
WHAT DOES 'NATION' MEAN TO PEOPLE IN THE NETHERLANDS?

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Nationalism is on the rise in many places in the world, including the Netherlands. On the first trip for the series #NewNationalism, DW's Fanny Facsar tries to find out what people mean when they speak of their "nation."

"I can't believe so many people voted for this liar, Rutte!" One day after the election in the Netherlands, in which Mark Rutte's center-right party (VVD) became the strongest party despite losing seats compared to 2012, Donny Bonsink sounds angry, though he denies it.

"I am not angry. I just don't understand that. This country is lost now. We can say goodbye to our traditions."

Donny Bonsink handed out flyers for Geert Wilders' campaign

'Take the Netherlands back'

When we first met, before the elections, Donny's voice sounded determined, ready to "take the Netherlands back." After all, that is what Geert Wilders has promised to do: "Make the Netherlands Dutch again." And that means: crack down on Muslim migrants, shut down mosques, ban the Koran, and quit the euro and the EU. Donny says that is the only way to bring back the "identity of the Netherlands," which according to him is under threat from EU membership and the influx of Muslim refugees.

Why young people support Wilders

But when I arrived in the Netherlands, I quickly realized that in spite of all the attention focused on Wilders, most people disagreed with his ideas. After Brexit and Trump, the media was bracing for the scenario that it once thought impossible - that the pollsters could get it wrong all over again. With nationalism on the rise in many countries around the world, why not seriously consider that the Netherlands might vote for the far right this time?

The fears that boost nationalism

Walking through Spijkenisse, south of Rotterdam, a district often referred to as a Wilders stronghold, I was on the lookout for problems that could explain strong support for the populist politician. But instead I found clean neighborhoods and decent standards of living for workers in an industrial suburb. The Wilders supporters I met - especially the young ones - seemed motivated by fearful emotions that didn't chime in with these decent conditions. "Losing jobs to migrants who

want to work for less," or "losing Dutch traditions because of mosques or because of the EU." Or, in Donny's case, "being scared to kiss a man in public." In fact, the Netherlands is one of the most gay-friendly countries in the world, and there are no reliable figures suggesting that crimes committed by Muslims against the LGBT community are on the rise. So where is all this fear coming from?

"For some people, the world is just turning too fast. They are unhappy," Jan-Daniel, an 80-year-old man, said on election day. But despite this insight, and for all his years, he didn't vote for Wilders.

In fact, much of Wilders' support appears to have come from young voters, with 27 percent of people under 25 saying they intended to support him in the run-up to the election. For these young voters, the existing political elite is detached and doing a lousy job of integrating migrants.

The Netherlands has experienced a large influx of migrants that dates back to the 1970s. Now, with the refugee crisis, fear has grown that greater numbers will create "parallel societies" and the sort of challenges faced in some French banlieues. Wilders often conjures up images of "dangerous no-go zones" - language also used by Trump in the US. Bring together rhetoric that stirs fears of immigration and terrorism, combine it with a sense of alienation from mainstream politics and the EU, and you have a recipe for voting "nationalist."

But as it turned out, the nationalists didn't get the triumph they had hoped for.

On election day, I met Bob Groos. He is young - and he didn't vote Wilders. "I voted for Rutte, because he is the best leader in a time when the EU may fall apart," he says.

Groos believes Wilders will continue to attract people because he has "the strongest voice against the establishment." But the result also shows: "Yes, there is populism in our country, but luckily it remains small enough."

More acceptable to push for a nationalist agenda

And Donny? He says he is ready to leave the Netherlands. "I want to move to the USA. Or see if Wilders wins maybe next time - in a year or so. Rutte can't form a stable government."

All in all, Wilder's PVV party lost but still managed to gain more votes than in 2012 and become the second-biggest party. And though he won't govern, his rhetoric has been adopted - in a more moderate vein - by other politicians, including Rutte himself. While the liberal left world shows signs of "relief" that Wilders' PVV has not become the biggest party, his influence actually grown?

At the main market in Rotterdam, I return to the question that's always at the back of my mind: "What does nation mean to you?" A Wilders voter who did not want to give his name says: "A free and liberal country. My home. And I want to keep it that way." Shortly afterwards, I meet Mohamed. He will vote for a party on the left, he says. To him "nation means where you belong, your home."

Both talk about the same thing: home. But they see different political parties as their way of preserving it. And there was something else that I found striking. A lot of people who said they would not vote for Wilders added that they still agreed with some of his ideas - especially those that are normally associated with the left. Things like direct democracy, people-power and the

importance of referendums. It occurs to me that if nationalism comes packaged in these sorts of ideas, it will become more socially acceptable - even if what lies beneath is less attractive to many.

Now it's time to prepare for the next stop on my journey - so stay tuned. And in the meantime, please get in touch on Facebook or Twitter and tell me what your nation means to you.

Kaynak/Source: