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Far right

From Pim Fortuyn to Geert Wilders & the PVV – Pro-gay and anti-Islam: rise of the Dutch far-Right

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In the Netherlands, the right-wing PVV (Freedom Party) has steadily garnered power using a hate-filled discourse directed at Muslims and elites alike.

The Dutch far-right has evolved into one of the most successful national movements in Europe. Its leader Geert Wilders is a major political figure with international support. In many ways Wilders is the heir of Pim Fortuyn, a politician who played a crucial role in shaping a new right-wing current, 'national-populism', in Dutch politics, and who was murdered in 2002.

Populism here means the idea that society is separated in two camps; the 'good people' versus a 'corrupt elite'. The 'people' are not the whole of society, but the part of the society that is considered pure and whose political will is considered legitimate: it is a partial object that stands in for the whole. Who is part of the 'people' is not given, the borders of this category are contested. The selection of those considered part of it and who are not is a political act.

Different kinds of populism use different criteria to select and shape 'the people' into political actors. In national-populism, the 'people' and the nation tend to overlap: the nation is not equal to the citizenry but to the 'people', a term with an historical, ethnic connotation. The national-populism of Fortuyn and Wilders calls for the disappearance of an 'alien' minority culture to preserve a mythical, homogeneous 'Dutchness'.

A nationalist trailblazer

During the nineties Fortuyn became a public figure combining nationalism with populism and right-wing, anti-left liberalism. He argued for neoliberal economic policies and deep cuts in social services. His book *De Verweesde Samenleving* ('The Orphaned Society'), published in 1995, showed him to be a conservative cultural pessimist, decrying the loss of community, the decline of patriarchal authority figures and the erosion of social norms and values.

Two years later, in his book *Tegen de islamisering van onze cultuur* ('Against the islamization of our culture'), he declared 'Islamic culture' in particular to be a threat to Dutch society. Fortuyn framed Islamic culture as uniform and a-historical. Supposedly, Islam was not only a religion, but also a world-view and political ideology. According to Fortuyn, under the influence of individualism and 'cultural relativism', Dutch people risked losing their identity to this 'backward' culture.

Fortuyn supposedly attacked Muslims for their culture, not for their ethnicity as such or for being immigrants. In this way, Fortuyn could distance himself from the pseudo-scientific biological racism of the extreme-right at the time. Cultural othering replaced racial othering; 'culture' replaced 'race' as the marker producing a hierarchical difference between an inferior out-group (the target being especially Muslims) and the superior in-group. Fortuyn's avoidance of the charge of 'racism' by claiming he wasn't targeting individuals or a 'race' but a 'culture' or 'religion' remains a standard argument of the Dutch Right.

In practice, the categories constantly overlap and the distinction often becomes meaningless; in his book *The Orphaned Society*, Fortuyn wrote that he considered it impossible for people to 'leave their culture behind'. And in a famous interview with the daily *De Volkskrant* Fortuyn's discussion of Islam segued into linking crime to ethnicity:

“Moroccan youth never steal from a Moroccan. Did you ever notice that? But we can be robbed.” [1] Culture functions here in a manner analogous to how race functions in biological racism; heredity is taken as determining the characteristics of human beings.

Fortuyn did not invent these ideas. An important step in introducing such views into the Dutch political mainstream was a 1991 speech by future European Commissioner for Internal Market and Services, Frits Bolkestein [2]. Back then, Bolkestein was leader of the right-wing liberal VVD, one of the major parties in the Netherlands. In a speech for a meeting of the Liberal International, Bolkestein posited a contradiction between European and Christian civilization and the culture of the Middle-East and Islam. In this discourse, democracy and human rights became products of a singular European culture, instead of results of political conflicts inside different cultures.

Likewise, Fortuyn assimilated political concepts as the separation of church and state or equal rights for women and homosexuals into ‘Dutch culture’. Fortuyn’s national-populism was a mix of moral conservatism and economic liberalism that integrated elements of the Dutch progressive liberal hegemony that had come into being after ’68. By linking his attacks on the Muslim minority to Muslims’ supposed reactionary views on democracy, women’s rights and equal rights for homosexuals, he also appealed to people who considered themselves to be progressive. For Fortuyn, Dutch culture ‘including the democratic gains he claimed were part of it’ was in danger because the ‘elites’ of the Netherlands refused to recognize the ‘threat’ of Islamic culture. In populist fashion, Fortuyn appealed to ‘the Dutch people’ to defend their culture.

But on 6 May, 2002, Pim Fortuyn was killed by environmental activist Volkert van der Graaf.

