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From Cohesion to Contagion? Populist Radical Right Contestation of EU Enlargement

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Abstract

The rise of populist radical right parties (PRRPs) in a growing number of European Union (EU) member states and inside the European Parliament (EP) has triggered concern over their ability to drive further contestation of European integration. Using EU enlargement as a test case, we analyse an original dataset of over 2/700 hand-coded statements from the last three EP mandates (2004–19) to trace the emergence of an increasingly coherent, oppositional discourse by PRRPs towards a further widening of the EU. We show that PRRPs contribute to a generalized hardening of opposition towards enlargement, but fail to impose their identity-focused framing upon other parliamentary actors. Instead, we suggest that mainstream party groups accommodate PRRPs' essentialist discourse by shifting from technical, conditionality-based reasoning towards more political arguments articulated around human rights and democracy. Our findings feed into debates about the transnational cooperation of PRRPs and the political impact of Euroscepticism.

Keywords: discourse; enlargement; European Parliament; Euroscepticism; political claims analysis; populist radical right

Introduction

Populist radical right parties (PRRPs) have been steadily gaining weight in European politics in recent years, including access to government in several European Union (EU) member states. Their strengthening is particularly visible inside the European Parliament (EP), where many of them experienced their first electoral successes. The EU's struggle to develop effective responses to the financial and economic crisis and the influx of refugees and asylum seekers galvanised support for nationalist, Eurosceptic forces (Taggart and Szczerbiak, 2013, p. 17; Brack, 2015, pp. 347–8). Among these, PRRPs represent a particular sub-type, combining far-right extremism and a populist worldview that assumes such ideas to express the popular will at large (Heinisch, 2003, p. 96). From an initial focus upon anti-immigrant discourse, their opposition to the EU has gradually broadened to garner wider support at the domestic level (Usherwood and Startin, 2013, pp. 5–6).

PRRPs' strengthening at the European level has triggered a growing interest in their ability to mobilize collectively and eventually shape policy-making processes at the European level (Brack, 2017; Caiani, 2018; McDonnell and Werner, 2019b). Whereas earlier studies tended to highlight the limits of transnational PRR mobilization due to substantive divergences and institutional obstacles (Almeida, 2010; Minkenberg and Perrineau, 2007; Startin, 2010; Whitaker and Lynch, 2014), more recent findings indicate a growing programmatic coherence of PRRPs (Falkner and Plattner, 2020) and suggest

some indirect PRR influence upon policy outcomes (Bergmann *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, scholars have pointed to the multiple interactions between populist and Eurosceptic forces (Heinisch *et al.*, 2020; Pirro and van Kessel, 2017) and the ‘mainstreaming’ of Euroscepticism over time (Leconte, 2010; Meijers, 2017). Others are more sceptical about the role of PRRPs in driving more critical positions on Europe (Mudde, 2013, pp. 12–13; Alonso and Fonseca, 2012).

Our study responds to calls to complement earlier findings on Eurosceptic contagion with a discourse-based analysis (Meijers, 2017, p. 421). We do so by analysing PRRPs’ discourse on EU enlargement in the EP. Earlier studies suggest that widening has traditionally been a very salient topic for PRRPs, which tend to display high levels of opposition to the admission of further countries to the EU (Dolezal and Hellström, 2016). Whereas enlargement long benefited from a climate of ‘permissive consensus’ (Hooghe and Marks, 2009) and a positive institutional framing, the ‘big bang’ Eastern enlargement multiplied concerns about the insufficient democratic and economic preparedness of the candidate countries and the EU’s limited absorption capacity. Against this backdrop, enlargement represents a fruitful area to examine the potential emergence of a transnational PRR ‘discourse coalition’ (Hajer, 1993).

We articulate our analysis of PRRPs’ discursive patterns around two key questions: have PRRPs rallied around a common discourse on EU enlargement? And if so, to what extent does this discourse cross ideological boundaries and affect the way in which questions of widening are discussed more generally in the EP? We analyse three dimensions of PRRP discourses: first, we examine their *cohesion* by assessing whether they share similar positions and align around a common narrative contesting further widening. Second, we address the *distinctiveness* of their discourses by comparing their positioning and privileged frames to those of representatives from other party families. Finally, we explore the presence of *contagion*, whereby the positioning and/or frames employed by PRRPs lead to adjustments in mainstream parties’ discursive patterns.

Starting from the critical milestone of the Eastern enlargement round of 2004/2007, we analyse parliamentary debates over the last three mandates of the EP (2004–19). By examining the substantive arguments employed in EU-level debates, we map the long-term evolution of discursive trends, offering complementary insights to those based on roll-call vote analysis or case studies (Høyland, 2010; Ker-Lindsay *et al.*, 2017; Wunsch, 2017). Our study draws on an original, hand-coded dataset of over 2,700 statements about enlargement from parliamentary debates in the EP. We use political claim analysis to examine the evolution of discourses from 2004 onwards. Unlike many studies of Euroscepticism that focus on Western or Eastern Europe in isolation (Grande and Hutter, 2016; Pirro *et al.*, 2018; Szczerbiak, 2020), our analysis includes all PRRPs represented in the EP, thus providing a comprehensive account of their discursive mobilization at the European level.

Our empirical analysis yields three main findings. First, we observe a strong cohesion of positions and framing among PRR actors, who display high levels of opposition, often backed by cultural and identity-related arguments. Second, we find that PRRP discourse is clearly distinct from that of mainstream parties, who are less hostile and privilege normative and procedural arguments to justify their views. Finally, our data provides mixed results on contagion: whereas we observe that PRRPs place themselves at the forefront of a generalized hardening of opposition towards EU enlargement, there is no direct transfer

of PRRPs' framing patterns towards mainstream parties. We cautiously suggest that PRRPs are driving a politicization of enlargement, but acknowledge alternative factors that may drive growing scepticism in this area.

