

Blurring borders: truth-seeking in a post-truth world

Tracing the process of legitimisation of Eurabia attitudes in Dutch political discourse



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Abstract

This master thesis intends to elucidate the legitimisation process of the Eurabia conspiracy theory by political mainstream and fringe actors in Dutch political discourse. Performing a process tracing analysis of the shifting political discourse in the 2006-2017 period, different party manifestos, speeches, interviews, letters and political statements of mainstream *VVD*-leader Rutte and fringe *PVV*-leader Wilders are analysed. Anti-migrant and anti-Islam attitudes have been growing since the 2000s, partly due to Islamic terrorism and political assassinations. Especially populist politician Geert Wilders has instrumentalised a growing feeling of fear and discomfort with non-natives, politicising and reshaping societal debates on these issues, reinforcing the sociocultural cleavage. Mark Rutte, in turn, increasingly responded to this electoral threat with an ideological reorientation, a negative frame on migration and Islam. In the end, even his rhetoric made a pessimist turn. It is demonstrated that the legitimisation of the premisses to this conspiracy theory in the political arena was a gradual process, to be divided into four phases. Starting with a context-changing run-up phase, followed by a taboo-breaking entry phase, then an absorbent, ideological internalisation phase, concluded with a legitimisation phase of rhetorical accommodation by the mainstream. Most importantly, the power of mainstream actors in crediting, confirming and redefining societal debates with re-adjusted ideas and statements is exemplified. The introduction of (previously) stigmatised knowledge is a two-sided process, magnified by political crises, induced by fringe political actors, but legitimised by the mainstream.

Keywords: anti-Islam, anti-migration, legitimisation, conspiracy theories, Eurabia, mainstream and fringe parties, populism, political discourse, the Netherlands

1. Introduction

1.1 The post-truth democracy

In 2006, Habermas famously stated: ‘A post-truth democracy (...) would no longer be a democracy.’¹ In the subsequent years, his feared vision of the future increasingly became reality. Events like the ‘migration crisis’ and terror attacks led to an unparalleled rise of post-truth politics. This is a setting in which fake news prevails, all-embracing distrust is spread and facts fade into the background of political debates.² Media and scholars have baptised this post-truth era ‘the age of conspiracism’, as the attention for conspiracy theories has increased tremendously.³ Populists have utilised the changed societal debate with fierce rhetoric. Rising populism throughout the world reflects this decline of trust in politicians, scientists and international organisations.⁴

An integral part of the post-truth democracy are conspiracy theories. These are theories that ‘accuse a group of individuals of orchestrating a plot that has harmed (or will harm) society’.⁵ Conspiracy theories encompass elements like a constant threat and fear for the future, the exclusion of factors like accidents or luck and the usage of extremist rhetoric.⁶ These ideas were traditionally expelled to the ‘fringes’ of society, political extremes that play a marginal role and are not part of mainstream politics. They contain stigmatised knowledge, defined as ‘knowledge claims that have been ignored or rejected by institutions we rely on to validate such claims.’⁷ These institutions, like political parties and mass media are called ‘mainstream’: ‘the ideas, attitudes, or activities that the majority shares and regards as normal, conventional.’⁸

1.2 Normalisation of conspiracy theories

Academics have often warned that a reduction of the boundary between truth and fiction would have serious implications for democracy.⁹ Therefore, mainstream media and politicians have traditionally stayed far away from conspiracy theories in the Netherlands. These actors

¹ Jürgen Habermas, *Between naturalism and religion: Philosophical essays* (European Journal of Philosophy Polity, 2006), p.18

² Eirikur Bergmann, *Conspiracy & populism: the politics of misinformation*. (Spring, 2018), p.173

³ Eric J. Oliver & Thomas Wood. *Medical conspiracy theories and health behaviors in the United States*. (JAMA Internal Medicine, 2014), 174(5), p.817

⁴ Michael Butter & Peter Knight, *Routledge handbook of conspiracy theories*, (Routledge, 2020), p.112.

⁵ Ibid. p.113

⁶ Ibid. p.115

⁷ Michael Barkun, *Conspiracy theories as stigmatized knowledge*. (Diogenes, 2016), p.115

⁸ Cambridge Dictionary <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/mainstream>

⁹ Robert Sutton & Karen Douglas, *Conspiracy theories and the conspiracy mindset: implications for ideology*. (Current opinion in behavioral sciences, 2020), 34, p.118-119

functioned as gatekeepers, pressing conspiracy theories to the fringe, the flanks of public debate.¹⁰ Recently, however, the boundary between mainstream and fringe ideas has started to diminish due to technological and socio-political factors. The changed political context created space for the introduction of extremist thoughts in public discourse. The rise of social media has created uncontrolled online networks proclaiming unfounded opinions. Furthermore, tightened, far-reaching security measures after 9/11 have reinforced people's distrust in democracy and scepticism about the state.¹¹

Paradoxically, research has proven that the amount of people supporting conspiracy theories has not increased significantly over the past decades.¹² Nevertheless, political mainstream attention to these fringe explanations has grown substantially. Mainstream political leaders and media have instigated a growth of coverage. More and more, they seem to take over rhetoric similar to the far-right, reinforcing their significance.¹³ Because sociocultural topics like migration have taken over political debates, mainstream actors have moved to the right. Mainstream politicians changed their attitude towards migration and Islam, fearing a loss of electorate when maintaining their old position. This caused 'normalisation' of fringe thinking, the incorporation of political extremist ideas into mainstream discourse.¹⁴

Besides, right-wing populist politicians have successfully instrumentalised conspiracy theories into their new master frame, a comprehensive set of practices that political groups easily apply to achieve success in different contexts.¹⁵ Populist politicians have implemented these theories in their argumentation against powerful decision-makers and minority groups within society.¹⁶ They reinforced a feeling of 'us vs. them', appointing Muslims or migrants as scapegoat.¹⁷ Conspiracy theories help these demagogues to spread frames of fear, danger and anti-elite sentiment, lowering democratic values and promote polarisation.¹⁸

¹⁰ Marijn van Klingeren, Andrej Zaslove & Bertjan Verbeek, 'Accommodating the Dutch populist radical right in a multi-party system: Success or failure?', in Pontus Odmalm & Eve Hepburn (Eds.), *The European mainstream and the populist radical right*, (Taylor & Francis, 2017), p.112-113.

¹¹ Barkun, *Conspiracy theories as stigmatized knowledge*. p.117

¹² Alfred Moore, *Conspiracies, conspiracy theories and democracy*. (Political Studies Review, 2018) 16(1), p.5

¹³ Joseph Uscinski & Joseph Parent, *American conspiracy theories*. (2014), p.7-8.

¹⁴ Markus Rheindorf & Ruth Wodak, *Austria First revisited: a diachronic cross-sectional analysis of the gender and body politics of the extreme right*, (Patterns of Prejudice, 2019), 53(3), p.307.

¹⁵ Robert D. Benford, *Master Frame*. (The Wiley-blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements, 2013), p.1.

¹⁶ Jan-Willem van Prooijen, André Krouwel & Thomas Pollet, *Political extremism predicts belief in conspiracy theories*. (Social psychological and personality science, 2015), 6 (5), p.571.

¹⁷ Jelle van Buuren, *Holland's Own Kennedy Affair. Conspiracy Theories on the Murder of Pim Fortuyn*. (Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung, 2013), p.277-278

¹⁸ Bergmann, *Conspiracy & populism*, p.169

1.3 ‘Eurabia’ in the Netherlands

In the Netherlands, conspiracy theories have also become increasingly legitimised. Political parties have started to adopt their premisses for political gain. The ‘Eurabia’ thesis is a conspiracy theory that has circulated in political discourse.¹⁹ In short, Bat Ye’or, a British publicist of Egyptian-Israeli origin, whose real name was Gisèle Littman, introduced Eurabia in 2002 in *Eurabia: the Euro-Arab axis*, accusing Europe’s political elite of secretly conspiring with Arabian elites to the ‘conscious Islamisation of Europe.’²⁰ This European doomsday scenario combines anti-elitist, anti-migrant, anti-Islam and anti-leftist political attitudes. These are dominant right-wing populist subjects. The murder on Fortuyn and worldwide terrorism led to increasing politicisation on these subjects, enabling populist actors to benefit of growing fear among Dutch citizens since the 2000s.²¹

In 2007, *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (PVV) leader Geert Wilders already showed his sympathy in a letter to *De Volkskrant*: ‘the cowardly elite collaborates to transform The Netherlands into ‘Nederarabia’ as a province of Eurabia.’²² The theory helped him to demonise the ethnic minority of Muslims and blame political establishment.²³ Migration was portrayed as an existential societal threat. Surprisingly, however, the position of mainstream political actors like Prime Minister Mark Rutte of *Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie* (VVD), became more radical over time as well. Exemplary for the hardened political debate was a letter to the Dutch people before the 2017 parliamentary elections, with an indirect message to migrants: “Act normal or go away”.²⁴

This raises the question to what extent conspirational tension is surrounding Dutch political debates, altering political mainstream attitudes and increasing polarisation and group prejudices. Conspirational thinking appears to have become a legitimised political tool in the multicultural and migration debate, since mainstream parties have adopted restrictive – rhetorical and programmatic – migration positions. Mainstream parties face difficult choices:

¹⁹ Dimitri Tokmetzis, “Deze rechtspopulistische complottheorie wil maar niet verdwijnen”, *De Correspondent*, 25 april 2018: <https://decorrespondent.nl/8182/deze-rechts-populistische-complottheorie-wil-maar-niet-verdwijnen/398438854-5fb989ee>

²⁰ Matt Carr, *You are now entering Eurabia*. (Race & Class, 2006): 48.1, p.1-2.

²¹ Jelle van Buuren. *Doelwit Den Haag?: complotconstructies en systeemhaat in Nederland 2000-2014* (Doctoral dissertation, Leiden University, 2016). p.119-122.

²² Koen Vossen, *Populism in the Netherlands after Fortuyn: Rita Verdonk and Geert Wilders compared*. (Perspectives on European Politics and Society, 2010), 11(1), p.26

²³ Michiel Leezenberg. *Discursive violence and responsibility: Notes on the pragmatics of Dutch populism*. (Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict, 2015) 3.1: p.211.

²⁴ Nikolaj Nielsen, “Dutch PM tells people to ‘act normal, or go away.’” *EU Observer*, January 24 2017, consulted on June 4 2021 at: <https://euobserver.com.proxy.library.uu.nl/political/136641>

falsifying these theories with thoughtful arguments, ignoring their existence or adopting similar political attitudes.²⁵

1.4 Research question

This research project aims to elucidate how and why Dutch political fringe and mainstream parties have contributed to the legitimisation of Eurabia. Migration and Islam increasingly got a negative connotation in Dutch political debates, leading to more restrictive rhetoric and policy proposals. It focusses on the right-wing populist parties' rationale of *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (PVV) to use conspirational rhetoric in political debates. On the other hand, it demonstrates how the position of mainstream right-wing party *Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie* (VVD) turned to the right due to the threat PVV was for their electorate.

The goal is to explain how and why Eurabia's conspirational rhetoric has entered mainstream political debates. Party leaders Rutte (VVD) and Wilders' (PVV) rhetoric will be compared, next to their political manifestos. In this way, fringe and mainstream rhetoric that have dominated Islam and migration debates between 2006 and 2017 are analysed, to interpret legitimisation of the Eurabia conspiracy theory, and the anti-migrant and anti-Islam attitudes of Dutch politicians. Then, it clarifies which thresholds and barriers these attitudes had to overcome before entering mainstream political discourse, to show how this theory has come to the political foreground and to derive lessons about the effect of diffusion of conspiracy theories on the political arena.

The research question this thesis employs is:

How and why did Dutch political fringe (PVV) and mainstream (VVD) contribute to the legitimisation of the Eurabia conspiracy theory?

This question looks into why and how conspirational thinking surrounding migration and Islam-related debates has moved from political extremes into everyday political debate. It contains two hypotheses:

1. Eurabia has influenced Dutch political debates.
2. Mainstream and fringe parties differ in the way they treat the migration and Islam debate, but both contributed to the legitimisation of Eurabia with underlying attitudes.

²⁵ Cass Sunstein & Adrian Vermeule, *Conspiracy theories: Causes and cures*, (Journal of political philosophy, 2009), 17(2), p.226-227.

