

Halloween in Brno

Discussing the Case of Wilders

On Friday the 31st of October I was invited to address a seminar of politicians in Eastern Europe. I was asked to discuss how Europe's perhaps most (in)famous populist, Geert Wilders, manages to keep his opponents on their toes. This is the gist of my talk.

What's this!?

They came jumping towards me in a street in the old Monrovia city of Brno, shrouded in bandages and ghostly attire. One a long, log skeleton, one a small skull on top of big, big shoulders. At least ten representatives of death, if not twenty. Tall they were, and jumping up to three meters high and more. Terrible and scary. Except for the one who laughed too loud, and then stumbled.

Halloween in Brno, would you believe it? A group of probably students – Brno is a nice university town – jumping up and down on wonderful artificial legs. Occasionally they tried to scare people with shouts and cries, but most of the time they were just enjoying the jumping up, jumping down kind of freedom the legs gave them. Later that evening I would see more evidence of people dressing up, like the proud father making a picture of his daughter and her small broom, a fetching little witch that reminded me of several books. Halloween in Brno.

It took me a little while before I made the connection, but now I cannot but see this attempt at Halloween as a sort of metaphor for the discussion I had had during the day about populism. It is a phenomenon that makes people jump up and down. It scares people, though many people seem to want to be scared, and in the end it is something that is a rather an artificial and imported way of getting excited. Nevertheless, it grows, it is a reality and we have to deal with it. One big difference though; it is far less fun.

The Wilders example

I was in Brno because I was invited to speak at a seminar on 'Gaining votes back from the populists'. It was the final seminar, after five that were held in Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Poland. The initiative for the seminar came from an all-party think tank called 'European Values'. For the meetings with center-right party representatives they cooperated with the Martens Centre, a Brussels think tank connected to the European Peoples Party. Though I have a connection with the Martens Centre, the invitation came through a different route.

The request put to me, was to tell the participants at this closing seminar – MP's, campaign managers and other high staffers – about the way the main parties in the Netherlands have tried to deal with Mr. Geert Wilders. Truly everyone abroad knows about Mr. Wilders, or thinks he does.

I had some doubts about that request – I felt a bit like being ask to tell how great we Dutch are in selling rotten tomatoes, but I think they are right to look at how other countries are dealing with it – and if you can deal with Mr. Wilders, you can deal with anything. In a lecture I gave in Vilnius in 2013* I gave my analysis concerning the ideological and policy aspects of dealing with populists. This time I could focus on the dynamics in our own House of Parliament. A different challenge, but interesting enough.



The insider as outsider

How and what to tell about Mr. Wilders? What most people do not realize abroad (or in The Netherlands for that matter) is that Mr. Wilders is the ultimate insider in The Hague. As the

almost longest serving member, he knows all the tricks, rules and procedures of the House, and usually knows very well where the lines are and how far they can be crossed. This is different from most populists, who seem to come from outside parliament and often have a business or media interest or at least a grudge. It also goes a long way to explain why Mr. Wilders is at it for more than 10 years now and most populist parties and candidates burn out after three or four years. My first lesson if you are worried about the chance that a populist as effective as Mr. Wilders will come along in your country: look at your colleagues in Parliament. Who among them could do the same?

Three examples

During the seminar I used three examples of Mr. Wilders in parliament. I did so in order to have a discussion with the participants along the line of 'How would you react to this?' Would you, as the reader, try this too? Here you find them described, so you can make your own decision. Not expecting you to understand the videos, as they are in the Dutch language, I will expand the text a little and give you the drift of what you are seeing and hearing.

The first example (I only showed the first half minute) is Mr. Wilders making a point of order at the very beginning of the General Political Debate ('Algemene Politieke Beschouwingen') at the beginning of the parliamentary year. He says he is not just angry, he says he is FURIOUS. And then he goes on saying that in advance of the debate the leader of the Christian-Democrats, Mr. van Geel, has let the media know there is no room for new initiatives. Absolutely scandalous, he says in several ways. This means that there is now no point in having a debate. He walks out. Representatives of other parties start making their own points of order, but this sounds flat, flat like the flabbergasted politicians they are at that moment. How would you react?

