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VARYING TRAJECTORIES OF MAINSTREAM RIGHT RADICALIZATION (MRR) IN CONTEMPORARY EUROPEAN DEMOCRACIES

Javid Ibad[1]

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Abstract: *The political science literature heavily focused on the phenomenon of the far right, its ideological tenets, and electoral fortunes. This has come at the expense of neglecting the party family that was tasked with gatekeeping the liberal democracy: the mainstream right. Existing research on mainstream right demonstrates that this party family is currently stuck between two diverging groups of voters. On the one hand, there are members of the progressive middle class, supporters of "the silent revolution." On the other hand, there are conservative, nativist, and authoritarian voters who support 'the silent counter-revolution' and increasingly vote for the far right. The existing empirical research suggests that mainstream right responds to this electoral threat by radicalizing to the right and departing from liberal democratic norms. However, this radicalization is by no means uniform. By conceptualizing mainstream right parties as active agents of change, this article explores varying trajectories of mainstream right radicalization (MRR) in contemporary European democracies. As such, the article lays out three different trajectories: issue-specific mainstream right radicalization, mainstream right radicalization into a far-right illiberal actor, and far right as a breakaway from the mainstream right. Eventually, the article demonstrates that even though trajectories diverge, all three of them blur the boundaries between the mainstream right and the far right, erode the cordon sanitaire, and most importantly, normalize the far right within the wider society.*

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

[1] Javid Ibad is a Ph.D. candidate and a research assistant at the Faculty of the European Studies, Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania. E-mail: javid.ibad@ubbcluj.ro.

The Mainstream Right's Ideological Dilemma

Even though the mainstream right parties have been quite influential and formed the backbone of many European democracies in the post-war decades, compared to other party families (mainstream left, far right, and even greens), research on this party family has been relatively scarce. Consisting of liberals, Christian democrats, and conservatives, the mainstream right party family also had a responsible task of acting as the "gatekeeper" of liberal democracy by protecting it from challengers rising from the far right of the political spectrum. Thus, the mainstream right has a critical responsibility of protecting the liberal democratic state structure.

Nevertheless, over the following decades, the mainstream right's gatekeeping role has been significantly challenged by the rising electoral fortunes of the far right. Apart from putting the mainstream right into an electoral crisis, such a development also puts the mainstream right party family into an ideological dilemma. Existing research demonstrates that this party family has currently found itself squeezed between two contrasting social developments and groups of electorates.[2] On the one hand, there is a traditional electorate of mainstream right who are generally progressive in their views on sociocultural issues, have a middle- and upper-class background, enjoy high-paid employment, and live in major metropolitan areas. This group of electorate constitutes a significant chunk of supporters of the so-called "silent revolution," a post-material value shift that occurred in Western societies starting from the late 1960s and 1970s. They are also known for their commitment to liberal democratic norms.

On the other hand, there is another group of the electorate aligned with the so-called "silent counter-revolution." Also described as "the losers of globalization" and "particularists," this group of electorate is known for its support for nativist and authoritarian policies, largely as a reaction towards anxieties caused by the social change inflicted as a result of "the silent revolution." In terms of electoral behaviour, they increasingly shift to the far right.[3]

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[2] Tim Bale, Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser (eds.), *Riding the Populist Wave: Europe's Mainstream Right in Crisis*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021.

[3] Ronald F. Inglehart, Pippa Norris, "Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism: Economic Have-nots and Cultural Backlash", HKS Working Paper No. RWP16-026, SSRN, 2016.

Interestingly, the empirical evidence indicates that mainstream right parties react by shifting to the right on sociocultural issues either to retain these voters or to bring them back.[4] At the same time, it is critical to highlight that this shift should not be treated as a mere reaction to the new electoral challenger. Rather, more recent and critical research highlights the importance of assessing political parties (specifically the mainstream actors) as active agents of political change that can act strategically to meet their political ends.[5] Based on these findings, it is possible to summarize that mainstream right radicalization is a phenomenon where the mainstream right party departs in its views (either partially or entirely) from ideas based on or associated with liberal norms towards ideas based on or associated with illiberal norms.

