&Government Opposition

Normalizing the Radical Right's Discourse on Press Freedom in the European Parliament: A Symbolic Interactionist Approach to the EMFA Debates

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Abstract

The radical right is now able to impose its personnel and its agenda as the 'new normal' for a different European Union (EU). Nevertheless, there is still a lack of research into how this normalization is circulated by radical-right members of the European Parliament (MEPs), eager to be part of the social world of the liberal democratic European parliamentarians. This process of normalization is investigated in this article by carrying out a critical discourse analysis of the argumentation used by radical-right MEPs to reject an EU regulation supposed to preserve press freedom, currently threatened by the radical right in many EU member states: the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA). The analysis shows that these MEPs have been keen to use a series of topoi to claim their embeddedness in liberal democracies, while mobilizing symbols and meanings revealing their autocratic roots and their willingness to redefine media freedom.

The June 2024 European Union (EU) parliamentary election showed the increasing centrality of the radical right, which has become the first or second most voted-for political family in countries such as France, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands. This success reveals the normalization of the political group and its agenda in Western democracies. The normalization has given rise to a series of academic works over recent years to better address the transformation of what constitute the accepted norms of politics and policies (Krzyżanowski 2020; Krzyżanowski et al. 2023). Investigations on

this topic have notably emphasized the role of interactions and social practices in facilitating the increasing legitimacy of radical-right organizations, personnel and agenda. These interactions and social practices involve centre-left/right political parties, but also established mass media outlets, offering visibility to the radical right and positioning themselves on the radical-right agenda (Brown et al. 2023; Lamour 2024a; Mondon 2025). The radical right has accepted playing by the rules of liberal democracies in order to circulate its publicity without being punished or banned, whereas the mainstream parties and mass media have progressively integrated the narratives and agenda of the radical right. However, there remains a lack of research into how the radical right has pursued its strategy of normalization when it addresses the threat that it poses to one of the foundations of liberal democracies: media freedom.

The normalization of the radical right in the EU has often been considered through the capacity of its 'issue entrepreneurs' to influence policies in key domains around the acceptance/rejection of cultural 'others' – for example, through migration control, foreign aid and the enlargement process (Hackenesch et al. 2022; Meijers 2017; Pirro and Taggart 2018; Pytlas 2020). The EU is also an arena in which other policy domains are debated, including the issue of media freedom. Media freedom was announced as a sensitive topic requiring EU-wide concern in the 2021 state of the union speech by Ursula von der Leyen, the president of the European Commission (EC). Von der Leyen signalled then that the EC would come up with a European Media Freedom Act (EMFA). This act came into force in May 2024 and included new rules to protect media pluralism (e.g. editorial independence, protection of journalistic sources, independence of public service media, transparency of media ownership and a European Board for Media Services to promote the new media law) (European Commission 2024). It was planned because of threats to media freedom that had been occurring for many years in European member states (Brogi et al. 2024), particularly in Hungary (Bajomi-Lázár 2021; Bátorfy and Urbán 2020; Holtz-Bacha 2024; Lamour 2021). The EMFA was debated in the European Parliament in 2023 and 2024, before it was voted for by the majority of the members of the European Parliament (MEPs). The new law was specifically designed to protect journalists and their sources of information from political interference (European Council 2024). The radical-right allies of Hungary's prime minister, Viktor Orbán, voted against the EMFA. This means MEPs from the 'Identity and Democracy' (ID) and 'European Conservatives and Reformists' (ECR) groups, together with, of course, the MEPs of Orbán's own party, Fidesz, part of the non-attached members of parliament (NI) (European Parliament 2024a). The question is thus: How do the discourses of the ID, ECR and Fidesz MEPs expressing themselves against this act reveal their strategy of normalization in the European Parliament?

In the next section, we present a review of the literature on the normalization of the radical right and the issue of media freedom, followed by the methodology used to address the research question, based on critical discourse analysis. The results are developed in three main parts, structured around the primary argumentations circulated by the radical-right political family that they should be accepted in the social world of EU parliamentarians, while in parallel diffusing the political agenda on media freedom, justifying their rejection of the EMFA. This analysis is followed by a discussion on the trajectory of media freedom in Europe and the positioning of the radical

right as it makes its stance on media freedom as a part of the 'new normal' of European democracies.

The radical right and media freedom: the value of symbolic interactionism to approach the normalization of a political entity in the public sphere

The radical right can be defined as a broad political family with political differentiation grounded in three main principles. First, its representation of an imagined exclusionary 'native' in-group whose cohesion is presented as jeopardized. Second, its comprehension of this native in-group as a dominated, silent and legitimate majority 'people', opposed to the dominant, vocal and illegitimate minority 'elite' and 'others'. Third, its common-sense legitimation of authoritarian measures presented as necessary to protect the native 'people' against their enemies and to express the will of the 'people'. The hegemonic sovereignty of the 'people' (generally understood as the nation) against the 'elite' is the power architecture marketed by the radical right to legitimize its agenda. For example, it helps this political group to justify its opposition to multilateral power organizations at the international level, such as the EU (Lamour 2024b, 2024c; Mudde 2017). These three principles – and the use of popular sovereignty – on which the discourse of the radical right are based are randomly emphasized, mitigated or silenced depending on a series of overlapping contextual elements associated with events or situations which the radical right market as constitutive of broader crises (Krzyżanowski et al. 2023; Lamour and Mazzoleni 2024; Moffitt 2015; Svraka 2024), sometimes including conspiracy theories (Bergmann 2018). These apparent crises require the radical right to shape 'chains of equivalence' – that is, a coalescence of communities presented as facing difficult issues or claiming different demands, but having in common an antagonistic relationship with an out-group presented as responsible for these unresolved difficulties or unanswered demands (Laclau 2005; Lamour 2020). The definition of chains of equivalence is what helps the radical right to reprocess an empty signifier (the 'people') and to ground a societal representation divided into separated and hermetic camps engaged in a power struggle (the 'people', the 'elite' and the 'others').

The definition of this structural antagonism fracturing society leads the radical right to remobilize and adapt statements produced in previous discourses. It reveals the historical and intertextual aspect of the radical right's discursive strategies. The historical roots of this political family are often associated with the vestiges of pre-Revolutionary France, 18th-century *Ancien Regime* power and state organization, with the emergence in the mid-19th century of the socioeconomic transformation of Europe and later condemnation of the liberal democratic regime, leading to its support of the 20th-century's fascist and Nazi regimes (Millington 2020; Saull 2015). The current radical right cannot be likened to fascist or Nazi parties, as it does not openly claim to end democracies or organize the killing of opponents. However, it is keen to use and distort quotations, metaphors and images previously present in the fascist and Nazi discourse, to generate a sense of crisis and for their provocative stance to be heard (Wodak 2021). The radical right also does not change its political regime from one day to the next when it reaches executive power, but it systematically promotes an illiberal strategy, hollowing out the substance of Western liberal democracy (Berezin 2009; Blokker 2022). This

notably includes the negation of minority rights, the ending of the separation between legislative, judiciary and executive powers, and the challenge to media freedom, as seen in Hungary (Lendvai 2017) and in Italy governed by Giorgia Meloni, the post-fascist leader welcomed in all the liberal democracies of the Western world (Giuffrida 2024; Kavall 2024).

The intertextual aspect of the electorally attractive radical-right narratives also reveals an imbrication of its discourses with those of other political groups and agents of the mass media through its normalization. The normalization of the radical right illustrates both its willingness to make itself and its agenda acceptable in the public sphere and the recognition of this acceptability by other political groups and the established mass media (Brown et al. 2023; Krzyżanowski 2020; Mondon 2025). The declining Christian democrat centre right may be particularly interested in forming opportunistic political coalitions with a normalized radical right, or at least in mobilizing its discourse and programme to regain a central place in the public sphere (Bale and Rovira Kaltwasser 2021; Lamour 2022a, 2024b, 2024d, 2025a; Ripoll Servent 2022). First, normalization is the adaptability of the radical right, whose strategists have developed a policy of respectability consisting of playing by the code of conduct of formal liberal democracy. This involves professional behaviour and the use of a more coded or moderate discursive style, which can secure access to cross-party institutional positions, possible alliances and visibility in the established mass media (Lamour 2022b, 2023, 2024a). The strategy can include internal 'ban and punish' policies towards party activists who are openly racist, as seen in the National Rally (RN) of Marine Le Pen in France during the 2024 legislative election campaign (Dély 2024). The second aspect of normalization is more about the transformation of what constitutes the normative approach to political behaviour, discourse and agenda in the public sphere. This aspect is based on the capacity of radical-right activists to become 'issue entrepreneurs' (Meijers 2017), imposing topics, agendas and discourse in public debates and requiring other political stakeholders and decision-makers to take positions accordingly (Hackenesch et al. 2022; Pirro and Taggart 2018; Pytlas 2021). This second aspect is about producing common-sense views, but also utterances that had previously been taboo and contained in the peripheries of politics (Krzyżanowski et al. 2023). Normalization as a discursive strategy of 'legitimization' of a radical-right party in the public sphere may be ineffective if we consider the party's ability to control the state executive, but normalization as a 'legitimization' of the topical discourse of the radical right in the state executive can be very effective (Krzyżanowski 2020). The case of French politics is particularly illustrative in this respect. Marine Le Pen's National Rally has been implementing a strategy of normalization for a decade and is perceived as a respectable party of French liberal democracy by the established media and centre-left/right parties. Nevertheless, it has been excluded from all national and regional coalition governments, even though its approach to a specific issue (immigration) has been the new norm in French government for many years.

This normalization of the radical right can be approached through symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionism consists of considering the adjustment processes carried out by interactive agents, defining their respective actions based on meanings associated with objects in a given context, with the constant use and manipulation of symbols to reproduce and shape the social world in which interactions take place

(Blumer 1986; Clarke et al. 2018). Social worlds are 'groups with shared commitments to certain activities, sharing resources of many kinds to achieve their goals, and building shared ideologies about how to go about their business' (Clarke 1991: 131). This does not mean that members of social worlds agree on the meanings associated with actions, but that they develop interactions ensuring they do things together on concrete issues, in spite of their disagreement (Lamour 2025b; Strauss 1978). For instance, the 'social world' of parliamentarians entails disputes, but MPs come together to argue and produce abiding laws voted for by majorities and leading to concrete consequences. The interacting agents of given social worlds, including that of parliamentarians, not only react to one another's positions, but are also engaged in the definition of meanings associated with these positions. Symbols and meanings are used to mediate the interactions on agreements and disagreements (Blumer 1986). The normalization of the radical right has been an emergent phenomenon in democratic public spheres over the past decade, implying the use of symbols and meaning in the social world of parliamentarians – including symbols and meanings associated with media freedom.

