Visual de-demonisation: A new era of radical right mainstreaming

Donatella Bonansinga (ID)

Abstract

This conceptual article calls for the integration of new approaches to the study of visual populist communication, arguing that it will play a critical part in a new era of radical right mainstreaming. Extant scholarship on the mainstreaming of the radical right has focused on party politics and rhetoric, neglecting the visual self-presentation and emotional strategies of radical right leaders on platforms like Instagram and TikTok. The article proposes the novel concept of 'visual de-demonisation' to capture these dynamics, articulating it as a three-fold strategy that emphasises the legitimacy, good character and ample policy platform of radical right leaders on visual social media. The article also argues that visual platforms provide the radical right with the ideal setting to present itself in a renewed and more positive light, hence serving its strategic interest in de-demonising. This poses a key challenge for the future, potentially contributing to its increased normalisation.

Introduction

Radical right populism has been considered one of the key challenges for democracy in the past decade (Abts and Rummens, 2007; Albertazzi and Mueller, 2013). Defined as a combination of populism, authoritarianism and nativism (Mudde, 2007), this form of populism has tripled its support in recent elections and secured government positions in Europe and the United States (Lewis et al., 2018). Concerns around the populist de-legitimisation of institutions at the national, supranational and international levels signal that radical right populism is likely to remain a key challenge for the future of democracy in the next decade too.

Electoral success, government responsibilities, increasing media coverage and widespread circulation of populist ideas via social media have meant that populists have

Department of Political Science, University College London, London, UK

Corresponding author:
Donatella Bonansinga, Department of Political Science, University College London, 29-30 Tavistock Square, London WC1H 9QU, UK.
Email: d.bonansinga@ucl.ac.uk

increasingly become part of the *mainstream* (Akkerman et al., 2016). Social media, in particular, have enabled direct communication between populists, their followers and the wider users of social media platforms, in a way that bypassed established media practices (Engesser et al., 2017). While populists still need parties on the ground to win elections and build a community of followers (Albertazzi and Van Kessel, 2023), digital media will continue to play a critical role in their future success. In this context, visuals and visual-centric social media have become pivotal players. Platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, the fastest growing in the sector, have broadened the availability of visual information about politics and politicians (Lalancette and Raynauld, 2023). Visual content on social media is particularly salient, has been increasing over time and is regarded by campaign managers as 'extremely important' (Larsson, 2022; Magin et al., 2016). Visual forms of online communication, notably political memes, have proliferated, fostering engagement and e-participation among the younger generations, enabling the simplification and expression of complex political ideas (McLoughlin and Southern, 2021). Scholars of the 'visual turn' argue that visual communication is crucial to modern politics. Visuals communicate traits, project qualities and affect perceptions, blurring the lines between political and non-political content (Liebhart and Bernhardt, 2017). While the turn to the visual is not something unusual or exceptional, it deserves adequate attention from political scientists because 'for many politically engaged citizens, politics is enacted in and through visual media cultures' (Dean, 2019: 256). However, when it comes to populist communication, research on its visual dimension is still in its infancy (Moffitt, 2022a).

This conceptual article is part of a Special Issue to mark and celebrate the 25th anniversary of the *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* and to reflect on key challenges that lie ahead (BJPIR, 2024). In line with the theme, the article invites the political science scholarship to devote particular analytical attention to visual social media, arguing that they will play a critical part in a new era of radical right mainstreaming with practices of *visual de-demonisation*. 'Mainstreaming' has broadly been defined as a process relating to ideological moderation, the taming of radical discourse, policy expansion and government participation (see, e.g. Akkerman et al., 2016; Moffitt, 2022b). The novel concept of visual de-demonisation, discussed in this article, places emphasis on additional important aspects of the process which is leading to the incremental acceptance of the radical right as part of the 'new normal': leaders' self-presentation, image management, storytelling and the role of emotions.

This conceptual article builds and extends the literature on radical right mainstreaming by bringing it into conversation with additional approaches and subfields, namely studies on populist visual communication, emotions and visual politics more broadly, to diversify and broaden the study of this phenomenon. In the following sections, I will first explore the concept of mainstreaming and provide a detailed account of 'visual de-demonisation', centring on its conceptualisation and strategic value for radical right actors. Before concluding with reflections on this new era of radical right mainstreaming, I will discuss the unique role that new visual social media are set to play in the process.

