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The far right in the Netherlands: the rise of the Party for Freedom

The article deals with the preconditions and growth of the far right movement in the Netherlands. Traced is the development and activity of the Party for Freedom, the movement's major representative, its program principles and attitudes to the state's internal and external policies. Special attention is paid to the party's views on immigration and the party's influence on the state policy in this area. Demonstrated is a policy which can reduce an electoral success of the far right.

Key words: G. Wilders, Party for Freedom, the far right, populism, immigration, Islam, national identity, elections

У статті розглядаються передумови та зростання крайньо-правого руху в Нідерландах. Прослідковано розвиток та діяльність «Партії за свободу», головного представника руху, її програмні принципи та ставлення до зовнішньої та внутрішньої політики держави. Особлива увага присвячена поглядам партії на проблеми імміграції та впливу партії на державну політику

в цій сфері. Продемонстровано політику, яка може призвести до зменшення електорального успіху крайньо-правих.

Ключові слова: Г. Вільдерс, «Партія за свободу», крайньо-праві, популізм, національна ідентичність, імміграція, іслам, вибори.

В статье рассматриваются предпосылки и рост крайне-правого движения в Нидерландах. Прослежено развитие и деятельность «Партии за свободу», главного представителя движения, ее программные принципы и отношение к внешней и внутренней политике государства. Особенное внимание уделено взглядам партии на проблемы иммиграции и влияния партии на государственную политику в этой сфере. Продемонстрирована политика, которая может привести к уменьшению электорального успеха крайне-правых.

Ключевые слова: Г. Вилдерс, «Партия за свободу», крайне-правые, популизм, иммиграция, ислам, национальная идентичность, выборы.

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The rise of the far right has become an all-European problem. Far right parties in many European countries have managed to get to parliaments and even to take part in forming governments. Thus, far right parties took part in coalition governments in Italy, Austria, Switzerland, Finland, and other countries. Their popularity is mostly fueled by immigration, especially by the recent refugee crisis. The Netherlands has experienced a considerable influx of immigrants, especially from non-European countries, during the last several decades, and that also contributed to the growth of far right sentiments in Dutch society and the rise of populist far right parties. The issue of the far right movement in the Netherlands has been investigated by Philip van Praag, Sarah de Lange, Cas Mudde, Alex de Jong, Adam Chandler, Andrej Zaslove, Anno Bunnik and others. Since this movement is growing in significance and can seriously influence the political configuration of the European Union the exploration of one of the major representatives of Europe's far right seems topical.

The aim of the article is to show the preconditions and growth of the far right movement in the Netherlands; to trace the development of the Party for Freedom, the movement's major representative; to display the party's attitude to the national external and internal policies; to investigate the party's activity which draws mass support of the population; to demonstrate a policy that can reduce an electoral success of the far right.

The Dutch society has a traditional reputation for tolerance and openness. It was the first country in the world to allow euthanasia and the first that legalized homosexual marriages. It is also quite soft on some drugs like marihuana. But at the same time Holland was also noted for its nationalism and right wing tendencies. For example, in the Second World War around

20 thousand Dutchmen voluntarily joined Nazi Germany's forces fighting on the Eastern front. Many Dutch cooperated with the Nazis in the Holocaust. Out of 140 thousand Jews who had lived in the country before the war at least 105 thousand perished (only about 25 percent survived). For comparison, in the neighboring Belgium over 60 percent of Jews survived the war [1, c. 158]. Thus, the Netherlands has a solid historical ground for nationalist and racist ideas. No wonder that racism is still strong in today's Holland. It is much easier for people with European names to get jobs than for those with non-European ones. Over a third of Muslim Dutch experience discrimination when looking for a job. Unemployment among them is 14.2 percent, while among native Dutch it is only 4.3 percent [2, p. 302].

