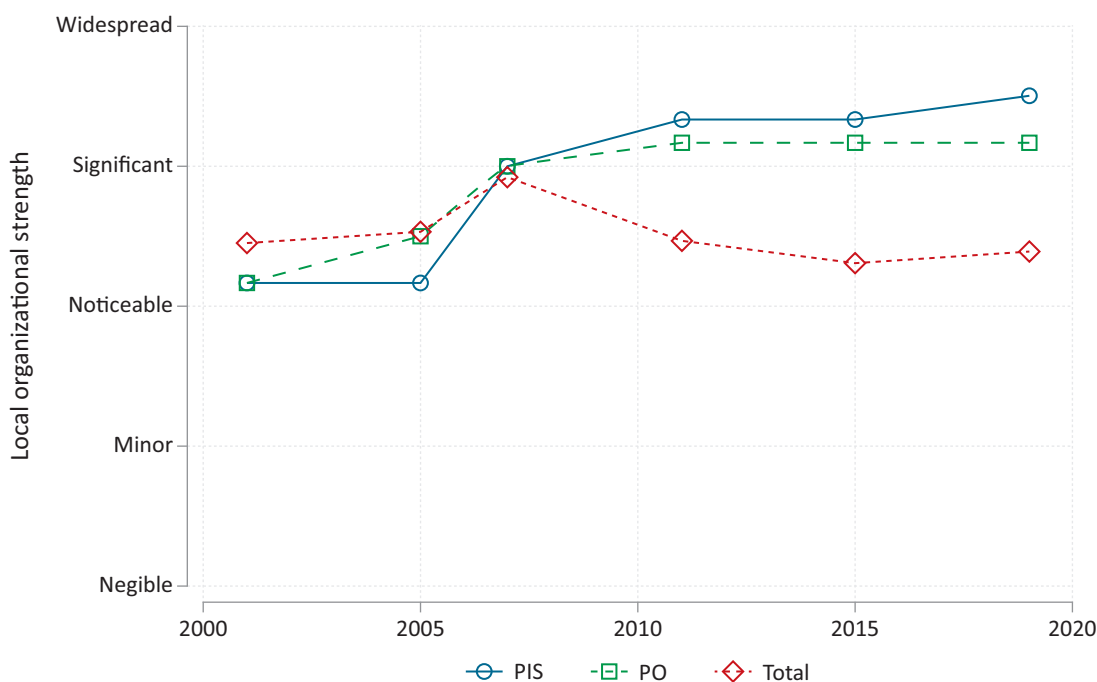
PiS swiftly developed a complex party structure. PiS’s statute names the Committee as the basic organisational party unit (PiS, 2016). Local party branches are managed by District Boards (*zarząd okręgowy*). The boards are distributed in correspondence to the constituency structure for parliamentary elections. Since 2012, PiS structures also include 16 Regional Councils (*rada regionalna*) which manage the party’s activities at the highest administrative level of a voivodship (*województwo*) and coordinate the activities of lower-level bodies. Regarding local organisational strength, PiS did not differ much from other established parties in Poland (Figure 2). Nevertheless, PiS’s local organisation has been more extensive compared to all Polish political parties—many of them including anti-establishment newcomers.

Furthermore, PiS developed a formally complex internal party structure (Figure 3). In central office, the PiS statute names the Congress as the highest party authority (PiS, 2016). The Congress elects the Chairperson (*prezes*) and decides on the party’s ideological principles. The Chairperson is the highest executive authority of PiS. Among other executive and representative functions, the Chair proposes candidates for parliamentary positions, coordinates socio-political activities of

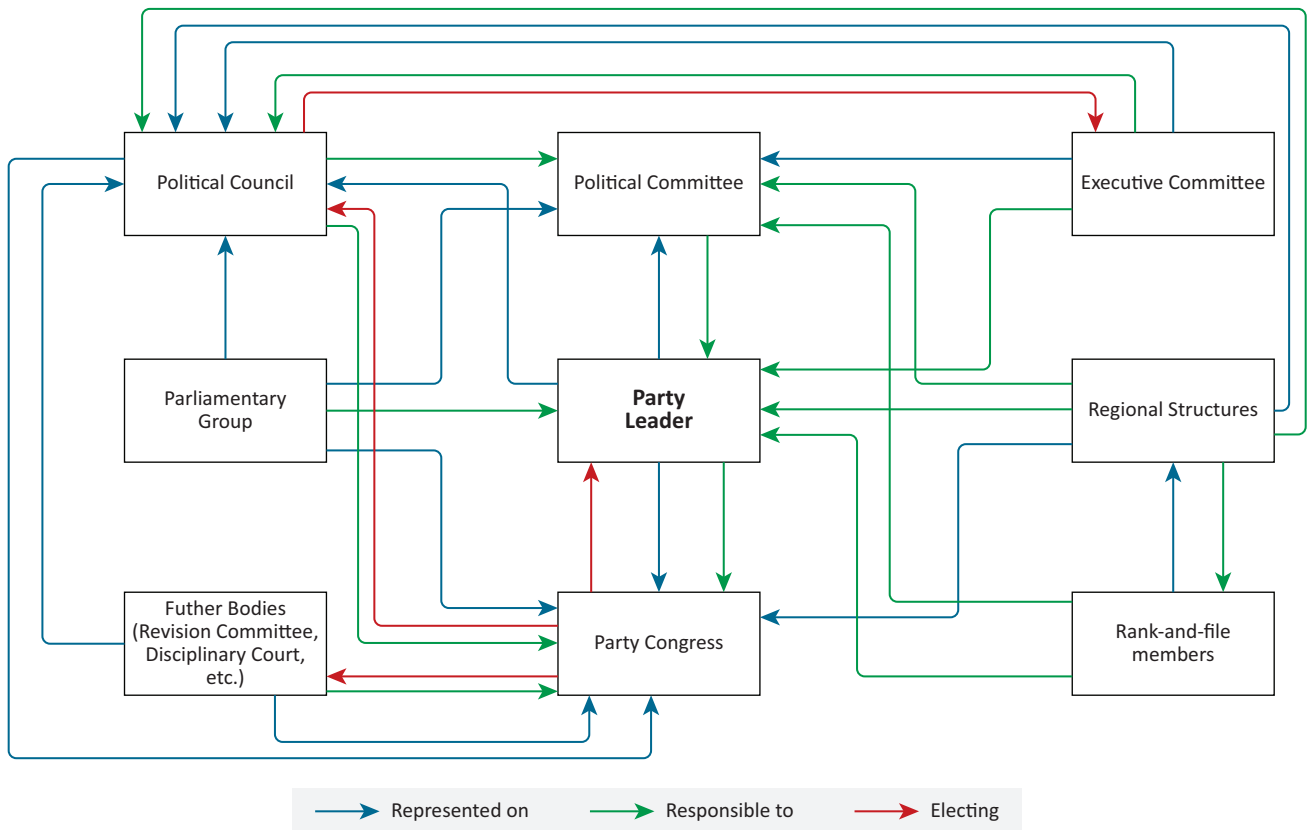
the party, and organises the work of the party in central office as well as the parliamentary group via its chairpersons. According to PiS statute, it is the Political Committee (*komitet polityczny*) led by the PiS Chair that runs the everyday activities of the party, with regional structures explicitly described as auxiliary to this goal (PiS, 2016, p. 15). Among management tasks, the Political Committee confirms the party’s candidates in elections and elects further administrative bodies. Finally, the Political Council (*rada polityczna*) is the highest legislative authority of PiS and is directed by the Chairperson. In addition to administrative functions, the Council develops the party’s programmatic direction and elects several central bodies proposed by the PiS Chair, as well as candidates in parliamentary, local, and presidential elections. In addition to this complex formal structure, Figure 3 illustrates that the PiS Chair has been granted a key role in the party organisation already at the formal level. As we will see below, the organisational practice of the party turns out to be much simpler once we account for the strongly leader-based accountability mechanisms and decision-making processes, as well as the absolutist leadership style of Jarosław Kaczyński, popularly dubbed as *The Prezes*.

### 3.2. Law and Justice Party Membership in Context

Already in the early 2010s, Poland exemplified the broader trend of party membership decline. Only under 1% of the electorate were members of a party, leaving Poland to trail behind all Central and Eastern European democracies except for Latvia (van Biezen et al., 2012).



**Figure 2.** Local organisational strength of PiS, PO, and all main Polish political parties 2001–2019. Source: V-Party Dataset (Lührmann et al., 2020)



**Figure 3.** PiS Organigram. Source: Own composition, based on PiS (2016).

In 2018, the 83 registered Polish parties had a total of 241,600 members—around 0.8% of the Polish electorate. An average Polish party had around 4,100 members, whilst half of Polish parties had no more than 300 members (GUS, 2020).

Observing self-reported party membership development for major parties since 2011, we see that the agrarian-conservative Polish People’s Party (Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe [PSL]) continues to have the strongest member base (cf. Figure 4). PO’s membership, on the other hand, peaked in 2011 with 50,234 members, but dropped to around 32,000 in 2020, a development observed also with the social-democratic Democratic Left Alliance (Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej [SLD]). Conversely, PiS was able to double its membership since 2011, declaring around 40,000 members in 2020.

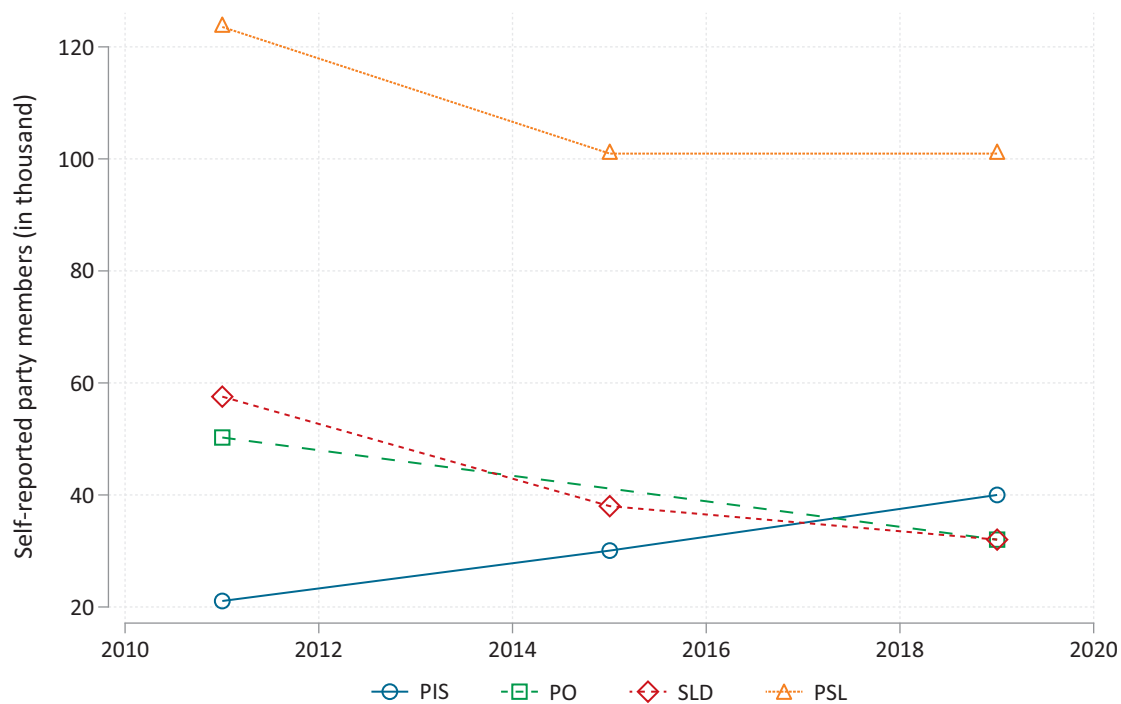
Overall, we need to be mindful of the (in)accuracy inherent to self-reported membership data, and it is important to place the figures in context. While PiS membership clearly increased since 2015, membership fees in 2019 still constituted only around 1.3% of the party’s revenue. Ninety-six percent of PiS’s income came from credits (around 50%) and state subsidies (around 46%; cf. PKW, 2019). Concurrently, organisational density (members/voters’ ratio) of PO fell from 0.0089 in 2011 to 0.0063 in 2019; for PiS, it remained stable with 0.0049 and 0.005, respectively. Thus, since 2015 PiS caught up with its arch-rival in absolute terms. Yet despite the

downward trend, PO still had a higher share of members relative to its electorate when compared to PiS.

### 3.3. Campaign Mobilization of Engaged Sympathisers—But No Efforts to Attract and Socialize Members

Regarding mobilization practices, major Polish parties have primarily emphasized political marketing and mediatized campaigning. Nonetheless, this focus did not replace organisational development. Major Polish parties—including PiS—swiftly developed electoral-professional organisations (Farrell & Webb, 2000; Panebianco, 1988) as the centre of strategic campaign efforts (cf. Mazur, 2011; Sula, 2008). Increasingly specialized party-affiliated staff and central offices thus play a decisive role in shaping the political “product” promoted in coordination with external campaign agencies and political consultants (cf. Biskup, 2011). To be sure, parties also did not relinquish face-to-face campaigning, such as organising public rallies and meetings with party figureheads. Yet, the campaign expenses of PiS and other major parties have become increasingly dominated by mass media communication, most notably television ads (Mazur, 2011).

After 2011, PiS began professionalizing its social media activity and dynamically campaigned on several channels, most notably Facebook and Instagram. Under growing competitive pressure from newly emerging



**Figure 4.** Self-reported membership numbers of PiS, PO, SLD, and PSL. Source: “Przybywa członków PiS” (2020), van Haute & Paulis (2016).

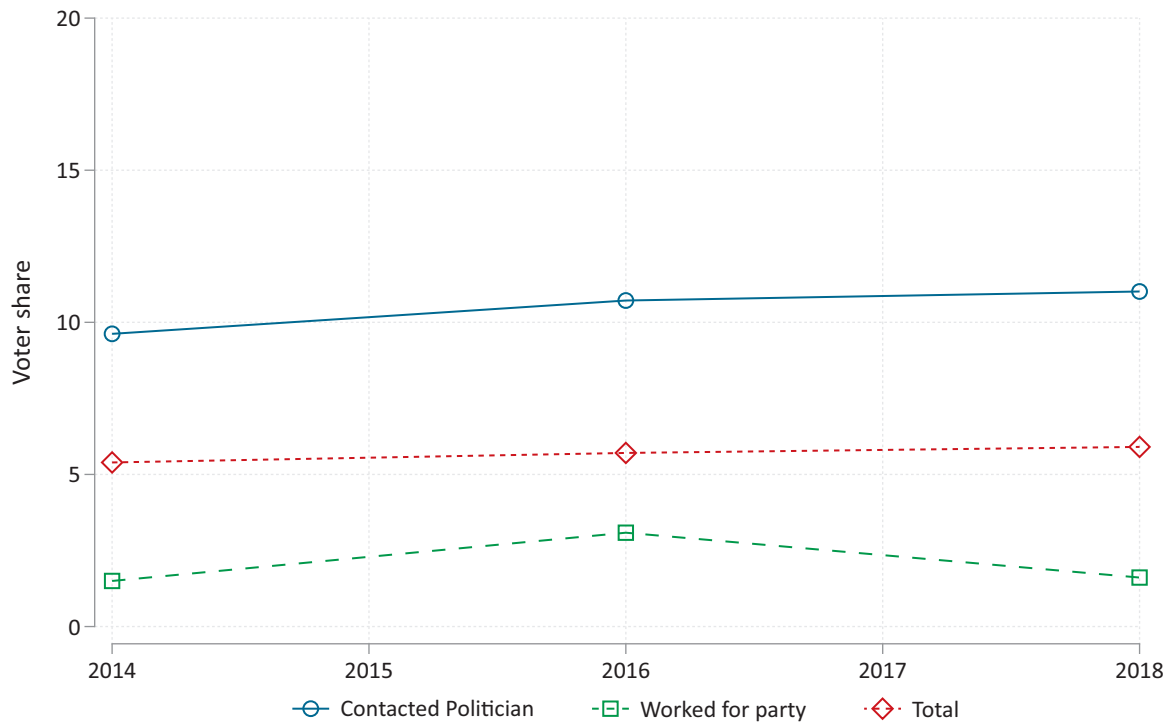
anti-establishment actors, PiS’s electoral campaign of 2015 tactically increased appeals to rebuilding representative party linkages. On the one hand, the aforementioned vision of “good change” invoked a passive notion of mass-party-like linkages, promising to close representational gaps by a caring elite attentive to the concerns of “the citizens.” On the other hand, the party’s new candidates constructed an image of PiS as an organisationally reinvigorated and united “team of good change” (wPolityce.pl, 2015). Yet PiS also appealed to more active mass-party-related linkages. For example, the video ad #wecandothis (#damygrade) mobilized sympathizers to actively participate in the PiS campaign by sharing and discussing the party’s programmatic arguments on social media, but also by engaging in personal conversations and canvassing (PiS, 2015). During the 2019 election, PiS launched a campaign titled Join the Team of Good Change. Its actual goal was nonetheless not to attract activists, but rather to advertise an SMS-messaging newsletter where subscribers could be informed about the party’s campaign activities (“PiS uruchamia system,” 2019).

