



# EUROPE'S FAR-RIGHT POPULISTS BUOYED BY WILDERS' WIN IN NETHERLANDS - ASSOCIATED PRESS

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*Photo: Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban delivers his speech after he was re-elected as party president*

If ever the hard right in Europe needed a set of jumper cables to rev up their electoral engine again in the wake of last month's major setback in Poland, Geert Wilders in the Netherlands provided it.

Congratulations rolled in Thursday from all sides where the far right holds some sway on the continent after anti-Islam firebrand Wilders scored an election victory as unexpected as it was massive. His party more than doubled in size in parliament to tower over mainstream parties that long specialized in marginalizing him.

Suddenly on Thursday, there was hope in the air again for nationalist conservative populists, especially with an European Parliament election coming up in June.

"All of Europe wants a political turnaround!" said Alice Weidel, the leader of German far-right party AfD, or Alternative for Germany, much more in hope than certainty as she congratulated Wilders on his win.

It will be tough to match Wilders' turnaround though. He more than doubled the seats of his Party for Freedom in the 150-seat parliament from 17 to 37. And while he was still trailing three parties in the polls with a week to go, he roared past them all by Thursday, leaving a green-left coalition second with 25 seats.

Buoyed by Wilders' win, a tectonic change in the Dutch political landscape, the far right now hopes to push ahead on a continent where Russia's war in Ukraine, chaotic and deadly migration on its borders and spreading poverty because of inflation has turned any election into a tough test where the outcome is never a given.

Last month, Alternative for Germany extended its reach from its dominant base in the country's formerly communist east by making two strong showings in the west, and recent polls have put the party in second place nationwide with support of around 20% — about double its popularity during the 2021 federal election.

Earlier, Slovakia had already turned populist with Robert Fico's Smer party winning a general election and setting up a coalition

government with an ultranationalist party.



Hopes were high that the vote in Poland in late October would cement that rise, but the extreme conservative Law and Justice party lost control of the Polish government to a moderate coalition. Now, Wilders has put the populist far-right movement back on track.

"The winds of change have arrived!," crowed Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, whose many rule of law issues with the European Union have turned him into the bane of proponents of Western liberal democracy.

Like Wilders, Marine Le Pen in France has been dreaming of grasping power for more than a decade and now sees that perseverance can pay off. And she is happy she has another powerful ally with a similar loathing of the EU. The 27-nation bloc is on the radar of just about every populist far-right politician, derided as a bullying behemoth that smothers national identities yet offers free entry to people who undermine what they see as traditional Christian values.

"It shows that more and more countries within the European Union contest the way it works ... and hope that we can again master a migration that is considered by many Europeans as both massive and anarchic," Le Pen said Thursday on France-Inter radio.

And as a founding member of the EU, and a vital trading link between many of its most powerful nations, the Netherlands might have issues with cutting the umbilical cord to the bloc.

Wilders calls for a "Nexit" referendum — a Dutch version of Brexit which saw the United Kingdom leave the EU. By nature, Dutch politics rely on coalitions between several parties and no other suitable party has followed Wilders on that.

"He can never rule on his own, and I cannot imagine any kind of coalition majority that would choose a confrontation with Europe," said professor Hendrik Vos of Ghent University, an expert on EU politics. "The Netherlands just has too much at stake in the EU market. It is unthinkable. And you have already seen him tone down some of his rhetoric," Vos said.

He also did so with his strident tone on Islam and warning that he would close off the national borders to migration. Now, he has already promised that if picked as prime minister, he would be there for all Dutch, including Muslims.

Words, though, have no expiry date — and they can haunt you.

When Italy's nationalist conservative League leader Matteo Salvini congratulated Wilders for his "extraordinary electoral victory" that he said showed that "a new Europe is possible," Italian opposition center-left lawmakers quickly showed he might not be the friend of Italy that Salvini thought.

They posted a screenshot of Salvini's tweet alongside a 2020 photo of Wilders holding a sign saying "Not a cent to Italy," in reference to his opposition to any EU funding for the country so that it could overcome the COVID-19 pandemic.

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AP journalists from across Europe contributed to this report.