Despite its electoral success, Fortuyn’s party quickly tore itself apart after his death in fights between feuding individuals. But the potential for an anti-immigrant party to the right of the VVD hadn’t disappeared and different political forces would try to appeal to Fortuyn’s followers. Of several would-be heirs, Geert Wilders has been the most successful. He has also moved much more to the right than Fortuyn ever did.

In Fortuyn’s footsteps

In the late nineties and early 2000s, Wilders was a parliamentarian on the right wing of the VVD and was closely associated with Bolkestein. Another strong political influence on him was fellow VVD-parliamentarian Ayaan Hirsi Ali [3]. Together, Wilders and Hirsi Ali developed a so-called ‘critique of the Islamic religion’ that saw the behaviour of Muslims as determined by their religion and that blamed the social-economic misery and lack of democracy in many Islamic countries as well as sexism and racism inside Muslim communities on their ‘backward’ culture. In 2004, Wilders left the VVD and two years later he organized his own party, the Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV, Freedom Party).

In the meantime, the Netherlands was shocked by another murder. In 2004, film-maker and columnist Theo van Gogh was murdered by an Islamic fundamentalist [4]. Van Gogh, a supporter of Pim Fortuyn was a reactionary who often insulted gays, women, Jews and most of all Muslims to whom he referred in terms like ‘goatfuckers’ or ‘pimps of the prophet’. After this murder, dozens of mosques and scores of people were attacked. The Monitor Racisme en Extremisme, a publication by the anti-racist Anne Frank foundation and the University of Leiden, recorded 106 cases of anti-Muslim violence between 2 and 30 November. In this climate, Wilders’ popularity soared. In 2006, in its first elections, the PVV won 9 out of 150 seats in the parliament.

After the beginning of the economic crisis in 2008, the major parties tried to make the parliamentary elections of 2010 about social-economic issues and Wilders’ popularity declined somewhat. In response, the PVV tried to connect its

anti-Islam and anti-migration positions to economic issues. Earlier statements about attacking trade-unions, or a flat tax rate, abolishing the minimum wage and liberalisation of the law on dismissals flew out of the window. Instead, the 2010 program of the PVV is an example of ‘welfare-chauvinism’.

The PVV now promised to defend the welfare state; rejected liberalization of the law on dismissals; demanded keeping the retirement age at 65 et cetera. Such proposals to preserve social rights were combined with proposals to exclude minorities from those rights, by making social security dependent on length of citizenship and language skills, and denying social security to people wearing a burqa or niqab.

The program claimed that ‘only the PVV defends the welfare-state and that is why we plead for a stop on immigration from Islamic countries. It’s one or the other; either a welfare-state or an immigration-country’. This link between ‘Islam’ and social rights is indicative of the ideological evolution of the PVV; a few years before, ‘Islamization’ was supposedly one of several problems facing Dutch society. By 2010 it had become the root cause of social problems, of crime, of the national deficit, of deteriorating social services....

The new government of VVD Prime-Minister Mark Rutte needed the support of the PVV to have a majority in parliament. Its coalition agreement reflected a number of priorities of the PVV. A ‘very substantial’ lowering of non-western immigration into the country was one of its top goals. The government proposed doing that through further restricting asylum-rights and restrictive immigration – policies.

Other typical PVV positions the government adopted were criminalizing undocumented migrants and revoking the Dutch nationality of criminals with double nationalities. In return for policies like these, the PVV gave up many of its ‘left-wing’ social-economic demands, instead supporting 18 billion Euros in austerity measures. However, the government collapsed in 2012 when the PVV withdrew from talks on even more austerity measures. At the following elections, the PVV took a heavy blow, losing ten seats. Even so, with 15 seats it is the third party in parliament.

The right-wing drift

In late 2013, Geert Wilders began cooperating with parties like the French National Front (FN), the Belgium Vlaams Belang (VB) and the Austrian Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ), parties who for decades have been the core of the European far-right. This step surprised many, since Wilders had always been careful to keep his distance from such parties. However, in recent years, the core of the European far-right has been converging with the trajectory of Wilders. The FN has been evolving towards positions that are close to those of Wilders. The FN today denies its antisemitic past. The FN and PVV pose as the defenders of certain gains of modernity against a supposed Islamic threat.

The FN, like the VB and FPÖ, still has in it remnants of an older European far-right which is anti-modernist, antisemitic and references historical fascism, but this side has been marginalized enough for Wilders to feel he can now ally himself with such parties. At the same time, the PVV is drifting further to the right. For the PVV, Muslims should be subjected to other, more oppressive laws and regulations than people in the ‘in-group’; their holy book should be banned, there should be a special tax for wearing head-scarves, unlike other religious groups they should not be allowed to organize their own schools, and recently the party called for closing all mosques in the Netherlands.