Overall, since 2015 PiS’s electoral rhetoric increasingly suggested that political change depends on hard work and active engagement of the party’s sympathizers, thus creating a mobilizing image of a united effort by party elites and supporters. Yet it seems that since 2014 the activity of PiS voters did not substantively increase (see Figure 5). The share of self-declared PiS voters who contacted politicians, engaged in party work, or openly expressed campaign support, remained comparatively low. It was also lower than the average share of active

voters for other major parties (cf. European Social Survey, 2018, rounds 7–9).

Furthermore, while PiS made rhetorical appeals to strengthen both active and passive mass-party-related linkages, evidence suggests that the party was reluctant to actually engage in attracting a large number of active members. In the wake of the Smolensk accident, a well-known right-wing publicist complained that local PiS officials resisted admitting the activated supporters of PiS-adjacent civic organisations into the party (Ziemkiewicz, 2011, as cited in Nyzio, 2014, p. 213). After the party’s return to power in 2015, PiS did not relax its relatively restrictive criteria for party admission. To become a PiS member, the candidate needs to provide a recommendation from at least two current party members already prior to submitting the application (cf. PiS, 2016; “Przybywa członków PiS,” 2020). PiS also did not launch a visible public campaign aimed at broadening its rank-and-file. On the contrary, statements by party officials instead suggest a reserved stance to expanding the membership base. Commenting on the party’s recent membership growth, the Chair of PiS Executive Committee noted that the party does not accept all membership applications and added “if this was the case, we would have 15–20 thousand members more” (cf. “Przybywa członków PiS,” 2020, translation by the author).

Analysing different sources, including secondary literature, local press reports, as well as party websites and social media communication channels, we have also found no evidence of substantial efforts by PiS to socialize and integrate their rank-and-file members



**Figure 5.** Activity of PiS electorate. Source: European Social Survey (2018, rounds 7–9).

more deeply into the party beyond electoral campaigns. Studies which survey party activists suggest that PiS members indeed had considerable mass-party-related expectations regarding their potential party activity, but these were not prioritized by the party organisation. Surveyed PiS members most frequently expected the party to foster a collective feeling of belonging, as well as to engage members in social activities and exchange (31% of all responses; Winclawska, 2020). The activities which PiS members named as actually performing within PiS included participation in party demonstrations and meetings with officials (32.8%), as well as instrumental tasks, such as signature collection or paying membership fees (40.1%; Winclawska, 2020). Interviewed PiS officials themselves perceived the role of membership mainly in instrumental terms and admitted that the party has fewer ideas about how to engage rank-and-file members beyond periods of electoral campaigning (Paczeński & Winclawska, 2017). Thus, despite PiS’s electoral campaign calls for sympathizers to engage with the party, actual efforts made by the party to foster the intra-party social rootedness of its members seem to have been largely absent.

### 3.4. Why Didn’t the Law and Justice Party Actually Pursue Mass-Party Organisation?

What are the possible reasons behind PiS’s reluctance to actually grow a large activist membership base? In general, party leaders need to consider trade-offs between their particular interests and a more sustainable development of their organisation (Bolleyer, 2013; Heinisch

& Mazzoleni, 2016). Here, it is important to account for the temporal aspect behind contingent choices by party officials on how to achieve their personal or policy goals, such as prioritizing short-term strategies shaped by electoral cycles or more long-term, and possibly uncertain investment in collective party building (cf. Bolleyer, 2013; Goetz, 2014).

On the one hand, in the case of an institutionalized, leadership-oriented party such as PiS, expanding its active membership base might have been viewed as secondary to short-term priorities such as vote maximization and office-seeking. These goals usually come with a trade-off between responsiveness to core supporters and strategic adjustments to the broader, potential electorate (Giger & Schumacher, 2020; Kitschelt & McGann, 1995; Schumacher & Giger, 2018). To be sure, this rule is not automatic. Northern League (Lega Nord) in Italy which combined vote-maximizing office ambitions with active member integration is just one example (Albertazzi, 2016; Heinisch & Mazzoleni, 2016). Nonetheless, building and sustaining a large, engaged membership costs time and can be perceived by party officials as disadvantageous for their ability to manage the party.

On the other hand, it is vital to note that organisational choices might also be related to various power conflicts within and across different levels of party hierarchy (cf. Bolleyer, 2012). Particularly in organisations shaped around multi-level patronal dependencies, not only central, but also regional mid-level leaders might fear that the uncontrolled entry of engaged members could shake up existing power structures and create potential risks for their own intra-party influence.

First, organisational considerations might thus revolve around perceived trade-offs between central and regional leader-oriented loyalty. From the point of view of central leaders, sustaining an engaged base of active members requires both distributing more resources and delegating more powers to local branches. While institutional routinization itself does not have to be problematic for strongly centralized parties, related “value infusion” which could potentially lead to a stronger transfer of loyalty from leaders to the party organisation itself might be perceived by the central leadership as a bigger challenge (Bolleyer, 2013). The central office may thus oppose a mass-party approach due to concerns over the diversification of power networks and the increased relevance of regional charters. Second, it is important to account for the crucial role of mid-level elites which might also not be willing to jeopardize their own intra-party influence at the regional level. For local officials, new highly engaged members can represent a source of competition in terms of regional power and position within the party hierarchy.

Comprehensive data on party elite attitudes regarding their organisations and party membership is generally scarce. Yet studies conducting deep interviews with Polish party officials and members lend empirical plausibility to some of the above assumptions. One PiS official commented: “In my private opinion, 30–35 thousand members is a kind of an optimal state, one which one is able to handle considering financial and human engagement” (Winclawska, 2020, p. 128, translation by the author). Another PiS member noted: “Local branches of Law and Justice do not really want new members, being convinced that this will destabilize some kind of current relations ....That new, more active, intellectually fitter people will come who feel like doing more” (Winclawska, 2020, p. 128, translation by the author). This further suggests that the party—including its regional mid-level elites—saw little merit in recruiting a large engaged member base. Additionally, this first evidence also supports the argument that PiS officials perceived such organisational approach as potentially problematic for effectively running the party and especially as a challenge to existing intra-party power relations and hierarchies.

#### 4. Power Centralization and Internal Democracy

##### 4.1. Centralization

While PiS is not the only strongly centralized Polish party, it stands out regarding its strongly leader-oriented character (cf. Paczeński & Winclawska, 2018; Tomczak, 2015; Uziębło, 2016). For example, unlike other parties such as SLD, PO and the new left party Together (Razem), PiS’s regional charters lack the freedom to decide on local coalitions (Uziębło, 2016). Overall, on a scale of leadership strength related to selection procedures and prerogatives, as well as the role of party Chair in legisla-

tive candidate selection and in parliament, PiS obtained a score of 24 of possible 28 points, with a large lead over the second-placed PO with 10 points (Paczeński & Winclawska, 2018). With his leadership tenure reaching 18 years in 2021, Jarosław Kaczyński is the longest consecutively acting party leader in Poland. PiS was the only Polish party in which the last four leadership elections took place without even a pro forma counter-candidate (cf. Paczeński & Winclawska, 2018).

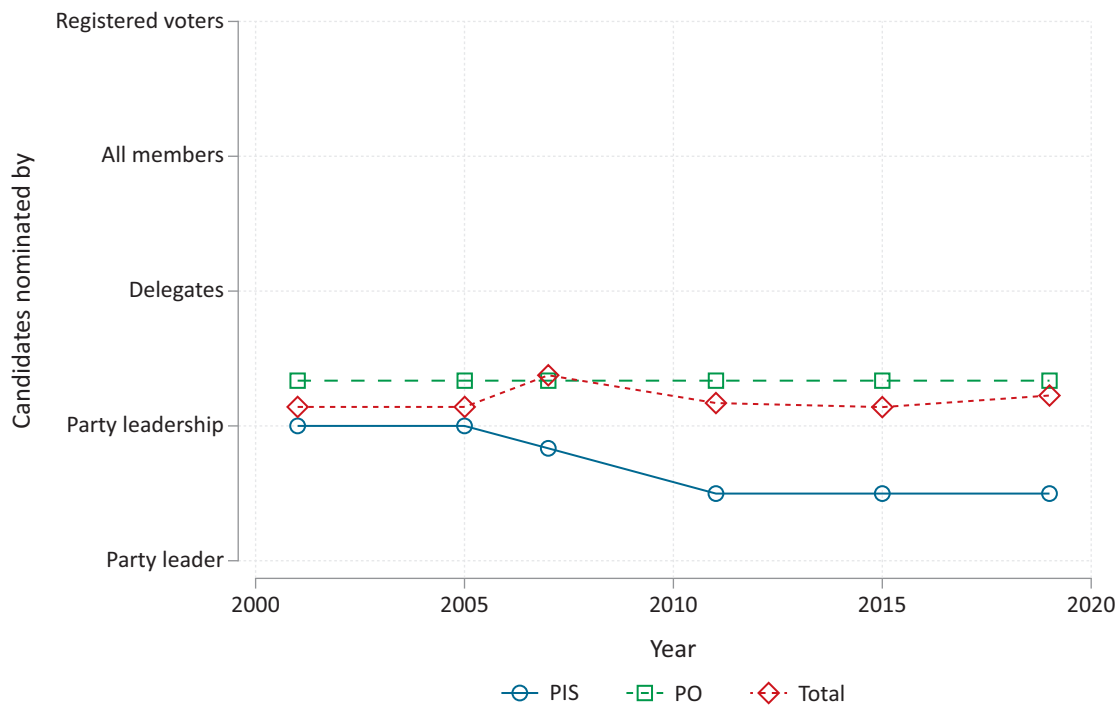
Returning to Figure 3, we see that the PiS leader has wide-ranging, formal prerogatives within the party. The leader derives his strength especially from the vast personalized possibilities to control, veto, and sanction members and activists. The Chair can personally suspend a party member based on a reasonable presumption that the member harmed PiS’s interests, even prior to taking the case to the Party Disciplinary Court (PiS, 2016, p. 6). PiS’s leader also has de facto control over candidate nomination in parliamentary elections. Even though candidate lists are officially confirmed by the Political Committee, it is the PiS Chair who has the personal prerogative to present the final candidate lists for approval. According to expert assessments, since 2011 Jarosław Kaczyński has increased his control over candidate nomination procedures (Figure 6).

In addition to formal prerogatives, the leader’s position is thus further strengthened by de facto control over the party’s daily executive and legislative activities. The PiS Chair presides both over the Political Council and the Political Committee. Thus, few key decisions in the party can be made without the knowledge and consent of the PiS Chair. Interestingly, in “urgent matters” the PiS leader can single-handedly make a decision pertaining to the Committee’s competences, subject to validation at the subsequent session (PiS, 2016; cf. Tomczak, 2015). The fact that it is the Committee that formally runs the everyday activities of the party gives the PiS Chair personal control over party branches. The PiS Chair, via the Committee, thus has the prerogative to nominate and dismiss local party leadership, as well as to create, suspend, or disband regional PiS structures as a whole.

##### 4.2. Intra-Party Democracy

While the PiS Chair already enjoys strong formal powers, the key feature of PiS’s organisational practice lies in the highly patronal and absolutist leadership style of Jarosław Kaczyński. In the past, the Chair did not hesitate to make use of his sanctioning tools, either directly or via the Political Committee. A regular disciplinary tool is the suspension of members and parliamentarians who have fallen out of favour with the leadership. Around 2010–2011, when the party entered an internal crisis, several officials increasingly criticized the leadership style of Jarosław Kaczyński. In 2011, the Political Committee disbanded the party’s local organisations in the constituencies of regional officials or





**Figure 6.** Decision-making power over candidate nomination in legislative elections in PiS, PO, and all Polish parties. Source: V-Party Dataset (Lührmann et al., 2020).

MEPs who had criticized Kaczyński. Conflicts emerged particularly between Jarosław Kaczyński and his former Justice Minister, Zbigniew Ziobro. In 2011, Ziobro—then PiS deputy Chair and MEP—called for the party’s “modernisation” and “bottom-up democratization, but without too much exaggeration” (“Wołanie o demokrację,” 2011). Ziobro’s challenge was echoed by the critique of Kaczyński’s absolutist rule by other prominent PiS MEPs, most notably Jacek Kurski and Tadeusz Cymański. In reaction, PiS’s Political Committee expelled all three officials from the party. Ziobro went on to form a fringe splinter-party, United Poland (Solidarna Polska), and returned as Justice Minister in the 2015 PiS-led government. After 2015, the formally non-partisan Kurski was entrusted with presiding over Polish public TV, soon turned into a PiS mouthpiece.

While Jarosław Kaczyński tightened his grip on PiS, his radical image and absolutist leadership style did not fit the party’s aforementioned new electoral tactics. In 2015, he re-emerged only late in the campaign to mobilize core supporters, and subsequently did not assume any senior office. Until 2020, Kaczyński formally remained a “mere rank-and-file” PiS member of parliament. It is from this back seat position that he nonetheless continued to exert personal control over not only parliamentary, but also governmental, PiS activities.

Formally, it is the PiS Chair who directs the activities of the party’s parliamentary group via its chairpersons (PiS, 2016). This means that the official of the party in central office has key decision-making power over the party’s parliamentary representation even if not personally elected to the *Sejm*. Jarosław Kaczyński’s guise as

an “ordinary member of parliament” ensured that he was able to control the party’s activities without facing direct accountability for the government’s actions. Independent media reports have nonetheless regularly highlighted his decision-making role, not only within the parliamentary group, but also within the government. Kaczyński enjoyed more privileges than an ordinary “rank-and-file” member of parliament. For example, he entered the lectern and told the PiS *Sejm* speaker that he would make a statement without considering the Parliament’s debate regulations. The PiS Chair—without holding any position in the executive—has, on occasions, personally announced government bills to quell scandals which had gained enough public visibility to pose a liability to the party. In 2019, media furthermore reported on regular meetings between Jarosław Kaczyński, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, and the president of the PiS-captured Constitutional Tribunal, Julia Przyłębska, at the latter’s private home during PiS’s attempts to gain control over the Supreme Court and the National Council of Judiciary (cf. Wroński & Kondzińska, 2019).