New approaches to the study of mainstreaming and de-demonisation

Mainstreaming is broadly regarded as the process according to which radical right parties gradually become 'the norm' in a given political system. It involves different aspects: taming radical discourse, moderating ideology, expanding the policy platform beyond

immigration, improving the potential for coalition-making and participating in government (Akkerman et al., 2016; Moffitt, 2022b).

As Moffitt (2022b) suggests, mainstreaming processes involve three key actors: mainstream parties, radical parties and the media. When radical parties themselves engage in processes aimed at fostering their inclusion, acceptance and integration into the political system, they can be thought of as engaging with *de-demonisation*. De-demonisation is a term coined in the context of French politics, specifically by Marine Le Pen who argued that one of her principal goals as the leader of the (former) *Front National* was to reverse the 'demonisation' (*déabolisation*) of her party allegedly engineered by the media.

De-demonisation is generally seen as a strategy that radical right parties employ with three aims: ameliorating their overall image in the eyes of the public, establishing their credibility as viable electoral options and broadening their electorate (Mayer, 2013). While image, credibility and diversification are key to de-demonisation for Mayer, for Ivaldi (2014) the strategy entails radical parties becoming 'less niche', 'less radical' and 'more coalitionable'. This means that de-demonisation is engineered when radical parties expand their policy platform beyond immigration (i.e. becoming less niche), 'cleanse' the party from extremist players and rhetoric (i.e. becoming less radical) and overall engage in a constructive way to form alliances with established parties (i.e. becoming more coalitionable).

Overall, extant scholarship on the mainstreaming and de-demonisation of the radical right has predominantly focused on party dynamics, neglecting the pivotal role played by perceptions, emotions, storytelling and image management. As further explored below, this article argues that the academic debate on mainstreaming and de-demonisation would benefit from the integration of new approaches.

To begin with, the scholarship on emotions and populism offers crucial insights (Bonansinga, 2020; Verbalyte et al., 2022, 2024). Although radical right populists are often regarded as predominantly mobilising negative emotions, aggression and attacks against their perceived enemies (Nai, 2021; Wodak, 2015), recent research has suggested new interesting patterns as radical right populists appear eager to engage in positive communication as well. As Bonansinga (2019, 2022) argues, these actors can mobilise a range of 'feel-good' emotions such as *hope* for a future in which the populist 'hero' restores security and ensures the 'will of the people' is implemented, or *pride* in the ordinariness and virtues of the 'good people' (Kazlauskaitė and Salmela, 2022). Radical right populists are fond of the past and the way things 'used to be', mobilising the bittersweetness of *nostalgia* for a time that was lost but can be re-captured (Kenny, 2017; Szabó and Kiss, 2022). Finally, populists channel *love* as the highest form of emotional connection between them and the 'people' (Beck, 2023; Martella and Bracciale, 2022). This means populists do not simply rely on negative politics but can also foster positive values, engagement and a sense of belonging that contribute to their increasing acceptance and appeal.

Visual social media can be crucial in the communication of positive emotions and the creation of (virtual) bonds and attachments. As Albertazzi and Bonansinga (2023) have shown, the radical right on TikTok relies overwhelmingly on positive content, such as funny videos that promote irony and sarcasm, inspirational representations of the nation and hopeful accounts of the future. These posts use images and videos to portray radical right leaders as caring individuals, as authentic persons 'just like any other' and as funny people capable of not taking everything 'too seriously'. The authors offer examples of how Marine Le Pen showcases interactions with her pets or encounters with children to

project the image of a kind and affectionate person or of how the Spanish radical right party Vox re-packages viral videos to ridicule and make fun of its ultimate enemy: 'the establishment'. Sampietro and Sanchez-Castillo (2020) have also shown that Vox's leader, Santiago Abascal, has built an inspirational image on Instagram by strategically using aspects of his private life, such as sports, to communicate strength, perseverance and commitment. On Instagram, radical right leaders like Marine Le Pen, Nigel Farage or Alice Weidel minimise negative and aggressive content, opting instead for professional and 'statesmanship' visual strategies, focusing on images that portray them as serious and competent politicians, who enjoy widespread legitimacy (Bast, 2024). These visual communication strategies are enabling radical right leaders to present a complex and well-rounded image as *legitimate and competent politicians* but also *normal people*.

