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**Netherlands**

# **The Decline of the Low Countries**

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### **The far right swept to record success in last week's Dutch elections. Yet the vote also saw Geert Wilders's PVV overshadowed by more traditionalist reactionary forces.**

The big winner of the Dutch regional elections on March 20 was the far-right Forum voor Democratie (FvD). [1] This was first time the FvD participated in these elections, which also decide the composition of the country's senate. With almost 15 percent of the vote, it immediately became one of the biggest factions in the upper house, in a fresh step forward for the far right in the Netherlands.

Having emerged out of a campaign against the European Union's trade association with Ukraine, the FvD became a political party only in 2016, winning two seats in parliament the following year. [2] Since then, the FvD, and especially its leader Thierry Baudet, have been permanent fixtures in the media. Baudet and the FvD follow in the footsteps of the far right in the Netherlands, which shot to prominence at the turn of the millennium, under the leadership of Pim Fortuyn. [3]

For the last few years, its main representative was Geert Wilders and his Partij voor de Vrijheid (Party for Freedom, PVV), but he is now being overshadowed by Baudet. Although Wilders and his Islamophobic movement in many ways laid the groundwork for the success of the FvD, this new party is different â€” and more radical. [4]

## A Reactionary Creed

One difference is that the FvD openly presents itself as ideologically driven. As its program declares, in an implicit swipe at Geert Wilders, "we are rational, cultured, serious and focused on matters of substance." FvD is sometimes labeled a "populist" force, but it is the most self-consciously elitist party in the Dutch political landscape. Baudet, who wrote a book on classical music, famously started his maiden speech in parliament by paraphrasing (in Latin) Cicero. [5] Meanwhile, the FvD candidate list is made up of lawyers, surgeons, corporate managers, businessmen, retired military officers.... And most of all the FvD's programmatic statements promise class war from above on all fronts.

Baudet and the people around him are working on a project for an authoritarian, nationalist transformation of Dutch society. As part of this, it is building a party organization (with 30,000 members, it already surpassed several of the established centrist parties) with local chapters and a rapidly growing youth wing as well as ideological training. In contrast, the PVV is, legally speaking, a closed association with only one member: Wilders himself. Whereas the PVV completely revolves around Wilders and his Twitter account, the FvD is creating a movement as part of its long-term strategy to remodel the Netherlands.

The ideology guiding their project is more coherent than that of the PVV. Wilders started out on the right wing of the free market, secular liberal VVD. Yet with Islamophobia as his central priority, he abandoned his initial radical neoliberal positions to embrace a kind of "welfare-chauvinism." Wilders thus instead postured as a defender of the welfare state, claiming the real threat to it was immigration and that immigrants' access to social security needed to be restricted further. Conversely, the FvD election manifesto calls for destroying laws that protect workers against dismissal and in case of illness, for selling off social housing, and abolishing inheritance taxes as well as subsidies for tenancy and health care costs. Adopting social-Darwinist terms, social protection has, the FvD national election manifesto proclaimed, turned people into "herd animals" and made society "indolent" (the Dutch term used was just as archaic). Instead, the FvD wants to see "dynamism" and turn the Netherlands into "the Silicon Valley of Europe."

To oversee this project, the FvD wants a strong executive branch. As the party euphemistically puts it, it wants to “increase the distance between the government and the parliament.” In the Dutch system, governments consist of coalitions of different parties, and traditionally the prime minister is a representative of the largest party in this coalition. The FvD wants to restrict this coalition process and concentrate more power in the hands of the premier. They propose that the prime minister should be directly elected, and be given the authority to appoint, dismiss, or overrule members of the cabinet.

While increasing the power of the executive, the party wants to limit that of the independent judiciary (supposedly “dominated by leftists”) and gut the mechanisms that provide state support for civil society, public broadcasting, and political parties. Instead of “endless compromises,” the FvD desires “more decisive governance,” commanding a strengthened military and police, and ruling over a disempowered population, and especially a precarious and weakened working class.