In 2020, internal power struggles, problems with the management of the Covid-19 public health crisis, and failure to contain mass anti-government civic protests, cumulated in a party and coalition crisis. Kaczyński entered the PiS government to “stabilize” the coalition as a deputy prime minister without a portfolio, responsible for public security. *The Prezes* suspended 15 PiS parliamentarians who voted against his favoured bill on animal rights protection, depicted as the alleged main reason behind the coalition crisis. In 2020, party officials began—mostly anonymously—to voice their irritation

with the leadership’s chaotic actions, unclear tactical direction, and attempts to intimidate dissenting voices (cf. Dziubka, 2020).

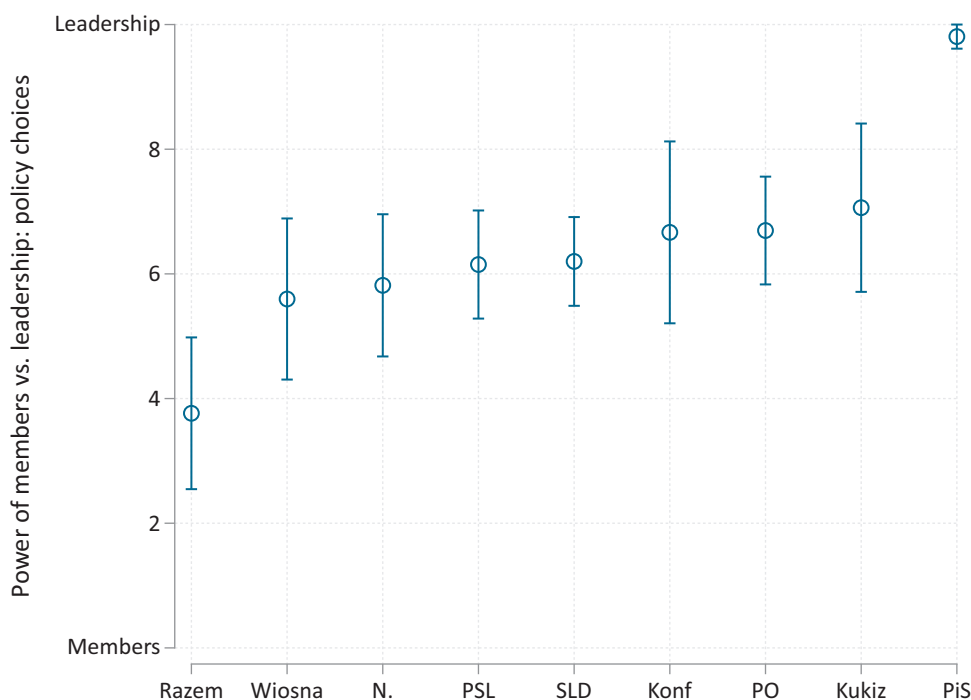
Given this absolutist leadership style as well as the general hierarchical and patronal organisation, intra-party democracy within PiS was thus almost non-existent. Similarly to other Polish parties, the PiS statute gives party members active and passive voting rights, the right to participate in PiS activities and to propose political or organisational initiatives to party bodies, as well as to seek party protection from any “repressive actions” related to being a party member (PiS, 2016, p. 7). Unlike in other major parties, such as SLD and PO, the PiS statute nonetheless does not grant individual members even the formal power to directly shape the party’s programme or direction. Direct bottom-up decision-making is generally uncommon in Polish political parties, but several have nonetheless introduced singular direct democratic mechanisms. For example, the PO has inclusive procedures of candidate nomination for public office; the PO, SLD, and Razem give members the right to select the party leadership; and both the SLD and Razem allow internal referendums before taking important party decisions (Winclawska et al., 2021). While the referendum initiative used by the SLD applies only to the central office, the statute of Razem foresees the possibility of a referendum initiated from the bottom-up by members or local party boards (Uziębło, 2016).

Summing up, rank-and-file members and PiS officials outside of central office had little practical influence on the party’s decision-making and programmatic direction. PiS stood out in this regard significantly, even when com-

pared to other centralized Polish political parties (see Figure 7). Again, a considerable share of PiS members hoped to have the opportunity to contribute by influencing the party’s programmatic course or running in elections (25.4% of responses). Yet fulfilling meritocratic tasks amounted only to 17.1% of responses to the question which activities PiS members actually pursue within the party—and the tasks mentioned were still predominantly restricted to running in elections (Winclawska, 2020). Even though in 2015 the campaign rhetoric of PiS signalled a turn towards openness to civic policy initiatives, within the party itself those activists who wanted to participate in shaping the party’s programmatic course remained sealed off from the party’s hermetic, centralized organisation.

### 5. Conclusions

This article analysed the organisational development of PiS in Poland. The framework by Albertazzi and van Kessel (2021) allowed us to observe PiS’s efforts to develop a mass-party-related organisation, as well as to explore the extent to which the party has centralized its intra-party decision-making procedures. The case of institutionalized incumbent PiS contributes not only to observing the organisational variety and dynamics in parties using PRR politics. Most notably, analysing a party which flexibly operated between radical and conventional politics shows that it is important to account for what parties using PRR politics might declare versus what they actually do, also with regard to their organisational characteristics.



**Figure 7.** Policy decision-making power of leadership vs. members in Poland 2019. Source: Chapel Hill Expert Survey 2019 (Bakker et al., 2020).

Particularly during the 2015 presidential and parliamentary elections, PiS attempted to simulate not only programmatic but also organisational renewal. The campaigns highlighted that fundamentally “fixing” politics is only possible by a united effort of both “new” efficacious party elites and engagement of (non-member) sympathizers. This shows that political actors may try to increase their potential mobilization appeal also by enacting their organisational reinvigoration, such as a supposed move away from more broadly stigmatized leaders, or a shift towards stronger mass-party-type linkages with engaged supporters.

Nonetheless, while PiS enacted mass-party-linkages to mobilise sympathisers especially during electoral campaigns, it did not actually pursue to develop a mass-party organisation. While between 2015 and 2019 PiS reported to have doubled its membership numbers, it did not actively engage in actually expanding its member base. Most notably, PiS branches also did not seem to put effort into fostering opportunities for its rank-and-file to develop a feeling of collective belonging and grassroots socialization through everyday intra-party activities. Surveyed PiS officials justified their reluctance to admit new members by citing issues related to party management. Local officials also feared that new, highly engaged members, would destabilize intra-party relations and increase competition over influence within the party (Winclawska, 2020). These insights invite further research into intra-elite conflict and contingent, organisation-related choices by party officials—not only central leadership, but also mid-level elites across and within different (sub-)national party levels.

Despite its performative reorganisation, PiS has also remained a strongly centralized party built around patronal networks and the power of its long-time leader. While PiS developed a complex and widespread organisation, the actual structure of decision-making relations within PiS remained much simpler and orbited around the party’s Chair, Jarosław Kaczyński. The continued dominance of Kaczyński over the party was sustained by his absolutist leadership style. *The Prezes* did not hesitate to deploy his vast prerogatives—whether personally or via central office bodies—to control, veto, and sanction party officials and local structures in practice. Regarding power centralization and instruments used to keep the leader in power despite stronger party institutionalization, PiS therefore did not differ in substance from most PRR parties in Western Europe (cf. Heinisch & Mazzoleni, 2016). Concurrently, the specific tactic of running the party from the back seat allowed Kaczyński, aided by PiS-loyal media, to present himself as a symbolic saviour of Polish politics—if necessary, even from the malaise of his own party organisation. On the record, PiS officials pledged allegiance to the party leader, underscoring his wisdom, skills, and charisma (cf. Paczeński & Winclawska, 2018). Yet obedience to Kaczyński seems to have rested not primarily in charismatic traits, but rather in his tight grip over party members and struc-

tures, as well as his use of sanctions to tame internal dissent. The potential for intra-party intrigue thus continued to simmer beneath the surface of a seemingly coherent organisation.

Our findings have important broader implications. Most notably, they invite further studies on the still relatively underexplored aspect of research on the radical right: the relationship between PRR party organisation and the mediatisation of politics (Art, 2018). Specifically, our analysis demonstrates that it is useful to complement crucial research advances on how external media outlets react to the PRR (de Jonge, 2021; Ellinas, 2009, 2014) with a perspective on how parties in general, and PRR parties in particular, actively communicate about and perform organisation. Concurrently, the case of PiS demonstrates that it is analytically relevant to disentangle and contrast what parties might rhetorically declare to what they actually do in terms of their organisational features. This implies the need to account for the ways communication and organisation constantly interact, rather than observing them just as a zero-sum game (Art, 2018).

Accordingly, our findings suggest that parties might try to actively navigate potential trade-offs between different organisational features and associated priorities, such as short-term office-seeking. Performative organisational “rebranding” facilitated PiS’s ability to include selected mass-party appeals into their campaign while minimizing time-intensive organisational costs and perceived risks to internal power hierarchies. At the same time, it allowed the party to blur its organisational profile. This has additionally helped PiS enact an image of a renewed challenger distinct from “politics as usual,” without impeding the party’s primary vote-maximizing strategy. These first insights invite further comparative research into the diverse ways by which parties try to de-demonize and broaden the appeal of their leadership and organisations without necessarily shifting their positions—an aspect particularly relevant to the analysis of the radical right (Akkerman et al., 2016). Future studies should also explore the impact of communicative strategies on political conflicts and party organisation itself.

The organisational development of PiS in Poland remains an important, but also a highly dynamic case. Fierce personal conflicts within PiS re-emerged anew since 2020 amidst the Covid-19 public health crisis and confrontation with anti-government protests. The most recent Congress, postponed to 3 July 2021 due to the pandemic, confirmed Jarosław Kaczyński as party leader, and he declared that this would be his last term in office. Simultaneously, the party signalled first steps towards reorganising its regional operations. In its core, the planned reform will prohibit officials with duties in public office from also serving as district chairs. Instead, the primary task of new district leaders would be to manage their regional branch. At first sight, this could suggest that PiS might be moving towards

strengthening bureaucratic ties between mid-level officials and ordinary members. In this vein, PiS central leadership has justified its reform plans by citing the need to end inertia caused by the inactivity of local party “barons” (*baronizacja*) and public officials who lack the time to adequately attend to their local organisations (Wróblewski, 2020). Still, given that the new officials would be directly remunerated by the central office, this reform might further cement the weak autonomy of local branches. Furthermore, given increased direct dependency on central office (qua the function of secretary general), hierarchical power conflicts are not unlikely to further impede developing a larger, socialized member basis. Party officials indeed expressed concerns about potential intra-party conflicts between new and old mid-level elites, suggesting that the planned reform is primarily aimed at strengthening the regional influence of officials loyal to the current Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki (Wróblewski, 2020), one of potential heirs to Jarosław Kaczyński. It will be relevant to observe which trajectory the party might take in the future, also once its founding leader decides to pass the torch to a successor.

### Acknowledgments

I thank Daniele Albertazzi and Stijn van Kessel, as well as the anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments. I also thank Aaron Martin for his diligent English-language proofreading of the accepted manuscript. Any remaining mistakes are my own.

### Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

### References

- Akkerman, T., de Lange, S., & Rooduijn, M. (2016). *Radical right-wing populist parties in Western Europe. Into the mainstream?* Routledge.
- Albertazzi, D. (2016). Going, going,... not quite gone yet? ‘Bossi’s Lega’ and the survival of the mass party. *Contemporary Italian Politics*, 8(2), 115–130.
- Albertazzi, D., & van Kessel, S. (2021). Right-wing populist party organisation across Europe: The survival of the mass-party? Introduction to the thematic issue. *Politics and Governance*, 9(4), 224–227.
- Art, D. (2018). Party organization and the radical right. In J. Rydgren (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of the radical right* (pp. 239–250). Oxford University Press.
- Bakker, R., Hooghe, L., Jolly, S., Marks, G., Polk, J., Rovny, J., Steenbergen, M., & Vachudova, M. A. (2020). *2019 Chapel Hill Expert Survey*. [Data set]. Chesdata. <https://www.chesdata.eu/2019-chapel-hill-expert-survey>
- Barr, R. (2009). Populists, outsiders and anti-establishment politics. *Party Politics*, 15(1), 29–48.
- Biskup, B. (2011). Models of political consulting in Poland, 1989–2009, in a comparative perspective. *Central European Journal of Communication*, 2(7), 227–240.
- Bolleyer, N. (2012). New party organization in Western Europe: Of party hierarchies, stratachies and federations. *Party Politics*, 18(3), 315–336.
- Bolleyer, N. (2013). *New parties in old party systems. Persistence and decline in seventeen democracies*. Oxford University Press.
- de Jonge, L. (2021). *The success and failure of right-wing populist parties in the Benelux countries*. Routledge.
- Dziubka, K. (2020, November 1). Kryzys w PiS. Zachwiana wiara w Kaczyńskiego [Crisis in PiS. Faith in Kaczyński shaken]. *Onet*. <https://www.onet.pl/informacje/onetwiadomosci/aborcja-ferment-w-pis-niektorzy-traca-wiare-w-kaczynskiego/mbbg7qc,79cfc278>
- Ellinas, A. (2009). Chaotic but popular? Extreme-right organisation and performance in the age of media communication. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 17(2), 209–221.
- Ellinas, A. (2014). *The media and the far right in Western Europe. Playing the nationalist card*. Cambridge University Press.
- Engler, S., Pytlas, B., & Deegan-Krause, K. (2019). Assessing the diversity of anti-establishment and populist politics in Central and Eastern Europe. *West European Politics*, 42(6), 1310–1336.
- European Social Survey. (2018). *European Social Survey*. <https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/data/round-index.html>
- Farrell, D., & Webb, P. (2000). Political parties as campaign organizations. In R. J. Dalton & M. P. Wattenberg (Eds.), *Parties without partisans. Political change in advanced industrial democracies* (pp. 102–125). Oxford University Press.
- Giger, N., & Schumacher, G. (2020). Bringing party organization back in: A comparative analysis of party representation in Europe. *Political Science Research and Methods*, 8(4), 692–706.
- Goetz, K. H. (2014). A question of time: Responsive and responsible democratic politics. *West European Politics*, 37(2), 379–399.
- GUS. (2020). *Partie polityczne w 2018 r* [Political parties in 2018]. [https://stat.gov.pl/download/gfx/portalinformacyjny/pl/defaultaktualnosci/5490/7/4/1/partie\\_polityczne\\_w\\_2018.pdf](https://stat.gov.pl/download/gfx/portalinformacyjny/pl/defaultaktualnosci/5490/7/4/1/partie_polityczne_w_2018.pdf)
- Heinisch, R., & Mazzoleni, O. (2016). *Understanding populist party organisation: The radical right in Western Europe*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kaczyński o patriotyzmie i “murze nienawiści” [Kaczyński on patriotism and “wall of hate”]. (2019, April 24). *Gazeta.pl*. <http://wiadomosci.gazeta.pl/wiadomosci/7,114884,24696725,kaczynski-o-patriotyzmie-i-murze-nienawisci-dzender-czy-gender.html>
- Kitschelt, H., & McGann, A. (1995). *The radical right in Western Europe. A comparative analysis*. University of Michigan Press.
- Lührmann, A., Düpont, N., Higashijima, M., Kavasoglu, Y.

