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„Euroscepticism among Mainstream Political Parties“

Hidden Euroscepticism in the Dutch “People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy”
(Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie – VVD)?

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Abstracts

Nowadays, the rise of Euroscepticism among mainstream political parties cannot be denied anymore and this is the reason why the master thesis' topic particularly concentrates on this phenomenon. The purpose is to further investigate and identify to what extent Eurosceptic stances can be found in the Dutch "People's Party for Freedom and Democracy" (Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie – VVD), with specific regard to their current European policy.

First, the theoretical framework, including the necessary typology and causes for Euroscepticism in party systems, was presented. Considerations of Taggart and Szczerbiak (2003) and Kopecký and Mudde (2002) were primarily taken into account. Second, specific background information on the political party, such as the party's main goals, development and European policy since the nineties, served as an adequate basis for the then following qualitative analysis of the current party program 2017-2021. In the context of the EU connected with the European integration, the VVD's current European policy was analyzed. Finally, the written viewpoints revealed to what extent the Dutch mainstream political party holds Eurosceptic positions.

Regarding the results of the qualitative analysis, it can be concluded that even though the VVD was argued to be a strong supporter for European integration in the beginning, this position changed significantly over the years. The VVD is not against the European Union or European integration, neither entirely in favor but rather sceptical and pragmatic about it. Favoring the Dutch economy, by boosting international trade and improving the position on the internal market, is the VVD's main aim in the sense of their European policy. In conclusion, the results provide some support for assuming that the Dutch mainstream political party holds Eurosceptic stances concerning specific European policy areas.

Der Anstieg von Euroskeptizismus in Mainstream-Parteien ist heutzutage nicht mehr zu leugnen und aus diesem Grund konzentriert sich das Thema der vorliegenden Masterarbeit auf dieses Phänomen im Speziellen. Ziel ist zu ermitteln in welchem Ausmaß euroskeptische Haltungen in der niederländischen „Volkspartei für Freiheit und Demokratie“ (Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie – VVD) im Hinblick auf ihre Europapolitik vertreten sind.

Zunächst wurde der theoretische Rahmen geschaffen, welcher die notwendige Typologie und Gründe für Euroskeptizismus in Parteiensystemen präsentiert. Überlegungen von Taggart und Szczerbiak (2003) und Kopecký und Mudde (2002) wurden hier vor allem zu Rate gezogen. Des Weiteren dienten spezifische Hintergrundinformationen der politischen Partei, genauer gesagt die Hauptziele, Entwicklung und Europapolitik seit 1990, als adäquate Basis für die folgende qualitative Analyse des aktuellen Parteiprogrammes 2017-2021. Im Zusammenhang mit der EU und der damit verbundenen Europäischen Integration wurde die momentane Europapolitik der VVD analysiert. Schließlich konnten die schriftlichen Standpunkte Aufschluss darüber geben, in welchem Maß die niederländische Mainstream-Partei euroskeptische Positionen vertritt.

Aufgrund der Ergebnisse dieser qualitativen Analyse, kann zusammengefasst festgestellt werden, dass sich die Haltung der VVD, als eigentliche pro EU-integrationistisch gesehene Partei, im Laufe der Jahre deutlich verändert hat. Die VVD ist weder gegen die Europäische Union oder Europäische Integration, noch gänzlich dafür, jedoch eher skeptisch und pragmatisch eingestellt. Die Begünstigung der niederländischen Wirtschaft durch die Stärkung des internationalen Handels und die Verbesserung der Position im Binnenmarkt sind die Hauptziele im Sinne ihrer Europapolitik. Zusammenfassend lässt sich sagen, dass die Ergebnisse die Annahme stützen, die niederländische Mainstream-Partei nehme euroskeptische Haltungen im Hinblick auf spezifische Europapolitikbereiche ein.

1. Introduction

With regard to the recent events, namely the United Kingdom's application of Article 50 TEU and the general rise of populism in Europe, the issue of Euroscepticism must now, more than ever, be paid attention to. Who would have thought years ago that any country would want to leave the European Union or political parties seek to exit the European Union and gain a tremendous amount of new voters? Euroscepticism played, undoubtedly, an integral role in these scenarios.

It should, however, not be neglected that the European Union is an intensively complex matter, requiring a great deal of specialized knowledge that needs to be thoroughly provided by its member states. If this is not the case, governments might be met with citizen's incomprehension. In relation to that aspect, it can be examined that certain political parties tend to hold a more sceptical opinion towards the European integration process and/or the European Union and take advantage of these groups of people. Therefore, the examination of Euroscepticism among political parties is of great concern in the scope of this thesis. More precisely, it will be concentrated on a Dutch mainstream political party, namely the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie - VVD).

1.1 Aim and Relevance

The current research on European integration highlights first and foremost the relation between Euroscepticism and fringe parties of the political spectrum. Consequently, it is of great relevance to also study mainstream parties, due to the fact that this field of research had not been paid sufficient attention to yet. In addition, it is highly interesting to analyze whether the uplift of radical parties has an influence on mainstream parties and if there are any signs that these drift more towards the edges.

Another aim of this master thesis is not only to serve as a contribution to the discourse on European integration but also to raise awareness of the multi-faceted phenomenon of Euroscepticism itself. Especially citizens of the European Union need to be informed and sensitized in order to critically scrutinize the country-specific European policy of political parties. Bearing this in mind, after the recent Dutch national elections, the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy was celebrated as pro-European winner in contrast to the anti-European Party for Freedom (Partij voor de Vrijheid – PVV). This context offers therefore a reasonable opportunity for the verification, whether this specific mainstream political party

might also hold Eurosceptic positions. These two aspects are the reason why this thesis aims for an intensive research in this comparatively unknown field of study.

1.2 Research Questions

The main purpose of this thesis is to find an answer to the question: To what extent can Euroscepticism be found among the Dutch “People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy” (Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie – VVD)?” It is of great concern to find out whether this specific Dutch party holds Eurosceptic stances and if so whether these views are openly or maybe subliminally expressed. It seems adequate to concentrate on Euroscepticism in the Netherlands, as it is one of the founding members of the European Union, besides Belgium, Luxemburg, Germany, France and Italy.

This gives rise to other following questions concerning firstly the theoretical aspects of Euroscepticism and secondly, certainly questions referring to the VVD as a mainstream political party. There is a multitude of related research questions that need to be answered before, to form a sufficient framework:

- Do scholars agree on a common definition of the term Euroscepticism? Are there different approaches including concepts of investigating Euroscepticism and thereby different resulting types that can also maybe be combined? What causes Eurosceptic stances in political parties in general?

- How can the political orientation of the Dutch mainstream political party VVD be defined? What are the main aims and therefore related values? Which issues are addressed in terms of the party’s European policy?

- What is the VVD’s general opinion on European integration and does the party in this context openly express their criticism towards the European Union or the European integration process itself?

This is the main research question and the thereby interrelated considerations, that this master thesis wants to discuss.

1.3 Disciplines and Methodologies

As the field of study dealing with the issue of Euroscepticism is a relatively extensive one, it should be first of all specifically outlined in which theoretical framework this phenomenon will be examined. It can be stated, due to the analysis of a political party that the main focus is on Political Science. However, the field of study concerning Euroscepticism is a rather interdisciplinary one. Thus, as it is indispensably linked to the field of European integration, and by regarding political parties as the main actors of integration, the research question should also be seen in the light of liberal intergovernmentalism.¹

After the definition of the field of study, the methods and the including instruments will be presented in order to understand how the main research question will be addressed. This thesis consists of two parts. Firstly, a part offering a solid theoretical basis of Euroscepticism will be established and secondly, the practical part, where an assessment of the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy will be made in combination with an analysis of the current party program. Primary and secondary literature will serve here as adequate sources.

The first part will be mainly literature based, where a summary of the most important concepts of Euroscepticism will be presented by relying on secondary literature (cf. Taggart 1998; Kopecký/Mudde 2002). Even though there exist newer approaches of studying Euroscepticism in political parties, it should be underlined that these concepts are mostly based on the considerations of either Taggart (1998) or Kopecký and Mudde (2002). Thus, these theories seem to be predominant in scientific terms and will therefore provide the necessary instruments in order to investigate the extent of Euroscepticism in the Dutch mainstream political party VVD. In addition, the main background information, that further helps to frame and complete the whole picture of the chosen political party, will be also discussed by examining secondary literature. Here, sources will not only include books but also a multitude of scientific papers and relevant online sources. The second part seeks to put this theory into practice and to be applied to the party's programs of the years 2002-2006, 2003 and the current program of 2017-2021. These online available programs serve as primary source for a qualitative analysis.

¹ See also: Pollak/Slominski 2012: 60

1.4 Structure

As far as the structure is concerned, it needs to be highlighted that the thesis is divided into three main parts. In short, the first part focuses on the conceptualization, the second part concentrates on the background information of the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy and the third part presents a qualitative analysis of the current party program of the recent national elections.

Regarding each of these parts individually, the conceptualizations attempt to provide a brief overview of the definition and typology concerning Euroscepticism. More precisely, assumptions are based on the scientifically prevalent work of Taggart and Szeczerbiak (2003) and Kopecký and Mudde (2002). It will not only be focused on hard and soft Euroscepticism but also to the concepts of diffuse and specific support for European integration. In line with that, party-based Euroscepticism and its causes will be further discussed. As a result, this conceptualization will be used as a solid basis for the following research.

The next section examines the political party VVD more closely. Background information, general principles, the party's development and their European policy since 1999 will altogether build the context in which the current party program can be analyzed. In order to detect to what extent Euroscepticism can be found in the VVD, this part should allow to gain some inside knowledge and to completely understand the interrelation of the Dutch party and the European Union itself. This part is, thus, already an examination of the VVD's political relation with the European Union, nevertheless, concentrating more on the past and the party's beginnings.

In contrast to that, the third main part should be regarded as the analysis of the current status quo. The recent national elections raised a great deal of controversy, especially in terms of Euroscepticism. Under these circumstances, the current party program will be specifically analyzed by applying the above mentioned theories. In short, it will underline whether the VVD holds Eurosceptic stances or not.

In the end, a conclusion will not only refer again to the most important aspects, but also summarize the most important ones as well as scientific findings.

2. Conceptualization

The field of study includes a wide range of complex disciplines. This is the reason why this section seeks to briefly summarize the most relevant theoretical concepts and aspects that will help to find an answer to this thesis' research question. It will not only be focused on Euroscepticism in general, but particularly on party systems.

Thus, it will be firstly examined whether scholars agree on a common definition of Euroscepticism or not. Secondly, in order to adequately analyze the Dutch mainstream party, namely the VVD, two different typologies of Euroscepticism will be presented. Two perspectives, the theories of Taggart (1998) on the one hand and Kopecký and Mudde (2002) on the other hand, will serve as a solid theoretical basis. Thirdly, the examination of Euroscepticism among mainstream political parties as well as the causes in the party systems will conclude the theoretical introduction. More specifically, the factors ideology and strategy will be discussed. In general, this part will not only give an overview of various concepts but also investigate if they overlap or might be combinable.

At this point it is worth noting that due to the extensiveness of this field of study, the theoretical part is limited to a summary of theories that are necessary for the purpose of this thesis. Then, as far as the analysis is concerned, those theories will be applied to the VVD's current party program "Zeker Nederland 2017-2021".