This article intends to contribute to the burgeoning line of research on this phenomenon by arguing that mainstream right radicalization does not happen uniformly, as there are diverging paths and scenarios on how it occurs. Specifically, the article highlights three varying trajectories for mainstream right radicalization. Therefore, the article proceeds in the following way. First, the emphasis will be put on the most widespread form of mainstream right radicalization, that is, when mainstream right parties radicalize on a specific issue. As the name can suggest, such radicalization is issue-specific but also highly context-dependent. Second, the discussion will proceed to another conspicuous development where several mainstream right parties have successfully transformed themselves into far-right illiberal actors by fully abandoning liberal democratic principles. Interestingly, such instances are not limited to Europe with more global instances of such

[4] Tarik Abou-Chadi, Werner Krause, "The Causal Effect of Radical Right Success on Mainstream Parties' Policy Positions: A Regression Discontinuity Approach", in *British Journal of Political Science*, vol. 50, no. 3, 2020, pp. 829–847; Tjitske Akkerman, "Immigration Policy and Electoral Competition in Western Europe: A Fine-grained Analysis of Party Positions over the Past Two Decades", in *Party Politics*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2015, pp. 54–67; Markus Wagner, Thomas M. Meyer, "The Radical Right as Niche Parties? The Ideological Landscape of Party Systems in Western Europe, 1980–2014", in *Political Studies*, vol. 65, no. 1, 2017, pp. 84–107.

[5] Kathy Brown, Aurelien Mondon, Aaron Winter, "The Far Right, the Mainstream and Mainstreaming: Towards a Heuristic Framework", in *Journal of Political Ideologies*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2023, pp. 162–179.

radicalization. Third, the attention will be put on less frequent but equally important development where a successful far-right challenger can emerge as a breakaway faction from an already existing mainstream right party. Finally, the article will conclude with several observations related to how these developments influence liberal democracies and the nature of party competition in them.

Issue-Specific Mainstream Right Radicalization

As mentioned above, the most frequent expression of mainstream right radicalization is the one where parties radicalize in their views on a specific issue/s. Instead of transforming itself into an outright far-right illiberal actor, parties may strategically opt for accommodating their views towards their far-right counterparts on a specific issue that is highly salient in a given period of time within the political debate. Such strategic radicalization gives the mainstream right party the possibility of accommodating both the demand-side anxieties voiced by voters and the political supply offered by the far right without abandoning commitment towards liberal democracy and existing "rules of the game."

Unsurprisingly, as one of the most salient issues over the last decade, migration has been the primary policy area where the mainstream right parties have consistently radicalized on a continental level.[6] In what is known as "the contagion effect," mainstream right parties tend to copy the views of their far-right counterparts to challenge their ownership over this issue and to bring the voters back. As such, mainstream right parties may adopt more restrictive stances on migration policy, resort to exclusionary rhetoric towards newcomers and communities representing ethnic and cultural minorities, voice scepticism over multiculturalism and support cultural assimilation, promote "welfare chauvinism," and generally start viewing immigration with mistrust.

Notable examples of issue-specific mainstream right radicalization are the classical liberal VVD in the Netherlands, ÖVP in Austria, as well as Moderaterna in Sweden. Not only have these parties radicalized their views on migration towards the far right, but they have also entered into governing

[6] Abou-Chadi, Krause, *art. cit.*, pp. 829–847; Akkerman, *art. cit.*, pp. 54–67; Wagner, Meyer, *art. cit.*, pp. 84–107.

coalitions with them.[7] At the same time, it is critical to point out that there are some early signs of mainstream right radicalization in policy areas beyond migration.[8] A notable emerging area for mainstream right radicalization is the domain of environmental policy.[9] Mainstream right parties are increasingly less enthusiastic about progressive climate policies, not least because of their support for neoliberal economic policies. In Spain, the Popular Party dismissed climate policies even before the far right. An even more important development is currently underway on the European level where the European People's Party, the political alliance of parties of the mainstream right, threaten to collaborate with the far-right groups, unless some parts of the Green New Deal get watered down.