Albertazzi and Bonansinga (2023) have preliminarily argued that these dynamics can result in processes of *visual* de-demonisation, as radical right leaders gradually (re)build an image as viable political actors, arguing that they are far different from the radical excesses that 'mainstream media' and 'the establishment' attribute to them. To advance and contribute to this nascent scholarship, this article provides a framework detailing visual de-demonisation strategies (see the next section), helping scholars conceptualise them and capture them empirically.

Visual de-demonisation

As discussed in the previous section, current accounts of de-demonisation have focused predominantly on changes to party rhetoric, policy focuses and coalition-formation attitudes. Visual communication has been neglected, only more recently becoming a topic of discussion. For instance, Dumitrescu (2017) has argued that visual de-demonisation is a personalised campaigning strategy that uses visuals to increase perceptions of 'closeness' to radical right politicians. Albertazzi and Bonansinga (2023) have suggested that visual de-demonisation relates to positive communication and the rebranding of a radical right party's or leader's image in a positive light, without however providing a definition. Given the current lack of a framework, this article seeks to illuminate how visual de-demonisation can be conceptualised. It also aims to show why studying how radical right actors (re)present themselves on visual social media will be crucial to understanding a new era of radical right mainstreaming.

I suggest *visual* de-demonisation can be conceptualised as a strategy comprising three central visual representations: (a) showcasing a radical right leader's *legitimacy*, (b) emphasising their good *character* and (c) promoting their ample *policy* platform. These three strategies build on existing research emphasising legitimacy, credibility and policy diversification as drivers of de-demonisation (see e.g. Mayer, 2013), delving into how these can be performed *visually*.

The first visual representation focuses on establishing legitimacy and weaponises visuals to project an image of the radical right leader as a competent and skilful political actor, capable of guiding the country. As extant research shows, professional and public settings are a central component of communicating competence in non-verbal settings (Bast, 2024; Lalancette and Raynauld, 2019). This is because an image of professionalism, communicated via images of the workplace, public institutions and official visits, suggests the possession of qualities such as trustworthiness and leadership (Grabe and Bucy, 2009). This would require radical right leaders to showcase themselves at work, for example giving a speech or being interviewed, as this communicates their expertise and

suggests that their competencies are publicly recognised. Visuals featuring large crowds or interactions with other political leaders, colleagues, the media and institutional figures are also important to visually de-demonise and establish legitimacy because they act as endorsements: they communicate that the leader has significant approval from different sectors of society and is respected by peers, at home and/or abroad (Liebhart and Bernhardt, 2017). While all politicians desire to be seen as competent statesmen, it is particularly important for the radical right to counter the perception that its leaders are just unskilled 'challengers' or mere 'oppositional' actors. Projecting competence, trust-worthiness, leadership and approval is therefore pivotal for the populist radical right to increase and establish legitimacy, making itself more appealing as an electoral option and more coalitionable for government participation.

The second aspect of visual de-demonisation focuses on visualising the 'good character' of the radical right leader, intending to showcase their persona as authentic, approachable and credible because 'normal'. Based on image-management theories, several proxies can be used to build a personable image. As Lalancette and Raynauld (2019) suggest, glancing at a politician's home and seeing them interact with their family and friends helps communicate authenticity and ordinariness. Private, informal or outdoor contexts particularly serve this function because they display the political leader outside of their work-related activities. This type of context helps them appear natural and 'normal'. In practice, we may see radical right leaders posting images and videos that show them wearing informal clothes or in their leisure time, a representation suggesting their closeness to everyday reality. Images of them enjoying food and drinks usually linked to 'popular culture', such as beer, contribute to the perception that they are 'one of us' (Albertazzi and Bonansinga, 2023). In addition, showcasing interactions with targeted subjects, such as children, the elderly or specific social groups, projects a compassionate and caring image and can specifically signal support and attachment to that group. Finally, taking a selfie with supporters further communicates approachability and closeness to ordinary people (Liebhart and Bernhardt, 2017). While all politicians can adopt these tactics in their visual communication, radical leaders have a strategic interest in embracing the combination of qualities projected by these image types, as this helps counter their public perception as 'terrible people' and 'extremists'.