Our findings shed new light on populist Eurosceptic mobilization at the EU level. On the one hand, we provide fresh empirical evidence for the mounting cohesion of PRRPs inside the EP that contrasts with earlier scepticism regarding their ability to formulate common substantive positions at the European level (Startin, 2010, p. 431; Minkenberg and Perrineau, 2007, p. 50). Specifically, our longitudinal approach indicates the emergence of a PRR discourse coalition characterized by a shared, alternative narrative that prominently foregrounds identitarian and religious issues. On the other hand, we speak to the literature on new transnational cleavages in the EU (Hooghe and Marks, 2018). Our finding on the limited contagion of PRRPs' identity-focused arguments casts doubt on the expectation that the strengthening of traditional/authoritarian/nationalist (TAN) actors translates into a greater salience of identity-related discourse across parties (Hooghe and Marks, 2009). Instead, we show that mainstream parties tend to shift from procedural arguments based on technical accession conditions towards a more normative discourse centred on political aspects including democracy and human rights to justify their own growing scepticism towards further enlargement.

I. A Discursive Approach to Eurosceptic Contagion

Our study bridges the literatures on Euroscepticism and populist contagion by studying PRRPs as Eurosceptic actors and exploring their impact and possible contagion effects on mainstream parties. Much of the early literature on Euroscepticism focused on building a taxonomy of Eurosceptic actors and dissecting the internal divergence in their positioning (Brack, 2015, p. 338). Taggart and Szczerbiak famously distinguished between 'hard' Euroscepticism in the form of an outright rejection of the entire European project, and a 'soft' version articulated around opposition to specific policies or an emphasis on the 'national interest' in European debates (Taggart and Szczerbiak, 2004, pp. 3–4). Kopecký and Mudde criticized the blurriness of this distinction and instead put forward a four-fold classification that differentiates between actors' diffuse support for general ideas of European integration and their specific support for concrete practices of the European Union (Kopecký and Mudde, 2002, pp. 300–2). Whereas more recent studies continue to acknowledge the 'dimensionality of Euroscepticism' (McDonnell and Werner, 2019a, p. 1763) that can prevent a joint mobilization of Eurosceptic actors at the European level, there has been a growing interest in exploring the impact of populist Eurosceptic actors at the supranational level (Vasilopoulou, 2013; Pirro and Taggart, 2018, p. 255).

Empirical studies of populist or Eurosceptic contagion to date provide mixed findings. Several studies recognize a PRR impact in the form of an increased salience of and hostility towards immigration (Abou-Chadi and Krause, 2020; van Spanje, 2010) and multiculturalism (Han, 2015). Others are more sceptical and suggest that the impact of PRR parties on mainstream party policy agendas has been overestimated (Akkerman, 2015), with other developments leading mainstream parties themselves to increase the salience of certain issues (Meyer and Rosenberger, 2015; Mudde, 2013, pp. 12–13). Inside the EP, scholars have pointed to PRRPs' diverging substantive priorities (Chiru and

Wunsch, 2021; Falkner and Plattner, 2020), the relative dominance of mainstream parties and low levels of politicization (Meijers and van der Veer, 2019, p. 1240; Startin, 2010, p. 432) as well as domestic constraints related to PRRPs' coalition potential (Almeida, 2010; McDonnell and Werner, 2018) as obstacles to greater PRR influence.

Against this backdrop, we propose a discourse-oriented analysis to establish whether and to what extent PRRPs have been able to overcome their institutional fragmentation and geographic dispersion to unite around a common discourse on EU enlargement. Proponents of discourse analysis contend that discourses create meaning over social and physical phenomena and eventually determine political decisions (Hajer & Versteeg, 2005). In the context of European integration, Diez has suggested that 'the power of discourse is that it structures our conceptualizations of European governance' (Diez, 1999, p. 605). By framing opposition to a further widening of the EU in a certain way, political actors contribute to the construction of a specific understanding of EU enlargement. The diffusion of such frames, in turn, can foster cross-national linkages by acting as a 'precondition for the formation of transnational cooperation and identities' (Caiani, 2018, p. 402). At the same time, frame diffusion beyond the narrow circle of populist Eurosceptic actors has been viewed as an expression of their ability 'to spread their critical framing of "Europe"' (Pirro *et al.*, 2018, p. 382). We therefore focus our empirical analysis on the frames or 'patterns of justification' (Helbling *et al.*, 2010) used by PRRPs to justify their positions on enlargement.

II. Assessing the Emergence and Impact of a Populist 'Discourse Coalition'

The theoretical anchor for our study is Hajer's concept of a 'discourse coalition' understood as 'the ensemble of a set of storylines, the actors that utter these storylines, and the practices that conform to these storylines, all organized around a discourse' (Hajer, 1993, p. 74). While the rise in numbers of PRR actors has created an anticipation for their eventual influence on EU-level policy-making, it is not enough for actors to represent a critical mass in order to influence the debate. To shift the discursive space, an alternative narrative must be coherent, distinct, and it must gain traction among other actors. In assessing PRRPs' discourse on EU enlargement, we proceed in two stages: first, we explore the emergence of a common discourse coalition by examining the *cohesion* of PRRP discourses as well as the *distinctiveness* of their positions and the arguments they employ to justify them. In a second step, we turn to the impact of such a discourse coalition by analysing the potential *contagion* of PRR discourse towards mainstream political actors in the EP.

