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Wilders Rides the Right Wave

The surge of fringe right-wing groups is a sign of things to come.

- Richard Palmer
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Geert Wilders's anti-immigration Party for Freedom (PVV) won a stunning number of seats in the Netherlands' national elections on June 9, taking 24 out of the 150. Before the election, the pvv had only nine. The leaders of the ruling coalition, the Christian Democratic Appeal, suffered an equally shocking defeat—falling from 41 to 21 seats—going from the largest party in parliament to the fourth largest.

The election's winner was the conservative Liberal Party, which won 31 seats. It was closely followed by the Labor Party, with 30 seats.

These results put Wilders in a strong position. "We really want to be part of government, we want to participate. I don't think the other parties can escape us," he said.

The results were a surprise, as both polls and pundits pointed to a less dramatic increase in seats for Wilders. Many assumed that because of Europe's financial troubles, economics—not immigration—would dominate the election. But to many, the Netherlands' immigration problems are more important than any financial ones.

Wilders has consistently made headlines for his confrontational anti-Islamic rhetoric calling for radical mosques to be [shut down](#), labeling the Koran "an inspiration for murder" and saying that if Mohammad were alive today, he would have him "[tarred and feathered](#) as an extremist and deported if he were in Holland."

In 2008 he produced [Fitna](#), a 15-minute-long film that links six violence-promoting passages from the Koran with footage of Islamist terror attacks and quotes from radical Islamic preachers. Since releasing the video, Wilders has had to be protected by an armed guard at all times due to death threats from Muslims. He is even being prosecuted by the Dutch government for inciting hatred, and was barred from visiting the UK.

Wilders's rise isn't an isolated event—fringe and extreme political parties are doing well in elections across Europe.

In April, the far-right, anti-Semitic party Jobbik won 17 percent of the vote in Hungary, and 26 seats. Jobbik has [strong links](#) with the paramilitary [Hungarian Guard](#)—its leader, Gabor Vona, was one of the Guard's co-founders. The Hungarian Guard's uniforms copy those of Hungary's fascist party during World War II, and it has attacked Roma settlements and vilified Jews. The Guard was banned in 2008.

In September 2008, two pro-Nazi parties won one third of the seats in [Austria's](#) national election. Six months later, Austria's main far-right party, the Future of Austria (BZÖ), won a landslide victory in the regional elections in the state of Carinthia—taking 45.25 percent of the vote. As well as being anti-Semitic, both parties are anti-Islam.

Jörg Haider led the bzö until his death in 2008. Haider admired SS soldiers as men of honor and once praised Hitler's economic policies as being superior to those of the current Austrian government. To him, Nazi concentration camps were actually "punishment camps." [Spiegel Online](#) reported that Haider's "constant, often xenophobic, attacks on immigration and

his vocal opposition to accelerating European Union integration earned him support from Austria's largely EU-critical population." Haider's successor, Stefan Petzner, has said he will not deviate from his predecessor's path "one millimeter."

In [Italy](#), last year the pro-fascist National Alliance party, whose leaders have openly praised Benito Mussolini, merged with the ruling People of Freedom bloc. Fascist leaders are at the helm of Italy's government.

In other parts of the continent, mainstream parties are enacting laws that would have once been seen as extreme. Switzerland banned the construction of [new minarets](#) after 57.5 percent of voters supported the measure in a national referendum. In Belgium, a ban on wearing the [burka](#) is set to become law on Thursday. France is considering a similar ban.

Of course not all of these parties are the same. Some, like the BZÖ, are unashamedly Nazi. Others, like Wilders's, are a more reasonable response to problems caused by Islam and immigration.

But Wilders's election is part of two related Europe-wide trends. One is the rise in anti-Islamic feeling, the other the rise in nationalistic fervor.

Many of Europe's right-wing parties have been riding to power on the back of anti-Islamic and anti-immigration sentiment. Islam can be an aggressive and imperialistic religion. Liberal leaders have pandered to the newcomers, often squashing local and national traditions to appease the Muslims. A failing economy only aggravates the problem. Natives lose their jobs, but see immigrants employed. When voters see immigrants threatening their way of life, their traditions and their prosperity, they start looking for a champion of their European way of life.

Currently they're finding that champion in nationalistic parties. But another entity is positioning itself to become the standard-bearer for Europeans: the Roman Catholic Church.

The church is telling Europe that it must return to its Catholic roots, or be overrun by Islam. "Europe has denied its Christian roots from which it has risen and which could give it the strength to fend off the danger that it will be conquered by Muslims—which is actually happening gradually," said the outgoing archbishop of Prague, Cardinal Miloslav Vlk, in an interview published January 6. "If Europe doesn't change its relation to its own roots, it will be Islamized," he said.

Aside from the odd bishop, the Catholic Church has been relatively quiet on the issue recently. But in his speech in [Regensburg](#) in 2006, the pope showed that the church has the capacity and will to confront Islam. "Show me just what Mohammad brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached," he said, quoting Byzantine Emperor Manuel ii Paleologus. As anti-Islamism becomes more mainstream, expect the Catholic Church to set itself up as the bastion of European values.

The rise in nationalism is also being driven by the economic collapse. "[I]f the 2008 economic crisis has revealed one thing, it is that nationalism is slowly becoming politically convenient, and a successful political strategy," wrote American think tank Stratfor (April 13).

"We are witnessing a process in which the elite—once happily co-opted by EU solidarity—turns toward nationalism. We can therefore expect to see not only a rise in far-right nationalism, but also a reorientation of center-right parties ... toward a more traditional nationalist platform," it continued.

More nationalistic sentiment may lead to increased squabbling and division in Europe over the short term. But as the economy falls, Russia rises, and the world becomes more dangerous, European nations will be driven together—with right-wing leaders at the helm.

The rise in the right so far is just the beginning. But don't expect fringe parties to come to power across all of Europe. Rather, mainstream parties will follow their voters, gradually adopting positions that would have been unthinkable a few years ago. This is just the beginning of the rise of the right. ■

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