Before the Second World War the Netherlands was predominantly a mono-ethnic country. Immigrants comprised less than one percent of the country's population. In the early 1940s and 1950s the first wave of immigrants with Dutch passports arrived mostly from the lost colonies such as Indonesia. Many of them were of mixed European and Indonesian ancestry. The economy of the Netherlands experienced an amazing growth in the 1960s. The growing economy needed a substantial number of guest workers and the government invited immigrants to come to the country to work. Majority of the guest workers arrived from the Mediterranean area (Portugal, Italy, Spain) and, especially, from such Muslim countries as Morocco and Turkey. It was initially believed that the immigrants would not stay long; they were expected to return in time to their home countries. The fuel and energy crisis of the mid-1970s reduced the need for immigrants and they stopped to arrive to the country en masse; but those who had worked here previously decided not to return

home. They had already put roots in their new home country and fully used the right to bring to the Netherlands their families and even their spouses to be. Due to a family reunification humanitarian policy applied in Holland, considerable numbers of immigrants, predominantly from Muslim countries, arrived in the country every year. In the 1970s and 1980s another wave of non-European immigrants with Dutch passports came from the former colony of Surinam. In the 1990s and 2000s many asylum-seekers arrived from such Muslim countries as Bosnia, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Syria, etc.

The influx of immigrants, especially of non-European origin, led to a substantial increase in the crime rate and the rise of far right sentiments in the Netherlands. The growth of far right sentiments has resulted in the growth of far right or right-wing populist parties. In 2002 Pim Fortuyn List, a far right party founded by Pim Fortuyn not long before his assassination, drew much attention in Holland. Many scholars agree that Pim Fortuyn played a crucial role in shaping a far right populist movement in the Netherlands of which Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom (in Dutch: *Partij voor de Vrijheid*, PVV) is now most significant representative. He became one of the most outspoken opponents of immigration, especially from Muslim countries. He saw in Islam the biggest threat to Western civilization. Fortuyn advocated putting an end to Muslim immigration, praised tolerance as a remarkable achievement of Western civilization and openly declared about his homosexual orientation. His major voters, according to historian Geert Mak, were taxi drivers, poor old people, housewives from disadvantaged city areas, about 30 percent of Dutch who were dissatisfied with their lives [1, c. 185]. Geert Mak is known as a critic of Pim Fortuyn; thus his opinion about Fortuyn's voters does not seem to be fully reliable. Many analysts claim that the far right all around Europe enjoy support from various segments of population: from the very educated and wealthy to the uneducated and poor.

In the general elections of 2002 Pim Fotuyn List got an unusually high result: it received 26 seats out of 150 in the parliament and became the second largest party in the legislature. Such a huge success may be partially explained by the assassination of the party's leader less than two weeks before the elections. Many Dutch started to consider Fortuyn as martyr and voted for his party out of protest. Soon the disagreements within the party contributed to the loss of its popularity and in four years it was finally dissolved.

In 2006 a major representative of the country's far right movement became the Party for Freedom founded by Geert Wilders. Born in 1963 in the town of Venlo, in the south-east of the country, Wilders graduated from a secondary school and went to Israel where he worked as a volunteer for about two years. Besides Israel he also visited some neighboring Arab countries and was shocked by their "economic and cultural backwardness." In Israel he was fascinated with how the Israeli develop national identity and

solidarity; with their readiness to defend their country from Arabs. This trip to Israel greatly influenced Wilders. He became an ardent supporter of Israeli in their struggle against Arabs and a staunch nationalist. After this trip he often referred to the Jews as "a role model for Europe" [3]. Upon returning home Wilders entered politics and got a job with the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), which held right-wing views. One of the party's leaders, Frits Bolkestein, became his mentor. Bolkestein was also one of the few Dutch politicians who openly criticized Islam and immigration. He, like Fortuyn, undoubtedly had a great influence on Wilders and planned to make him a leader of the party. In 1998 Wilders became a MP and an ardent adherent of the far right views in the VVD. The policy of the VVD seemed too moderate for Wilders and in September 2004 he split from the VVD and founded a one-member party for himself in the parliament. Officially he did it in a protest against the VVD's decision to accept Turkey to the EU. Wilders was afraid that "Turkey's inclusion into the EU will hasten Islamization and fall of Europe" [4, p. 504].

