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The Netherlands and the EU

# Unfriendly Terrain

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### **In the Netherlands, the Right is dominating debates on European integration and refugees.**

The Netherlands has been a loyal supporter of the European Union. The small country's economy consists primarily of financial services and trade – sectors at the core of the EU project. At the same time, many Dutch people like to see themselves as cosmopolitan, tolerant members of a peaceful trading nation and understand participation in the EU as a logical extension of this.

The mood, however, has shifted. The clearest example was the victory of the right-wing “No” campaign in the April 6 consultative referendum on the EU association treaty with Ukraine. The treaty would be a step toward more political and legal cooperation between the EU and Ukraine and establish a free-trade area between the two.

As early as the 2005 referendum on the EU constitution – which was rejected by 61.5 percent of the voters – it was clear that Dutch citizens were changing their attitudes toward the EU. [1] The motivations for this “No” were mixed. Many voted with the understanding that EU policies demolish social services, but national chauvinism also appeared, each sometimes mixing with the wish to defend the Dutch welfare state against outside influence. But despite the presence of the Right in the campaign, the 2005 “No” was a clear rejection of the EU's neoliberal economic policies.

The Dutch political climate has shifted rightward over the past decade, however. According to Kevin Levie, a left-wing Socialist Party (SP) member, a new, nationalist right wing has “been advancing already for fifteen years. Established parties have partly taken over their vocabulary and agenda, and for fifteen years the Left has not been able to adequately respond.”

This nationalist right combines free-market economics, nationalism, populist demagoguery, xenophobic sentiment, and racism, especially Islamophobia. Today, Geert Wilders and his Freedom Party (PVV) are the most prominent representatives of this current. They see the EU as a threat to Dutch sovereignty and an obstacle to the draconian anti-immigration laws they would like to introduce. Instead of a political union, the PVV wants a purely economic free-trade zone in Europe. [2]

Although the PVV and its forerunners have not yet succeeded in becoming part of the government, they have successfully pushed the previously dominant progressive liberalism to the sides, and their ideas have become accepted as part of the country's common sense. [3] Since 2005, this right has only grown stronger, successfully shaping the anger and insecurity caused by the recent euro crisis. Their winning narrative: the EU is transferring money from hard-working Dutch workers to lazy Greeks.

#### Right-Wing Climate

Given this context, it is no surprise that the Right dominated the recent referendum campaign. The right-wing think tank *Forum voor Democratie* and the popular news and entertainment website *Geenstijl* drove the debate. *Forum voor Democratie* is the brainchild of publicist Thierry Baudet – who combines the pretensions of a conservative intellectual (he took a course on how to smoke cigars) with a talent for self-advertisement.

Baudet promotes anti-feminism, nationalism, and Islamophobia. *Geenstijl* (loosely translatable as “tasteless”) is a product of the major Dutch right-wing newspaper *De Telegraaf*. It shares the right-wing agenda of Baudet and the PVV, cultivating Islamophobia and hostility to the Left. It hides its blatant racism (for instance, it routinely refers to

refugees drowned in the Mediterranean as dobbernegers: “floating Negroes”) behind the name of “satire.”

While writers like Baudet make reactionary ideas respectable, a forum like Geenstijl provides the populist vulgarization of the same agenda. With the help of Geenstijl, who produced an app so people could sign electronically, the three hundred thousand signatures that require the Dutch government to organize a consultative referendum were easily gathered.

Just as in the campaign around the European constitution, the country’s center-left and center-right supported the association treaty. The most outspoken voice in the “Yes” camp was the neoliberal D66 party. Often called social-liberal, it’s a formation that combines neoliberal economic policies with socially liberal rhetoric about individual rights.

The party positioned the treaty as if it would protect Jews, the LGBT community, and Ukrainian democrats against Putin’s authoritarianism. The social-democratic Labour Party (PvdA), who is in government, and the Greens used similar rhetoric. Underlining the absence of any positive argument in favor of the treaty, the PvdA’s and D66’s campaign posters featured a photo of Putin, calling for a “Yes” vote to strike a blow against the Russian leader.

The pro-business VVD, the other party in the government coalition, focused on the opportunities the treaty would bring Dutch corporations – an idea that, in the post-2008 era, has lost much of its popular appeal.

