

# [***A quiet Dutch village holds clues as European politics veer to the right***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6B3S-Y221-JC5B-G1K3-00000-00&context=1516831)

The Associated Press

January 15, 2024 Monday 5:09 AM GMT

Copyright 2024 Associated Press All Rights Reserved

**Section:** INTERNATIONAL NEWS; DOMESTIC NEWS

**Length:** 1548 words

**Byline:** RAF CASERT, Associated Press

**Dateline:** SINT WILLEBRORD, The Netherlands

**Body**

SINT WILLEBRORD, The Netherlands — “Everyone is welcome,” reads the sign at the church door in this quiet Dutch village, where neighbors greet each other from tidy porches overlooking manicured lawns.

But that declaration of tolerance seems oddly out of place.

Triggered by economic and cultural anxieties that have whipped up [*fears about immigrants*](https://apnews.com/article/migration-asylum-eu-pact-reform-4c7ff7d75f728593b7708150201693e0), people here and throughout the Netherlands have veered far to the right politically. It's an extreme example of a trend being felt across the continent that could tilt the outcome of this year's [*European Union*](https://apnews.com/hub/european-parliament) parliamentary election.

In Sint Willebrord, which has few immigrants among its 9,300 residents, almost three out of four voters chose a virulently anti-migrant, anti-Muslim party in an election last year that shattered the Netherlands' image as a welcoming, moderate country.

The Party for Freedom, led by [*a peroxide-haired firebrand named Geert Wilders*](https://apnews.com/hub/geert-wilders), received nearly a quarter of all the votes — in a country where less than 5 percent of the people are Muslim — with slogans such as “no Islamic schools, Qurans or mosques” and “no open borders and mass immigration we cannot afford.”

Voters across Europe are increasingly [*empowering leaders like Wilders*](https://apnews.com/article/eu-wilders-populist-farright-migration-muslims-netherlands-c8617a97a03011f98ed898ce863b579f) who promise to restrict immigration and, in some cases, constrain democratic freedoms: of religion, of expression, of [*the right to protest*](https://apnews.com/article/britain-democracy-protest-arrests-unwritten-constitution-616078b918e27d5098890be6f9967b14).

These forces have bubbled up to varying degrees one country at a time, including in [*Germany*](https://apnews.com/article/germany-far-right-afd-state-elections-8814bb775addc9e279979028bbcad772), [*France*](https://apnews.com/article/france-police-shooting-far-right-85adc47ce3e6982879b391fcd84758e9), [*Spain*](https://apnews.com/article/spain-elections-pacts-right-left-government-f7d276a20dace2931eb95208e728d183), [*Sweden*](https://apnews.com/article/politics-sweden-government-europe-european-union-d6e0caa44d234f822a055998dc6c9ff7) and [*Austria*](https://apnews.com/article/politics-austria-government-europe-3294042df471db5b4e52bb0b38500f56). But before long, experts worry, they could dramatically reshape the continent from the top down.

In June, voters in the 27 member states of the European Union will elect their next Parliament for a five-year term. Analysts say that far-right parties, now the sixth-largest group in the assembly, are primed to gain seats – and more influence over EU policies affecting everything from civil rights to gender issues to immigration.

“People have a score to settle with ‘old ***politics***,’” said Rem Korteweg, senior research fellow at the Clingendael think tank in The Hague.

In the Netherlands, long a haven on things like drug use, end-of-life decisions and gender issues, this score-settling paved the way for the shrill voice of Wilders. “A vote for Wilders clearly was a protest vote,” said Korteweg.

In some other European nations, the shift to the right has gone even further and begun to gnaw at the foundations of democracy.

In [*Hungary*](https://apnews.com/article/business-europe-elections-hungary-general-elections-d48974ece91f6237789b8a5b423876b5) and [*Serbia*](https://apnews.com/article/serbia-election-vucic-fraud-observers-9dedac922fce746a30cdc16ce4a32c5f), recent elections were free but not fair, democracy experts say, because the ruling parties captured the media, the courts and the electoral authorities. The EU has withheld funds from Hungary and Poland as punishment for backsliding on basic rules of law.

And in the Netherlands and beyond, politicians like Wilders have built their support on promises not to treat all as equal before the law. That often translates to: keep foreigners out.

“The clear trend toward anti-migration policies is there,” said Korteweg. “And in some nations, it has already allowed the radical right to gain power.”

**RISING COSTS, RISING ANGER**

Support for Wilders' Party for Freedom more than doubled since the last Dutch election in 2021. With 23% of the vote, Wilders stands a good chance of leading any future governing coalition.

Nowhere was there more support for Wilders than in Rucphen, a town in the south of the Netherlands to which the village of Sint Willebrord belongs and where, for the first time, more than half of voters chose Wilders' party. In 2012, his party received 27 percent of the town's vote.

For a quarter century, voters across the Netherlands have grown increasingly disgruntled as successive governments — despite high levels of taxation — were unable to stop the erosion of cradle-to-grave benefits citizens had come to expect for things like education, health care and pensions.