While mainstream right parties have embraced liberal views on many sociocultural issues over the last couple of decades, more recently, some of them started to employ the so-called "culture war" tropes in their discourse. Specifically, the discussions concerning gender and sexuality became a new point of contention. Parties such as Les Republicans in France, CDU/CSU in Germany, and ÖVP in Austria have become more critical over the so-called "gender ideology" and the way it is "propagated" in educational institutions.[10] In a similar vein, there are instances of Christian democratic parties involved in what is known as the "family mainstreaming," where

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[7] François Hublet, Mattéo Lanoë, Johanna Schleyer, *Spelling out the European Center-right's Dilemma: Renewal of the Grand Coalition or National-conservative Alliance?*, Paris: Groupe d'Études Géopolitiques, 2023.

[8] Reinhard Heinisch, Annika Werner, "Austria: Tracing the Christian Democrats' adaptation to the silent counter-revolution", in Bale, Kaltwasser (eds), *op. cit.*, pp. 91–112; Maurits J. Meijers, "Contagious Euroscepticism: The Impact of Eurosceptic Support on Mainstream Party Positions on European Integration", in *Party Politics*, vol. 23, no. 4, 2017, pp. 413–423.

[9] Manes Weisskircher, Sabine Volk, "The People against the Sun? Ideology and Strategy in Far-right Parties' Climate Obstruction of Solar Energy", in *Environmental Politics*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2026, pp. 240–271; Camil Ungureanu, Marc Sanjaume-Calvet, "The Blurred Lines between Center-right and Far-right: 'Reverse Contamination' and the People's Party's Environmentalism in Spain", in *Party Politics*, vol. 31, no. 4, 2025, pp. 646–659.

[10] Anne-Sophie Heinze, Sanna Salo, "No One to Our Right? The Transformation of the Mainstream Right in Germany and Its Impact on (Social) Democracy", in Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser et al., *The Transformation of the Mainstream Right and Its Impact on (Social) Democracy*, Brussels: Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS), 2024, pp. 94–107, https://feps-europe.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/The-transformation-of-the-mainstream-right-and-its-impact-on-social-democracy-1.pdf.

they attempt to protect traditional social structures via criticizing gender studies and LGBTQ+ activism that allegedly damage the heteronormative nature of a traditional nuclear family.[11] Additionally, parties may also resort to "homonationalism" and "femonationalism" and claim that migration from culturally incompatible countries is a threat to gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights.[12]

These instances clearly demonstrate the issue-specific nature of mainstream right radicalization that heavily depends on the local political context, nature of party competition, as well as the salience of various issues. However, there are also significant examples of how parties have successfully transformed themselves into far-right illiberal actors.

Mainstream Right Radicalization into a Far-Right Illiberal Actor

In this section, the discussion will proceed to the second trajectory of mainstream right radicalization in European democracies. There has been an extensive line of literature inquiring into this phenomenon, where the particular emphasis is put not only on the mere fact of radicalization but also on how these actors end up becoming active agents of democratic backsliding and institutional decay by departing from liberal democratic norms.[13] Critically, examples of such parties go well beyond the European context and can be found globally. Within the existing political science literature, the two most-mentioned and talked cases of mainstream right radicalization into a far-right illiberal actor constitute the prominent instances of FIDESZ and PiS in Hungary and Poland, respectively.[14]

Initially, FIDESZ was established as a liberal movement targeting the socialist elites in Hungary and actively campaigning for the end of their rule. The movement was known for its collective leadership structure. In the aftermath of the socialist rule, over the course of the 1990s, one of its founders, Viktor Orbán, gradually took the leadership role into its hands and

[11] Martino Comelli, "Paradoxes of (Il)liberal Democracy: The Role of Christian Democracy", in *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research*, vol. 37, no. 4, 2024, pp. 1032–1055.
[12] Bale, Kaltwasser (eds.), *op. cit*.
[13] Steven Levitsky, Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, New York: Crown, 2018.
[14] Andrea L. Pirro, Bill Stanley, "Forging, Bending, and Breaking: Enacting the 'Illiberal Playbook' in Hungary and Poland", in *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2022, pp. 86–101.