On November 2, 2004 all the country was shocked by a cruel killing of film-maker Theo Van Gogh by a Muslim fundamentalist of Moroccan origin, Mohammed Bouyeri. Van Gogh was noted for his criticism of Islam. His film *Submission* which showed the oppression of women in Muslim countries caused an outrage in Muslim communities in the Netherlands. The murder of Van Gogh led to the growth of anti-Muslim feelings and, consequently, to the growth of popularity of far right views, including those of Wilders, in Dutch society. In March 2005 Wilders published a manifesto called the Declaration of Independence where he revealed his political concept. His ideology was based on a classical populist platform. Populism normally divides society into two groups: the corrupt elite (that includes established political parties, the upper business class, intellectuals and the mass media) and the ordinary people. It regards the elite as a parasitic class that ignores the needs of the people, and exists at their expense. Populism believes that power should belong to the people and be exercised through referendums and direct elections of officials. The elites are interested in promoting multiculturalism through immigration for the purpose of retaining power. Similar views were expressed by Wilders who said that "the people are sensible, good, and grounded in reality, in contrast with a corrupt, ideologically blinded and weak political elite," which placed the country under the EU control and made the Dutch political life "dominated by political correctness, multiculturalism and submission to the bureaucrats in Brussels" [2, p. 283, 286]. No wonder that Wilders called his future party PVV an anti-establishment party. According to American political scientist Matt Golder, populism in Europe has an exclusionary character, i.e. it excludes "certain groups from 'the people,' and thus limits their access

to benefits and rights; the criteria for exclusion are almost always cultural, religious, or ethnic" [5, p. 4]. This kind of populism can be seen in Wilders' Declaration, which radically limited immigrants' access to Dutch citizenship and welfare. In many respects the Declaration of Independence had a neoconservative character; it propagated a free market economy and attacked workers' rights.

In May 2005 Wilders used the referendum on the European Union constitution for propagating his ideas. He campaigned against it with the slogan "The Netherlands Must Remain." Despite the fact that almost the whole political elite was for the constitution, the majority of Dutch (62 percent) voted against it on June 1. In the opinion of political analyst Willem Bos, motivation for the no-vote "varied from nationalism and anti-immigrant feelings to the desire to protect what was left of the welfare state against EU-regulations and a rejection of the neoliberal course of the EU" [6]. Learning from mistakes the elite did not initiate a second referendum on the EU constitution anticipating its failure. It just passed a necessary decision through the parliament. Unfortunately, a referendum on an association agreement with Ukraine was held in the Netherlands in April 2016, which postponed Ukraine's European integration. It would have been better for Ukrainians if the Dutch elites had passed the necessary decision in the parliament as they did concerning the EU constitution. Mostly to Wilders' huge propagandistic campaign the referendum results were not favorable to Ukraine.

In November 2006, Geert Wilders' recently founded Party for Freedom (PVV) participated in its first general elections under the banner of struggle against "a tsunami of Islamization." Wilders emphasized that all Muslims were enemies since "their behavior flows from their religion and culture" and he made it clear that Islam should not be part of Dutch society [2, p. 287]. He also proposed to outlaw "the fascist Koran" and place a ban on building Islamic schools and mosques. "Not all Muslims are terrorists, but almost all terrorists are Muslims," stressed Wilders [7]. Moroccans were singled out as a special target for criticism. Practically all crime was blamed on Moroccan youth. Such a dislike of Moroccan youth can be partially explained by the fact that Wilders was robbed and beaten by them in a street even before the time when he joined politics. That event probably encouraged him to join politics and choose a right-wing party, the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD). He wrote about such an experience in his autobiographical book "Marked for Death" [4, p. 408]. The results of the 2006 general elections were quite favorable as for a new founded party. The Party for Freedom won almost 6 percent of the vote and got 9 out of 150 seats in the legislature. One of the first acts of the PVV in the new legislature was an objection to the appointment of Muslims (a Moroccan and a Turk) to the position of state secretaries

because they retained two nationalities. Wilders condemned the practice of double citizenship as seriously hampering the process of assimilation.

