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KREMLIN-FRIENDLY
POPULISM
IN THE NETHERLANDS**

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The Rise of Kremlin-Friendly Populism in the Netherlands

Marcel H. Van Herpen

EARLY POPULISM AND THE MURDERS OF FORTUYN AND VAN GOGH

The Netherlands is known as a tolerant and liberal country, where extremist ideas – rightwing or leftwing – don’t have much impact. After the Second World War extreme right or populist parties played only a marginal role in Dutch politics. There were some small fringe movements, such as the Farmers’ Party (*Boerenpartij*), led by the maverick “Boer Koekoek,” which, in 1967, won 7 seats in parliament. In 1981 this party lost its parliamentary representation and another party emerged, the extreme right Center Party (*Centrum Partij*), led by Hans Janmaat. This party (after a scission in 1984 called “Center Democrats” (*Centrum Democraten*) never had more than 3 seats (of 150) in parliament. However, things changed at the end of the 1990s, when immigration became an issue and Dutch multicultural society came increasingly under attack. A new kind of political leader emerged, adapted to the Dutch political culture: the “liberal populist.” His name was Pim Fortuyn. Fortuyn distinguished himself from extreme right populists in other countries, because, far from being xenophobic, authoritarian, and nationalist, he claimed to defend the tolerant, liberal traditions of Dutch society against intolerant and illiberal threats. These threats, he said, came from Muslim immigrants, who didn’t respect women’s rights, had cruel slaughter practices, and attacked homosexuals (this last point in particular was emphasized by Fortuyn – himself an openly gay person). In his book “The Islamization of our Culture – Dutch Identity as Foundation” (*De islamisering van onze cultuur – Nederlandse identiteit als fundament*) he wrote that “the Netherlands is full,” adding a demand “to close the frontiers

definitively.” On May 6, 2002, Fortuyn was assassinated by an environmental activist. Theo Van Gogh, a Dutch film maker and critic of Islam, underwent the same fate. He was assassinated on November 20, 2004, in the streets of Amsterdam, by a Dutch-Moroccan extremist.

THE EMERGENCE OF GEERT WILDERS AND HIS PARTY FOR FREEDOM

These murders were deeply traumatic events. They led to continuing divisions in Dutch society and were a fertile soil for populist movements. It was, however, a new populist leader, who would reap the benefits: Geert Wilders, a former MP for the conservative VVD party, who, in 2004, founded his own party, the Party for Freedom (*Partij voor Vrijheid*). Initially Wilders distanced himself from other extreme right parties in Europe. He also didn't show any particular sympathy for Putin's Russia. However, in April 2013, Wilders made the first overtures toward the French Front National and in November of that year he invited Marine Le Pen to The Hague, initiating a collaboration between the two parties in the 2014 election campaign for the European Parliament. After the election it was not possible to form a political group in the European Parliament (for which 7 nationalities were needed), because the British UKIP refused to join. However, one year later, after a schism within UKIP, former UKIP member Janice Atkinson joined and the formation of the group "Europe of Nations and Freedom" was a fact. The PVV was now in the same group as the Front National, the Austrian Freedom Party, the Italian Lega Nord, The Polish New Right, and the Belgian Vlaams Belang. The Front National already had a close relationship with Putin's Russia, while the Lega Nord and the Austrian Freedom Party would soon sign "cooperation agreements" with the Kremlin party United Russia. It would not take long before the PVV began to warm towards Moscow. While at home the PVV played down its sympathy for the Kremlin, its voting behavior in the European Parliament, where the PVV consequently supported Moscow, was quite different. (1) In 2017 the moment seemed to have come for an open embrace: on November 22 of that year Wilders visited the Russian embassy in The Hague. He declared that he wanted "to counterbalance the hysterical Russophobia that exists." (2) On February 28, 2018, Wilders visited the State Duma in Moscow, where he was received by Leonid Slutsky, chairman of the foreign affairs commission, and by Anatoly Karpov, a former

chess champion. It was not (yet) the high profile meeting with Putin himself that Wilders might have hoped for. (3)

