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A greener kind of red

GroenLinks and PvdA have merged to shift Dutch politics to the centre. But internal divisions could derail their ambitions

We are currently living in an 'era of chaos', as The Economist accurately put it on its front page recently. Western democracies are under pressure, both from abroad and within. The timing could hardly be more dramatic. At a time when stable Western democracies are needed to stand up to autocratic threats such as China, Russia, Iran or Trump's America, it is precisely divided, fragmented and polarised democracies in which the political centre is being severely tested, above all by right-wing populist challengers.

Established parties and right-wing populist contenders are up against each other almost everywhere in Europe: the AfD and the GroKo in Germany, Le Pen against Macron in France, Geert Wilders against the governing parties in the Netherlands. A polarisation and fragmentation of the post-war party system can be observed everywhere, and the rule of law and democracy are increasingly on shaky ground. The disruptive consequences of globalisation, individualisation and poorly managed mass migration are generating populist resentment combined with social decline at a time of socio-economic and cultural insecurity.

What is the most effective way to counter the uprising of discontent and political mistrust? How can we combat (right-wing) populism or take the wind out of its sails, which, with its autocratic and anti-pluralistic traits, represents a potential threat to liberal democracy?

A new model emerges

This is not only a task for centre-right parties such as German Christian democracy, but also for centre-left parties, especially European social democracy. Above all, where socio-economic inequality and distributional conflicts over existential security form the roots of populism, their action is called for.

Broadly speaking, there are two types of reactions by centre-left social democratic parties in Europe to the populist challenge: the Danish and the Dutch.

Under the leadership of Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen, the Danish Social Democratic Party has embarked on a course of welfare state nationalism in response to the success of the right-wing populist movement in Denmark. This can be summarised simply: Limit immigration and promote integration. The rigid Danish immigration policy is defended with left-wing arguments: in order to secure the financing and functioning of the Danish social model, only a limited influx of migrants can be permitted. Too much immigration is detrimental to the Danish welfare state. Therefore, strict quotas for the admission of asylum seekers were introduced and great efforts were made to promote the integration of immigrants and prevent segregation.

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Significantly, Frederiksen, together with Italy's Prime Minister Meloni, launched an initiative to appeal to the European Court of Human Rights. In it, they called for more room for manoeuvre for the deportation of criminal asylum seekers. Interestingly, this letter was not signed by the Prime Minister of the Dutch right-wing populist coalition of VVD and PVV (Geert Wilders), as he considered this interference in the rule of law to be too radical.

A second model for the social democratic approach to populist discontent is currently emerging in the Netherlands. As in many other countries, a right-wing conservative wind is blowing there too — two thirds of the parliament are right-wing populist, conservative-liberal or Christian democratic in character. Only a third is left-wing, radical left-wing or moderate left-wing — all fragmented into relatively small parties below the 20 per cent mark. In response to the relative marginalisation of the left in the Netherlands, the PvdA and GroenLinks have dared to make the leap forward. They are the first country in Europe to merge the Social Democrats (Red) and the Greens (Green) into a single party.

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Recently, an overwhelming majority of members of both parties voted in favour of a merger in 2026 in a referendum including a new party name and a new logo, among other things. Until then, the political groups will continue their already close cooperation and will stand in the upcoming parliamentary elections on 29

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October with a joint list and a joint election programme.

The aim of the new red-green party is to combat the right-wing conservative interpretation of today's politics. It wants to offer a left-wing alternative, particularly in the areas of climate policy, anti-racism, international law, socio-economic redistribution and a more generous migration policy. The main aim is to launch a democratic right-wing offensive against the populist infiltration of democracy, for which the centre-right parties are held partly responsible. This is because they are not only contributing to the erosion of democracy by adopting right-wing populist discourse, but also by cooperating with right-wing populists, as in the case of the recently overthrown Dutch government, in which the conservative-liberal VVD ultimately governed together with Geert Wilders' PVV.