In 2008 Wilders produced a short documentary film *Fitna* which provoked outrage in the Muslim communities all around the country and abroad. The film demonstrates that Islam motivates its followers to hate western values and provokes terrorism, homophobia, anti-Semitism, misogyny, etc. Wilders characterized the Muslim reaction to the film in the following words: "Outraged at my film's suggestion that the Koran advocates violence, furious Islamic activists unleashed wild threats of violence" [4, p. 541].

On June 4, 2009 the Party for Freedom participated in its first elections to the European Parliament and won 17 percent of the vote and 4 out of 25 seats allocated for the Netherlands. That was the second result, after the VVD, among the Dutch parties. In its election program the party called to put an end to any possibilities of accepting Turkey into the EU, to stop mass migration to the Netherlands, and to limit the functioning of the EU to exclusively economic issues. At that time Wilders decided to abstain from cooperation in the EU parliament with such far right parties as France' National Front and Belgium's Flemish Interest. He did not want his party to be blemished by collaboration with "fascists" [8]. Later, however, he changed his mind and formed a coalition with them in 2014. It probably can be explained by the fact that National Front of France had become more moderate after Marine Le Pen took over the party leadership in 2011. The Flemish Interest had also become more moderate.

The year of 2010 turned out to be triumphed for the PVV. It showed a remarkable result in the Dutch general elections and got 24 seats in the parliament. It became the third largest party in the legislature after the center right VVD and the left wing Labor Party (PvdA). Wilders assessed the electoral result as a change in public opinion concerning Islam and immigration: "Our electoral victory shows that many Dutch people will no longer tolerate being shut out of the discussion about Islam, multiculturalism and immigration" [4, p. 580]. The PVV was supported by many former voters of the left parties like SP or PvdA, especially in small towns and countryside [2, p. 291]. These segments of the population, mostly from the working class, were especially vulnerable to the processes of immigration and globalization.

The PVV did not enter the government, however. Without being a part of the cabinet it decided to support the minority government led by the VVD leader, Mark Rutte, in exchange for implementation of some of its policies by the government. An appropriate coalition agreement was signed between Rutte and Wilders. It reminded in some respect the Danish model when the far right Danish People's Party supported a minority government without being part of it in exchange for implementation of some of its policies [9]. The Rutte

government agreed to put obstacles to non-Western immigrants and asylum-seekers. The government also agreed to limit family reunification policies which allowed bringing “numerous relatives” from Muslim countries. The word “Muslim” was not mentioned; a euphemism was used instead which called Muslims “migrants with few future prospects” [4, p. 583]. The new policy permitted to bring only young children and spouses who were to be at least 24 years of age. Those who invited their family members were to have a sufficient income to support them. The newcomers were obliged now to integrate; it means that stricter educational and language requirements were imposed on them [10]. According to Wilders, the aim of these innovations was to stop “the creation of a parallel Islamic society” [4, p. 608]. As part of the agreement the PVV had to consent to some austerity measures, proposed by the VVD, such as an increase in the retirement age to 67. In 2012, however, the PVV, not willing to participate in further increasing of austerity measures, decided to withdraw its support from the coalition, and Rutte had to call new elections. The new parliamentary elections of 2012 brought victory to Rutte’s party, the VVD. Wilders’ Party for Freedom (PVV) came third with 10 percent of the vote and 15 seats in the legislature.