The radical right has been keen to connect negative meanings to the use of freedom exercised by the established mainstream media, portrayed as part of the 'elite system' and disconnected from – and even lying to – the 'people'. It has remobilized the 1920s–1930s German Nazis' *Lügenpresse* (lying press) narratives to discredit and reject authoritative journalistic information, portraying it as 'fake news', as seen randomly in Trump's America and Orbán's Hungary (Bajomi-Lázár and Horváth 2023). In parallel, media freedom has been both used and jeopardized by the radical right to legitimize exclusively its vision of society and its political agenda, through the control of mass media ownership and editorial lines (Lamour 2024a, 2025a). The interest of the radical right in mass media control necessitates a consideration of the conceptual definition of media freedom. A number of works have been published about the commercial and political pressures on independent journalism (Steel and Petley 2023), and media freedom has been investigated by international organizations such as Article 19. It is apparent that 'media freedom' is an issue that has been heavily used over past decades by interest groups and individuals eager to imply the defence of the status quo in media capitalism, with an equivalence between media freedom and media power (and especially that of media owners to prioritize the news agenda). This has led to the subsequent depoliticization of media freedom as a citizen's right (Dawes 2023).

The meanings of media freedom are based on two main theories. The first, claimed by the radical right and its allies in the social and mass media, concerns dissolving media freedom into a broader freedom determined by the absence of constraints and especially rejecting the regulatory authority of the state over the delivered information, seen as a potentially manipulative and pressuring organization, limiting individual liberties and leading to censorship of the media that should be self-regulating. The radical right has remobilized this theory to construct its discursive opposition between an oppressed, sovereign and exclusionary 'people' who demand the truth, and the oppressive, global and politically correct minority groups ('elite' and cultural 'other') who hide the truth (Knops and de Cleen 2019). This radical-right approach was notably spelled

out by US Vice President JD Vance at the 2025 Munich Security Conference (Wintour 2025). The second theory is about empowering the media as an instrument support-ing plural democratic views. The idea is that the media not only has to circulate its own ideas, but also needs to receive and circulate external, plural and contradictory ideas, while banning discourse considered to be against human dignity (for example, racist discourse). This second conceptualization of media freedom is central in the EU (Tambini 2021). It led the European Parliament to vote in favour of the EMFA in order to contain or reverse the successful use of the media freedom argument by the radi-cal right wishing to appear as the 'new normal' of European liberal democracy while destroying the essence of European liberal democracy (Holtz-Bacha 2024).

Many current radical-right political groups use 'freedom' in their naming, such as the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), the Dutch Freedom Party (PVV), the Latvian National Alliance for Fatherland and Freedom (NA) and the one-time EU parliamen-tary radical-right group coordinated by the National Front of Marine Le Pen and named the 'Europe of Nations and Freedom'. Nevertheless, there is limited research on how this political family defines symbols and meanings associated with media free-dom in its current strategy of normalization in political arenas. MEPs had to debate the European Media Freedom Act in 2023 and 2024, as a result of the eagerness of the EC to protect press freedom as a central element of liberal democracy in the EU. This act was supposed to protect liberal democracies in EU member states from the current trend of journalistic censorship, experienced notably in radical-right-controlled coun-tries. It was voted for without the support of radical-right MEPs (European Parliament 2024a). How did the radical-right MEPs' discourse against this act reveal their strategy of normalization in the social world of EU parliamentarians?

Methodology: looking at normalization through critical discourse analysis

The research was carried out via a critical discourse analysis of speeches circulated by a series of radical-right MEPs during the plenary sessions of the EU parliament in Strasbourg on 3 October 2023 and 12 March 2024, concerning the EMFA. These speeches were collected in the verbatim record of the proceedings available on the website of the European Parliament (European Parliament 2023, 2024b). The aim of the critical discourse analysis is to study the radical-right MEPs seeking normalization within the European Parliament as a discursive strategy of 'legitimization' mobilized by politicians eager to show that they belonged to the liberal democratic order through a softening of their extreme positions, leading to the manipulation of symbols and mean-ings to make their argumentation acceptable (Krzyżanowski 2020). Critical discourse analysis is especially appropriate to investigate this aspect of the normalization of the radical right performed through their interaction with other politicians, as it considers discourse both as a social practice and as constituted by other social practices defined by situational, institutional and social contexts (Fairclough and Wodak 1997). Here, the radical-right MEPs produced a discourse in reaction to a legislative act (situational context) in a specific political arena, the EU parliament (institutional context), exclu-sively on one social issue: media freedom (social context). These MEPs also had a given trajectory in politics orientating their discourse (social context). The contexts required them to use and manipulate specific inherited symbols and meanings to interpret this

legal act and justify its rejection, without being expelled or punished by the European Parliament for not respecting its code of conduct and democratic principles.

The symbols and meanings used by the radical-right MEPs are approached by paying attention to discursive aspects investigated in critical discourse analysis in order to single out the circulated power and ideological struggle (Wodak and Meyer 2001). First, the common-sense *argumentation* or *topos* justifying their rejection of the EMFA. Second, the *nomination* and positive or negative *attributes* these MEPs associated with media freedom, the EMFA and the institutions involved in the processual definition of the EMFA to ground their topoi. Third, the *mitigation* or *intensification* of discursive strategies used to emphasize their rejection of the EMFA without being banned or punished by the EU pParliament. The intertextual dimension of their discourse and the eagerness of the radical right to mobilize past symbols and meanings associated with radical-right history is emphasized, while available information about the social and political trajectory of intervening radical-right MEPs is used to understand their specific stances.

