


RESEARCH ARTICLE

Normalizing and Mainstreaming the French Radical Right: Divergences in Leadership Communication during a Summer of Inland and Borderland Tensions

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Abstract

The radical right has become a central political force in most Western democracies. This process has been the result of the normalization and mainstreaming of its political leaders, discourses, and visions of society, notably involving the scapegoating of immigration and the use of the Great Replacement conspiracy theory. However, the normalization and mainstreaming of radical right actors competing for the leadership of their overall political family remain an under-researched topic. The scope of the current article is to explore this phenomenon by considering the case of France, which after the United States, is the largest Western state that could potentially be ruled by a radical right president with extensive executive powers. The analysis shows that actors competing for the leadership of the radical right in a given country can generate diverging strategies of normalization and mainstreaming to secure their political distinction. Immigration and the Great Replacement constitute, respectively, a topic and a conspiracy theory that are emphasized and/or downplayed by opportunistic stakeholders weaving a web of interactions to define their comparative legitimacy and supremacy in the public sphere.

Keywords: Radical-right normalization and mainstreaming; immigration; Great Replacement conspiracy theory; France; critical discourse analysis

Introduction

The radical right can be defined as a political family founded on three interdependent ideological pillars, constantly reinforced or attenuated according to political opportunities: nativism, populism, and authoritarianism. The radical right claims to speak on behalf of an exclusive, cohesive, and rooted group of “natives”, endowed with specific and fixed cultural, civilizational, and national traits. This in-group of “natives” constituting the “people” is then opposed to out-groups (the liberal “elite” and the “others”, i.e., minorities, including migrants) whose actions and interests are flagged as threatening to the “natives”. Finally, the radical

right supports the authoritarian use of state power against the designated enemies of the “natives” (Lamour 2024a; Mudde 2017).

This political family has gradually been able to frame what should constitute a return to normal situations following the presence of issues they helped construct as crises such as migration management (Biancalana et al. 2023; Krzyżanowski et al. 2023; Lamour and Carls, 2022; Moffitt, 2015). This ability to circulate performative societal imaginaries presupposes interactions between the radical right and other actors in circles of power such as other political parties and the mass media. Two concepts have been used to capture the performativity of radical right-wing in the political sphere: normalization and mainstreaming. The normalization of the radical right is an electoral strategy of this political group to appear as respectful of the norms of liberal democracy. It is also the progressive acceptance of its discourse and political program, which were once taboo and rejected (Krzyżanowski, 2020; Wodak, 2013, 2021). The mainstreaming of the radical right is a parallel and complementary process, which ensures that its discourse and political program are not only accepted, but also become dominant in the public sphere. This dominance is expressed in particular by the use of its antagonistic vision of society by the main center-left/right parties, and by its central visibility in the established mass media, where radical right politicians can circulate vitriolic narratives or present themselves as respectable political actors using the communication codes of traditional politicians (Brown et al. 2023). The normalization and mainstreaming of the radical right are best illustrated by the ability of this political family to produce or recuperate conspiracy theories such as the Great Replacement that will become accepted and dominant in the public sphere (Bracke and Hernández Aguilar 2024; Lamour 2024a; Lamour and Mazzoleni 2024).

The normalization and mainstreaming of the radical right also depend on two other dynamics involving the media. First, the need for the radical right to communicate about its interactions with the in-group of “natives” and to use the stereotypical communication code associated with this in-group to present itself as an emanation of normal people, distinct from the liberal “elite” and cultural “others” (Lamour 2022; Ostiguy, 2017). This process can be likened to a grassroots normalization beyond the delimited fields of power and in order to increase its electorate. It is often facilitated by social media (Ernst et al. 2017). Second, the existence of potential competition for leadership within the radical right as in any political family. This competition requires each contender to define her/his strategy for grassroots normalization on social media and mainstreaming into mass media in order to attract the largest number of citizens. However, there is relatively little research on what constitutes this grassroots normalization on social media and mass media mainstreaming of radical right-wing actors competing for leadership.

The scope of the current article is to investigate this process by considering the communication developed by the two stakeholders competing for the leadership of the French radical right: Marine Le Pen (President of the National Rally) and Eric Zemmour (President of the Reconquête party). The specific objective here is to investigate this grassroots normalization and mass media mainstreaming by paying attention to Facebook posts and mass media interviews by the leaders following events they could use to scapegoat immigrants and circulate the Great Replacement conspiracy theory. It is argued that competition for leadership of the overall radical

right can be associated with a divergent process of grassroots normalization and mass media mainstreaming to secure the political distinction of each competitor.

The article is structured in four parts. First, a review of the literature on the normalization and mainstreaming of the radical right, with a focus on “Great Replacement” as a conspiracy theory circulated in the public sphere. Second, a presentation of the research hypothesis, methodology, and case study. Third, an analysis in two parts: an investigation of the grassroots normalization aimed at by each selected leader on their Facebook accounts, followed by an analysis of their mainstreaming goal when they interacted with interviewers from the established mass media during a period marked by events enabling the leaders to emphasize immigration as a threat and the relevance of the Great Replacement conspiracy theory. The article concludes with a discussion on radical right grassroots normalization and mass media mainstreaming as a process of comparative tensions between competing leaders.

Radical Right Normalization and Mainstreaming: A Discursive and Interactional Approach to Processes Involving Elites, Leaders, and Followers

The presence and centrality of the radical right in most European and broader Western democracies require attention to be paid to the normative and interactional dynamics taking place between this political family, other political forces, and other segments of the elites, such as the established mass media (Brown et al. 2023). The normalization of the radical right supposes first the construction of evolving ideal-types of conduct in relation to the institutional political sphere. Respecting these ideal-types leads to rewards for political parties and personnel, while deviating from them leads to the punishment of the parties and personnel, in line with the Foucauldian “Discipline and Punish” power coercion of specific institutions (Wodak et al. 2021). The normalization of the radical right can reveal both their acceptance of the formal ideal-types imposed by democratic institutions to enlarge their electorate and the parallel evolution of democratic ideal-types, which can prevent the discipline and punishment of the radical right. The attitude to and acceptance of the radical right in the American and French democracies illustrate this parallel process of normalization. The U.S. Republican Party and its ruling patrician elite have been unable to punish and ban the vulgar and provocative Donald Trump notably mocking Republicans opposed to him, such as the moderate, handicapped, and now deceased John McCain. In fact, Trump has been able to impose new acceptable norms in the party and the possible replacement of common decency by the common-sense insult of opponents, dead or living (CNN 2024). By contrast, Marine Le Pen and her French MPs in the radical right National Rally have abided by the institutional norms of French democratic politics. They show commitment and seriousness, participate actively in different parliamentary commissions, and are rewarded by heading some of these commissions and even holding the vice-presidency of the chamber of deputies, although incidents showing the unabashed extremism of National Rally personnel are always possible (AFP 2024a; Porter and Meheut 2022).

