



## **“TROUBLE IN PARADISE”: WHAT HAPPENED IN THE NETHERLANDS?**

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On the morning of November 2<sup>nd</sup> 2004, the Netherlands seemed suddenly to have been jolted awake from the dream of multiculturalism. The murder of the filmmaker Theo van Gogh by a young Dutch man with Moroccan parents caused a great deal of shock. In the following days, a number of attacks were made on mosques, Muslim schools and, to a lesser extent, Catholic and Protestant churches too. Nobody could believe this was happening in the Netherlands. “Trouble in Paradise”, the *Financial Times* called it.

In March 2017, the Netherlands was in the news again. It was feared that Geert Wilders’ Party for Freedom would become the country’s leading political force. Beneath the title “Make the Netherlands ours again” Wilders’ concise programme (11 points, no more) proposed less immigration, less Islam and recovering independence by leaving the European Union. All of this in an idiosyncratic style: patently discriminatory declarations (like wanting fewer Moroccans) and absurdly unconstitutional proposals (such as the promise to prohibit the sale of the Koran and to close mosques), all announced on Twitter and with no greater party structure than Wilders himself as its sole member. So, again, who would believe this could happen in the Netherlands, where the old saying goes that “acting normal is crazy enough”?

Still shaken by Brexit and Trump’s victory and with French elections around the corner, Geert Wilders’ xenophobic message and the fear that his victory would mean populism had arrived in continental Europe made us lose sight of the wider picture. We must remember that the Wilders phenomenon is nothing new. The party of his predecessor Pim Fortuyn received 17% of the vote in 2002. Geert Wilders himself got 16% in 2010, 10% in 2012 (after supporting the first Rutte government) and now 13% in 2017. Even when surveys suggested he would be the candidate to receive most votes, the percentage of that vote was not significantly higher. The real novelty lies in the fragmentation of the

political spectrum: there are more and more parties in parliament and they are increasingly small.

We must also remember that xenophobic and Islamophobic discourse, in particular, are not used by Wilders alone. After the Dutch elections, many breathed a sigh of relief to see the victory of the liberal-conservative, Mark Rutte, and the defeat of the populist Wilders. The European Commission president himself, Jean-Claude Juncker, declared with relief that "The people of the Netherlands voted overwhelmingly for the values Europe stands for: free and tolerant societies". But, as has been pointed out, Rutte's victory came at a price: influenced by the polls, Rutte adopted some of Wilders' populist rhetoric, above all that relating to immigration and Islam. But that is nothing new either. We need look no further than the hardline policies and clearly Islamophobic declarations made by Rita Verdonk, minister of immigration and integration for Rutte's party from 2003 to 2007.

The question we should therefore be asking is not so much what explains the rise of populism in the Netherlands, but how and why a country that boasted about its multicultural policies has in part succumbed to the discourse of fear towards the other. To explain it, some point to the feeling of loss generated by the austerity policies of recent years. Although economic growth has stabilised at around 2% and unemployment is below 6%, the reality is much more complex. The unemployment figure is not real: those working part-time are left out of it, as are those not seeking work and those who have a permanent incapacity pension. The Dutch central bank estimates that if these people were taken into account, the figure would rise to 16%. Job insecurity has also grown: one in five workers has a temporary contract and around 17% are self-employed. Meanwhile, the austerity policies of recent years have led to significant cuts in health, education and programmes to help the disabled, infrastructure and social housing, among others. It is in this context that we must explain the populist argument of "our people first".

But the anti-immigration discourse began early in the 2000s, long before the economic crisis and the austerity policies. At the heart of these debates has always been identity, that is, what it means to be Dutch. The centrality of this issue is connected to profound changes occurring in Dutch society. Until the 1980s, the Catholic and Protestant communities lived in separate worlds, each with its own schools, newspapers and hospitals. In this setting, immigrants were accommodated as culturally distinct social groups in an already divided society ("pillarised" is the Dutch word). Nevertheless, a strong secularisation process transformed the Netherlands into one of the most homogeneous societies in Europe. The defence of liberal values (around issues such as abortion, homosexual marriage and gender equality) became the new core idea of Dutch identity. Those

who did not share it were systematically identified as not Dutch and invited to leave. This does not happen in countries such as France and Spain, where the population is much more divided and, as a result, being for or against abortion, for example, does not make you more or less of a citizen.

Finally, the political component must not be forgotten. Throughout the 1990s, the language of the politically correct prevented a certain discomfort accumulated in some sectors of society from being shown and thereby diluted. Politicians preferred not to talk about immigration, when they should instead have been explaining it better. When this discontent was expressed, it came through the mouth of Pim Fortuyn who – just as Geert Wilders later would – accused the traditional politicians of ignoring what was happening in the street. What is surprising is that many politicians went to the other extreme very quickly. On both left and right, the “failure” of integration policies was soon taken as read, Islam was systematically placed under suspicion and the binary language of us and them began to prevail. All of this came accompanied by a media that systematically placed the focus on those who «spoke loudest and clearest». Thus the most extreme messages have been amplified while all the others are silenced.

The Dutch case shows that the xenophobic and Islamophobic discourse goes far beyond the populists. It is essential to step out of this binary logic (populists versus the other politicians and citizens) in order to become aware of the point to which we are repeating their arguments. But also to understand their reasoning, which is the prior step that must be taken in order to fight them with facts and arguments as well as with more (not less) public policy.