2.1 Definition: Euroscepticism

The term Euroscepticism can be easily misunderstood. In addition to various existing approaches that define the complex phenomenon, it is easily met with incomprehension. First, it has to be made clear that Euroscepticism mainly focuses on the political and institutional structures and the ongoing development of the European Union (EU) in a political lexicon, rather than on the "Euro" as the European currency in the Eurozone² (cf. Oberkirch/Schild 2010:8). Looking at the origins of the term, Harmsen and Spiering (2004:15) argue that Euroscepticism was firstly used in the mid-1980s in the United Kingdom. The British newspaper "The Times" used the term in an article published in 1986 and explained it by citing the Oxford English Dictionary: "Euro-sceptic" is "a person who is not enthusiastic

² The Eurozone on the other hand is defined as "a geographic and economic region that consists of all the European Union countries that have fully incorporated the euro as their national currency." (Investopedia Dictionary 2017)

about increasing the powers of the European Union”³. (Harmsen/Spiering 2004:15) In general, it was argued that the term ‘Eurosceptic’ was associated with “a basic opposition British participation in the European integration project”. Thus, the original meaning can be directly linked to the EU-sceptical national politics of the British Conservative Party, formerly led by Margret Thatcher (cf. Harmsen/Spiering 2004:16; Oberkirch/Schild 2010:9). Euroscepticism is a multilayered phenomenon. Oberkirch and Schild (2010:13f.) described the phenomenon of Euroscepticism by agreeing on influences existing on a micro-level (economical cost-benefit ration; ideas, values, norms; political attitudes; identification with social group) and on a specific macro-level (socio-economical context; European contexts of elites, media influences, political parties). Bearing this in mind, this thesis needs to be viewed from a macro-level, where the influence of political parties forms the main focus of interest (cf. Oberkirch/Schild 2010: 14).

As the Online Oxford Dictionary’s definition seems too vaguely formulated to serve as a solid basis for understanding Euroscepticism as such, the theory will rely on the considerations provided by Taggart (1998), Taggart and Szczerbiak (2002) and Kopecký and Mudde (2002). In the ongoing scientific discussion about party-based Euroscepticism, the existence of two different schools can be observed. On the one hand, the University of Sussex with its main representatives Taggart and Szczerbiak play a major position whereas on the other hand the University of North Carolina, based on considerations of Ray (1999), plays the opposing position. It is worth noting, that the School of Sussex, however, has more intensively focused on various approaches to define the term Euroscepticism as such (cf. Mudde 2012: 194f.). Even though there is no commonly accepted definition, the groundbreaking and well-known theory of Taggart (1998) is in all probability the most prevalently used.⁴ He described Euroscepticism as follows:

“The term ‘Euroscepticism’ is used in this article as an encompassing term. Euroscepticism expresses the idea of contingent or qualified opposition, as well as incorporating outright and unqualified opposition to the process of European integration. The justification for using the broad term Euroscepticism, apart from its popular usage, is that it exists, albeit in a variety of guises, in the face of an on-going de facto process of integration at the institutional and elite level. The context is one of European integration, and so the term Euroscepticism encompasses those who stand outside the status quo. Scepticism in the face of an institutional reality is here taken as equivalent to opposition in the face

³ When comparing the Oxford English Dictionary from the mid-1980s with the current online Oxford English Dictionary (2017) it should be stated that one word has changed: “Eurosceptic – A person who is opposed to increasing the powers of the European Union.” The words “not enthusiastic” were replaced by the word “opposed”.

⁴ See also references to this definition in: Harmsen/Spiering 2004; Fuchs/Roger/Magni-Berton 2009; Kopecký/Mudde 2002; Adam et al. 2013; Leconte 2010; Brack/Startin 2015; Hooghe/Marks 2007; Mudde 2012

of uncertainty. It is also used because it is more inclusive. All opponents of the EU are, at least, scepticals, but not all sceptics are opponents.” (Taggart 1998:366)

With regard to his definition, it may be observed that his focus lies on the national party systems, and he uses the term “as a way of describing and highlighting transformations in West European party systems.” (Taggart 1998:364) He directly bridges the phenomenon of Euroscepticism with the margins of the political spectrum, by assuming that more populist parties tend to have these stances. As the title of Taggart’s study (1998) already introduced, this phenomenon forms an integral part of the politics of opposition and could be seen as a “touchstone of dissent”. In addition, it should be strongly underlined, particularly in the context of the thesis’ research question, that Taggart lays the emphasis on the fact that not all “sceptics are opponents”.⁵ (1998:366)

Nevertheless, as it is very common in scientific discussion, Taggart’s approach of the definition was heavily criticized. As far as the theories by the School of North Carolina are concerned, its representatives Kopecký and Mudde (2002) formulated serious criticism concerning Taggart’s theories. These critical standpoints, however, will be later taken into consideration in the examination of the different types of Euroscepticism. Also, it is questioned whether his definition might be too broad as it does not refer to different types of Euroscepticism (cf. Fuchs/Magni-Berton/Roger 2009:20).

To sum up, this theoretical part will take the criticism into consideration, will therefore focus on two different concepts, the approaches provided by Taggart and Szczerbiak (2002/2003) and Kopecký and Mudde (2002), and will provide typologies that can afterwards act as a useful tool regarding the analysis of mainstream political parties.⁶

2.2 Typology

As the aim of the theoretical part of the thesis is to give a brief overview of the subject area of Euroscepticism, this part will focus on two main approaches. Since the conceptualization of Taggart and Szczerbiak (2000/2002/2003/2008/2013) can be declared as the most frequently

⁵ See also: Oberkirch/Schild 2010:10

⁶ However, it should not be forgotten, that there exist various attempts to define the subject of Euroscepticism. According to the definition of Fuchs/Magni-Berton/Roger “the EU may be referred to as an attitudinal object, that can be evaluated from three perspectives: first, the principles of the EU referring to economic or political integration; second the contemporary political system of the EU referring to its special institutionalization and third, the evaluation of the political system on the basis of basic standards or reasons. The evaluations can be located somewhere on a continuum between very positive to very negative dispositions towards the three aspects of the EU and the results of these evaluations can be called principled support, generalized support and reasoned support. Euroscepticism is a term which merely denotes the negative evaluations of the EU with regards to these three perspectives.” (cited after Siegers 2009:116)

used due to its recognition, the application of their typology of *hard and soft Euroscepticism* seems adequate. Furthermore, as their concept has been redefined and adapted after having taken into consideration the criticism of Kopecký and Mudde (2002), it appears more than relevant to also include their approaches of *diffuse and specific support* for European integration. These different concepts will, nonetheless, both form the appropriate basis for the upcoming analysis. Euroscepticism cannot be seen unilaterally; hence the two concepts will form a combined framework for detecting the phenomenon in the Dutch mainstream political party VVD.

2.2.1 Hard vs. Soft Euroscepticism by Taggart and Szczerbiak

In order to not only address the issue of Western political party systems, but also those of Central and Eastern systems, Taggart and Szczerbiak (2002:7) offered an extended conceptualization of Euroscepticism, that distinguishes between hard and soft Euroscepticism. This distinction led to a more specific definition of Euroscepticism. However, a high degree of criticism expressed by Kopecký and Mudde (2002) provoked Taggart and Szczerbiak (2003) to a redefinition of these concepts. At this point, it needs to be emphasized that definitions of party-based Euroscepticism should not be used “over-inclusively”. The awareness of laying the focus on “party attitudes towards European integration through the EU in principle and the EU’s current or future trajectory” needs to be constantly present. (Szczerbiak/Taggart 2003:5) The first definition attempt of “hard Euroscepticism” was where

“there is a principled opposition to the EU and European integration and therefore can be seen in parties who think that their countries should withdraw from membership, or whose policies towards the EU are tantamount to being opposed to the whole project of European integration as it is currently conceived.” (Taggart/Szczerbiak 2002:7)

There exist two methods in order to examine the extent of ‘hard Euroscepticism’ in political parties: Firstly, the analysis of whether the party is “a single issue anti-EU party” or secondly asks for a “fundamental re-casting of the terms on which their country is an EU member” due to the incompatibility with the current development of the EU. To sum up, hard Euroscepticism is related to envisioning the EU as a “previously identified ‘enemy’”. (Taggart/Szczerbiak 2002:7f.) Whereas on the other hand, “soft Euroscepticism” was formerly defined as a phenomenon

“where there is NOT a principled objection to European integration or EU membership but where concerns on one (or a number) of policy areas lead to the expression of qualified opposition to the EU, or where there is a sense that ‘national interest’ is currently at odds with the EU’s trajectory.” (Taggart/Szczerbiak 2002:7)

Contrary to hard Euroscepticism, soft Euroscepticism can be regarded as the opposition of contradictory “interests, policies or issues”, rather than the mere principled opposition towards European integration as such. (Taggart/Szczerbiak 2002:8) Thus, a “contingent (Soft) Euroscepticism” can be seen as weaker type compared to the “principled (Hard) opposition to European integration”. (Szczerbiak/Taggart 2003:6)

Even though Taggart and Szczerbiak expressed the warning of using the term Euroscepticism too broadly, they were accused of it when including in their definition of party-based Euroscepticism “a sense that national interest is at odds with the EU’s current trajectory”. (Szczerbiak/Taggart 2003:12) Consequently, they distanced from defining a party as Eurosceptic if simply national interests differing to those of the EU. In addition, with regard to Kopecký’s and Mudde’s criticism towards the definition of soft Euroscepticism as being too vast, they reformulated their opinion by stating that opposition against one or two EU policy areas seems truly not sufficient to declare a party as being Eurosceptic (cf. Szczerbiak/Taggart 2003:13). By taking into account the publicly-formulated criticism, a redefinition of their concepts of hard and soft Euroscepticism was published. Therefore, the focus in their reformulation was laid on “the importance of party attitudes towards the *EU integration project* rather than *EU membership* as key”. (Szczerbiak/Taggart 2008:3)

As a result, the redefinition of the conceptualization of hard and soft Euroscepticism by Taggart and Szczerbiak is formulated as:

“being based on either *principled* opposition to the project of European integration as embodied in the EU; in other words, based on the ceding or transfer of powers to supranational institution such as the EU (Hard); and opposition to the EU’s current or future planned trajectory based on the *further* extension of competencies that the EU is planning to make (Soft).” (Szczerbiak/Taggart 2008:3)

To conclude, as their conceptualization emphasizes, one has to pay attention avoiding a specific over-inclusiveness when speaking of party-based Euroscepticism. The two different types of hard and soft Euroscepticism are, nevertheless, widely recognized and form the basis of intensive research.⁷

⁷ See also references in: Harmsen/Spiering 2004; Fuchs/Roger/Magni-Berton 2009; Kopecký/Mudde 2002; Adam et al. 2013; Leconte 2010; Brack/Startin 2015; Hooghe/Marks 2007; Mudde 2012

2.2.2 Diffuse and Specific Support of European Integration by Kopecký and Mudde

		Support for European Integration	
		Europhile	Europhobe
Support for EU	EU-optimist	Euroenthusiasts	Europragmatists
	EU-pessimist	Eurosceptics	Eurorejects

Figure 1 Typology of party positions in Europe (Kopecký/Mudde 2002:303)

The concept of hard and soft Euroscepticism was heavily criticized by Kopecký and Mudde (2002). In order to summarize the four detected weaknesses, it is first argued that the definition of soft Euroscepticism seems too broad, justified by the fact that “every disagreement with any policy decision of the EU can be included”. Second, the distinction between hard and soft appears “blurred”. Third, the used criteria in order to identify the connection or the separation of the two types inaccurately, as it might be too difficult to detect their specific difference. Fourth, the vague or not even clearly existent distinction between the ideas of the European integration and those of the European Union is criticized (cf. Kopecký /Mudde 2002:300). Thus, the most frequent criticism relates to the wrong definition of the term Euroscepticism and the possible resulting over- and underestimation of this phenomenon:

“As a result, the term ‘Euroscepticism’ is, in our view wrongly, ascribed to parties and ideologies that are in essence pro-European as well as to those that are outright anti-European. In practice, this may result in over- and underestimation of the strength of the phenomenon in any (party) political system and lead us to see either more or less Euroscepticism than there actually is.” (Kopecký/Mudde 2002:300)

Kopecký and Mudde (2002), in contrast to Taggart and Szczerbiak propose another typology of Euroscepticism. A “less inclusively, yet more precisely” definition of Euroscepticism, should mark the difference in the conceptualizations. While the focus of interest similarly lies on Euroscepticism in political parties and party systems, their conceptualization refers to theories of Easton (1965)⁸. In analogy to him, it is generally differentiated between diffuse

⁸ Leconte (2010:249) refers to Easton more precisely when attempting to explain diffuse and specific support: “According to David Easton, political regimes can elicit two types of support: specific support and diffuse support. Whereas specific support refers to satisfaction with specific policies or with the general performance of incumbent governments (the outputs of the system), diffuse support relates to general support for the political regime. Diffuse support, especially, is crucial to the endurance of a regime since it constitutes ‘a reservoir of favourable attitudes ... that helps members to accept or tolerate outputs to which they are opposed’. When diffuse support is secured, a significant variation in specific support can occur, without endangering general attachment to the political system. Conversely, in the absence of diffuse support, positive outputs or performance will not easily translate into increased support for the political regime.”

and specific support for European integration. More precisely, by *diffuse* support the “support for the general *ideas* of European integration that underlie the EU” is meant, in contrast to a *specific* support that is defined as “support for the general practice of European integration; that is, the EU as it is and as it is developing.” (Kopecký/Mudde 2002:300) In other words, their two-dimensional typology distinguishes between the support for European integration, referred to as diffuse support and on the other hand between the support for the European Union, nominated as specific support (cf. Kopecký/Mudde 2002:303). The first dimension (support for European Integration), could be seen as the more ideological dimension and separates Europhiles from Europhobes. Whereas the second dimension (support for the EU) can rather be regarded as the strategical dimension and it is distinguished between EU-optimists and EU-pessimists. If these two dimensions would be transformed into a four-dimensional diagram, the result would present four idealistic categories in which political parties could be placed (cf. Kopecký/Mudde 2002:301ff.; Fuchs/Magni-Berton/Roger 2009:6; Oberkirch/Schild 2010:11; Harmsen/Spiering 2004:19).

To begin with the first axis, namely the support for European Integration, *Europhiles* “believe in the key ideas of European integration underlying the EU”. Acknowledging the “political” and the “economic” element of the EU, regardless of the definition or realization concerning European integration. Hence, the term Europhile includes convictions of European integrations either being a “project of creating a new supranational state” or being purely economical connoted and thinking of a free trade zone.⁹

In contrast, *Europhobes*, placed on the same axis, “do not support (and often even oppose) the general ideas of European integration underlying the EU.” They are characterized by their belief that European integration is either incompatible with their positions as nationalists, socialists or isolationists or because they simply doubt the feasibility of it between the European states. (Kopecký/Mudde 2002: 301)

As far as the second axis is concerned, *EU-optimists* have an obviously positive attitude toward the current construct and development of the EU. Satisfaction about the EU’s political, institutional and social architecture and the way it is functioning, there might be two reasons for this position. Kopecký and Mudde, however, emphasize that “a critical attitude towards a certain EU policy does not in itself disqualify a party from being an EU-optimist. As soon as the party accepts the current EU overall, it is included in this category” (2002:302).

⁹ Kopecký and Mudde (2002:301) examine Jean Monnet, Margret Thatcher and Charles de Gaulle as being Europhiles.

EU-pessimists are either not supportive towards the current form of the EU or pessimistic about the future development, due to the fact that it drifts too far away from its founding ideas. EU-pessimists are, nevertheless, not automatically opposing the EU membership (cf. *ibid*).

The four-dimensional graphic of Kopecký and Mudde (2002:302ff.) identifies four different “ideal-type categories of party positions on Europe”: Euroenthusiasts, Eurosceptics, Eurorejects and Europragmatists. These four types form the essence of Kopecký’s and Mudde’s (2002) conceptualization. *Euroenthusiasts* are “parties or groups that combine Europhile and EU-optimist positions. Such groups support the general ideas of European integration and believe that the EU is or will soon become the institutionalization of these ideas.” *Eurosceptics* “combine Europhile and EU-pessimist positions. They support the general ideas of European integration, but are pessimistic about the EU’s current and/or future reflection of these ideas.” The combination of a Europhobe and an EU-pessimistic position leads to the type of a *Euroject*, who “subscribe neither to the ideas underlying the process of European integration nor to the EU.” As a fourth type, the *Europragmatist* are a composition of Europhobe and EU-optimist positions. “They do not support the general ideas of European integration underlying the EU, nor do they necessarily oppose them, yet they do support the EU.” If a party is not prejudiced by a significantly ideological opinion towards European integration or simply considers due to their pragmatism that the EU could be lucrative for their own country, the EU will be positively regarded. (Kopecký/Mudde 2002:304)

In conclusion, the typology of Taggart and Szczerbiak (2002/2003/2008) and Kopecký and Mudde (2002) form a suitable theoretical framework for the following analysis. However, it should not be forgotten, that Kopecký’s and Mudde’s (2002) conceptualization was also, unquestionably, confronted with heavy criticism. Nevertheless, the combination of both concepts, as they slightly overlap to a certain extent, will be used as helpful tools in order to find answers to the thesis’ research questions.

2.3 Euroscepticism among Mainstream Political Parties

In the scope of scientific and political discussion, it is argued that the Eurozone crisis, thus an economic and political crisis, was a trigger in terms of the outbreak and furthermore the increase of Euroscepticism among mainstream political parties (cf. Brack/Startin 2015:242; Taggart/Szczerbiak 2013:17). In addition, it became steadily “more legitimate and salient (and in many ways less contested) across Europe as a whole” and could more precisely be noticed

by the “increase in Eurosceptic rhetoric among traditionally pro-EU mainstream parties.” (Brack/Startin 2015:240) Even though the main focus of interest lies clearly on the relation between Euroscepticism and the marginal party systems (cf. Vasilopoulou 2013; Leconte 2010), it is common that “Euroscepticism has in recent years increasingly moved from the margins to the mainstream”. (Brack/Startin 2015:242) Thus, the consideration of Euroscepticism mostly being related to radical parties is relatively outdated due to the fact that the political party scenery has significantly changed over the years. Consequently, it should not be neglected that mainstream parties can also comprise Eurosceptic attitudes (cf. Brack/Startin 2015; Taggart/Szczerbiak 2013; Vasilopoulou 2013; Leconte 2010; Adam et al. 2013).

In regard to the suitable framework for this thesis, the following concepts are general theories to make an attempt to explain the existence of Euroscepticism in party systems as such. There is no distinction between either the marginal or mainstream parties. To put it differently, these concepts are therefore not specifically tailored to the analysis of only mainstream parties.

2.3.1 Party-based Euroscepticism

To begin with, it must be outlined once more that this thesis focuses on the field of study of Euroscepticism that examines actors of the macro level, in fact political parties (cf. Oberkirch/Schild 2010:14). In general, political parties as important actors can be considered as one of the main interests of current research (cf. Oberkirch/Schild 2010:42; Hooghe/Marks 2007:120).

Taggart (1998:363ff.) argues that with the acceleration of European integration, the “opposition to the European Union (EU) in party systems across Western Europe” has risen. With regard to the European issue as such, it could be stated that the phenomenon of Euroscepticism in party systems is generally linked to their position of their political party. As Euroscepticism is undoubtedly related to the subject of European integration, the examination of the institutional context is essential to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon of Euroscepticism. This context is partly composed of the “domestic context of party systems” and of the “institutional development of the EU and the more general process of European integration.” (ibid: 385)

Differences between party-based Euroscepticism can be justified by their “differences in patterns of party competition”. In that sense, Euroscepticism might be seen as “the politics of

opposition”. (Sitter 2002:5) More precisely the politics of opposition could be described as follows:

“In short, the central point is that the various bases for Euro-scepticism are translated into party competition in the context of the party system, i.e. the patterned interaction between parties. Euro-scepticism is not a single coherent stance on the EU as a polity, but rather a term that covers a multitude of ideological and interest-driven stances. The scope for party-based Euro-scepticism is shaped by a combination of longer term party strategy and shorter term tactical pressures – and these variables are the product of the politics of opposition.”¹⁰ (Sitter 2001:22)

Taggart (1998:367ff.) argues that political parties “can be classified in relation to their party system”. With view to Euroscepticism in political parties, four different forms can be manifested and used. First, the *single issue Eurosceptical parties*¹¹, which are directly determined by their opposition to European integration. Their simple existence is driven by the mobilization of electors on the European issue. However, because of their form the “development into or out of parties” resulting impact on party systems, Taggart considers this form as “party-based opposition”. Second, the *protest based parties with Euroscepticism*¹² are not part of the former or current established government parties. In general, these parties seek to extend their protest on the national political level to the EU-level. Third, the *established parties with Eurosceptical position* in contrast, and as the name already reveals, refer to an established party (as formerly being or current governmental party) where the majority holds a Eurosceptical opinion. The last and fourth form of Euroscepticism in political parties is called *Eurosceptical factions*. In terms of that form, it could be stressed that only a specific faction in a political party refers to as being Eurosceptic, whereas the general orientation of the party is viewed as generally pro-integrationist. (Taggart 1998:368f.)

This concept had been adapted and deepened in scientific cooperation with Szczerbiak (2008:349f.). The main focus of research had been laid on three different types of political discourses in political parties about the European Union. Here, the first type “*systems of limited contestation*” included governing party systems, or parties that would have the possibility to do so, which had no intention to see the subject of European integration as an issue as such. Thus, there exists a general consent with regard to the European integration. However, this does not directly implicit the general absence of Euroscepticism, that is perhaps

¹⁰ Here, it should be underlined that ideology and strategy form an important aspect with view to the determination of causes of party-based Euroscepticism. This issue, however, will be addressed in chapter 2.3.2 Causes of Euroscepticism in Party Systems more specifically.

¹¹ “The People’s Movement Against the EC-Union in Denmark, Philippe de Villiers candidacy for the French presidency in 1995, and Manfred Brunner’s Free Citizen’s Alliance party in Germany” are defined as single issue Eurosceptical parties. (cf. Taggart 1998: 368)

¹² Protest based parties with Euroscepticism could be according to Taggart (1998:368) the Swedish Green Party and the French Communist Party.

only existent to a limited extent in smaller parties. The second type, the parties of “*systems of open contestation*”, is defined by the obvious Eurosceptic attitude. The expression of Eurosceptic rhetoric in a political discourse is thus not just a simple instrument of ‘politics of opposition’ (cf. Sitter 2001:22), but more of an important factor of the political party contest. And last but not least, the third type of “*systems of constrained contestation*” is composed by party systems where the political discourse of the issue of Euroscepticism is existent, nonetheless just of little relevance (cf. Taggart/Szczerbiak 2008: 349f.; Oberkirch/Schild 2010: 46f.).