Neither of the appeals were greeted with much enthusiasm.

## Left-Wing Decline

The far left was divided on the referendum. The left-wing Socialist Party [4] organized its own “No” campaign focused mostly on the neoliberal character of the association treaty. But its appeals were not free of chauvinism – just like in the 2005 campaign around the EU constitution.

One part of the radical left called for a boycott of the referendum. They justified their position by arguing that the Right dominated the debate, and the referendum would give more legitimacy to its initiators. From their perspective, the best possible outcome would have been a turnout below the 30 percent threshold, invalidating the whole referendum.

Another far-left “No” campaign, set up by socialists, NGOs, and independent activists, called for radically reforming the process of European unification and rejecting the EU’s neoliberal course. It published material explaining the negative consequences of the treaty for Ukrainian workers and collaborated with Ukrainian leftists like Volodomyr Ischenko. [5] Supporters of this campaign argued that the Left should try to make its own anti-EU case rather than abandoning the terrain to the Right.

Although the SP was by far the most visible left-wing “No” force, neither it nor the other left-wing initiatives succeeded in mobilizing much support. A substantial group of voters left their sheets blank or deliberately invalidated them to show their rejection of the whole referendum. Turnout was low: 32.2 percent, 61.1 percent of whom voted “No.” The low turnout shows that many SP supporters stayed home rather than add their “No” votes to Baudet and his right-wing allies.

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The referendum took place in a bleak context for the Left. The SP has been in the doldrums for the last few years, facing declining membership and disorder in its youth wing. Polls consistently predict a massive victory for the PVV and an implosion of the PvdA. Support for the Socialists hovers more or less around its current 10 percent. The dissatisfaction with the centrist government has not benefited the party.

Meanwhile, the Dutch right has largely dominated the recent public debate. In addition to the referendum, refugee policies have been at the center of a national conversation that is moving to the right. Refugees and politicians who are seen as supporting their rights have been the victims of intimidation and violence.

Agitation against refugees is the prelude to more general racist actions: attacks on Muslim citizens and threats to mosques. Right-wing demonstrations, such as those organized by Dutch supporters of Pegida, [6] are relatively small for now, but the popularity of the PVV and Geenstijl indicate a large right-wing potential in the country. They are not opposed to working together with genuine fascists in such mobilizations. The Dutch far right is taking its first steps as a street movement.

Anticipating next year's national elections, government parties are under pressure to give some meaning to this month's result. But few people assume the referendum will change much. Although the association treaty needs to be ratified by all twenty-eight EU member states to become permanent, it already became provisionally active in the beginning of 2016. Most people expect that, after a few cosmetic changes, it will be ratified despite the Dutch consultative referendum "â€" just as happened with the EU constitution.

The clear winner of the whole episode is the nationalist right. Already Baudet has said he wants to organize several more referenda, including one on EU "aid" to Southern European member states and another on immigration policies. Both Ron Meyer, chair of the SP, and the PVV's Geert Wilders responded to the April "No" result by tweeting it shows the gap between "the people" and "the elite."

But who counts as part of "the people" "â€" and more importantly, who does not? Meyer and Wilders would give wildly different answers. But the referendum campaign and the political climate in general favor the right-wing nationalist response, which would exclude Muslims and other minorities.

Pushing back against this trend is difficult, requiring a new emphasis on class issues instead of national, religious, and ethnic divisions. One campaign that has some potential to do this calls for a referendum on the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) agreement with the United States. A vote around this, which would necessarily center on the material concerns of millions of workers, would give the Left a much more favorable terrain on which to argue its case.

It's up to us to regain the initiative and propose a real alternative to austerity and racist scapegoating.

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[1] See [The Guardian](#).

[2] See [From Pim Fortuyn to Geert Wilders & the PVV – Pro-gay and anti-Islam: rise of the Dutch far-Right](#).

[3] See Alex De Jong *New Politics*, "[The Netherlands: Neoliberal Dreams in Times of Austerity](#)".

[4] See [Dutch Socialist Party from Sect to Mass Party](#).

[5] See Volodymyr Ischenko *New Left Review* "[Ukraine's Fractures](#)."

[6] See Anthony Fano Fernandez, *Jacobin*, [Germany's New Far Right](#).