Seventeen Eurosceptic MEPs belonging to the radical right-wing groups 'Identity and Democracy' (ID) (seven) and 'European Conservatives and Reformists' (ECR) (nine), as well as one MEP from the non-attached members of parliament (NI) (a member of the Hungarian Fidesz party) took part in the debates during the two plenary sessions. Ten voted against the EMFA, three voted in favour (exclusively from the ECR), two abstained and one did not take part in the vote. The aim is not to carry out a critical discourse analysis of all the speeches produced by the 17 MEPs. The objective is to analyse textual segments expressing the main types of argument developed by MEPs rejecting the EMFA while clearly expressing a normalization strategy within the European Parliament.

Debating on media freedom in the European Parliament: to interact on an act with tact and diktat

The MEPs considered in this article belong to Eurosceptic radical-right parties that are keen to speak in the name of their native national 'people' against the 'elite' and 'others', with a view to justifying authoritarian measures targeting the enemy of the native people (Mudde 2017; Svraka 2024). However, these nativist, populist and authoritarian ideological backgrounds were clearly silenced or reprocessed by almost all MEPs when discussing media freedom and the EMFA. Their engagement within the social world of MEPs led them to produce symbols and meanings associated with these topics that were characteristic of a strategy of normalization as a discursive strategy of 'legitimization' in the political arena (Krzyżanowski 2020). This was in spite of their disagreement with other MEPs (Strauss 1978) and with the aim of achieving a common goal (Clarke 1991) – here, voting for laws. Most of them were against the EMFA, in contrast to centre-left/right MEPs, but they nonetheless produced a discourse expressing their eagerness to belong to the 'social world' of EU parliamentarians. Their common rejection of the EMFA, combined with their common desire to be part of the EU legislative community (expressed in various ways), points to the existence of a 'unity in diversity' of EU radical-right parties included in specific parliamentary groups (ID, ECR and NI). These MEPs worked collectively to make these political

groups appear as a 'new normal' of European democracy, even if they had not been able to influence the vote of non-radical-right MEPs. They implemented a structural strategy of 'legitimization', showing that they could easily be involved in future collaborations with a weakened centre right because of their respectability, professionalism and coded moderation. The normalization of the radical right was organized around three main topoi. First, the topos of the law in liberal democracies. Second, the topos of media freedom, centred on the oppression by regulators. Third, the topos of media freedom dissolved into the broader freedom of speech and an antagonistic vision of society based on chains of equivalence and discursive ambivalences. These common-sense argumentations often somehow included reverence for the EU parliament and freedom of the media. The topoi also incorporated the historical and ideological backgrounds of the radical right that were circulated through inherited utterances and used to condemn the EMFA and the EU without the risk of being banned from the EU parliament.

Introducing respectability and engaging with parliamentary social practices around the law

Members of the European Parliament who took advantage of their freedom of speech to use vulgar content in contrast to the more coded and elaborate discourse expected of parliamentarians were very rare in the present case. Only one of them clearly used a metaphor painting the EU negatively with a lowbrow discursive populist style – Harald Vilimsky of the Austrian FPÖ, who had previously shown disrespect for the EU, notably by calling past EC President Jean-Claude Junker a shameful alcoholic who should be removed from his post. 'Whenever the European Union takes up the issue of freedom, it is a bit like asking your dog to look after the sausage. That certainly does not work', said the foul-mouthed MEP in his introduction to reject the EMFA (European Parliament 2023).

By contrast, what all the other radical-right MEPs had in common was their shared willingness to signal their opposition in line with the common goals of all MEPs – that is, the debates, implying the use of a respectful discursive style, and the passing of laws. They could do so as solicitors contesting the admissibility of a case in a court of justice, requiring them to master and enunciate all the legal procedures of the EU parliament. Gilles Lebreton of the RN was the one who by far clearly most wanted to show all his colleagues that he was an expert in the field. This inclination can be explained by the fact that he was a professor of law studies in a previous professional academic life:

Lebreton: Madam President, ladies and gentlemen, freedom of the media is a fundamental principle that anyone who sincerely believes in liberal democracy must defend. However, for three reasons, I disagree with the text proposed by the Commission to protect it. First, media freedom is the exclusive competence of States. The legal basis used to justify the European Union's interference, Article 114 TFEU, is completely artificial, as the French Senate, the German Bundesrat and the Hungarian National Assembly have pointed out. Secondly, the instrument chosen, the regulation rather than a simple directive, reflects the

authoritarianism of the Union, which wants to impose its ideological conformity on the national media. Finally, the intentions of the text are as clear as they are frightening. It is a question of bringing to heel the media that resist the Europeanist doxa in Hungary, Poland and also in France, as far as Vincent Bolloré's group is concerned. You say that media freedom is in danger. That is true, but in this case it is the European Union that is threatening it. (European Parliament 2023)[1]