took the party into a conservative direction. This culminated in FIDESZ coming to power and serving as the senior partner in a coalition government from 1998 to 2002, with Orbán serving as the Prime Minister. The brief stint in opposition in the period of 2002-2010 oversaw a further shift to the right. In 2010, FIDESZ achieved a 2/3 supermajority in the Hungarian Parliament and gained the power of amending constitution. Followed up by other supermajority victories in the following three national elections, Orbán-led FIDESZ considerably amended the constitution, changed the electoral law multiple times, reformed the judiciary, public broadcaster, tightened its grip over media, academia, and civil society, and dismantled numerous other checks and balances in its attempt to build what became known as an "illiberal democracy."[15]

The 2015 general elections in Poland resulted in PiS (Law and Justice) taking over the Polish government. Established in 2001 as a conservative party, PiS took a similar route to FIDESZ and attempted to dismantle liberal democratic institutions in Poland.[16] Even though it had some success in reforming the judiciary, public broadcaster, and some other state institutions, compared to FIDESZ, it fell short in the magnitude of its actions. PiS was not able to gain a supermajority and faced strong opposition in the Parliament.[17] In their rhetoric, both FIDESZ and PiS have demonstrated profound opposition towards the European Union and employed Eurosceptic talking points on a regular basis. The European Union was also extensively scapegoated for the "negative" consequences of the social change, with a notable instance of anti-LGBTQ+ policies.

Beyond these two "usual suspects," there are a number of more notable examples of full transformation into a far-right party in Europe. One of the most crucial instances is the Freedom Party (FPÖ), which was established in the 1950s in Austria by the representatives and supporters of the previous Nazi regime.[18] It should be noted that in the first decades of its

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[15] Péter Krekó, Zsolt Enyedi, "Explaining Eastern Europe: Orbán's Laboratory of Illiberalism", in *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 29, no. 3, 2018, pp. 39–51.

[16] Pirro, Stanley, *art. cit*., pp. 86–101.

[17] Zofia Kinowska-Mazaraki, "The Polish Paradox: From a Fight for Democracy to the Political Radicalization and Social Exclusion", in *Social Sciences*, vol. 10, no. 3, 2021, p. 112.

[18] Valentina Ausserladscheider, *Far-right populism and the Making of the Exclusionary Neoliberal State*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024.

existence, FPÖ had a sizable faction that concerned itself with economic matters, and it largely positioned itself as a centre-right market liberal party. This all changed when Jörg Haider became the party chairman in 1986. The party quickly adopted a harsh stance on foreigners, specifically of non-Western origin, established itself in the far right of the political spectrum, and even ended up as a junior partner in two coalition governments led by the mainstream right ÖVP. Over the last several years, FPÖ has consistently leads the polls in Austria.

One more notable example comes from neighbouring Switzerland, where the Swiss People's Party (SVP) also established itself in the far right of the party system. Started in 1971 as a conservative party protecting the agrarian interests, its path of radicalization commenced in the 1990s, when Christoph Blocher, a billionaire entrepreneur, became one of the most influential figures in the party. Just as in Austria, SVP consistently voiced concerns over migration.[19] Due to its specific nature, the European integration and bilateral relations with the European Union are traditionally salient issues in Switzerland. SVP also established itself as the main voice of Euroscepticism in Switzerland. Remarkably, SVP is quite successful in using the tools of direct democracy to push its agenda so that it can bypass other established actors (by also labelling them as elitist), even though SVP has consistently been the biggest party in the country for more than the last two decades.[20]

Turkey offers another critical example of a full mainstream right radicalization. The Justice and Development Party (AKP) started off as an inclusive reformist movement that pledged to bring the long-awaited change to social and political structures that have long suffered from rigidity imposed first from the Kemalist elites and then from various military governments. AKP was also considered a textbook example of a successful Islamic democratic party that even pursued accession talks with the

[19] Daniele Albertazzi, Stijn van Kessel, Adrian Favero, Niko Hatakka, Judith Sijstermans, Mattia Zulianello, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Action: The Survival of the Mass Party*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2025.