THE UKRAINE REFERENDUM: A BONE FOR PRO-KREMLIN POPULISTS

This pro-Moscow alignment of the populist PVV party is not the only sign of the Kremlin's growing influence in the Netherlands. Another important event was the Ukraine referendum in 2016. On July 1, 2015, a new law came into force in the Netherlands which gave Dutch citizens the right to demand an advisory referendum on laws and treaties which had been adopted by parliament. After its adoption it was generally believed that it would be some time before the population would make use of this new right – due to an inbuilt hurdle: in order to organize a referendum it was necessary to collect a minimum of 300,000 signatures. The result of the referendum would be valid if at least 30 percent of the electorate participated in the vote (about 4 million people). However, it took only a few months before an organization, called *GeenPeil*, a cooperation platform of three populist, Eurosceptic groups, jumped at the opportunity. Their target was a law passed in 2015 by the two houses of parliament which had given the green light for the ratification of the Ukraine-European Union Association Agreement. In September 2015 the organizers of the initiative had gathered 427,939 valid signatures and on April 6, 2016, the referendum took place. According to the Dutch journalist Laura Starink, “a quick glance at the website [of *GeenPeil*] makes it clear that the followers have developed ... a pure hatred of Ukraine.” (4) This hatred was incomprehensible, because the referendum was organized only one year and nine months after the downing of the Malaysian civilian plane MH17 by a Russian BUK missile above Eastern Ukraine. In this criminal act the crew and all passengers died. Of the 298 victims 196 were Dutch citizens, including many children. One would, therefore, have expected rather sympathy for Ukraine and hatred for the aggressor, Russia. This was not the case. On the contrary, the strangest arguments were used. One of these was that the agreement would be a ‘provocation’ of the aggressor, Russia. The referendum led to a heated debate between advocates and opponents of the agreement. On April 6, 2016, the “no” vote won with 61 percent. Because 32 percent of the population had voted, the vote was declared valid. It put the Dutch government in an awkward position. Although the referendum was only advisory and had no binding character, the government had promised

to take the result of the referendum “seriously” and, eventually, renegotiate some aspects of the agreement in Brussels. However, it was clear that the Dutch government could not (and did not want to) block an agreement which had already been ratified by the parliaments of the other EU member states. This first experience with the new law, therefore, was negative. The feeling was that a law, which had been created to enhance the influence of the ordinary citizen, had been hijacked by Eurosceptic populists. And not only by them. On the internet there appeared videos and fake news intended to influence the debate. On one of these videos could be seen six militiamen of the nationalist Ukrainian “Azov” battalion, burning a Dutch flag and threatening the Netherlands with terrorist attacks if it voted against the association agreement. Research by Bellingcat revealed that this was a fake video, produced by the well-known St. Petersburg troll factory “Internet Research Agency.” (5) In November 2017 the Dutch minister of internal affairs, Ollongren, confirmed the existence of a Russian disinformation campaign during the referendum. (6) There had been not only disinformation, but also active interference by Russian or pro-Kremlin actors.

One of them was Vladimir Kornilov, who claimed to lead a “Center for Eurasian Studies” in The Hague. Kornilov, who was born in Russia, but has a Ukrainian passport, was presented by the leftist Socialist Party and the Forum for Democracy, two organizations which supported the ‘no’ vote, as a Ukrainian citizen who opposed the EU-Ukraine agreement. Kornilov, who, until 2013, had been director of the Russian CIS Institute in Ukraine and had close contacts with the separatists in Donbas, managed to get himself interviewed on Dutch television as an “expert.” (7) It was not the first time that direct interventions by Russians or Kremlin-related individuals had taken place. In July 2015, one year after the downing of the MH17, a rally was organized in the Dutch town of Eindhoven by a group, called “Break the System,” with banners demanding “the truth” about the MH17 crash. The leader of the rally, Natalya Vorontsova, was interviewed extensively by the Russian TV channels RT and Rossiya24. During the Ukraine referendum in 2016 the same Vorontsova would participate in a rally for the ‘no’ vote in Amsterdam alongside Harry van Bommel, an MP of the left populist Socialist Party.(8)

THIERRY BAUDET'S FORUM FOR DEMOCRACY: A NEW PRO-KREMLIN POPULIST OFFSHOOT

After the referendum, Thierry Baudet, the leader of Forum voor Democratie, transformed his group into a political party of the same name. In the parliamentary election of 2017 the party got two seats in parliament. The new party, which was a direct competitor of Wilders's Party for Freedom, did not confine itself to anti-immigration rhetoric, but presented itself openly as an alt-right and white supremacist party. (9) Thierry Baudet visited Jean-Marie Le Pen twice and had dinner with Jared Taylor, one of the leaders of the American white supremacist movement. (10) Baudet shares Wilders's admiration for the Kremlin. A Dutch Labor MP said that Baudet promoted a narrative that was "word for word what would be used by a spokesman for the Kremlin." (11) Does the Forum also have financial links with the Kremlin? It's difficult to say. However, Hugo Berkhout, one of the party's candidates for the parliamentary election of 2017, is employed by Mikhail Fridman, the Kremlin-related oligarch who owns the Alfa Bank. According to one author, "therefore the possibility [is] very real that Thierry Baudet has received donations from Berkhout, which are indirectly paid by his boss Fridman." (12)