2.3.2 Causes of Euroscepticism in National Party Systems

Since different definition attempts and two concepts of Euroscepticism have already been clarified, this section will now form the concluding part of the theory. How can the relation between Euroscepticism and political parties be explained? As it has been shown, that the main aspect focuses on the issue of the European integration, it is of great interest what causes Euroscepticism in a national party system. First, the main focus was lied on the examination of Western European party systems (cf. Taggart 1998), but the focus of research was soon extended to national party systems of the EU member and candidate states (cf. Taggart/Szczerbiak 2002:9). It is widely agreed on the fact that two factors can be differentiated when referring to political parties’ attitude concerning European integration, which is firstly parties’ strategy and secondly, parties general ideology (cf. Adam et al. 2013; Topaloff 2012; Leconte 2010; Kopecký/Mudde 2002; Szczerbiak/Taggart 2003/2008).

“On the one hand, Euroskepticism describes parties’ general ideological position. On the other hand, it is also used to describe a concrete contestatory political discourse. These two concepts differ fundamentally, as a party’s broad underlying ideological position may be different from what this party chooses to publicly advance in a specific campaign. A party might be Euroskeptic in its fundamental position, but for strategic reasons, might decide not to voice this skepticism in the context of an election campaign. In contrast, there may be mainstream parties with pro-EU positions that criticize EU integration for specific matters in the context of a specific campaign. Following this reasoning, we distinguish between a party’s general ideological position and its strategic campaign communication.” (Adam et al. 2013:80)

In the light that these two factors could differ enormously in their context, it should be more closely investigated where exactly the distinction can be made and if there exist possible overlaps regarding the following practical part of this thesis.

2.3.2.1 Ideology

Is it possible, that ideology plays the main role in explaining a party's position towards European integration? Once again, this factor means the general ideology of a party position that is therefore directly linked to its identity and political orientation (cf. Adam et al 2013:80; Leconte 2010:106).

Kopecký and Mudde (2002:319f.) argue in favor of this assumption, by justifying their opinion when stating that the complex interrelation between ideology and strategy is directly related to the multi-layered nature of the concept of Euroscepticism, outlined in their typology. More precisely, it is asserted that the party position can only be amended on the vertical dimension, being the dimension that stands for the support for the EU. In other words, Euroenthusiasts could become Eurosceptics and vice versa, but this principle may not be applied to the horizontal dimension, which concerns the support for European integration. Thus, it might be assumed that this is the evidence of ideology being the determining factor for a "party's support for the ideas underlying the process of European integration, whereas strategy can play an important role in explaining a party's support for the EU." (Kopecký/Mudde 2002:319f.) In order to strengthen their finding, it is emphasized that with regard to the "congruence between individual party positions and membership in party families", if a change would be possible on the dimension concerning the support for European integration, it must be assumed that all parties of the same party family would automatically have the same position on this specific dimension. (Kopecký/Mudde 2002:320)¹³ "In short, the party-political affiliation determines the parties' position towards the process of European integration, rather than the national political context of the party system as far as Euroscepticism is concerned."¹⁴ (Oberkirch/Schild 2010:43)

However, it should not be ignored that Kopecký and Mudde (2002:320) also remark the importance of strategy when arguing "that differences in position may be attributed to strategic considerations, most notably related to being in government or opposition."

¹³ See also Hellström (2008: 189), who shares the opinion that the stances of political parties on European integration „are largely determined by their ideology” by measuring “the locations of the parties within party families and their general orientation along the left/right ideological continuum.” He underlines the existing connection between marginal parties with their ideological position and Euroscepticism. However, he further relativize that this phenomenon has changed over time and that “the influence of ideology has diminished, as most parties have adopted more favourable positions towards the European project over time.” (Hellström 2008:189)

¹⁴ Translated by the author from German into English

2.3.2.2 Strategy

In contrast to the factor of ideology, strategy in relation to government is assumed to play a crucial role in terms of the causality of Euroscepticism in party systems. This factor describes Euroscepticism resulting out of strategic actions (cf. Sitter 2002; Szczerbiak/Taggart 2003/2008; Topaloff 2012; Leconte 2010).

At this point, one can argue that the theory can be again connected to its beginning. It might be claimed that political parties use the issues of European integration in the scope of party competition and this, as a result, can be adapted to other parties' strategies. This implies that due to the changing political environment a continuous adjustment of strategies is taking place (cf. Sitter 2002: 5). Sitter (2002) comes, thus, to the conclusion that

“party-based Euro-scepticism is therefore a product of parties' strategic choices in the light of survival, ideology, organization and the pursuit of office. This means that it cannot be understood outside the context of the party system, i.e. patterned interaction between political parties that compete for office or to influence policy.” (Sitter 2002: 23)

In addition to Sitter (2002), Taggart and Szczerbiak (2003/2008) are commonly associated with the theory that a parties' strategy determines Euroscepticism. Even though it has been noted that a Eurosceptic tendency may stand in relation to a parties' ideological background, this assumption has been relativized by their empirical findings. “A linear relationship between Euroscepticism and left and right wing location on the political spectrum” had not been able to be confirmed. However, a predisposition for Eurosceptic stances of marginal parties or parties of rather extreme politics could be determined. (Szczerbiak/Taggart 2003:17f.)

Nonetheless, it has to be underlined that ideology and strategy as factors for the cause of Euroscepticism are closely interrelated and should not be observed separately (cf. Szczerbiak/Taggart 2003:21; Szczerbiak/Taggart 2008:13; Leconte 2010:111). More precisely, the determination of a parties' position towards European integration could be summarized as follows:

“The relative importance of two causal factors depends on whether it is a more ideological, value-based, goal-oriented party or a more pragmatic, interest-based office-seeking party. Whether or not (and to what extent) a party uses the issue of Europe in party competition depends on the party's electoral strategy and coalition-formation and government participation tactics.”¹⁵ (Szczerbiak/Taggart 2003: 21)

¹⁵ Taggart and Szczerbiak go even further and draw the line to their theory of the “Euro-contestation”. These same „causal mechanisms“ could be applied when determine the „rhetoric of Euro-contestation“ of a political party. Here, the focus lies on the “*problematization* of European integration”. In other words it is related to the

It can be concluded, after having presented the factors that cause Euroscepticism, namely ideology and strategy, the existence of an interrelation or even an overlap needs to be highlighted. Thus, in order to identify the parties' position towards European integration, these factors should not be seen separately. Instead, the combination of these two variables should be used to declare a party's position on European integration. Also, one should not forget that the national context plays also a crucial role as far as the influence of these factors is concerned. (Leconte 2010:111)

In order to conclude the theoretical section and to further proceed with the practical part, a short overview of the most important aspects will be presented. The previous pages will serve as an adequately compact theory that can be furthermore applied to the party program of the Dutch People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie – VVD). First, it has been examined that there exist no general definition of Euroscepticism as such, however, in scientific fields it is widely agreed on Taggart's (1998) attempt. Second, as far as different types of Euroscepticism are concerned, the concepts of Taggart and Szczerbiak (2002) and these of Kopecký and Mudde (2002) form the main focus of interest. The ideas behind hard and soft Euroscepticism (Szczerbiak/Taggart 2003) and, in contrast, diffuse and specific support including four ideal types, namely Europhiles, Europhobes, EU-optimists and EU-pessimists (Kopecký/Mudde 2002) will be taken into account for the following analysis. Third, as Euroscepticism is no fringe phenomenon anymore and obviously moved from the margins to the mainstream over the years, it should be underlined that political parties as actors of Euroscepticism require sufficient attention (cf. Brack/Startin 2015; Taggart/Szczerbiak 2013; Vasilopoulou 2013; Leconte 2010; Adam et al. 2013). In view of that, Taggart (1998) proposes four different types of political parties that are related to Euroscepticism: Single issue Eurosceptical parties, protest based parties with Euroscepticism, established parties with Eurosceptical position, eurosceptical factions. To round this conceptualization up, the causality of party-based Euroscepticism needs to be stressed. As far as the clarification of parties' position on European integration is concerned, the examination of the interrelation between the factor of ideology as well as of strategy seems to be essential.

use of the critical rhetoric of a party against the EU that however, at the same time holds a principled supportive opinion concerning EU integration or the EU's integrationist direction in general. (Szczerbiak/Taggart 2008:4)

All in all, these theories are mostly overlapping or interrelated to a certain degree. Thus, there exists no specific theory for an adequate analysis of party systems in general. However, the different approaches will be used in parallel in order to fully investigate whether the chosen mainstream political party (VVD) presents Eurosceptical stances. With the theory on Euroscepticism being summarized, it can now be moved forward to the practical part of the thesis.

3. Hidden Euroscepticism in the Netherlands?

Due to the extensive media coverage lately, the Dutch mainstream political party “People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy” is presented as being pro-European and preventing the Netherlands from leaving the European Union. With specific regard to the center of party competition, the issue of Euroscepticism was undisputedly present, as one party fought for a “Nexit”, in other words for the Netherlands to leave the European Union. In addition, as the general rise of Euroscepticism in political parties can be detected, it is now of major importance in this part of the thesis to find out to what extent these stances could be found in the VVD. Therefore, the context and more precisely the framework of this mainstream political party needs to be created and examined.

3.1 Background Information of the VVD

The Netherlands, with its population of 17 million people, is a constitutional Monarchy with a parliamentary political system. Willem Alexander, King of the Netherlands, as the head of state having specific executive and legislative rights, forms together with the council of ministers the Dutch government. The parliament and the crown, also called the House of Representatives, holds all the legislative power.¹⁶ The House of Representatives is furthermore divided into the first chamber (the Senate), with 75 seats representing the Dutch provinces, and into the second chamber consisting of 150 seats for elected representatives. To be more precise, after the last provincial elections of 2015 the VVD holds the most seats (13) in the first chamber, followed by the PvdA¹⁷ (8) and the CDA¹⁸ (12). As far as the Senate, the second chamber is concerned, after the recently held national elections in March 2017 the

¹⁶ As far as the crown is concerned, the most important organ is the council of state, consisting of 28 members where the chairperson is the king, assisted by a vice president. All legislative acts must be approved by the council before transferring it to the parliament. In addition, this council of state is the highest administrative court of the country (cf. Auswärtiges Amt 2017)

¹⁷ Partij van de Arbeid (Labour Party)

¹⁸ Christen-Democratisch Appèl (Christian Democratic Appeal)

VVD holds 33 seats, directly followed by the PVV¹⁹ with 20 and the CDA representing 19 (cf. Wilp 2012:79ff.; Die Bundesregierung 2017; Auswärtiges Amt 2017 ; Eerste Kamer der Staten-Generaal 2017; Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal 2017). With that being said, the parliament is usually composed by a coalition government consisting of a number of parties, that has, however, not been established yet. Nevertheless, due to the election's outcome, it is envisaged to form under Mark Rutte, the prime minister, a broad coalition government that is composed by the VVD, CDA, D66²⁰ and ChristenUnie²¹ (cf. Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal 2017).

As far as political parties in the Netherlands are concerned, there exists a difference between the political head²² (“politieke leider”) and the party's chairperson²³ (“partijvoorzitter”). Mark Rutte, the political head of VVD, represents not only the party as such but also functions as the negotiator and coordinator for his party, in order to secure the common political agreement by giving general guidelines. In general, he as the political head was also the top candidate during times of elections. Eric Wetzels in contrast, the current chairperson of VVD, has less influence in the party. He does not own an official political position, in other words he was not directly elected, but he is the party's chairman in the second chamber in general, and functions furthermore as minister, as the VVD is the governing party at present (cf. Wilp 2012: 197; Parlement 2017).

