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Netherlands: Geert Wilders, the Dutch “Cricket”

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In a country long known for its tradition of tolerance, the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV) is an outlier. Vocally Islamophobic and unapologetically Euro-skeptic, the party has risen to global prominence by embodying the rise of Europe’s growing far-right fringe. At the forefront of the PVV is Geert Wilders – a Dutch parliamentarian infamous for his uncensored criticism of Islam.

It was that very criticism which led to the PVV’s founding in 2005. Incensed by the center-right’s growing acceptance of Turkish entry into the European Union, Wilders broke off from his then-party, the liberal People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy, to form his own one-man party in the Dutch parliament. That party’s successor, the PVV, went on to win 9 seats in the 2006 general elections held in the Netherlands. Four years later, the PVV almost tripled its turnout, winning 24 parliamentary seats to become the third largest party in parliament. Though the PVV would lose 9 of those in 2012’s early elections, it remains one of the most prominent and controversial parties in the Netherlands today.

The key to the PVV’s strong electoral showing is rooted both in the rhetoric of its leader, as well as the extremist positions which the party has championed. A frank public speaker known both for his platinum-blond mane and his refusal to mince his words, Wilders builds on the legacy of Pim Fortuyn – the controversial far-right populist assassinated in 2002. Like Fortuyn, Wilders has won both notoriety and popularity for his vocal anti-Islamic, anti-immigrant positions. Since assuming office, Wilders has warned of the so-called “Islamization of the Netherlands”. In addition to professing his “hate” for Islam, he has compared the Koran to Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*. And lest his anti-immigrant rhetoric be reserved to the world’s 1.5 billion Muslims, he has also singled out Eastern European migrants, who he blames for stealing Dutch jobs and taking advantage of generous social services.

A key difference between Fortuyn and Wilders, however, is the latter’s staunch anti-EU stance. The PVV’s frequent denunciations of progressive elites have translated into a deep disdain for the EU. This was apparent even before the PVV was founded. In 2005, Wilders spearheaded the Dutch campaign to reject the European Constitution – which the Netherlands ultimately did, with some 60 per cent of Dutch voters opting against the Constitution. Since its founding, the PVV has offered a stinging rebuke of the European Union, and taken increasingly harsh positions on the Netherlands’ role within the EU.

The party’s initial position, calling for the reformation of the EU into an economic union, hardened in 2012 as its popularity fell in the run-up to national parliamentary elections. Hoping to increase its electoral odds by tapping into rising anti-EU sentiments, the party transformed the elections into a national referendum on the EU. The PVV campaigned with the slogan “Their Brussels, Our Netherlands”, argu-

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ing that the EU had lost the trust of the Dutch voters and that the Netherlands should extricate itself from both the EU and the Eurozone. In the months prior to the elections, the PVV launched an anti-EU website tellingly entitled “stop the European thieves”, in which it lambasted EU officials for bankrolling pet projects and high salaries on the backs of hard-working Dutchmen and women. But the party’s high stakes decision to bet it all on an anti-EU stance ultimately backfired. By election’s end, voters had opted for the European Union, supporting center-right and center-left parties like the Labor Party, which adhered to a more traditional, pro-EU position. As a result, the PVV lost more than a third of its seats.

Despite its recent electoral misfortunes, however, the PVV remains a political force to be reckoned with. It has successfully given voice to a growing minority in the Netherlands that views Dutch politics as elitist and blames external forces – whether the EU, immigrants, or Islam – for domestic hardship. The anti-traditionalist vein to which Wilders aspires in some respects explains the odd character of the party.

The PVV is the only party in the history of the Dutch parliament to lack a membership base. Since its founding, the party has had just one member: Geert Wilders. Wilders is the party’s only governing force and not subject to any formal internal sanctioning. Former Wilders allies have accused the party leader of autocracy, saying he fears internal competition. The party has also been subjected to accusations that it lacks financial transparency.

Wilders himself is something of enigma. While he is ever present in the Dutch media and in parliament, Wilders rarely takes part in public events – ostensibly for security reasons. Unlike most Populist Party leaders, Wilders thus rarely interacts directly with the people whom he claims to represent. But that is not the only way Wilders, and his PVV, distinguish themselves from the traditional far-right populists that have taken Europe by storm. Unlike France’s National Front Party or Belgium’s Flemish Interest, the PVV has not espoused anti-Semitic rhetoric and has in fact embraced a firmly pro-Israel stance.

Nor has the PVV advocated for a return to traditional family values. To the contrary, the party is a vocal supporter of women and gay rights, the legality of euthanasia, embryo selection and abortion – rights it believes are under siege throughout Europe. Wilders has in fact repeatedly spurned efforts to align his party with Europe’s far-right, professing his distaste for both the Flemish Interest and the National Front. Yet if the PVV does not fit within traditional conceptions of the far-right, its anti-Islamic positions, inflammatory rhetoric to foreigners, and staunch anti-EU platform have made it an intensely polarizing force on the Dutch political scene. Whether the party can sustain popular enthusiasm in its divisive positions beyond the current period of economic uncertainty remains to be seen.

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