[20] Oscar Mazzoleni, "Staying away from the Mainstream: The Case of the Swiss People's Party", in Tjitske Akkerman, Sarah L. de Lange, Matthijs Rooduijn (eds.), *Radical Right-wing Populist Parties in Western Europe: Into the Mainstream?*, London: Routledge, 2016, pp. 193–207.

European Union.[21] Nevertheless, as negotiations with the EU stalled and AKP slowly but steadily diminished the influence of Kemalist institutions, it consistently shifted to the right in many of its views. Several critical events, such as the Gezi Park protests in 2013, the general elections in 2015, and the failed Gülenist coup attempt in 2016, gave further grounds for AKP to radicalize and to crack down on academia, media, civil servants, military officials, civil society, and even political figures. At the time of writing, AKP is a one-man party, and its ideology is consistently in line with the core tenets of the far right (i.e., nativism, authoritarianism, populism) combined with Islamism and neopatrimonialism. Additionally, the party significantly employs discourses based on various conspiracy theories, victimhood narratives, and civilizationalism.[22]

As mentioned, there are more and more global instances of mainstream right parties that have profoundly departed from liberal democratic norms. In Israel, the mainstream right Likud embraced xenophobic exclusionary narratives and adopted authoritarian and nativist policies.[23] Similar to AKP, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India has been challenging the liberal democratic nature of state institutions by marginalizing non-Hindu minorities since coming to power in 2014.[24] Most importantly, the Republican Party in the US has been dominated by Donald Trump and his allies within the so-called 'MAGA' movement, which, at the time of writing, has an unprecedented power over the federal institutions of the US and actively looks for ways to subjugate other federal bodies to the executive branch of the state.[25]

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[21] Ihsan Yilmaz, Galib Bashirov, "The AKP after 15 Years: Emergence of Erdoganism in Turkey", in *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 39, no. 9, 2018, pp. 1812–1830.

[22] Ihsan Yilmaz, Mustafa Demir, "Manufacturing the Ummah: Turkey's Transnational Populism and Construction of the People Globally", in *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 44, no. 2, 2023, pp. 320–336.

[23] Dani Filc, "Political Radicalization in Israel: From a Populist Habitus to Radical Right Populism in Government", in Kristian Steiner, Andreas Önnerfors (eds.), *Expressions of Radicalization: Global Politics, Processes and Practices*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, pp. 185–205.

[24] Sebastian Haug, Supriya Roychoudhury, "Civilizational Exceptionalism in International Affairs: Making Sense of Indian and Turkish Claims", in *International Affairs*, vol. 99, no. 2, 2023, pp. 531–549.

[25] Levitsky, Ziblatt, *op. cit*.

Far Right as a Breakaway from the Mainstream Right

Finally, a third prominent trajectory of mainstream right radicalization concerns the scenario when an emerging radical faction breaks away from the mainstream right party to become an independent political actor. Geert Wilders, the founder of the far-right Freedom Party (PVV), used to be an MP for the mainstream right VVD. He quit the ranks of VVD after the party was supportive of starting negotiations over the accession of Turkey into the European Union. Most of the post-war far-right parties in Germany have emerged from the ranks of CDU/CSU.[26] Specifically, two splits are of relevant importance. CSU's drift towards centrism in the 1980s met the resistance of its radical faction that broke away and founded Die Republikaner. More recently, the Euro crisis in the early 2010s led to the split of another faction that formed the Alternative for Germany (AfD). Starting as a Eurosceptic party focused on economic issues, AfD gradually transformed itself into one of the most extreme members of modern European far right.[27]

In Southern Europe, VOX and Fratelli d'Italia have followed a similar path, where the former is a splinter from the Popular Party (PP) due to its frustration towards mishandling of the Catalan independence movement, and the latter was a reaction towards Silvio Berlusconi's attempt of building a unified right-wing party.28 In the UK, disillusioned liberals and conservatives established the Anti-Federalist League, which was later transformed into UKIP, while in Belgium, Vlaams Blok (the predecessor of Vlaams Belang) split from the Volksunie.[29]

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[26] Sarah E. Wiliarty, "Germany: How the Christian Democrats Manage to Adapt to the Silent Counter-revolution", in Bale, Kaltwasser (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 141–169.