The normalization of the radical right in the political sphere consequently involves negotiation within an institutional order shaping discourse, political agenda, and behaviors in circles of power determined by the elite. However, the normalization of radical right parties also supposes a specific strategy on their part to secure their distinction from other political parties in order to attract voters. This involves the promotion of sociocultural norms, enabling them to proclaim themselves as parties of the “natives” set against all the other political parties that are painted as interchangeable elements of the vilified liberal “elite.” This grassroots normalization implies the representation of a sociocultural norms, binding together leaders and followers. These represented bounds often occur through “low” appeals (Ostiguy 2017, 73). Here, this refers to the sum of transgressions, provocations, and/or closeness to given segments of the citizenry presented as resentful toward the liberal “elite,” its cultural tastes, political correctness, and socioeconomic policies. This grassroots normalization aimed for by the radical right to increase its electorate can have three main overlapping aspects, especially visible when one considers its leaders. First, it has a corporal dimension, with white male and female leaders often eager to mobilize the gendered stereotypes derived from hegemonic masculinity and imagined as the physical embodiment of the white “natives” (the masculine male leader and the maternal/attractive female leader establishing emotional bonds with their followers) (Gibson and Heyse 2010; Meret 2015; Sauer 2020; Strick 2020). Second, there is a societal trait, with radical right leaders visiting places, experiencing cultural practices, expressing exclusionary religious values, and encountering individuals from given social categories supposed to represent the white “natives” and estranged from the liberal “elite” (Norris and Inglehart 2019). Third, there are political traits, with leaders using common-sense arguments, slang expressions, and a simplistic approach to complex situations deployed in different genres of discourse, such as talks with citizens in the street, public speeches, tweets, Facebook posts, and so on (Cervi et al. 2023; Moffitt 2015, 2020; Strick 2020). This is best illustrated by the political communication of Trump, who routinely monopolizes the news agenda in most Western countries. Trump is a billionaire raised in a privileged metropolitan environment whose political fortune depends on his ability to market himself as a representative of the “natives” through his body language, discursive style, and proposed simplistic policies. This grassroots normalization sought by the radical right can be somewhat chameleonic and create inconsistencies in everyday communication. One can think, for example, of some radical right parties in Belgium, the Netherlands, and France. These parties support traditional family values and the cultural patriarchy as legitimate norms to be politically supported. However, they also claim to support women and LGBTQ+ communities, to better “market” antagonism between them, as parties of the tolerant Western white “natives”, and the scapegoated Islam and its patriarchy (Duina and Carson 2020; Mayer et al. 2014; Rahbari 2020; Vieten 2016). This chameleonic gendered, societal, and political grassroots normalization is routinely reproduced in reaction to events discussed in the public sphere. However, it is also based on the remobilization and reframing of discourses and key utterances defined in the past, for example, as seen during the 2024 US presidential campaign, with Trump reusing Hitler’s blood poisoning rhetoric to scapegoat immigration (Michael 2023). Trump obviously rejected the Hitler connection, but even his greatest

political supporter in Europe, Viktor Orbán, was inclined to draw a parallel between Trump and Hitler (Lamour 2024b). The reference to inherited discourse, argumentations, and the use of metaphors is especially central in Europe, as the current radical right is rooted in the *longue durée* reactionary past of the continent (Lamour 2023b, 2023c, 2024c; Millington 2020; Noiriel 2019; Saull 2015; Wodak 2021; Winock 2017).

The grassroots normalization of the radical right needs to be seen as a process of democratic acceptance of an earlier repulsive and silenced political family, successfully marketing itself as the common-sense voice of the resentful “natives.” The mainstreaming of the radical right can in turn be defined as the dynamics leading to the shift of the radical right personnel, ideas, and discursive style from the accepted margins of the public sphere to the dominant center under the gaze of the mass media. This move cannot be understood without paying attention to the interactions between the radical right, and agents of the mainstream political parties and personnel often associated with the center-left/right, as well as established mass media reaching a plural and wide audience (Brown et al. 2023). In the same way as normalization, mainstreaming has dual aspects. On the one side, in order to attract voters and to secure executive power the radical right engages in a softening and coding of its discourse to make it look like that of the long-term democratic mainstream ruling the state (Alduy and Wahnich 2015). This process is linked to the “haiderization,” a term defined by Wodak (2013; 2021) in reference to Jörg Haider, the radical right Austrian leader who was among the first to follow this strategy that then spread in the rest of Europe. On the other side, there is a continuing evolution of what constitutes the mainstream. For instance, the political opportunists of the moderate mainstream can circulate a discourse in the public sphere similar to the past repulsive radical right, in terms of content, style, and/or agenda, thereby revealing the strength of the radical right to define what constitutes the dominant approach to social reality (Dietze and Roth 2020; Fraser 2017; Jessel 2019; Mondon 2013). For example, one could think of the Great Replacement conspiracy theory promoted by the radical right and now discussed and remobilized by the mainstream center-right and established mass media (Ekman 2022; Linders 2024). This conspiracy theory has its roots in the earlier modern Western democracies of the first capitalist globalization during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, which was accompanied by an important period of immigration. This time was characterized by political movements decrying the cultural and national decay stated as notably due to the scapegoated migrants, as shown in the United States (Zolberg 2008) and in France (Noiriel 2019; Winock 2017). The contemporary Great Replacement conspiracy theory has been framed in late modern capitalist globalization by intellectuals such as Renaud Camus, Jean Raspail, and Dominique Venner in France (Bar-On 2021; Bergmann 2021; Önnersfors 2021). It is based on three main principles in Europe. First, the existence of white “natives” being replaced by non-white populations coming from Asia and Africa. This replacement is explained as resulting from fertility rate differentials between Europeans and non-Europeans already present in Europe, and by the agenda of the conspiring liberal “elite” and its nominated representatives, such as George Soros who has been scapegoated by Orbán, Salvini, Babiš, and others. Second, the conspiracy theory includes the enunciation of a dystopian trend associating “nocence” (used by Camus

to describe the daily practice of delinquency and violence of alien populations toward indigenous Europeans, as well as the conquest of their territory) and “decadence”—the perceived decline of European civilization in different domains (culture, education, morality, international affairs, etc.) explaining the replacement, through which alien civilizations, such as Islam, become more dominant. Third, the conspiracy theory induces the presentation of a desirable future based on the “Great Return” of non-European migrants to their homeland, and the defense and regeneration of traditional values that have secured the greatness of European civilization (Zúquete 2018). This Great Return objective is best exemplified in 2024 by the “Remigration masterplan” in Northern Africa discussed by the German AfD (Alternative für Deutschland) radical right party, some members of the CDU (Christlich Demokratische Union) Christian-democrat party, and well-off followers during a secret meeting (Corrective 2024). The meeting took place in the Potsdam region, not far from the location of the 1942 Nazi Wannsee conference during which the extermination of all the Jews in Europe was initiated, following the abandonment of any resettlement masterplan for the Jewish community.