In addition, the FvD wants to introduce a system of referendums through which citizens can launch proposals and introduce new bills. This proposal is a centerpiece of the FvD’s ideology and why the party calls itself a supporter of “direct democracy.” But in a society where workers’ rights have been destroyed, and mechanisms of public debate gutted, those with wealth and connections will be even more advantaged, and referendums another way to implement their wishes. For Baudet, this is not a problem, of course — he waves this objection aside by writing that the economically powerful getting their way is hardly unique to referendums: “After all, are parliaments not also susceptible to powerful lobbies of multinationals and other wealthy corporations?” The ideological glue holding together the FvD’s atomized society would consist of nationalism and white supremacy. In the paranoid worldview of the FvD, “in the past decades there has been an attempt to alienate the Dutch from their history and separate them from their culture.” The FvD is a strong supporter of the far-right myths of the “great replacement”; a supposed conspiracy by leftists to replace the white European population through immigration, and “cultural Marxism.” [6] [7]

To counteract these plots, the FvD calls for “teaching, disseminating, and promoting” all “the beautiful things the West has produced,” while closing the borders (apart from for “those who we need”), and purging left-wing influences from academia. The FvD wants “to encourage remigration” when “assimilation has been unsuccessful,” deport immigrants whose political views “do not fit our Western civilization,” and restrict immigrants’ access to social security.

For an example of what kind of society the FvD wants, one can look at Hungary: in an interview with a Hungarian magazine, Baudet called its prime minister Viktor Orbán a “hero of the Western world,” and especially praised his anti-Soros campaign. [8]

Baudet developed his ideas on national sovereignty and democracy in his PhD dissertation, published as a book in Dutch and English (*The Significance of Borders*). For Baudet, “democracy” is the sovereign exercise of legitimate power in the name of a nation. This legitimacy is not the result of the mutual recognition of rights and democratic organization — it is a cultural construction. When rulers and ruled are part of the same national culture, Baudet argues, the ruled will recognize themselves in their rulers, and accept their power as legitimate. It follows for him that nations need to be homogeneous to enable the required recognition. States should not only uphold the law, but actively mold the “norms of values” of its society to preserve (or rather: create) its homogeneity. Baudet has a history of sliding between defining this homogeneity in cultural terms, or in ethnic ones, as when he said that that he wants to keep Europe predominately white, or when he voiced his fear of the “dilution” of the Dutch people through mixing with others.

Baudet’s concept of democracy logically leads him to reject human rights. Baudet considers a nation sovereign when the state acting on its behalf is not limited in the exercise of its power. Since rights are given and decided upon by the sovereign power, people have only such rights as are granted to them as part of the nation. But human rights bodies put limits on what a sovereign nation-state can do, and this is why Baudet considers such institutions, as well as any

other international structure, as “anti-democratic.” The FvD’s opposition to human rights treaties is not only a matter of tactics, based on how these treaties hinder the implementation of closed borders — it is a matter of principle.

# The F-Word

Baudet repeatedly refers to fascists for inspiration. In a piece for the French right-wing magazine *Valeurs Actuelles* in December 2015, discussing the terrorist attacks in France, he compared the jihadist terrorists with Gilles, the main character of the 1939 autobiographical novel of the same name by the French fascist Pierre Drieu de la Rochelle. For him, each of these figures are attracted by the “erotic effect of violence,” a view with which he himself evidently sympathizes; “Everything in life is achieved through combat. He who does not fight dies. And we would like our society to wish for ‘peace’ at all costs?”

Society is, Baudet writes, approaching the point of no return at which it will be forced to face the need for such combat, just like Gilles did.

Another French writer promoted by Baudet is Dominique Venner. [9] Venner spent time in prison in the early 1960s because of his involvement with the right-wing terrorist *Organisation Armée Secrète*, and was later an associate of Alain de Benoist and other figures in the French Nouvelle Droite. [10] Central to their project was a reformulation of the ideas of the far-right in terms of the supposed “essential differences” — and hence impossibility of mixing or combination — between nations.

In the words of De Benoist: “The true wealth of the world is first and foremost the diversity of its cultures and peoples. The West’s conversion to universalism has been the main cause of its subsequent attempt to convert the rest of the world ... the Westernization of the planet has represented an imperialist movement fed by the desire to erase all otherness.”

