



**Left-wing populism and the Dutch Socialist Party  
An interview with Professor Gerrit Voerman**

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## **Left-wing populism and the Dutch Socialist Party (SP) An interview with Professor Gerrit Voerman**

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**GIORGOS KATSAMBEKIS:** *The Netherlands is considered to be a hotspot of populist mobilisation, both on the right and the left of the political spectrum. You have been studying the Dutch political system, and especially the left-wing Socialist Party (SP), for quite a while. Should we start with a few words about your current work and interest on the SP?*

**GERRIT VOERMAN:** I am currently writing a book on the SP in the Netherlands. The party started as a Maoist sect in the early 1970s. It developed into a radical social democratic party, which it is today, and also went through a populist phase, especially in the 1990s. Having been so electorally successful, the party also started to orientate itself towards government at the local and provincial levels, and is now trying to become a reliable partner, or, at least, trying to get the image of being a reliable partner, so that it can participate in national government. This means that it is not so easy to characterise the SP nowadays as populist. It still has certain populist traits, but at the same time it is aiming at building the profile of a responsible actor able to govern. Of course, everything depends on what you label as 'populist'. In the book on Dutch populism that I wrote with Paul Lucardie and which was published in 2012,<sup>1</sup> we regard populism as a partial ideology. It does not have a vision of society as a whole, but a number of more or less coherent ideas concerning the political system, like the antagonistic relationship between 'the people' and the 'elite' in which the people are considered to be good, and the elite is considered to be bad or evil. There is a tension between the people and the elite because the elite does not take into account the popular will. I would say that this is the core of all populist definitions.

What we also include in our criteria of populism is whether parties or politicians endorse a political programme in which the expression of the popular will acquires priority: whether, that is, they are in favour of introducing referenda, people's initiatives, the direct election of the Prime Minister or the mayor. They will often say, for example, that representatives of the party can be recalled and replaced by other representatives. If you look at the SP you will see that they included these items in their programme in the 1990s. Since 2000 you can also see that these principles are now more or less disappearing. The only issue that is still there in the platform of the party is referenda. They no longer mention the direct election of the Prime Minister or the mayor, or the introduction of people's initiatives. So, this also

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<sup>1</sup> Lucardie, Paul & Voerman, Gerrit, *Populisten in de polder*, Meppel: Boom, 2012.

fits with our opinion that the SP is no longer a party that you can label as fully populist.

***By defining populism like this, would you also say that populism cannot have an a priori positive or negative connotation? Would you agree that it is more of a descriptive term, used to describe a specific approach to the democratic process that can be both a ‘threat’ and a ‘corrective’ to democracy? The way that you described it suggests that it is a matter of first defining ‘the people’ and its antagonistic relationship with the elite, its enemy, and then assessing the relationship of each specific populist case to democracy and democratic institutions.***

The way that I have just described populism is what Paul and I took as our starting point when we wrote the book on Dutch populism. Of course, excluding groups that do not belong to the people is a characteristic of populism, especially of right-wing populism. For instance, the SP, even during its pure populist phase, was not exclusionary. It excluded the elite, but that is self-evident. If you have an antagonistic relationship between the people and the elite then you have to exclude the elite. But, are other groups excluded? Muslim immigrants are clearly excluded from Geert Wilders’ vision of the people. That is a big difference. You also mention in your article with Yannis Stavrakakis that SYRIZA,<sup>2</sup> for instance, is inclusive; gays, for example, are included.

Wilders is a liberal, although in recent years he developed some leftist positions in the socio-economic sphere. So, he includes groups like gays etcetera. But, he is a populist and he does not include Muslim immigrants. Even Pim Fortuyn included those who were already in the Netherlands. They belonged to the people. So, Wilders is going one step further by excluding immigrants even if they live in the Netherlands or are Dutch citizens and have Dutch nationality. They still are not part of the people. They are Muslims, and Muslims do not belong to the people, in his view.

***Would you say that they cannot belong to the people for cultural reasons?***

Yes. This is a very nationalist approach to the people. So, Wilders is very exclusionist. Pim Fortuyn was not as exclusionist. He did not want to have new immigrants in the Netherlands. He said we should close our borders, and in that sense he was exclusionist too. But, at the same time, he conceded that everybody who was here legally did belong to the people. We have to deal with them, and should not exclude them. The exclusionist aspect of Wilders’ views is, of course, important, especially for right-wing populism.