The circulation of the Great Replacement conspiracy theory in society would not be possible without the involvement of the established mass media; that is, well-known publishing outlets, radio stations, and television networks reaching a large proportion of the citizenry. The dissemination of this conspiracy theory by the mass media exemplifies the process of radical right mainstreaming in the public sphere. The radical right and its sensationalist/provocative vision of societal challenges correspond to the horizon of expectation of the mainstream media, eager to organize polarizing and heated debates to attract a mass audience at a time of fierce competition to secure public attention, which in turn can be traded to commercial advertisers (Lamour 2022, 2023a; Mazzoleni 2008; Moffitt 2020). The mainstreaming of the radical right is the result of another phase of tensions between information and commercial interests, currently making the news an “infotainment” product addressed to consumers rather than citizens (McManus 1994). This is especially favored following events associated with immigration and represented as a “crisis” by the mass media, contributing to the dramatized approach to reality and the mainstreaming of radical-right ideas (Boukala and Dimitrakopoulou 2018; Rheindorf and Wodak 2018). Mass media interviews with radical right leaders notably comprise a genre of discourse through which this mainstreaming is accomplished. These interviews help radical right leaders to promote a softer and more coded communication strategy, and also offer a window of opportunity to routinely circulate their unabashed extremism to a mass public through interactions with supportive or adversarial reporters (Bull 2008; Schulz et al. 2020). Some media moguls have been particularly involved in the mainstreaming of the radical right. Silvio Berlusconi marketed himself as a politician, but he also established the respectability of Italian post-fascism through the visibility given to Gianfranco Fini in the 1990s, rooting the current-day Italian government ruled by Giorgia Meloni, the leader of the post-fascist Fratelli d’Italia party. Rupert Murdoch participated in the promotion and electoral success of Boris Johnson and of Donald Trump by circulating their false allegations as central points of view around which to structure the news agenda. Vincent Bolloré in France, the upper-class entrepreneur, has also diversified his acquisitions in the mainstream mass media and gave a boost to

politicians and reporters promoting radical-right ideas through a focus on immigration as a threat, apocalyptic insecurity, and civilizational decadence (Bacqué and Chemin 2021; Cagé et al. 2022). He has also facilitated the rapprochement between the radical right and the conservative right (Chemin and Trippenbach 2024). The routine mainstreaming of radical right discourse, sensational utterances, visions, and virile body language by established mass media outlets can then be repeated by opportunistic leaders of the liberal camp, who increase the centrality of these radical views in the public sphere, as seen in France with Presidents Chirac and Sarkozy (Mondon 2013), and now President Macron (AFP 2024b, Livingstone 2024).

The normalization and mainstreaming of the radical right in Western democracies are currently taking place with the increasing copresence of party leaders competing to dominate this political family in each country. One can think of Wilders and Baudet in the Netherlands, Salvini and Meloni in Italy, and also Trump, De Santis, and Ramaswamy during the short-lived 2024 Republican primaries. However, a comparative approach to the grassroots normalization and mass media mainstreaming of radical right competitors is under-researched, especially in the aftermath of events they can associate with the Great Replacement conspiracy theory and immigration as a threat. The research question here is thus: How is the radical right strategy of grassroots normalization and mass media mainstreaming organized in a context of leadership competition within the radical right?

Hypothesis, Methodology, and Case Study

It is argued that multiple communication strategies can be put forward by radical right competitors with a view to securing their political distinction in the aftermath of events they can associate with immigration as a threat and the Great Replacement conspiracy theory. The strategy of grassroots normalization can particularly illustrate the eagerness of competitors to market differentiated and acceptable sociocultural identities binding them to the “natives” in order to attract voters (Mudde 2017; Ostiguy 2017). Their mainstreaming, visible through interactions with journalists in the established mass media, can also probably denote the willingness of the leaders to place themselves in the moderate mainstream or to impose their extreme view in the mainstream to circulate their specificities toward the electorate (Brown et al. 2023).

The methodology here is based on a mixed qualitative method, which is used to examine the communication developed by leading radical right competitors on two types of media platforms.

First, social media Facebook is chosen for the analysis because it is often preferred by extreme parties to build-up communities and to circulate their grassroots normalization through the display of sociocultural traits. These traits in turn shape the identity of leaders in relation to the segments of the citizenry imagined as “natives” and with whom a common set of affects and ways of living can be shared to secure electoral gains (Ernst et al. 2017; Harel et al. 2020). The scope here is to consider all the posts (photos, videos, and texts) circulated during a selected period characterized by events the radical right generally associates with the “immigration threat.” These posts are analyzed to single out three main

sociocultural traits of grassroots normalization promoted by leaders in relation to their online community of “natives” (Ostiguy 2017). First, the stereotyped and normative gender corporality of the leaders, eager to market the norms imagined as expected by the “natives” from their leaders, such as virile masculinity and female attractiveness or motherliness. Second, expressions of the societal embeddedness of leaders among the “natives” in terms of the routine cultural practices and places of this population, notably represented during public events. Third, the common sense expressed by the leaders as the political voice of “natives” through posted reactions to daily events and especially those related to immigration. The scope here is not to comment about each post, but to single out structuring tendencies regarding the ways in which each leader normalizes him/herself as a representative of the “natives” and in relation to a series of inherited affects and ways of being, making them a legitimate voice of the rooted “natives.” These tendencies are contrasted with the leader’s sociocultural background.

Second, established mass media outlets as institutions participating in the mainstreaming of the radical right through regular and prime-time debates, and the continual portrayal of this political family. The interview is the genre of discourse chosen for the analysis because it allows us to identify the interactional dimension of the mainstreaming process through the answers of radical right leaders given to journalists. The scope is to research interviews following key events this political family is keen to associate with the Great Replacement conspiracy theory and immigration as a threat. This second investigation includes a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of the narratives by radical right stakeholders. CDA is used because it focuses on the relationship between discourse and societal issues such as the reproduction and consolidation of ideologies, institutions, and power relations (Fairclough, 2012). It involves considering here the antagonistic vision of society deployed by the radical-right leaders and based on sequences of dissimilation (otherness) and assimilation (sameness) (Reisigl and Wodak 2016; Van Dijk 2013). Special attention is paid to the nomination of the in-group (“natives”) and the out-group (“elite”/“others”) constitutive of society proposed by political leaders, the attributes they associate with these groups, and the perspectivation of the leader taking a personal position on the events following questions by reporters. This potentially illustrates three types of professional approaches: supportive, neutral, or adversarial. The scope is to investigate three key discursive bases constitutive of the radical right mainstreaming from characteristic narratives produced by the selected leaders confronted live by journalists. First, the eagerness of the radical right leaders to use victimization to contrast themselves, and indirectly their followers, with reporters, the “elites”, and the “others” (Schulz et al. 2020). Second, the tendency of these leaders to deviate in order to protect themselves from embarrassing questions put by adversarial reporters and/or to emphasize their antagonistic vision of society (Bull 2008). Third, the interpretation and resolution of problems associated with events justifying the presence of radical right leaders in mass media interviews, and who display political expectations based on the dramatization of situations and the delivery of simplistic policies (Moffitt 2015, 2020).