This kind of reasoning justifies anti-immigrant policies, but in the name of preserving “difference between nations” instead of a supposedly superior “race.” It can also be seen in Baudet’s calls for a “sovereign cosmopolitanism” to protect each nation’s unique identity (while removing all difference inside the nation, in order to preserve this identity).

But the right-wing thinker that Thierry Baudet resembles most is Oswald Spengler, author of *The Decline of the West*. [11] According to Spengler, humanity consists of essentially different peoples (“Volker” in the original German) that are fated to be in eternal struggle. Each people is determined by its “blood” — a word that Spengler uses in a very vague way, but indicates a kind of eternal, metaphysical essence. The continuous struggle between “peoples” (at other times called “nations” or “civilizations”) is cyclical, each going through rise and decline. According to Spengler “western civilization” was nearing its end in the twenties. The task was to courageously face the inevitable — like the Roman soldier who remained at his post when Mount Vesuvius erupted, his remains to be discovered centuries later.

Baudet considers Spengler a “great philosopher” and echoes his rhetoric of decline, the need for essential differences, and for eternal struggle. Disconnected from its national essence, a society will lose its life-giving culture, instead only producing “formless, modernist buildings” while “abstract, meaningless — art” destroys people’s sense of home,” dooming them to a future of “spiritual homelessness and political dispossession.” “Society has lost its organic unity” and “modernity has gone too far,” making us forget that “life means struggle.” Denial of this eternal struggle makes a society decadent, and attempts to protect people against its effects turns them into the “indolent herd-animals” the FvD election program denounces.

But Baudet also has a difference with the Spengler of *The Decline of the West* – perhaps also the reason why he says he is no longer an “acolyte” of his. For Baudet believes the decline can be reversed.

This was also the theme of his victory speech, a piece of oratory that was flowery even for Baudet’s standards, and packed with references to far-right themes. Claiming to be “standing among the ruins” of the “greatest and most beautiful civilization the world has ever known,” a “boreal civilization,” under attack from the inside by journalists, artists, and left-wing teachers, and from the outside by migration, Baudet described his movement as “a new political theology,” the carrier of an “unique force that can never be taken away,” a movement that will bring about a “rebirth” by reconnecting the country to its “ancient roots and make it blossom again.”

The clear influences on Baudet of European far-right figures from the 1920s and 1930s, his nationalism and racism, his misogynist statements and desire for authoritarian leadership inevitably raise the question of what makes him and his party different from fascism. The FvD does not have the kind of militant street presence associated with classical fascism, and neither does it want to abolish multi-party democracy. When needed, Baudet can still shift to a milder register, and in the last campaign the FvD skillfully avoided discussing the full implications of its program. Internationally, its contacts vary between the French Rassemblement National (the former National Front) and the right wing of the British Tories.

In general, the FvD’s worldview fits very well with the description of what the Italian historian Enzo Traverso has called “post-fascism,” in his book *The New Faces of Fascism*; “Its recipes are politically reactionary and socially regressive: they involve the restoration of national sovereignty, the adoption of forms of economic protectionism [the FvD wants to use the state to support ‘national industries’], and the defense of endangered ‘national identity’, it upholds a plebiscitary model of democracy that destroys any process of collective deliberation in favor of a relationship that merges people and leader.” [\[12\]](#)

## Who Supports These Policies?

When the FvD first started to rise in the polls, there was some expectation the party would mainly appeal to supporters of Wilders. As politics becomes more and more indistinguishable from the entertainment industry, part of the appeal of Baudet is simply the fact he is new. The appeal of Wilders’s image of permanent outrage and folksy sayings has started to wear off. Baudet offers something new and different; he is younger, handsome, well-dressed, and tweets about how listening even to the “second-rate” nineteenth-century composers makes him realize how much better things were back then. He explains the need to study how to smoke cigars properly, and considers himself “the most important intellectual in the country.”

But while Wilders’s party lost significantly in the regional elections, and polls predict it will also lose support in the next national elections as well, its loss is less than the FvD’s (expected) gain. The FvD’s “classy” self-presentation appeals to right-wingers who rejected Wilders because of his vulgarity and the plebeian character of his movement.