The topos of law used by Lebreton shows how radical-right MEPs can mingle symbols and meanings with the aim of bringing together MEPs and different types of democracies to secure the radical-right politicians' position in the social world of parliamentarians, while rejecting the core essence of the EU. First, Lebreton's common-sense argumentation was introduced by the undefined nomination of a group ('anyone') with an ideational common positive attribute (a belief in liberal democracy), justifying a shared perspective of media freedom (a fundamental principle). Lebreton was one among the 'anyone' of the liberal democratic order assembled in the EU parliament. Second, his transition from the positive 'anyone' to the progressively defined negative 'someone' (the EC and progressively the whole Union) was moderated by his recognition of a positive attribute defended by the EC (the protection of media freedom). Third, he used a nation-first argument, which helped to endorse a negative portrayal of the law defended by the EC. It was not only he who defined the negative attribute of the law from a regulatory point of view ('completely artificial'), but democratically elected national assemblies did so too. However, in his enunciation of these national assemblies, one can note that the MEP was eager to mingle opposing types of democracies in Europe (the French and German ones, still animated by liberal democratic principles, and Hungary, which has become a simulacrum of a liberal democracy). The mention of Hungary constituted a point of fracture in the topos of the law of Lebreton. What followed was a 'copy and paste' of all the negative attributes traditionally associated with the radical right and its allies (Hungary, Poland, the media group of Bolloré in France) as attributes of the EC and EU, while the radical right and its allies were presented as victims of the Commission and the Union. One can also note the intensification of the negative aspects of the EC and EU, with a transition from negative ideology (authoritarianism, doxa) to metaphors for symbolic violence (to bring to heel the media), justifying negative emotions (fears, threats). The EU parliament was nevertheless not the target of his attack.

Elżbieta Kruk of the Polish Law and Justice (PiS) also insisted on a topos of law, with an opposition between EU and national laws to emphasize the national popular sovereignty characteristic of the radical right (Mudde 2017). However, she was engaged in an attempt at normalization characterized by a more pronounced softening of discourse:

Kruk, on behalf of the ECR Group: Madam Chairwoman, I would like to thank you for your comments. The proposed regulation on the European Media Freedom Act introduces provisions that are not concerned with improving the functioning of the single market. It thus violates the provisions of the Treaty on

the Functioning of the European Union indicated as the legal basis. It also significantly limits the competence of member states to shape cultural and media policy. The unification of media regulations throughout the Union may in fact lead to the destruction of national systems … No one questions the principle of media freedom. But is the Commission's real goal to strengthen this freedom, or, under the guise of concern for it, to assume extra-treaty powers that infringe on the sovereignty of member states in this area? (European Parliament 2023)

Kruk (ECR): Mr President! The few positive changes made to the European Media Freedom Act as a result of inter-institutional negotiations are not enough. The basic issue that remains is the wrong legal basis for the proposal. Not all the regulations included here apply to services provided in the single market, so Article 114 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union cannot be invoked here. The extension of regulation to such markets as the radio market or, in particular, the press market, furthermore violates the provisions of the treaties, limiting the competence of member states in shaping media policy, and thus their cultural sovereignty. This has nothing to do with protecting media freedom. On the contrary, it is contrary to the protection of press freedom, to say the least. … Is it possible to regulate freedom by regulation, especially when, under the guise of protecting values such as freedom of expression, independence of the media, their freedom is in fact threatened? (European Parliament 2024b)

Her willingness to be accepted as part of the social world of MEPs was determined by the singularity and the positive interaction sought by nominated liberal democrats occupying a function of power in the parliament. Her two interventions in 2023 and 2024 followed the same line of introduction, although the later one revealed the limit of the cooperation (2023: 'Madam Chairwoman, I would like to thank you for your comments'. 2024: 'Mr President! The few positive changes made to the European Media Freedom Act as a result of inter-institutional negotiations are not enough'). Her topos of the law was thus organized around the same negative attributes (violation, limitation, destruction) in both speeches. Her speeches always ended with an interrogative, producing an image of the European Commission inducing what is common in radical-right discourse: conspiracy theory (Bergmann 2018; Lamour 2024a, 2024b): 'is the Commission's real goal to strengthen this freedom …?'; 'Is it possible to regulate freedom by regulation, especially when … their freedom is in fact threatened?'. Once again, it was not the European Parliament that was under attack by the MEP.

Reversing attributes of an alien past and present while circulating a topos of media freedom

MEPs insisted on being on the side of freedom. Nevertheless, the striking dimension of their sought-for normalization when emphasizing their love of freedom often consisted of absorbing symbols and meanings that were distant from their historical roots and that could be promoted to defend a legislative status quo. Their rejection of the EMFA was in fact about promoting an equivalence between media freedom and the power of media owners (Dawes 2023). It was especially about preserving the power of media owners sympathetic to the radical right, such as the French entrepreneur

Bolloré, mentioned in the discourse of some National Rally MEPs and behind the rapprochement between the RN and a part of the mainstream right in France (Chemin and Trippenbach 2024). We should note the speech below by the French MEP André Rougé of the National Rally, a party with historical origins in the past National Front of Jean-Marie Le Pen and including the support of the autocratic regime of Pétain in Vichy France and political opposition to the election of General de Gaulle as French president in 1965 (Millington 2020).