Coming back to the difference between populism and democratic radicalism, they both take as a starting point popular sovereignty. With democratic radicalism there is a kind of republican approach, or republican perspective. Sovereignty belongs to the people and the people should express their will in the political realm.

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<sup>2</sup> Stavrakakis, Yannis & Katsambekis, Giorgos, ‘Left-wing Populism in the European Periphery: The Case of SYRIZA’, *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 19(2), 2014, pp. 119-142.

However, democratic radicalism does not have an antagonistic approach to the establishment. So, they are fairly close but they differ in terms of the antagonistic relationship with the elite. Moreover, populists take homogeneity as their point of departure; they dislike divisiveness. Democratic radicals (or radical democrats) have a stronger pluralistic approach.

***If populism is primarily an appeal to the people or to popular sovereignty or the popular will, how can it be differentiated from democratic discourses in general? Do you think that there are specific differences between a populist appeal to the people and other 'non-populist' or 'anti-populist' appeals to the people?***

This is difficult. In our view the antagonistic relationship to the establishment is what defines populism, and what distinguishes it from democratic radicalism. Of course, there are other things. For instance, the role that the leader plays in populist movements is completely different compared to democratic radicalism, where there is a more democratic relationship between the leader and the rank and file – and there are further differences between the two, as I just mentioned. In populist movements, the idea is, more or less, that the rank and file transfer sovereignty to the leader who can then do whatever he (rarely a she) likes. This is a paradox, of course.

***So you would say that the role of the leader is central in populism?***

I think so. Of course, there are also consequences for the party's organisation. Again, there is a difference here between the left and right. For instance, the SP has a very strong organisational cohesion. Right-wing populist parties have a very low degree of organisational intensity. If you look at the Party for Freedom (PVV) it has only one official member, or you could say two as there is also the Geert Wilders Foundation. Otherwise, the party is formally non-existent. Informally, there is of course some organisational structure to the extent that this is needed in order to take part in the political process. Wilders tries to minimise organisation as much as possible in order to maintain his dominance within the organisation and to exclude potential conflict. According to him, if you allow voters to become members you also import the potential for conflict, which is what happened in Pim Fortuyn's party.

***Obviously this is not the case with the SP and other left-wing populist parties. The SP has a much stronger organisation, and power is decentralised within the party. Would you say that the role of the leader is usually intensified in right-wing populist parties?***

Well, from the way the media presents Tsipras I got the impression that he is quite dominating within SYRIZA. If you look at the SP, Jan Marijnissen has been very important in the party. He is still crucial within it.

***But, these leaders are democratically elected and collectively checked within the party. There are democratic processes.***

I would say that there are formal democratic processes. Consider the fact that Jan Marijnissen has now been chairman of the party for more than 25 years. This is

unique in modern Dutch political history. Every party has limitations on the terms that an office can be held for, normally just two or three terms. In the SP there are no limits. That is one thing. The other thing is that for a long time Jan Marijnissen combined being chairman of the party with being the leader of the parliamentary group. That is, again, quite unusual in the modern political history of the Netherlands. He concentrated a lot of power. But yes, he has been elected by the party as chairman, some six, seven times, I think.

For a long time there was a special group in the SP called the 'victory team'. The members were not democratically elected and neither were they accountable to elected party organs. It was a group of advisors that Jan Marijnissen had created. They were like a small think-tank discussing how the SP should develop. It was a small group of five or six people. I think it is still there. It was very influential in the 1990s, and in changing the strategy of the party. Jan Marijnissen and Tiny Kox were part of it.

***This is a bit of a paradox. At the same time as the SP attributes a central position to the people and to popular will, significant power at the top level is invested in a group that has practically no accountability: a group that was not elected.***

Accountability was only there when Jan Marijnissen presented his proposals to the party executive. At that time the party executive could say yes or no or whatever. The problem, especially when the SP entered Parliament, was that there was a kind of dual relationship between Jan Marijnissen and parts of the executive. Jan Marijnissen was leader of the parliamentary group. He was also decisive in attracting party MPs' assistants. The SP has a recruitment strategy where they recruit new MPs from the assistants, as well as from other people who have been active in the party. In a very deliberate way they want to know who they recruit. They want potential MPs to present themselves so that the party leadership can assess their quality and loyalty.