- B., Marquardt, K. L., Bernhard, M., Doring, H., Hicken, A., Laebens, M., Lindberg, S. I., Medzihorsky, J., Neundorf, A., Reuter, O. J., Ruth-Lovell, S., Weghorst, K. R., Wiesehomeier, N., Wright, J., Alizada, N., Bederke, P., . . . Seim, B. (2020). *V-party dataset version 1*. [Data set]. V-Dem. <https://www.v-dem.net/en/data/data/v-party-dataset>
- Mazur, M. (2011). Amerykanizacja polskich kampanii wyborczych? [The americanisation of Polish political campaigns?]. In K. Churska-Nowak & S. Drobczyński (Eds.), *Profesjonalizacja i mediatyzacja kampanii politycznych w Polsce* [The professionalisation and mediatization of political campaigns in Poland] (pp. 17–38). Wydawnictwo Naukowe Wyższej Szkoły Nauk Humanistycznych i Dziennikarstwa.
- Mudde, C. (2007). *Populist radical right parties in Europe*. Cambridge University Press.
- National Electoral Commission. (2021). *Information services of national elections and referendums*. <https://wybory.gov.pl/index/?language=en&tab=wybory>
- Nyzio, A. (2014). With strength comes weakness. The evolution of political parties in Poland, 1989–2013. *Poliarchia*, 2(2), 199–232.
- Onet Wiadomosci. (2020). *Protesty w Polsce. Jarosław Kaczyński wzywa do obrony kościołów* [Protests in Poland. Jarosław Kaczyński calls for defending churches]. <https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/kraj/protest-kobiet-ws-aborcji-jaroslaw-kaczynski-komentuje-oswiadczenie/8zm3j7t>
- OSCE. (2020). *Poland, presidential election, 28 June 2020: Statement of preliminary findings and conclusions*. <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/poland/455728>
- Paczeński, A., & Winclawska, M. (2017). Czy współczesne partie potrzebują jeszcze członków? Wnioski z badań empirycznych w polskich partiach politycznych [Do contemporary political parties still need members? Conclusions from the empirical study into Polish political parties]. *Political Preferences*, 17, 7–26.
- Paczeński, A., & Winclawska, M. (2018). Leadership in Polish political parties. *e-Politikon*, 28, 92–114.
- Panebianco, A. (1988). *Political parties: Organisation and power*. Cambridge University Press.
- PiS uruchamia system smsowy informujący o kampanii [PiS launches a new SMS campaign information system]. (2019, September 7). *TVP3*. <https://regiony.tvp.pl/44294010/pis-uruchamia-system-smsowy-informujacy-o-kampanii#>
- PiS. (2015, September 26). *#DamyRadę* [#wecan-dothis] [Video]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wP8ZBg2FLFY>
- PiS. (2016). *Statut Prawa i Sprawiedliwości* [Statute of Law and Justice]. <http://pis.org.pl/document/archive/download/122>
- PKW. (2019). *Sprawozdania finansowe partii politycznych za rok 2019* [Parties' financial statements for 2019]. Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza. <https://pkw.gov.pl/finansowanie-polityki/finansowanie-partii-politycznych/sprawozdania-finansowe-partii-politycznych-za-rok-2019>
- Przybywa członków PiS. W PO i SLD ubywa działaczy [Increase in PiS membership. PO and SLD lose activists]. (2020, February 1). *Interia Wydarzenia*. <https://wydarzenia.interia.pl/polska/news-przybywa-czlonkow-pis-w-po-i-sld-ubywa-dzialaczy,nld,4302408>
- Pytlas, B. (2015). *Radical right parties in Central and Eastern Europe. Mainstream party competition and electoral fortune*. Routledge.
- Pytlas, B. (2018). Populist radical right mainstreaming and challenges to democracy in an enlarged Europe. In L. Herman & J. Muldoon (Eds.), *Trumping the mainstream: The conquest of democratic politics by far-right populism* (pp. 165–184). Routledge.
- Pytlas, B. (in press). From mainstream to power: The Law and Justice Party in Poland. In F. Decker, B. Henningsen, M. Lewandowsky, & P. Adorf (Eds.), *Aufstand der Außenseiter. Die Herausforderung der europäischen Politik durch den neuen Populismus* [The rebellion of the outsiders. Challenges to European politics by the new populism]. Nomos.
- Sadurski, W. (2019). *Poland's constitutional breakdown*. Oxford University Press.
- Schumacher, G., & Giger, N. (2018). Do leadership-dominated parties change more? *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion & Parties*, 28(3), 349–360.
- Stanley, B. (2016). Confrontation by default and confrontation by design: Strategic and institutional responses to Poland's populist coalition government. *Democratization*, 23(2), 263–282.
- Sula, P. (2008). Party system and media in Poland after 1989. *Central European Journal of Communication*, 1(1), 145–155.
- Szczerbiak, A. (2007). 'Social Poland' defeats 'liberal Poland'? The September–October 2005 Polish parliamentary and presidential elections. *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, 23(2), 203–232.
- Tilles, D. (2020). *Poland's anti-LGBT campaign explained: 10 questions and answers*. Notes from Poland. <https://notesfrompoland.com/2020/06/17/polands-anti-lgbt-campaign-explained-ten-questions-and-answers>
- Tomczak, Ł. (2015). Czy polskie partie są demokratyczne? [Are Polish parties democratic?] *Athenaeum Polskie Studia Politologiczne*, 47(3), 84–97.
- Uziębło, P. (2016). Aspekty ustrojowe stosunków wewnątrzpartyjnych [The internal organisation of political parties in Poland]. *Toruńskie Studia Polsko-Włoskie*, 12, 107–122.
- van Biezen, I., Mair, P., & Poguntke, T. (2012). Going, going, ... gone? The decline of party membership in contemporary Europe. *European Journal of Political Research*, 51(1), 24–56.
- van Haute, E., & Paulis, E. (2016). *Mapp Dataset* [Data

- set]. Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/ZENODO.61234>
- Walker, S. (2020, October 23). Pro-choice protesters march in Polish cities amid abortion ban anger. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/23/poland-braced-for-more-protests-over-abortion-ban-ruling>
- Winclawska, M. (2020). Obszary aktywności członków polskich partii politycznych z perspektywy zadań partii i aspiracji jej działaczy (grassroots) [Activities of the members of Polish political parties from the perspective of the functions and aspirations of the grassroots]. *Przegląd Politologiczny*, 1, 119–130.
- Winclawska, M., Pacześniak, A., Brodzińska-Mirowska, B., & Jacuński, M. (2021). Party management from the perspective of party members: Evidence from Poland. *Problems of Post-Communism*, 68(4), 315–326.
- Wołanie o demokrację w PiS! [Calls for democracy in PiS!]. (2011, October 24). *Dziennik.pl*. <https://wiadomosci.dziennik.pl/polityka/artykuly/363118,ziobro-w-naszym-dzienniku-nie-mozemy-wiecej-przegrac.html,komentarze-najstarsze,1>
- wPolityce.pl. (2015). Jarosław Kaczyński na Konwencji PiS [Jarosław Kaczyński during the PiS congress]. <https://wpolityce.pl/polityka/265120-jaroslaw-kaczynski-na-konwencji-pis-chcemy-zmienic-polske-na-lepsze-to-jest-motywacja-podstawowa>
- Wróblewski, M. (2020, September 4). Rewolucja w PiS. Działacze mają obawy przed planami Jarosława Kaczyńskiego [Revolution in PiS. Activists worry about the plans of Jarosław Kaczyński]. *Wiadomości*. <https://wiadomosci.wp.pl/rewolucja-w-pis-dzialacze-maja-obawy-przed-planami-jaroslaw-kaczynskiego-6550123128073024a>
- Wroński, P., & Kondzińska, A. (2019, May 23). Centrum dowodzenia w domu Przyłębskiej [Command centre in Przyłębska's house]. *Wyborcza*. <https://wyborcza.pl/7,75398,24815201,centrum-dowodzenia-w-domu-przylebskiej-ujawniamy-sekretne-spotkania.html>

#### About the Author



**Bartek Pytlas** is a postdoctoral researcher at the Geschwister Scholl Institute of Political Science, LMU Munich. He is the author of the award-winning monograph *Radical Right Parties in Central and Eastern Europe: Mainstream Party Competition and Electoral Fortune* (Routledge). His work has been published in journals such as *West European Politics* and *Journal of Common Market Studies*. His current project funded by the German Research Foundation focuses on strategic patterns of anti-establishment politics across Europe.

Article

## When a Right-Wing Populist Party Inherits a Mass Party Organisation: The Case of EKRE

Tõnis Saarts \*, Mari-Liis Jakobson and Leif Kalev

School of Governance, Law and Society, Tallinn University, Estonia; E-Mails: tonis.saarts@tlu.ee (T.S.), mari-liis.jakobson@tlu.ee (M.-L.J.), leif.kalev@tlu.ee (L.K.)

\* Corresponding author

Submitted: 29 May 2021 | Accepted: 8 October 2021 | Published: 24 November 2021

### Abstract

When the Eesti Konservatiivne Rahvaerakond (EKRE, Estonian Conservative People's Party) took over the defunct but extensive party organisation of the Estonian People's Union, it placed great emphasis on rebooting and extending the organisation and bringing in new activists. As a result, EKRE has grown into a full-fledged mass party type of organisation with all the characteristics associated to it. Furthermore, it has become the fastest-growing party in Estonia in terms of membership and been notably successful in electoral terms. This article focuses primarily on the question of how EKRE developed a mass party organisation with a strong, ideologically-devoted activist core and a remarkable presence on the ground. The article also demonstrates how the party offers a variety of opportunities for engagement to its members. In contrast to an archetypical right-wing populist party, the decision-making power is somewhat diffused within the party, though the party leader remains the public face and mouthpiece of the party. EKRE's online engagement strategies have been among the most successful in recent Estonian politics and make the party stand out. The article demonstrates that parties can often revise as well as repurpose the features of the predecessor parties and even build defunct mainstream parties into mass parties with a firm ideological core.

### Keywords

EKRE; Estonia; party organisation; right-wing populism; successor parties

### Issue

This article is part of the issue "Right-Wing Populist Party Organisation Across Europe: The Survival of the Mass-Party?" edited by Daniele Albertazzi (University of Surrey, UK) and Stijn van Kessel (Queen Mary University of London, UK).

© 2021 by the authors; licensee Cogitatio (Lisbon, Portugal). This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

### 1. Introduction

In spring 2012, the Eestimaa Rahvaliid (ERL, Estonian People's Union)—a by then defunct, but formerly major party—and a minor radical right activist group, the Eesti Rahvuslik Liikumine (ENM, Estonian Nationalist Movement), announced a merger and the creation of a new party: the Eesti Konservatiivne Rahvaerakond (EKRE, Estonian Conservative People's Party). In legal terms it was simply a name change and not recognised as a true merger (because one was a party and the other a small movement). However, it became an alliance in which the activists and ideological architects came from the ENM,

and organisational structure and mass membership was inherited from the ERL. Political observers were initially sceptical whether the combination of a rather marginal (ENM) and a waning (ERL) political actor could achieve electoral success. However, the combination proved to be notably successful. In its first national election in 2015, EKRE won 8% of the seats in parliament. In the next election, in 2019, EKRE obtained 18% of the seats in the legislature and was invited to join a governing coalition (Mölder, 2020).

According to Arter (2012, p. 109), a successor party is born when a new party emerges after its predecessor ceases to exist and the replacement party becomes

virtually a new political entity with a new name, changed ideology, and renewed electoral appeal, which enables it to fill and expand the remaining political niche. Most importantly, the successor party inherits the human, organisational, and financial resources from its predecessor, but seeks to develop them as a “new enterprise.” EKRE fulfils all the criteria: It replaced ERL when the latter became dysfunctional, radically redefined the party’s ideology, partly transformed the electoral base, and further developed the inherited party organisation on new grounds. Successor parties are rather common among populist radical right parties (PRRPs). For instance, the Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ, Austrian Freedom Party) formed based on the Verband der Unabhängigen (VdU, League of Independents) and the Perussuomalainen Puolue (PS, True Finns Party) replaced the Suomen Maaseudun Puolue (SPM, Finnish Rural Party), to name a couple (Arter, 2012). However, the organisational transformations of successor parties have not been studied widely.

This article aims to analyse how the succession process influenced the development of EKRE’s mass party structure. As the introduction to this thematic issue states, the mass party model has proven to be popular and viable among a number of parties whose “populist message challenges ‘the political elites’ precisely for disengaging with ordinary citizens” (Albertazzi & van Kessel, 2021, p. 224). This article thus demonstrates a special case of mass party organisation-building among PRRPs in Central and Eastern Europe, showing that the relevant organisational model can also be found in the Eastern part of the continent. Furthermore, EKRE’s case is interesting because it shows the development of a mass party structure in a successor party that partly draws from a grassroots activist group.

This article is focused on EKRE’s party organisation and seeks answers to two principal research questions: To what extent and how has EKRE made an effort to develop a mass party type organisation? To what extent is EKRE centralised in terms of key decision-making areas?

The article will demonstrate that EKRE has developed an extensive party organisation reminiscent of a mass party. Even if the inherited party organisation proved to be a useful foundation for a mass party, the party leaders had to reboot the whole organisation. They reinvented the party’s political programme, brought in new activists, and created new engagement strategies and institutional practices in order to create a fully functional organisation. Overall, EKRE has successfully adopted the mass party organisational model, and it is now the fastest-growing party in Estonia. Furthermore, it has also become a pioneer in online engagement strategies, having a notably larger online presence than other parties in Estonia. Regardless of its leader-centred public face, the party has developed relatively advanced mechanisms for intra-party democracy. The party has multiple institutionalised and non-institutionalised avenues for engaging local elites,

members, and supporters into the decision-making process, even if there is only anecdotal evidence of the grassroots affecting the party’s policy.

The study relies primarily on secondary source analysis (party charters, party membership lists, electoral data, speeches and press releases, media texts, online archives, social media pages), but also draws on 12 qualitative interviews conducted with members of EKRE who hold, or have held, positions in the party’s decision-making bodies or in branch- or district-level leadership. The interviewees were drawn from a diverse spectrum of activists who varied in terms of their age, gender, and period of party membership (see Supplementary File).

## 2. The Origins and Development of EKRE

EKRE is often classified as a PRRP (Mudde 2016, p. 7; see also Braghiroli & Petsinis, 2019; Kasekamp et al., 2019; Petsinis, 2019) although, as our interviews indicate, the members prefer to see themselves as “national conservatives.” Its ideology is based on nativism (an anti-Russian stance and anti-immigration sentiments), Euroscepticism, and the promotion of traditional family values. One can also add anti-liberal views (limits on individual freedom and an emphasis on collective national values) and elements of populism such as anti-elite rhetoric and an appeal to “the people” (Braghiroli & Petsinis, 2019; Kasekamp et al., 2019).

The ENM, which joined ERL in forming EKRE, was a relatively small nationalistic and Eurosceptic group (Braghiroli & Petsinis, 2019) with around 300 members (Kund, 2012). In contrast, the socially conservative and agrarian ERL had been one of the mainstream parties in Estonia, whose membership peaked at around 10,000 in its heyday (Toomla, 2011). ERL was founded in 2000, when two smaller agrarian parties and a retirees’ party merged. Its predecessors date back to the rural participants of the late Soviet time pro-independence movements and the 1990s countermovement against rural decline and neoliberal reforms. As a merger party, ERL was initially quite diverse, but consolidated under the broad umbrella of an agrarian-conservative ideology with a solidaristic and mild nationalist leaning.

ERL participated in several governments and developed a well-oiled patronage network that facilitated the consolidation of its elites. This resulted in a spiral of decline after 2006 when the party faced corruption charges. In the 2007 elections, ERL lost more than half of its seats (from 13 to six) and moved into opposition (Saarts, 2015). Subsequently, the party lost almost all support it had, and many prominent members joined other parties’ ranks. There was a failed attempt to merge with the Sotsiaaldemokraatlik Erakond (SDE, Social Democratic Party of Estonia), which caused further tensions within the top echelons of the party and resulted in the younger and more progressive elites leaving ERL. By the time ERL merged with the ENM, the party mainly consisted of the elderly agrarian elite with



broadly nationalist and social conservative orientations and a declining and passive membership.

