

Geert Wilders is no longer so keen on pushing for a 'Nexit' – and it's because Dutch people don't want it

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The intensity of the the Dutch Freedom Party's Euroscepticism has varied over the years, writes [Stijn van Kessel](#). Unlike what happened in occasion of the 2012 vote, when opposition to the EU took centre stage in the party's electoral programme, Geert Wilders is currently giving less prominence to the issue in the run up to the [15 March election](#). As van Kessel explains, Dutch citizens' support for a 'Nexit' is clearly limited and campaigning on a multifaceted nativist programme may be a better way for Wilders to expand his support base.



As in many European party systems, Eurosceptic sentiments in the Netherlands are most loudly expressed by a party of the populist radical right. Members of this party family typically lament the loss of national sovereignty due to European integration and see the EU as an elite-driven project which does not benefit 'ordinary people', and even hurts their interests. The Dutch Freedom Party (*Partij voor de Vrijheid*, PVV) of Geert Wilders is no exception in this regard, although the [intensity of its Euroscepticism and the prominence of the issue](#) in its communication have fluctuated over the years. Notably, while opposition to the EU was at the heart of the PVV's 2012 parliamentary election campaign, Mr. Wilders is seemingly giving somewhat less priority to the issue in the current campaign for the upcoming election of 15 March.

Two weeks ahead of the poll, the PVV is one of the front-runners. [Recent opinion polls](#) suggest that the PVV is competing with the Liberal Party (*Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie*, VVD) of prime minister Mark Rutte to become the largest party in parliament. The PVV has, nevertheless, seen its predicted number of seats dwindle somewhat in the most recent weeks. It also seems unlikely – at least at this stage – that the PVV will enter a governing coalition: all mainstream parties, and most other serious contenders, have [ruled out cooperating with Wilders' party](#) in government. Although the PVV has never been in government before, the party provided parliamentary support for a centre-right minority coalition including the VVD and the Christian Democrats (*Christen Democratisch Appel*, CDA) between 2010 and 2012.



Geert Wilders at a rally organised by Pegida, 2015. Credits: [Metropolico](#) (CC BY-SA 2.0)

The PVV has been a Eurosceptic party from the outset. The party was founded after Mr Wilders left the VVD parliamentary group in September 2004, following a conflict with the party leadership over the issue of Turkish EU membership, which he opposed. In a document titled 'declaration of independence' ([Onafhankelijkheidsverklaring](#)) from March 2005, Mr Wilders continued to voice opposition to Turkish EU accession and also spoke about the loss of sovereignty as a result of European integration, not least regarding the area of immigration, and the EU's high costs to the taxpayer. He also criticised the EU's undemocratic character, stressing its remoteness from citizens.

In the years after the official foundation of the PVV, and entrance into parliament in November 2006, the party's line on 'Europe' remained fairly consistent. While the PVV acknowledged the value of economic cooperation in the form of trade, it remained sceptical of other forms of integration. From the election campaign of 2010 onwards, the party also made a more explicit link between European integration and multiculturalism. By this time, Mr Wilders' position on Islam had become more radical, and warnings about the threat of 'Islamisation' more central to the PVV's discourse. Not only the 'left-wing elites' at the national level were blamed for allowing this process happen; in the [2010 PVV manifesto](#) the EU was dubbed a 'multicultural super state', and the party complained that 'thanks to that club in Brussels, Europe is swiftly turning into Eurabia'.

The issue of European integration truly took centre stage in the programme of 2012, which was titled '[Their Brussels, our Netherlands](#)'. At this time Mr. Wilders explicitly criticised the EU's handling of the financial and economic crises. Indeed, Mr Wilders' central argument for withdrawing his support from the governing coalition – and thus triggering the 2012 election – was that the austerity measures deriving from Brussels' budget rules threatened the financial position of the Dutch elderly. The 2012 manifesto was filled with a multitude of disparaging comments about partying 'EU-nationalists' enjoying 'ever-lasting lunches', 'blind inhabitants of the ivory towers in Brussels', and Dutch politicians obediently following the orders of their European 'masters'. According to the manifesto, Romanians were laughing at the silly Dutch for continuing to donate money, while Greeks drank another ouzo at the expense of the Dutch citizens.

Thus, the unfolding of the 'Great Recession' and Eurozone crisis seemingly encouraged Mr Wilders to increase the salience of the EU issue, and to make opposition to 'Europe' a central theme of his party's campaign. What is more, the party also shifted to a 'hard Eurosceptic' position: for the first time the PVV proposed to end Dutch membership of the EU and the Eurozone.

The PVV maintained this position in more recent years. As a case in point, Mr Wilders congratulated Britons with 'Independence Day' after the Brexit vote of June 2016. The party wrote in a [newsletter](#) that Great Britain showed Europe the way towards the future, and that the Dutch deserved their own referendum as soon as possible. The desire to leave the EU in order to make the Netherlands independent again was also reflected in the [party manifesto for the 2017 election](#), which notably covered only a single page.

In comparison with the 2012 campaign, however, Mr. Wilders' focus is less strongly on 'Europe'. For the PVV leaving the EU still constitutes a crucial step towards making 'the Netherlands ours again' – the party's key slogan for the campaign – and Mr Wilders' [criticism of EU institutions and representatives](#) has not waned. Yet the issue takes a less central position in the party's communications, in which themes concerning immigration, cultural identity and 'Islamisation' – issues whose salience has been fuelled by the more recent refugee crisis – traditionally play a large role.

It may nevertheless be clear that no other significant Dutch party rivals the PVV's Euroscepticism. Two new parties on the conservative right, For Netherlands (*Voor Nederland*, VNL) – a party founded by two ex-PVV MPs – and Forum for Democracy (*Forum voor Democratie*, FvD), are in favour of a 'Nexit' referendum, and otherwise seek to reverse many aspects of European integration (VNL) or promote to leave the EU altogether (FvD). Their electoral support, however, is likely to remain limited. On the socio-economic and ecological left, Eurosceptic messages are

voiced by the Socialist Party (*Socialistische Partij*, SP) and Party for the Animals (*Partij voor de Dieren*, PvdD), but they propose reforming the EU and continuing Dutch membership. The traditional mainstream parties – CDA, VVD and Labour (*Partij van de Arbeid*, PvdA) – have, in recent years, been keen to identify publicly the weaknesses of the EU, but remain firmly in favour of EU membership and the idea of European co-operation more generally. The greens (*Groenlinks*) and social liberals of Democrats 66 (*Democraten 66*, D66) are the two most unapologetically pro-European parties.

This leaves the PVV as the most prominent opponent of the EU. Whether many citizens are attracted by the PVV's Euroscepticism *per se* is a moot point. More generally, even though public Euroscepticism is also evident in the Netherlands, certainly among PVV supporters, Dutch citizens [favouring a 'Nexit' clearly remain in the minority](#). If extending electoral support for the PVV is his aim, Mr Wilders is probably wise to campaign on the basis of a multifaceted nativist programme, and not one primarily centred on opposition to Europe.

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Note: This article was originally published at [EPERN](#). It gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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