With specific regard to the keystone of politics of the Dutch mainstream party VVD, which is the party having the most votes at present, their aim is to ensure a secure and fair society, where everyone should have the chance to live up to their full potential. Enforcing low taxes, supporting entrepreneurship, ensuring security, investing in national defense in NATO and guaranteeing education – these are only four main goals the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy wants to reach. However, other topics are also of great interest such as the economy, where the need of a liberal market and the trust in citizen's independence is envisaged. In addition, the importance of social matters, such as a well-functioning welfare system, is strongly underlined. It should not be forgotten, that the freedom of the media, the respectful coexistence of different religions (even though the party is rather neutral towards religion), the free emancipation of people (especially of minorities, homosexuals or

¹⁹ Partij voor de Vrijheid (Party for Freedom)

²⁰ Democraten 66 (Democrats 66)

²¹ Christen Union (Christian Union)

²² Translated by the author

²³ Ibid.

transsexuals) and the safeguarding of private sphere are included into the VVD's political persuasions. In terms of the attitude towards the European Union, the VVD is generally declared as being pro-European, most notably because of the advantages of the EU's internal market (cf. VVD 2017; Hoppe 2015; Parlement 2017)

3.1.1 Development of the Party

The VVD had originally been developed in 1948 as a merged successor party of the liberal Partij van de Vrijheid (PvdV) and the Comité-Oud²⁴. As some politicians could not fully relate to the principles of these parties, it was decided to create a new form of liberalism and to slightly change the political direction. During that time, Dirk Stikker, one of the founding members of the PvdV, Pieter Oud, former member of the Vrijzinnig-Democratische Bond (VDB)²⁵ and Henk Korthals were highly involved in establishing the new political party VVD as such and in deciding the political orientation. Thus, Peter Oud was in the years 1949-1963 not only the political leader of the party but also the party's chairperson (cf. Wilp 2012:256f.; Parlement 2017). As far as the party's origins are concerned, it can be examined that the VVD had been a party of the Dutch upper-class throughout the first two decades. It was not only consisting of better situated people such as advocates, doctors or entrepreneurs with medium-sized companies but also of directors, CEOs of companies or successful office workers were members (cf. Parlement 2017).

Besides the fact that the party's success, under the lead of Oud, was in the first twenty years not as noteworthy as hoped, there had been quite a high number of internal conflicts. Thus, it was time for a change of plans, for better decisions including another strategy and for a complete improvement of the VVD's political structure itself. With a new young and charismatic political leader, namely Hans Wiegel, the VVD succeeded in addressing also another class of voters, mostly the skilled workers of the middle-class. On this ground he managed to gain a higher number of voters. His upswing could be explained by the subjects that he had addressed. Although critics related his approach and persuasions to a more populist way of leading, the broad mass was entrained. Main subjects in the VVD included for instance the reducing of the power of the government and with that along the cutting of public expenditure (cf. Wilp 2012: 258). In 1977 the VVD could not only record a rise in voters but also an enormous increase of numbers concerning its members that had almost tripled in ten

²⁴ See also: Comité-Oud 2017

²⁵ See also: Vrijzinnig-Democratische Bond (VDB) 2017

years. In short, in the seventies the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy expanded their electorate, opened it also for other classes of society next to the Dutch upper-class and defended their political standpoints against the labor union and PvdA. Successor of Wiegel was Ed Nijpels, who was a 32-year-old delegate of the VVD. Due to the permanent success of the VVD, the party managed to be part of the Lubbers cabinets I and II until 1989, where important political decisions with regard to economical and financial measures for the Netherlands had been made (cf. *ibid*: 259f.).

As it is the natural circle of politics, the VVD could not hold on to their success due to the uprising Christian Democratic Appeal. This was not only caused by the CDA's general political upswing but also by internal conflicts, inner political discrepancies and inconsistencies. These circumstances let the VVD drift to the opposition. All in all the 1980s had been a turbulent decade that was marked by the loss of voters, members and political strength (cf. *ibid*: 261).

After this time of crisis, the VVD got a foothold again. In the beginning of the 1990s, Frits Bolkenstein, former VVD delegate, secretary of state of the ministry of economic affairs and minister for national defense, turned to be the next political leader of the party. In fact, his controversial and polarizing attitude towards the direction of the Dutch government seemed to help to gain voters. The opposition to the broad opinion of a multi-cultural society, which was directly linked with the asylum politic of the former government, the reduction of immigration, the pursuing of national interests in terms of the Dutch foreign policy had only been some ways to influence the political discourse. As can be noticed, Frits Bolkenstein changed and furthermore shaped the political appearance and orientation of the VVD extensively. His controversial way of addressing topics such as migration or integration was on the one hand obviously confronted by a great deal of criticism but on the other hand was, to a certain extent, well-received by the voters. However, from the year 1999 onwards he changed his position and functioned as EU commissioner (cf. *ibid*: 262ff.).

In the year of 2002, it was again time to change the political face and to decide on another strategy. The avoidance of controversies or discrepancies, in other words the coherent appearance as the VVD as such was focused on. However, this was not achieved, due to the fact that one of the party's members, Geert Wilders, rejected it entirely. He met with disapproval by trying to direct the VVD towards the right sphere of the political spectrum. His

believes and persuasions, as far as migration or integration were concerned, differed extremely to those of his party's colleagues. When the VVD expressed its opinion on the accession of Turkey to the EU, Geert Wilders took this conflict of interest as an "opportunity" to leave the party. The VVD separated from Wilders due to the extreme differences in interest and because it would harm the new face of the party. Wilders founded his own party called *Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV)* (cf. Wilp 2012:265; Hoppe 2015; Parlement 2017).

In 2006 the VVD needed to appoint a new political leader. The competitors had been Rita Verdonk, who was already minister of integration and immigration from the right political spectrum, and Mark Rutte, who was secretary of state and part of the left wing in contrast. Rutte turned out as the winner holding 51.5% of the votes. The year 2010 can be considered as a turning point for the VVD. The party managed to be the strongest, with holding 31 seats in parliament. The reason for this might be the global economic and financial crisis had been dealt as a trigger occurrence for the overall political change in Europe. The VVD was originally related to economic and financial topics; as a result, it was relatively probable that the voters sought to be guided by a strong party being experts on that level. In addition to that, Mark Rutte managed with his rhetorical competence to win the elections (cf. Wilp 2012:270; Hoppe 2015). Since 2010, the VVD is considered as a constant part of the coalition government (cf. VVD 2017).²⁶

To draw the line to the thesis' theory, and with regard to the phenomenon of Euroscepticism, it can be seen that the Dutch political support for the European Union was generally out of pragmatic intentions, yet it had still been regarded as "one of the most enthusiastic supporters of further integration amongst the European Union's member states" in the beginning. However, a notable change had been taken place in this country that is in the scientific world described as a "critical turn", where the former VVD political leader Frits Bolkenstein strongly expressed for the first time his critical opinion on the European issue in the 1990s. He is thus considered to be the first important Dutch politician who was called a "Eurosceptic". (Harmsen 2004: 99ff.; Oberkirch/Schild 2010: 61)²⁷ As a result, and with the background of Taggart's and Szczerbiak's concept of political discourses in party systems, the VVD could be described after this critical turn as part of the system of open contestation (cf.

²⁶ In current times it should not be forgotten to draw attention to women in the political world. As this historical background and development was not referring directly to it, the VVD was continuously determined to include women entirely and to also leading positions as ministers in the second chamber (cf. Parlement 2017).

²⁷ See also: Vollaard 2013

Taggart/Szczerbiak 2008: 349f.; Oberkirch/Schild 2010: 46f.). In addition to this connection of the thesis' theory to the practical part, it should also be underlined that the economic and political crisis, in fact the Eurozone crisis, is assumed to be a trigger for the intensification of Eurosceptical stances in mainstream political parties. Apparently, the VVD had a remarkable rise in votes since the outbreak of the crisis (cf. Brack/Startin 2015:242; Taggart/Szczerbiak 2013:17; Wilp 2012:270; Hoppe 2015). Thus, it is of great interest in the scope of this thesis to analyze whether this assumption of the increase of Eurosceptical stances might be also the case in the Dutch People's Party for Freedom and Democracy, as it forms an integral part of the Dutch government since 2010 (cf. VVD 2017).

3.1.2 European Policy since the 1990s

The following part seeks to critically examine the European policy of the VVD over the last decades. Due to the scope of this thesis, it will be only focused on the main issues, the crucial aspects behind exactly these and the therefore possibly related impact on Euroscepticism. It will concentrate on the 'critical turn' (Harmsen 2004), hence starting with the European policy in the nineties. The Netherlands were always interpreted as a supporter of the European Union until then and the relevant political parties used to have pro-European stances (cf. Harmsen 2004: 99). "The creation of the internal market had to be pursued without hesitation, the European Parliament had to be strengthened to democratize the European Communities (EC), and more supranationalism should foster efficient decision making." (Vollaard 2013) Nevertheless, this image has changed to a more critical way of handling their European policy. The pursuing of national interests was and is still one of the political parties' priorities. Thus, the political system plays a crucial role in terms of the rise of Euroscepticism among Europe (cf. Harmsen 2004; Oberkirch/Schild 2010: 61; Terry 2014). Therefore, significant areas of interest are the EU budget, the general frame of European Policy, the economy, the European Monetary Union (EMU), the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the EU enlargement.

The first issue that needs to be addressed in terms of the VVD's European policy is a financial one, namely the EU budget. The Netherlands had experienced a change from being a net recipient to developing to the biggest net-contributor in the Community seen in relation to their per capita income (cf. Oberkirch/Schild 2010:61; Harmsen 2004: 100; Vollaard 2013). On the grounds of this financial burden, in the mid-nineties the former political leader Frits

Bolkenstein openly expressed his displeasure and sought to reduce it. He was argued to be the first Eurosceptic politician, not only resulting out of his strong criticism directed against the European Union concerning the budgetary difficulties but also because of his critical stance on European issues as such (e.g. immigration). He was therefore an opponent of a federal Europe and focused on the national financial interests. The Community budget raised a great deal of controversy, thus, Gerrit Zalm the former VVD's Finance Minister pleaded for a budgetary reform favoring or in other words relieving the Netherlands as a net contributor (cf. *ibid*). Due to an "exceptionally high degree of interministerial co-ordination in aid of a clearly defined national policy goal", the VVD achieved to minimize the Community payments (cf. Werts 1999, cited after Harmsen 2004:100).

As far as the general frame of the European policy is concerned, the further related issues of the bilateral negotiation, the view towards a 'European identity' and the stance on the principle of subsidiarity should be highlighted. In the nineties, it could be said that the Netherlands in general, but also with specific regard to the VVD, preferred traditional bilateral contracts over the supranational ideas of European integration. However, it could be argued that the Dutch relation to supranationalism is a very complex one. "One must, however, be careful not to overstate the change of direction in Dutch European policy. On the one hand, the perception that a federalist idealism drove Dutch European policy was never sustainable on the record." (Koch 2001, cited after Harmsen 2003:101)

"Rather, Dutch policy is historically better characterized in terms of a pragmatic support for supranational institutional structures in areas where this corresponded to identifiable national interests. On the other hand, the recent development of a more critical approach must be understood as nuancing, rather than in any sense reversing a continuing, basic commitment to the integration process. As has often been said, European integration for the Netherlands remains like the weather – one may complain about it, but it must be accepted as an inevitable part of life." (Harmsen 2004: 101f.)

