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Disunity within the Ranks? Party Expulsions in the European Far-Right: 2000–2020

Drawing on an original database of party expulsions of far-right parties in Europe across twenty countries from 2000-2020, Felix Wiebrecht, James F. Downes, Edward Chan and Anna Kam devise a theoretical model that groups expulsions into two categories that comprise accountability mechanisms and political purges.

They find empirically that within the modern far-right, expulsions primarily take place due to two key factors, namely (a) ideological party disputes and (b) varying forms of extremism. These findings highlight the importance of internal party disputes alongside party leadership within the modern far-right that pose significant barriers to their electoral success.

The Case of the AfD

In July 2020, the Alternative for Germany's (AfD) party tribunal upheld the expulsion of its leader in the East German state of Brandenburg, [Andreas Kalbitz](#). The party leadership accused him of not having disclosed previous memberships in extreme right-wing organisations. Kalbitz held that he fell victim to conflicts within the party on its future direction.

Expulsions can be a double-edged sword for party leaders. On the one hand they can function as sanctioning and serve as accountability mechanisms to discharge members that damage the party's reputation, for instance through extremist or inappropriate remarks. On the other hand, though, expulsions can also portray a party as chaotic and divided, especially if the expulsion is heavily debated and has to go through several instances as in the case of Kalbitz.

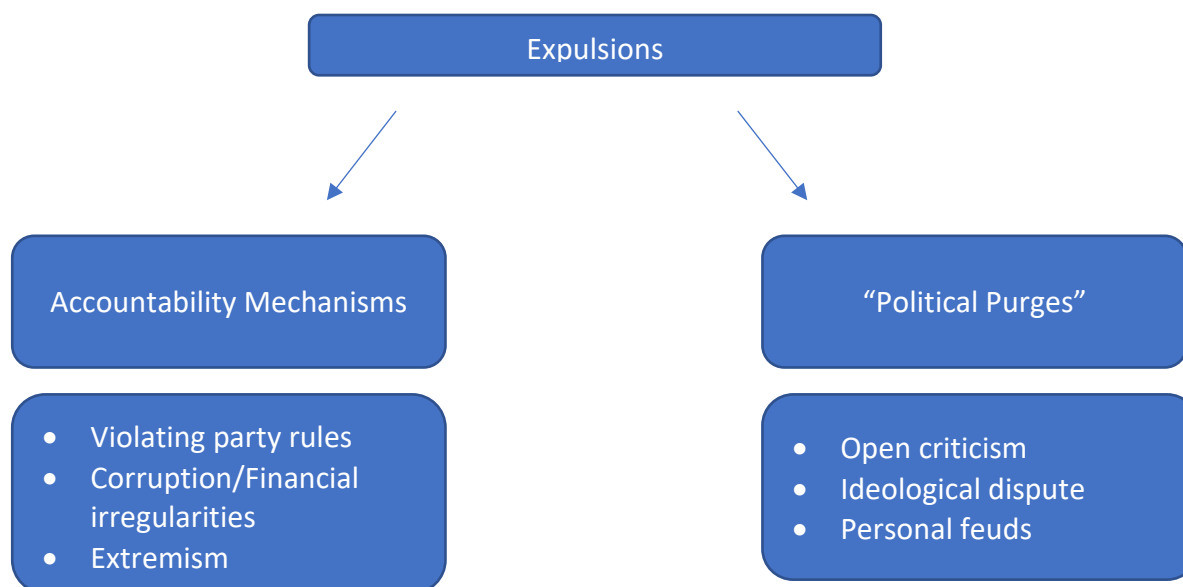
This can in turn easily lead to an electoral demise of the party or their own [‘self-sabotaging’](#). This recently occurred in both the far-right The Finns Party in Finland (Timo Soini) and in the Freedom Party of Austria ([Heinz-Christian Strache](#)) through their respective party leaders.

Theoretical Model

In order to explain different forms of party expulsions within the modern far-right, we devise a theoretical framework. For one, (a) expulsions can be accountability mechanisms to sanction genuine (or perceived) misconduct of members that can include the violation of formal party rules, corruption or other financial irregularities and being too extremist. On the other hand, (b) expulsions can be the result of open criticism of the party leadership, ideological conflicts or personal feuds.

We argue that the far-right parties' ideologies as well as their central party leadership are decisive in explaining which kind of expulsions occur in far-right parties. Figure 1 below outlines our main theoretical model of far-right party expulsions.

Figure 1: Theoretical Model of Expulsions (Far-Right Parties)



PRR v. ERW Parties: European Context

We draw on the scholarship of [Cas Mudde](#) in conceptualising the far-right as an ‘umbrella’ term, with populist radical right parties (PRR) and extreme right wing (ERW) parties falling under the far-right party family label. The modern extreme right includes parties such as Golden Dawn (Greece), Jobbik (Hungary), the NPD (Germany) alongside Kotleba (Slovakia).