The third representation in the visual de-demonisation strategy focuses on policy and entails the visual (re)presentation of the number of issues the leader cares about. This subset of visual de-demonisation supports radical parties in diversifying the party's electorate by signalling that immigration is not their sole policy interest. Radical right parties are often niche parties, owning a narrow set of policy issues, most notably on the cultural end of the policy domain, that immigration encompasses and symbolises. Indeed, these parties are said to 'own' cultural and authoritarian issues, such as law and order (Mudde, 2010). This, in turn, links to the legitimacy deficit these parties experience, as they are perceived not only as incompetent but also as disinterested in issues beyond the criticism of immigration. Images can provide a new avenue for leaders and parties to showcase their interest in a variety of domains because visuals can provide fast and useful cues into the range of policy issues they wish to advocate (Bast et al., 2022).

Visual de-demonisation is therefore a complex strategy that can support the rebranding of a radical party over time, by (re)constructing the way the party and its leader are perceived by the public. While all political actors wish to project a positive and appealing image to voters, the radical right has a stronger strategic incentive: the need to communicate credibility, legitimacy, competence and integration into the party system.

The next section discusses why the emergence and success of visual social media such as Instagram and TikTok have provided a crucial window of opportunity for the radical right to perform visual de-demonisation and why this is likely to represent a crucial challenge in the next decade.

Visual platforms and the future of de-demonisation

Why should we study visual de-demonisation in the present and the foreseeable future? I argue that visual platforms provide the radical right with a unique and ideal setting to present itself in a renewed and more positive light, thereby serving its strategic interest in de-demonising. The emergence and growth in popularity of Instagram and TikTok, in particular, has been a game-changer in the mainstreaming of the radical right, opening a new era for this party family to join the mainstream. This is because the focus of the visual de-demonisation strategy aligns with the 'affordances' of the two platforms, hence allowing the 'de-demonising' radical right content to 'blend in'.

Affordances refer to the relational structures that foster particular types of behaviour and interactions with and within a social media platform (Bossetta, 2018). Instagram's key affordance is the rewarding of aesthetically pleasing and light-hearted content that promotes an aestheticisation of everyday life (Haßler et al., 2023). TikTok's main affordance, on the other hand, is the rewarding of prolonged engagement through content that is entertaining and likely to go 'viral' (Albertazzi and Bonansinga, 2023). I argue that these platforms' expectations for inspiring, intimate and entertaining content generate an incentive for radical right parties and leaders seeking to improve their image. This is because affordances demand that content is tailored to the features of the platform, and then reward aligning content with engagement, visibility and attention, contributing to its 'spreadability' (Jungherr, 2016). In other words, strategically embracing Instagram's and TikTok's communication norms allows the radical right to circulate positive content such as relatable, humanised or inspirational images and 'blend in'.

Importantly, Instagram and TikTok provide not only a unique contextual opportunity to implement a visual de-demonisation strategy but also the ideal audience for a radical party's rebranding. Both platforms are popular with young people and women, two key segments that radical right parties traditionally struggle to attract. In terms of age demographics, more than half of the Instagram[1] and TikTok[2] users worldwide are aged 34 years or younger. TikTok, in particular, is known for its *very* young audience. For instance, in the United States, the country where the app enjoys the most popularity, almost 70% of users in 2023 were aged 12–17 years.[3] In France, a 2022 survey conducted with children and teenagers (11–18 years old) revealed 60% of respondents were engaging with the platform.[4] In terms of gender distribution, women represent crucial audiences on both platforms, often overtaking men. For instance, in the United Kingdom, women make up 55.3% of Instagram active users[5]; in France, 55.2%[6]; in Italy, 53.8%[7], with this percentage going up to 55.7% in the United States[8] and 59% in Denmark.[9] As for TikTok, women account for over 50% of active users in the entire Scandinavian region (Norway, Finland, Sweden, Denmark),[10] for 52% of users in France[11] and for over 60% in the United States.[12]

Visual social media such as Instagram and TikTok provide radical right populists with access to audiences that are not traditionally part of their base, hence augmenting the potential to broaden their electorate. The younger generations, in particular, have likely no firsthand knowledge of the radical right as a marginal actor; before they reach the voting age, all they may have been exposed to is the de-demonised image it now promotes

on these popular media. There is a possibility this may lead to an uncritical stance towards the evolution of these parties and to a further increase in the normalisation of the radical right and its discourse in the future.

