Populist rhetoric: the Dutch PVV
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This is the first of a series of briefings by Counterpoint leading up to the European Parliament elections. These briefings are designed to help those looking to build a counter-narrative to populist rhetoric in Europe – including politicians, campaigners and journalists. Our concern is that rhetoric opposing an open, tolerant Europe is gaining ground. Through these briefings we intend to redress the balance by showing what a counter-narrative could look like.

In these briefings, we will study the discourse of some of the most important parties that use this kind of rhetoric. We will show what their MEPs have been saying in the European Parliament and how other politicians have responded. Our aim is to shine a light on the rhetoric of these parties, to highlight when this language has had influence, and to outline where responses and counter-strategies have been effective. In this first briefing, we focus on the PVV (Partij Voor de Vrijheid) in the Netherlands.

Our approach

Counterpoint uses frames, narratives and cultural codes to better understand political language. Our research draws on the work of psychologists and linguists including George Lakoff, Drew Westen, Daniel Kahneman and Jonathan Haidt. By revealing the hidden frames in political discourse, Counterpoint aims to understand both the political appeal of populist rhetoric and the effectiveness of counter-narratives to populism.

Outside the European Parliament

Geert Wilders has courted controversy in the past for his statements about Islam and Muslims. One well-known line is his assertion that “Henk and Ingrid are paying for Mohammed and Fatima”. By associating himself with “Henk and Ingrid”, typical Dutch names, Wilders uses a common populist strategy, siding with the “ordinary people” against the political, cultural and financial elite, as well as “Mohammed and Fatima”.

With the European Parliament elections only a few months away, a number of parties across Europe who have positioned themselves as critical of liberal immigration policies, the EU institutions, and the political elite in general are set to perform well. These parties have been described as “populist” by many leading politicians and commentators. Some have been described as “xenophobic” or “extremist”. While polling suggests that the majority of European voters will still support mainstream parties, a significant minority are likely to vote for populist parties such as these.

In this briefing, we will look at the rhetoric of members of the PVV in the European Parliament. The PVV (Partij Voor de Vrijheid), led by Geert Wilders, is a Dutch party that in the past has been most associated with its strict anti-Islam stance. Since bringing down the coalition government in 2012, followed by a poor performance in general elections later that year, Wilders has focused his attention on criticising the EU. Wilders recently commissioned a disputed report by British firm Capital Economics citing the economic benefits of the Netherlands exiting the European Union. He has paired up with Marine Le Pen, leader of the Front National in France, ahead of the European Parliament elections, intending to form a united front to bring down “this monster called Europe”. This briefing shines a light on how the PVV’s MEPs have interacted with other politicians in debates in the European Parliament.
Auke Zijlstra (member state: the Netherlands, party: PVV, European political group: non-attached):

Madam President, eight years ago, no fewer than 12 countries joined the European Union. Everyone knew then only too well that those countries were not ready to join. The ambition was to create not a stable EU, but, first and foremost, a large EU. The accession requirements were simply relaxed.

The consequence of that is that already, three hundred thousand people from Central and Eastern Europe have moved to the Netherlands. The reality is that the sheer numbers of these people are causing major problems in terms of housing, employment, education and social security. Unfortunately, this has also been accompanied by a large increase in crime and a massive burden on our society.

Yes, Madam President, this is the reality, one we have found out about through the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV)'s website, which has already received more than a hundred thousand complaints...

Ria Oomen-Ruijten (member state: the Netherlands, party: Christian Democratic Appeal, European political group: European People's Party):

Madam President, a question: does the honourable member know what Poland's growth figures are and would it not be a splendid thing if the Netherlands achieved such a high level of growth, too?

And do you know any people in your neighbourhood who can say that they have never had a Polish worker provide a service for them? Can you confirm that?

And is it not the case that the Netherlands has achieved its prosperity because it has been an open country? Is it not the case, Madam President, that the Polish workers are making an important contribution to our open economy and that those same Polish workers are paying taxes and social security contributions and that, therefore, under law, they are also accruing rights, and that they are not entitled to benefits. You know that. You ought to know it.

Case Study: the debate on discriminatory Internet sites and government reactions

In 2012, the PVV launched a website, “Hotline for Reporting Central and Eastern Europeans”, encouraging people in the Netherlands to anonymously comment about their negative experiences involving Eastern Europeans, highlighting things like noise pollution, drunkenness, and losing out on jobs. After widespread condemnation, the European Parliament decided to hold a debate to discuss the website. Auke Zijlstra, a PVV MEP, gave his opinion at the debate:

Zijlstra responds to the question by identifying economic growth with “hard-working Dutch people”. As with Geert Wilders’ line “Henk and Ingrid are paying for Mohammad and Fatima”, this phrase puts Zijlstra on the side of “ordinary people”. By accusing Oomen-Ruijten of “leaving these very Dutch people in the lurch”, Zijlstra brands her as an uncaring elite. By referencing “housing, employment, education and social security”, he identifies his party with these bread and butter issues, making Oomen-Ruijten appear out of touch.

Zijlstra explains the PVV’s website in the context of his story of EU failure. Listing the number of complaints the website has received suggests the mass appeal behind his message.

Oomen-Ruijten reframes the issue as a question of economic growth: does Polish immigration help or hinder the Dutch economy?

Why has the Netherlands become rich, you ask? The Netherlands has become rich thanks to hard-working Dutch people, the Dutch men and women who have put their country on the map. You are now leaving these very Dutch people in the lurch by talking only about the impact of individual migrant workers and by failing to discuss the problems I have raised here, ones which councillors in big cities have also witnessed, namely, in the fields of housing, employment, education and social security.
On the basis of this case study, we make the following recommendations for countering the PVV’s populist rhetoric:

- First, it is important to note that this rhetoric is made up of narratives – Zijlstra responds to the controversy about the PVV’s website by embedding the incident in a wider narrative about the enlargement of the European Union and the strain immigration has put on the Netherlands’ welfare system. Responding effectively to this narrative requires an alternative story of the EU, one that acknowledges people’s concerns about freedom of movement while at the same time framing the accession of the new member states as part of a larger drive to ensure stability and prosperity. Otherwise, there is a danger of being trapped arguing over technical policy details and losing the overall message.

- One effective tactic used by the PVV is to emphasise the widespread appeal of their message. But in truth the party still only finds the support of a small minority of voters – the PVV received 10.1 per cent in the 2012 Dutch parliamentary election. An effective counter-narrative would highlight that there is a broad level of support for open, tolerant societies and that in fact on many issues populists hold a minority position.

- Any counter-narrative must “block” the populist attack that you are only sticking up for elites. One way of doing this is to attach specific, personal examples to any macroeconomic claims (about, for example, growth figures), in order to make sure that these claims are clear and relatable.