1.5 Conspiracy theories and the pessimist turn on migration and Islam

It was long believed that the Dutch were way too down to earth for conspiracy thinking. Before the 2000s, conspirational thinking was not common in politics. The Dutch political arena was characterised by a common urge for consensus, driven by a mix of neoliberals, conservatists, progressives and socialists. This consensus-seeking attitude was called ‘polderen’.²⁶ After 2000, however, the first major anti-establishment, right-wing populist party (*LPF*) had silently entered Dutch political landscape, because of growing disappointment, a loss of identity sentiment and (political) assassinations.²⁷ Populist party *PVV* instrumentalised the attitude of capitalism ‘losers’ that started to rebel against elites. The collapse of communism made a common enemy disappear and was a major political development that generated new cleavages in society. New communication means eased dissemination of fringe ideas, the traditional media role diminished. To combat diminishing power, traditional media engaged in sensationalised (‘clickbait’) outlets.²⁸ Stigmatised knowledge was available online for citizens, undermining the gatekeeping role of traditional media.²⁹ ‘Live journalism’ and blogging facilitated dissemination of falsehoods. Citizens started websites that looked reliable, but contained false ideas. Overflow of information was in fact a source of knowledge lowering.³⁰

Figure 1 shows the Dutch political arena. In this figure, *VVD* is the most right-wing party, propagating market freedom, freedom of speech and self-sustainability. That is because the *PVV* proposes left-wing initiatives attracting lower-income and senior population.³¹

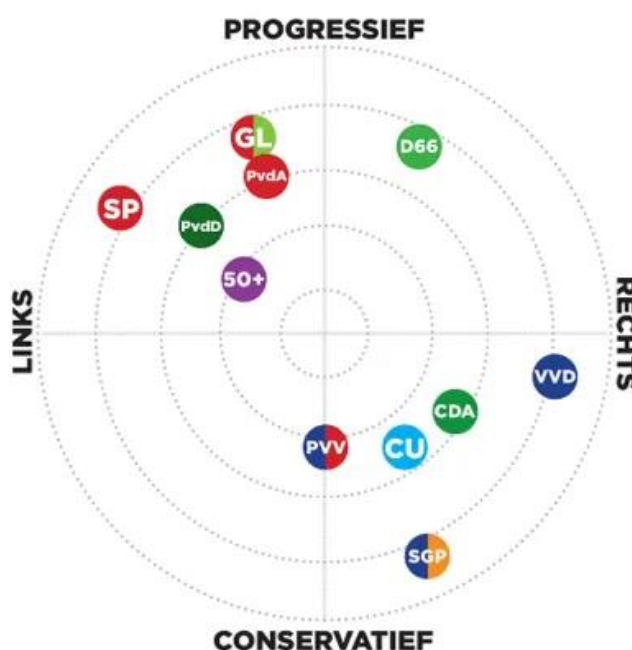


Figure 1: Dutch political landscape containing the main political parties between 2006 and 2017. Source: Abuzer van Leeuwen, *The Dutch language guide to understanding Dutch politics*, Dutchreview.com, March 19 2020: <https://dutchreview.com/news/politics/dutch-language-guide-understanding-dutch-politics/>

²⁶ Van Buuren, *Doelwit Den Haag?*: p.43.

²⁷ Vossen, *Populism in the Netherlands after Fortuyn*: p.22-23.

²⁸ Jaron Harambam, *De/politisering van de waarheid*. (Sociologie, 2017), p.79-80.

²⁹ Van Buuren, *Doelwit Den Haag?* p.50-51.

³⁰ Harambam, *De/politisering van de waarheid*. p.80-81.

³¹ Leezenberg, *Discursive violence and responsibility*, p.204-206

However, *PVV* has traditionally been considered as ‘fringe’, because they spread nationalist rhetoric and aim to ‘stop Islamisation’ with exclusionary measures (e.g. *Kopvoddentax*).³²

Several authors focused on populist rhetoric penetrating mainstream Dutch politics. Vossen demonstrated how Geert Wilders (*PVV*) instrumentalised the political vacuum Fortuyn left on the right flank, combining economic liberalism, anti-elitism and anti-immigrant perspectives.³³ His ‘Islamisation’ narrative of Europe was deepened by Damhuis, who decomposes the Islam politicisation strategy.³⁴ Leezenberg analysed *PVV*’s anti-migration and anti-Islam discourse, concluding that criticising Islam became a legitimate liberal tool. Eurabia served as a key component to their political ideology.³⁵ Van Buuren showed the dynamic of how Wilders spread Eurabia for political purposes.³⁶ Moreover, Akkerman showed how *PVV* indirectly altered the preconditions of immigration debates, politicising the 2015 migration crisis during the 2017 election campaign.³⁷

Lucassen & Lucassen named the Dutch politicisation of Islam and migration after 2000 the ‘pessimist turn of the immigration debate’. After 9/11 and political murders on Pim Fortuyn and Theo van Gogh, the 1990s political correctness transformed into a polarised political climate.³⁸ On the contrary, Grisdale argued that, instead of a sudden post-9/11 attitude of anti-Islam politics, politicisation was an incremental process, moving from a short period of multiculturalism towards an assimilationist position among Dutch population.³⁹ Van Heerden et al. added that mainstream parties altered their migration position to a ‘monoculturalist’ approach, emphasising cultural integration instead of socio-economic integration.⁴⁰

³² Henk J. van Houtum & Rodrigo Bueno Lacy, *The political extreme as the new normal: the cases of Brexit, the French state of emergency and Dutch Islamophobia*, (2017), p.94-95.

³³ Vossen, *Populism in the Netherlands after Fortuyn*: p.22-23.

³⁴ Koen Damhuis, “The biggest problem in the Netherlands: understanding the Party for Freedom’s politicization of Islam”, *Brookings.edu*, July 24 2019, consulted at May 16 2021 at: <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-biggest-problem-in-the-netherlands-understanding-the-party-for-freedoms-politicization-of-islam/>

³⁵ Leezenberg, *Discursive violence and responsibility*. p.201

³⁶ Van Buuren, *Doelwit Den Haag?*: p.127-130

³⁷ Tjitske Akkerman, *The Impact of populist radical-right parties on immigration policy agendas*, (Washington, DC, United States, 2018), p.4-6

³⁸ Leo Lucassen & Jan Lucassen, *The Strange Death of Dutch Tolerance: The Timing and Nature of the Pessimist Turn in the Dutch Migration Debate*, (*The Journal of Modern History*, 2015) 87(1), p.72

³⁹ Otilie Kate Grisdale, *Seeing Past the 'Post-9/11' Framing: The Long Rise of Anti-Islam Politics in the Netherlands*. (Diss. Carleton University, 2015), p.108-111.

⁴⁰ Sjoerdje van Heerden, Sarah de Lange, Wouter van der Brug & Meindert Fennema, *The immigration and integration debate in the Netherlands: Discursive and programmatic reactions to the rise of anti-immigration parties*, (*Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 2014), 40.1: p.119

Van Buuren exemplified the danger of conspiracy theory normalisation, when picked up by mainstream politicians and media.⁴¹ Kesic & Duyvendak demonstrated that the roots of anti-migration and anti-Islam attitudes cover the entire political spectre, even the progressive left, as protagonists of freedom of speech and sexuality.⁴² Van Klingereren, Zaslove & Verbeek proved that not only right-wing populists propelled animosity against migration and Islam, but also right-wing mainstream parties adopted these attitudes.⁴³ Van Houtum & Bueno Lacy showed that *VVD* has adjusted their liberal position to a populist, political opportunist position before the 2017 elections, to retain voters, spreading an exclusionist migrant frame.⁴⁴ Van Heerden quantitatively demonstrated that *VVD* manifesto's migration coverage increased between 1994 and 2010, moving towards right-wing populist narratives.⁴⁵

The aforementioned bibliography on the Dutch context underlines the increasing significance of anti-migration and anti-Islam attitudes. Scholars have focused abundantly on populist rhetoric on migration and Islam. However, to understand the dynamic between conspiratorial populist rhetoric and mainstream policy adjustments, an investigation into this process of shifting discourse is needed. An all-encompassing investigation on the effect of political rhetoric on legitimisation of Eurabia is missing. A comparison between right-wing populist *PVV* and right-wing mainstream *VVD* is fruitful for explaining this legitimisation process of anti-migrant and anti-Islam attitudes and could prove insightful to legitimisation processes of conspiracy theories in general. This research differs from previous investigations, as it traces the legitimisation process on the basis of recent political developments over time, specifically focusing on Eurabia resemblances in political rhetoric.

Besides, it demonstrates why conspiracy theories prevail in crisis situations and how political actors take advantage of these crises. This thesis can show which tactics political entrepreneurs employed while adopting similar narratives such as these theories. It underlines the differences and similarities between mainstream and fringe parties over time. Scholars are unsure how mainstream actors should respond to simplified rhetoric like conspiracy theories.⁴⁶ This research shows effects of political responses to conspiracy thoughts from a

⁴¹ Van Buuren, *Holland's Own Kennedy Affair*, p.280-282.

⁴² Josip Kešić & Jan-Willem Duyvendak, *The nation under threat: Secularist, racial and populist nativism in the Netherlands*, (Patterns of Prejudice, 2019), 53(5), p.456-461

⁴³ Van Klingereren, et al. 'Success or failure?', in P. Odmalm & E. Hepburn (Eds.), *The European mainstream and the populist radical right*. (2017), pp. 125–126.

⁴⁴ Van Houtum, et al.. *The political extreme as the new normal*, p.94-95.

⁴⁵ Van Heerden et al. *The immigration and integration debate in the Netherlands*, p.132-134.

⁴⁶ Butter & Knight, *Conspiracy theories*, p.245-246.

clear-cut case. It contributes to existing scholarly debates why and how the increased articulation of attitudes similar to Eurabia in mainstream discourse occurred. Political-historical events that shaped the discourse in the period 2006-2017 are guiding.

1.6 Method

This thesis engages in process tracing of the 2006-2017 period. This research strategy is a longitudinal design that investigates the sequence of events leading from A to B. It is a within-case method that examines assumptions, in order to delineate causality.⁴⁷ The starting point (=A) is the 2006 introduction foundation of *PVV*. My thesis is that until 2017 (=B), a legitimisation process of Eurabia's premisses took place. A chronological analysis of statements and proposals shows the adoption of restrictive attitudes towards migration and Islam, reinforcing Eurabia's significance in political discourse. The interpretation of outcomes is placed in historical perspective and highlights the radicalised positioning.

It discursively analyses party manifestos, speeches, interviews, letters and specific statements of Wilders and Rutte. A discourse analysis is a qualitative, interpretative research strategy that focusses on the way language is used in society, trying to investigate 'the way versions of the world, society, events and inner psychological worlds are produced in discourse.'⁴⁸ Language is key: a means to communicate a worldview with other social actors, an entity shaped by socio-political and cultural circumstances. This thesis is a critical discourse analysis that investigates 'the role of language as a power resource that is related to ideology and sociocultural change.'⁴⁹ Comparing mainstream and populist discourse can exemplify the gradual legitimisation of conspirational allegations on Muslims and migrants.

Qualitative research is a strategy that looks at the way that people conceptualise social phenomena.⁵⁰ Analysing political discourse can figure out why parties embrace certain political attitudes and can demonstrate how admission of stigmatised knowledge contributes to hardened public debates. As events influence political language heavily, contextual components are distilled through party outlets. Conclusively, this thesis demonstrates how false claims on migrants and Muslims have become a legitimised discursive tool.

⁴⁷ Bo Bengtsson and Hannu Ruonavaara. *Comparative process tracing: Making historical comparison structured and focused*, (Philosophy of the Social Sciences, 2017), 47.1: p.45-46.

⁴⁸ Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, (Oxford University Press, 2012), p.528-529

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.537-538.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.379

Authors widely use discourse analyses to investigate populist narratives. Most conceptual thinking was done in the US. Castanho Silva, Vegetti and Littvay investigated the link between American populist attitudes and conspirational beliefs.⁵¹ Vossen examined populist elements in party outlets and interviews in Dutch context.⁵² Hameleers focused on how populists disseminate conspiracies, comparing Wilders with Trump.⁵³ This thesis tests theoretical concepts on the articulation of Eurabia in Dutch political context and complements existing theories by verifying (or falsifying) scientific claims.

An operationalisation of important concepts in this thesis is needed to perform a thorough analysis. Conspiracy theories are used as a means to spread stigmatised knowledge about the suspicion of malignant intentions by state institutions. They are defined as ‘attempts to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstances, with claims of secret plots by two or more powerful actors.’⁵⁴ Besides, this thesis revolves around the concepts ‘fringe’ and ‘mainstream’, that are used to indicate the position that Eurabia has in Dutch politics. The concept ‘fringe’ is defined as ‘an idea, viewpoint or group that circulates solely on the margins of society, the political extremes and has marginalised political impact.’⁵⁵ The definition of ‘mainstream’ is ‘an idea, attitude, or activity that is shared by most people and regarded as normal or conventional.’⁵⁶ Normalisation, or legitimisation of a conspiracy theory means an absorption into mainstream political debates. This concept is understood as ‘the incorporation, acceptance, of extremist ideas into mainstream political discourse.’⁵⁷ To estimate Eurabia’s legitimisation, anti-Islam sentiment defined as ‘wholesale rejections, denigrations and hostility of Islam, rather than argumentative criticism.’⁵⁸ The employed definition of anti-migration sentiment is ‘enhancing measures to restrict immigration and stress the urgency of taking restrictive measures.’⁵⁹

⁵¹ Bruno Castanho Silva, Federico Vegetti, and Levente Littvay. *The elite is up to something: Exploring the relation between populism and belief in conspiracy theories*, (Swiss political science review, 2017) 23.4: p.423-443.

⁵² Vossen, *Populism in the Netherlands after Fortuyn*.

⁵³ Michael Hameleers, *They are selling themselves out to the enemy! The content and effects of populist conspiracy theories*, (International Journal of Public Opinion Research, 2021) 33.1: p.38-56.

⁵⁴ Karen Douglas, Joseph Uscinski, Robert Sutton, Aleksandra Cichočka, Turkay S. Nefes, Chee S. Ang & Farzin Deravi, *Understanding conspiracy theories*. (Political Psychology, 2019), 40: p.4

⁵⁵ Butter & Knight, *Routledge book of conspiracy theories*, p.113-115

⁵⁶ Lexico, “Definition of mainstream”, (Oxford), consulted on June 10 ’21 at: <https://www.lexico.com/definition/Mainstream>

⁵⁷ Rheindorf & Wodak, *Austria First revisited*, p.307.

⁵⁸ Anna Sophie Lauwers. *Is Islamophobia (Always) Racism?* (Critical Philosophy of Race, 2019), 7(2): p.308-310.

⁵⁹ Joost van Spanje, *The wrong and the right: A comparative analysis of ‘anti-immigration’ and ‘far right’ parties*. (Government and Opposition, 2011), 46.3: p.308.

The data was gathered from the websites of the Dutch parliament, political parties and media outlet archives. It was split in two main categories – propaganda and manifestos – described as primary sources part of political discourse.⁶⁰ Additionally, media outlets and scientific political publications serve as secondary source material. Documents were selected equally distributed and on the basis of their connection with migration and Islam debates, leaning to Eurabia's premisses. The chronological distribution of the sources was important, to provide a significant overview of discursive shifts over time.

An overview of sources is added in the appendixes (I-II):

- **Party manifestos:** 2006, 2012, 2017 elections. (Total: 6 manifestos)
- **Party propaganda:** Interviews, letters, movies, commentaries, speeches, statements, debates. (Total: 24 outlets)

These data exemplify the increasingly negative attitude attributed to these topics. These fragments portray how rhetorical and ideological positioning has shifted over time. Manifestos show the ideal image of a party, their worldview. Propaganda is a communication means to attract a broader public of voters. These dissemination tools of political intentions shifting attitudes of parties. Explicitly, they underline the changing discourse, helping to understand why and how mainstream and populist rhetoric contributed to the legitimisation of the Eurabia conspiracy theory.

The next chapter is dedicated to introducing the theoretical concepts, consisting conspiracy theory effects, discursive framing, populism relation, legitimisation and mainstream response to conspiracy politics. Chapter three traces the legitimisation process, analysing political, discursive expressions chronologically in different 'phases'. Chapter four answers the research question.

⁶⁰ Aditi Bhatia, *Critical discourse analysis of political press conferences*, (Discourse & Society, 2006), 17(2): p.176

2. Theoretical framework

This chapter introduces the concepts that are applied in the analysis: (1) conspiracy theories and effects, (2) framing in political discourse, (3) populism and legitimisation and (4) responding to conspiracy politics.

2.1 Defining conspiracy theories and effects

Scholars from different disciplines have defined conspiracy theories. Political science defines them as theories that ‘accuse a group of individuals of orchestrating a plot that has harmed (or will harm) society’.⁶¹ Conspiracy theories assume that an overarching party, a state actor, tries to control the people’s mind and actions: everything happens for a reason. They contain stigmatised knowledge: ideas moderate citizens and mainstream political actors do either pay no attention to, or actively attempt to disprove. Conspiracy theory believers treat official institutions with suspicion, because they believe the elite is controlling them.⁶² In short, conspiracy theories are simplified, unfalsifiable answers to complex situations that most people cannot easily understand. Thus, conspiracy theories are a way of sensemaking of one’s environment, of incomprehensible (political) events. In a complex world, people can be distracted; feelings of insecurity and loss of control can easily lead to beliefs of distrust.⁶³ Conspiracy theorists frequently accuse actors like ruling (political) elites or cultural minorities (e.g. Muslims, Jews).⁶⁴

Douglas et al. distinguish roughly six reasons why people believe in conspiracy theories, using insights from different academic fields.

1. Psychological explanation: conspiracy thoughts are interconnecting and complementary, because of motivated reasoning: everyone looks for verification of their own ideas, even when information is contradictory.
2. Epistemic explanation: people try to make sense of events and underestimate the level of luck and coincidence.
3. Existential fears: lack of control and feelings of uncertainty lead to anxiety.
4. Social factors (group identification): people attempt to frame their ethnicity, religion or political group positively, especially during identity struggles in crisis situations.

⁶¹ Butter & Knight, *Conspiracy theories*, p.113

⁶² Barkun, *Conspiracy theories as stigmatized knowledge*, p.115

⁶³ Jan-Willem van Prooijen & Karen Douglas, *Conspiracy theories as part of history: The role of societal crisis situations*. (Memory studies, 2017), 10(3): p.327-329.

⁶⁴ Van Prooijen, Krouwel & Pollet, *Political extremism*, p.571.

5. Demographic features: conspiracy theories are enhanced more in lower educated spheres, as these only comprehend simple explanations.
6. Political elements: disappointment in government due to political incompetence or scandals generate distrust in political institutions.⁶⁵

The effects of conspiracy theories on society are largely negative. First, people can get socially detached from their community, as they can no longer meet social standards and get mentally separated from their social contacts. Likewise, conspiracy theories change people's political attitudes to feelings of distrust, suspicion and fear. These attitudes induce polarisation and establish prejudices about other groups, as they promote 'we versus them' thinking.⁶⁶ They cause a lack of trust in professionals, institutions and the government, and challenge the objectivity of the academic world. Conspiracy theories have implications for political participation of believers. Standing up against the political elite, they radicalise, join extremist movements or even spread violence.⁶⁷

Furthermore, conspiracy theories prevail in perceived crisis situations, when feelings of fear take the upper hand.⁶⁸ When in danger, people tend to search for simplified explanations as a sensemaking process, making them susceptible to narratives of a preconceived plan propagated by political figures.⁶⁹ Conspiracy theories are then consistently integrated into someone's historical framework: a conspiracy theory believer will automatically frame other historical events as greater conspiracy plots. More specifically, it is integrated in someone's remembrance of historical events.⁷⁰ Therefore, conspiracy theories function as a catalyst, a self-reinforcing mechanism for belief in other conspiracy theories. Once supporting one conspiracy theory will automatically reinforce the likelihood of supporting others.⁷¹ Conspiracy belief increases the distance from reality and stimulates motivated reasoning, as one will frame other (political) events from a pre-existing, suspicious narrative.⁷² Especially, because conspiracy believers receive their information from (social) media and extremist groups.⁷³

⁶⁵ Douglas, et al. *Understanding conspiracy theories*, p.6-11.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p.17.

⁶⁷ Butter & Knight, *Conspiracy theories*, p.232-237.

⁶⁸ Van Prooijen & Douglas *Conspiracy theories as part of history*, p.330

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.326

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p.330

⁷¹ Sutton & Douglas, *Conspiracy theories and the conspiracy mindset*, p.119-121.

⁷² Douglas et al. *Understanding conspiracy theories*, p.11-12.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p.14-15.

2.2 Framing in political discourse

How do conspiracy theories enter political language? To answer this question, the theoretical explanation of the concept ‘framing’ is needed. Benford and Snow defined framing as a ‘schemata of interpretation that enable individuals to locate, perceive, identify and label occurrences within their life and the world at large.’⁷⁴ Collective frames, instead of individual frames, are the result of the composition of the perceptions of a specific social group.⁷⁵ Framing is a way of presenting a group’s own reality. Frames have the potential to place events in another dimension, as they highlight particular facts or events deliberately, in order to propagate a certain opinion. Framing has become an important instrument for politicians to transmit their political message to the public, by underlining a particular perspective beneficial to their position. Moreover, once a frame has demonstrated to be successful, it becomes a ‘master frame’, a frame that also fits other contexts, as long as it feeds disappointment of a group of individuals.⁷⁶ The master frame theory explains why conspirational elements have been introduced in politics: once proven profitable, it was copied to other topics.

Conspiracy theories have become such a master frame, applicable on almost every situation. They have become a political instrument to frame the ruling elite as conspirators. In the struggle for power, conspiracy theories are a tactical way for political entrepreneurs to process power to another political group, generating new electorate by propelling falsehoods.⁷⁷ Political entrepreneurs are actors that attempt to fulfil their political ambition by adopting positions that attract large parts of the population.⁷⁸ Sutton & Douglas demonstrated that conspiracy theory belief is not a matter of political affiliation. Instead, it reflects an overall ‘ideological polarisation’, that impacts intergroup dynamics and troubles relations with opposing ideological groups.⁷⁹ People supporting conspiracy theories substantially antagonise with the political mainstream. Locals throwing a molotov cocktail to a mosque in Enschede in 2016 illustrate increased polarisation because of anti-Islam attitudes.⁸⁰ Conspiracy belief thus

⁷⁴ Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow. *Framing processes and social movements: An overview and assessment*. (Annual review of sociology, 2000), p.614.

⁷⁵ Ibid. p.614.

⁷⁶ Robert D. Benford, *Master frame*. (The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements, 2013), p.1

⁷⁷ Joseph Uscinski, Joseph Parent, & Bethany Torres, *Conspiracy theories are for losers*. (American Political Science Association Annual Conference, 2011), p.14-16

⁷⁸ Nissim Cohen. *Policy entrepreneurs and the design of public policy: The case of the National Health Insurance Law in Israel*, (Journal of Social Research & Policy, 2012), p.2-3.

⁷⁹ Sutton & Douglas, *Conspiracy theories and the conspiracy mindset*: p.118-119.

⁸⁰ Tubantia, ‘Molotovcocktail tegen moskee Enschede: domme actie of een aanslag?’, *Tubantia.nl*, 29-06-2016, consulted on May 24 at: <https://www.tubantia.nl/nieuws/molotovcocktail-tegen-moskee-enschede-domme-actie-of-een-aanslag~a1df6509/>

aggravates existing political dissatisfaction, polarisation, bias and cleavages in society, from which political extremes profit.

Frames shape the political discourses, written or spoken communication of political discussions. Discourse is every expression, formal or informal, written, a speech or a manifest, that helps spreading one's ideas. Allen & Faigley argued that actors use 'discursive strategies' to bring about shifts in power dynamics. These strategies are expressions, linguistic structures, and specific words propagated by politicians, used to trigger change.⁸¹ This thesis uses a few categories of discursive strategies to discern how anti-Islam and anti-migration attitudes have shifted into mainstream discourse.

1. **Neologism:** use of new words to alter general principles of language, to spread a new doctrine or interpretation;
2. **Redefinition:** finding new definitions for already existing phrases to trigger a change in the public's opinion;
3. **Reversal:** rejecting a commonly held position by turning around the argumentation, framing the 'Other' as outrageous and inappropriate;
4. **Calling without naming:** using other words as a tactic of expressing an idea commonly unaccepted with a less impactful description;
5. **Metaphor:** inserting an uncommon idea by using figurative speaking (sayings), adjusting the uncommon for a more negotiable expression;
6. **Narrative:** an encompassing story that disputes common beliefs. Consciously constructed way of expressing a set of opinions, in which a message becomes reliable.⁸²

The right-wing populist discursive strategies can be delineated in two groups of enemies, (religiously, culturally, ethnically, socio-economically) 'Others' and 'elites'. Categorical distinctions and generalisations reinforce the frame of 'Others' as dangers and underline dissimilarities. Eurabia blames Muslims for invading the country and blames the elite for cooperating with 'Islamising' Western culture, which reinforces their frame of defending the native population from an external, direct threat.⁸³

⁸¹ Julia M. Allen & Lester Faigley, *Discursive strategies for social change: An alternative rhetoric of argument*, (Rhetoric Review, 1995), 14.1: p.143.

⁸² Ibid.: p.150-166.

⁸³ Inari Sakki, and Katarina Pettersson. *Discursive constructions of otherness in populist radical right political blogs*. (European journal of social psychology, 2016): 46.2: p.157-158.

2.3 Populism and legitimisation

Who introduced conspiracy theories in the mainstream political arena? An extensive body of literature connects the growing significance of conspiracy theories in societal debate with the rise of populism. These academics argue that charismatic leaders brought general scepticism against official institutions to the mainstream of the political arena, adopting conspirational argumentation. The ‘Fourth Wave’ of populism, in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, brought about a new political discourse in which sociocultural issues dominated.⁸⁴ The populist worldview, a new cleavage, includes rhetoric of a nation in danger of foreign pressure, stigmatising the elite as deceiving rulers and raising themselves as a force protecting the nation.⁸⁵

Like conspiracy theories, populists employ a simple dichotomy of powerful forces and oppressed people. Similarly, they alienate themselves from the ‘Other’, someone that cannot comply with their believed national identity. Populists instigate similar feelings that attract conspiracy believers: sensemaking of crises, fear, subordination, distrust, feelings of deception and hostility towards everything linked to the state.⁸⁶ Populism and conspiracy theories are not the same, but contain similar attitudes, portrayals of the world. Conspirational reasoning has proved to be a populist rhetorical tool: delineating an irrational situation in which other actors are deceiving ignorant people to provide alienation for the ‘Other’.⁸⁷ Conclusively, populists instrumentalised fringe theories to attract voters, as they offer simple solutions for deeper problems.

Subsequently, conspirational thinking has moved from the fringe into the mainstream, a process towards legitimisation in the political arena.⁸⁸ A discrepancy exists among scholars whether mainstreaming by the political fringe or general ‘*verrechtsing*’⁸⁹ of political discourse has facilitated this process.⁹⁰ On the one hand, some scholars have emphasised the role of right-wing populists themselves, for instrumentalising the conspirational scheme of argumentation. These political entrepreneurs spread a frame of fear and exclusion throughout society, appointed a scapegoat and dramatised political developments. Their appealing program of

⁸⁴ Jakub Wondreys & Cas Mudde, *Victims of the Pandemic? European Far-Right Parties and COVID-19*, (Nationalities Papers, 2020), p.2-3.

⁸⁵ Bergmann, *Conspiracy & populism*: p.169

⁸⁶ Castanho Silva et al., *The elite is up to something*, p.425-428

⁸⁷ Ruth Wodak, *The politics of fear: What right-wing populist discourses mean*. (Sage, 2015), p.91

⁸⁸ Grant, *Taking Conspiracy Theory Seriously*, p.476.

⁸⁹ Dutch term for the process of mainstream political positions moving to the right.

⁹⁰ Wodak, *The politics of fear*, p.181-188

simplifications attracted people that are disappointed in political institutions. The gradual acceptance of right-wing populists into political discourse fed growing discontent with political establishment and reflected people's feeling of uncertainty and fear with incomprehensible technological and socio-political developments like increased migration flows and terror attacks.⁹¹ The acceptance of these fringe ideas in political discourse occurred due to controversial sociocultural issues dominating public debates. Wondreys & Mudde defined this shift of far-right parties 'the process of 'Koalitionsfähigkeit'. Instead of a 'cordon sanitaire', the political outsiders increasingly transformed into suitable coalition partners.⁹²

On the other hand, some argued that conspiracy theories were adopted in political debates due to mainstream media and political actors. A sociocultural cleavage rose as a decisive line that exemplifies people's political affiliation, which has increased polarisation on the migration issue. To preserve voters, mainstream parties engaged in a re-alignment process, which means they changed their position in cultural debates. In fact, this meant a '*verrechtsing*', a move to the right.⁹³ Re-alignment alongside the sociocultural cleavage has led the mainstream to promote the politicisation of migration. Bergmann blames the decreased role of traditional media, the rise of fake news and uncontrolled propaganda, in combination with moderate political parties and popular culture that paid abundant attention to conspiracy theories.⁹⁴ In their despair to lose electorate to right-wing populists, mainstream political parties have adjusted their political positioning to restrictive stances, by which the political debate hardened.⁹⁵ These polarising tendencies within society caused that political mainstream parties had to follow populists and adjusted their stances to more extreme positions. In the end, this could lead to diminishing democratic values like human rights, freedom of speech and diversity, vital elements of democracy.⁹⁶ Thus, conspiracy acceptance by mainstream actors generates further respectability and significance in political discourse. This process helps the margins to become mainstream.

⁹¹ Barkun, *Conspiracy theories as stigmatized knowledge*, p.116-117

⁹² Wondreys & Mudde, *Victims of the Pandemic?* p.2-3.

⁹³ Jens Rydgren, *Is extreme right-wing populism contagious? Explaining the emergence of a new party family*, (European journal of political research, 2005), 44(3), p.420.

⁹⁴ Bergmann, *Conspiracy & populism*: p.172-173; Van Buuren. *Holland's Own Kennedy Affair*. p.282.

⁹⁵ Van Buuren, *Holland's Own Kennedy Affair*, p.257-285.

⁹⁶ Bergmann, *Conspiracy & populism*, p.172-173.

2.4 Responding to conspiracy politics

Legitimation of conspiracy thinking radically changed the political discourse and hardened the societal debate. The introduction of conspiracy theories in mainstream political context is believed to result in ‘conspiracy politics.’ This is a rhetorical style defined as ‘political discussions driven by insinuations of malign, hidden international agency in relation to an event.’⁹⁷ Societal debates evolving with conspiratorial rhetoric have serious implications for democracy, as it fuels aversion to political institutions. Paradoxically, liberal democracies also need distrust, in order to control political representation. Yet, conspiratorial thinking contains the overarching assumption that political actors never act fairly. In this way, conspiracy theories can actively contribute to a political game of disruption: political entrepreneurs instrumentalise distrust and misuse it for own political gain.⁹⁸

Right-wing populists promote conspiracy theories in a characterising sequence that is called ‘the right-wing populist perpetuum mobile’: creating a scandal, attaining media attention, publicly denying previous statements, redefining events, playing victim and after all dramatising their own victimhood.⁹⁹ At the same time, mainstream parties, in order to retain voters, move their policy proposals to the right, expressing similar statements as ‘us versus them’ anti-migrant positions.¹⁰⁰ This process is called ‘pseudo-legitimacy’: the respectability and visibility of these fringe thoughts in mainstream political discourse are reinforced.¹⁰¹

Scholars have been discussing the most effective approach for mainstream actors. Van Heerden et al. pointed out three mainstream responses to populist anti-Islam and anti-migration attitudes. First, accommodation: treat the topics and take over right-wing populist stances. Second, adversarial: treat the topics, but drastically disagree with populists. Third, dismissive: shift focus to other domains and ignore claims.¹⁰² Political scientists agree that legitimisation of conspiracy thinking is a dangerous phenomenon for democracy and national security. Legitimation will be accelerated if mainstream actors pick up conspiracy theories for their own political gain.¹⁰³

⁹⁷ Alfred Moore, ‘On the democratic problem of conspiracy politics’, in Unscinski, Joseph E., *Conspiracy theories and the people who believe in them*. (Oxford University Press, USA, 2018), p.2.

⁹⁸ Matthew D. Atkinson & Darin DeWitt, , ‘The politics of disruption’, in Unscinski, J. E., *Conspiracy theories and the people who believe in them*. (Oxford University Press, USA, 2018), p.11.

⁹⁹ Wodak, *The politics of fear*. (2015), p.19-20

¹⁰⁰ Erikur Bergmann, ‘The Eurabia Doctrine’, In E. Bergmann, *Conspiracy & Populism*, (Springer International Publishing, 2018), p.140-141.

¹⁰¹ Barkun, *Conspiracy theories as stigmatized knowledge*, p.118

¹⁰² Van Heerden, *The immigration and integration debate in the Netherlands*, p.122.

¹⁰³ Van Buuren. *Holland's Own Kennedy Affair*, p.282.

In choosing an alternative response, it is believed that mainstream actors should consider the severity of conspirational ideas and the amount of people indoctrinated. Mainstream politicians and democratic institutions stay behind disillusioned, because they face a dilemma of either actively contesting conspiracy theories, ignoring their existence or embracing these thoughts.¹⁰⁴ In conclusion, scholars depict democracy as both a source of and solution for conspiracy theories. Conspiracy allegations will always go along with political power shifts and sudden crisis situation, but increasing political credibility and general education level can partly diminish conspiracy belief among citizens.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ Sunstein & Vermeule *Conspiracy theories*, p.220-226.

¹⁰⁵ Joseph Uscinski & Joseph Parent, 'Chapter 7: Conspiring for the common good.', in Joseph Uscinski and Joseph Parent, *American conspiracy theories*. (Oxford University Press, 2014), p.7-8.

3. Interpreting the legitimisation of Eurabia

This analysis combines the aforementioned theoretical insights with contextual data gathered from recent Dutch political history. It chronologically explains how the process of legitimisation of the Eurabia conspiracy theory in Dutch political discourse occurred, by using *PVV* and *VVD*'s party manifestos (2006, 2012, 2017) and twelve party outlets (2006-2017) of Wilders and Rutte each. Although other political figures also play a considerable role, these are two politicians that dominated political discourse in this time period. An overview of all the public speeches, letters to the public, shorter statements, movies and interviews that were analysed, can be found in *Appendix I* and *II*.

This section is structured in 'phases'. As I will contend, anti-migrant and anti-Islam rhetoric, central to Eurabia, have gone through these different stages. It starts with a run-up phase (2000-2005), then an entry phase (2006-2009), followed by an internalisation phase (2010-2014) and finally a legitimisation phase (2015-2017). *Figure 2* shows these different phases alongside the increasing significance of *PVV*. In this way, the process of legitimisation of Eurabia's premisses in political discourse is judged. All in all, this helps to show the gradual inclusion of anti-migrant and anti-Islam attitudes in the Dutch political arena.

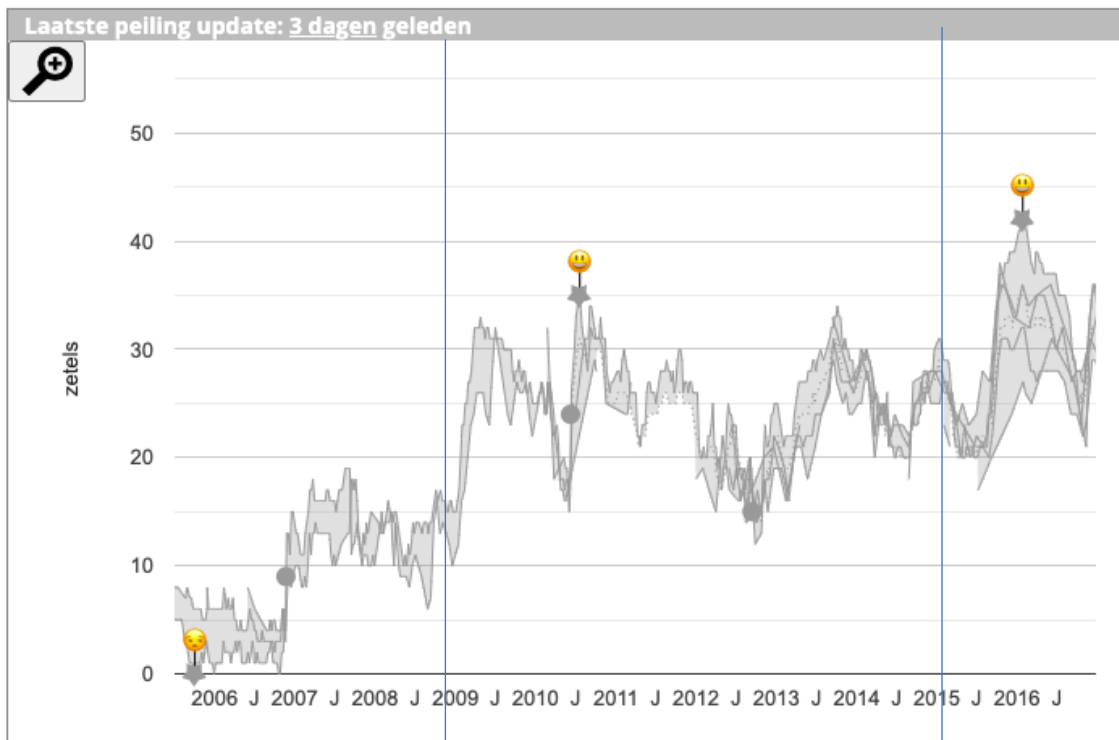


Figure 2: This figure shows the fluctuation of *PVV*'s electorate in polls between 2006 and 2017. Their increased significance is marked by a higher amount of seats. The 2006-2009 entry phase indicated a growing trend, the 2010-2014 internalisation phase demonstrated their inclusion, the stabilisation of electorate, and the 2015-2017 legitimisation phase shows an upward trend outbreak, indicating their popularity. (The run-up phase 2000-2005 is not included in this graph, as *PVV* did not exist at that time yet.)
Source: www.allepeilingen.com

3.1 Run-up phase: a planted seed (2000-2005)

Where is this growing idea of Dutch society under threat by ‘Others’ rooted? It is generally believed that Dutch society has made a pessimist turn concerning immigration, multiculturalism and Islam since the 2000s. During the 1990s, a ‘depillarisation’ process had occurred. Which meant that existing societal structures – the pillars (e.g. protestants, liberals, socialists and Catholics) – had started to fall apart. The Netherlands was no longer divided in these four societal groups. Far-right politicians like Hans Janmaat (*Centrum Democraten*), scarce at the time, had been consciously excluded from political influence, since the mainstream had agreed upon a ‘cordon sanitaire.’¹⁰⁶ Simultaneously, general urge for consensus in political debates was losing significance. Partly, the depillarisation process was triggered by the end of the Cold War, when a common enemy of the West had disappeared, which caused this ideological reorientation of Western societies.¹⁰⁷

In the 1960-70s, large groups of Turkish and Moroccan guest workers had come to the Netherlands to supplement labour shortages of the industrialised post-war economy. Lots of temporal workers stayed permanently, especially since family reunification had become a legal option. As their intended stay was short, they lived segregated from native Dutch communities. Politics, at the time, still widely embraced and promoted multiculturalism with policies.¹⁰⁸ However, in 2000, publicist Paul Scheffer released his sensational work *The multicultural drama* on failed integration of migrant communities. His plea against multiculturalism was the beginning of politicisation on migration, in which multicultural policies were gradually altered into a general norm of civic integration. It was only then that the negative aspects of uncurbed migration were brought to the political foreground, and signals of failed integration were raised to the bigger public.¹⁰⁹

Not much later, the permanent politicisation of Islam and migration occurred, when the 2001 9/11 terror attacks instigated major feelings of uncertainty, fear and anger among Dutch population. All over the world, populists instrumentalised the quickly altered political context, as socio-cultural topics started to dominate political debates.¹¹⁰ In the Dutch context, it was

¹⁰⁶ Wondreys & Mudde, *Victims of the Pandemic?*, p.2-3.

¹⁰⁷ Van Klingeren, et al. ‘Success or failure?’, in P. Odmalm & E. Hepburn (Eds.), *The European mainstream and the populist radical right*. (2017), p. 110.

¹⁰⁸ Sipko Vellenga, ‘Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia in the Netherlands: Concepts, developments, and backdrops.’ (*Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 2018), 33(2), p.179-181.

¹⁰⁹ Lucassen & Lucassen, *The Strange Death of Dutch Tolerance*, p.96-101

¹¹⁰ Wondreys & Mudde, *Victims of the Pandemic?*, p.2-3.

political actor Pim Fortuyn and his party *Lijst Pim Fortuyn (LPF)* that addressed these nationalist, anti-elitist and anti-foreigners attitudes. Fiercely, he put Islam and migration on the political agenda, arguing that ‘a Cold War against the Islam, an ideological fight with Islam is needed and that Dutch culture has to be defended.’¹¹¹ In the 2002 election run-up, Fortuyn was murdered, marking the first political murder in almost a century. Unsurprisingly, this event led to an even more polarised, hardened political ambiance and a big election win for his *LPF*. The rapid downfall of the disorganised *LPF* party in 2003 created political vacuum for new contenders on the far-right flank.¹¹²

Conclusively, within this run-up phase, various political events created a breeding ground for political anti-Islam and anti-migrant attitudes. More broadly speaking, the Netherlands moved towards a more secularist position, defending its liberal, progressive traditions and values like freedom of speech.¹¹³ At the same time, the effect of immigration without integration of guest workers, that had quickly established their own cultural (Islamic) traditions and reunited their families, became apparent for natives.¹¹⁴

While these acts caused suspicion towards Islamic non-natives, Eurabia started to gain traction in 2004, when writer Theo van Gogh was murdered by Muslim terrorist Mohammed B., which triggered comprehensive Dutch suspicion against foreigners that had incrementally been growing. The sensemaking process of Dutch people and media led to the introduction of Bat Ye’or’s Eurabia conspiracy theory in 2004.¹¹⁵ In their quest of a scapegoat responsible for their suffering and fear, a growing group targeted Muslims and migrants. It was only a matter of time before another right-wing populist would aggravate the accentuated ‘sociocultural cleavage’ in Dutch society, building on Fortuyn’s legacy.

3.2 Entry phase: taboos broken (2006-2009)

Who was the political entrepreneur that brought up Eurabia first? How did he discursively break existing Dutch taboos? The paragraph investigates how political actor Geert Wilders

¹¹¹ Pim Fortuyn, *De islamisering van onze cultuur: Nederlandse identiteit als fundament: het woord als wapen*. (Karakter Uitgevers B.V., 2016), p.8-11

¹¹² Lucassen & Lucassen, *The Strange Death of Dutch Tolerance*, p.72

¹¹³ Damhuis, “The biggest problem in the Netherlands:”, July 24 2019

¹¹⁴ Grisdale, *Seeing Past the Post-9/11 Framing*: p.7-10.

¹¹⁵ Van Buuren. *Doelwit Den Haag?*: P.119-123.

instrumentalised anti-migrant and anti-Islam attitudes. It shows the response of Rutte's *VVD* and decomposes their initially divergent perspectives from party documents.

3.2.1 Contextual introduction

Already in 2004, Geert Wilders became a *VVD* dissident. He fiercely resisted against Turkey's accession to the European Union, kept his seat and became a one-man faction (*Groep Geert Wilders*). On February 22 2006, his party *PVV* was ratified and in March 2006 he released his first manifesto.¹¹⁶ Later that year, the government fell because of the naturalisation affair of *VVD* MP Ayaan Hirsi Ali. This underlined the growing emphasis on migration in parliament. *PVV* won nine seats at their first participation.

At the same time, *VVD* had just witnessed an impactful battle for party leadership: the moderate Mark Rutte won against a more right-wing populist contender Rita Verdonk. *VVD* won 22 seats in parliament, but, remarkably, Verdonk got more preferential votes than Rutte. The following friction led to the Verdonk's departure, enabling Rutte to develop himself as the prime leader.¹¹⁷ Rutte's doctrine initially was less restrictive, he called himself a 'green, right-wing leader.'¹¹⁸ Migration and Islam were not his primary domains of focus.

This political period was drowned out by the all-encompassing economic crisis that hit the Netherlands. Yet, it was a period in which Wilders established himself as a more extreme right-wing alternative to Rutte.¹¹⁹ Because of the limited amount of words, it was chosen to only focus on Wilders and Rutte as two main players on political stage, however, lots of other political figures have played a role. Most important achievement of Wilders was the 2008 release of the movie *Fitna*, which already caused public outcry during its production. Another broken boundary was the rhetoric Wilders expressed in the 2009 'Algemene Beschouwingen', when he asked for the implementation of a 'Kopvoddentax', a tax on headscarves.¹²⁰ Above all, the Eurabia conspiracy theory was officially introduced in political discourse by Wilders in 2007.

¹¹⁶ Vossen, *Populism in the Netherlands after Fortuyn*, p.22-23

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.32-33

¹¹⁸ Bauke Schram, "Dit zei Mark Rutte in 2008 over Groen Rechts", *Elsevier Weekblad*, March 21 2017, consulted on May 25 2021 at: <https://www.ewmagazine.nl/nederland/achtergrond/2017/03/dit-zei-mark-rutte-in-2008-over-groen-rechts-474770/>

¹¹⁹ Van Klingeren, et al. 'Success or failure?', in P. Odmalm & E. Hepburn (Eds.), *The European mainstream and the populist radical right*. (2017), p. 125–126.

¹²⁰ Leezenberg. *Discursive violence and responsibility*: p.207-212.

3.2.2 PVV: The rise of Wilders: setting and sharpening the tone

Wilders' 2006 party manifesto contains lots of references to the immigration and Islam threat, attempting to fill the vacuum on the right flank left by *LPF*. To be precise, fifteen percent of his manifesto is dedicated to immigration.¹²¹ The pamphlet makes a disorderly impression, without formatted content. Point by point, the measures were introduced, instead of explaining the further implications of proposals. That feature corresponds with the populist's aim to portray societal problems as simplicities to ordinary citizens.

The ideas were radical at that time. For instance, he proposed to replace Article 1 (discrimination ban) of the constitution with 'preserving a dominant Christian-Jewish-humanist culture in the Netherlands.' On Islam, Wilders among others proposed to shut down radical mosques, stop building mosques and Islamic schools for five years, ban the burqa, ban headscarves in public jobs, ban foreign (financial) influence on mosques and ban double nationality. On the migration theme, Wilders among others proposed to stop immigration of non-Western migrants (Moroccan and Turkish), maximise asylum seekers to 5.000 a year, only permit first-aid to asylum seekers, stop benefits for outsiders and only permit naturalisation after ten years without criminal offenses.¹²²

Written as a pamphlet, it attempts to attract disgruntled citizens, fearing a loss of identity and under pressure by external forces. It blames mostly the 'leftist' elite and 'outsiders' (e.g. cultural minorities). It approaches societal problems from a nativist perspective: the nation is under threat. The simple dichotomy of the corrupt elite versus the ignorant population is recurring. The anti-Islam attitude:

"De-naturalisation and eviction for recidivist (Moroccan) street terrorists with double nationalities."

This quote shows the direct, negative connection that is made between criminality, Islam and migration. It responds to the new sociocultural cleavage that had risen, in which populist were trying to appoint 'Others' as scapegoat.

Wilders spelled out his intentions more openly in an interview with newspaper *De Telegraaf* in 2006. He attacked the Islam on its aggressiveness, warned for a 'tsunami of Muslims' and fell

¹²¹ Van Klingeren, et al. 'Success or failure?', in P. Odmalm & E. Hepburn (Eds.), *The European mainstream and the populist radical right*. (2017), Pp. 117.

¹²² PVV, *Verkiezingspamflet*, (2006), p.3-4

back on the forced renunciation of cultural activities (e.g. ‘Sinterklaas’) in certain neighbourhoods. In a 2007 interview with *De Volkskrant* he even went further, comparing the Quran to Mein Kampf. He started making references to Oriana Fallaci, protagonist of the Eurabia conspiracy theory.

“The Netherlands is led by cowardly elites that do not care about the Dutch, but cooperate in the transformation towards Nederabia as a province of the Islamic superstate Eurabia.”

Here, a few discursive strategies were used. ‘Nederabia’ was a neologism, helping Wilders to strengthen his national narrative of political establishment and foreigners as enemies. The ‘us vs. them’ schemata led to a new way of politics, in which Muslims and migrants were seen as threatening strangers, criminals and even terrorists, a label applicable on hardly anything. It was the start of a redefinition of immigration debates. *PVV* successfully became issue-owner on the subject.

In 2008, the film ‘Fitna’ was released, after lots of commotion in the Islamic world beforehand. This movie made claims to prove the extremity of the Islamic religion:

“The Islam wants to dominate and is out for destruction of our Western civilisation. (...) We have to overcome this Islamic ideology. Stop Islamisation.”

Wilders continued his focus on Islam in 2009, when he proposed ‘Kopvoddentax’ in parliament, a tax on headscarves. He added that the government actively collaborated with the Islamisation of the Netherlands and that the elite is opening the gates for Muslims. He called migrants ‘fortune seekers.’ These allegations correspond with the cost picture. As the country was still in an economic crisis, Wilders also focused specifically on the detrimental economic effects of newcomers in his speech, to strengthen his narrative of closing the borders for newcomers.

3.2.3 VVD: a divergent approach

Rutte adopted a divergent approach on migration and Islam. His frame of migration was mainly socio-economic. Within this perspective, he shifted focus to the advantages of highly-skilled migrants, emphasising their additive value to our knowledge-based economy. In the 2006 party manifesto, designed in a newspaper format, *VVD* argued for a business perspective on migration: scouting educated people could benefit the Dutch economy. Equality was a main aim, a precondition to their liberal ideology. Yet, strict requirements were argued for labour migration and asylum seekers, although it got less attention. Integration was a matter of participation, integration courses and learning Dutch. Concerning Islam, *VVD* propagated the

freedom of religion, their neutrality and the prohibition of discrimination conform Article 1 of the constitution.¹²³

Furthermore, in Rutte's own 2006 candidacy manifesto, migration was portrayed as 'magnet for international talent'. He argued for a point system for immigrants with economic motives. Integration was set down as an integral part of successful migration. Moreover, a consolidation of the existing restrictions on migration was argued for. As long as it was not against rules or provoking, the freedom of religion should be maintained. Thus, a socio-economic scope on migration was central to his ideas, fuelling a narrative of beneficial effects that newcomers had for Dutch society.

To respond to Wilders' nativist approach on migration, Rutte did not completely remain silent. He expressed his disgust with the concept 'cultural relativism': the realisation that own cultural values are relative, while avoiding judging others' culture. Rutte's 2008 interview with *Trouw* was remarkable in that sense. He called Western culture superior to Islamic culture, blamed cultural relativists for existing integration problems and urged for making clear cultural demands to migrants. Rhetorically, he pushed the boundaries of the time:

"I do not want that pity music¹²⁴ five times a day, seven days a week from a minaret. You cannot annoy the entire neighbourhood with that whine music."¹²⁵

Another example of a tiny step towards *PVV*'s assimilationist proposals was the 'Vrijdenkersruimte' that was furnished in the House of Representatives in 2008. While in the parliament's opposition, he made slight references to the nation under threat from losing cultural core values in his speech:

"The core value of our open society, freedom of speech, is under external pressure. (...) the government has failed to protect our country's culture of free speech."

Acting as a protectionist of liberal values, such as freedom of speech, Rutte attempted to retain electorate on the right flank. It was a discursive strategy to prove himself as a defender of Dutch culture. Signs of glorification of the nation and its values can be discerned here. All in all, Rutte employed a mainly moderate, positive perspective of migrants and other cultures. However, first signs of slightly dismissive rhetoric can be discerned here, in order to retain right-wing

¹²³ VVD, *Voor een samenleving met ambitie*, (2006), p.2

¹²⁴ Literally translated from 'jammarmuziek.'

¹²⁵ Literally translated from 'jengelmuziek.'

flank voters. Rutte did so as a response to Wilders' extremist statements, who was rising in polls to almost twenty seats already.¹²⁶ *VVD's* political motive of supporting the 'Vrijdenkersruimte' was to guarantee artistic freedom for artists. For instance, they invited the parents of Theo van Gogh, the artist murdered by Mohammed B.¹²⁷ In this way, Rutte could depict himself as a more moderate alternative to Wilders' *PVV*.

3.2.4 Takeaways: taboos broken?

Wilders succeeded in putting the migration and Islam topic on the political agenda. His rhetorical discourse consisted of glorifying the nation, appointing a scapegoat, underlining the threats and exaggerating foreigners' criminal attitude and blaming the political elite. He recontextualised debates, using 'unpolitical' words. He redefined existing frames and used metaphors. In the end, it helped to spread his narrative of the nation under threat of becoming Eurabia. Thus, it was a phase of addressing the topic, and breaking previously existing taboos. His impact on the political arena appears from polls, in which his increased amount of seats is demonstrated in this period. Moreover, Wilders impacted the feeling of Islam as a threat, as in 2008 already 39 percent of people found Western and Islamic values unmatchable.¹²⁸

Rutte did not cooperate in negatively framing migrants and Islam yet. He highlighted the positive effects of migration and pleaded for compliance with freedom of religion. However, in order to retain the more right-wing voter, he did verbally express himself against cultural relativism, blaming political establishment for moving along too much with interests of cultural minorities. Thus, despite the more positive narrative of Rutte, Wilders was able to break taboos in the entry phase. Using discursive strategies, he became issue-owner, redefining nationalist values and permeate Islam and migration debates with polarisation in Dutch society.

3.3 Internalisation phase: initial signals of mainstream programmatic adoption (2010-2014)

How did anti-migrant and anti-Islam ideas become internalised in the Netherlands? This paragraph investigates how anti-migrant and anti-Islam proposals became an integral part of

¹²⁶ See *Figure 2* for an overview of how the polls evolved in this time period.

¹²⁷ Van Buuren, *Doelwit Den Haag?*, p.127-130.

¹²⁸ Damhuis, "The biggest problem in the Netherlands:", July 24 2019

Dutch political debates, questioning multicultural values and the cooperative attitude of migrants. It shows how *VVD*'s programmatic stance on migration took a more negative turn.