Towards a Common Discourse Coalition

A discourse coalition implies not only the presence of a *shared* storyline, but also requires such a storyline to be *alternative* and thus distinct from the discursive patterns shown by other actors (Hajer, 1993). To establish the presence of a discourse coalition on EU enlargement among PRR actors inside the EP, we examine both the positions adopted by their representatives as well as the arguments they use to frame their views on EU enlargement. We understand framing as the process by which actors define political issues and justify their positions in a debate (Entman, 1993). Because they refer to general

conditions under which a state should seek – and the EU should offer – membership, arguments justify and legitimate specific membership practices.

To qualify as a ‘discourse coalition’, PRR discursive patterns must be both internally coherent and externally distinct from those of other political actors in the EP. *Cohesion* has been posited as central to PRR actors’ influence: where they are able to formulate a common discourse, they stand a much greater chance of shaping the general debate than when they are divided (Falkner and Plattner, 2020, p. 724). Regarding the *distinctiveness* of their discourse, PRR representatives are well-known for their anti-immigrant positions and their strategic use of migration issues at the European level to back their general anti-integrationist stance (Almeida, 2010, p. 243; Meijers and van der Veer, 2019, p. 1247). Rydgren has pointed to the diffusion of a new ‘master frame – combining ethnonationalist xenophobia (...) with anti-political-establishment populism’ (Rydgren, 2005) to explain the emergence of PRRPs as a new party family.

Accordingly, we expect to see PRRP framing patterns emphasize the ‘otherness’ of accession candidates to motivate their positions. Such identity-related arguments have been opposed to those referring to interests and emphasise either ‘particularistic categorical attributes’ such as ethnicity or religion or ‘sameness among members of a group or category’ (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000, pp. 6–7). In the enlargement context, Sjørnsen observed a prioritisation of ‘those states with which it [the EU] considers an element of kinship’ (2002, p. 495). Vasilopoulou (2011, pp. 229–30) underlined that radical right discourse on European identity is generally intertwined with religious elements, resulting in a cultural definition of Europe articulated around Christianity and the rejection of non-Christian countries as culturally different.

Following these considerations, we expect PRRPs’ opposition to enlargement to consist of a ‘hard’ rejection justified by immutable qualities such as identity, geography, or religion rather than a ‘soft’ emphasis for instance on strict conditionality. We formulate three expectations:

H₁: PRRP discourses show a higher share of outright opposition to enlargement compared to representatives of other party families. H₂: A candidate country’s cultural closeness affects PRRP positions towards it more strongly than is the case for mainstream parties.

H₃: PRRP discourses emphasize identity-related arguments more prominently than other party families.

Mainstream Responses to a Populist Discourse Coalition

If the emergence of a coherent, distinctive PRRP discourse is the first step towards a strengthening of their role, the *contagion* of such discourses towards mainstream parties forms the basis for their influence upon institutional practices. Populism research has recognized the crucial role of mainstream parties in mediating populist success via their response to populist pressures (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018, p. 1687; Pirro and van Kessel, 2018, p. 339; Meguid, 2005). Previous studies seek to categorize different mainstream response patterns: Meguid (2008) distinguishes between (1) accommodative strategies in the form of contagion or mainstreaming of challenger positions; (2) adversarial strategies to directly confront challengers, resulting in a polarization of party competition; and (3) dismissive strategies that seek to ignore challengers

(Atzpodien, 2020, pp. 4–6). Pirro and Taggart discern two broad options whereby mainstream actors either engage with Eurosceptic positions via direct collaboration or co-optation of their views, or disengage by seeking to isolate or ignore them (Pirro and Taggart, 2018, p. 259). By examining whether PRR discourses permeate ideological borders and influence the ways in which mainstream actors discuss the widening of the EU, we seek to feed into ongoing debates about their ability to shape processes and outcomes at the European level.

We study the presence of contagion of PRR contestation of EU enlargement by examining the possible adjustment of mainstream parties' discursive strategies to accommodate the stances or specific arguments raised by PRRPs. Contagion may concern general positions on further EU widening as well as specific frames employed in enlargement debates. Regarding positions, we expect contagion by PRRPs to translate into a hardening of opposition to enlargement, with conditional positions emphasizing specific reservations towards the pursuit of enlargement shifting towards outright rejection of further widening. Regarding frames, we assume contagion effects to manifest via an increased use of identity-related arguments that we expect to dominate PRRP discourses. Enlargement skepticism thus becomes motivated not by effective shortcomings of candidate countries or with reference to member states' interests, but due to concerns over candidate countries' belonging to a shared political and cultural community. We formulate two expectations:

H₄: PRR discourses drive a general hardening of opposition to further EU widening.

H₅: Mainstream parties increasingly employ identity-related frames to justify their positions on EU enlargement.

In sum, our theoretical approach is articulated around the concept of 'discourse coalition' as a form of joint mobilization that allows PRRP representatives to overcome their institutional fragmentation across different party groups by rallying around a shared alternative narrative on EU enlargement. We analyse evolving discourses over time to assess whether and how PRR actors have developed a common, distinctive discourse to contest further EU widening, and to what extent this discourse has affected enlargement discourses in the EP more broadly.

III. Research Design and Data

We use enlargement as a case study to test a broader argument on the increasing ability of PRRPs to develop a coherent, distinctive storyline on core issues of European integration. We do so by comparing the parallel evolution of PRRP and mainstream actors' positions and arguments about EU enlargement over time. We identify PRR MEPs by using the classification provided by PopuList (Rooduijn *et al.*, 2019) and follow Helbling *et al.* (2010, p. 503) in defining mainstream parties as including Social Democrats, Liberals, Christian Democrats and conservative MEPs. In addition, we assign each national political party to a broader party family based on the Chapel Hill Expert Survey dataset (Bakker *et al.*, 2015; Polk *et al.*, 2017). In total, we identified 21 PRRPs represented in the EP over the course of the last three terms (see Appendix Table A1).