Since 2013, the PVV has slowly extended its field of activity. In 2010, when Wilders was tried for inciting hatred, the PVV organized a small support rally but for a long time this was the only extra-parliamentary activity of the party. However, in early 2013 the PVV opened a website to give juridical advice to people objecting to the construction of mosques in their neighbourhood and in February that year Wilders declared a ‘resistance tour’ throughout the

country to collect signatures against the government's austerity policies.

On September 21, on the same day that left-wing organizations organized an anti-austerity protest, the PVV organized its first large demonstration, with a couple of thousand of participants. Wilders' speech at the rally was a mix of nationalist rhetoric, attacks on austerity policies and against his usual targets like Islamization. New about this rally was the presence of activists from a range of fascist and nazi groups. Wilders doesn't feel the need anymore to distance himself from such groups.

The potential of the PVV to mobilize supporters was remarkable considering its weak organizational structure. The PVV doesn't have members, branches or other publications than a website. This way, Wilders is not accountable to anybody. He determines who will be candidate in elections for the PVV and who of its representatives are allowed to talk to the media. Wilders is a prominent figure in the media, regularly drawing attention with statements intended to provoke, but often refuses to participate in news-programs and talk shows, saying he distrusts the "left-wing" media. However, the PVV and Wilders reach a large audience through right-wing blogs and social media.

Riding the wave of institutionalized racism

One distinctive characteristic of Wilders' current, and of the new right-wing in the Netherlands in general, is its ambiguous attitude to the heritage of the post-'68 social movements. They are vehemently opposed to the ecological movement, and of course to anti-racism. But (verbal) support for women's rights and those of LGBT's as well as opposition to antisemitism have been made into markers of "Dutchness" and modernity. In Dutch national-populism, the left and progressive background of these emancipatory ideas and how they were part of social conflict is ignored.

Emancipation in Dutch society is supposedly completed: emancipation movements are "out-dated", except among "backward" minorities. The fight against sexism, homophobia and antisemitism is redefined as one against "non-integrated minorities", especially Muslims who are considered to be inherently misogynist, homophobic and antisemitic. In the words of PVV parliamentarian Fleur Agema; "antisemitism and homophobia are not Dutch phenomena. They have been imported, for a deplorable part from Morocco."

Racism in the Netherlands is not limited to the PVV, but Wilders, and Fortuyn before him, do more than just reflecting existing sentiments: they mobilize and shape a social base for their politics. A 2010 report showed job applicants with non-western names had less chance to be invited for a meeting with potential employers: on average 9% less chance for men. More than a third of Dutch jobseekers of Turkish and Moroccan origin experience discrimination when looking for work.

Unemployment among people with a non-western background is 14.2%, among "indigenous" Dutch it is 4.3% [5]. Amnesty International has criticized the Dutch police's ethnic profiling, and the dominant nature of prejudices and stereotypes among them [6]. One 2010 study showed that over a quarter of the 1020 respondents had a negative view of foreigners, with 10 % stating they were racists [7]. Almost three-quarters of Dutch Muslims feel that since the rise of Geert Wilders Muslims are viewed more negatively and almost a quarter of Muslims experience discrimination on a regular basis.

At the same time, the development of Dutch nation-populism shows racism doesn't grow spontaneously into a political force. Bolkstein and Wilders were members of the mainstream "center-right" VVD, Fortuyn was a well-known publicist for established right-wing media. Together with a range of publicists that are also often linked to the center-parties, they shaped and popularized the culturalist and nationalist ideas that come together in the

ideology of the PVV.

With the parliamentary left either largely ignoring racism or even taking over parts of the national-populist discourse, opposition to this deeply rooted Dutch racism needs to come from somewhere else. There's a strong taboo on the existence of everyday and institutionalized racism in Dutch society since it so strongly contradicts the Dutch self-image as 'open and tolerant'. Many anti-racist organizations and organizations of minorities have become institutionalized, dependent on government funding and are hesitant to rock the boat. The liveliest anti-racist activities have come from outside the established left organizations and structures, often organized by young people of color.

8 February 2015

[Roarmag](#)

[1] <http://www.volkskrant.nl/binnenland...>

[2] [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frits ...](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frits_...)

[3] [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ayaan ...](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ayaan_...)

[4] <http://www.theguardian.com/world/20...>

[5] <http://statline.cbs.nl/StatWeb/publ...>

[6] <http://www.amnesty.nl/sites/default...>

[7] <http://religionresearch.org/act/201...>