The research is based on a French case study. Two events that took place in summer 2023 are considered, around which the selected radical right key figures had to position themselves. First, the killing of Nahel Merzouk (a 17-year-old man

from the inner city of Nanterre in the Parisian basin) by a policeman on June 27, 2023. This led to a series of night riots in poor suburbs and urban centers at the national scale until July 3, 2023, mobilizing more than 45,000 policemen and women. Second, the arrival of 6,000 migrants from Tunisia on the small Italian island of Lampedusa on September 14, 2023. The island constitutes an EU Schengen border and the event was publicized in the European press, and discussed by most mainstream mass media and radical right leaders on the continent. The period to approach the overall communication of the selected radical right politicians on Facebook starts at the beginning of the first event (June 27, 2023) and ends a week after the second (September 21, 2023), an equivalent of three months. To examine the mainstreaming discursive strategy of the leaders through the mass media, we consider political interviews that took place in the days following each of the two events.

The first selected Facebook account is that of Marine Le Pen (www.facebook.com/MarineLePen/), who heads the dominant French radical-right party in terms of MPs and electoral support: The National Rally. Marine Le Pen is seen by most French political analysts as a possible next French president in 2027. This could even be before that, if earlier elections are organized in case of a conjunction of insurrectional-like mass discontent destabilizing the state and the legitimacy of the already unpopular President Macron, whose government has no majority in parliament. The second Facebook account considered is that of Eric Zemmour, the leader of the more recent Reconquête Party (www.facebook.com/ZemmourEric/), who was able to contest the supremacy of Marine Le Pen as the leader of the radical right in the early phase of the 2022 French presidential election campaign. Marine Le Pen and Eric Zemmour are currently developing politically in the French Republic where 82% of people consider that their country is in decline and that a new leader is needed to restore order (Bristielle 2023).

Processing Normalization and Mainstreaming: A Radical-Right Duopoly in a French Summer Time

The overall communication of the two main French radical right leaders during summer 2023 and their reading of the two aforementioned events show that they developed parallel yet somewhat divergent trajectories to secure their normalization and mainstreaming. Both Le Pen and Zemmour circulated messages during a changing season of politics: the summer break and one year later the most important French election—the presidential one. However, the radical right always needs to establish a permanent campaigning style to keep up the antagonistic vision of society to secure their sensationalist visibility (Conley 2022). They were consequently in continual pursuit of grassroots normalization by informing their online Facebook community of their actions in order to attract and enlarge their electorate. This involved photos and videos centered on themselves, and that could also include segments of the French citizenry with a horizon of expectation toward the leaders as their representatives sharing sociocultural traits (Ostiguy 2017). These leaders also had to produce texts expressing shared effects and a common-sense vision of society, binding together themselves and the “natives” as political subjects requiring radical changes in reaction to everyday events to be commented upon.

The production of images and texts was in reaction to a series of events that took place during the summer. However, it also reveals longer-term dynamics of diverging normalization, explained by the readiness to accept or silence the long history of the French radical right including its support for twentieth century autocratic regimes (Millington 2020; Saull 2015). The mainstreaming of the leaders through the established mass media during interviews reveals the same assumed divergence in circulating common-sense argumentations supposed to make each of them appear as the most appropriate politician to assume state executive power.

A Parallel Grassroots Normalization: The Displacement and Replacement of Two Leaders among the “Natives”

Marine Le Pen’s Facebook account attracted far more followers than that of Zemmour (1.7 million vs. 0.3 million), reflecting their relative weight in French politics. However, there were far fewer posts during the selected period between June 27 and September 21, 2023 on Le Pen’s account (142 vs. 216). One can also note that only 18% of the posts made by Marine Le Pen included a reference to immigration as a problem (26 posts), whereas 42% of those by Zemmour did mention this topic (90 posts).

The overall representations put forward by the two leaders show similarities, as they were responding to the same information in the mass media. They both mentioned the same statistics concerning violence against women on public transport, the increase in inflation, and the death of famous people in relation to France (the old soldier Léon Gautier, the academician Hélène Carrère d’Encausse, and the novelist Milan Kundera). They also represented the start of the campaign for the European elections on June 9, 2024 and a laid-back summer atmosphere with events in which the two leaders participated. Nevertheless, a more-detailed approach shows that they both put forward opposite strategies of grassroots normalization in terms of embodiment, societal embeddedness, and political message.

Marine Le Pen wanted to be seen as a personalist leader similar to her father (Alduy and Wahnich 2015). However, in contrast to her father, she showed sociocultural traits indicating normalization as the common-sense representative of a mass and popular white France and not the champion of reactionary activists. First, a series of photos focused on her often showed a leader wanting to erase the martial, upright, and grave stance generally associated with radical right male leaders, by contrast insisting on the willingness to appear as a photoshopped, attractive, middle age, and cheerful woman during the summer (Le Pen 2023a). She abided by the stereotype of a woman eager to attract a large audience without breaking away from the radical right stereotypical embodiment of women in politics (Gibson and Heyse 2010; Sauer 2020; Strick 2020). She supplanted this with a video of her dancing and humming to a song by Dalida, enabling her to connect both to popular France and also the LGBTQ+ community (Le Pen 2023b). Dalida, the pop and disco singer of the 70s and early 80s, was looked down on by the French intellectual elite, but went through a second phase of popularity as an icon of the French gay community. Dalida was used by Le Pen to secure her normalization as a popular and open-minded leader (Duina and Carson 2020). However, the cheerful