Our empirical analysis builds on an original dataset of MEP statements from the last three EP terms (2004–19), allowing us to assess how the numerical growth of PRR MEPs over time affected their ability to form an effective discourse coalition on EU enlargement

(see Appendix Table A2). Whereas previous studies have analysed party manifestos to study the evolving discourses of PRRPs (Falkner and Plattner, 2020; Pirro and van Kessel, 2017), we consider that statements by individual MEPs provide a more nuanced insight into convergent and divergent discursive patterns among PRRP representatives. To build our dataset, we identified all EP debates that discussed EU membership ($n = 218$) and subsequently hand-coded 2,715 individual statements referring to enlargement towards the Western Balkans and Turkey.¹ A statement is defined as an actor's position about a country's membership to the EU, supported by one or multiple arguments.²

Operationalizing a Discourse Coalition

In a first stage, we assess whether PRR actors inside the EP have been able to rally around a shared, alternative discourse on EU enlargement. We use political claims analysis to identify, classify and compare actors' positions about EU enlargement and the arguments they use to justify their stance. This allows us to assess both the cohesion and the distinctiveness of their positions and the frames they employ, which are the two key criteria to establish the existence of a 'discourse coalition' (Hajer, 1993).

At the level of positions, we distinguish between three possible postures by any individual actor: the actor can oppose (0), grant conditional support (0.5) or fully support enlargement (1). We then average these positions by national party and EP mandate. We measure cohesion among PRRP actors' positions by using the Hix–Noury–Roland 'Agreement index' (AI), which allows us to integrate our three possible positions, thus enabling a more inclusive analysis than other binary cohesion measures. We calculate the AI as follows:

$$AI_i = \frac{\max\{Y_i, N_i, A_i\} - \frac{1}{2}(Y_i + N_i + A_i) - \max\{Y_i, N_i, A_i\}}{(Y_i + N_i + A_i)}$$

where Y_i represents the number of supportive positions by group i about the membership of a specific country, N_i the number of opposing positions, and A_i the number of conditional positions. AI equals 1 when all the members of a party family share the same position and 0 when they are equally divided between all three positions (Hix *et al.*, 2005, p. 215). In addition to the AI, we also measure the average position over time to determine whether opposition or support become stronger within a given party or party group across the period, as well as how distinct PRRP positioning is from that of other actors. For national parties in the EP, we aggregate positions at the party level and average them by session of the parliament for 178 national parties across three parliamentary sessions. We similarly calculate the position of European political groups by averaging the position of all statements from actors belonging to that group for each session, irrespective of their nationality or national party.

¹The full *Constructing Europe's Border* dataset is available online here: <https://www.research-collection.ethz.ch/handle/20.500.11850/472717>

²More details about the framing protocol, coding process, inter-coder reliability tests and the description of cases can be found here: <https://www.research-collection.ethz.ch/handle/20.500.11850/414771>

In a second step, we look at how actors frame their support or opposition to membership. Whereas positions are reasonably straightforward to code and scale, arguments are much more varied and complex. We therefore developed a composite approach to collecting, labelling and grouping arguments that enables a longitudinal comparative pattern analysis. We first coded all arguments inductively before aggregating them into 50 first-level framing categories, which we then grouped into five topical categories. In doing so, we adapted categories developed in earlier efforts to clarify arguments in European elite discourses (Helbling *et al.*, 2010; Maier and Rittberger, 2008; Sjursen, 2002) and eventually distinguish between procedural, utilitarian, strategic, normative, and identity-related arguments. In addition, we differentiate arguments on a scale ranging from more technical to more political (see Appendix Table A3). Besides examining the distribution of different types of arguments among PRR and mainstream parties, we also examine whether their discourse differs depending on characteristics of the target countries. We operationalize cultural distance based on the target country's dominant religion, with Christian countries considered culturally close, Orthodox ones more distant and Muslim countries most distant.

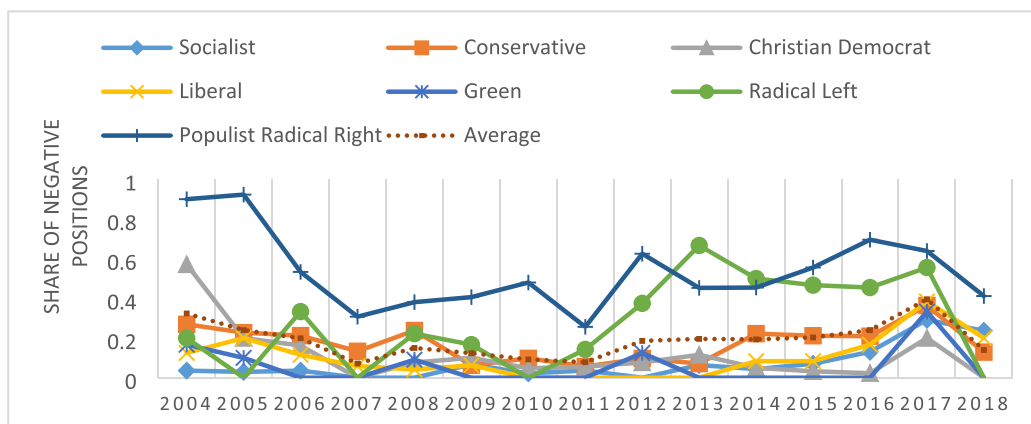
Assessing Contagion

To assess the contagion of PRRP discourses towards other parties, we examine shifts in mainstream actors' positioning as well as prevalent types of arguments employed by different party families over time to uncover a possible convergence of patterns, whereby positions and arguments privileged by PRRPs cross ideological borders. Contagion implies that the alternative storyline developed by a subset of actors has become sufficiently coherent and distinctive so as to pose a threat to mainstream actors, prompting them to adapt their own discourse by integrating elements of the alternative storyline either to neutralise it or to benefit from its attractiveness among voters.