Even in this situation, ERL provided the main organisational foundations for the new party. It provided the first chairman of EKRE (Margo Miljand) who served for a year before EKRE's long-term leader Mart Helme (2013–2020) took over. By that time, Mart Helme was already a well-known public personality in Estonia. He had served as an ambassador in Russia in the 1990s and had later become one of the figureheads of the nascent Eurosceptic conservative movement in Estonia, known for his radical public statements (see Auers & Kasekamp, 2015). Mart Helme served as a charismatic leader and figurehead of the party, but the party has rarely been seen as his personal vehicle. In addition to Mart Helme, several other people have become highly visible and important spokespersons of the party, among them other members of the Helme family: his son Martin Helme, who assumed party leadership in 2020, and his wife Helle-Moonika Helme, who has also been part of the party leadership. While Helle-Moonika Helme was a newcomer in politics when joining the party in 2012, Martin Helme had already built a solid public profile as a radical and Eurosceptic activist.

One should also not underestimate the role played by the former Estonian president Arnold Rüütel, who had served as a prominent member of ERL and later became the honorary chairman of the EKRE. As he was still very popular among the rural population, he contributed to legitimising EKRE as a successor party of ERL (Auers & Kasekamp, 2015, p. 145).

EKRE inherited a strong and geographically extensive party organisation from ERL, with ca. 8,000 members (Toomla, 2011). Thus, EKRE had a mass party type of organisation already from the outset. However, while ERL relied on its patronage networks and almost constant presence in government (Saarts, 2015), EKRE significantly strengthened the emphasis on ideology.

Few commentators (see, e.g., Auers & Kasekamp, 2013) saw potential in EKRE at that time, as many parties had already adopted an ethnonationalist agenda and the 5% national electoral threshold is rather high for newcomers. The window of opportunity opened for EKRE when Estonia adopted the Civil Partnership Act, which legalised gender neutral partnerships in 2014 (Kasekamp et al., 2019). That was a wake-up call for the more socially

conservative segment of society, which lacked prominent spokespersons in parliamentary politics at the time. EKRE and the Helme family were able to fill the void. In the subsequent national elections, in March 2015, the party obtained 8% of votes and 7% of seats in the parliament (Table 1).

The European refugee crisis of 2015–2016 further increased the popularity of the party. By utilising the anti-immigration card and anti-establishment rhetoric, EKRE was able to obtain 18% of the vote in the national elections in 2019. The electoral success was further boosted by the personal charisma of the then chairman Mart Helme and systematic campaigning and organisation-building efforts (largely in the less affluent rural districts).

After the 2019 election, EKRE entered government. The former incumbent party, Eesti Keskerakond (KE, Estonian Centre Party) unexpectedly lost the elections, but, in order to remain in power, and since it had few options on the table, decided to cooperate with EKRE (Mölder, 2020). In government, EKRE did not manage to implement the more radical parts of its agenda (Jakobson & Kalev, 2020). However, it was rather successful in utilising government media briefings to maintain public attention on their policy positions. Hoping to expand its appeal to new electoral segments, EKRE elected a new chairman (Martin Helme) in 2020.

### 3. The Efforts to Build and Maintain a Mass Party Type of Organisation

According to Panebianco (1988) and Albertazzi (2016), a mass party type of organisation is characterised by the drive to recruit a large activist membership as a way to reach out to the public, rootedness to the ground, a well-articulated ideology creating a distinct collective identity, and sense of community (see also Albertazzi & van Kessel, 2021). While EKRE's leadership noted that "establishing a mass party type of structure was never a goal on its own" (Interview 10), EKRE can be said to meet all these criteria. While it builds on ERL's heritage in terms of its structure and extent of party organisation, it has developed even further towards a mass party structure.

While ERL was rather pragmatic and technocratic (Saarts, 2015), EKRE describes itself as "the most ideological party in Estonia" (Helme, 2020). EKRE has a rather

**Table 1.** Performance of EKRE and its predecessors in the national elections.

Year	1995	1999	2003	2007	2011	2015	2019
Party	Electoral alliance KMÜ	EME (ERL)	ERL	ERL	ERL	EKRE	EKRE
Seats	41 (23*)	7 (11*)	13	6	0	7	19
Votes	174,248	35,204	64,643	39,215	12,184	46,772	99,671
Vote share	32,2	7,3	13,0	7,1	2,1	8,1	17,8

Notes: The first number is the result of the formal electoral list, the latter stands for the actual number of deputies of the ERL; KMÜ: Koonderakond ja Maarahva Ühendus (The Coalition Party and Estonian Country People's Party Union); EME: Eesti Maarahva Erakond (Estonian Country People's Party). Source: Estonian National Electoral Committee (2021).

broad societal following and has been associated with a wider nativist conservative movement, which has been on the rise both internationally as well as in Estonian society since the mid-2010s (Kasekamp et al., 2019). ERL was never supported by such a wider social movement, although its predecessors were (the rural movement in the 1990s).

After the merger, the new activists predominantly came from the ENM’s side or from the newly recruited members. Even if, immediately after the merger, some former members of the ERL were still playing a relatively active role in organisational affairs and central leadership, the newly recruited members and ENM’s activists “soon took the lead” (Interview 10).

Currently, EKRE is the third largest, but also the fastest-growing party in Estonia: While the membership of the other parties has stagnated or increased at a low pace, the membership of EKRE (along with the Estonian Centre Party) has grown considerably (Estonian e-Business Register, 2021). Between 2015 and 2020, EKRE recruited 3033 new members and most of this growth happened naturally, without major recruitment campaigns. To date (2021), the party has launched only two centralised recruitment campaigns. The 2015–2016 campaign, during the refugee crisis, was not very successful. However, in 2021, when the party fell out of the governing coalition, the leadership was more successful in sustaining momentum and gained hundreds of new members.

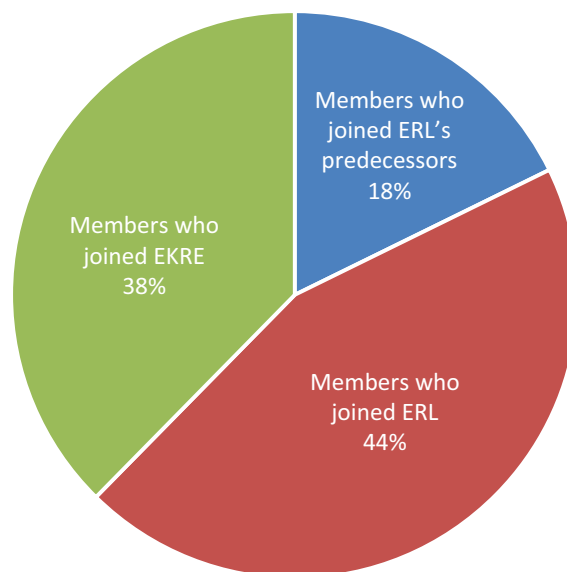
It is equally noteworthy that, so far, EKRE has been the only Estonian party to have established a party organisation abroad (see Jakobson et al., 2020). In 2013, conservative-minded Estonians living in Finland founded EKRE’s party branch there, and in 2019 another external

branch organisation was founded in Sweden. It was a genuine bottom-up initiative, which also refers to ideologically motivated grassroots activism rather reminiscent of a mass party.

Unlike some other PRRPs (see, e.g., Albertazzi, 2016) and many other parties in Estonia, the party only has full members and no supporting members, whose association to the party is not made public. Also, the process of accepting new members is more rigorous than it was in the ERL. New members go through background checks—a measure that was implemented in order to keep away “troublemakers” and avoid scandals over members who have committed felonies (Interviews 1, 4). Nonetheless, the party has still witnessed some public scandals around wayward members. Most notably, one of the party’s candidates for minister in the cabinet formed in spring 2019 was caught driving under the influence of alcohol and was later accused of domestic violence. The party was forced to withdraw his candidacy (“Kuusik accused,” 2019).

Additionally, applicants for party membership can also name an endorser among party members to boost their applications. The application procedure thus expects active agency and some networking on behalf of the applicants and is not designed merely for maximising the number of formal members.

Among EKRE’s members one can find both the new members and those who had formerly joined with the predecessor parties. As of January 2021 (see Figure 1), over half of EKRE’s members had joined the party before the 2012 rebranding—most prominently into ERL, but some do remain members since the 1990s, i.e., from earlier periods of party succession. It is even likely that many people who were members of the predecessor parties



**Figure 1.** EKRE’s members on 1 January 2021, according to the time and legal entity they joined. Time periods for calculating the number of members we as follows: Members who joined ERL’s predecessors (25 January 1990–6 June 2000), ERL (10 June 2000–23 March 2012), and EKRE (24 March 2012–31 December 2020). Source: Estonian e-Business Register (2021).

have not been made fully aware that they are members of EKRE, since inherited members have not been required to renew their membership or pay membership fees.

EKRE has built its territorial organisation largely upon the nation-wide network developed by ERL, but the party has made a considerable effort to re-activate and expand the local organisations—for instance, in his inauguration speech, the new party chairman Martin Helme emphasised the need to have a branch organisation in every single municipality by 2021 (Helme, 2020). In contrast to its predecessor, EKRE has also achieved a solid presence in larger cities. While ERL tried to penetrate the cities (e.g., the capital city Tallinn), it never succeeded, and the party even failed to field a full list of candidates there (Saarts, 2015). By contrast, EKRE has founded vibrant branches in all electoral districts of Tallinn. In the 2017 local elections, the party compiled the third-longest list of candidates for local elections in Tallinn and even got six representatives into the city council.

Regarding the party structure, EKRE initially adopted virtually all the organisational principles of ERL, but altered them somewhat afterward. Like all Estonian parties, EKRE's organisational structure consists of three levels: the local branch, the district, and central level. A branch organisation is formed on the basis of local election districts and needs at least five members to be formally founded. Branch organisations have a directly elected leadership consisting of a chair, vice-chairs, and a local leadership board (Party Charter of EKRE, 2016).

However, while EKRE initially adopted ERL's organisational model where districts overlapped with counties (Party Charter of EKRE, 2012), the structure was soon altered to a more functional model where party districts follow the lines used in national elections—leaving aside its foreign branches (Jakobson et al., 2020).

As with all Estonian parties, the highest decision-making body is the party congress—consisting of all members who typically meet once a year. In the meantime, decisions are taken by the board of trustees, which convenes monthly and consists of the chairmen of the districts (plus an extra member for every additional 300 members), 15 directly elected representatives, all the party MPs, group representatives, honorary chairs, and the central leadership of the party. In late 2020, the board of trustees consisted of 87 members, the majority of whom are representatives of districts.

Executive power is vested in the party leadership, which consists of the party chair and three vice-chairs. They are assisted by the party's leadership board, which is directly elected at the party congress and currently consists of 11 members.

As a proper mass party, EKRE has also established a wide array of intra-party groups and affiliated organisations, which attempt to strengthen the ideological devotion of the members. For instance, the party has an active youth organisation, a women's group, and a choir. Organisational activities are further supplemented with

local-level discussion clubs, regular festive events, and extensive online engagement platforms.

While the statutory rules regarding the formation and internal organisation of intra-party groups have been copied from ERL, the regulatory shell has been filled with “notably more ideological content” (Interview 11). For instance, the youth organisation, Blue Awakening (Sinine Äratust), plays an important ideological role by organising the annual Etnofutur conference, which welcomes identitarian and far right activists across the world as speakers, and organising the party's annual torch march on Estonian Independence Day, which usually attracts over a couple of thousand participants and involves political speeches by the party leaders. The aesthetics of the torch marches bear resemblance to the contemporary torch marches of various radical and far right groups in other countries, which have been linked to the historical torch marches in Nazi Germany and those in the US by the Ku Klux Klan (Korhonen, 2020). However, there has also been a long-lived tradition in the region in which student sororities organize their own torch processions. In case of EKRE the event also feeds into the sense of community among party members and gives an impression to the general public that the party is backed up by a broader popular movement (Interviews 5, 10).

The Blue Awakening is ideologically further to the right than the main party and openly associates with organisations such as the Swedish youth organisation Nordisk Ungdom, which have been characterised as Nazi and right-wing extremist. The organisation has also served as a breeding-ground for the new party elites. For instance, EKRE's representative in the European Parliament, Jaak Madison (belonging to the Identity and Democracy Group), has a background in the youth organisation.

The central and district levels also organise various discussion events—for instance, in late 2020, the party had a series of meetings between the party's headlining politicians and supporters titled “Dialogue With the People” (*Kahekõne Rahvaga*). Districts organise talks on various topics that “provoke people to think” (Interview 8), such as nationalism, democracy, humanism, etc. The party or its district organisations are also active in organising political rallies, e.g., in support of the Estonian language high school in the predominantly Russian-speaking town Kohtla-Järve, or commemoration ceremonies of the important events for Estonian independence and statehood.

The shift towards more profound ideological engagement has also been supported by the party's activities online. In 2015, party activists founded the “national conservative news and opinions portal” Uued Uudised (<https://uueduudised.ee>). It could be classified as politically alternative media (Kasekamp et al., 2019), but shows some features of hyperpartisan media. Stier et al. (2020, p. 431) define hyperpartisan media as sources that purport “to be news outlets while promoting a narrow and skewed political agenda without making

an effort toward a balanced representation of major political issues, events or political actors.” In the second half of 2020, Uued Uudised drew on average 41,125 unique visitors per week (Metrix Station, 2021, authors’ calculations for 1 June 2020–3 January 2021), which is among the largest in the Estonian alternative media scene. In comparison, another well-known outlet, conspiratorialist-spiritual Telegram received on average 19,232 unique visitors per week over the same period. However, it still remains modest in comparison to larger news outlets. The most widely visited news portal Delfi received over 1,1 million unique browser visits per week (Gemius, 2021).

Uued Uudised provides an important component for EKRE’s online presence, as it is the main reference source to EKRE’s numerous social media channels. The party has a notable social media presence. In addition to the party’s national Facebook page, most of its branch and district organisations have a Facebook page, often accompanied by a closed Facebook group “for coordinating activities with the more engaged activists” (Interview 6). One of the party’s goals has been to reinforce the communication capacities of the regions (Espenberg, 2018). In addition, the party also has a closed Facebook group, the EKRE’s Friends Club (EKRE Sõprade Klubi), which is a discussion board for people who are not necessarily members of the party, but align ideologically. The group was initiated in September 2014, i.e., when the Civil Partnership Act act emerged on the political agenda. At the end of 2020, the group had around 7500 members and a notably active membership with around 40 posts daily. At the time of writing, EKRE’s online and social media presence exceeded other parties in Estonia (see Figure 2).

Another important communication tool for consolidating the party’s support base and achieving a wider

public resonance has been the weekly radio show *Räägime Asjast* (which broadly translates to “let’s talk about the important thing”) on a relatively small radio channel owned by a prominent member of the party, TRE Radio. The show features the Helmes’ father-son duo analysing weekly political events. When EKRE was in government, the Helmes utterances during this show generated several scandals and controversies, some of which reached even the international arena. For instance, Mart Helme’s characterization of the Finnish prime minister as a “sales girl” (“Estonian minister under fire,” 2019) or questioning the legitimacy of Joe Biden’s presidency in the US (O’Grady, 2020).