A short story

The second fragment has to do with Mr. Wilders' art of telling a story in just a few artless, but well-chosen words. In little more than 15 seconds 1) he warns that 1 in 5 citizens in Europe now adhere to the Islam, 2) sets the Cabinet aside as weaklings – they let it happen, SCANDALOUS! And 3) the CDA, the Christian Democratic Appeal, should henceforth be called Christians Devoted to Allah.

Quite an achievement; to say so many things in such a short time. He builds a short stories of infamy. You are the leader of the CDA. How would you react?

Ending the frame

The third and final fragment is about framing and counter framing.

In this fragment the present prime minister, Mr. Rutte, plays a strong debating role, by showing everyone how Mr. Wilders actually makes his points.

Mr. Wilders says that Mr. Rutte should be ashamed of himself for allowing old people to get kicked out of nursing homes and having old people with Alzheimer running around in a diaper. Mr. Rutte agrees that this would be shameful, but he says that the government wants to make every effort to prevent him. Will you help us, asks Mr. Rutte playfully of Mr. Wilders.

Mr. Wilders says that the prime minister should be ashamed to take a joke out of something so serious. Then Mr. Wilders repeats his assertion how terrible old people are treated, and this while millions of euros are flowing to states like Greece and Cyprus in order to bail them out. It is at that moment that Mr. Rutte refuses to step in the frame of his opponent and instead makes a reference to a Dutch magazine called 'Car and doctor'. He says that this title also connects two things that are in fact unrelated: the care for the elderly and Europe.

He then in effect demonstrates that Wilders is not the courageous outsider who comes up for



the common man, but an insider using cheap debating tricks to get his way. A frame is countered by another frame; that of someone who is only out for effect. It must be said that Mr. Rutte is usually not the one who wants to confront Mr. Wilders, a point I coming back to a little later on. But here he does, and quite nicely too. I still have this question: what would you do when a populist puts you in a frame, or perhaps two at the same time?

I have to say, making the right video selection was not an easy or pleasant task. Mr. Wilders tone almost always seems to hold a sneer or other form of contempt. A relentless anger is only very occasionally leavened by an attempt at humor. Later generations will truly wonder what on earth appealed Dutch voters in this man. Yet it is always important to realize that even after ten years of his relentless politicking he still represents many voters. It does not do to be arrogant or condescending. And if the response to Mr. Wilders is often inadequate, is that because 'we are obviously the good guys' - or is it because we do not prepare as well as Mr. Wilders?

Profiting from populists on the other side

If it is not a lack of preparation, what then should the response be to Mr. Wilders and other populists? Let us go back for a moment to the Dutch parliament. You have already met Mr. Rutte and now you should also be introduced to Mr. Pechtold and Mr. Buma. Mr. Pechtold represents D66, a progressive-liberal party. He must love Mr. Wilders, because every time he attacks Mr. Wilders he gets praise from all that is progressive. As long as he shows himself equal in rhetoric to Mr. Wilders, which he does, he cannot lose since there is almost no overlap in voter potential. At some time though, he will have to be careful when other liberals start to steal his message in a populist way. This is already happening on the social-democratic side, where the traditional labour party, the PvdA, is losing heavily in the polls to the much more populist SP. The thing to know is, that center-right and center-left parties do not really help each other when it comes to confronting populist parties. In the end they are more competitors than colleagues.



Different answers

Mr. Rutte represents the center-right VVD party; Mr. Buma leads the Christian-democratic party, the CDA.

In the video Mr. Rutte shows himself to be a fine debater, yet he has in fact refused to confront Mr. Wilders for many years now. He says that he "does not want to throw red meat at him". He wants to take the high road and do nothing to give the media more reasons to show or quote Mr. Wilders. He has a point, of course. Yet it is also true that no other large party is closer in position and has more to lose than Mr. Rutte's VVD.