As Frits Bolkenstein doubted the existence of a 'European identity' as such, he was as a result, not surprisingly, against the idea of the European Union developing into a federal state:

"The EU shall never become a federation in the sense of the United States or of Germany. This is because there is not European people, no European language, no European legal system, and no European public opinion. And I also think that it is not desirable for the Netherlands, in a future European Union, to accept a position like that of the state of Bavaria in Germany." (Bolkenstein 1996, cited after Harmsen 2004:104)

Bearing this in mind, it was in the VVD's sense that the principle of subsidiarity was strictly respected. In other words, the "transfer of sovereignty to the European level" should be

generally kept to a minimum in the political parties. (Harmsen 2004:104) Now it might seem more evident why Frits Bolkenstein was supposed to be the first Dutch Eurosceptic politician. The next area that should be paid specific attention to is the Dutch economy. As the VVD has a strong relation to financial and economic matters due to their political position (cf. Wilp 2012:270; Hoppe 2015), it is argued that the economic dimension of the European Union had always been their main focus of interest (cf. Harmsen 2004; Vollaard 2013). Ever since Bolkenstein, for instance, set the impetus that the European Union should be reduced to exactly that aspect, in fact establishing that “unhindered internal market” (cf. Harmsen 2004:104), the VVD had not changed their view on the importance of economic matters (cf. Terry 2014; Vollaard 2013; Van Houten 2013). The market liberalization measures, the abandonment of trade barriers and the therefore necessary European Monetary Union (being another crucial aspect in the European policy) had been the main goals of Bolkenstein’s European policy: “The heart is the internal market, with hopefully European Monetary Union. For the rest you must work pragmatically. The focal point of the European Union is and shall remain economic.” (Bolkenstein 1996; cited after Harmsen 2004:104) With regard to the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), in short, the deepening of this concept was an important issue. However, again, intergovernmentalism should not be neglected and on that grounds member states should keep their veto rights (cf. Harmsen 2004:105).

As a last essential aspect of the European policy of the VVD, the issue of the EU enlargement should be further specifically examined. This issue lays on the same level as the EU budget in terms of the intensity of their political actions on the one hand, and the direct relation to this issue as such on the other (cf. Harmsen 2004:109ff.). With regard to the years 2002 and 2003, it can be seen that the EU enlargement subject had grown in importance, as it firstly had had an important impact on the election campaigns and secondly had been clearly addressed in the VVD’s party program (cf. Harmsen 2004:109; Verkiezingsprogramma 2002-2006; Verkiezingsprogramma 2003). The party program from the year 2002 underlined immediately the VVD’s position on the issue of the EU enlargement, and was perceived as rather Eurosceptic by the other member states (cf. Harmsen 2004):

“The aim of the European integration process is to establish peaceful, stable and democratic relations. For its achievement, economic and functional integration is needed. The framework consists of a supranational legal order and independent institutions.”²⁸ (Verkiezingsprogramma 2002-2006:47)

²⁸ Translated by the author from Dutch into English

The VVD held a very reserved position on the upcoming first Eastern enlargement due to its possible negative consequences, even though accession of new member states was desired as the VVD regarded the globalization process in terms of the economy and the therewith coming elimination of borders in a market as an advantage for the country (cf. Verkiezingsprogramma 2003:4).²⁹ It was just a question on how this procedure would take place (cf. Harmsen 109ff.). Firstly, the VVD fought for the maintenance of a well working stability pact. Secondly, in relation to that, a pre-enlargement reform of the EU budget was envisaged and more specifically called for publicly. The VVD expressed their concerns about the possible threatened credibility of the new member states (cf. Harmsen 2004:110ff.):

“The enlargement of the EU forms an important new dimension in the European integration process on the way to sustainable and stable relations on the European continent. New member states can access, after their governments have effectively adopted the EU-law and when their markets can cope with the openness of the internal market.”³⁰ (Verkiezingsprogramma 2002-2006: 47)

Therefore, in order to secure the stability and the credibility, the VVD pleaded for the strict application of the Copenhagen criteria (cf. Harmsen 2004: 112), and in order to help the country to achieve this goal, structural adjustment programs had been asked for (cf. Verkiezingsprogramma 2002-2006: 47). In order to draw the line now back to the opinion of a threatened stability pact, the VVD was a clear opponent of the so-called ‘big-bang’ enlargement, as it was feared the necessary criteria for the accession might not be fulfilled. In that sense the VVD pleaded for a strict compliance of accession principles. Also, it should not be forgotten that with the view on the EU budget, the Dutch feared to return being a crucial net contributor (cf. Harmsen 2004: 112):

“We are... for a solid position in Europe

The membership of the European Union offers the Netherlands a great deal of advantages. The European Union’s power must be limited to cases, where individual member states’ measures are less efficient. In terms of the European enlargement, the accession criteria need to be strictly applied in order to avoid possible negative consequences for accession countries, Europe and the Netherlands. The agreements concerning the financial policy in the member states (stability pact) must not be neglected. A missing solid base of European policy is a possible threat to the value of the Euro, the Dutch economy and the solidity of the pension provision.”³¹ (Verkiezingsprogramma 2003:4)

²⁹ **“We are for... a liberal world.** That is the reason why we want open borders in the European Union and free trade in the world. Trade boosts the economy and that is an advantage for everyone. Globalization is not a threat, but offers opportunities for the less privileged in the world.” (Verkiezingsprogramma 2003:4), Translated by the author from Dutch into English

³⁰ Translated by the author from Dutch into English

³¹ Translated by the author from Dutch into English

In conclusion, the European policy of the VVD with its 'critical turn' in the nineties seems to have changed from 'automatic' pro-integrationist to a "more explicit discourse of national interest, stressing the need for a careful assessment of the costs and benefits of further integration." (Harmsen 2004: 122)

In addition, due to the liberal-conservative political orientation of the VVD the main focus of interests focuses on the development of the economy, economic integration and measures that facilitate trade in general. Social and generally broad political issues on a European or supranational level tend to be usually opposed (cf. Marks/Wilson 2000:449, cited after Harmsen 2004:123). In other words, conservative and liberal political ideas are internally combined, where however, issues concerning law and order, immigration and integration are more conservative treated compared to the for instance social issues, speaking of the protection of rights for homo- or transsexual people. (Terry 2014)

Moreover, it can be argued that "the critical European discourse amongst the mainstream parties" has risen in general. This critical turn introduced with Frits Bolkenstein, might have integrated a more sceptic position in mainstream political parties and this might tend to be accepted to a certain extent (cf. Harmsen 2004:109;123f.). Harmsen (2004) links this phenomenon to the party competition and argues that this change of discourse did not affect it:

"The overall pattern is thus one of a discernible discursive shift which has not, however, been accompanied by significant changes in the terms of party competition. Dutch European discourse as a whole has become more critical, but the issue (of still comparatively low salience) has not been used as a mobilising theme by individual parties. This critical turn is, moreover, likely to be sustained over the coming years. Budgetary issues will continue to preoccupy Dutch governments on the European stage, as the country seeks to reduce the level of its net contribution." (Harmsen 2004:124)

With specific regard to his conclusion and relation to the EU budget issue, that had raised a great deal of controversy in the VVD and between the Dutch political parties as such, it will be more closely analyzed in the following part whether this topic is still paid attention to in the scope of the current VVD's party program.

As the VVD's party programs from the year 2002-2006 and 2003 showed, the attitude towards the European Union itself is generally supportive. The importance of a union including supporting members is strongly underlined in a globalized world. However, the national interests had not been forgotten and thus still envisaged in this view. Even though Frits Bolkenstein and Gerrit Zalm heavily expressed their critical stances on specific European issues, they did not oppose the euro, as it is an advantage for the European economy

and trade in general or the supranational decision-making if it were more sufficient (cf. Vollaard 2013). Another aspect that should be particularly emphasized in relation to the European policy is the VVD's Europragmatism. The question may be posed if their European policy reflects Eurosceptic stances or it can be argued to stand in direct relation to it. If so, it is necessary to determine to what extent this might be the case. These questions will be answered in the next part.

3.2 National Elections 2017

The Dutch have raised a great deal of media excitement because of the last national elections that took place on March 15th 2017, with an electoral turnout amounted to 81.9%. The VVD was again the strongest party with a percentage of 21.3% (cf. Parlement 2017). It could be argued that the Media was mainly focusing on one subject in relation to the polls, namely on the European Union. On the grounds of the rising right-wing populist attitudes, most notably led by the PVV's political leader Geert Wilders, and his resulting desire to leave the European Union, it was more a question of "Are the Dutch for or against the European Union?".³² This is why the following part will now concentrate on the VVD's party program, examining whether the theory of a general rise of Euroscepticism among mainstream political parties might be approved or if there is the need for a relativization. How can the theory be now put into practice? Can specific patterns be classified? Does the party program include Eurosceptic viewpoints? With specific regard to the VVD's European policy, an analysis will provide adequate information in order to come to a conclusion.

3.2.1 "Zeker Nederland 2017-2021"

To begin with, due to the limited scope of this thesis, a detailed analysis of the colors, pictures and design of the party program cannot be taken into consideration, thus the main focus of interest lies on the main thematic aspects. However, to serve the understanding of the analysis as such and to receive the full picture of the VVD as a mainstream political party, a brief description of the general design appears useful. First, the generalities will be examined, followed by the foreword and the party program's introduction and then the VVD's European policy will be subject to an analysis.

³² See also: Dobbert 2017; Cleppe 2017; Diemand/Kohrs 2017; O'Leary 2017

First of all, the colors blue, orange and white are omnipresent in terms of the design and the written text. The party relies on exactly these colors, representing the Dutch national colors. The front page shows a blonde woman on a bike in the streets of the Netherlands. This might be one of the most stereotypical Dutch pictures. With returning back to the colors again, it is detected that the national colors are also represented in this picture (e.g. the bike's wheels, the basket). As far as the title of the current party program is concerned: "Zeker Nederland", the statement of the VVD is rather obvious. By translating "zeker" into English as "of course, especially, certainly", the message might be clear. It can be interpreted that the VVD's main priority lies on the Netherlands itself.

When turning from the visual appearance of the party program to its content, it consists of 102 pages, where the VVD explains their viewpoints concerning seven different main areas: security and freedom, security and income, education and culture, medical care and health, mobility and public space, energy and climate and state and money. The first main area, namely security and freedom is the most comprehensive part with almost twice as many pages and subtopics.

Before the main part of the analysis, more specifically the analysis of the VVD's current European policy, the foreword and the instruction deserve a compact examination as well, due to the fact that they also provide relevant information that will in the end complete the overall picture of the VVD's party position towards the European Union. As far as the foreword is concerned, in terms of the political strategy it can be seen that the main focus lies not only on the preservation of the living quality in the Netherlands but also on its protection:

"In the end, it is of course about the Netherlands...A program that will protect what we have built together, that will ensure that people's prosperity increases and that preserves our country's living and working quality."³³ (Verkiezingsprogramma 2017-2021:3)

The party seems to directly address the voters who fear a change or expect a threat. This might be an indirect reference to for example the migration crisis. To continue with the VVD's introduction to their program, the solving of current problems is directly approached. The VVD's strategy is thus not only composed by theoretic approaches but also by announcing that the party has also the answers to the current problems. In the first paragraph, the line is drawn to the Dutch history, referring to the Netherlands as being a country that is

³³ Translated by the author from Dutch into English

driven by curiosity, trade and life. In addition, the Dutch optimistic, hardworking and fair mentality, the Dutch living standards and the Dutch way of living are immensely pointed out and furthermore directly set in focus. Also, the current global challenges (e.g. immigration) are not only referred to but furthermore directly accompanied by proposed solutions. With regard to the European Union, the introduction focuses mainly on the work that needs to be done by the Dutch government accompanied by the Dutch population (cf. Verkiezingsprogramma 2017-2021: 6ff.). In one paragraph it is even clearly underlined that problems in the Netherlands should not be outsourced to the European Union, due to the fact that this behavior would not be brave (cf. Verkiezingsprogramma 2017-2021:7). In short, it could be argued that the focus lies on the Netherlands as a nation state rather than on the Netherlands as being a country in the European Union.