Previous studies of populist or Eurosceptic contagion have employed a range of methods to detect mainstream party accommodation. Meijers examines the annual change in mainstream parties' European integration position, while controlling for public opinion as a potential alternative driver of increasing Euroscepticism at the party level (Meijers, 2017, p. 417). Abou-Chadi and Krause (2020) employ a regression discontinuity design and leverage the exogenous variation created through differences in electoral thresholds to establish a causal effect of radical right success on mainstream parties' policy positions. Closest to our own approach is the emphasis on frame diffusion as a measure of Eurosceptic impact at the party level (Pirro *et al.*, 2018, p. 382) that has also been used in studies of radical right cooperation (Caiani and Della Porta, 2011) and social movements (Della Porta and Parks, 2016).

Building on some of these earlier approaches, we assess contagion by examining the change in mainstream parties' positions on EU enlargement as well as the relative prevalence of specific frames over time. Since the qualitative nature of our underlying coding process precludes any formal modelling process that would allow us to control for alternative explanatory factors, we proceed with a very cautious interpretation of our findings regarding the effective impact of a PRR discourse coalition upon mainstream parties.

Figure 1: Evolution of Negative Positions over Time, by Party Family [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]



IV. Empirical Findings

Our study examines enlargement debates in the EP to determine whether PRR actors are capable of developing a common discourse coalition and to evaluate the possible influence of their discourse on mainstream actors' positions and framing patterns. We conduct our analysis for PRRPs as well as for all other large party families, but exclude small party families that make only a low number of enlargement-related statements throughout the observed period, thus precluding a meaningful analysis (see Appendix Figure A1). We find strong evidence for the emergence of a coherent, distinctive PRR discourse on enlargement articulated around an identity-based rejection of further widening, but are more cautious in interpreting our findings regarding the impact of this discourse upon mainstream parties.

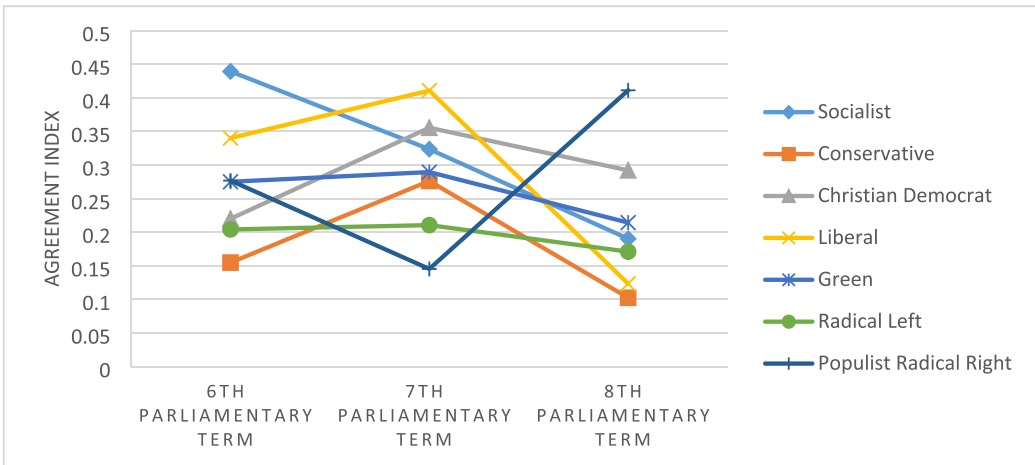
Growing Cohesion around Opposition to Enlargement

We expected PRR discourses to display a higher share of outright opposition to enlargement than mainstream parties (H_1). Our data confirm this expectation: PRRPs show considerably higher shares of negative positions on EU enlargement than mainstream parties throughout the observed period (see Figure 1).³ Following an initial moderation after a markedly negative position in the wake of the 2004 enlargement round, we observe a renewed deepening of PRRP opposition to enlargement until 2017.

Regarding their internal agreement, PRRPs are the only party family to display increasing cohesion on enlargement issues in recent years (see Figure 2). This is particularly surprising given the institutional dispersion of PRR MEPs, meaning that party group discipline cannot account for this trend. On the contrary, the six national parties that jointly

³In 2018, there is an important debate on the future of the Balkans in the EU, which drives all positions up: actors across all party families tend to be much more supportive of enlargement when the object is not an individual country, but rather a region (for example 'the Balkans'). See also Appendix Figure A8.

Figure 2: Agreement Index by Party Family and EP Mandate [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]



contribute almost two-thirds of all PRR statements analysed are spread across three different party groups as well as the *non-inscrits* (see Appendix Table A4).

