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Netherlands

# Dutch Socialist defenders of welfare state leading polls

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**After having agreed to numerous austerity attacks, Geert Wilders' far right PVV suddenly withdrew its support to the right-wing coalition, and left the Netherlands without a government in April. The Socialist Party is doing remarkably well in polls and might become the biggest party after elections in September. In Netherlands, as elsewhere on the continent, traditional politics is being stirred by opposition to harsh austerity measures, which are being felt hard by ordinary people.**

After over a month of negotiating the three parties that made up the coalition were unable to reach an agreement. This coalition was an alliance of two governing parties, the free-market right-wing liberal VVD and the conservative CDA, supported by the xenophobic right-wing party PVV, lead by Geert Wilders, that stayed outside the government. The PVV combines a neoliberal economic agenda with anti-immigrant and especially anti-Muslim ideas. However, the PVV also uses populist demagoguery, posing as the defender of certain social rights, to attract voters who feel threatened by the economic crisis and neoliberal policies.

After supporting a coalition that has implemented 18 billion euros of cuts through such measures as raising the retirement age to 67 years, Wilders pulled out when negotiating over another 12 billion euros in cuts. This was a reaction to polls predicting heavy electoral losses for the PVV, pushing Wilders to again emphasize his populist image.

Only a few days after the fall of the coalition, a slightly modified version of the austerity package was accepted anyway by a majority in parliament. Except from the VVD and CDA the new cuts were supported by three other parties, including the Greens (GroenLinks). Although coming from a fusion of the Communist party and socialist and progressive parties in the early nineties, GroenLinks has evolved into a more and more liberal direction the last few years. The new austerity package includes raising the cost of parts of health care, an earlier introduction of the raised age of retirement, further liberalization of the labor market, making it easier for employers to fire people, and an increase of the standard VAT rate.

Pressure on the government parties to introduce this new austerity package was high; without it, the Dutch budget deficit was going to grow bigger than three percent of the Gross Domestic Product. This was unacceptable for the CDA and VVD: in the European Union, the Dutch have consistently taken a hard line in favor of austerity. Together with the German government, the Dutch have insisted on drastic cuts in order to meet the standard that a country's deficit should never be more than three percent of its GDP. Most of the Dutch political parties insist that austerity is needed to lower the public debt (which was 66 percent of GDP last year) as an answer to the economic crisis and have supported the European Stability Mechanism.

## Erosion of traditional parties

The collapse of the coalition was a new step in the years long process of erosion of support for the traditional government parties in the Netherlands, like the CDA and the social-democratic Labour Party, the PvdA. The CDA, once the most influential party in the country, is in a crisis caused by disintegrating electoral support and the lack of a clear perspective. Meanwhile, the PvdA has been unable to make itself visible as the largest opposition party and is divided between people who want to continue on its social liberal course, comparable to the British Labour Party or the German SPD, and those who want a 'return to its social democratic roots'. On the far right side of the political spectrum, Wilders' PVV has grown rapidly since its foundation in 2005 and is now the third largest party in

parliament. The PVV is now using nationalist and populist rhetoric against the EU in an, according to early polls, relatively successful attempt to recover ground it lost during its time as a supporter of the government.

The most remarkable development, and the most positive sign for the left, on the Dutch parliamentary scene is the growth of the Socialist Party (SP). Originally founded as a maoist party in the seventies, the SP has evolved into the major force of the Dutch left, which has attracted increasing support for its anti-neoliberal positions and defense of social security. Numerous polls predict that the SP could become the largest party and lead the next government. It is likely that the SP will surpass the traditional left party, the PvdA. It remains unsure what the SP will be prepared and able to do this unprecedented support. Its growth is not yet matched by a corresponding increase in social struggles or the social roots of a left wing current in Dutch society. The Dutch trade-unions are going through a process of reorganization that has affected their ability to resist the attacks and there are no other strong social movements challenging the right-wing course of the government.

Without doubt, it will be difficult for the SP to form an alliance with other parties without heavily compromising its positions. The most likely ally of the SP is the PvdA that, under pressure of the growth of the socialists, has made a cautious turn to the left but even together they will not have a majority in parliament.

The rise of parties on the left and right flanks of traditional parliamentary politics has put strong pressure on the usual practice of consensus-oriented Dutch politics, the so-called 'poldermodel'. This model has served to de-politicize fundamental social questions by bringing the mainstream right- and left together in discussions in which neoliberal principles were taken for granted and differences of opinion between them were often different opinions on how to best implement these principles. Over two decades of such unquestioned acceptance of neoliberal policies by shifting coalitions has alienated many people from the mainstream parties. It is especially the PvdA that has lost support because of this. Part of the votes of people who are dissatisfied with established politics go to the nationalist right but the growth of the SP proves many people, instead of blaming immigrants, wish for a social solutions to the economic crisis.