leader also posted a photo of her performing a pseudo-Roman salute in a Volkswagen Beetle convertible car, commented on by the mass media. This photo can be seen as an expression of a “haiderized” leader (Wodak 2013; 2021), eager to reprocess symbols inherited from a European fascist and Nazi past in a current time of infotainment (Mazzoleni 2008; McManus 1994; Le Pen 2023c). Second, her grassroots normalization online is about representing a societal nearness and benevolence toward the less affluent segments of the white French society which are very different from her bourgeois milieu. Marine Le Pen wanted to show her online followers that she enjoyed popular hobbies (street sales) and culinary habits (eating chips and mussels). She also wanted to appear to be on the side of two different types of men from the same part of France, thereby expressing her closeness to popular France. First, Jordan Bardella, the new president of the party and young heterosexual man. Second, Steeve Briois, a middle-aged, openly gay, and married man, thus showing Le Pen’s openness concerning gender issues, although she and her party can also in parallel promote traditional family values contradicting LGBTQ+ people’s individual rights (Marchand-Lagier 2018). Both Bardella and Briois come from the working class or lower-middle-class parts of France, as noted by their American TV soap opera Christian names; working-class places where Le Pen achieves her best electoral results. This quest for grassroots normalization through popular embeddedness is also expressed by the choice of places Le Pen decided to present on her Facebook account: the relatively poor southern city of Beaucaire where a political meeting had been organized, and the city of Henin-Beaumont in the Northern France rust belt where she was elected. The last and third aspect of Marine Le Pen’s strategy of normalization was political, with the building up of her stature as a French president in waiting, through videos and photos including quotations presenting a calm, resolute, and polite politician, able to develop a solemn and professional discourse (Le Pen 2023d). This president in waiting had a key political target: the unpopular President Macron and his government. Le Pen’s clearly transversal political message during the summer was a return to state sovereignty, authority, and social protectionism for fellow nationals. Her populist dimension was visible through her consistent call for a referendum. This was mentioned as the solution to the French problems and it was reprocessed by asking people to sign online petitions. Marine Le Pen’s normalization online during the chosen period consisted of illustrating her displacement from the authoritarian, reactionary, and immigration-focused radical French far right of her father, to the popular, inclusive, law-and-order, and often social-oriented middle ground cross-cutting party politics best mastered in the recent French political past by Jacques Chirac (Jessel 2019) (Table 1).

Eric Zemmour’s online strategy of grassroots normalization was totally different. It can only be understood through his search for recognition among a segment of the French citizenry resenting Marine Le Pen’s shift away from her father’s reactionary position. This electorate is against the haiderization of Le Pen’s far right heritage, with a long-term political history that includes a vocal nationalist revivalism, antisemitism, conspiratorial politics, authoritarianism, as shown during WWII Vichy France (Millington 2020; Noiriel 2019; Saull 2015; Winock 2017). This electorate has always mixed different social classes, with the key importance of the petty bourgeoisie and an elite regrouping the “God, Family, France” Catholic

traditionalist bourgeois and aristocrats. The aim of Zemmour to normalize himself as the legitimate leader of these French white “natives” is challenging, when one considers his sociocultural background (the son of modest Northern African Berber Jews raised in the Hebrew faith) and the standing anti-Semitism in the French far right (CNCDH 2024; Igounet 2019). However, he has been ready to respond to expectations. He engaged himself in the historical revisionism of anti-Semitic France under the Vichy government and the circulation of ambiguities concerning some past and present Jewish victims of anti-Semitism, while also constantly quoting past anti-Semitic and reactionary French men as notorious thinkers necessary to understand contemporary France (Noiriél 2019). The challenges to his grassroots normalization during the summer 2023 are all the more remarkable when we pay attention first to the physical embodiment binding together traditionally radical right male leaders and followers in France. These leaders are generally expected to represent a hegemonic masculinity based on virility and toughness typical of white supremacists, and exemplified by broad-shouldered and loud men such as Jean-Marie Le Pen. Zemmour’s modest physical presence and strident voice are the exact opposite. However, he responded to the requirements of the expected and stereotypical masculine virility by implementing a strategy of physical compensation. He posted a series of photos centered on strong and virile men on his Facebook account (rugby players scoring a try, the professional swimmer Léon Marchand, young white soldiers surrounding Léon Gautier, security services, armed police, muscular sympathizers, etc.). He also presented himself looking as though he was piloting a helicopter on Bastille Day, while the French military planes flown by leading airmen were performing their spectacular aerial demonstration. One of these Bastille Day photos served to illustrate the homepage of his Facebook account for several months. Second, his normalization in terms of an online process of societal embeddedness among the reactionary hardcore electorate over the summer consisted of silencing where he came from. His summer and leisure-oriented encounters with French citizens did not take place in the French working-class peripheries and among the less-affluent French people where he was born, like Bardella and Briois, although a proportion of this French electorate vote for him (Cébille et al. 2022). His main aim from a societal perspective was especially to be seen as absorbed by the white, bourgeois, and traditional family of provincial France (Zemmour 2023a) and in the company of the young heiress of the Le Pen family, Marion Maréchal. Maréchal supported Zemmour instead of her aunt, Marine Le Pen, who was said to have raised her, (Willsher 2022; Zemmour 2023b). The places where Zemmour organized his summer meetings (Cogolin and Gréoux-les-bains) bring together relatively well-off pensioners and somewhat old-fashioned activities associated with this aging bourgeoisie (for example, thermal activities in Gréoux-les-bains, similar to those in Vichy). Last, his search for normalization consisted of making acceptable in the public sphere a central political message in tune with the expectation of the hardcore extreme right electorate of Jean-Marie Le Pen: the “immigration threat.” His scope was not to act like Marine Le Pen, building up her political identity as a serious, respectable, and temperate French president in waiting and considering immigration as a matter to be dealt with simply through the down-to-earth application of French laws decided by the French people. Zemmour associated any topics with immigration as a threat, including the death of the

Table 1. The online sociocultural normalization of French radical right leaders

| | | Marine Le Pen | Eric Zemmour |
|--------------------------------|------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Frames and Trajectories | Corporal | Looking for femininity | Aiming for virility |
| | Societal | Expressed popular inclusivity | Claimed old bourgeois exclusivity |
| | Political | Presented presidential solemnity | Professed radical-right hegemony |

novelist Milan Kundera. What mattered for Zemmour was notably the circulation of sensationalist content of the radical right hegemony in tune with the Great Replacement conspiracy theory (Bergmann 2021; Önnersfors 2021; Zúquete 2018; Zemmour 2023c), which he also wanted to become mainstream through interviews with established mass media (Table 1).

To Swallow or to be Swallowed by the Mainstream: Diverging Mass Media Interactions on Homeland and Borderland Tensions

Marine Le Pen and Eric Zemmour showed structurally divergent tendencies of political mainstreaming when we consider their approach in terms of victimization, deviation, and expectation. This was evident through their interactions with reporters concerning the French riots following the death of Nahel Merzouk on June 27, 2023 and the arrival of migrants in Lampedusa on September 14, 2023. Marine Le Pen opted for a strategy of mimicking the established mainstream center-right, with a softer reaction and mitigating attitude to questions put by reporters in order to attract voters. By contrast, Eric Zemmour chose to circulate extreme views, presented as common sense and worthy of constituting the dominant interpretation of these events. The first analysis is about the French riots and the second about the arrival of migrants in Lampedusa.

