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An unexpected Trump-shock in Dutch politics

A political earthquake has occurred in the Netherlands: distrust and social unease have brought about the win of a notorious populist

A political earthquake has occurred in the Netherlands, spectacularly-unexpected. In the final week of the election campaign, Geert Wilders, the notorious anti-Islam-national-populist, won the election on 22 November by a wide margin (23.4 per cent). The question, however, is whether other parties will want to work with him and his partly anti-rule of law election manifesto, and thus whether he will really become the new prime minister of the Netherlands, the successor to long-serving Prime Minister Mark Rutte.

At first, it looked like the Netherlands was going to be the exception in the great anti-establishment revolt that is currently fragmenting and polarising Western democracies. But tensions around new social inequalities and divisions are expressing themselves almost everywhere through radical right-wing populism or national populism. In many European countries, so-called flank parties have already reached the centre of power. See Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni in Italy or the Sweden-Democrats' toleration role in the Swedish government. See the rise in polls and regional elections of the ultra-radical, populist AfD in Germany. And how far away is Marine Le Pen from the French presidency? And then, of course, there is the shadow of a possible new presidency of Donald Trump in America.

An unexpected turn of events

The Netherlands seemed set to become the exception to this international trend. But political distrust and social unease, especially from peripheral regions and the less educated, found a voice here through the political centre. In two new parties, the New Social Contract (NSC) party and the Farmer–Citizen Movement (BBB). Both parties have Christian Democratic roots and come from regions far from political The Hague. BBB became the largest party, with a landslide victory at the

provincial elections (March 2023), following farmers' protests against strict anti-nitrogen climate policies.

Then, out of nowhere, NSC was founded by dissident Christian Democrat MP Pieter Omtzigt. Omtzigt lived on a war footing with outgoing PM Rutte, as he brought numerous government scandals to the surface, such as a child allowance scandal, which humiliated citizens. This 'Robin Hood' of the disconnected, the unheard, the victims of failing government policies, became very popular. For a long time, his party was the biggest party in the polls. The 'anti-Rutte' was expected to become Mark Rutte's fated successor as prime minister and usher in his neoliberal era.

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But nothing of the sort happened. On election night, we instead saw a totally different series of events unfold in the Netherlands. It was not Omtzigt' s party that became the biggest party in the Lower House (albeit it performed handsomely with 20 seats/12.8 per cent), but the surprising victor was GeertWilders. — a man who has been in the Dutch parliament for 20 years and walks around with more security guards than the Dutch royal family because of fatwas against him from the Muslim world.

This highly controversial politician (also in the Netherlands) trumped the other candidates. Includes Frans Timmermans, the leader of the red-green combination of PvdA and *GroenLinks (*GreenLeft*)*, despite becoming by far the second largest party after Wilders' Freedom Party (PVV). This was partly because many progressive voters started voting strategically when it became clear in the very last polls that Wilders and not Omtzigt would become the leader of the anti-establishment vote in the Netherlands.

One of the causes for Omtzigt's loss was his wavering attitude, and his lack of hunger for power and will to become prime minister. The final blows came from the convincing performances of the very experienced Wilders in TV debates, in which he repeated a Trump-like slogan over and over again: 'put the Dutch back on 1'.

A strong anti-establishment revolt

This had everything to do with the campaign's all-important theme: migration. In recent years, the Netherlands has received a disproportionate number of migrants, whether asylum seekers, labour

migrants, international students or Ukrainian refugees. And a consensus has emerged, certainly on the right, that this migration has put enormous pressure on public services in the Netherlands. More specifically, an emerging and worsening housing crisis. In the big cities, affordable houses are almost impossible to find, and accepted asylum seekers are given priority housing. This is one of the sources of an anti-establishment mood in the Netherlands.

But government scandals from the Rutte era have also played their role. There is a strong sense of political distrust and unease among large parts of the population, and this is stronger amongst people with a lower level of education and a greater distance from The Hague and Amsterdam.

There is even talk of a 'diploma democracy' for metropolitan academic professionals, with an economic and cultural liberal value system and outlook.

The anti-establishment revolt could also be seen as a social-conservative correction to this. The big question in the Netherlands now is what it means that this correction expressed itself not through the political centre but through the radical national-populist party of Wilders.

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Geert Wilders, surprisingly, has been mild and responsible in his campaign, saying that he will not do anything frantic, and, in particular, will put his anti-Islam policies on hold. People are now speaking about Geert 'Milders', the mild-mannered Wilders. Still the question of how credible this self-moderation will be remains. The fact is that large parts of his programme are not government-proof. Parts are contrary to the rule of law, such as his plans to ban Islamic schools, Korans and mosques, as well as headscarves in government buildings. This is a policy that flagrantly violates constitutional freedom of religion (Wilders sees Islam not as a religion but as a 'detestable ideology').

Understandably, Muslim organisations in the Netherlands are deeply concerned about this. Will the soup really not be eaten so hot? Will coalition politics in the Netherlands (one needs at least three parties to form a government) succeed in taming Geert Wilders? Or will an aggressive Islamophobe really come to power in the Netherlands?

At the time of writing, it is still completely unclear exactly which way the

government formation will go. In the Netherlands, the coalition formation process takes many months and often more than a year.

A reconnaissance scout has now been appointed to take stock of the parties' wishes. The VVD, Mark Rutte's conservative-liberal party, has already said two days after the elections that it does not want to sit in a Wilders cabinet but at most wants to support or tolerate a new centre-right government.

All in all, it remains to be seen whether the Trump-shock in Dutch politics, the unexpectedly huge victory of the anti-establishment and anti-Islam stokefire Wilders, will really result in him becoming the new prime minister of the Netherlands. I wouldn't bet anything on that right now.



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