

**Babeş-Bolyai University
Faculty of the European Studies
European Paradigm Doctoral School**

**Programmatic Analysis of
Mainstream Right Radicalization (MRR)
in the Netherlands and Romania:
the Tale of a Typical and a Diverse Case.**

Ph.D. Thesis

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Abstract

The contemporary European political landscape is increasingly challenged by the mainstreaming and normalization of the far right, which has been steadily gaining a stronger, more permanent electoral foothold across the continent. Historically relegated to the fringes of the political spectrum through a strict cordon sanitaire, these challenger parties have now become vital power brokers. A conspicuous and consequential development in this shifting environment is the increasing occurrence of formal and informal coalition governments forged between established parties of the mainstream right and challenger parties of the far right. The existing empirical research overwhelmingly demonstrates that these strategic alliances and changing competitive dynamics have been accompanied by an increasing ideological and rhetorical radicalization of the mainstream right. This radicalization, often characterized by a shift toward nativism, authoritarianism, and populism, has been specifically pronounced in the highly salient areas of migration and cultural policy, where established parties attempt to co-opt far-right platforms to recapture alienated voters.

While existing political science literature successfully documents this mainstream right radicalization via quantitative cross-case studies, a significant methodological and theoretical gap remains. Large-N spatial models are highly effective at tracking aggregate shifts, but there is a pressing need for more granular, qualitative within-case studies that explore the deeply context-dependent developments, internal party mechanics, and historical path dependencies of this phenomenon. Furthermore, the academic focus has been disproportionately heavily skewed toward sociocultural issues. Consequently, it is necessary to assess whether the mainstream right also radicalizes in other salient policy areas, particularly foreign policy, which has become a renewed focal point of ideological contestation in the face of shifting geopolitical realities, Euroscepticism, and democratic backsliding.

Addressing these gaps, the primary goal of this doctoral thesis is to explore and document mainstream right radicalization across both migration and foreign policies. The ultimate objective is not merely to describe these shifts, but to build robust, testable hypotheses for future comparative inquiries on this topic. To achieve this, the study develops an original analytical framework to formulate how competing liberal and illiberal norms shape party platforms regarding migration and foreign relations. By categorizing policy stances along a continuum of liberal and illiberal norms, the framework provides a precise matrix for measuring radicalization over time.

The research employs an exploratory case study design. To ensure a comprehensive analysis across differing democratic environments, the study utilizes a distribution-based

case selection strategy, focusing on two distinct political and geographic contexts. The Netherlands, a consolidated Western European democracy with an established, well-documented track record of mainstream right radicalization, serves as the typical case. Its political arena, characterized by high fragmentation and the persistent electoral pressure of far-right challengers, acts as the baseline for observing how a mainstream right establishment adapts to continuous nativist pressure. Conversely, Romania, an emerging democracy at the Eastern frontiers of the European Union, serves as the diverse case. Unlike its Western counterparts, the Romanian mainstream right has historically maintained a staunchly pro-European and broadly centrist orientation. Selecting Romania allows the study to test the boundaries of radicalization theories in a context defined by different historical legacies, distinct geopolitical vulnerabilities, and a newer, yet rapidly ascending, far-right challenger.

The empirical analysis relies on a triangulated qualitative methodology. The primary data corpus includes official party manifestos, formal coalition agreements, and internal party documents, supplemented by existing academic research on both national contexts. Methodologically, the study utilizes process tracing to rigorously assess and map the policy shifts within the mainstream right parties chronologically. This longitudinal approach allows for the identification of specific critical junctures, electoral shocks, and coalition negotiations that trigger ideological shifts, thereby moving beyond static snapshots of party positions.

The empirical analysis reveals a stark divergence between the two contexts. In the Netherlands, the mainstream right exhibits clear and sustained radicalization on migration policy, progressively adopting more illiberal norms and exclusionary rhetoric in response to competitive electoral pressures. Conversely, the analysis demonstrates that the mainstream right in Romania does not radically shift in any of the assessed policy areas. Despite the emergence of domestic far-right challengers, the Romanian mainstream right remains anchored to its established pro-European foreign policy and moderate migration stances.

The study concludes that mainstream right radicalization is not a monolithic, inevitable pan-European trend, but is significantly context-dependent. The divergence between the Dutch and Romanian cases indicates that three primary mechanisms govern radicalization: issue salience, issue ownership, and, crucially, the nature of party competition. Based on these comparative observations, the thesis ultimately builds a series of nuanced hypotheses regarding how geopolitical constraints, coalition viability, and issue salience interact to either facilitate or inhibit the radicalization of the mainstream right, providing a vital foundation for future academic inquiry.

Keywords: mainstream right, far right, liberal norms, illiberal norms, radicalization.

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