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**Populism in the Netherlands**

The German-British political scientist Ralf Dahrendorf once said “The one’s populism, is the other one’s democracy, and vice versa”. There is truth in that, isn’t it? Dictators, shallow populists and even thoughtful and principled democratic politicians must cater to the needs of their constituency. Dutch politicians make no exception.

Populists have shown themselves able “harvesters of resentment”, as the Dutch-German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk has it in his 2010 essay *Rage and Time*. It is a telling sign for mainstream politicians. Shallow ideology, superficial if not unreal solutions and emotion are sufficient to garner votes. In essence populist ideology boils down to the following argument: a corrupted and selfish elite is vegetating on the people; they are squandering the nation and must be removed from power so that true nationals can regain their freedom.

In this short introduction we will have a look at how populism in the Netherlands has come to play an increasingly important role. It is however important to mention here that we do not intend to draw an image of vile and evil populists, who deliberately seduce and mislead the electorate. Populists do have a story to tell and respond, at least partially, to genuine concerns.

### **The Triumph of Populism**

“Triumph des Populismus” was the Swiss *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*’s label for the political year 2016. Since then the Dutch parliamentary elections have shown that the populists’ triumphs are not yet over.

Of course, Geert Wilders’ Freedom Party (PVV) did not meet expectations on Election Day 15 March 2017, but it still managed to capture 20 seats with a one page concept party programme *The Netherlands ours again*. Unfortunately, Dutch populism doesn’t stop there – there is more to it. Our list also contains the Socialist Party SP – leftist, anti-Brussels and anti-international finance (14 seats), the Party for the Animals (5), 50PLUS – for senior citizens (4), DENK – a pro-migrant party (3) and Forum for Democracy of anti-EU, kind of hard core conservative-nationalist Thierry Baudet (2). It must be said though that some deserve the epithet “populist” more than others. In total 46 of 150 seats in the Chamber of Representatives are now taken by populist, often not much more than single issue parties.

Furthermore, it should be noted that mainstream parties do not shy away from populism. This was clearly demonstrated by the Ukraine advisory referendum of April 2016, when the ruling coalition of liberal-conservatives (VVD) and social-democrats (PvdA) decided to treat it as a binding referendum, arguing that in spite of a 32 percent voter turnout, the “voice of the people” could not be ignored. The migration crisis of 2016/2017 allowed politicians of all walks to agitate against the EU, Islam, and against multiculturalism and its negative side-effects, which are undeniably there. Populism did not remain on the fringes of Dutch politics.

It is interesting to note as well that the left-wing SP party adopted specific populist themes and attitudes. Formerly a Maoist party, the SP criticised migration policies as far back as 1983 and opposed the influx of uneducated, unorganised labourers as a setup by politicians and capitalists. After all, migrants were thought to be unwilling to join the class struggle. Last year, the *New York Times* wrote about former SP Parliamentarian Harry van Bommel. In early 2016, he had *adopted* a group of fake pro-Russian Ukrainians who agitated against the EU-Ukraine Association Treaty and aped Kremlin rhetoric.

In 2013, Dutch political sociologist Matthijs Rooduijn was certainly right in arguing that populism has only a limited role in most party programmes, but the day-to-day reality was and is different. Migration, multiculturalism, Islam, “Islamic culture” and the EU have been commented in a one-sided, unfair and vindictive way over and over again. In fact, mainstream politics became a kind of *Wilders Light*, although some parties stuck to a *Wilders Zero* line, e.g. the left-liberal Groen Links party, the social-democrat PvdA and the right-liberal D66.

### **The demise of political ideology**

Of course, populism is not new to Dutch politics and perhaps it has always been there. Take Protestant statesman Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920), who was nicknamed “the carillon player of the

common people” for a reason. Kuyper agitated, for example, against “Jewish-liberal interests” as harmful to the ordinary man, but stopped doing so once he saw it didn’t attract new voters. Another example is the post-WW2 antagonism between the liberal VVD and the social-democrat PvdA, which was marred with populist sentiment. While the latter party was routinely depicted as “wasters of the tax payers’ money”, the former was often described as a party of self-serving capitalists.

In fact, inside all main parties there have been different approaches to politics; one more intellectual and deliberate, the other more populist. However, it was the advent of political newcomer and ostentatiously homosexual Pim Fortuyn – “Islam is a backward culture” – that took populism to new heights. Shortly after his murder on 6 May 2002, his List Pim Fortuyn party obtained 26 of 150 seats in Parliament.

So, if populism is of all ages, why exactly is there a populist uprising now? There are, we think, two main reasons. First, a serious change of the ideological climate occurred over the last 30 or so years. Two, to withstand the populist temptation political courage and leadership is needed, but it is lacking right now.

First, there was Francis Fukuyama’s optimism about the *end of history* that coincided with the unravelling of communism in Central and Eastern Europe. As we recall, in 1989 Fukuyama predicted the global dominance of Western liberal democracy and hailed globalisation as the huge flywheel of world civilisation. The simultaneous arrival of the Internet at our offices and living rooms was the digital yet tangible proof. Thus, the end of history and of communism allowed us to adopt a quieter, laidback attitude towards ideological differences, which was abruptly disturbed by the rise of Islamic terrorism – 9/11 being the loud and dissonant counterpoint of globalisation. The disoriented, undecided but also scared voter emerged from it.