The parliamentary group has assistants. Some of these assistants are also members of the party executive. It is difficult because Jan Marijnissen is chairman of the party and has been the leader of the parliamentary group from 1994 till 2008, and is also the one who once a year discusses how things are going in terms of labour relations. These individuals have to check Jan Marijnissen within the party executive. They have to control him and sometimes they have to oppose him, but at the same time they have a formal relationship with him in terms of employment. They are the assistants of the MPs and so they are paid by the party group in Parliament. At the same time they are part of the party executive checking and controlling Jan Marijnissen. You can see that this is not a healthy situation. These two relationships interfere with each other.

***Before we discuss these complex issues of organisation could you please describe how the SP was transformed from a tiny Maoist sect to a Marxist-Leninist party and then to a populist party that gained momentum in the central political scene?***

It started as a Maoist sect in the 1970s. It is very important to keep in mind that at this point the party was based on Mao's strategy of the 'mass line': you have to dive into the people, listen to the people, and hear what they are thinking.

***So there was already a populist component at this point?***

Yes. Maoism had a populist component. This Maoist element is still there in their discourse now. We digitalised all of the SP party newspapers and members' journals, and checked for Maoist terms such as the 'mass line' or 'you can fight and you can win'. In the 1970s you see a lot of these terms, and even today it is still present in the rhetoric now and then. The ones that were educated within the Maoist movement sometimes still use these Maoist quotations. Perhaps it is without really thinking what they are saying, but it is still there. The SP later moved away from China and Mao, and later on said that it had been a mistake and not the paradise that they had thought it was. What they kept was the Maoist approach to the 'mass line'. Or, you could say that they ended up with a de-Maoised practice of the 'mass line'.

At a certain point the SP started taking part in elections. It was very difficult for them to get represented in the national parliament, though they did well in the municipalities where the party was active. Sometimes they attracted more votes in municipal elections than in national ones, even though they only participated in some 10% of the municipalities. In this 10% they would gain 60,000 or 70,000 votes, which would have been enough to win a seat in the national Parliament. So, one would have thought that if they would run in the whole of the Netherlands, which is one big district for national elections purposes, it would be very easy for them to enter Parliament. But, that did not happen. All the time they were successful in the municipal elections and unsuccessful in the national elections. They started to question themselves. For a long time Labour was so strong that it functioned like a magnet. It dominated the left. People were voting for the SP in the cities because they saw that they were doing good things. At the same time, they knew that in national elections the SP was not to be taken seriously. It was too small, so why should they vote for them?

***So at the time the SP was not considered a reliable force.***

At that time it might be considered a reliable force at a local level but not at the national one. This was an advantage for Labour. It was easy for them to dismiss the SP and say that they were just a Maoist sect. Then the party started asking what they should do to attract more votes. 'What stands between us and the people? What are the barriers? Which barriers should we get rid of?' They wrote about it. I saw it when I was allowed to see the party archives, and it is also in the party magazines. There were certain things standing between them and the people and they were trying to work out how to get rid of them.

The first thing is that in the late 1970s they realised that the people were not waiting for Mao. Then in the early 1990s, after the changes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, they got rid of Marxism-Leninism. Well, perhaps not really Marxism but let us say Leninism, as the party still considered itself to be socialist. They said that based on what happened in Eastern Europe they should get rid of

Leninism because people did not understand it: people do not understand it so get rid of it. But, they were still a socialist party. You could say that in the late 1990s they decided to get rid of Marx. They said, “The socialisation of the means of production.” Who will understand this? This is old fashioned. It stands between us and the people, between us and the voters.’

***Does this mean that their populism also entailed a movement towards moderation? The party started moderating and abandoning certain elements of its original platform in order to get closer to the people?***

This is a difficult question, because how should we label this? Is it populism? What is lacking in this process is the anti-elitist element. I would say that it was adaptation. They are very keen on adapting themselves to changing situations. I think that this is the result of internalising the Maoist line. These people were socialised in the 1970s. They would go to city quarters where poorer people lived. They would knock on the door and ask them what their problems were. That is how they were socialised. They still think in that way; ‘we have to be close to the people’.