Marine Le Pen produced a discourse live on the most-watched morning TV news program (*Télématin* on France 2) on July 6, 2023. This was through the most adversarial interview genre possible, including cutting-off interviewees, negative presuppositions in questions, and repeated unanswered questions (Bull 2008). Le Pen’s interactions with the incisive reporter about the riots enable one to see how she refused to react aggressively, to prevent damaging her image as a respectful, moderate, and serious potential French president. First, like all radical-right leaders, she was keen to use the argumentation of self-victimization when confronted by a difficult journalist (Schulz et al. 2020). She did so when the reporter asked her why she was relatively silent about the riots (“I think that if I’d been doing a lot of TV appearances, I’d have been accused of electioneering, wouldn’t I? So in reality, we are always wrong”). However, she quickly diverged from this victimization to detail all of the speeches she had made on the issue, as a dutiful professional political leader, notably intervening in the institutional debates of the French parliament. Her attachment to the radical right in this interview was clearly signified by revealing the negative attributes of the rioters, which was in tune with the Great Replacement “nocence” (Zúquete 2018) (“a hatred of France” due to “uncontrolled

immigration,” “communitarianism,” and “secession from French society”). However, she refused to make any direct reference to the replacement of white French citizens by an African or Asian population. Her perspectivation on the connection between the riots and immigration shows a clear willingness to detach herself from the political-right margins of her father and to be accepted by the entire French citizenry (“But everyone makes it [the connection between riots and immigration]. It’s only you [the interviewer] and a certain number of journalists and Mr Darmanin [the Home Office minister] who don’t make the connection”, France 2 2023).

Le Pen’s greatest embarrassment in her interview on France 2 came when the reporter repeatedly asked a question concerning her potential approval of and donation to an online crowdfunding initiative launched by a member of Zemmour’s party and ex-special adviser to Le Pen, Jean Messiha. The crowdfunding was created to support the family of the policeman who had killed Nahel, the inner-city youngster. Le Pen’s strategy consisted of producing a series of equivocations, presenting her perspectivation of the general French mood, and explaining the crowdfunding in the manner of a detached political analyst. Her desire for political mainstreaming prevented her from directly supporting the crowdfunding initiative or saying whether she had made a donation to it, as asked by the journalist. The reporter’s next question was even more sensitive for Le Pen, as her popular electorate is somewhat distant and fearful about the rioting youth following the death of Nahel (“What do you have to say to Nahel’s family?”). As a leader eager to preserve face among center-right/left mainstream politicians, she continued her perspectivation as a detached analyst. However, due to the repetition of the question and in a willingness to show empathy characteristic of mainstream politics, she conceded to nominate the event as a “drama,” for the family of Nahel, before rapidly concentrating her attack on President Macron, who condemned the policeman’s act before waiting for the justice court’s decision. She needed to give a sign to her electorate of supporting the police rather than inner-city youngsters. The overall solution of Le Pen to these riots was not to plan the “Great Return” deriving from the Great Replacement conspiracy theory (Zúquete 2018), but to ensure the respect of law and order with the enunciation of the existing penal code. This constituted the rejection of an abnormal situation (riots) through the down-to-earth application of existing laws. The only concrete law proposed by her on France 2 in relation to the riots was the re-establishment of a 1993 act, passed under the presidency of Jacques Chirac and scrapped in 1998 with the return of the left to power: the suppression of automatic French citizenship for French-born youngsters of foreign parents on reaching the age of 18 (France 2 2023) (Table 2).

The interview with Eric Zemmour following the death of Nahel took place on the Zemmour-friendly Bolloré’s radio station, Europe 1, where he used to produce his controversial chronicles as journalist. The scope of the interactions with the neutral and sometimes helpful reporter was to make extreme views the dominant approach to the French inner-city riots (Europe 1 2023). In contrast to Le Pen, Zemmour associated negative nominations and attributes with the youngster who had died (“this young man was clearly not an angel, as Killian Mbappé mistakenly said; in any case, the angel had spots on his wings”) and his mother (“Where do you see the dignity in these scenes worthy of the Cannes Film Festival [the solemn march in

Table 2. Mainstreaming strategies during interviews with established mass media

| | | Marine Le Pen | Eric Zemmour |
|---------------------|----------------------|---|---------------------------------------|
| French Riots | Victimization | Limitation of self-victimization | Intensification of self-victimization |
| | Deviation | Detached interpretation | Ethnicized explanation |
| | Expectation | Needed return to normality | Continued dystopian reality |
| Lampedusa | Victimization | Indifference toward migrants as victims | Negation of migrants as victims |
| | Deviation | Ignored radical-right connection | Proposed civilizational division |
| | Expectation | Moratorium on immigration | Expulsion of migrants |

remembrance of Nahel]? Where do you see dignity when your own mother [...] Excuse me, when I see Nahel’s mother get on a motorbike and proclaim her power [during the solemn march]?”). The leader of the Reconquête party used the riots to emphasize an argumentation about his own victimization, with extreme utterances (“they call you factionalists, fascists, racists, and infamous profiteers.” “I can still hear my eardrums deafened by the accusations of profiting”). This victimization was in relation to his participation in a demonstration many months before, following the murder of a young girl (Lola) by a woman who was qualified by Zemmour on Europe 1 by her alien status (an Algerian woman in an irregular situation). His overall strategy was to organize antagonism between an in-group qualified by death and persecution (himself, the young Lola, the police forces) and a negatively presented non-white European out-group and its appointed representatives (Nahel, his mother, the soccer player Killian Mbappé who reacted on X after the death of Nahel (Mbappé 2023), and the illegal Algerian female murder, but also the sister of a black man killed by the police a few year before, Assa Traoré).

The interview with Zemmour on Europe 1 was also used to circulate the Great Replacement conspiracy theory. Le Pen signaled a hatred of France among youngsters, but she rejected the idea of a plot to replace the white society that is characteristic of the Great Replacement. She mitigated the conspiracy theory whereas Zemmour fully supported the conspiracy theory by nominating the riots (“We’re in the early stages of a civil war [...] that’s exactly what we have, we have a revolt, clearly ethnic”) and by offering a perspectivation of the riots marked by an insinuation about the real causes: the power control by “aliens” (“I see this Nahel’s mother [...] proclaims her power, that’s obviously, I wonder,” “When I see Assa Traoré says that ‘we [Assa Traoré and her followers] have to show them that we [Assa Traoré and her followers] are the force’ [Reporter: “the sister of Adama Traoré who died a few years ago”], “that ‘we [Assa Traoré and her followers] are absolutely the force’, I also wonder”). The meta-narrative of Zemmour was not the needed respect for the law, in contrast to the presidential hopeful, Marine Le Pen. It was the proclamation of a dystopian reality based on punchlines. His interview was not focused on solutions, but on an apocalyptic and antagonistic presentation of a France circulated daily toward millions of French people on Bolloré’s mass media, such as Europe 1 and C-news (Bacqué and Chemin 2021; Cagé et al. 2022) (Table 2).