As demonstrated above, EKRE presents numerous clear characteristics of mass party organisation: a vibrant and growing membership, a significant activist core, an extensive party organisation, and strong impetus to ideology. While EKRE’s leaders have never considered the development of an extensive mass party type of organisation as a priority on its own, it could be seen as a pure necessity and a pragmatic choice. First, a mass party type organisation has been a way to increase the party’s public legitimacy. Many see EKRE as a fringe party with an extreme ideology, and so there has been an urgent need to demonstrate that the party has a much wider public support and could be considered a true “people’s party.” The “people’s party” image is also extremely important considering the party’s populist ideology. Second, party membership numbers are relatively high in Estonia (one of the highest in Central and Eastern Europe; see Biezen et al., 2012). Since the 2000s, there has been a constant competition between the Estonian parties over membership size. Thus, EKRE’s leadership, whose ambition has been to become the largest party in Estonia and to obtain the prime minister-ship (Helme, 2020), could not afford to ignore that race

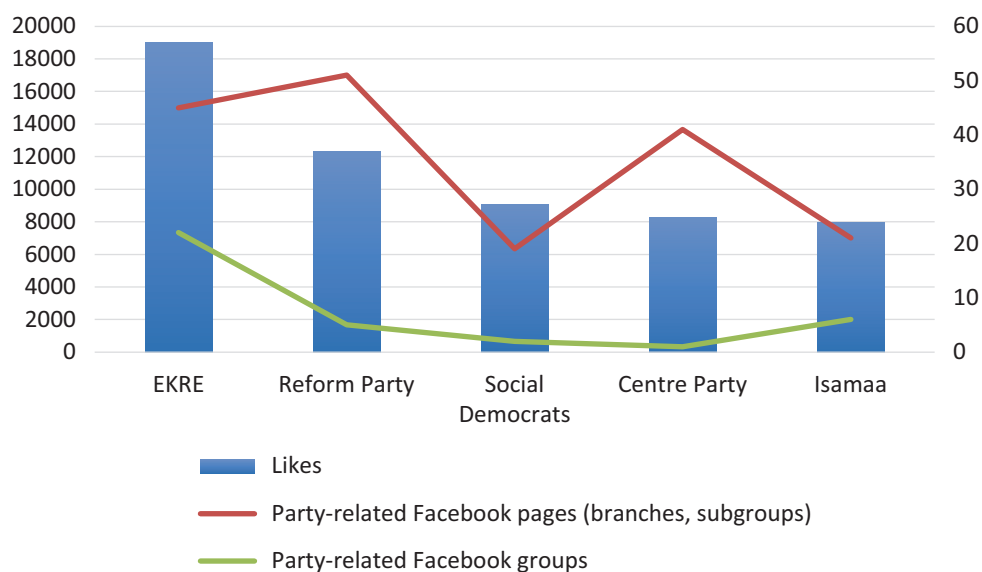


Figure 2. Parties’ official Facebook page likes and number of party-related Facebook pages and groups on 12 March, 2021.

and neglect organisation-building. Finally, one has to consider the party's history and the socio-demographic profile of its supporters. Lower-income groups are over-represented in EKRE's support base: They are usually middle-aged and often live in rural districts and smaller towns (Trumm, 2018). Given these characteristics, the traditional "party on the ground" mobilisation strategies would work much better with them than a thin party organisation mostly visible and active online.

#### 4. Centralisation of Power and Internal Democracy in EKRE

In many ways, EKRE's image corresponds to a typical populist party in terms of its leadership (see, e.g., Heinisch & Mazzoleni, 2016). Following Eatwell's (2018) theory on the charismatic leadership of PRRPs, it appears that Mart Helme possesses many traits of a charismatic leader: radical mission, personal presence, closeness to the people (symbiotic hierarchy), and Manichean demonization of its opponents. During his time as party chairman, Mart Helme frequently appealed to the masses and gained media attention with colourful assertions. Furthermore, the hereditary element witnessed in some PRRPs (Heinisch & Mazzoleni, 2016) is evident also in the case of EKRE, as the chairman position passed from father Mart Helme to son Martin Helme in an uncontested leadership election at a snap Party Congress in the summer of 2020. Previously Martin Helme was one of the 11 members of the party's leadership board (the positions of vice-chairmen were reserved for other prominent party members), but after the election, father Mart Helme became one of the three vice-chairmen. Furthermore, Mart Helme's wife Helle-Moonika Helme has been an important spokesperson for the party, a member of the party's leadership board, and vice-chairman of the party's parliamentary faction since 2021. The family-centred leadership model described earlier is unusual even among other PRRPs in the Baltic states (Wierenga, 2019).

The Helmes alone do not constitute the party's leadership as such, but play a major strategic role inside the party. The Helmes have adopted the journalistic derogatory "two-men-backroom" (consisting of Martin and Mart Helme) as a self-legitimizing discourse: they acknowledge that the father-son-tandem works closely together and have framed their close cooperation as something highly beneficial to the party (Helme, 2020). The party also depicts the passing of the leadership position from father to son in a positive sense: namely, as a means to safeguard continuity.

Our interviews reveal that, unlike public performance, where leadership plays a very important role, the decision-making power within the party is more dispersed. While the Helmes still feature most prominently in public, there are also other actors in the party, who can influence the internal decision-making process. Consequently, there are different power-centres within

the party beyond the "two-men-backroom": the directly elected vice-chairmen, the board of trustees, and the leadership board, in particular, have become the major nerve-centres of the party (Interviews 11, 12). Some of these venues are more institutionalised, while others can influence decisions more on an ad hoc basis. For instance, one of the interviewees described the ad hoc consultations in the leadership board: When Mart Helme's scandalous statements caused a media storm, chairperson Martin Helme discussed possible response strategies (Interview 8).

First, EKRE has developed a significant infrastructure for internal democracy. Unlike other Estonian parties which generally tend to re-elect the leadership every two or three years (Aylott, 2014), EKRE re-elects its representative and executive bodies annually. Besides the annually re-elected party chairman and vice-chairmen, the party also has an elected leadership board and a board of trustees, consisting of directly elected and locally assigned members, which issues regular political statements and is in charge of approving decisions between party congresses. However, the leadership board, in particular, is generally considered the major nerve-centre of the party and the body for everyday strategic decision-making (Interviews 10, 12).

Unlike the party chairman elections, which have thus far (2012–2020) been uncompetitive, there has been more competition and representative alternation both on the leadership board as well as the board of trustees. Furthermore, annual re-elections are also held in the branch and district organisations.

Members can raise issues through a hierarchical process by bringing the issue from the local branch level to the district level leadership, which plays a critical role in moving these issues onto the agenda of the board of trustees, from where input is given to the leadership board. While this mechanism was underlined in several interviews, there is no automatic guarantee that every issue raised reaches to the party leadership: It all depends on the nature of the proposal, context, etc. The district level organisations also legitimise the national level political process, as the MPs elected from the district frequent the district organisation meetings and bring news from the legislative arena.

EKRE has also developed participatory instruments for allowing grassroots level initiatives within the party. For instance, 1/10 of the party members can initiate party charter amendments provided that they represent more than one district. The district assemblies and board of trustees are obliged to discuss the proposal before it is voted on by the party congress (2/3 support is required for acceptance).

The branch and district level organisations also have notable control over the candidate selection process. The local election candidate lists are drawn up by the branch organisations and districts decide most of the candidates for their electoral district in the general election. The leadership board can amend lists by only 1/5

before the party congress approves the list of candidates. However, for almost all elections, there has been at least one fallout between the local and central leaderships over top positions in electoral lists. For instance, when the central leadership tried to replace the top candidate for elections in Tartu city, it resulted in a prolonged conflict within the local party branch, re-election of the local branch chairman, and forcing the former chairman to leave the party (Saar, 2020). Thus, critics have seen the candidate selection procedure and frequent intra-party elections as an instrument that helps leaders keep unruly local elites in check.

Electoral manifestos are compiled by a special committee summoned before every election for drafting the party manifesto. All party members are free to send their proposals and ideas to the committee. Our interviews indicate that the committee is a relatively autonomous body, and although the party leadership can later make some amendments to the draft manifesto, this right is not excessively used. The manifesto is later approved by the party congress.

However, there are also several non-institutionalised arenas through which members and even supporters have been able to influence the intra-party decision-making processes. For instance, one of the interviewees described that when Mart Helme served as minister of the interior and got involved in a serious political scandal, the chairman of the party, Martin Helme turned to the selected members of the leadership board and board of trustees to discuss the situation and political strategies. Other interviewees have also mentioned instances where the Helmes have changed political tack due to internal discussions in the party regarding the appointments of government ministers or select policy positions. For instance, regarding forestry policy, EKRE initially supported a more pro-industry policy, but when a notable number of members yearned for a more environmentalist position, the party agenda also shifted. However, it is important to point out that such conflicts have not had an impact on the core issues of the party.

The party leadership is also rather receptive to the members' and sympathisers' feedback online, i.e., through the EKRE's Friends Club Facebook group as well as via personal accounts. For instance, in 2018, the well-known singer Siiri Sisask was about to join the party ranks and run as a candidate on the invitation of the party leadership. When she revealed that she personally held rather liberal views on same-sex couples, the discussions on EKRE's Friends Club Facebook discussion board grew ballistic. Eventually, the leadership, which was willing to ignore this fact, revised their position, and Sisask renounced her candidacy.

Occasionally ordinary party members have had a chance to express their opinion even with regard to more strategic matters. One of our interviewees described:

Since EKRE became a government party, the regular online surveys started to appear in the [elec-

tronic] mailing list of party members. As far as I know, the feedback collected was often taken into account while making decisions in the government. (Interview 12)

Thus, EKRE features both institutionalised and functioning intra-party democracy arenas as well as non-institutionalised channels through which they keep their supporters engaged. While in principle these channels can also be used for other purposes—e.g., the frequent elections can also be used for grooming new dynamic elite for the party as well as co-opting dissenting local elites—it is still fair to say that EKRE's internal engagement mechanisms are fairly well-developed in comparison with some other Estonian parties (see Aylott, 2014). As one of our interviewees from the leadership board explained the evolution of power concentration in EKRE: "It is inevitable that the party's public face is their leaders....When the party was founded, the leader was playing a prominent role in decision making, indeed, but nowadays there are more extensive and inclusive discussions within the party" (Interview 10).

When comparing the centralisation of power and intra-party democracy in EKRE with its predecessor (ERL), one can find notable path-dependency: Both are fairly leader-centred parties with a leaning towards the diffused leadership model (Jakobson et al., 2020; Saarts, 2015). However, ERL provided fewer arenas for an active engagement for its members: There were less frequent intra-party elections, fewer active affiliated organisations, and the internet engagement platforms were relatively underdeveloped, resulting in a less vibrant intra-party democracy. Yet, as with the mass party type structure in general, the responsiveness of the elites and the frequent elections can be associated with the party's age, the need to maintain a dynamic activist core, and upholding the party's public image.

## 5. Conclusion

The study demonstrates that EKRE evokes all the features of a mass party type organisation: It has a relatively large membership-based organisation that is rapidly expanding, a strong rootedness on the ground supported by an extensive network of local party branches and affiliated organisations, and the party has a solid core of devoted activists who rely on a coherent and well-articulated ideology for constructing their distinctive collective identity. Some of these features are inherited, which has made building up a mass party type organisation and legitimising EKRE as a major player notably easier than it might otherwise have been. Yet, in many respects, EKRE is an even more typical mass party than its predecessor, particularly due to its strong ideological core and the ability to inspire ideological devotion among its members. Thus, the case of EKRE conforms with Arter's (2012) observation that "successor parties" never become the replicas of their predecessors, but

experience a substantial transformation and develop new qualities of their own.

EKRE has also developed an extensive online ecosystem for promoting its ideology and engaging its members, and has been more successful at it than any other party in contemporary Estonia. While the public image of the party is quite leader-centred, the mechanisms for members' engagement have become increasingly important—even to a larger extent than other electorally significant Estonian parties which tend to cultivate more managerialist styles. Therefore, when it comes to power-centralisation EKRE is not considerably more centralised than many other Estonian parties (see Aylott, 2014). However, evidence of internal democracy is still rather contradictory. While the leadership is re-elected annually and the vice-chairs change over time, the elections of party chairs tend to be uncontested. The same is evident at the local level: Frequent local level elections and candidate selection procedures are, on one hand, an indicator of internal democracy, but on the other hand can also be used to keep dissenting activists in check. Nevertheless, the open and participatory system has helped the party to build a vibrant and geographically extensive network of activists and local elites who are well-informed about the central level decision-making and have a channel for promoting issues relevant for them.

There is no doubt that EKRE was in an advantageous position in being able to take over the empty shell of its predecessor (ERL), which saved the party from having to build a mass party organisation from scratch. However, the party put great effort into further developing and expanding the party organisation and making it even more compatible with the mass party type. Thus, adopting the mass party structure is not just a *sui generis* move, but a deliberate strategy into which the organisation has invested.

In the previous sections, we highlighted three major reasons why EKRE adopted the mass party type of organisation: (a) an aspiration to gain wider societal and political legitimacy as a true “people’s party” (the “populist argument”), (b) the socio-demographic profile of their electorate (the voters belonging to the lower classes and older generations living predominately outside of big cities), and (c) competition with other parties which had already developed extensive membership-based party organisations. While the first reason could be derived from PRRP ideology (at least to some extent), the second is mainly based on pragmatic considerations; the third reason purely relates to the local political context. In Estonia, where almost all the major parties have made a considerable effort to increase their membership and extend the geographical scope of their party organisations (see Tavits, 2013), any party with a serious ambition to become a significant actor in Estonian politics (and EKRE definitely has that ambition) had to act in a similar fashion. In short, the specific political circumstances and necessities largely favoured a more considerable organisation-building effort, and it should be noted

that EKRE surpassed the other parties in developing a well-articulated ideology and devoted activist core.

Finally, the mass party type organisation is aligned with EKRE's ambition to be “the most ideological party” in Estonia. Such a goal is also facilitated by growing societal demand in Estonia for a party espousing a nationalist and socially conservative ideology. Hence, not only the ideological devotion of its members, but also the fact that EKRE is directly or indirectly supported by a wider national-conservative social movement made it easier for the party to expand and engage with potential supporters—in short, to adopt the mass party model.

In conclusion, EKRE serves as a good example of a relatively new PRRP with a mass party structure, that also puts considerable effort into party institutionalisation and nurturing new party elites. It facilitates frequent internal elections which attest to a significant degree of internal democracy for a PRRP. Interestingly, the case of EKRE demonstrates that charismatic leadership should not be seen as an indicator of an under-institutionalised and personalistic power vehicle. Rather, charismatic leadership and even some hereditary features can coexist with an articulate mass party structure. EKRE, like many other PRRPs, has a clear preference for hierarchy over deliberation, but they have institutionalised a system where frequent elections facilitate moderate diversification of party elites and encourage the engagement of local ones.

### Acknowledgments

First and foremost, we are grateful to our interviewees who allowed us to get a deeper glimpse into the EKRE's party organization and its institutional practices. We are also thankful to the anonymous reviewers who made very constructive suggestions and the editors of the current thematic issue, Stijn van Kessel and Daniele Albertazzi, who provided very useful feedback and made many insightful comments on the various drafts of this article. This research has been supported by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program under Grant Agreement No. 857366.

### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

### Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

### References

- Albertazzi, D. (2016). Going, going, ... not quite gone yet? Bossi's Lega and the survival of the mass party. *Contemporary Italian Politics*, 8(2), 115–130.
- Albertazzi, D., & van Kessel, S. (2021). Right-wing populist

- party organisation across Europe: The survival of the mass-party? Introduction to the thematic issue. *Politics and Governance*, 9(4), 224–227.
- Arter, D. (2012). Analysing ‘successor parties’: The case of the True Finns. *West European Politics*, 35(4), 803–825.
- Auers, D., & Kasekamp, A. (2013). Comparing radical-right populism in Estonia and Latvia. In R. Wodak, M. KhosraviNik, & B. Mral (Eds.), *Right-wing populism in Europe. Politics and discourse* (pp. 235–248). Bloomsbury Academic.
- Auers, D., & Kasekamp, A. (2015). The impact of radical right parties in the Baltic states. In M. Minkenberg (Ed.), *Transforming the transformation? The East European radical right in the political process* (pp. 137–153). Routledge.
- Aylott, N. (2014). A question of priorities: Candidate selection in Estonian political parties. *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 45(3), 321–344.
- Biezen, I. v., Mair, P., & Poguntke, T. (2012). Going, going,... gone? The decline of party membership in contemporary Europe. *European Journal of Political Research*, 51(1), 24–56.
- Braghiroli, S., & Petsinis, V. (2019). Between party-systems and identity-politics: The populist and radical right in Estonia and Latvia. *European Politics and Society*, 20(4), 431–449.
- Eatwell, R. (2018). Charisma and the radical right. In J. Rydgren (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of the radical right* (pp. 251–268). Oxford University Press.
- Espenberg, U. (2018). *Oma meedia rajamine oli ainuõige otsus* [The decision to establish our own media outlets was the right one]. EKRE. <https://ekre.ee/urmas-espenberg-ekre-kongressil-oma-meedia-rajamine-oli-ainuõige-otsus>
- Estonian e-Business Register. (2021). *Political parties membership lists*. <https://ariregister.rik.ee/index?lang=eng>
- Estonian minister under fire after mocking Finnish PM as ‘sales girl.’ (2019, December 17). *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/dec/17/estonia-minister-who-mocked-finland-pm-survives-confidence-vote-sanna-marin-mart-helme>
- Estonian National Electoral Committee. (2021). *Valimised* [Elections in Estonia]. <https://www.valimised.ee/en>
- Gemius. (2021). Delfi audience overview by unique browsers. <https://rating.gemius.com/ee/overview>
- Heinisch, R., & Mazzoleni, O. (Eds.). (2016). *Understanding populist party organisation. The radical right in Western Europe*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Helme, M. (2020, July 4). *Martin Helme: Ma tahan, et Eesti oleks nagu Läänemere Šveits* [Martin Helme: I want Estonia to be like Switzerland in the Baltic Sea] [Speech transcript]. ERR Uudised. <https://www.err.ee/1109358/martin-helme-ma-tahan-et-estii-oleks-nagu-laanemere-sveits>
- Jakobson, M.-L., & Kalev, L. (2020). COVID-19 crisis and labor migration policy: A perspective from Estonia. *Frontiers in Political Science*, 2. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2020.595407>
- Jakobson, M.-L., Saarts, T., & Kalev, L. (2020). Radical right across borders? The case of EKRE’s Finnish branch. In T. Kernalegenn & É. van Haute (Eds.), *Political parties abroad. A new arena for citizenship?* (pp. 21–38). Routledge.
- Kasekamp, A., Madisson, M.-L., & Wierenga, L. (2019). Discursive opportunities for the Estonian populist radical right in a digital society. *Problems of Post-Communism*, 66(1), 47–58.
- Korhonen, K. (2020). Politics of fire: The commemorative torch rally 612 of the Finnish radical right. *European Politics and Society*, 21(3), 307–322.
- Kund, O. (2012, February 20). Koitla: Me ei hakka IRLiga konkureerima [Koitla: We will not compete with the IRL]. *Postimees*. <https://www.postimees.ee/745696/koitla-me-ei-hakka-irliga-konkureerima>
- Kuusik accused of episode of physical abuse. (2019, July 7). *The Baltic Times*. [https://www.baltictimes.com/kuusik\\_accused\\_of\\_episode\\_of\\_physical\\_abuse](https://www.baltictimes.com/kuusik_accused_of_episode_of_physical_abuse)
- Metrix Station. (2021). *Statistics*. <https://metrix.station.ee>
- Mölder, M. (2020). Estonia: Political developments and data in 2019. *European Journal of Political Research Political Data Yearbook*, 59(1), 119–129.
- Mudde, C. (2016). *The populist radical right: A reader*. Routledge.
- O’Grady, S. (2020, November 9). Estonian cabinet minister to resign after calling Biden corrupt, saying Trump would emerge as election winner. *The Washington Post*. <https://washingtonpost.com/world/2020/11/09/estonia-trump-election-mart-helme>
- Panebianco, A. (1988). *Political parties: Organization and power*. Cambridge University Press.
- Party Charter of EKRE. (2012). *EKRE põhikiri* [Party charter of EKRE].
- Party Charter of EKRE. (2016). *EKRE põhikiri* [Party charter of EKRE]. <https://www.ekre.ee/pohikiri>
- Petsinis, V. (2019). Identity politics and right-wing populism in Estonia: The case of EKRE. *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 25(2), 211–230.
- Saar, J. (2020, September 2). EKREst välja heidetud linnavolinik: Mart Helme vihkab Tartut [The city councillor expelled from EKRE: Mart Helme hates Tartu]. *Tartu Postimees*. <https://tartu.postimees.ee/7052406/ekrest-valja-heidetud-linnavolinik-mart-helme-vihkab-tartut>
- Saarts, T. (2015). Persistence and decline of political parties: The case of Estonia. *East European Politics*, 31(2), 208–228.
- Stier, S., Kirkizh, N., Froio, C., & Schroeder, R. (2020). Populist attitudes and selective exposure to online news: A cross-country analysis combining web tracking and surveys. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 25(3), 426–446.
- Tavits, M. (2013). *Post-communist democracies and party*



organization. Cambridge University Press.  
Toomla, R. (2011). *Eesti erakonnad 2000–2010* [Estonian parties 2000–2010]. Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus.  
Trumm, S. (2018). The ‘new’ wave of populist right-wing parties in Central and Eastern Europe: Explaining electoral support for the Conservative People’s Party

of Estonia. *Representation*, 54(4), 331–347.  
Wierenga, L. (2019). Bauska’s chairmen: Party leadership and Twitter engagement in Estonian and Latvian populist far-right parties. *Polish Political Science Review*, 7(1), 138–154.

### About the Authors



**Tõnis Saarts** is an associate professor of comparative Politics at Tallinn University. His research interests include political parties, party systems, electoral cleavages, and populism in Central and Eastern Europe and the Baltic States. He has recently published in *East European Politics*, *Problems of Post-Communism*, and *European Politics and Society*. He has also authored several book chapters in the edited volumes and handbooks published by Routledge and Palgrave Macmillan.



**Mari-Liis Jakobson** is an associate professor of political sociology at Tallinn University. Her research focuses primarily on migrant political transnationalism, populism, and transnational political parties. Her more recent publications include chapters in edited volumes published by Springer, Palgrave, and Routledge, and journal articles in *Europe-Asia Studies*, *Comparative Migration Studies*, and *Frontiers in Political Science*.



**Leif Kalev** is a professor of state and citizenship theory at Tallinn University. His research interests include citizenship, the state as a political community and its modes of governance, democracy, globalisation, transnationalisation, and political parties. His more recent publications include an edited special issue in *Acta Politica Estica* and articles in the *International Journal of Public Policy*, *Social Science*, and *Comparative Migration Studies*. He has also published with Springer, Peter Lang, and Routledge.

Editorial

## Right-Wing Populist Party Organisation Across Europe: The Survival of the Mass-Party? Conclusion to the Thematic Issue

Stijn van Kessel<sup>1</sup> and Daniele Albertazzi<sup>2,\*</sup><sup>1</sup> School of Politics and International Relations, Queen Mary University of London, UK; E-Mail: [s.vankessel@qmul.ac.uk](mailto:s.vankessel@qmul.ac.uk)<sup>2</sup> Department of Politics, University of Surrey, UK; E-Mail: [d.albertazzi@surrey.ac.uk](mailto:d.albertazzi@surrey.ac.uk)

\* Corresponding author

Submitted: 27 October 2021 | Published: 24 November 2021

### Abstract

This article provides a comparative conclusion to the thematic issue on the organisational characteristics of 12 right-wing populist parties (RWPPs) across Europe. We observe that many RWPPs—at least partially—adopt features of the mass party model. This finding illustrates the ideological aspects behind organisational choices: For populist parties, in particular, it is important to signal societal rootedness and “closeness to the people.” It furthermore challenges the idea that there is a one-way teleological movement towards more lean, electoral-professional kinds of party organisation. At the same time, the case studies clearly illustrate that RWPP leaders and executives continue to exercise great power over their members, who are essentially offered “participation without power.”

### Keywords

mass party; party membership; party organisation; populism; radical right

### Issue

This editorial is part of the issue “Right-Wing Populist Party Organisation Across Europe: The Survival of the Mass-Party?” edited by Daniele Albertazzi (University of Surrey, UK) and Stijn van Kessel (Queen Mary University of London, UK).

© 2021 by the authors; licensee Cogitatio (Lisbon, Portugal). This editorial is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

### 1. Introduction

By means of 12 case studies, this thematic issue has analysed how right-wing populist parties (RWPPs) across Europe organise themselves. In light of recent research on the importance of large and rooted party organisations for RWPP survival and success (Art, 2011; Heinisch & Mazzoleni, 2016), we sought to interrogate the still-prevailing assumption that these parties rely on charismatic leadership to survive and thrive (e.g., Eatwell, 2018). More specifically, each contribution assessed whether individual RWPPs showed characteristics congruent with the “mass party” organisational model. In the introductory article (Albertazzi & van Kessel, 2021), we outlined three key dimensions of the mass party: (a) the drive to recruit a large activist membership as a way to reach out to the public through canvassing, campaigning and other means; (b) rootedness on the ground and the provision of a variety of activities to members;

and (c) the preservation of “collective identities through ideology” (Panebianco, 1988, p. 268), by creating closed political communities of activists, promoting social integration among them, and actively shaping their interpretations of political developments (Albertazzi, 2016). We also emphasised that *actual* membership numbers are not a defining criterion.

In the context of declining party membership and perceived elite disengagement from grassroots politics, several scholars have announced the demise of the mass party model and a shift towards, for instance, “catch-all” (Kirchheimer, 1966) and “cartel” (Katz & Mair, 1995) parties. However, the adoption of mass party characteristics by several RWPPs, in particular, suggests that it may be too soon to herald the end of this party model. For these parties, the creation and fostering of closed communities of political activists can in fact lend credence to their populist claim that they are of, and for, ordinary people, and able to understand their needs and speak on their behalf.

To be clear, not all RWPPs have chosen to adopt the mass party model—there are obvious examples of leader-centred and light-weight party organisations amongst this type of party, such as the Dutch radical right *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (PVV, Freedom Party) and the ideologically more moderate parties of Silvio Berlusconi in Italy and Andrej Babiš in the Czech Republic. Rather than assuming that all cases covered in this thematic issue are mass parties a priori, the contributors have assessed the extent to which, and how, a broad variety of RWPPs have invested in mass party structures. Bearing in mind that mass parties offer participation to members, but not necessarily meaningful influence (Duverger, 1951; Michels, 1962), the contributions also examined whether the selected RWPPs remained centralised in terms of their decision-making procedures, and whether opportunities were provided to members to shape their parties' direction and ideology. This concluding article highlights the key comparative findings from the 12 preceding articles.

## 2. The Survival of the Mass Party Amongst Right-Wing Populist Parties?

As our 12 case studies have indicated, a considerable number of RWPPs defy the common wisdom that such parties are organisationally light-weight and purely leader-centred. In many cases, RWPPs maintain an extensive structure with an institutionalised local presence, actively aiming to develop a grassroots following which is tied to the party by means of organised party activities. Several well-established RWPPs in Western Europe conform to the definition of the mass party, including the *Lega per Salvini Premier* (LSP, League for Salvini Premier) in Italy, the *Vlaams Belang* (VB, Flemish Interest) in Belgium, the *Schweizerische Volkspartei/Union Démocratique du Centre* (SVP/UDC, Swiss People's Party) in Switzerland, and the *Perussuomalaiset* (PS, the Finns Party) in Finland (Favero, 2021; Hatakka, 2021; Sijstermans, 2021; Zulianello, 2021). Whilst some of these parties may rely on highly personalised campaigns centred on the leader—Salvini's League being a particularly good example—they maintain a high degree of organisational articulation, as well as vertical linkages to regional and local areas.

Some newer entrants in Western Europe are also found to defy received wisdom and adopt at least some characteristics of the mass party model. The *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD, Alternative for Germany), for example, has lacked a single "charismatic" leader, and developed regional and local party branches across the country, as well as links with radical and extreme right social movement groups and online spheres (Heinze & Weisskircher, 2021). The absence of a dominant leader and the presence of territorial penetration are also visible in the case of *Vox* in Spain. Even though organisational development and member recruitment remain geographically uneven, local and provincial branches are

connected to the central level through vertical links (Barrio et al., 2021).

We also observe several RWPPs in Central and Eastern Europe investing in mass party structures or, at least, seeking to attain a "presence on the ground" and connecting with grassroots supporters. This is notable given the generally low levels of party membership and partisan alignment in post-communist party systems (van Biezen et al., 2012). Building on the foundation of a predecessor party, the *Eesti Konservatiivne Rahvaerakond* (EKRE, Estonian Conservative People's Party) has made efforts to re-activate and expand its local organisation, contributing to it being the fastest-growing Estonian party in terms of its membership (Saarts et al., 2021). According to the analysis of Petar Bankov, Sergiu Gherghina and Nanuli Silagadze (Bankov et al., 2021), the *VMRO-Balgarsko Natsionalno Dvizhenie* (VMRO-BND, IMRO—Bulgarian National Movement) has also made conscious efforts to maintain strong links with local communities through activities that give it public visibility. Whilst formal membership numbers remain low and branch development limited, informal affiliations with a variety of like-minded far right and nationalist organisations enable the party to organise street actions, reach out to grassroots sympathisers, and recruit nominally independent candidates for public office. This more "fluid" connection with allied sub-cultures, the authors note, is quite typical of the radical right in Central and Eastern Europe, and not quite in line with the more formalised relationships in mass parties. In their contribution on the Hungarian case, Rudolf Metz and Réka Várnagy similarly note the role of informal networks. Describing the ideological and organisational transformation of *Fidesz-Magyar Polgári Szövetség* (FIDESZ, Fidesz-Hungarian Civic Alliance) in Hungary, they argue that the party has built a "hybrid" party organisation, "which demonstrates selected characteristics of mass parties, personal parties, movement parties, and even cartel parties" (Metz & Várnagy, 2021, p. 318). Whilst not a typical example of a mass party, FIDESZ has aimed to strengthen its mobilisation capacity and collective identity-building in an attempt to take root in civil society, whilst simultaneously occupying the state.

To be clear, the contributions in this thematic issue do not point to a general and full-fledged revival of the mass party model across *all* RWPPs. This is illustrated by the above examples, but also by several other articles. In some cases the adoption of mass party characteristics remains partial and half-hearted, and largely driven by a desire to signal a "closeness to the people." Bartek Pytlas observes how the commitment of *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (PiS, Law and Justice) to organisational renewal and forging linkages with its supporter base has been largely rhetorical; the party "put little effort into actually recruiting a large number of engaged party members or fostering their social rootedness" (Pytlas, 2021, p. 341). In Slovakia, the efforts of the *Slovenská Národná Strana* (SNS, The Slovak

National Party) to socialise members remained very limited, too, irrespective of a recent rise in membership numbers. Tim Haughton, Marek Rybář and Kevin Deegan-Krause conclude that “the party may have been more mass-like than many of the newer parties in Slovakia, but it fell well short of the mass party model” (Haughton et al., 2021, p. 330). In the Netherlands, the Forum voor Democratie (FvD, Forum for Democracy) appeared to divert from the extremely leader-centred organisational model of the longer-established PVV of Geert Wilders by seeking to build a large membership (de Jonge, 2021). Léonie de Jonge nevertheless observes that the party remained organisationally lightweight. Furthermore, after a period of extended organisational turmoil and defections, the FvD became increasingly dominated by its leader, Thierry Baudet, whilst efforts to engage and socialise members remained limited and selective.

What appears important in these latter parties’ organisational choices is the desire to avoid complicating the management and internal structure of the party. Pytlas (2021) argues that, in the case of PiS, central and mid-level party leaders likely fear the undermining of existing power structures and the destabilising effects of letting in engaged members. Similarly, de Jonge (2021) notes that in the Netherlands the erstwhile architect of FvD’s organisation, Henk Otten, was keen to limit the influence of partisan activists in order to prevent the internal instability that plagued the Dutch right-wing populist predecessor Lijst Pim Fortuyn (LPF, List Pim Fortuyn). It is obvious that some RWPPs, like other parties, prefer to adopt an “atomistic conception of party membership” (Katz & Mair, 1995, p. 21) whereby supporters are affiliated directly with the central party, avoiding the potentially destabilising influence of intermediary subnational branches with unruly local leaders and activists.