In regard to expulsions, ERW parties [largely differ](#) from PRR parties in the sense that they rarely need to moderate themselves ideologically. Whilst PRR appear to be more ideologically moderate, ERW parties do not attempt to hide their ‘extreme’ positions. Thus, expulsions in ERW parties tend to fall into the second group of expulsions. This is also in line with their (even) more hierarchical leadership style, relative to PRR parties.

Importance of Party Leadership

The [party leadership](#) and underlying party organisation tends to be decisive in determining what ‘type’ of expulsions take place in far-right parties. It appears that strong party leaders are associated with the second type of expulsions (i.e. political purges).

Strong party leaders seek to strengthen their position by pre-empting potential challenges for the party leadership and have thus, exploited their position to expel other influential party members. Important leaders include Joerg Haider and Heinz-Christian Strache (both FPÖ), Jean-Marie Le Pen (Front National), Marine Le Pen (previously Front National/now National Rally) Pim Fortuyn (Pim Fortuyn List), Carl I. Hagen (Norwegian Progress Party) and Jarosław Kaczyński (PiS).

Original Database: Party Expulsions

Past party expulsions from far-right parties in Europe reveal that the Andreas Kalbitz AfD case is not a unique one and is part of a broader set of party expulsions within the modern far-right. We have collected a unique database of more than 200 past expulsions of far-right party

members in Europe, from 2000 until 2020. We find that we can group expulsions into two separate categories.

We collected a wide range of variables in our expulsions database. We included important variables such as the name of the expelled member, the reason for the expulsion, the position of the expelled member in the party, existing conflicts with far-right parties, the expulsion date, incumbency status, alongside the geographical location in Europe (West vs. East).

We expanded our database through collecting information in numerous European languages online, to enhance our overall sample size of cases. The database featured collecting information from (a) newspaper articles and (b) peer-reviewed academic publications of ‘party expulsions’ to enhance the overall sample size of party expulsions for far-right parties.

We have identified cases of expulsions in 20 different European countries that vary regionally (Western vs. Central-Eastern Europe). A large proportion of cases can be found in Western Europe, including Italy (Lega), Sweden (Swedish Democrats) and the United Kingdom (The United Kingdom Independence Party alongside the British Nationalist Party).

We then transformed our qualitative variable “Reason for Expulsion” into a categorical variable. This allowed our expulsions database to have a wide range of response options and a more fine-grained approach in classifying diverse cases of party expulsions. The categorical variable was also cross-checked by all of the four researchers, in order to increase both (a) reliability and (b) inter-coder consistency for this the variable. We also cross-checked our empirical findings with a number of country experts in European politics, who we acknowledge at the end of the article.

Our preliminary empirical analysis in Table 1 (N=234 cases) demonstrated that party expulsions are wide ranging in their overall nature and highlights important patterns. The most common explanation of party expulsions within far-right parties was ideological disputes (N=78), followed by varying forms of ‘extremism’ (N=56), such as anti-Semitism, anti-Islam and racism. It is interesting to note that personal feuds (N=8) played a weak role overall in constituting cases of party expulsions for far-right parties.

Table 1: Summary of Party Expulsions (Far-Right Parties in Europe, 2000–2020)

<u>Reason for Expulsion</u>	<u>Frequency (N)</u>
Breaking party internal rules/codes of conduct	37
Open criticism of party leadership	21
Ideological Disputes	78
Personal Feuds	8
Corruption/Scandals (Financial irregularities)	17
Extremism (Anti-Semitism/Anti-Islam/Racism)	56
Others (Unclassifiable)	11
Don’t Know	6
N=	234

Implications

Our preliminary empirical research has highlighted a considerable number of expulsions that have taken place within the modern European far-right. Two key factors in the form of (a) ideological party disputes and (b) varying forms of extremism can be found in our overall database. Other reasons for expulsions such as internal party disputes and open criticism of the party leadership play a less important role, alongside personal feuds.

Though these findings are preliminary, they highlight important implications, in demonstrating that modern far-right parties in Europe are far from [united](#) and have a considerable number of ideological disputes and tensions amongst both the (a) party leadership and amongst (b) rank and file party members.

In particular, ideological disputes between the more ‘moderate’ populist radical right and the more ‘extreme’ extreme right ideological wings continue to cause negative electoral implications for a number of far-right parties in the European political context. Our findings demonstrate important internal party disputes over ideology and ‘extremism’ that more likely than not cause significant barriers for the modern far-right to succeed electorally in the long-term.

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