> André Rougé (ID): Mr President, dear colleagues, in 1941, in Oxford, General de Gaulle declared: 'At the basis of our civilization, there is the freedom of each individual in his thoughts, beliefs and opinions'. To speak of freedom in this forum, where texts are voted on that standardize and constrain in a punitive manner, and where the Commission blackmails States, is like speaking of ropes in a hanged man's house. Attempted democratic dispossession of States, revision of national history, Brussels lawsuit brought by Thierry Breton against Elon Musk, threatened with 'von der Leyenienne' purge. On YouTube, far-left groups and the Macronian *bien-pensance* have censored content deemed hateful according to their own criteria. … Our freedoms are threatened by the construction of a European superstate, of which Emmanuel Macron is one of the architects. And in Macronie [France under President Macron], depending on whether you're a globalist or a patriot, the judgements of the intelligentsia in power will make you guilty or innocent. The French still want to believe in the free France of liberty, equality and fraternity. So leave them in peace. (European Parliament 2024b)

André Rougé connected media freedom to distorted meaningful symbols and quotations associated with the rejection of authoritarian oppression. First, he endorsed a quotation by the Frenchman who rejected the collaborationist regime of Pétain (De Gaulle) and, later in his speech, de Gaulle's political goal during World War II ('La France Libre', 'Free France'), together with his respect for French democratic symbols ('liberty, equality and fraternity'). In parallel, he associated the EC with negative attributes and metaphors of real or symbolic violence connected with the 20th-century Nazi, fascist and autocratic past of Europe ('punition', 'blackmail', 'ropes in a hanged man's house', 'revision of national history', 'von der Leyenienne purge'). Rougé ended his dystopian vision of today's EC with rearranged versions of famous quotations by important Frenchmen. First, the 17th-century fabulist La Fontaine, with the adapted ending of his fable *The Animals Sick of the Plague*, including a reflection on authoritarian power dominance (La Fontaine: 'Depending on your power or lack, judgement will paint you white or black'; Rougé: 'Depending on whether you're a globalist or a patriot, judgement of the intelligentsia in power will make you guilty or innocent'). Second, the French centre-right and liberal president who followed de Gaulle, President Georges Pompidou, expressing his annoyance at too many French regulations in general. This sentence was often mentioned in the French mass media during the preparations for the 50th anniversary of Pompidou's death in 2024 (Pompidou: 'Leave the French in peace'; Rougé: 'Leave them [the French] in peace'). It is worth noting that the normalization sought by the RN MEPs was, in the case of Rougé, facilitated by his own personal trajectory in French politics. Before joining the RN, he

was a long-term activist in the centre right created by de Gaulle and his successors. He brought with him to the RN the 'Free France' symbols and meanings corresponding to the expectations of the RN in its strategy for acceptance in democratic politics. The motto of Vichy France ('Work, Family, Homeland') or the vitriolic quotations of Jean-Marie Le Pen, who created his party in the last years of Pompidou's presidency with the support of former members of the SS, were by contrast cancelled in Rougé's speech.

Like many of her radical-right colleagues, Beata Mazurek of the Polish PiS suggested belonging to the EU parliament by associating positive attributes to the EMFA in her introductory address to the head of the parliament on 12 March 2024:

> Beata Mazurek (ECR): Mr President! The goal and objectives of the European Media Freedom Act are unquestionably correct. However, the proposed solutions are not legally sound, nor do they guarantee media independence. Despite declarations about the full sovereignty of the EU institutions that are supposed to guard media freedom, the European Commission will have significant influence over the newly established supervisory body, the European Media Services Council. Media pluralism should be ensured in member states without interference from Brussels. I believe that the Commission has already tried more than once to interfere in the electoral process of individual member states. So what guarantee do we have that it will not do so again with the influence provided by this act? The foundation of our democracy is freedom of speech, which must not be interfered with by excessive regulation. Otherwise it will be a 'European anti-freedom media act'. Commissioner Jourová, to you I say, I don't believe you either. The takeover of the media by the current ruling coalition in Poland, which many refer to as the 'December 13 coalition', took place illegally, as we know not only in Poland, but also in Europe and the world. You and your Commission have done nothing to protect journalists. (European Parliament 2024b)

Nevertheless, Beata Mazurek then developed an exacerbated criticism, moving from legality and sovereignty to the media freedom theory with the inclusion of a national situational context to ground her argumentation: the recent departure of the PiS from the Polish government following national elections. Mazurek was less opposed to media freedom regulatory authorities than to the upscaling of this power of control with a nominated empowered EC, the negative aspects of which were amplified in the speech (an influence later becoming an interference). The illegitimacy of the EMFA would progressively become an illegitimacy of actions taken by authorities opposed to the regulatory power of the radical right, with an extensive recollection of the Polish situation without directly mentioning the PiS. This reversal of the threat to media freedom between liberal democratic authorities and radical-right ones ended with the negative and generalized qualification of a non-regulatory EC ('You and your Commission have done nothing to protect journalists'). Mazurek's normalization strategy was about silencing a structural difference on media freedom between liberal and radical-right executive power in charge of media regulatory authorities, while making a victim of a radical-right-ruled media system (characterized by structural censorship) when it is re-appropriated by liberal parties.

Connecting media freedom to chains of equivalence and ambivalent meanings

Two female radical-right MEPs whose views were circulated in both October 2023 and March 2024 (Andrea Bocskor of the Hungarian Fidesz party and Catherine Griset of the French National Rally) notably developed a discourse grounded in a theory of media freedom, to which unclear allegations and 'chains of equivalence' were associated, connecting media freedom to other issues (Laclau 2005). What distinguished their speeches compared with most of the other MEPs considered here was their criticism of the institution that included them: the EU parliament. This criticism can be related to political and personal contexts. Bocskor was critical of the parliament that, a few years before, voted for a procedural sanction against Hungary following the publication of a report describing the collapse of the rule of law in the Fidesz-ruled member state (Sargentini 2018). Griset was, for her part, personally involved in a court case and accused of being a fictive attaché of the MEP Marine Le Pen (Maad 2024).