Conclusion

This conceptual article has shown the value and significance of integrating new approaches to the study of radical right mainstreaming. While extant scholarship has focused predominantly on party system dynamics (e.g. delving into the strategies and behaviour of mainstream parties in relation to radical right actors, or into the extent of coverage that established media devote to populists), this article has stressed that developing novel theoretical frameworks is paramount to better understand the complexity of radical right mainstreaming and to envision adequate analytical tools to study the future challenges it poses. In particular, the article has shown how positive emotionality and visual storytelling can be key. Positive emotions can play an important role in mainstreaming processes, notably as a tool to nurture attachment and connection to radical leaders as they unveil their 'authentic' and 'relatable' selves on visual social media. Visual storytelling is central to the creation of a rebranded radical party. By definition, the study of a radical actor's attempt at improving its image and public perception cannot escape the examination of its visual self-presentation. Yet these two facets are understudied aspects of radical right communication which deserve specific attention in relation to mainstreaming and de-demonisation practices.

Building on these premises, the article has advanced a new definition and detailed account of *visual de-demonisation*, articulating it as a strategy aimed at the rebranding of radical right actors as (a) legitimate and competent leaders; (b) good, affectionate and relatable persons and (c) as politicians caring about a range of policies beyond immigration, via the skilful use of visual social media. This new framework provides scholars with an initial conceptual device to study how radical right parties and leaders attempt to overcome their 'extremist' status via strategic self-presentation. The introduction of the concept lays the ground for future research. There are a number of avenues scholars should explore further. For instance, the *micro-dynamics* of visual de-demonisation, to uncover the variety of *sub-strategies* that radical right actors can employ to visually communicate legitimacy, good character and policy priorities; the qualitative *differences* between visual de-demonisation strategies across contexts and stages of the political life-cycle, which would entail comparing election and non-election periods; the *emotional experiences* that exposure to visually de-demonising content generates in audiences and more generally how this type of content 'lands' with its target audiences.

Overall the growth in popularity of visual social media opens up a new era of radical right mainstreaming, as these platforms are shaping the way populists communicate online, the style they adopt and the content they prioritise. Skillfully and rapidly adapting to changing media technology, and adjusting their communication strategies to fit the structures or 'affordances' of novel platforms, allows the radical right to gain new ground with and access to diverse audiences. A fruitful way forward to understand these future challenges is increased cross-fertilisation between different approaches to the study of politics and populism.

ORCID iD

Donatella Bonansinga https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1968-0811

Notes

1. https://www.statista.com/statistics/248769/age-distribution-of-worldwide-instagram-users/
2. https://www.statista.com/statistics/1299771/tiktok-global-user-age-distribution/
3. https://www.statista.com/statistics/1095196/tiktok-us-age-gender-reach/
4. https://www.statista.com/statistics/1244511/tiktok-use-minors-france-gender/
5. https://www.statista.com/statistics/1315723/uk-instagram-users-by-gender/
6. https://www.statista.com/statistics/1196395/instagram-users-by-gender-france/
7. https://www.statista.com/statistics/692373/instagram-users-by-gender-in-italy/
8. https://www.statista.com/statistics/530498/instagram-users-in-the-us-by-gender/
9. https://www.statista.com/statistics/1416789/instagram-users-share-in-denmark-gender/
10. https://www.statista.com/statistics/1419600/nordics-tiktok-users-by-gender/
11. https://www.statista.com/statistics/1088783/tik-tok-users-gender-france/
12. https://www.statista.com/statistics/1398182/tiktok-us-audience-by-gender/

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