The arrival of migrants in Lampedusa in September 2023 was commented on by Marine Le Pen on France's most-watched evening news bulletin (The 8.00 pm news program of TF1) on September 18, 2023. The adversarial attitude of the reporter consisted of posing questions positioning Marine Le Pen in her radical-right and/or Eurosceptic family of origin, including the failing Brexiteers unable to stop immigration and her "friend" Viktor Orbán. This inclusion was not necessarily good for her political mainstreaming, as French people are against leaving the EU and Orbán's radicalism could be a disturbance to her softened communication. To secure her mass media mainstreaming, Le Pen did not use self-victimization to oppose the adversarial reporter. She also did not want to present migrants as unjustified victims. Her strategy consisted again of remobilizing the reflexive distance she used on France 2 to address the French riots, with a view to circulating her meta-narratives on state-national sovereignty and legality. First, a Europe of nations controlling immigration and not a "Frexit." Second, a legal wall and not a material one, in contrast to that put in place by Orbán and mentioned by the reporter. Orbán is a friend that she did not want to mention at all in her comments, but whose friendship is nevertheless promoted on her Facebook account (Le Pen 2023e). She also presented elements in relation to the Great Replacement theory: this time, as an upper-level governmental goal to encourage immigration, but without any clear reference to the replacement of a white European population ("Settlement immigration," "Pact of migration," EU fine of "20,000 euros per migrant" for member states refusing this settlement). She reworked the Great Replacement conspiracy theory, giving her radical-right interpretation of official documents and rejecting the hidden agenda of "elites" defined behind closed doors often disseminated by the radical right (Zúquete 2018). Lastly, no "Great Return" was suggested by Le Pen in the interview. One of the most striking ways she appeared to have built up a softened politician identity is how she rephrased the comment of her party's president and member of the Le Pen family clan, Jordan Bardella. The reporter enunciated Bardella's perspectivation of the migrant arrival in Lampedusa ("not a single one of these migrants in Lampedusa today will set foot on French soil,' Bardella has said"). Le Pen displaced Bardella's perspectivation into one of a cool-headed and "wait and see" campaigning politician, who asked for a delay to the overall resolution of the immigration problem in the same way that the campaigning Jacques Chirac could have done in his time ("Of course, he's absolutely right. We need a total moratorium on immigration", TF1 2023) (Table 2).

Zemmour did not have Le Pen's self-imposed constraints of softening communication. His aim was not to nurture the image of a moderate presidential candidate, but to secure the mainstreaming of controversial norms in relation to extra-European immigration and the Great Replacement conspiracy theory. His interview on the evening program of the news television channel LCI (*Un oeil sur le monde*) shows how this discursive strategy was organized. Zemmour's goal was to accentuate his rejection of migrants, following the lack of empathy toward them and the absence of the recognition of asylum rights mentioned by one of the two reporters. Zemmour's scope was to transform what was expected from him in the public sphere (a lack of empathy for migrants as victims) to something that should constitute a central approach to immigration in the public sphere (a justified vision of migrants as profiteers). First, he used the technique of mimicking to negatively

paint migrants (“ah, well in France, they give us medical care free of charge,” “ah, well in France, they help us find accommodation,” “ah, well in France, it’s easy to work illegally etc., etc.” the migrants will say, according to Zemmour). Second, he denied asylum rights from a homophobic angle characteristic of the reactionary radical right (“we’re going to welcome all the people who believe or consider or lie, who say they’re homosexuals, and where are you going with this?”). This mainstreamed negative portrayal of migrants puts in place a context justifying the political goal arising from the Great Replacement theory avoided by Le Pen: The “Great Return” (Zúquete 2018). The most central verb and noun used by Zemmour to present his perspective of the required policy were “to expel” and “expulsion,” even applying to foreign workers unemployed for longer than 6 months (LCI 2023). A post on Marine Le Pen’s Facebook account dating from July 6, 2023 and subsequent to the French riots includes the image of a plane with a sentence equivalent to the narratives of Zemmour (“to put France back in order. We have solutions. To expel foreign delinquents and criminals”, Le Pen 2023f). However, she stopped short of mentioning this during her TV interviews with the established TF1 and France 2 after the two events mentioned (Table 2).

As an open believer in the Great Replacement conspiracy theory, Zemmour also upscaled his antagonistic argumentation to add a civilizational dimension (Bergmann 2021). This civilizational threat included highbrow and lowbrow references located in different time frames: from the ancient past to recall the battle between civilization and barbarism (“Will Rome be Rome again?”) to the more trivial rooted culinary habits in today’s Europe, with an indirect reference to the advancing threat of Islam and the Arabic community (“Will we still be able to eat chips and mussels in Brussels and not just kebabs?”). Zemmour, the leader of reactionary France, mentioned chips and mussels as a heritage of a white European civilization under threat, while Marine Le Pen, marketing herself as LGBTQ+ friendly, ate chips and mussels with Steeve Briois, his married partner, and other smiling young men in her political and working-class stronghold of Henin-Beaumont (Le Pen 2023g). Zemmour also used his interview on LCI to present a re-elaborated interpretation of the Old Testament and the migration of the Jews. This reference was a way of marketing the exclusionary Judeo-Christian values of the French-rooted white “natives.” However, one can wonder if his particular reading of the scriptures was a premonition about what could happen to him, the son of Northern Africa Berber Jews, as a leader of a mainstream, pro-Great Return, and strengthened radical-right family, in which anti-Semitism is still a structuring phenomenon (“you must welcome the stranger, because according to the Old Testament, the Jews were slaves in Egypt, they were strangers in Egypt. What we forget to say is the rest of the sentence, after ‘we must welcome him’, but we must send him back, he must not stay here”, LCI 2023).

Conclusion: *Courte Durée* and *Fins de Siècle* in a French Milieu

The normalization and mainstreaming of the radical right are strongly determined by discourses and interactions taking place in the broader political sphere. It is both an electoral strategy for the radical right, and a process of acceptance/dominance of its presence and program in public debate. The media play a key role in this regard,

as the transformation of communication platforms over the past few decades has facilitated the visibility and centrality of this political family (Brown et al. 2023; Mazzoleni 2008). One should also not forget the meaningfulness of sociocultural ties, binding together radical right leaders and their followers, whose stereotyped styles, values, and expectations are absorbed by these leaders to normalize themselves as the emblematic representatives of the rooted “natives” (Norris and Inglehart 2019; Ostiguy 2017). The current analysis of this normalization and mainstreaming has shown that the copresence of radical right actors competing for the overall leadership of this political family can be associated with the display of key differences in terms of communication. These differences can involve radical and opposite transformations when we consider the competitors in the *courte durée* of their political life. These differences can also involve the display of a structural historical embeddedness, with the remobilization of a political heritage linked to separated *fins de siècle*. This competition also forms a context that can justify divergent communication strategies in social and mass media. Last, this competition between actors and specific parties to dominate the radical right must be seen at the meta-level as a process nurturing its overall normalization and mainstreaming in the public sphere.