3.3.1 Contextual introduction

In 2010, the Balkenende IV government fell because of the Uruzgan Crisis.¹²⁹ In the subsequent elections, both *VVD* (from 22 to 31) and *PVV* (from 9 to 24) gained seats, which meant that the right-wing of parliament had increased significance. *PVV* was crowned big winner, holding sixteen percent of votes in parliament. After a hefty formation period of 127 days, the first Dutch 'toleration government'¹³⁰ was installed on October 14 2010, containing *VVD*, *CDA* and 'tolerance partner'¹³¹ *PVV*. *PVV* withdrew their toleration already on April 23 2012, because of budget cut negotiation failures.¹³² In the 2012 elections, *VVD* grew to 41 seats, *PVV* fell to 15 seats. *VVD* and *PvdA* formed a new coalition, *PVV* became opposition party again.¹³³

Despite the aftermath of the economic crisis, migration was becoming more salient. Exemplary, a special minister of immigration, integration and asylum seeking was re-established in the 'toleration government.'¹³⁴ *PVV* was increasingly utilising their issue-owning capacity, successfully generating attention for their nativist attitude in everyday political debates. For instance, they proposed to add third-generation migrants to the categorisation 'allochtoon.', meaning migrant.¹³⁵ Also, their framing of the 'Moroccan problem' was becoming more apparent in political discourse. The migration issue became a battleground for volatile voters between opposition party *PVV* and coalition party *VVD*.

3.3.2 *PVV*: Absorption in party system

After *PVV* had already expressed conspirational elements in their rhetoric, the 2010-2014 period was marked by an intensification of conspirational claims, connecting migration and

¹²⁹ Teun Lagas, "Uruzgan, of hoe oorzaak van crisis vergeten werd", *Trouw*, June 9, 2010, consulted on June 5 2021 at: <https://www.trouw.nl/nieuws/uruzgan-of-hoe-oorzaak-van-crisis-vergeten-werd~bcf4eea5/>; the Uruzgan crisis was a political crisis on the presence of Dutch military in a province in Afghanistan to train Afghanistan's police.

¹³⁰ Literally translated: 'gedoogkabinet', meaning that coalition parties have no majority, but receive committed tolerance of another party in government.

¹³¹ Literally translated: 'gedoogpartner'

¹³² Parlement.com, "Kabinetcrisis 2012: de Catshuiscrisis", consulted on May 26 2021 at:

https://www.parlement.com/id/vj1ped4lzuz8/kabinetcrisis_2012_de_catshuiscrisis

¹³³ Parlement.com, "Kabinet Rutte II (2012-2017)", consulted on May 26 2021 at:

https://www.parlement.com/id/vj47glycfix9/kabinet_rutte_ii_2012_2017

¹³⁴ Nieuwsuur, "Gerd Leers: van burgervader tot omstreden minister", May 22 2012, consulted on May 27 2021 at:

<https://nos.nl/nieuwsuur/artikel/375758-gerd-leers-van-burgervader-tot-omstreden-minister>

¹³⁵ Nu.nl, "PVV wil definite allochtoon oprekken", June 29 2011, consulted on May 26 2021 at:

<https://www.nu.nl/politiek/2551779/pvv-wil-definitie-allochtoon-oprekken.html> -- An 'allochtoon' is a Dutch categorisation of immigrant, also second generation migrants.

Islam. The 2010 party manifesto, for instance, linked EU's elite with their conscious contribution to a transformation of Europe into Eurabia. Moreover, in a 2010 speech in London, Wilders directly accused the left elite of a secret plot by promoting mass immigration:

“Because of Islamisation, the European civilisation could fall, like Ancient Rome did. (...) Apparently the truth about Islam is scary, cannot be told in public and has to stay secret, while the left is wildly excited.”

Moreover, he used neologisms like ‘Londonistan’. To exemplify the downfall and threat of ‘Others’, he glorified the past, calling to ‘reclaim the Netherlands.’ He employed metaphors to aggravate his claims about loss of identity, for instance in a 2010 campaigning speech:

“What was once the biggest harbour in the world (Rotterdam, red.), is now the capital of Eurabia, a city of minarets and a massive mosque.”

In his 2011 process peroration, he combined his anti-elitist and anti-outsiders frame, while exaggerating his claim by calling out ‘a war on multicultural elite’:

“All over Europe multicultural elites are fighting a total war against our people. At stake is the continuation of mass migration, resulting in an Islamic Europe, without freedom: Eurabia.”

Interestingly, after the 2011 Breivik's massacre in Norway, a cooling-down period in Wilders' rhetoric of the word ‘Eurabia’ was established. In order to escape connections with this lone wolf, Wilders explicitly framed Breivik a ‘psychopath, misusing the fight against Islamisation’, introducing another neologism with ‘Islamisation.’ He assured the Netherlands that his intended fight against foreign cultures was democratic and nonviolent, aiming for maximisation of freedom and security. Media criticism was a major setback for the PVV. Because of the violent tension surrounding Eurabia, the word was replaced with Islamisation, containing a similar dichotomy of a malicious elite threatening Europe with irreversible insertion of Islamic culture.

PVV's 2012 manifesto, in comparison to the 2006 manifesto, consists of a more detailed, multidimensional and orderly formatted structure. Its name, *Their Brussel, our the Netherlands*, reflects the elections' head theme: Europe. It literally reflects his narrative of ‘us vs. them’, political elite against the true people. Similarly, it contained more radical rhetoric, corresponding to their anti-stranger's narrative. Still, migration and Islam got the most prominent position, connected them one-to-one with criminality, gay hate, antisemitism and

honour killings. The manifesto introduces new words like ‘diversity posturing’¹³⁶ and ‘multicultural nonsense.’¹³⁷

PVV’s ideas had become more radical, all effects of migrants were framed negatively. On migration, an ‘assimilation contract’ was introduced, which was a redefinition of the integration debate urging migrants to fully conform to Dutch culture. Besides, they insisted on criminalisation of illegality, integration courses in country of origin and a complete immigration stop from Islamic countries. The asylum seeker quota was reduced to thousand a year. On integration and Islam, they also drastically sharpened their plans: no new mosques, ban on minarets, closure of all Islamic schools, no more foreign financing of mosques, no more headscarves in public functions or subsidised organisations, ban on the burqa and tax on headscarves.¹³⁸

Wilders’ exclusionist approach of (ethnic) migrant groups was reinforced again in 2014, when he adopted a frame of exclusion:

“Maybe I cannot really say, because I will be reported to D66¹³⁹-prosecutors, but the freedom of speech is a great good. (...) Do you want more or less Moroccans? <The audience yells ‘Less, Less, Less.’> Well, let’s settle that.”

Here, Wilders reverses the danger. He claims his right to freedom of speech is restricted by the elite. He said that the underlying reason for left-wing parties to report him and depict him as Hitler was that they would not survive without Arabic votes. Furthermore, he urged the Dutch to stop being afraid and take action against criminal Moroccan youth. According to him, they outpaced natives on every criminal act, being ‘22 times more guilty to street robbery than native youth.’ Thus, his statements corresponded with his narrative of two main enemies that are targeting a destruction of Dutch culture: the (left) elite and the non-Western migrants. The following media sensation of his statements exemplify the right-wing populist perpetuum mobile: creating a scandal, attaining media attention, public denial of previous statements, redefining the event, playing victim and after all dramatising the own victimhood.

¹³⁶ Literally translated: ‘diversiteitsgeneuzel’

¹³⁷ *PVV, Hun Brussel, ons Nederland*, (2012), p.25; Literally translated from ‘Multi-kul.’

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 34-37

¹³⁹ D66 is Democraten ’66, a political mainstream party that has traditionally been a strong opposer in political debates with Wilders. It is a direct blame to political elites of controlling the judiciary.

3.3.3 VVD: adoption of restrictive plans

Rutte took small steps towards populist rhetoric in this period. For instance, after VVD's 2011 provincial election win, he stated that he wanted to 'give back the Netherlands to the Dutch people, making it safer.' Here, the discursive strategy of calling without naming recurs. He is not naming the reason why the country is unsafe. Still, his statement presupposes that the Netherlands are currently claimed by 'outsiders', not belonging to the Dutch. He portrays his party as true defender of ordinary Dutch people. The statement reflects his changing attitude towards migrants, repositioning along the shifting sentiment among Dutch population that 'Others' were destructing Dutch cultural features.

More precisely, Rutte exemplified his changed attitude towards multicultural society in a one-to-one confrontation with PvdA-leader Samsom on September 10 2012 at NOS. Rutte called the multicultural society 'failed' and invigorated his earlier statements on cultural relativism as a reason for failed multiculturalism.

“Multiculturalism caused two problems: a disdain of western norms and values (cultural relativism red.) and a taboo on naming that immigrants are at the top of all the wrong lists: criminality, school dropout and unemployment.”

He said that newcomers are not welcome if they come to the Netherlands to beg money, without working for it and that he wanted to avoid '90s multi-culti policies.' This connects well with a frame of migrants as lazy, poorly participating people. Therefore, according to Rutte, tougher migration and integration laws were needed, to only accept people entering the Netherlands to contribute significantly. Emphasising the negative sides of migrants, Rutte had adopted a more restrictive, dismissive narrative towards non-natives. The first steps towards a monoculturalist perspective were discernible, since he focuses on the sociocultural differences of migrants.

Not so much rhetorically, but ideologically VVD changed in the 2010-2014 period. Overall tightening of migration laws was proposed. Their 2012 party manifesto, in comparison to their 2006 manifesto, contained a predominant focus on hard integration. The migration topic was placed under the subheading 'government', to indicate the need of governmental intervention. Furthermore, problematic aspects of integration and immigration were underlined.¹⁴⁰ The manifesto picks out extreme cases of non-cooperative migrants and propose measures to further complicate asylum seeking. Lots of integration measures proposed ask for the responsibility of

¹⁴⁰ VVD, *Niet doorschuiven, maar aanpakken*, (2012), p.48-50

migrants themselves. Integration is a free choice, but not optional: failing the integration course means leaving the country, asylum seekers should pay their exams themselves, social security for newcomers should be limited and general knowledge and acceptance of cultural norms and Dutch language should be compulsory. Besides, VVD wants to stop the subsidised integration industry and ban face covering clothes.¹⁴¹ Similarly, more attention is given to negative effects of Islamic extremism: dangerous sharia laws, cultural honour killings and genital mutilation. They also wish to delete the ban on scornful blasphemy.¹⁴²

Besides, the proposed measures on immigration have become more restrictive. Family reunification should be tested on income and age, marriage migration on knowledge, education, age and income. Refugees are only welcome for the time they are unsafe and have to ‘fight themselves into society.’ Refugees must be taken care of in their own region. Illegality should be dealt with hard. Any conviction in the first three years of a residence permit should be followed up by an eviction of this ‘criminal refugee.’¹⁴³ Above all, the positive sides of highly-skilled migrants have been pushed into the background. Highly-skilled migrants are drowned out by threats of illegality, non-cooperative migrants, and criminal suspicions.

These passages demonstrate how the emphasis in the party’s frame of migrants shifted from a socio-economic to a sociocultural perspective. Cultural values and legal requirements are raised and integration becomes compulsory for newcomers. It is a definitive step to all-or-nothing integration, leaving the previously conceived narrative of the Netherlands as a multicultural nation behind. Most important is the programmatic takeover of 2006 PVV’s ideas. After PVV’s internalisation in the party system and stabilisation of seats in polls, VVD had to shift their position to turnaround vote loss.¹⁴⁴ Similarly, as migration was regarded as a threat by an increasing part of Dutch people, it had become an important topic to position on.¹⁴⁵

For instance, VVD now claimed that it wants to counteract EU’s objective in reducing underprivileged migrants, similar to PVV’s nationalist frame. They even expressed the suggestion to re-establish national borders.¹⁴⁶ Likewise are the ban on face covering clothes,

¹⁴¹ VVD, *Niet doorschuiven, maar aanpakken*, (2012), p.48-50

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p.50-51

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, p.51-53

¹⁴⁴ Van Klingeren, et al. ‘Success or failure?’, in P. Odmalm & E. Hepburn (Eds.), *The European mainstream and the populist radical right*. (2017), Pp. 114-118.

¹⁴⁵ Damhuis, “The biggest problem in the Netherlands:”, July 24 2019

¹⁴⁶ VVD, *Niet doorschuiven, maar aanpakken*, (2012), p.51

language requirement and civic integration obligation. Idem, naturalisation is stretched to ten years and the criminalisation of illegality is taken over.¹⁴⁷ In conclusion, the negative aspects and dangers of unbridled migration are now predominantly embraced, shifting their frame. *VVD* adopted *PVV*'s 2006 stances, that they would not have without their increased significance.

3.3.4 Takeaways: initial signals of mainstream adoption?

To conclude, Wilders intensified his message on the detrimental effects of multiculturalism, the criminal behaviour of migrants and claims of a secret plot against the 'ordinary Dutch.' His rhetoric, full of simplifications, new phrasing and ideological redefinitions, supported his narrative of the two main enemies of the Dutch folk: the elite and non-natives. Most importantly, his message reached many disappointed citizens, which caused an electoral threat for Rutte in the 2012 election. Therefore, in the run-up to the elections, Rutte depicted himself more as a liberalist, in opposition to socialists, claiming that 'no-one is willing to cooperate with *PVV* anymore, so a vote on Wilders would be worthless', to differentiate himself from Wilders.¹⁴⁸ He placed himself on the same step as *PVV* and bombastically spoke of 'the most important voters' choice ever.'¹⁴⁹ In order to profit from the pessimist turn on migration among Dutch citizens, Rutte shifted his stances to more restrictive ideas. This turn was initially ideological, instead of rhetorical. Therefore, Wilders had facilitated an ideological reorientation concerning migration of the mainstream right-wing party *VVD*. Rutte first had a utilising, positive socio-economic perspective on migration, but now this frame transformed into a more restrictive, sociocultural one.