The so-called “Third Way” in social democracy (viz. Tony Blair and Gerhard Schröder) perfectly illustrated how the already faded colours of antagonistic political ideology were rapidly disappearing. In the Netherlands, the social-democrat PvdA started moving to the centre of the political spectrum and the *less state and more individual* Third Way was incorporated in the “purple coalition” with the liberal VVD (1994-2002). As a consequence large numbers of voters felt alienated and uncertain. In 2002 *Purple* lost almost 43 of 97 seats. Then, the elections of 2017 saw the demise of the PvdA that, in the past, stood up for working-class and underprivileged citizens but refused to play the Islam or migrant card now. It lost 29 of 38 seats. The VVD skilfully tapped into the populist agenda and lost just 8 of 41 seats.

In the meantime *Purple* had side-lined the Christian-democrat CDA party, a union of three Christian parties (1980) that had ruled the country since 1918. Until the mid-1990s this broad popular party had tied believers and non-believers of all walks of life together. Although leading in coalitions between 2002 and 2012, and enjoying some electoral gain, the CDA’s number of seats dwindled from 48 in 1981 to 19 in 2017. Secularisation had struck a huge blow to centrist politics, which started to move to the right.

Globalisation produced *non-politics* or *symbolic politics*, the flamboyant, neo-Marxist philosopher from Ljubljana Slavoj Žižek argues. The era of ideology is over and the political debates about the good society have been abandoned. Henceforth, the interplay of the global forces of an anonymous and self-regulating free-market economy will decide what is good for us. This might explain why populists in the Netherlands as well as elsewhere in Europe confine themselves to the new (or old) ideology of the claustrophobic nation state. When they deal with questions of the good society, they will focus more on the symbolic order: identity politics, indigenous culture, immigration, good old moral values and so on.

### **A lack of courage**

The two-sided sword of globalisation, fading ideologies, secularisation and failing constituencies have left us with a rather complex situation, which the British journalist David Goodhart tried to explain in his 2017 *The Road to Somewhere*. Goodhart argues that political mainstream is only attractive to the *anywheres*: cosmopolitan, highly educated, flexible and mobile citizens who are geared up for the globalised world of today. Populists, however, cater to the needs of the *somewheres*. The *somewheres* feel themselves endangered by globalisation, because they are less educated, lower-

class, less flexible and therefore stuck in their local context.

The *somewheres* especially worry about job security, unemployment, EU, competition by migrants, market solutions for social issues, health care, aging and pensions. Also, the fact that migrants enjoy the same rights without having ever contributed to the society, which by their presence they undermine, weakens the social fabric. We may call it welfare chauvinism, but the worries are real. While Goodhart's dichotomy seems adequate, he is mistaken in thinking that populists will deal with the concerns of the *somewheres*.

Indeed, the influx of migrants made and makes many indigenous feel homeless and disoriented in their own street, in their neighbourhood or town. But by blaming the *anywheres* for neglecting the *somewheres*, by rolling back European integration and finally by harassing migrants who came to the Netherlands in the 1960s and 70s does not bring the country closer to solving the *somewheres'* problems. In the Netherlands, Geert Wilders, the SP and Thierry Baudet want to leave the EU, OK. But how will they defend the national interests of a country with only 17 million inhabitants? And how will blaming Islamic culture, criminalising Islam, closing mosques, banning the Koran and outlawing specific Muslim dress codes make us all feel more at home?

Unfortunately, traditional mainstream parties that committed themselves to the *discipline* of the self-regulating free-market economy do not address the worries of common men or women either. And they lack the courage to break the sad message to the voters that some of their worries do indeed belong to the realm of politics, while others don't. Making citizens feel at home, for example, is something that they must do for themselves and others, while the welfare state and the rule of law is indeed the politician's "thing".

On the contrary, especially CDA and VVD, played the populist card in the wake of the 2017 elections. Aiming at resentment, estrangement and fear in society, the VVD, for example, launched an electoral three stage rocket. First, Turkish immigrants who do not connect well with Dutch culture were told on a state subsidised television channel "to get lost" by our Prime Minister Mark Rutte. Then, Minister of Health Edith Schippers discussed the gap between Dutch and immigrant values as a threat to Dutch culture. Finally, two months before the elections a one page advertisement appeared in national newspapers, in which again migrants were told by our PM "to act normal or to just go away".

Especially at election time, a *Wilders Light* approach like this can bring profits, but in a legal, constitutional and human rights sense, it is meaningless, because like any citizen migrants must abide by the law as much as they enjoy freedom of conscience. And where might we want migrants with Dutch passports to go, if they fail to reach the bar of social respectability and adaptation?

Moreover, *Wilders Light* comes at high costs, that is, in a context where populists claim that *the majority of the people* take precedent over the rule of law, political compromise or minority rights. Sadly, the mainstream is endorsing, legitimising and finally adopting the populist agenda. This strategy is outright dangerous, because it will increase the lack of confidence in mainstream politics, that is, in its issue oriented problem solving qualities. Instead of styling themselves as problem solvers politicians are acting like nannies. This brings us back to Pim Fortuyn who, seemingly suffering from a kind of nostalgia for the closed, paternalistic society of the 1950s, diagnosed our Dutch society in 1995 as a "society of orphans" in need of Moms and Dads.

And if it is true that the younger generations are more cosmopolitan than the elder, populism has a bright future in the Netherlands and the whole of Europe. With our aging population the populist temptation will undoubtedly seduce many new supporters. Will populism become our "new normal"?