In the 2014 elections to the European Parliament the PVV showed a good result and signed an agreement with Marine Le Pen’s Front National and several other far right parties (Belgium’s Flemish Interest, Freedom Party of Austria, Swedish Democrats, Italy’s Northern League, etc.). The Front National and PVV had established particularly close ties. Both parties proclaimed their struggle against Islam and support for the rights of homosexuals, women, and Jews. Le Pen even declared that her party was now Zionistic. Such a position made this group different from many other far right parties like Hungary’s Jobbik or Greece’s Golden Dawn, which were anti-Semitic and thus rejected by Wilders and Le Pen. In general, the Party for Freedom’s foreign policy did not distinguish it from the majority of other far right parties. It advocated the withdrawal from the EU, return to the national currency, tightening the national borders, expulsion of immigrants who committed crime or have no desire to integrate, ending the immigration from Muslim countries, reducing foreign aid, etc. In its internal policy Wilders’ party differ from other far right parties in its inclusive focus on Islam and national identity issues; economic issues are often of secondary importance for the PVV [11].

Donald Trump’s electoral success in the USA was met with great enthusiasm by the European far right. Wilders even visited the Republican National Convention in Cleveland in July of 2016. Analysts have noticed many similarities between Wilders’ and Trump’s rhetoric. For instance, Wilders criticism of Moroccans in Holland strongly resembled Trump’s criticism of Mexicans in the USA [11]. Wilders’ criticism of Moroccans has brought him a lot of trouble and even legal prosecution,

but at the same time drew the attention of the press that contributed to the growth of his popularity among the public in general [12]. His slogan “The Netherlands first” also strikingly reminded of Trump’s electoral slogan “America first.” Wilders repudiated all the accusations of provoking hatred against Muslims by stating that he did not hate Muslims, that he just hated Islam. By focusing on religion and culture Wilders managed to defend himself in court. His criticism of Muslim culture as “retarded” and “barbaric” and incompatible with “far superior” Western culture resembles the rhetoric of the far right Danish People’s Party in Denmark [9].

Brexit and Trump’s victory shocked Europe and drew much attention to the 2017 Dutch general elections. Many analysts considered these elections as a big test for populism. The PVV’s victory would have been a springboard for the further rise of the far right all around Europe, which might have put the very existence of the EU at risk. The voter turnout (81%) was the highest in 30 years. Polls often showed that the PVV might be the winner and other mainstream parties started to emulate the PVV’s rhetoric, attacking Islam and immigration, and focusing, like Wilders, on identity issues. The leader of the governing center-right VVD, Mark Rutte, issued an open letter calling the immigrants who “reject Dutch values” to leave the country [13]. The Christian Democrats (CDA) and the Christian Orthodox (SGP) run their campaigns on anti-refugee agenda. According to a Dutch lawyer group, all three election winners (VVD, PVV, CDA) included into their programs the ideas which were “contrary to human rights or are openly discriminatory toward certain groups” i.e. Muslims [14].

The winner of the 2017 general election was the center-right VVD with 33 seats, led by Prime Minister Mark Rutte; Wilders’ PVV was the second with 20 seats, another center-right Christian Democrats (CDA) came third with 19 seats. Even if Wilders had won the election he would not have been able to be prime minister since the Dutch proportional electoral system practically excludes such possibilities. The extremely low threshold (only 0, 67 percent) gives too many parties real chances to get to parliament (28 parties vied for 150 seats in 2017) and practically does not allow forming a government without a coalition. According to Dutch political scientist Philip van Praag, some people who usually did not vote for the VVD voted for it this time because of strategic considerations, to prevent Wilders from winning. Some also did not vote for Wilders because he did not have chances to be prime minister [15]. At the same time we can assume that some people voted for Wilders not because they fully supported his ideas but rather as a protest against the policy of the ruling elites. Wilders’ major base of support in the recent elections was the people mostly hit by Rutte’s tough austerity measures and immigration, namely, the lower middle class or the working class, unemployed or people with part-time jobs, more men than women and usually with little education, who live