3.4 Legitimation phase: mainstream accommodation of anti-migrant rhetoric (2015-2017)

How did anti-migrant and anti-Islam discourse become normalised in the Netherlands? This paragraph investigates how anti-migrant and anti-Islam rhetoric became legitimised features of Dutch political debates and have even been discursively propagated by mainstream actor Rutte. Despite other political actors concerned with the migration debate, it only focuses on specific outlets of Wilders and Rutte, two important political figures. It takes various political events

¹⁴⁷ *VVD, Niet doorschuiven, maar aanpakken*, (2012), p.53

¹⁴⁸ Harmen S. Teunis, "Rutte haalt uit naar socialisme," *BNR Nieuwsradio*, August 25 2012, consulted on June 10 2021 at: <https://www.bnr.nl/nieuws/10011121/rutte-haalt-uit-naar-socialisme>

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

and statements of the 2015-2017 period to show rhetorical radicalisation of Dutch (mainstream) attitudes.

3.4.1 Contextual introduction

In the turbulent 2015-2017 period, Islam and migration were dominating the news. They became main debate topics, especially in the run-up to the 2017 parliamentary elections. January 2015 started with the crude terror attack on cartoonists of Charlie Hebdo, a beacon of freedom of expression, which shocked the Western world. Later that year, in November 2015, Paris was startled by another major terror attack, claimed by ISIS terrorists. A sentiment of fear was rising, as the perpetrators indicated that they acted in the name of Islam.¹⁵⁰

Furthermore, the Syrian civil war, rise of ISIS in the Middle-East and various African military conflicts had instigated a large influx of migrants on European soil. In April 2015, the term ‘migration crisis’ became commonplace, after hundreds of migrants had drowned on the Mediterranean Sea in short time.¹⁵¹ The reception of large groups of asylum seekers became a subject of conflict within the EU, enabling right-wing populist parties to reinforce their frame of nativism, imminent danger and loss of cultural identity.¹⁵²

The combination of Islamic extremism and immigration increase generated a feeling of fear among Dutch population. Violent protests against asylum seekers centres (AZC’s) occurred in many municipalities.¹⁵³ PVV benefitted from this increased significance in political discourse. They created a hotline for nuisance of asylum seekers to further implant a feeling of insecurity. The mass assault in Cologne on new year’s night 2015 served as another confirmation opportunity for Wilders’ ‘us vs. them’ rhetoric. Wilders’ party was rising in polls considerably in the 2015-2016 period and became the largest party with at the peak 42 predicted seats.¹⁵⁴ *Figure 3* shows the fluctuation in polls between 2015 and 2017. Notwithstanding that he was

¹⁵⁰ Akkerman. *The Impact of populist radical-right parties on immigration policy agendas*, p.4-6

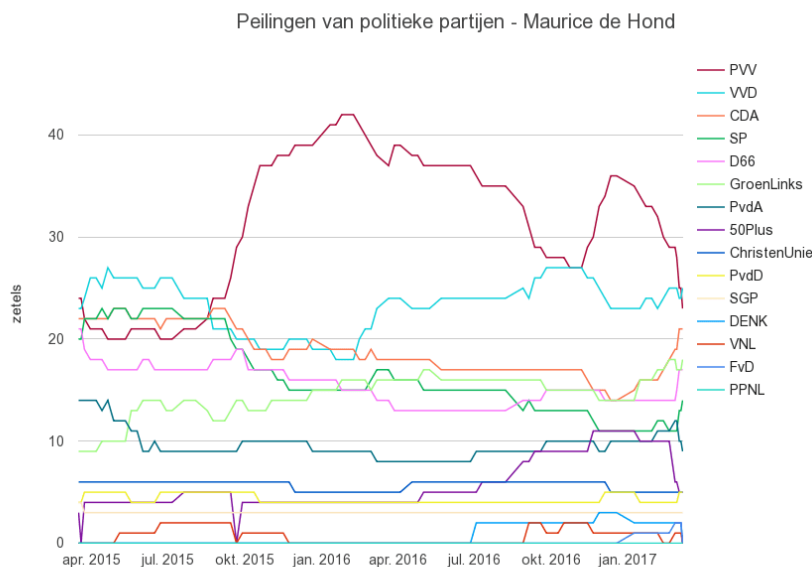
¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.1-3

¹⁵² Erikur Bergmann, ‘The Eurabia Doctrine’, In E. Bergmann, *Conspiracy & Populism*, (Springer International Publishing, 2018), p.125-126

¹⁵³ NOS.nl, “Grimmige AZC-protesten leidden ook elders tot schrappen opvang,” February 3 2016, consulted on May 26 2021 at: <https://nos.nl/artikel/2084758-grimmige-azc-protesten-leidden-ook-elders-tot-schrappen-opvang>

¹⁵⁴ NOS.nl, “Peilingwijzer: opmars PVV zet door”, December 21 2016, consulted on May 26 2021 at: <https://nos.nl/artikel/2149429-peilingwijzer-opmars-pvv-zet-door>; NU.nl, “Zetels PVV en GroenLinks in peiling hoogste aantal ooit”, January 24 2016, consulted on May 26 2021 at: <https://www.nu.nl/politiek/4202839/zetels-pvv-en-groenlinks-in-peiling-hoogste-aantal-ooit.html>

convicted on December 9 2016 for his 2014 ‘Less Moroccans’ speech for group insult and inciting discrimination.¹⁵⁵



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Figure 3: This polls' overview shows the electoral danger PVV was in between 2015 and 2017. In hardly a year, the party more than doubled from twenty to at its peak 42 seats in polls, while VVD was struggling to retain twenty seats at that time.

Source: www.allepeilingen.com

Mainstream politicians of coalition VVD and PvdA in Rutte II also struggled with the influx of migrants, fuelled by the electoral explosion of PVV in polls. As this is a two-sided process tracing analysis, it was chosen not to include PvdA or other parties' responses to the migration crisis in this thesis. One of those debates, the ‘bed-bath-bread regulation’ brought about a political conflict on the specific interpretation of the refugees' right on food, clothes and accommodation. VVD argued for sober day care with a specific focus on return of underprivileged migrants, in the fear for attracting lots of new migrants.¹⁵⁶ Moreover, Rutte's political rhetoric saw a dramatic turn to fierce, populist and restrictive expressions. For instance, he removed the Turkish minister Kaya as an unauthorised stranger, to show his discomfort with Turkish government.¹⁵⁷ Simultaneously, Rutte, like other mainstream politicians, had ensured voters that he would not cooperate at any cost with PVV.

¹⁵⁵ De Rechtspraak, “Wilders schuldig aan groepsbelediging en aanzetten tot discriminatie”, December 9 2016, consulted on May 28 2021 at: <https://www.rechtspraak.nl/Organisatie-en-contact/Organisatie/Rechtbanken/Rechtbank-Den-Haag/Nieuws/Paginas/Wilders-schuldig-aan-groepsbelediging-en-aanzetten-tot-discriminatie.aspx>

¹⁵⁶ Joanne van Selm, “Migration in the Netherlands: rhetoric and perceived reality challenge Dutch tolerance”, Migration Policy, May 1 2019, consulted on May 28 2021 at: <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/migration-netherlands-rhetoric-and-perceived-reality-challenge-dutch-tolerance>

¹⁵⁷ Akkerman. *The Impact of populist radical-right parties on immigration policy agendas*, p.12-15.

3.4.2 PVV: far-reaching radicalising rhetoric and ideas

As migration became a more prominent topic in politics due to the ‘migration crisis’, Wilders’ rhetoric focused more on the detrimental effects of migrants in the 2015-2017 period. His narrative was based on highlighting news facts in which the newcomers could be depicted as traitors, criminals or terrorists. For instance, in his response to the new years’ eve sexual harassments in Cologne he demonstrated which measures he envisioned: locking up all male asylum seekers in a closed institution. His depiction of all male migrants as rapists was another step in his gradual discriminatory statements. He used new words like ‘testosterone bombs’ and was able to redefine the debate surrounding Islam and migration on the basis of this news fact that had instilled fear among Dutch population. In this way, he was able to respond to the fear of Dutch people and the anger of the large admission of asylum seekers in newly built ‘AZC’s.’

“Testosterone bombs, sexual terrorists, a sexual jihad, (...) we should lock up all male asylum seekers in AZC’s, that should become closed institutions, so that not a single man is out on the street and our women are finally protected.”

Media attention grew alongside his increasing popularity in polls. The new ‘magic word’ was ‘de-Islamisation’, an ending point in Wilders’ radicalisation. Despite Wilders did not name Eurabia explicitly, the consequences of ‘de-Islamisation’ reached beyond his previous allegations. The narrative shifted towards depicting the Netherlands on the edge of the abyss, with only a last chance to save the country from extinction. An interview with news channel NOS portrays his more radicalised view:

“We should de-Islamise the country and close our borders for fortune seekers if we want our own culture to be leading and wish that the Netherlands in a few decades will still exist. (...) It is an existential problem.”

When exposing his plans in another interview on conservative news channel WNL, the discursive strategies of stereotyping, simplification and exaggeration, focusing on loss of culture and propagating ‘us vs. them’ rhetoric becomes apparent. With a more ominous discourse than before, Wilders spreads the same message: a tragedy is waiting for the Dutch, restrictive measures are urgent.

“Africa is exploding this century, one third of Africans comes our way (one to four billion people). (...) Syria is nothing compared to what is waiting us, our Marechaussee should guard the border to prevent us to become an Arabian-African part of the world.”

PVV's 2017 party manifesto had only one page, called 'Nederland weer van ons', and contained a calculation on revenues of totally stopping migration and 'de-Islamise' the country. It directly connects migration and Islam with terror, violence and insecurity. It was a definitive radicalisation of policy proposals, arguing for shutting down all mosques, all Islamic schools and officially banning Quran. Furthermore, preventively locking up all radical Muslims was suggested, as well as a ban on asylum seekers and migrants from Islamic countries. Similarly, closing borders, revoking all residence permits, closing all 'AZC's' and denaturalising criminals with a double nationality were proposed. In a personal response from Wilders, he calls all refugees 'potential terrorists.'¹⁵⁸

Compared to previous phases, the ideas have become more radical. A reason for this radicalisation process into 'de-Islamisation' is the sociocultural debate that had successfully been implanted in Dutch politics. As mainstream parties had now taken over the 'softer' restrictive proposals, Wilders successfully stretched the debate further to the more conservative, right-wing flank of his political ideology. He discursively forced mainstream parties to adopt, albeit less extremist, restrictive positions of migration and Islam. Nevertheless, this shift to the right was also triggered by the sequence of events like the migration crisis and Islamic terror attacks. In conclusion, a consolidation of extremist positioning is visible, Wilders has moved along with recent developments. Similarly, a change of phrasing Eurabia to 'de-Islamisation', having the same premisses. However, in eleven years, *PVV*'s proposed measures have moved dramatically to the far-right.

3.4.3 VVD: a considerable step to the right

With migration on political foreground, Rutte had to re-establish his position. From his role as Dutch Prime Minister, his tone was not as radical as Wilders. Yet, compared to his earlier statements, advancing rhetorical steps in his rhetorical depiction of Muslims and migrants are discerned. For instance, his presence in TV show *Buitenhof* on January 11 2015 contained a much more dismissive tone of Islam as a religion with 'less room for criticism and interpretation.' However, his main narrative on the religion remained to preserve the distinction between extremist and moderate Muslims. In a 2015 speech after the November terror attacks,

¹⁵⁸ *PVV, Nederland weer van ons!*, (2017), p.1

he clarified that there was no room for extremists in the Netherlands and that ‘they could better leave.’

On the migration topic, Rutte made specific statements leaning towards a more populist narrative. His comparison between the Roman Empire and the European Union in *Financial Times* was striking, since he was glorifying a highly violent empire from the past, but it also reflected his anti-migrant’s frame. Remarkably, Wilders had made a similar comparison in 2010:

“As we all know from the Roman Empire, big empires go down if the borders are not well protected. We really have an imperative that it is handled.”

The sexual assaults in Cologne are another example in which Rutte propagated his stricter opinion on integration. In a negative way, he depicted ‘newcomers’ as people that completely had to adjust to Western standards, once again underlining the greatness of the nation. It was a shift towards assimilationist positioning, as own interpretation of rules and expression of culture was not desirable anymore:

“We have built this beautiful country with fundamental values underneath, we will make no concessions on that. (...) You have to clarify what newcomers have to integrate into.”

Furthermore, his 2016 ALDE¹⁵⁹ conference speech on the migration topic contained an adoption of anti-elitist frames, similar to Wilders’ claims. He blamed European politicians for losing connection with the people, embracing a dichotomy of the people versus the elite. As he himself is also part of this ruling elite, it is a discursive reversal, using a populist argumentation to frame the migration issue. He used populist language like ‘ferry service’, a metaphorical expression that enabled him to speak more directly on the negative effects of migration flows with disapproval.

“Too often elites in Europe say ‘the citizens do not understand.’ That is not true, you do not understand yourself. (...) European ships are picking up migrants and taking them to Italy. That is a ferry service! We have to pick them up and bring them back to Africa.”

Most importantly, this period was marked by dramatic rhetorical radicalisation of Rutte when he, in the run-up to the elections, made statements that reinforced a feeling of ‘us vs. them’

¹⁵⁹ The ALDE is the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, a political party from the European Parliament. From the Netherlands, VVD and D66 are affiliated with this European party.

among the native Dutch. His goal was to attract voters that had defected to PVV, because of concerns on migration and loss of identity. He stigmatised large minority groups of Turks and migrants in TV show *Zomergasten*. His rhetoric was fiercer than ever before and he framed these non-natives as dangers for Dutch society. Most importantly, he generally excluded them, saying that they could better leave and that the Netherlands had to defend their own culture.

