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Total honesty and far-right lies

The confidence with which analysts have settled on the causes of Geert Wilders' victory is misplaced. More humility and introspection are needed

On 22 November, almost 2.5 million Dutch citizens voted for Geert Wilders' PVV, a radical right-wing party that wants to ban the Quran, close the borders and leave the EU. This put them ahead of the second-placed party, the Green-Labour alliance led by Frans Timmermans, by well over 800 000 votes. While talk of a far-right surge is hyperbolic, the Dutch election shows how the slow and steady progression of the far-right in Europe cannot be ignored.

In the days that have followed, the results have been studied intensely: there are three running themes in this commentary. First, the liberal VVD party galvanised support for the far-right by making migration the core theme of the election. Second, VVD leader Yeşilgöz-Zegerius further boosted Wilders by entertaining the possibility of a coalition. Finally, the media also played a role in uncritically accepting that 'Geert Milders' had moderated his views.

This is the position of political scientists Cas Mudde writing in *The Guardian* and Stijn van Kessel in *The Observer*, echoed in long reads from *Foreign Policy* to *The Jacobin*. And no doubt there is some truth to it. The VVD certainly seems to have blundered. And Wilders' more moderate tone was a thin veil to his radicalism. He simply agreed to put some more fanatic policies (like mosque bans) 'on ice' and cuddled some kittens on TV.

But the confidence with which analysts have settled on the causes of Wilders' victory seems misplaced. No one expected this result. Though the PVV was rising in the final days of the campaign, the last polls were still off by a mile. We should start by being honest about how unexpected this was. More humility and introspection are needed.

What can we do better?

While strategic blunders may play a part, so too do the real concerns of voters. About a European integration process that they feel disenfranchises them. About a massive bill for climate policy that comes at a time of inflation and economic uncertainty. About poorly regulated migration leading to chaos and tragedy at Europe's borders.

Across Europe, the far-right claims these policy areas as its own. But moderate parties cannot simply walk away from them. Nor should they pander to the far-right fiction that migrants and minorities (especially Muslim Arabs) are the cause of these problems.

Faced with such a brutal election result, we must ask: what has been neglected? How can we speak to citizens' worries about European integration, climate change and migration without compromising our values?

On European integration, there are two key points. First, we should celebrate the benefits of integration. The possibilities to work and travel across Europe are life-defining freedoms for hundreds of millions of EU citizens. No political conflict between EU Member States has ever degenerated into the threat or use of military force.

If we let the costs of a green transformation fall as they will, they are going to be borne disproportionately by those working in heavy industry, agriculture and manufacturing. This would be deeply unfair.

But this does not mean that every aspect of the EU works well, or that everyone shares Europe's prosperity. Sometimes, EU policy is clumsy or incoherent. Open markets and a monetary union appear not as an opportunity but a constraint to some people. It is right that European policy is democratically contested and includes the possibility to change or reverse course.

Climate policy, too, requires nuance. The world is heating rapidly because of human activities. Radical action is needed to slow climate change. Not enough is being done. But we cannot – must not – deny that the transformation to a green economy will require extraordinary efforts in investment. If we let these costs fall as they will, they are going to be borne disproportionately by those working in heavy industry, agriculture and manufacturing. This would be deeply unfair.

On migration, we also need to face hard truths. For example, while the majority of migrants integrate well and make a positive contribution, the link between migration and crime is not a pure fantasy of the far-right.

When people do not have adequate access to education, healthcare and welfare, they are more likely to turn to crime. This is true for migrants just as it is for everyone else.

Addressing these issues at the European level is crucial, even when it means dealing with far-right leaders like Giorgia Meloni and Viktor Orbán. The massive benefits of our European freedoms to work and travel continent-wide mean we must regulate the reception of asylum-seekers together.

As well as honesty, we must fight for social inclusion and cohesion.

The far-right fights for exclusion, blaming minorities for all of life's hardships. This is a lie. Minorities are not to blame for European policy failures. But that does not mean that there are no hardships and risks. And we concede ground to the far-right by ignoring this.

Progressive and centrist parties in Europe must not gaslight those left behind, pretending there are only winners in the European project in its current form. Pretending that we can decarbonise European economies without risk. That arranging the humane reception and smooth integration of migrants in Europe is easy.

As well as honesty, we must fight for social inclusion and cohesion. For the inclusion of peripheral regions in Europe's rising prosperity, the inclusion of asylum-seekers and refugees seeking shelter here, in line with our values. And for the inclusion of working-class and rural communities demanding a fair distribution of the costs of climate change adaptation.

If anything, inclusion is the antidote to the politics of fear.



Tom Theuns
Leiden

Tom Theuns is Senior Assistant Professor of Political Theory and European Politics at Leiden University.



László Andor
Budapest

László Andor is Secretary General of the Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS) and a former member of the European Commission.

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