Still, there is no linear increase in cohesion levels among PRRPs, but rather a drop during the EP's seventh term and a subsequent sharp increase in the eighth term, during which PRRPs are by far the most cohesive party family on enlargement matters. Two trends explain this pattern: first, low agreement levels during the seventh term are driven by a large number of positive statements by MEPs from the Polish Law and Justice Party (PiS) and Hungary's Fidesz, which jointly account for 65 per cent of positive PRRP statements during this period (35 statements out of 60). As 'soft' Eurosceptics with government responsibilities, PiS and Fidesz are systematically more supportive of enlargement than the other PRRPs, especially towards culturally close Western Balkan candidate countries. Yet, during the eighth mandate, both parties only contribute 15 positive statements between them, which still represents 62 per cent of all positive PRR statements (15/24), signalling a creeping opposition to further widening even for these outliers. Second, we observe a qualitative change in the composition of the PRR party family, with parties classified as 'radical right' increasing their share from 65 to 80 per cent of the party family between the seventh and the eighth term, allowing PRR forces to represent a more unified force in the EP (see Appendix Figure A2).

Identity-Based Rejection of Further Widening

Our expectations regarding the distinctiveness of PRRPs' enlargement discourse focused on cultural closeness as a mediating factor for support or rejection of a specific candidate country (H₂) and a general prevalence of identity-related arguments to justify their positions (H₃). Again, our data confirm both expectations.

Regarding levels of support by target country, we observe important differences in positioning, with PRRPs typically less supportive of individual countries than other party

families (see Appendix Figure A8). A closer examination of support based on religion points to cultural exclusion as a key motive driving PRRPs' opposition to enlargement. While there is a clear pattern of declining support from Christian to Orthodox to Muslim countries across all party families, it is most pronounced for PRRPs. Their rejection of Muslim countries is almost uniform, while they are second only to the Christian Democrats in their support for Croatia, the only Christian candidate country during the observed period (see *appendix figure A9*). This divergence dovetails earlier findings on a cultural definition of Europe as one of the main distinctive features of radical right parties (Vasilopoulou, 2011, p. 229).

Regarding framing patterns, our data underscore that identity-related arguments dominate PRRP discourses on EU enlargement. Table 1 displays the five most frequent arguments employed by each party family to justify their position towards enlargement. Keywords indicate the specific argument employed by the actor (first level of aggregation), while colours represent overarching frame types (second level of aggregation, see legend). The colour coding reflects the classification of arguments along a scale ranging from most technical (green) to most political (red).

Whereas we observe a striking convergence of thematic priorities among most other party families, the distinct pattern of PRRP discourses sticks out. Two of the most dominant arguments, accounting for over 15 per cent of all PRR arguments, are 'belonging' and 'religion', confirming a narrow definition of sameness as central motivation to support or reject enlargement. PRRPs' focus on identity-related arguments contrasts with the predominance of procedural and normative arguments among all other party families, including the Conservatives as the PRRPs' closest ideological competitors. Technical arguments related to conditionality and (institutional) efficiency are prominent among both mainstream and radical left actors, but completely absent from PRRPs' argumentative emphasis. For all party families, the five most common frames represent roughly 30 per cent of their arguments, with the remainder distributed across the 45 other frames, thus signalling a high salience for the arguments located at the top. Coupled with our finding on the prevalence of negative positions, the emphasis on identity-related arguments and cultural closeness signals what determines PRR exclusion of a country from the enlargement process: its perceived lack of 'European identity' (see also Appendix Figure A10).

Overall, our analysis of PRR discourses signals a striking internal unity among PRRPs. Despite their institutional fragmentation across different party groups, diverging national

Table 1: Five Most Commonly Used Arguments and Frames for Different Party Families

	Radical Left	Green	Socialist	Liberal	ChristDem	Conservative	PRR
1st	Bilateral Issues	Human Rights	Human Rights	Human Rights	Human Rights	Bilateral Issues	Belonging
2nd	Human Rights	Efficiency	Efficiency	Efficiency	Efficiency	Human Rights	Bilateral Issues
3rd	Conditionality	Bilateral Issues	Bilateral Issues	Cost-Benefit	Bilateral Issues	Efficiency	Human Rights
4th	Efficiency	Conditionality	Cost-Benefit	Conditionality	Conditionality	Conditionality	Religion
5th	Cost-Benefit	Reforms	Reforms	Reforms	Reforms	Minorities	Cost-Benefit
	Procedural	Utilitarian	Strategic	Normative	Identity		

backgrounds,⁴ and differing degrees of Euroscepticism, PRR MEPs have been able to rally around a common set of positions and frames on enlargement and to build a coherent and distinctive discourse coalition in this area. This finding alone calls into question previous negative evaluations of PRRPs' ability to mobilize effectively at the European level.

Mainstream Party Accommodation?

The development of a joint discourse coalition is a major achievement, but a common narrative is but a first step towards greater PRRP influence on EU policy-making. Regarding a possible contagion effect of PRR discourses, we expected their hostile stance on further widening to drive a general rise in opposition to enlargement (H₄) as well as an increased use of identity-related frames by mainstream parties to justify their positions on EU enlargement (H₅). Our analysis yields mixed results when it comes to the contagion of PRR discourses.

Regarding positions, we observe a clear hardening of opposition to enlargement over time. Whereas PRRPs are almost unanimous in their outright rejection of any further widening during the eighth EP session, mainstream parties' positions also become notably more critical over time (see Figures 1 and 2). Echoing earlier findings on right-wing and Eurosceptic contagion (Abou-Chadi, 2016; Han, 2015; Meijers, 2017), the convergence of PRR and mainstream parties is strongest for those party families that are ideologically closest to PRRPs (see Appendix Figure A3). Among party groups, we note a sharp expansion of negative statements within the radical right and among Conservatives (ECR), which becomes less notable for the ideologically more distant European People's Party (EPP) and is barely visible among liberal and left parties. Instead, ideologically more distant political groups appear to respond to the growing contestation of enlargement by increasing their number of conditional, rather than negative statements (see Appendix Figures A6 and A7).