“Go away, go back to Turkey yourself. (...) They trample our achievements, norms and values. (...) We as a society must standardise, the Netherlands must remain the Netherlands.”

The second statement is a good example of calling without naming. Rutte wrote a letter to the Dutch people called ‘Normaal.Doen.’ in 2017.¹⁶⁰ The narrative he wishes to spread is that every person has to live up to certain standards and that newcomers should feel lucky to be allowed. It is an urge for unity, ‘normality’, which he asks for, but he does not explicitly name which groups he means that do not live conform Dutch norms and values. His vandalising accusation was directly associated with minority groups like Moroccans, following Wilders’ previous rhetoric on this ethnic group. His message was perceived as discriminatory by minorities.

“We feel a growing discomfort when people abuse our freedom to ruin things, people that came to our country for that same freedom (...) I understand very well that people think: if you reject our country so fundamentally, I’d rather you leave. I have that feeling too. Act normal or go away.”

Also the 2017 party manifesto shows (new) programmatic repositioning, another step to increasingly emphasise the negative sides of other cultures and non-natives. Migration and integration are now placed under the heading ‘security and freedom’, underlining the shifted focus to threatening elements and fears among the population. Lots of the 2006 Wilders’ rhetoric and plans have been taken over. Partly, that is to respond to fears on migration and terror. However, while campaigning, he actively presented himself as an alternative to the PVV, that was pushed to great heights (42 seats at the peak).¹⁶¹ He argued that ‘PVV runs away when it becomes difficult and they magnify polarisation.’¹⁶² Besides the ideas already taken over in the 2012 manifesto, Rutte has included the banning of dubious financial sources of mosques,

¹⁶⁰ ‘Normaal.Doen’ could be translated as ‘Act Normal.’

¹⁶¹ See *Figure 3* for an overview of the fluctuations in polls between 2015 and 2017.

¹⁶² Tom Reijner, “PVV 15 zetels? Rutte is er toch niet zo gerust op”, *Elsevier Weekblad*, March 1 2017, consulted on June 10 2021 at: <https://www.ewmagazine.nl/nederland/achtergrond/2017/03/rutte-is-er-niet-gerust-op-pvv-kan-allergrootste-worden-461145/>

the possibility of fining a municipality that keeps on providing shelter to illegal people, banning Children Amnesty and accelerate the return of criminal refugees.¹⁶³ Furthermore, the ‘earning of Dutchness’ is included and the possibility to withdraw Dutch citizenship for terrorist joiners.¹⁶⁴

In conclusion, policy proposals in their manifesto are more focused on exclusion than before and are an imitation of the (2006 & 2012) nationalist measures introduced by *PVV* in political discourse to maintain national identity. A legitimisation of the ideas of restricting rights of migrants and religious freedom are manifested, with fiercer verbal expressions than before. An overall reposition of *VVD* has marked the 2006-2017 period, in which they have redefined their attitude towards migrants and minorities, affecting their liberal values.

3.4.4 Takeaways: mainstream accommodation?

All in all, due to the political developments of the migrant’s crisis and Islamic terrorism in the 2015-2017, the debate on susceptibility of migrants and acceptance of Muslim culture had shifted dramatically. On the one hand, it enabled Wilders’ *PVV* to intensify their claims into a ‘de-Islamisation’ of Dutch culture. More radical rhetoric, but especially far-reaching policy suggestions were the result. On the other hand, *VVD* embraced a ‘strategy of accommodation’, in which policy proposals that used to belong to the right-wing populists were now included in their own manifestos. Most striking is that leader Rutte’s political rhetoric now propagated a more negative attitude on migrants and Muslims. With the large amount of people Prime Minister Rutte reaches and influences, that last observation is the most ominous one.

3.5 ‘Verrechtsing’ reinforces anti-migrant and anti-Islam attitudes

Between 2006 and 2017, the political discourse on Islam and migration has become dramatically sociocultural. In this respect, a focus on Wilders and Rutte was done, without including other political leaders’ stances over time. After this negative sentiment was injected by political entrepreneur Wilders in the ‘entry phase’ (2006-2009), mainstream party *VVD* initially remained relatively positive on migration, emphasising economic advantages of highly-skilled migrants. Yet, taboos had been broken, as freedom of speech permitted making radical statements. After that, an ‘internalisation phase’ (2010-2014) of *PVV*’s inclusion into

¹⁶³ This means ‘Kinderpardon’, a Dutch policy to spare migrant children staying in the Netherlands for the majority of their youth.

¹⁶⁴ *VVD, Zeker Nederland: VVD Verkiezingsprogramma*, (2017), p.18-21

the party system followed, in which it was able to permanently ventilate their conspirational ideas to a bigger public, partly because the interest of mainstream actors had risen drastically. *VVD* ideologically shifted from a socio-economic to a sociocultural position, causing an ideological reorientation with more restrictive measures. In order to retain hard right-wing voters, they adopted several policy proposals on migration and Islam. However, a major rhetorical shift came only in the 'legitimisation phase' (2015-2017). Wilders further aggravated his narrative to a frame of exclusion, a radicalisation he called 'de-Islamisation.' The two main catalysts for the legitimisation of anti-rhetoric were the large influx of migrants and the attacks by Islamic terrorists. To respond to growing fear for strangers and for loss of Dutch culture among Dutch citizens, Rutte took a large rhetorical step to the right. He adopted discursive anti-migrant and anti-Islam positions, albeit less obviously manifested than Wilders did, promoting polarisation and aggravating cultural differences. In eleven years, Rutte's rhetoric and *VVD*'s policies have moved to a more right-wing populist, conservative flank, a form of accommodation to changed socio-political circumstances, a shift from socio-economic to sociocultural domination of debates. This, in turn, affected the uncomfortable feelings and attitudes the Eurabia also comprises.

4. Conclusion

This thesis has investigated how the premisses underlying the Eurabia conspiracy theories have increasingly become legitimised in Dutch political discourse. The purpose of this study was to demonstrate how and why political mainstream party *VVD* and fringe party *PVV* contributed to the legitimisation of anti-migrant and anti-Islam attitudes. To do so, process tracing was performed, using thirty sources that portray political rhetoric and ideas of Wilders and Rutte. It was found that discursive shifts are discernible in the 2006-2017 period, marking a general ‘*verrechtsing*’ of debates on migration and Islam. Negative attitudes have been implanted by political issue-owner *PVV* and subsequently taken over by political mainstream *VVD*, first in their ideology, then in their (verbal) rhetoric.

On the basis of four phases, this thesis has described this discursive process. In the run-up, the breeding ground for anti-attitudes was founded due to political murders and terror attacks. Then, the entry of *PVV* caused an introduction of fierce criticism on migration and Islam, breaking existing taboos about minorities. After its intense politicisation, the internalisation of *PVV* in party system followed and programmatic re-alignment of *VVD* led to adoption of *PVV*’s previously restrictive plans. After an ideological step to anti-migrant and anti-Islam discourse, rhetorical legitimisation followed in the run-up to the 2017 elections, in which this mainstream party made a considerable step to a more right-wing, conservative ‘us vs. them’ narrative.

Interestingly, the same stigmatising portrayal of Muslims and migrants can be found in party outlets and manifestos of *PVV* and *VVD*, albeit less extreme for the latter. While Wilders directly embraced conspirational discursive argumentation, Rutte merely reinforced them indirectly. By re-aligning his party ideals along the sociocultural cleavage, Rutte has discursively embraced the very premisses of the Eurabia conspiracy theory. He has increasingly blamed (leftist) elite for relativising Western values like freedom of speech. Besides, he has disseminated dismissive messages to Muslims and migrants, telling them to completely conform to Dutch standards. The intensification of rhetoric in Dutch political discourse reflects the hardened debate as a result of fears among citizens after terror attacks, criminal behaviour and influx of migrants. Instead of repelling propelled falsehoods by right-wing extremists’ rhetorical issue-ownership, mainstream adoption of ideas and phrases has led to increased polarisation, moving the discourse to the right.

Inevitably, this thesis was complicated by limitations. As the time frame was relatively short, limited amounts of data could be analysed. Similarly, only two political leaders could be included, while political discourse is composed by lots of other actors, such as other parties, media and NGO's. Furthermore, it only contained a snapshot of eleven years, without predictive value of what happened next. Moreover, the subjectivity of discourses inexplicably leads to researchers' bias in selecting sources and interpreting data. Besides, a difference exists in the impact and specific conditions in which political figures have made these discursive statements, differing from an underlying intention of short accidental statements to conscious outlets of party propaganda. Lastly, specific words could lose their linguistic value while translated into English, therefore they were put in original Dutch in footnotes.

These findings have implications for studies on conspiracy thinking, political discourse and mainstream and fringe divisions. It could be regarded as a typical case study on dissemination of conspirational attitudes. New insights have been offered on how legitimisation processes take place in the political arena. After a fringe party introduced stigmatised knowledge, Dutch mainstream took on similar positions while the electorate was shifting during societal crises. To further progress insights on conspiracy theory normalisation, future research could investigate how conspiracy thinking has developed in Dutch political context since the rise of another major right-wing populist party, *Forum voor Democratie*, and their leader Thierry Baudet, who became famous introducing conspiracy theories like 'cultural Marxism.' The COVID-19 crisis could be another interesting angle of view. Besides, scholars could perform a new discourse analysis on other, or a wider group of political leaders, on the role of the media or they could focus on a different political topic like environmental change. Lastly, a comparison with other (Western) countries could advance knowledge in this specific field.

In conclusion, the legitimisation process of conspiracy theories can be understood as a two-sided, gradual process. Different phases reflect the introduction, internalisation and normalisation of these theories' premisses in political discourse. Above all, not only populists reinforce negative attitudes underlying conspiracy theories. Mainstream political actors possess great power in crediting, confirming and redefining societal debates with re-adjusted ideas and statements. Like populism, conspiracy thinking comes and goes with waves, depending on societal crisis situations. Yet, it is the mainstream, or the demise of their own moderation, that determines the persistence of stigmatised knowledge in societal debates, and their further effect.

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Appendix I: Sources overview

Nr.	Who?	Category	Type	Head theme	Year	Context
1	Wilders	Party outlets	Interview Telegraaf	Islam/migration	2006	Tsunami of Muslims
2	Wilders	Party outlets	Letter to Volkskrant	Islam	2007	Letter on Quran Ban, Eurabia
3	Wilders	Party outlets	Movie	Islam	2008	Fitna
4	Wilders	Party outlets	Speech	Islam & migration	2009	Algemene Beschouwingen 'Kopvoddentax'
5	Wilders	Party outlets	Speech	Islam & migration	2010	Eurabia PVV response
6	Wilders	Party outlets	Speech	Islam	2010	Quran, Jihad, Islam as dangerous ideology
7	Wilders	Party outlets	Speech	Islam	2011	Eurabia & freedom of speech
8	Wilders	Party outlets	Statement	Islam	2011	Breivik aftermath
9	Wilders	Party outlets	Speech	Islam	2014	More/less Moroccans
10	Wilders	Party outlets	Movie	Migration	2016	Dangerous Arabians 'AZC'/ Keulen
11	Wilders	Party outlets	Interview	Islam & migration	2016	Breedveld NOS ten year anniversary
12	Wilders	Party outlets	Interview	Islam & migration	2017	Nieman WNL plans PVV
1	Rutte	Party outlets	Plan proposals	Migration	2006	Plan release personal campaign
2	Rutte	Party outlets	Interview	Islam	2008	Vision on Islam
3	Rutte	Party outlets	Speech	Islam/migration	2008	Opening 'Vrijdenkersruimte'
4	Rutte	Party outlets	Speech	Migration & Islam	2011	'Provinciale Staten' win speech

5	Rutte	Party outlets	Debate	Migration & Islam	2012	Vs. Samsom on multicultural society
6	Rutte	Party outlets	Interview	Islam	2015	Charlie Hebdo terrorism
7	Rutte	Party outlets	Interview	Islam	2015	War with IS, not with Islam
8	Rutte	Party outlets	Statement	Migration	2015	Roman Empire & EU Financial Times
9	Rutte	Party outlets	Speech	Migration & Islam	2016	Sexual assault Cologne
10	Rutte	Party outlets	Interview	Migration	2016	'Pleur op' statement
11	Rutte	Party outlets	Speech	Migration	2016	ALDE conference, anti-elitist frame
12	Rutte	Party outlets	Letter to the Dutch	Migration	2017	Act normal or go away

Nr.	Who?	Category	Year	Name
1	PVV (Wilders)	Party manifesto	2006	Verkiezingspamflet
2	PVV (Wilders)	Party manifesto	2012	Hún Brussel, óns Nederland
3	PVV (Wilders)	Party manifesto	2017	Nederland weer van ons!
1	VVD (Rutte)	Party manifesto	2006	Voor een samenleving met ambitie
2	VVD (Rutte)	Party manifesto	2012	Niet doorschuiven, maar aanpakken
3	VVD (Rutte)	Party manifesto	2017	Zeker Nederland

Appendix II: Analysis material

Primary sources:

Party manifestos:

- PVV, partijprogramma 2006, <https://www.pvv.nl/30-visie/publicaties/788-verkiezingspamflet.html>
- PVV, partijprogramma 2012, <https://www.pvv.nl/images/stories/verkiezingen2012/VerkiezingsProgramma-PVV-2012-final-web.pdf>
- PVV, partijprogramma 2017, <https://dnpprepo.ub.rug.nl/628/12/PVV2017-2021con.pdf>
- VVD: partijprogramma 2006, <https://dnpprepo.ub.rug.nl/60/1/VVD-VerkProg-TK-2006-definitief.pdf>
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