The normalization sought by Bocskor, a Ukrainian-born Hungarian, consisted of combining multiple symbols attached to Hungary progressively becoming a common-sense identity of the European right. She was the voice of Viktor Orbán in the European Parliament:

> Andrea Bocskor (NI), in writing: We Hungarians knew what freedom of the press was even in 1848 … It is no different today when we talk about freedom of the media or freedom of expression. Hungarian society clearly wants peace, a Hungary based on European and Christian values and a traditional family model, and does not want to be under the tutelage of a centralized Brussels bureaucracy … We stand for freedom of opinion and media freedom and plurality. We will not give up our sovereignty! We do not ask for outside interference, for propaganda from Brussels that war is a good thing, that the migrant flood is boosting and beautifying our country, that there is nothing more progressive than having our children sensitized by gender activists, to have Soros activists posing as journalists elevated above the law. We will stand up for the protection of journalists and free speech to the end! (European Parliament 2023)

> Andrea Bocskor (NI): The aim of EU regulation is to ensure that only the voice of Brussels can be heard in the public sphere in the Member States, and to suppress national and Christian conservative opinions and values. Hungary is committed to free expression and diverse media content. We Hungarians knew what freedom of the press was in 1848. Therefore, it is clear that in the context of the upcoming EP [European Parliament] elections, this regulation is yet another tool to weaken the right. (European Parliament 2024b)

Bocskor's discourse echoed the repeated hatred circulated by Viktor Orbán, who was keen to connect multiple issues to construct an overarching antagonism between the imagined national communities of Europe (in particular the Hungarian ones) and the EU (Lamour 2021, 2022a, 2024b; Lendvai 2017). Her critical stance was constantly regenerated by mobilizing the negatively connoted nomination of the EU ('Brussels') to which were attached no-less-negative attributes ('bureaucracy', 'bureaucrats', 'propaganda', 'censorship law'). All this negativity and her strategy of joining together

equivalent situations and issues served to promote a theory of media freedom opposed to the idea that the role of a free media is to enable citizens to access a diversity of views as a right (Dawes 2023) ('freedom of the media or freedom of expression'). The necessary media freedom in the current Europe suggested by Bocskor was associated with that of the mid-19th century, when there was no regulation to enable citizens to access plural news content. The ending of her first contribution to the debates in 2023 concerned binding media freedom to the tensions and cultural war waged by Orbán over the past years (Orbán's struggle with the EU over the positioning on the war in Ukraine, the scapegoating of minorities such as migrants and LGBTQ+, the focus on manipulative fifth-column-like Soros supporters). These connections helped her to redefine the meaning of journalists without claiming the end of democracy: professionals to be protected by an in-group ('we') whose attributes are those of the radical right (prevention of support for Ukraine attacked by the autocratic Russia, stigmatization of cultural communities as existential threats). The conclusion of her second discourse was about reprocessing the chains of equivalence, but by qualifying a political positioning in a rescaled Europe and political family. Her normalization strategy therefore consisted of displacing Hungarian demands on a European scale and incorporating the radical right into a broader right ('Christian conservative opinion') which could appeal to Christian democrat MEPs.

Griset, a long-term friend, ex-sister-in-law and ex-parliamentary attaché of Marine Le Pen, preferred to define a normalizing discourse by circulating insinuations, truncated symbols and meanings in which both a reversal of accusation and a radical-right agenda for France surfaced (if the party reached national executive power). She was the voice of Marine Le Pen in the European Parliament:

Catherine Griset: Madam President, Commissioner, ladies and gentlemen, according to Edmund Burke, the Irish philosopher, the media were already a fourth estate in the 18th century, and since then their influence has continued to grow … the freedom of these media is one of the foundations of democracy, which is based on freedom of expression and opinion. And it is our duty to ensure that this freedom continues to be protected by national laws. There are a number of fundamental reasons why I am opposed to this regulation. Firstly, because the Commission is relying on the false argument that there is a European media market. Secondly, because it is lying when it says that its aim is to protect media freedom. And finally, because it wants to impose a set of binding rules on all Member States, even though only a few States are targeted. To sum up this legislative proposal, the Commission is seeking to monopolize a new national prerogative while ensuring that Europeans get the information it would like and that they finally vote accordingly. (European Parliament 2023)

Catherine Griset: We are well aware that pluralism and freedom of opinion are not values of the Europe of Brussels. The way this assembly treats the opposition is a case in point. While France's public broadcasting system blithely professes an ideology, it is a private channel that is targeted and then sanctioned by the media regulator. With this text [the EMFA], we are going to entrust all the regulators to a

committee steered by the European Commission, which, in its hands, risks transforming itself into the Ministry of Truth described by Orwell to track down the politically incorrect. Media freedom is a principle at the heart of the democracy to which we are committed. Along with my French colleagues in the Identity and Democracy group, we will oppose any form of gag order that bureaucrats would like to impose. (European Parliament 2024b)