Strength in unity

Last weekend, the merger congress of the PvdA and GroenLinks took place in two neighbouring halls. The parties met separately in the morning, followed by a joint congress in the afternoon with Frans Timmermans, the former Social Democrat EU Commissioner from Brussels, as party chairman.

Initially, the congress was characterised by positive signs. There was great euphoria about this new left-wing progressive adventure, especially among the younger generations. It could be the ideal combination of the administration-orientated PvdA – which suffers greatly from ageing and the image of a 'party of grandparents' – and the activist, progressive metropolitan youth party GroenLinks. They are seen as the ideal combination of social, ecological and international solidarity. It is also an opportunity to shift the political debate and the political centre of the Netherlands more to the left again.

In fact, current polls show a strong left-wing formation in the Netherlands. In current polls (after the fall of the Schoof government), GroenLinks-PvdA is in second place with 29 seats in the 150-seat Second Chamber — directly behind Geert Wilders' PVV with 30 seats. However, following his failure and resignation from the government, Geert Wilders has been excluded from government participation by almost all other parties. The firewall around Wilders has been re-established. This opens up considerable opportunities for GroenLinks-PvdA to participate in government.

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The fusion congress was based on a new joint policy paper: 'Time for Solidarity'. This text focuses on ecological and social justice as central values and aims to appeal to and mobilise the 'social majority' in the Netherlands. In terms of programme, it unites the positions of GroenLinks and the PvdA, which have in any case increasingly converged in recent decades.

In contrast to the German Greens, GroenLinks has never been involved in a government at national level. Nevertheless, the party has extensive administrative experience through mayorships in major cities and in large NGOs. The GroenLinks youth of Generation Z is radically activist, especially with regard to Israel. This became dramatically clear at the last fusion congress.

What should have been a festive and unified spectacle of left-wing revival in the Netherlands ended in a debacle. A motion tabled in parliament by the GroenLinks-PvdA parliamentary group at the beginning of the week became a divisive factor: a temporary complete arms embargo against the 'war criminal' Israel, including Dutch supplies for Israel's defensive Iron Dome defence system.

A failure to launch?

This motion caused an uproar in the Dutch parliament: how dare anyone deliberately sabotage the self-defence of the Israeli population? Accordingly, the motion was massively rejected by the other parties. But it also proved to be a major disruptive factor at the fusion congress. In the run-up to the congress, several prominent PvdA members, including former party leaders Cohen, Asscher and Melkert, had tabled a counter-motion aimed at maintaining support for Israeli missile defence. However, this motion was rejected in the joint part of the congress with 80 per cent of the votes, after a vote on it had previously been blocked at the separate PvdA party conference.

The mood at the party conference was gloomy and aggressive, strongly reminiscent of the pro-Gaza demonstrations on the streets of Berlin and Amsterdam. The fusion party conference thus turned into an anti-Israel tribunal. Woke GroenLinks youths, adorned with Palestinian flags and scarves, pushed through far-reaching anti-Israel motions - with a large majority: over 83 per cent called for an 'immediate and complete arms embargo against Israel', almost 94 per cent rejected the 'racist and exclusionary ideology as it prevails in Israel', and almost 95 per cent opposed 'genocide and apartheid as committed by Israel now and in the

future'.

Resignations from the PvdA have been pouring in.

Speakers with dissenting views on Israel and the Middle East conflict were booed, including Jewish PvdA members. The PvdA has always counted many Jewish Dutch people among its members. For them, but not only for them, this fusion congress turned into a nightmare of intolerant left-wing radicalism. In the meantime, resignations from the PvdA have been pouring in. The media are reporting that the PvdA has been taken over by GroenLinks, or even more drastically: that the PvdA, once the proud standard-bearer of Dutch social democracy, died at the merger congress.

For many long-serving, loyal social democrats, the red-green merger party seems to have failed before it has even got off the ground. Rumours about the possible formation of an alternative social democratic party are becoming more persistent by the day.



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