

## Opinion

# Rise of Geert Wilders' PVV Party in the Netherlands reminds us of the Rise of Extremism in Bosnia

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## Introduction

During the most recent election cycle in the Netherlands, the response was fairly lukewarm to the expected election victory of Geert Wilders' rightwing-populist Freedom Party (*Partij voor de Vrijheid*, PVV)—as polls at the time indicated 30 to 35 seats in the Second Chamber of the Dutch parliament after the elections on March 15th, 2017.

This is despite the fact that Wilders' program does not offer any policies on and solutions for socio-economic problems, and groups in society are being incited against each other. That reminds us of the extreme-nationalist leaders in the former Yugoslavia on the eve of the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1992: they too had no solutions for the economy, and simply put the blame on other ethnic groups. The Netherlands is not Bosnia, and Wilders is no Karadžić, but any implementation of Wilders' programme will gravely disrupt Dutch society.

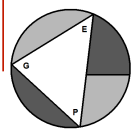
## Extreme Nationalism devastated Bosnia

Comparisons are always relative and contestable, but one can also learn from history. We see similarities between the rise of the PVV in the Netherlands and the rise of extreme nationalist parties in Bosnia during the early 1990s. As in the Netherlands, different communities lived in Bosnia peacefully together for years (indeed decades), but nationalist leaders incited them against each other.

In Bosnia-Herzegovina the three main population groups were and are: Bosniaks (Muslims), Serbs (Orthodox Christians) and Croats (Catholics). These groups lived to a large extent apart from each other, but in a peaceful fashion. In the course of many years, there was more and more exchange: in the 1980s one of four marriages was mixed.

The situation changed in the late 1980s when there was political and economic turmoil. The background of that was that Bosnia was part of Yugoslavia. That country was struggling with large debts and fell apart. Then the economy collapsed completely. It led to fear and anxiety.

In that situation nationalist leaders forward came in different republics within Yugoslavia, most prominently Franjo Tuđman in Croatia, Slobodan Milošević in Serbia and Radovan Karadžić in Bosnia. Each of these leaders offered no solutions to the serious economic problems, but simply put the blame on other populations. Karadžić's 'solution' was that Bosnia had to become an ethnically pure Serbian country: the Bosniaks and Croats had to be



removed. That message hit home. His politics eventually led to a terrible war with dramatic consequences: 100,000 people dead, one million people displaced and a torn country.

During the Bosnian war (1992—1995) 40,000 Bosnians fled to the Netherlands. The Netherlands gave them good opportunities to rebuild their lives here. Bosnians have come to regard the Netherlands as a second homeland, and fully participate in Dutch society. According to recent figures from the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) of the Netherlands, 40% of the Bosnian youth are highly educated, a percentage that is higher than the national average. The Netherlands has become their society.

### Consequences of the Implementation of Wilders' Program

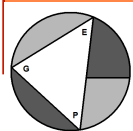
However, we see sad parallels between the developments in the Netherlands now and what has happened in Bosnia. There is uncertainty about the economy. Attacks by terrorists with an Islamic background reinforce these feelings of anxiety. In this situation of unrest, many people feel drawn to the simple 'solutions' of Wilders.

It is also true of Wilders that he has no substantive program. His program literally fills just one sheet of paper; it promises all kinds of things (pension age back to 65 years, Netherlands out of the EU, closure of borders, etcetera), but lacks any economic foundation. At the same time this tends to turn groups against each other. His first program point is to “*de-islamise the Netherlands: .... close all mosques and Islamic schools in this country*”. Be aware that this proposal of Wilders is not empty talk: Wilders is tenacious in his aim to remove Islam from the Netherlands.

With his plans Wilders also creates a great gulf towards the Bosnians living in the Netherlands, irrespective of the fact that almost all of them have attained Dutch citizenship many years ago. Also Bosnian mosques will be closed if Wilders comes to power. And he wants to stop immigration from “Islamic” countries; assuming that he also considers Bosnia to be as such, then no Bosnians will be able to emigrate to the Netherlands any longer. While Bosnians are now part of Dutch society, they will soon become outsiders—indeed outcasts—under a ‘Wilderian’ regime.

These are no solutions to the challenges facing our country—to the contrary, they would aggravate current ones and create new ones if they ever come to fruition. Among many Dutch people, the belief appears to have gained ground that current parliamentary elections are “ordinary” ones, and that the PVV is a “normal” party. But the PVV is not a normal party and expounds extreme ideas.

The Netherlands is not Bosnia. The situation now is in many ways different. We have a stable democracy, unemployment is low, the independent rule of law is firmly established. There will be no war here. But implementing Wilders' plans, if ever implemented, will also bring chaos and polarisation here. In Bosnia people could and did not imagine what would be the consequences of an election victory of extreme nationalists. Let's not be naive. A victory of



Wilders can also disrupt Dutch society. It is important to offer a counterbalance to this dire specter on March 15th, on election day. If we can draw a lesson from the horrors of the war in Bosnia, it is that extreme nationalism, in whatever shape or form, is highly perilous—indeed potentially lethal.

### Postscript

The final results released by the Dutch Electoral Council confirmed on 20 March 2017 that the PVV has taken 20 seats—a gain of five seats, but much less than previous opinion polls indicated with 30-35 seats for the party in total. There is every reason to be relieved about this result. On the other hand, the ‘Wilderian’ form of populism—read: extreme nationalism—is all but dead and buried. Wilders’ PVV and similar parties in the Netherlands may still become the largest parties(s) at the next election. And right now the PVV is already the second largest party in the Second Chamber of the Dutch parliament.

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*An earlier version of this article can be found on the website of the International Committee for Humanitarian Intervention ([www.ichuminterv.org](http://www.ichuminterv.org)) and in Dutch on the website of the Political Committee ‘Stari Most’ ([www.starimost.nl](http://www.starimost.nl)).*

21th Srebrenica commemoration in The Hague, the Netherlands, 11 July 2016



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