Griset's topos of media freedom was also based on remembering a distant historical past when liberal democracy was still in its infancy, with a reference to a thinker important for recognizing the power of the media in his time: Burke – a thinker who was actually also a fervent opponent of the 1789 French Revolution. Griset's introductory speech in 2023 and her concluding one in 2024 helped her to position herself in the democratic camp of freedom and not in favour of autocracy. She always grounded her legitimacy to belong to the social world of the elected MEPs. The hegemonic popular and national sovereignty argumentation was similar to that of her radical-right colleagues. However, she added another dimension to her normalization strategy: ill-defined nomination and attributes in the tension between the radical right she represented and the liberal parties of the centre left and right in terms of media freedom regulation. First, she did so by recalling problematic countries in terms of media freedom in the EU behind the decision to have an EMFA regulation, but without defining them ('only a few States are targeted'). She did not feel obliged to defend the radical-right-controlled countries targeted as damaging the media freedom, such as Hungary. However she later endorsed the vision of the radical-right Hungarian MEP on the meaning behind the EMFA, a negative attribute to end democratic pluralism ('to monopolize a new national prerogative while ensuring that Europeans get the information it would like and that they finally vote accordingly'). This vision could be reprocessed by moving to the symbolic world of novels and negative attributes ('a committee steered by the European Commission, which, in its hands, risks transforming itself into the Ministry of Truth described by Orwell to track down the politically incorrect'). Second, she rescaled her speech to the national French context, but again without clearly defining the terms of the tension between the radical right and their liberal opponents in the French democracy. This could sound merely like a tension between the public and private media sector, as the attributes were never clearly determined. No information was provided regarding the meaning of the negative attribute given to the public broadcasting system ('an ideology'). Further, no information was provided about the victimized private channel and the reason behind the sanction put in place by the French public regulator. Media regulation in a liberal democracy was thus oriented as an arbitrary rule affecting the private sector. This approach was in tune with the theory of media freedom professed by the radical right to be accepted in the social world of parliamentarians in liberal democracies. It was about claiming a status quo supporting private mass media ownership power and primarily the power of media owners supportive of the radical right, such as, potentially, Bolloré – owner of the C-News and C8 'private channel' mentioned – although not clearly identified by Griset. The Bolloré media empire has been condemned by the French media regulatory agency, Arcom, for disseminating sensationalist misinformation in line with the discourse of the radical right (*Le Monde* with AFP 2024).

Conclusion: the dying trajectory of media freedom in Europe

The radical right's normalization strategy included different techniques in the European Parliament when the EMFA was debated. First, the radical-right MEPs tended to claim their place in the social world of liberal democrat politicians, animated by the quest for freedom and the rule of law. Second, they used all the negative symbols and meanings associated with the radical right and its historical roots to define the reasoning and consequences behind a liberal democrat media regulation. Third, they mobilized distorted theories of media freedom, combined with discursive ambivalence and chains of equivalence, to reject the act. The radical-right politicians did not succeed in convincing a majority of MEPs to prevent the EMFA being passed. However, their discursive strategy was an element to show that they constituted a 'new normal' face of the social world of EU parliamentarians. They were listened to and not ejected from the parliament, because they mastered the discursive code, preventing their expulsion and securing their respectability. These politicians showed the Christian democrat and conservative MEPs in particular that their political groups could constitute acceptable coalition partners in a future European Parliament, while the *cordon sanitaire* between the weakened centre right and the strengthened radical right was becoming increasingly porous in multiple political arenas (Bale and Rovira Kaltwasser 2021; Ripoll Servent 2022). The radical right's soft opposition to the EMFA concealed nevertheless a clear strategic and anti-democratic process: the dying trajectory of media freedom.

As sociologists studying death in 1960s US hospitals, Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss coined the phrase 'dying trajectory' to describe a process with an end that is certain, but somewhat unplanned, with relatively loose institutional framing and the involvement of a series of actors whose social practices are partially regulated. Patients who are at the centre of the process experience desirable/undesirable, inevitable/reversible, alone/collectively, voluntarily/involuntarily transitions of status from life to death. This transition depends on their experience of prescribed steps and on the regularized actions assumed by a series of participants securing the actual transition, depending on the clarity of signs available and the amount of control they have. The patient also assumes a control function more or less developed in interaction with the surrounding participants (Glaser and Strauss 1968). As conceptualized by Glaser and Strauss (1968), there are many dying trajectories and 'trajectory' as a concept can be used to address the evolution of a phenomenon and the sum of actions and interactions contributing to this evolution (Strauss 1993), such as for instance that of media freedom. European MEPs can be considered important stakeholders whose collective social practices (such as defining abiding laws) determine the trajectory of media freedom and the transition of the status of the 'patients' at the centre of media freedom, who are not journalists or editorial teams, but more importantly citizens (Dawes 2023). The dying trajectory of media freedom involves all the sets of actions carried out and potentially leading to the death of the liberal democratic citizenry. It can take place through the progressively changing status of the citizenry as a group that is denied access to plural and critical news content due to the ability of the radical-right stakeholders and their supporters in the realm of media capitalism to frame news agendas and cancel critical voices. The normalization strategy of the radical right in the social

world of parliamentarians can be considered as one of the actions carried out by this political family to advance its visions for media freedom and to facilitate the death of liberal democratic citizenry without being excluded from parliaments.

The passing of the EMFA can be seen as a victory to reverse the dying trajectory of media freedom in an EU in which the member states are one by one becoming controlled by radical-right parties, alone or in coalitions. Nevertheless, the EMFA arrived too late and with a limited ambition to prevent the process of media control by the radical right and the cerebral death of the liberal democratic citizenry when this political family can maintain executive power in the long term, as seen in Hungary. The EMFA would also not prevent the claimed privatization of the French public, quality and investigative audiovisual sector (potentially to media owners supportive of the radical right) by the French National Rally if it was in power, as planned in its 2024 national legislative election campaign agenda. Exploring the political and policy transformation of the EU in the current era, leading to the possible collapse of the democratic ideational backgrounds of its founders, is about addressing the changing nature of the radical-right agents mastering communication codes to impose step by step the dying trajectory of media freedom and liberal democracy.

Notes

1 Translations are the author's.

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