“It is as if people are being forced to vote for Wilders,” said Walter de Jong, 80. A lifelong baker, De Jong said he was forced to close his business last year because of rising costs and stringent government rules.

“Everything is going backward. Every year, it gets worse,” said De Jong. He previously supported the free market party of the outgoing prime minister, Mark Rutte, but chose not to vote in the latest election.

The decline in Dutch living standards has coincided with rising immigration. Most have come from Ukraine and other former Soviet states; a smaller number have come from countries such as Syria and Turkey. Two decades ago, the Netherlands had a net outflow of migrants, but by 2022 that had swung to an influx of 224,000 in a nation of 17.5 million.

The Netherlands has also been hit hard by [*a cost-of-living crisis*](https://apnews.com/article/netherlands-election-costofliving-food-bank-poverty-f4886bf7b3b24e26c27a4c86f9f7f450) affecting everything from the price of healthcare to food. Inflation has fueled inequality and forced some lower middle-class families into poverty.

The income needed to buy a first home has risen far faster than earnings, according to a 2022 study by the Dutch lender Rabobank.

“Housing is a policy failure. It is very true and very real," said Tom Theuns of Leiden University. "And then you have a populist who says, ‘OK, the reason is: asylum seekers are given priority.’ Even if this is a lie, this is how immigration becomes linked via racist messaging. It’s scapegoating.”

Wilders advanced this line of reasoning in his election platform: “Why are asylum seekers first in line when looking for scarce housing? It has to stop.”

His supporters placed the blame for these problems at the feet of the ruling coalition of Rutte.

It is a pattern repeated by voters in many European countries, Theuns said.

“And one of the places those votes are going all too often are radical right-wing parties who are playing on social and economic themes — at least in their discourse,” Theuns said.

**SHUN OR EMBRACE POPULISM?**

For traditional parties of the European center-right and center-left, the success of populist messaging presents a challenge.

In the past, many of them regarded the upstarts as dangerous predators bent on destruction. The favored analogy for dealing with them was a “cordon sanitaire,” the protective barrier put in place to stop the spread of infectious diseases. Politically speaking, that meant not forming coalitions with them.

In Belgium, this strategy was used to isolate far-right nationalists, and in France, the Front National party of Jean-Marie Le Pen was kept at arm’s length.

However, under Le Pen’s daughter, Marine, the Front National — rebranded as the National Rally — is no longer a pariah. In November, she was welcomed at a protest march against rising antisemitism. That prompted critics to use an unflattering German expression — "salonfähig” — to describe a former outcast being welcomed into polite society.

"Salonfähig" is often used to refer to how the Nazis — initially shunned — eventually gained entry into mainstream ***politics***, before their total takeover ahead of World War II.

In the Netherlands, forming a majority coalition with Wilders' party was considered unthinkable not long ago.

In 2010, Wilders' party propped up a minority Dutch government. But Wilders refused to let up on his anti-immigrant rhetoric, and 1 1/2 years of acrimony later, the plug was pulled.

But then the mood of the continent began to change. The 2015 [*migration crisis in Europe*](https://apnews.com/article/europe-germany-migration-angela-merkel-97946524737de3685bd5a558acca4e23) was an opening for far-right ***politics*** following the EU's halting response to the arrival of some 100,000 asylum seekers each month.

Wilders' anti-migrant rhetoric began to resonate even more. Last year, the number of migrants arriving into the 27-nation bloc by irregular means — such as dinghies crossing the Mediterranean from North Africa — was at its highest level since 2016, according to the EU border agency, Frontex.

In July, Mark Rutte's majority coalition collapsed over his handling of immigration, and his successor as leader of the VVD party hinted that Wilders might be a partner to talk to again.

“Suddenly, a vote for Wilders was no longer a wasted vote," said Korteweg of the Clingendael think tank. "And Wilders took off in the polls.”

In December, a member of Wilders' party became president of parliament, marking a breakthrough in political acceptance. There is now a real prospect of his far-right party joining, or even leading, a majority governing coalition.

Sensing the opportunity for more power, Wilders has said that he would be willing put his most abrasive points “temporarily in the fridge.”

Political rivals are skeptical. “When you put something in the fridge, you put it in there to get it out all fresh later," said Frans Timmermans, a longtime center-left leader in Dutch ***politics*** who ran against Wilders in the November election.

Political analysts looking ahead to the EU Parliament elections in June say what is happening in countries like the Netherlands could be a harbinger for the governing body of the bloc's 450 million people.

Rather than far-right parties being pulled to the center, the center may veer to the right.

“And this may be the biggest danger for Europe," said Korteweg of Clingendael. "On the one hand, such coalitions may well take the sharpest edges off those politicians. But on the other hand, there is the massive risk to normalize such parties.”

\_\_\_

This story, supported by the Pulitzer Center for Crisis Reporting, is part of an ongoing Associated Press series covering threats to democracy in Europe.

**Load-Date:** January 15, 2024

**End of Document**