As far as the European policy is concerned, the current party program includes a bit more than two pages that are focusing on Europe and the relationship between the Netherlands and the European Union in particular. It is clearly pointed out by the VVD that the main, or in fact the only, topics that should be treated on a supranational level, thus in association with the European Union's supranational institutions, should be issues that are more efficient to deal with on a transnational level: internal market, international trade, migration, energy security and climate change (cf. Verkiezingsprogramma 2017-2021:24). This standpoint is highly emphasized by clearly stating, in the first paragraph, that every subject that lies beyond these matters will be strictly refused, namely social or financial issues:

„We will continue to do, what we can do better in the Netherlands. Brussel should not interfere in national matters, such as pensions, medical care, living, public space, taxation and social welfare. We will take care of that in the Netherlands ourselves. We will reject all new taxation imposed by Brussels.”³⁴ (Verkiezingsprogramma 2017-2021:24)

According to this statement, where the VVD openly addresses “Brussels” in a warning way, thus actually urges the European Commission to reduce their powers, the Eurosceptic attitude related to specific issues is clear. This leads to the fact that the VVD as a mainstream political party, hence traditionally holding pro-European opinions, can be also taken as evidence for the assumption that the Eurosceptic rhetoric became increasingly more “legitimate and salient (and in many ways less contested) across Europe as a whole”. (Brack/Startin 2015:240) With respect to this finding, Taggart's (1998:367ff.) classification of the relationship between the political parties and their party systems seems also accurate to apply. Thus, the VVD as a

³⁴ Translated by the author from Dutch into English

mainstream political party could be described as an established party with Eurosceptic position, where the majority of the party has Eurosceptic opinions. Also, following this theoretic concept, the VVD forms a part of the system of open contestation, due to the fact that this specific Eurosceptic rhetoric will most likely not only be a simple instrument of 'politics of opposition' (cf. Sitter 2001:22; Taggart/Szczerbiak 2008: 349f.; Oberkirch/Schild 2010: 46f.). "Mainstream parties have adopted some Euroscepticism, but not to a great extent. They might block any more transfers of powers to the EU level, but there's not going to be a referendum on EU membership." (Cleppe 2017, cited after McBride 2017) According to this first assessment of the VVD's attitude towards the EU, it could be argued that the concept of Taggart's and Szczerbiak's (2008:3) soft Euroscepticism can be set into relation to that, as it describes the "opposition to the EU's current or future planned trajectory based on the *further* extension of competencies that the EU is planning to make." Also, it should not be forgotten, that Taggart and Szczerbiak underlined their change of concept due to the fact that soft Euroscepticism does not necessarily should be referring to the opposition of the EU membership, rather than on the EU integration project as such. Thus, the VVD seems not to question the membership of the European Union, but to be sceptical about the future trajectory. In addition to Taggart's and Szczerbiak's theory, Kopecký's and Mudde's (2002) considerations should also be taken into account due to the fact that the VVD shows EU-pessimistic stances. The party definitely does not support the current form of the EU and appears to be rather pessimistic about the future development, as it moves too far beyond the founding idea, in fact the economic cooperation (cf. Kopecký/Mudde 2002:304). This observation, however, will be more specifically examined on the following pages.

The first directly addressed subject in the chapter about Europe is that of the Dutch economy, more precisely in relation to international trade. On the one hand, the internal market with its main advantage having open internal borders is noted. On the other hand, this aspect is followed by the importance as well as the need of the therefore carefully protected external borders. The highest priority of the Dutch European policy is apparently to make a profit from the export and sale. Thus, the main focus of the VVD lies on the trade relationship between the Netherlands and the EU. It can be argued, that this is an example for the concept of specific support (Kopecký/Mudde 2002), as this could be related to a strategical dimension. In other words, "support for the general practice of European integration; that is, the EU as it is" (Kopecký/Mudde 2002:300), due to its economic advantages. Also, when drawing the line to the four ideal categories, the VVD could be categorized as Europragmatist, due to the fact that

the party does not generally has prejudices towards the ideas of European integration that would be caused by their ideology and therefore regards the EU as a profitable community for their own country. Nonetheless, as far as the theory is concerned, it cannot be fully emerged yet whether the VVD internalizes Europhobe and EU-optimistic positions that would be necessary, according to Kopecký and Mudde, to be classified as Europragmatist. With a closer view to the VVD's opinion on the internal market, it is openly expressed that this economic accomplishment is "the main pillar of the European cooperation" and therefor "of great interest for a traditional trading country such as the Netherlands". "Protectionism needs to be reduced" and it is as a result demanded that "the European Commission functions as an efficient arbitrator by taking adequate juristic measures" (cf. Verkiezingsprogramma 2017-2021). Thus, they want the European Commission to be an integral part of this international trading cooperation. At this point it is now briefly referred to the Dutch history, as this background information will help to understand the high priority of trade for the VVD. As the Dutch strategy during wars always counted on the combination of diplomacy and trade, this mentality led to the support of European integration in the first hand. Also, it should be kept in mind that the Dutch economy heavily depends on foreign trade. Thus, the protection and preservation of the open borders in the internal market is of extreme importance. In other words, the VVD calls for EU reforms, not for a "NEXIT" (cf. Verkiezingsprogramma 2017-2021; Vollaard 2013; Stratfor 2017; Cleppe, cited after McBride 2017): "There is still a lot to improve concerning the EU as it is right now. With the years, the trust in this good working union that is focused on these main priorities has been under pressure."³⁵ (Verkiezingsprogramma 2017-2021:24)

An aspect that is also part of the economic discourse is the issue of the external border protection. The VVD holds the view that in order to reach the goal of an internal market that brings continuously welfare, stability and jobs due to a steady growth, it is essential to take care of the security of the EU's external borders. Thus, transnational solutions, tackling problems of migration and terrorism are strongly emphasized. The collaboration and help of other countries is needed to ensure the control of migration flows and countering terrorism.

³⁵ Translated by the author from Dutch into English

As far as the EU reforms are concerned, the VVD outlines a number of issues that show their unsatisfied attitude towards the EU's current trajectory and call for more efficient and effective cooperation. First, turning the EU into a multi-speed Europe³⁶ is one suggested reform of the VVD. The advantage would be that the Netherlands could have more space for negotiations about different topics. Second, another reform focuses on the decision-making of the European Commission. The VVD is in favor of providing more legislation that stimulates economy and improves security. Third, in terms of the decision-making process between different member states and the European parliament, a more qualitative independent monitoring process should be assured. Fourth, as far as the application of rules in the European Union is concerned, they need to be more strictly monitored. As "agreements and rules are the fundament of the European cooperation" (Verkiezingsprogramma 2017-2021:25), the EU must guarantee that all member states abide to these rules. Also, if they do not respect them, it is the EU that needs to take measures. The fifth reform concerns the trajectory of the EU regarding the budget. In terms of increasing the EU's savings, the VVD proposes not only to reduce the European Parliament locations to one main city, namely Brussels, as this double location is only a waste of money. The EU needs also to focus on transparency in all member states. A list of the EU's provided money in each member state should guarantee this high-quality control. Also, the VVD wants to reform the multiannual financial framework, in order to reduce the contribution of the Netherlands. It is specifically asked for investing in only necessary and essential matters, rather than in new projects (cf. Verkiezingsprogramma 2017-2021:24ff.). In short, to draw the line to the theory again, this attitude of changing and reforming the EU shows that they do not oppose the EU or the European integration as such. However, due to the dissatisfaction of the "future planned trajectory", these stances could support the assumption of Taggart's and Szczerbiak's (2008) that soft Euroscepticism is described as such. In addition, to combine this idea with the concept of Kopecký and Mudde (2002) the ideal type Eurosceptic and Europragmatist party fit as a categorization.

³⁶ According to EC president Juncker, he proposed five options for the future of the EU. Two of these five are about less European integration, without, however, leaving the EU, focusing on for example on the EU transformation into a free-trade project or to reducing the activities of the EU and assuring efficacy with doing so. Pieter Cleppe further outlines that a multi-speed European Union is possible: "I think it is. But the core of the EU project is open trade. The EU idea is that reducing trade barriers is going to make it less likely that countries go to war against each other. That has been a massive success, first of all, in peace terms, but also in economic terms. And the EU is good at that. It has the capacity, that experience." (Clepe 2017, cited after McBride 2017); See also: European Commission 2017; Plomecka/Stankiewicz/Ciecierski 2017

The EU enlargement is, in addition, an issue that is emphasized by the VVD in the current party program. Further European integration, in terms of accessions of other countries is not envisaged at the moment, rather clearly rejected and justified by stating that the EU takes a break now. In reference to the accession criteria, the VVD underlines that no current country that is interested to join the EU fulfills them (cf. Verkiezingsprogramma 2017-2021).

Due to the current discourse and ongoing negotiations, the VVD expressed also the opinion concerning the future relationship between the United Kingdom and the Netherlands after BREXIT. As the VVD aims to maintain the cooperation in areas such as economy (trade) and also in security matters (counter-terrorism strategies), it is highly envisaged to ensure this practice in the European Union. However, the VVD argues that these agreements may also go beyond the framework of the European Union, referring to bilateral agreements, due to the fact that the UK is one of the main trading partners (cf. Stratfor 2017). In terms of BREXIT, the VVD raised also the issue of the EU's future as such, with a reduced total number of 27 member states. "The European Union has to work more efficiently and needs to reduce the distance to the citizens."³⁷ (Verkiezingsprogramma 2017-2021:25). This statement can be directly linked to the VVD's plan to reform the EU.

3.2.2 The VVD's Strategy and/or Ideology?

After the analysis of the current party program it seems adequate to continue with the examination of the factors causing Euroscepticism. It is of concern whether the VVD is prone in general to relate with Euroscepticism due to its ideology or if this could be a strategy in the party competition. As it has been determined that ideology is a factor that describes the support of a party towards the European integration process, whereas on the other hand the support for the European Union could be described as a strategic approach (cf. Kopecký/Mudde 2002), these concepts will be now applied to the VVD's party program. The VVD is the leading party in the Dutch government, thus it is essential to proof whether Euroscepticism appears due to a certain strategy or the VVD's ideology.

As far as the last Dutch national elections are concerned, it is argued that Geert Wilders, the political leader of the PVV, was the reason for the significant move to the right. Thus, it could be examined that the VVD adopted some of his viewpoints, or at least included some issues

³⁷ Translated by the author from Dutch into English

that would have been related to the PVV in the first place. The addressing of topics concerning immigration policies are one adequate example for this phenomenon (Holodny 2017; Cleppe, cited after McBride 2017). The VVD has in that respect not “moved to the far-right” but a “shift in that direction” can be seen. Also, it could be said that “most parties have become more nationalist” and this might have been caused by the influence of the PVV. (Rooduijn, cited after Holodny 2017) It is seen that the VVD’s party program implies that there is no intention to leave the EU whatsoever, yet the focus obviously lies on the pursuing of national interests.³⁸ Also, it is outlined that national, or Dutch concerns should be taken more seriously by the EU. Therefore, the principle of proportionality and subsidiarity need to be strictly applied (cf. Verkiezingsprogramma 2017-2021; Europa-Nu 2 2017).