Mr. Buma's position and that of his CDA is possibly more difficult still. The CDA is now in opposition, but still carries the scars of a failed attempt to tame Mr. Wilders by making him co-responsibility in government. The so-called 'tolerance-agreement' backfired both because Mr. Wilders did not really change his tune and because too many members and voters could not abide a combination of his populist party and the CDA as 'value-driven' party. Things are turning around now. By choosing a line that stays closer to the core convictions of the party and because Mr. Buma manages to be both firm in his policies and clear in his Christian-democratic convictions, whether people appreciate this or not. This creates a sense of authenticity that has brought the party back to a high position in



the polls. So Mr. Buma has found his answer to Mr. Wilders and does not hesitate to challenge him.

Stepping into a vacuum

The three examples and the discussion afterwards hopefully brought some insight into the different ways populism and extremism can be approached. Of course Mr. Wilders provides just one example. In countries like France and Britain we see powerful examples as well. No doubt the populists and extremists in the five East European states provide their own idiosyncrasies. In the end it is not about these persons and personalities. It seems logical to assume that between 10 and 20% of the population, many of them young, will always be susceptible to the simplistic appeal of the populists in a time when (social) media are outside of control in a modern democracy. There is also a valid point to be made that the rise of populism is at least partly the result of a multiple failures elsewhere. Politics abhors a vacuum. If the economy is not managed well, or if political parties cannot formulate a winning message, a populist can and will step in.

Preparation and authenticity

This all does not mean that center parties are powerless in the face of Mr. Wilders and the like. Coming back to the point of preparation, parties could do more to prepare for populist initiatives. Mr. Wilders is very good at exaggerating facts and figures, but he is always alert at finding them and his opponents too often less so. You have to have the correct facts and figures at your fingertips. After that, it is mostly a matter of patience, authenticity and distinction.

The patience to wear them out is helped by the populist parties tendency to implode. Mr. Wilders tried to avoid that fate by not participating in local elections, even though he might have won many seats for his parties. He thought he would not get enough qualified people. His problem is that he did not find them either at the national level, with the result that his party has suffered many and loud defections.

Only the authentic survive

Authenticity: is your behavior consistent with who you claim you are? In short: Are you honest? Is your party reliable? The strange thing is that voters can tolerate much erratic behavior, just like at Halloween they can appreciate a bit of dressing up, but that ends sooner rather later when there is no consistency, or when nothing changes.

The trouble with marketing

Marketing is a wonderful thing, at least in the beginning. It lets you see where the chances in the voters market are and what you should communicate in order to reach them. But be warned, if you go where all the voters are, you will be there with every one else. Mr. Wilders acted very smart for a while. He was very consistent in a few of things: Islam, Israel and not being called undemocratic. He was much more flexible in a number of other things, among them Europe, law and order and the welfare state. The crucial thing he did, was to embrace a program that combined both right wing conservatism – strict on law and order, migration – and left wing conservatism – no change in benefits or pensions. In the combination of his extreme views, he suddenly became a party smack in the middle of the voter spectrum. Election aids showed him closer to them middle than the VVD and almost as close as the CDA. So Mr. Wilders had also done his marketing, leaving the other middle parties not much place to go to.

Looking for distinction

In the end Mr. Wilders did not escape trouble with all his hard talk and smart positioning. When the government he tolerated decided to cut back on benefits, he gambled and walked out of the negotiations. This was enough for the other parties to say 'Never again!', kicking him out of the mainstream. Later he would try to get back through the theme of Europe, but the voters did not buy it any more. In the polls Wilders can still go very high (he is again at nr.

1 in The Netherlands at the time this is written), but time after time he has disappointed at election time. He remains a thermometer for discontent, but he no longer looks like a viable alternative. Perhaps this is also because the other parties work harder now on their own message, even when this message can hurt potential voters. There is a premium on distinction now: my party is different from yours. Even to say: 'we might be hard bastards, but we are your bastards'. This might be a very good development.

Ready for a political Halloween

So patience, authenticity and distinction are the main recipes against the likes of Mr. Wilders now. I guess that is not a very sexy message, but you and your party will much easier survive when it is once more time for a political Halloween.

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* <http://www.norhedge.nl/wp-content/uploads/iri.13.vilnius-16-6-ed.-200414.pdf>