First, the willingness of individuals to be the leader of the normalized and mainstreamed radical right in a competitive context can favor a stretching of their sociocultural identity of origin. The research shows that Marine Le Pen, raised by the authoritarian, reactionary, and vitriolic Jean-Marie Le Pen, promoted a communication strategy consisting of mitigating her father’s heritage to successfully enlarge her electorate. The political transition she marketed over the past decade left a vacuum in terms of an exemplary leader for the far right followers nostalgic for Jean-Marie’s extremism. This vacuum was filled by the most unlikely candidate: Eric Zemmour, a physically modest Jew raised in the Hebrew faith yet eager to reincarnate the virile leader of the radical right often condemned for anti-Semitism by French justice and where anti-Semitism is still structurally present (CNCDH 2024; Igounet 2019). The competition to lead an expanding radical right from a niche (Eric Zemmour endorsing Jean-Marie Le Pen’s heritage) or an enlarged basis (Marine Le Pen negotiating with Jean-Marie Le Pen’s heritage) required both the respective readiness to endorse a discourse distancing these leaders in waiting from their social world of origin, and a parallel acceptance of the marketed political shift among their respective electorates. This phenomenon should be further researched in countries where such competition exists, as in Italy with Meloni (the heiress of Mussolini’s fascism eager to soften her communication) and Salvini (the leader of a former anti-fascist and regionalist party eager to present himself as the new national and authoritarian Duce).

Second, the radical right always looks to the past to circulate a political message. However, it is not necessarily the same meaningful past that is remobilized by copresent radical right competitors. The political distinction of Marine Le Pen and Eric Zemmour is secured by their willingness to remobilize a communication inscribed in two different *fins de siècle*. Marine Le Pen grounds her communication in a late twentieth century *fin de siècle* of the popular, social, law-and-order, and inclusive France resenting the advance of the late modern neoliberal globalization and the progressive collapse of the welfare state. This communication can draw

parallels with that of the chameleonic, left/right, and “catch-all” Jacques Chirac, who was elected president after many failed attempts in the 1990s (Jessel 2019). Eric Zemmour based his communication on the long-lasting nineteenth century *fin de siècle* of the reactionary far right, which in the twentieth century constantly reprocessed the idea of cultural decadence, national revivalism, and the need for a conservative revolution inducing the continual scapegoating of migrants (Noiriel 2019; Winock 2017). Immigration is an important issue for Marine Le Pen, but her discourses show her willingness to include it in a more multifaceted political agenda, and from the perspective of trustworthy leader of the social-oriented center-right, ready to assume the responsibility of the French presidency *à la Chirac*. It would be interesting to study how other Western radical right leaders seeking power or in charge of the public executive use former figures of non-radical right to define their communication. One example is Donald Trump, who has often expressed his admiration for Ronald Reagan.

Third, social and mass media are both important for radical right leaders. However, the present analysis shows that the competition between radical right actors and their quest for political distinction can lead to different use of the media in Western democracies. The political messages of the leaders on the topic of immigration, delivered on their social media to secure their grassroots normalization in tune with their followers, can be nuanced when they are looking for mainstreaming by established mass media. Everything tends to depend on who occupies the uncontested position of “haiderized” leader (Wodak 2013; 2021). Currently, it is Marine Le Pen. She has refined her softened and coded communication on immigration when facing adversarial mass media reporters, whereas she has more openly supported radical views for her online followers. Eric Zemmour cannot mimic the haiderized Marine Le Pen, resented by his electorate. Consequently, he assumes an aggressive and provocative nature when commenting on immigration issues online and in the mass media. It is his trademark to be politically visible. To be or not to be haiderized can determine the discourse circulated in online and mass media by radical right competitors needing to cultivate their political distinction. It would be interesting to study how politicians directly involved in the “haiderization” of the radical right can modify their social and mass media communication over time. This is the case, for example, with the former Austria’s interior minister, and current president of the radical right Austrian Freedom Party, Herbert Kickl, who was Jörg Haider’s speechwriter in the 2000s.

Last, the difference between radical right competitors in terms of communication does not mean that their political manifestos are radically different in their contemplated immigration policies (Alduy and Wahnich 2015). One can even say that the competition between radical right actors is not the source of a division jeopardizing the potential access to executive power. By contrast, it needs to be seen as a process enriching the radical right at the meta-level and increasing its capacity to occupy center stage in politics. The aggressiveness and provocation taken up by Eric Zemmour, mainstreamed notably by the established mass media of Bolloré and circulating the Great Replacement conspiracy theory, in turn form part of the mainstreaming of Marine Le Pen as a moderate politician proposing common-sense law-and-order arguments on immigration and mitigating the Great Replacement.

This complementarity is all the more important when one pays attention to the fact that the competition between these two actors overlaps with the existence of real family ties. Mainstream politics in the USA has experienced the dynastic dimension of parties, with the Kennedys, the Clintons, the Bushes, and possibly one day the Trumps and the Obamas. The French radical right milieu is not estranged from this tendency, as it has stayed strongly organized around the Le Pen clan since the 1970s. It is nevertheless a somewhat dysfunctional clan, with its Caesars, Brutuses, and unstable friends and countrymen, while since 2022 Zemmour has endorsed the momentary role of a Mark Anthony on stage. The president of the Reconquête party is in fact merely mainstreaming the once repulsive, then tolerated voice of the old Jean-Marie Le Pen, silenced by Marine Le Pen who risks being silenced herself in the coming years by the next generation of the competing Le Pens' clan seemingly more open to Jean-Marie's discourse: Jordan Bardella and Marion Maréchal (AFP 2024a; Willsher 2022). The 2023 summer of the French radical right leaders' normalization and mainstreaming was only one season of their political communication. However, it was a moment to grasp the comparative tensions existing between different currents of a radical right ready to control the nation state with a view to imposing a new order in the name of the "natives." One summer later, Marine Le Pen's normalized and mainstreamed National Rally was seen as a party that could potentially control the French lower house of parliament and therefore the government, after the unexpected dissolution of the national assembly by President Macron and the subsequent elections. This was a situation unseen for the radical right since the summer of 1940, when Vichy France entered into collaboration with Nazi Germany.

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