Another aspect that should be discussed when speaking of strategy and ideology concerns the political performance of Mark Rutte as the VVD’s political leader. On the one hand it is generally observed that he presents himself, especially in Brussels, holding a pro-European attitude. Emphasizing the importance of a strong European cooperation in terms of for example the migration crisis, security issues or climate change. However, on the other hand a more Eurosceptic opinion is voiced in the Netherlands. The open criticism towards the EU in their party program, more precisely the specific call for Brussel focusing on only the “important, cross-border core tasks”, rather than on issues that are better solved on a national level, is another side (cf. Verkiezingsprogramma 2017-2021; Haringsma 2017; Van Boxtel 2017). Rutte emphasizes the fact that it is now time to see more results. A pragmatic access to the EU is essential according to him, rather than the ideal vision of the EU as a “super state”: “It’s history. Abandon this romantic view and stop seeking to turn the EU step by step to a super state, because this is the fastest way to destroy the European Union.”³⁹ (Rutte, cited by Het Financieele Dagblad 2017) Rutte urges to see results, to guarantee that the EU is a well-functioning, efficient and effective cooperation of states that improve the living quality of its citizens. Hence, pragmatism is his highest priority.

After having highlighted these aspects, this can be related to the theory of party-based Euroscepticism. It had been outlined, that issues concerning the European integration are being used in the party competition. In other words, these issues are adapted by parties as a specific strategy. As the political environment, however, changes continuously, these

³⁸ For a brief summary of main subjects in relation to the European policy of the VVD party program see also: Europa-Nu 2017; TMI 2017; Moerman 2017; Tjoelker 2016

³⁹ Translated by the author from Dutch into English

strategies need to be adapted on a regular basis. With view to the right-wing shift, the adaption of more Eurosceptic issues of mainstream political parties could be explained, as they needed to change their strategy in order to be successful. Thus, party-based Euroscepticism could be seen as a “product of parties’ strategic choices in the light of survival, ideology, organization and the pursuit of office”. (Sitter 2002:23) As there has been a rise of right-wing populism throughout Europe, a mainstream party such as the VVD might have changed their strategy in order to defeat the PVV. The two sides of attitudes towards European integration, or the European policy as such, might be explained as a strategic way to gain voters who also possess critical viewpoints on the one hand but do not necessarily oppose the European Union in general (cf. Haringsma 2017; Van Boxtel 2017). Are the factors that caused Eurosceptic stances in the VVD purely strategic, due to the fact that the party is aware of the advantages that come with the European Union? As it is argued that ideology is on the other hand related to the support of European integration, the VVD never opposed the European integration as such (cf. Kopecký/Mudde 2002). The completion of an efficient internal market had always been the main goal and therefore European integration, such as for example the creation of a Eurozone, was necessary to a certain extent (cf. Harmsen 2004). However, whereas on the one hand European integration in specific areas had always been supported (e.g. economy, security), it seems that this integration in other areas is nowadays strictly rejected (cf. Verkiezingsprogramma 2002-2006; Verkiezingsprogramma 2003; Verkiezingsprogramma 2017-2021). In short, as far as the factor ideology is concerned, the VVD has more conservative standpoints concerning specific areas due to their center-right party position and thus might be as a result more Eurosceptic with regard to specific areas.

In conclusion, the assumption of Taggart and Szczerbiak that ideology and strategy are two interrelated factors can be proven. The Eurosceptic attitudes in the VVD cannot be either seen black or white. It is the interrelation of these two causal factors that help to receive the entire picture.

3.2.3 Summary of the Findings

After having analyzed the current VVD’s party program, the following findings can be presented: The VVD is an established party with Eurosceptic positions, is part of the system of open contestation, has soft Eurosceptic stances and could be additionally defined as Europragmatist. Eurosceptic stances are not in this particular case only caused by the party’s ideology but also by their strategy in the party competition. Thus, these causal factors are

interrelated. However, it is beyond doubt that these findings need to be explained and justified more closely.

To begin with, due to the design, the introduction and the forewords it can be already stated that the Netherlands on the one hand, particularly functioning as a nation state, is supposed to be the main focus of interest. The Dutch living quality is aimed to be protected and preserved. On the other hand, the country's EU membership is neither denied nor opposed, rather strongly underlined in their European policy chapter. In view of this, some transnational areas are specifically highlighted that should be focused on by the European Union: the economy with its internal market and international trade, security matters, migration and climate change in combination with energy security. Other areas should definitely not be treated on a supranational level and will be furthermore strictly opposed and rejected, due to the fact that this could be better handled by the Dutch themselves (cf. Verkiezingsprogramma 2017-2021). This implies that the VVD is an established party, being part of the coalition governments since 2010, where the majority holds Eurosceptic positions.⁴⁰ Also, the open criticism especially directed towards Brussels, while explicitly outlining that there should not be more rules, is evidence for the VVD to be part of a system of open contestation.⁴¹

The current European policy in the VVD's party program calls for EU reforms in various areas, thus this implies certain dissatisfaction with the current or future EU trajectory. Therefore, the relation of the VVD and soft Euroscepticism would be appropriate. By continuing with the types of Euroscepticism, the ideal-type category would be Europragmatist (the combination of Europhobe and EU-optimist), as the VVD regards the EU as a lucrative and beneficial concept, in specific matters. Here, the strong relation to the economy, more precisely the internal market, could be taken as the best example. It is also argued that if "European integration can effectively and efficiently serve Dutch economic interests, it could rely on Dutch support". (Vollaard 2013). Nevertheless, on the other hand, the European integration is generally not supported due to the underlying ideas of the EU. They simply accept it because of their goal to profit from it.

⁴⁰ See also theoretical approach by Taggart 1998: 368f.

⁴¹ See also theoretical approach by Taggart/Szczerbiak 2008: 349f.; Oberkirch/Schild 2010: 46f.

The conceptualization of Kopecký and Mudde (2002) seems only partly suitable with reference to the VVD. Europragmatists combine Europhobe and EU-optimistic stances. However, it can be summarized that the VVD does not have an “obvious positive attitude toward the current construct and development of the EU” when analyzing the current party program. It rather appears that mostly EU-pessimistic opinions overweigh at the moment, thinking that the EU drifted too far away from the formerly economic focus; hence according to Kopecký and Mudde the VVD could not be regarded as Europragmatist. As a result, the VVD would need to be declared as being Euroject, due to their Europhobe and EU-pessimistic position. This, in any case, does not apply to the VVD at all, as they support the EU for very specific reasons and might be sometimes also argued as being Europhile.

As the liberal-conservative party had always held rather conservative views in terms of specific issues (e.g. immigration, EU budget), it can be stated that ideology is one factor for the cause of Euroscepticism in the VVD. However, the VVD never entirely opposed the European integration process whatsoever, due to the urge to establish the internal market and the Eurozone. Thus, another factor that of strategy, needs to be taken into consideration. The factor strategy is directly linked to the support of the EU, and this had been reduced as far as the current party program is concerned. This tendency might be evoked by the general rise of right-wing political parties and their impact on the national party system and party competition. It seems to be the VVD’s strategy to openly voice their criticism towards the EU, however not in a radical way as the right-wing party PVV. When criticizing the EU, they are immediately calling for reforms, thus a statement that clearly shows that the VVD seeks to stay a member of the European Union as such. In short, ideology and strategy cannot be regarded separately and without the party’s history, nor outside of the national context and party competition.

In conclusion, it might be claimed that the VVD is not directly for the EU but at the same time not entirely against it. This leads to the assumption that they hold, nonetheless, rather critic stances towards the EU and European integration as such. Consequently it could be argued to be one possible indication for the general rise of criticism among mainstream political parties.

4. Conclusion

The main aim of this master thesis was to assess whether the Dutch People's Party for Freedom and Democracy comprises Eurosceptic views, as they were celebrated the pro-European winner after the recent national elections. The establishment of the theoretical framework, whilst relying especially on the work of Taggart and Szczerbiak (2003) and Kopecký and Mudde (2002), helped to use their typology as instruments for the critical analysis of the VVD's European policy not only since 1999 but also with specific regard to the current party program 2017-2021. The research question "To what extent can Euroscepticism be found in the Dutch People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie – VVD)?" could therefore be answered.

This research has shown that the VVD holds for almost three decades soft Eurosceptic stances to a certain extent that is not only caused by their ideology but nowadays also to a large part by the parties strategy in the party competition. Hence, the VVD is the pro-European winner compared to the opposing radical right Party for Freedom, however only to a certain extent due to their openly expressed criticism towards the EU. The VVD has experienced a rather extensive change of attitude over the years. Having started as a party that was supposed to be Europhile and EU-optimistic, thus a clear supporter of the EU and driven by their main economic goal to complete the establishment of an internal market, the political direction changed in the mid-nineties (introduced by Frits Bolkenstein). This however, seems not to be a contradiction, as it could be argued that the process of European integration, on both the economic and political level, had been a certain means to an end to fulfill national objectives. In addition, the VVD's general pragmatic philosophy in combination with liberal-conservative viewpoints is the reason why the European Union is seen as profitable for the Netherlands. It could be furthermore determined, that even though the VVD has never opposed the European integration in principle, it should only concern specific areas, in fact cross-border matters. In view of that, the result of the analysis also indicates a common thread in the VVD's European policy: the advantage seeking attitude and the thereby pursuit of economic goals. As the current and future trajectory of the EU slowly but steadily derogates from the main value, being an economic community, the VVD turned more Europragmatic and clearly state the urge to reform the EU. In short, less European integration but an improved, efficient and effective European Union with focus on the economy is envisaged. In

addition, the focus of the VVD's European policy lies more on the Netherlands as a nation state rather than the Netherlands as an EU member state.⁴²

This research will serve as a base for future studies as the relevance of analyzing Euroscepticism among mainstream parties will definitely rise. One reason for further research could be the development of new instruments and concepts in order to detect Euroscepticism in party systems. It should be critically emphasized at this stage that the conceptualization of Kopecký and Mudde (2002) appeared in the beginning as a suitable instrument in order to analyze the existence of Euroscepticism in the VVD, however a complete and adequate application was not entirely possible as two indicators were rather contradicting.⁴³ To argue that the four ideal category types are always composed by two specific components referring to two different dimensions is after their application rather inconvenient. In contrary, the concepts of Taggart and Szczerbiak were rather broad, thus easily applicable.

In conclusion, as the aim of the master thesis is also to raise awareness to the phenomenon of Euroscepticism itself, the research will be completed by an impetus on this crucial issue. As the relevance of Euroscepticism in the European Union is clearly supported by the current findings, it has to be referred to the title of this thesis. Hidden Euroscepticism? As the results have shown, the Dutch mainstream political party VVD does not hide the Eurosceptic attitude, rather openly expresses this criticism. However, the party has another approach to address this issue than fringe parties in general. A more pragmatic way that should shape and tailor the EU towards the national needs. Opposing European integration does, nonetheless, not necessarily stand for the urge to leave the European Union. Party-based Euroscepticism has mainly focused on fringe parties, as the opposition towards the EU is aggressively expressed. However, one should not underestimate the power of mainstream parties and thus the danger of subliminal Euroscepticism. Even though this scepticism appears in another form, more pragmatic for example, this can also strongly influence the European citizen's opinion on the European Union. Radical parties seem to be more driven by their ideology, whereas the Eurosceptic stances of mainstream parties could be argued as caused by the interrelation of ideology and strategy in the party competition. Taken together, these results and considerations suggest that the attention should be shifted to mainstream parties.

⁴² In relation to that, one can draw the line to the European integration theory liberal intergovernmentalism.

⁴³ Compare with 3.2.3 Summary of the Findings.

All in all, the political landscape is steadily changing and currently Euroscepticism seems to be one of the strongest factors. Euroscepticism can, however, also lead to reforms and could also be directed into a positive direction, not necessarily leading to a leaving of a member state. On the other hand, opposing European integration and emphasizing only the economic advantages of the European Union would represent a tremendous step backwards. Time will show in what direction the European Union will head to, until then, the scientific world clearly needs to extend their research of Euroscepticism, also with specific regard to mainstream parties.

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