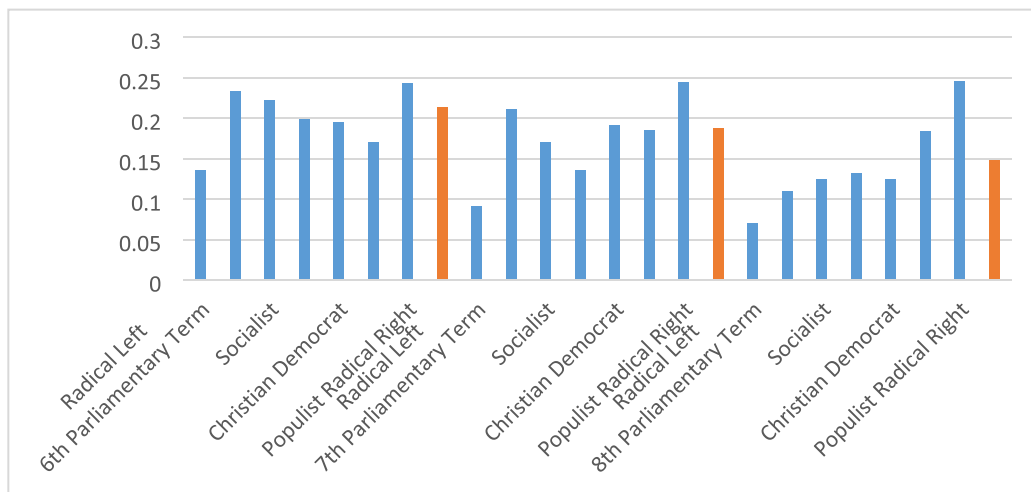
In contrast, regarding framing patterns, the identity-based discourse propagated by PRRPs does not appear to cross over to other parties. From the EP's seventh term onwards, PRRPs concentrate more than half of the family/identity/belonging and religion arguments in the entire sample (51.2 per cent), although they produce only about 18 per cent of the overall frames. The same trend holds for all arguments within the wider 'identity' frame: we observe a growing consistency among PRR actors in their use of these arguments over time, but no transfer towards mainstream parties, among which identity-related frames actually decrease in relevance over time (see Figure 3).

Nevertheless, we do observe a significant change in the way mainstream actors justify their positions about enlargement. Figure 4⁵ shows the evolution of frames used to justify non-positive (conditional and negative) positions, indicating a gradual shift from more technical (green) to more political (red) arguments across party families and over time. As with positions, this trend reflects ideological proximity and is thus more notable for

⁴For a more detailed discussion of Eastern vs. Western European PRR discourse, see Appendix Section IV.

⁵We attribute a value from 1 to 5 to each frame, 1 being the most technical frame (green), and 5 the most political (red). For each year of the dataset, we measure the proportion of each of the five frames used by each party family, which we multiply by the value attributed to each frame. The average total for each statement per year is represented by a color, which is defined in relation to the scores of the other parties.

Figure 3: Prevalence of Identity-Related Arguments by Session [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]



Conservatives and Christian Democrats.⁶ While mainstream parties do not espouse the identity-related arguments put forward by PRRPs, there is a marked increase in normative arguments related to core European values such as human rights and democracy in the EP's eighth term (see Appendix Figures A11 and A12).

The increased use of normative arguments to oppose accession from 2014 onwards represents an important change in the pro-European discourse. Shifts in mainstream parties' discourse on EU enlargement may be due to a host of factors, including the objective degradation of the situation in candidate countries and an increasingly hostile public opinion among EU citizens towards further accessions. That such discursive adaptations come in response to the growing coherence and electoral weight of PRRPs in the EP – the number of PRR MEPs increased by 30 per cent from the seventh to the eighth term – is therefore only one possible reason for the observed patterns. With this caveat in mind, we advance an indirect accommodation by mainstream parties to PRRPs' identity-focused framing as one plausible interpretation of the observed discursive shifts. Specifically, we suggest that PRRPs' increasingly coherent contestation of further enlargement has resulted in the politicization of widening issues. Among mainstream parties, this politicization translates into a change in emphasis away from more technical, measurable membership conditions towards a focus on values and principles to justify their positions. This shift allows them to engage with PRRPs' political discourse at the same level, but without betraying their core values or losing their base.

When normative arguments are used to support enlargement, actors often highlight how the enlargement process 'brings democratisation' to candidate states (Michl Ebner,

⁶The dominance of political frames in the first two years of the dataset is explained by a strong bias towards the Turkish case in enlargement debates, which typically triggers more politically/culturally motivated arguments across all party families (see Appendix Table A4).

Figure 4: Transformation of Frames over Time [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

<i>Party Family</i>	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
<i>Radical Left</i>	8.9	12.3	6.4	3.0	8.4	4.9	3.0	4.3	4.7	6.9	4.5	7.2	11.6	8.4	13.5
<i>Green</i>	14.5	7.0	4.0	6.0	12.3	9.3	3.5	5.2	9.0	5.8	0.0	14.6	12.4	6.5	13.5
<i>Socialist</i>	9.4	7.9	7.3	4.4	9.7	5.4	6.3	8.7	9.9	11.7	15.3	11.3	13.2	10.1	14.6
<i>Liberal</i>	7.0	7.7	7.8	4.3	8.7	10.3	8.2	6.7	6.2	9.8	8.0	13.6	10.6	11.5	9.3
<i>Christdem</i>	13.2	10.0	10.4	3.9	11.5	6.3	6.6	10.3	10.3	10.4	10.9	13.1	10.1	11.6	11.7
<i>Cons</i>	13.5	15.8	8.0	4.4	11.5	4.1	6.0	7.0	6.6	6.8	8.5	10.9	12.4	12.1	12.6
<i>PRR</i>	18.4	11.2	14.9	11.9	14.5	10.8	12.3	8.3	7.8	10.1	15.8	12.4	13.7	11.8	14.0

13/12/2004) and that ‘membership brings peace and reconciliation’ (Knut Fleckenstein, 26/03/2019) to the European continent. However, these normative arguments become a means of exclusion when they are used to oppose membership and enlargement based on irreconcilable differences in values, with arguments highlighting the ‘[violation of] fundamental democratic principles’ (Maria Spyraiki, 20/05/2015) and lack of respect for ‘freedom of expression’ (Ria Oomen-Ruijten, 17/04/2013) multiplying.