[27] Vicente Valentim, *The Normalization of the Radical Right: A Norms Theory of Political Supply and Demand*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024.

[28] Sonia Alonso, Bonnie N. Field, "The Development and Decline of the Popular Party", in Bale, Kaltwasser (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 216–245; Pietro C. Gattinara, Catarina Froio, "Italy: The Mainstream Right and Its Allies, 1994–2018", in Bale, Kaltwasser (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 170–192.

[29] Daphne Halikiopoulou, Tim Vlandas, *Understanding Right-wing Populism and What to Do about It*, Berlin: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2022; Paul Lucardie, Tjitske Akkerman, Teun Pauwels, "It Is Still a Long Way from Madou Square to Law Street: The Evolution of the Flemish Bloc", in Akkerman, de Lange, Rooduijn (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 208–224.

Concluding Remarks

This article puts the emphasis on one of the pressing political developments of recent decades within European party politics, namely, the increased radicalization of mainstream right parties. Even though the electoral surge of the far right is a crucial topic for discussion, there is a need to talk more about mainstream actors and the mainstream right in particular, since the mainstream right has the reputation of being the "gatekeeper" of liberal democracy.[30] It is critical to highlight that just as any other political actor, mainstream right parties are also active agents of change, and their choices shape the health of liberal democracies. Stuck between the so-called "silent revolution" and 'silent counter-revolution,' the mainstream right is increasingly prone to radicalization by embracing the latter.

As this article demonstrates, the trajectories for such radicalization are quite diverse. In countries where liberal democratic institutions have been established the most, mainstream right radicalization tends to have an issue-specific character. In these contexts, mainstream right parties attempt to bring the voters back by accommodating the far right and adopting harsher stances on issues such as migration, welfare, and other newly emerging cultural debates, while remaining committed to liberal democracy on other issues and in general terms. In other countries, mainstream right parties cross the boundary entirely and end up occupying the far right of the political spectrum. Finally, in some instances, especially where the party system is fragmented, more right-wing factions within the mainstream right parties break away to establish themselves as the far right.

Considering that the mainstream right and the far right have a lot in common in terms of their ideological and historical roots, these parties end up fighting for very similar groups of electorates. What unites all three of these trajectories is an increasingly fragile state of cordon sanitaire.[31] With more coalition governments between the two and with more accommodative strategies employed by the mainstream right, the boundaries between the mainstream right and the far right are becoming blurry. A major implication

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[30] Bale, Kaltwasser (eds.), *op. cit*.

[31] Kathy Brown, Aurelien Mondon, Aaron Winter, "The Far Right, the Mainstream and Mainstreaming: Towards a Heuristic Framework", in *Journal of Political Ideologies*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2023, pp. 162–179.

of this direction is the normalization of far-right ideas within the wider society[32]. In fact, the empirical evidence shows that when mainstream actors adopt previously unacceptable ideas voiced by the far right, they just end up legitimizing and normalizing them on a societal level.[33] Therefore, mainstream right radicalization is not simply an electoral strategy to bring back the votes. It is a major threat to the health of liberal democracies within the nation states and the liberal international order on a global level.

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[32] The degree of acceptance of the far-right and radical ideas within the wider society is one of the major consequences of MRR, with effects on the further political marginalization of the vulnerable and excluded minorities. See, for instance, Sergiu Gherghina, Monika Mokre, and Sergiu Mișcoiu, "Deliberative Democracy, Under-Represented Groups and Inclusiveness in Europe", in *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research*, vol. 34, issue 5, 2021, pp. 633–637

[33] Valentim, *op. cit*.

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