The FvD is also quite popular among ambitious university students who see themselves as the upcoming elite. They have grown up in a society that has become increasingly nationalist and right-wing over the last two decades, and the FvD is the most coherent expression of this. [\[13\]](#) And it promises them a chance at shining careers: its program opens by declaring the country is an “existential crisis” but solutions to it are blocked by a “cartel” of political parties who monopolize positions of power. The FvD promises to sweep aside this “outdated, suffocating” establishment to make way for the “new generation” so that it can arrive at their “proper positions.”

Two years ago, the Dutch social-democratic party, the PvdA, imploded in the heaviest election defeat in Dutch

political history. Many of its voters moved rightwards, to parties of the mainstream right, but a large part opted instead for the left-liberal Green party, GroenLinks. The latest regional elections confirm this picture; with some important exceptions, the support for the far right does not come from voters leaving parties of the center en masse, but from right-wing voters moving further right. Although the governing right-wing coalition lost its majority in the senate, the Right as a whole did not grow much. Instead, the Dutch right wing has recomposed and further radicalized.

From the 1970s to the late 1990s, a kind of progressive liberalism was hegemonic in Dutch society. The thin wedge that opened a breach in this hegemony was Islamophobia. The new Dutch right adopted elements of liberal hegemony to turn them against the Muslim and immigrant other, by claiming sexism and homophobia are products of “non-western cultures,” and that the defense of women’s and gay rights necessitate anti-immigrant policies. [14] The FvD continues to make homo- and femo-nationalist statements – but in a much weaker vein. Baudet is known for making sexist remarks. He claims that women do not want their partners to respect them when they do not consent to sex, and secretly desire to have it forced upon them. One of his first public acts was when he defended “pick-up artist” Julien Blanc (who advised men that in order to “seduce” a Japanese woman, a guy should “just grab her … to take the pressure off, yell Pikachu or Pokemon or Tamagotchi or something”). Movements and parties the FvD consider allies, such as Pegida, or the Belgian group Schild en Vrienden, are rife with homophobia and sexism.

For two decades, the traditional parties of the Right have also become more right-wing, simultaneously posing as the reasonable alternative to the far right while taking over its ideas and making them “respectable.” This was the dynamic with Pim Fortuyn, with Geert Wilders, and it now seems to be happening with Baudet as the “center right” rushes to congratulate him and declare their willingness to work together. Each time, Dutch politics as a whole has become more reactionary and nationalist. No left-wing force in Dutch politics matches the radicalism of Baudet, or before him that of Wilders.

The Green party has recently prospered because it positions itself as a progressive alternative that stands opposite to the far right on issues that have become central to public debate, like racism and, with the recent protests, climate change. It doubled its Senate representation in the last elections, growing to over 10 percent of the vote. However, after the current right-wing coalition lost its majority in the upper house, Groenlinks – which has in the past helped to abolish the system of public study grants and implement other cuts – indicated it is willing to make deals with such forces. This would likely demotivate many of its voters.

The other main left-wing force, the Socialist Party (SP), has been unable to find its way in this context, although on socioeconomic issues it is significantly more left-wing than the Greens. The SP’s recent course has been a mixture of accepting parts of the Netherlands’ right-wing drift, including on immigration and refugees, while simultaneously trying to change the conversation by focusing on issues it is stronger on, such as health care. [15] This approach has not been a success – the party has been losing in elections for almost ten years straight, and in the last elections, its vote almost halved, to less than 6 percent. Its membership figure is the lowest it has been in fifteen years. The outbreak of the crisis in 2008, when the time for its ideas seemed to have come, was instead the end of the SP’s upward trajectory.

The greatest threat to “occidental civilization,” Spengler wrote in his last book, is the coming together of class struggle from below with the struggles of oppressed peoples in a “colored world revolution.” An obvious lesson for the Left is that issues of racism and immigration are not somehow secondary matters but indeed need to be combined with other emancipation struggles. The Netherlands has recently gone through a period of increasing strike activity and recently saw large protests around women’s day and climate change. Instead of trying to be a partner for the Right, the Left can learn one thing from the approach of Wilders and Baudet: consistent opposition and ideological struggle can change what is considered possible in politics.

[Jacobin](#)

# The Decline of the Low Countries

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