In practice, the shift from arguments relating to conditionality and efficiency towards political debates around enlargement has direct implications for future decisions about EU accession. Normative criteria are harder to measure and not as straightforward as technical membership conditions, thus providing a more indirect opportunity to slow or even halt enlargement negotiations. Recent years have already seen such a slowdown of the accession process and a growing number of proposals for alternative arrangements for candidate countries below the level of full membership. Ultimately, since candidate countries require the endorsement of the EP to join, the downward trend of support could shift the majority for future enlargements as more mainstream parties continue to move towards greater opposition.

Conclusion

We set out to analyse the discursive mobilization of PRRP actors in the EP as an innovative way to assess the impact of their strengthening at the European level. Our empirical data provide evidence that PRRPs have been able to form a discourse coalition articulated around a coherent and distinct narrative on enlargement. Our analysis highlighted three central trends: first, PRRPs show growing hostility towards the admission of further EU members, with a shift from ‘soft’ scepticism towards an outright rejection of further widening in the last EP mandate. This hardening of PRR positions is mirrored by a rise of critical views of EU enlargement also among mainstream parties. Second, we show PRRP opposition to enlargement to be rooted in an identity-related discourse emphasizing cultural and religious aspects that contrasts with the procedural and normative concerns voiced by representatives of all other party families. Finally, we suggest that PRRPs’

critical views of enlargement have contributed to a growing enlargement scepticism especially among ideologically close party families. Whereas we do not find PRRPs' identity-focused framing to permeate ideological borders, we note a growing politicization of EU enlargement that finds expression in a shift from technical arguments focused on conditionality towards a dominance of political arguments which, in practice, have resulted in a slowdown of accession negotiations. Overall, our findings indicate that despite PRRPs' framing patterns not (yet) translating into mainstream parties' discourses, their collective strengthening and strong contestation of further EU enlargement is putting mainstream parties under increasing pressure to respond.

These findings hold several theoretical as well as practical implications. In terms of PRRPs' potential for transnational cooperation, we suggest that while they may face some natural obstacles to formulating common positions at the European level, they show a growing capacity to develop a common agenda and to propose a distinct alternative narrative to the European public. Although we do not claim generalizability to other policy areas, our evidence on PRRPs' discursive mobilization around EU enlargement certainly nuances earlier findings on their limited ability to collaborate at the European level. Future studies could expand our discursive analysis of populist mobilization to other policy areas, including those where PRRPs may not appear to share common positions at the outset.

Regarding Eurosceptic contagion, our discourse-based approach allows us to nuance earlier findings that the strong dominance of mainstream parties and low levels of politicization make the EP more resilient to Eurosceptic voices (Meijers and van der Veer, 2019, p. 1241; McDonnell and Werner, 2019b). Instead, we suggest that mainstream parties respond to PRRPs' enlargement hostility by adopting more sceptical positions themselves and by shifting away from technical towards more political arguments to justify their views. Nonetheless, other factors unrelated to PRRP's discourse may account for the growing hostility among mainstream parties towards the admission of new members. While our research design and our focus on substantive arguments driving enlargement narratives do not allow us to control for such additional factors, future research could seek to assess more directly the impact of multiple confounding factors upon Eurosceptic contagion within the EP.

Finally, in practical terms, our findings suggest the PRRPs' growth in numbers inside the EP is increasingly matched by an ability to formulate cohesive positions on core issues of European integration. For mainstream parties to ignore this development means to underestimate its threat potential to the broader process of European integration. Instead, mainstream parties need to adopt similarly clear positions on issues that are highly salient for public opinion and articulate the arguments underpinning these positions clearly towards European citizens. In the case of enlargement, this might amount to acknowledging the growing politicization of accession negotiations, while nonetheless spelling out under which conditions a further widening of the Union would be in the interest of current member states and their citizens.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

Table S1. PRR parties included in analysis.

Table S2. Number of statements by party by mandate.

Table S3. Categorization of frames and arguments.

Table S4. Number of statements, party family and group affiliation and average position by national PRR party.

Table S5. Share of Turkey-related statements by year.

Table S6. Distribution of frames among party families, differentiating between Eastern and Western European origin for PRR actors.

Table S7. Average position by country, differentiating between PRR and non_PRR actors.

Table S8. Negative statements by PRR actors from Eastern and Western Europe.

Figure S1. Distribution of statements by party family.

Figure S2. Composition of PRR group over time.

Figure S3. Ideological proximity of PRR and other party families.

Figure S4. Average position over time, by party family.

Figure S5. Evolution of conditional positions over time, by party family.

Figure S6. Evolution of negative positions by party group.

Figure S7. Evolution of conditional positions by party group.

Figure S8. Support by target country.

Figure S9. Position by religion of the target country.

Figure S10. Use of identity framing by party family and as proportion of overall use and of negative positions.

Figure S11. Prevalence of normative arguments by session.

Figure S12. Evolution of framing over time.