Netherlands: Following elections, establishment parties shift to the right

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Leading European politicians welcomed the election results in the Netherlands as the end of the series of successes by right-wing, nationalist movements that began with the Brexit vote in the UK and continued with the election of Donald Trump as US president.

European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker described the result as an "inspiration." German Chancellor Angela Merkel called it "very pro-European," and French presidential candidate Emmanuel Macron said the feared victories of the right wing could be stopped.

Others emphasized how important it was to sharply oppose right-wing populists. The Social Democratic Party (SPD) leader in the German parliament, Thomas Oppermann, said, "Rudeness needs to be answered with more rudeness. We must directly confront demagogues like [Geert] Wilders." Bavarian Christian Social Union (CSU) leader Horst Seehofer said it was worth something when a head of government took a stand "against incitement and right-wing extremism."

In reality, the rise of nationalism and xenophobia has not been halted in the Netherlands. It is only developing through a different form. Instead of primarily proceeding through right-wing populist parties, it is now developing within the establishment parties—both those on the right as well as those nominally on the left.

The neoliberal Peoples Party of Freedom and Democracy (VVD) of Prime Minister Mark Rutte has "defeated" the far-right Party for Freedom (PVV) of Wilders by adopting its xenophobic programme. Britain's *Guardian* wrote of a "pyrrhic victory": "Rather than challenge racists, Rutte has boosted their confidence, pouring arsenic into the water supply of Dutch politics."

Other Dutch parties have similarly moved far to the right. For example, the conservative Christian Democrats (CDA) conducted their election campaign with the demand that the school day start with the singing of the national anthem while standing. In the election, the CDA finished in third place, just behind Wilders' PVV. It is expected to join the next government.

The ex-Maoists of the Socialist Party also supported these nationalist and xenophobic sentiments.

Even the right-wing British tabloid the *Daily Mail* remarked, "If this stuff had been peddled by Mr. Trump, there would have been howls of liberal anguish from the usual quarters. But it is now part of mainstream Dutch discourse."

It is above all this shift to the right that, besides Rutte's support for the European Union, is being met with enthusiasm and support in other European countries.

In Germany, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* cited Rutte's deliberately provoked conflict with the Turkish government as proof "that liberal European democracies cannot be straitjacketed by autocrats." Rutte had shown himself to be a statesman "who sets limits on Erdogan."

It is undeniable that Rutte's provocation against the Turkish government was an attempt to stir up nationalist sentiments and to overtake Wilders from the right just three days before the election. He denied entry to the Turkish foreign minister and had the Turkish family minister forcibly escorted to the border to prevent her speaking to an audience of fellow Turks about the constitutional referendum in Turkey.

This deliberate provocation was greeted with enthusiasm throughout Europe, also by Greens and supposedly left-wing politicians. For example, the former German Green Party Chairman Claudia Roth

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spoke in favour of banning Turkish politicians: “Now it is important that we clearly define the rule of law.”

Left Party parliamentary group chair Sahra Wagenknecht called on the German government to “finally show its true colours.” Merkel and Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel had the ability to stop Erdogan’s propaganda tour, she said, “just like the governments of Austria and the Netherlands have done for their countries.”

Many observers have now concluded that after the election in the Netherlands, Marine Le Pen “still has a good chance of becoming French president,” as *Spiegel Online* writes. “Her *Front National* [FN] is anchored much more deeply in many social layers in France, is politically friendlier and more capable of winning a majority than the one-man party of the shrill Wilders in the Netherlands.”

Large banks and fund managers have apparently also drawn similar conclusions, since they assess politics according to their future profit prospects. Yesterday, the *Financial Times* reported that “global financiers line up to engage with Le Pen.”

Analysts from UBS, BlackRock and Barclays, among others, have met with representatives of the FN to discuss its economic plans. The same applies to representatives of several dozen governments, including the US, Argentina, Sweden and Denmark. The chief strategist of the FN, Florian Philippot, has spoken recently with diplomats from five European and three Asian countries.

Wilders and other right-wing demagogues are only a symptom, not the cause of the turn to the right by bourgeois politics. The cause lies in the deep crisis of the capitalist system. Decades of welfare cuts and the enrichment of a tiny minority at the expense of the majority, along with increasing global conflicts, have generated economic and social tensions that cannot be overcome by democratic methods.

This finds its sharpest expression in the collapse of parties that had earlier preached social conciliation and then organized massive social cuts. The Dutch Social Democratic Labour Party (PvdA), the former coalition partner of Rutte’s VVD, saw its vote collapse. It lost 29 of its 38 seats, and now only has just 9 deputies in the new parliament.

Those that have benefited from this collapse and the losses of Rutte’s VVD (-8 seats) include the Christian Democratic CDA (+6) and the liberal D66 (+7), as well as a number of smaller parties. Wilders’ PVV was also able to increase its seat total from 15 to 20.

With the exception of the ultranationalist Forum for Democracy (2 seats), the smaller parties all advanced social demands or opposed xenophobia. For example, the immigrant party Denk (in Dutch: Think!, in Turkish: Equality) won three seats, the Pensioners’ Party 50+ won two seats, and the animal rights party PvdD three seats.

The Greens (Green-Left) increased the number of its deputies from 4 to 10. Under its 30-year-old leader Jesse Klaver, who has Moroccan and Indonesian roots and is compared alternately with the US Senator Bernie Sanders and Canadian Premier Justin Trudeau, the Greens have sought to present a more cosmopolitan appearance.

But none of these parties has an answer to the social crisis. They all support the capitalist system and seek to prevent an independent socialist movement of the working class. The Greens might even become part of the next government, in order to lend a more “youthful” face to the right-wing policies of the old parties.

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