Yet it is clear that a considerable number of RWPPs do build extensive party organisations and invest resources and time in attracting new members, and socialising existing ones. These parties consider the advantages of active membership: Members and sympathisers provide loyal support in elections and can deliver practical benefits, such as “feet on the ground” for election campaigns (Favero, 2021; Hatakka, 2021; Sijstermans, 2021; Zulianello, 2021). Yet at least as important appears to be the desire to gain an aura of authenticity and respectability. Even in cases where actual membership numbers remain low, like in the case of the Estonian EKRE, parties are keen to convey an image of being rooted in society and representing the ordinary “forgotten” people in local communities.

It is noteworthy that traditional means of interaction and communication remain important for these parties. Recruitment often happens through canvassing and street stalls. Parties organise in-person events for their members, such as political discussion meetings with invited speakers, training sessions on the eve of election campaigns, but also more informal social

events (yearly festive meals, excursions, etc.) meant to strengthen cohesion and trust amongst members. Tõnis Saarts, Mari-Liis Jakobson, and Leif Kalev, for instance, describe how EKRE has active youth and women groups, as well as a choir (Saarts et al., 2021). As Adrian Favero and Judith Sijstermans observe in their case studies of Switzerland and Belgium, respectively, community building also involves the identification of “enemies,” such as media organisations and established (left-wing) political parties (Favero, 2021; Sijstermans, 2021). The perception of being part of an ignored or ostracised community tends to feed an “us” versus “them” mentality that can strengthen intra-party cohesiveness.

In present-day mass parties, social media also tend to play an important role. Niko Hatakka, for instance, observes how the PS has a substantial online network of activists and sympathisers which is instrumental in increasing the party’s societal presence (Hatakka, 2021). There are however also risks associated with this virtual form of mobilisation, in the sense that it creates more scope for organisational and ideological dissonance. In other cases, the internet also appears to play a vital role in the building of a “modern mass party.” The VB is shown to extend its grassroots base beyond its formal membership via digital tools such as Facebook and mobile apps (Sijstermans, 2021), confirming the evolving nature of party membership (Scarrow, 2015). Mattia Zulianello similarly observes that continuous interaction between digital and physical activism allows the Italian League to nurture an image as a party firmly rooted in society (Zulianello, 2021). In the Spanish and Estonian cases, too, online platforms and communication have been instrumental to engaging, mobilising, and socialising activists and supporters (Barrio et al., 2021; Saarts et al., 2021). With respect to the German case, Anna-Sophie Heinze and Manès Weisskircher note the AfD’s cooperation with “alternative media” platforms that have flourished in the German-speaking online sphere (Heinze & Weisskircher, 2021). Not all RWPPs are equally tech-savvy, however; the SVP’s digital communication, for instance, is mainly top-down and geared at conveying ideological messages instead of mobilising activists (Favero, 2021).

Altogether, the case studies suggest that many RWPPs see value in creating extensive organisational structures and building online and offline communities of loyal party members or more loosely affiliated adherents. As will become clear in the next section, however, adherence to the mass party model—whether wholly, partially, or rhetorically—does not imply giving members a meaningful voice in intra-party affairs.

### 3. Centralisation of Power in RWPPs

Even though a considerable number of RWPPs involve members in party activities and facilitate (online) platforms for discussion and interaction, the parties analysed in this thematic issue tend to be highly centralised,

offering few opportunities to their members to influence key decisions about internal governance, choice of candidates, and ideological direction. Thus, these parties' strategies are typically dominated by their leader alongside a restricted group of representatives serving in the party executive. Whilst not all RWPPs have an unmistakable "charismatic" leader or a powerful chair operating behind the scenes—examples include the AfD and Vox—the central leadership is usually able to instruct and guide those at lower levels, and if need be to enforce internal discipline. In some cases, such as the Polish PiS, leadership is practically absolutist, whereby few key decisions are taken without the knowledge and consent of the chair, Jarosław Kaczyński (Pytlas, 2021).

Our cases do reveal some contextual idiosyncrasies. In the case of Spain, as Astrid Barrio, Sonia Alonso and Bonnie Field observe, power centralisation within the party is not only borne out of organisational and operational needs, but also in line with Vox's Spanish nationalist and state centralist ideology (Barrio et al., 2021). Efforts to centralise power inside the party have, however, provoked serious internal disputes and factionalism—something that has also happened in the case of the Dutch FvD. Conversely, in the case of the SVP/UDC, power centralisation is mitigated by the features of the Swiss political culture and federal system of government (Favero, 2021). The party maintains a highly centralised party apparatus at the national level, where a professionalised leadership has the ability to shape its ideology and key messages, but cantonal and local branches retain some degree of autonomy due to the highly decentralised political system.

Power centralisation in RWPPs almost automatically implies that the ability of ordinary members to influence party decisions tends to be limited. Representatives' informal responsiveness to local activists may in some cases give ordinary members more influence than official party rules suggest. Yet in almost all cases, levels of internal democracy tend to be low—this is certainly no different in the case of the Dutch Forum for Democracy, whose name therefore rings somewhat ironic (de Jonge, 2021). What is more, assemblies on which members are represented may formally be the supreme party organs, but in practice tend to have very few opportunities to affect the party's strategy or to shape its key policies. As the case of SNS illustrates particularly well, formal member prerogatives in the areas of policy formulation and candidate selection may prove rather meaningless in practice (Haughton et al., 2021). Across the cases, leadership elections are generally held, but these often have the character of a confirmatory vote rather than a genuine contest.

There is nevertheless some variation between the cases as well as across time. FIDESZ is a particularly notable case; Metz and Várnagy (2021) describe how it started out as an activist organisation adhering to principles of participatory democracy. Its authoritarian ideological turn and "capture" of the state in more recent

years was accompanied by the dwindling of internal democracy, increased personalisation, and power concentration in the hands of Viktor Orbán and a small party elite in public office.

Amongst the cases in this thematic issue, EKRE, the PS, and the AfD appear to be the parties with currently the most developed, albeit still highly imperfect, infrastructures for internal democracy. Whilst EKRE displays a "clear preference for hierarchy over deliberation" (Saarts et al., 2021, p. 362), it is characterised by various power centres, and allows for grassroots initiatives and the election of personnel at various levels. In the case of Finland, Hatakka (2021, p. 304) argues that the PS is "organisationally a Frankenstein's monster," combining radically democratic elements in its congress and advisory assembly with a very powerful executive which faces little accountability. The German AfD appears to go somewhat further in offering genuine competition in terms of candidate selection and opportunities for members to influence party decisions. Heinze and Weisskircher (2021) argue that the party's relatively decentralised decision-making and collective leadership has come at the cost of constant intra-party conflict. The desire to prevent such internal turmoil appears to be a main reason why most other RWPPs shy away from even limited forms of internal democracy.

Generally speaking, then, RWPPs may claim to speak in the name of the "ordinary people" who have ostensibly been ignored by political elites, but this does not mean they give their members and activists a meaningful say over party affairs and ideological direction. This is no less the case for those RWPPs that adhere closest to the mass party organisational model.

#### 4. Conclusions

Defying common wisdom about this type of party, and the direction of party evolution in general, many RWPPs analysed in this thematic issue are committed to maintaining rootedness on the ground. They continue to rely on activists or supporters to bring their message to the electorate and to facilitate the running of the party. In general terms, we have found that the existence of complex and rooted organisations usually allows party elites to shape members' interpretations of political developments in their countries, facilitating the creation of closed communities of like-minded members. Social media, far from being seen as an alternative to face-to-face interaction, are often essential to *facilitate* the organisation of in-person activities and face-to-face initiatives that allow members to interact both with the public and with each other.

There are clearly examples of lean and leader-centred party organisations among our cases. These parties seem to be mainly motivated by a desire to retain strict centralised control and avoid the cultivation of unruly local branches and activists. For most other parties considered in this thematic issue, however, the

encouragement of traditional means of participation, involving *actual encounters* between people, is meant to lend credence to their populist claim that they are of, and for, ordinary people, and able to understand their needs and speak on their behalf. We see this as a contribution to the literature worth reflecting upon, given the tendency to study ideology and party organisations separately, when in fact there are important ideological aspects behind organisational choices. In other words, organisational choices can themselves be revealed to be “ideological products” (Scarrow, 2015, pp. 20–21).

Ultimately, the resilience of the mass party model challenges the idea that there is some sort of one-way, “one-size-fits-all” teleological movement towards “electoral-professional” forms of party organisation. For RWPPs, in particular, it makes sense to rely upon activism, rootedness on the ground, and the creation of communities of loyal members, both in practical terms (as ways to build effective campaigning machines) and ideologically (as means through which to strengthen narratives about parties allegedly being “close to the people”). For parties that place great importance on being seen to be different from the much criticised “cartel” of their opponents, presence on the ground and a growing membership suits their populist identity rather well.

As for how power is shared within organisations, this thematic issue has stressed the great influence that leaders and party executives continue to exercise over their members. The League and the VB provide the perfect case studies of RWPP mass parties in this respect, as they are disciplined, pyramidal, and run from the centre. Yet the same parties are also very able to foster participation and interaction between their members. Our articles thus point at the need to stop conflating internal democracy with the opportunity to take part in a variety of activities, interact with other members, discuss and interrogate political events, and possibly even criticise the choices made by party elites. If anything, much work remains to be done on *why* people are willing to keep donating their time, efforts, and sometimes money to organisations that—whilst certainly valuing what they do—are clearly not keen to let them have a say on strategy, alliances, and choice of candidates. As we challenge the dominant idea that political parties rely ever less on members (e.g., Katz & Mair, 1995), we are therefore left with the question of what motivates party members to accept their parties’ offer of *participation without power* (Albertazzi & Vampa, 2021).

Clearly, there is still a serious gap in our knowledge about how party organisations operate, in particular regarding the role of members and activists (Gauja & Van Haute, 2015). As far as its contribution is concerned, our thematic issue thus heeds calls for more comparative work to be produced on the way party organisations actually work, thus advancing our knowledge of what happens inside parties and suggesting new questions about the nature of political commitment and activism today.

## Acknowledgments

The support of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) is gratefully acknowledged (Grant Ref: ES/R011540/1). The authors would also like to thank the contributors of the thematic issue for their work and feedback, as well as Petra Guasti and Andrej Zaslove for their valuable comments on the project and individual case studies.

## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

## References

- Albertazzi, D. (2016). Going, going... not quite gone yet? “Bossi’s Lega” and the survival of the mass party. *Contemporary Italian Politics*, 8(2), 1–16.
- Albertazzi, D., & Vampa, D. (2021). *Populism in Europe—Lessons from Umberto Bossi’s Northern League*. Manchester University Press.
- Albertazzi, D., & van Kessel, S. (2021). Right-wing populist party organisation across Europe: The survival of the mass-party? Introduction to the thematic issue. *Politics and Governance*, 9(4), 224–227.
- Art, D. (2011). *Inside the radical right: The development of anti-immigrant parties in Western Europe*. Cambridge University Press.
- Bankov, P., Gherghina, S., & Silagadze, N. (2021). Walking the walk or just talking the talk? VMRO-BND’s efforts to become a mass party. *Politics and Governance*, 9(4), 307–316.
- Barrio, A., de Oger, S. A. S., & Field, B. N. (2021). Vox Spain: The Organisational challenges of a new radical right party. *Politics and Governance*, 9(4), 240–251.
- de Jonge, L. (2021). Is the (mass) party really over? The case of the Dutch Forum for Democracy. *Politics and Governance*, 9(4), 286–295.
- Duverger, M. (1951). *Les partis politiques* [The political parties]. Armand Colin.
- Eatwell, R. (2018). Charisma and the radical right. In J. Rydgren (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of the radical right* (pp. 251–268). Oxford University Press.
- Favero, A. (2021). Rootedness, activism, and centralisation: The case of the Swiss People’s Party. *Politics and Governance*, 9(4), 252–262.
- Gauja, A., & Van Haute, E. (2015). *Party members and activists*. Routledge.
- Hatakka, N. (2021). Between horizontality and centralisation: Organisational form and practice in the Finns Party. *Politics and Governance*, 9(4), 296–306.
- Haughton, T., Rybář, M., & Deegan-Krause, K. (2021). Leading the way, but also following the trend: The Slovak National Party. *Politics and Governance*, 9(4), 329–339.
- Heinisch, R., & Mazzoleni, O. (Eds.). (2016). *Understanding populist party organisation. The radical right in*

- Western Europe*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Heinze, A.-S., & Weisskircher, M. (2021). No strong leaders needed? AfD party organisation between collective leadership, internal democracy, and “movement-party” strategy. *Politics and Governance*, 9(4), 263–274.
- Katz, R., & Mair, P. (1995). Changing models of party organization and party democracy: The emergence of the cartel party. *Party Politics*, 1(1), 5–28.
- Kirchheimer, O. (1966). The transformation of the Western European party systems. In J. LaPalombara & M. Weiner (Eds.), *Political parties and political development* (pp. 177–200). Princeton University Press.
- Metz, R., & Várnagy, R. (2021). “Mass,” “movement,” “personal,” or “cartel” party? Fidesz’s hybrid organisational strategy. *Politics and Governance*, 9(4), 317–328.
- Michels, R. (1962). *Political parties: A sociological study of the oligarchical tendencies of modern democracies*. The Free Press. (Original work published 1911)
- Panebianco, A. (1988). *Political parties: Organisation and power*. Cambridge University Press.
- Pytlas, B. (2021). Party organization of PiS in Poland: Between electoral rhetoric and absolutist practice. *Politics and Governance*, 9(4), 340–353.
- Saarts, T., Jakobson, M.-L., & Kalev, L. (2021). When a right-wing populist party inherits a mass party organisation: The case of EKRE. *Politics and Governance*, 9(4), 354–364.
- Scarrow, S. (2015). *Beyond party members*. Oxford University Press.
- Sijstermans, J. (2021). The Vlaams Belang: A mass party of the 21st century. *Politics and Governance*, 9(4), 275–285.
- van Biezen, I., Mair, P., & Poguntke, T. (2012). Going, going,... gone? The decline of party membership in contemporary Europe. *European Journal of Political Research*, 51(1), 24–56.
- Zulianello, M. (2021). The League of Matteo Salvini: Fostering and exporting a modern mass-party grounded on “phygital” activism. *Politics and Governance*, 9(4), 228–239.

#### About the Authors



**Stijn van Kessel** is senior lecturer in European politics at Queen Mary University of London. His main research interests are populism and populist parties, as well as the politics of European integration. He is the author of *Populist Parties in Europe: Agents of Discontent?* (Palgrave, 2015) and of articles in journals including *European Journal of Political Research*, *West European Politics*, and *Government & Opposition*. He is joint editor of the Routledge book series on *Extremism & Democracy*.



**Daniele Albertazzi** is professor of politics at the Department of Politics of the University of Surrey. The major strands of his work have been about populism in Western Europe, party organisation, Italian politics, Swiss politics, and the communication strategies and mass media use of political parties. Daniele’s most recent books are *Populism and New Patterns of Political Competition in Western Europe* (Routledge, 2021), co-edited with Davide Vampa, and *Populism in Europe—Lessons from Umberto Bossi’s Northern League* (Manchester University Press, 2021), co-written with Davide Vampa.

## **Politics and Governance (ISSN: 2183-2463)**

*Politics and Governance* is an innovative new offering to the world of online publishing in the Political Sciences. An internationally peer-reviewed open access journal, *Politics and Governance* publishes significant, cutting-edge and multidisciplinary research drawn from all areas of Political Science.

[www.cogitatiopress.com/politicsandgovernance](http://www.cogitatiopress.com/politicsandgovernance)