THE MH17: DEBUNKING RUSSIAN FAKE NEWS

The Dutch counterintelligence service AIVD wrote in its annual report 2017 that "in recent years, influencing operations have become an increasingly important part of Russian foreign policy." (13) The Netherlands would have become of strategic importance for Russia since the downing of the MH17. Debunking Russian fake news seems, therefore, to be of major importance. However, in February 2018 the East Stratcom Taskforce of the European Commission, which runs the website EUvsDisinfo, came under attack by the Dutch parliament, which adopted a motion, demanding the closure of this Taskforce. The reason was that four Dutch media had been accused by EUvsDisinfo of spreading Russian fake news. (14) The Dutch parliament was concerned about the freedom of the press and warned against Brussels imposing "censorship." It is an indication of how the task of countering Russian influence and debunking Russian fake news has become a sensitive subject. However, the cases reported by EUvsDisinfo did not seem to have been totally unfounded. A Dutch radio station broadcast a program, titled "Rightwing extremists seize power in

Ukraine” (a title which was later changed into “Growing influence of extremists in Ukraine”). (15) And in September 2016 the regional paper De Gelderlander published a press conference given by a spokesman of Almaz-Antey, the producer of the BUK missile, in which he repeated the Russian narrative that the MH17 was downed by the Ukrainian army, a version of the facts which was completely at odds with the results of the Dutch-led Joint Investigation Team. (16) After the paper threatened with legal action, the East Stratcom Taskforce removed the item from its website. This is an example of how the fight against Russian disinformation is far from easy. In an expert report on disinformation, prepared for the European Commission, the authors define “disinformation” as “all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit.” (17) Some of the Dutch cases, presented by EUvsDisinfo, lacked the characteristic of being “presented and promoted to *intentionally* cause public harm or for profit,” and, as such, would not qualify as being “disinformation.” However, Russian fake news can also be spread *unintentionally* and it is useful and even necessary that there should be watchdogs whose task it is to debunk misleading news, although it may be preferable for these watchdogs to operate independently of national governments and/or European institutions. (18)

Marcel H. Van Herpen is author of three books on Putin’s Russia:

- *Putin’s Propaganda Machine – Soft Power and Russian Foreign Policy* (2016)
- *Putin’s Wars – The Rise of Russia’s New Imperialism* (2014)
- *Putinism – The Slow Rise of a Radical Right Regime in Russia* (2013)

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NOTES

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- 4) Laura Starink, *Slag om Oekraïne – Referendum over een land in opstand*, (Amsterdam and Antwerp: Uitgeverij Augustus, 2016), p. 8.
- 5) Bellingcat Investigation Team, "Behind the Dutch Terror Threat Video The St. Petersburg "Troll factory" Connection," *Bellingcat*, April 3, 2016. <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2016/04/03/azov-video/>
On the troll factory "Internet Research Agency" see my book *Putin's Propaganda Machine – Soft Power and Russian Foreign Policy*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), p. 97.
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- 8) Andreas Kouwenhoven and Wilmer Heck, "Pro-Russische activisten proberen in Nederland de publieke opinie te bespelen," *NRC*, November 14, 2017. <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2017/11/14/pro-russische-activisten-proberen-in-nederland-de-publieke-opinie-te-bespelen-14008383-a1581044>

- 9) Thijs Kleinpaste, "The New Dutch Disease Is White Nationalism," *Foreign Policy*, March 20, 2018. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/03/20/the-new-dutch-disease-is-white-nationalism/>
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- 17) "A Multi-Dimensional Approach to Disinformation – Report of the Independent High Level Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation," European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication Networks, Content and Technology,

Brussels, 2018, p. 35. <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/final-report-high-level-expert-group-fake-news-and-online-disinformation>

18) Watchdogs, tasked with debunking Russian disinformation, should be subsidized, but be independent of governments. An interesting initiative of civil society is also the “Journalism Trust Initiative,” organized by the Global Editors Network, Reporters without Borders, the European Broadcasting Union, and Agence France Presse, to give an approval mark to “quality media” which are transparent about their media ownership and sources of revenue, and respect certain professional and ethical standards. This approval mark should give them concrete advantages, such as privileged treatment by the algorithms of search machines and the social media. (Cf. Caroline Scott, “Reporters Without Borders launches The Journalism Trust Initiative to combat disinformation online,” *Journalism, co.uk*, April 3, 2018. <https://www.journalism.co.uk/news/new-initiative-launched-to-combat-disinformation-online/s2/a719892/>)

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