***Usually this statement, ‘We have to be close to the people’, is more of a symbolic statement, especially for mainstream parties. They cannot be actually ‘close’ to the electorate when their electorate is 40% of the population. But the SP actually meant it when they said that they wanted to be ‘close to the people’?***

They actually meant it. That is how it started. And today their friends and enemies agree that they are indeed closer to the people. I collected examples of other parties saying, ‘We should be like the SP.’ The SP became a kind of model. First, they were pariahs and then, from the late 1990s onward, they became, in a certain way, a model for other parties which were losing members, and whose members were not so active. This is, of course, a complete victory for the SP. They had originally been considered sectarian and Maoist, and had not been taken seriously. Then, they gradually became a model for other parties because other parties experienced losses in membership and were criticised for being too distant from ordinary people. The SP was showing them how it should be done. But, is it populism because you are close to the people? I think it could be populism if it is combined with an antagonistic attitude towards the elite. It is the same thing with the ‘mass line’ of Mao, and the complete identification with the people. Of course, in Mao’s view there was the bourgeoisie or the rich, a kind of elite. This is difficult because Marxism and Marxism-Leninism also have this antagonistic relationship between the people, or the working class, and the bourgeoisie.

***Yes, but ‘the people’ of Marxism-Leninism is quite different from the one of populism. It is much tighter. It is the proletariat, or, let’s say, ‘the working class and its allies’.***

I agree. It is the working class. But, if you look at China at the time of Mao, 95% of the population were peasants.

I would say that the extraordinary capacity of SP to adapt itself to changing situations originates from the 'mass line', and from the party's Maoist period. There are a lot of political scientists, such as Duverger, who say that if you look at a party's organisation you can see traces of its genesis. With the SP that is clearly the case. The SP is formally a democratic party but, even at this formal level, it is much more hierarchical than other Dutch political parties. Many other parties have introduced direct democracy within the party allowing the members to vote for the party leader. In the SP that is not the case. I talked about this with the party's secretary, Hans van Heijningen when I interviewed him. He said, 'Well, at this very moment we do not see the need'. It is true. The party is doing relatively well in the polls, although it is not really profiting from the problems of the Labour party. He said that they did not see a problem, but if they do then they might change things.

***So, is this too a matter of adapting? It seems like a very significant element of their ideology and programmatic orientation.***

Exactly. It is also important for their strategy. Programmatically, they have approached populism symbolically and through their discourse, saying that the elite does not listen to the people. Talking about the parliament Jan Marijnissen has said that the 'Parliament is horrible. I hate it. It takes a lot of time, and you don't produce anything.' He compared this to the time when he had been working in industry. He said, 'That was great. You went to your job and you were working with people. You created something, and at the end of the day you went home happy because you had produced something.' It is quite a populist approach, being opposed to the political establishment.

***Does it also have to do with mediation? In parliament everything is mediated, whilst 'out there' everything is practical and immediate and happening right now.***

Exactly. It has to do with the daily process of political representation and governance: dealing, wheeling, and trying to accomplish something. If you really try to accomplish something in a multi-party system like the Netherlands you have to compromise. Jan Marijnissen was trying to explain that it was horrible for him to stay in Parliament because it was too far away from the people. It was impossible for him to realise the closeness that he wanted and found necessary – or at least to present such an image. He tried to demonstrate that ordinary life is much better than what is happening in parliament. So, there was this populist elite critique and at the same time he was saying, 'I was working there with other people, and they were just great.' So, again, the closeness to the people. He does this quite often: he uses his personal biography in order to give meaning to his populism.

***This seems very deeply embedded in every aspect of the SP. You have pointed out that the party is today somehow 'less populist', but still populism seems to characterise the party's culture, organisation, and programmatic appeals. It is still a central element.***

It also plays a role in the considerations of the way the party recruits. With the SP you have to sign an agreement committing you to pass your salary from the



parliament to the party and then get paid by the party. The wage they give is a bit more than the average, but it is more or less typical. They are the only party that does this to such a degree in the Dutch Parliament. They say that it is important for three reasons. One is that it creates solidarity within the party between those who get paid and all of the volunteers who are unpaid. Second, it creates income, resources for the party. The SP has become very rich because of this policy. The third thing is that it fits with their populist rhetoric and discourse. They can say, 'Look at you talking. You don't listen to the people and you get well paid. We only get half or so and the rest goes to the party and we do good things with it.' It is a very important thing for them to maintain, and they have done it since the mid-1970s.

***There is an ongoing discussion about comparisons nowadays, regarding diverse populist phenomena. We see it in journalistic discourse but also in academia: comparing left-wing populist parties to right-wing populist parties. Often, the comparison in the Netherlands is between the SP and the PVV. Given that they are both identified as 'populist', what are for you the main differentiating characteristics between the SP and the PVV?***

Exclusionism. That is decisive. I know it has been argued that the SP excluded segments of the population in the early 1980s, and I know that the party still says that they were right at that time. However, I do not think that they were really exclusionist, although they were not smart about how they wrote their ideas down: in a rather generalizing and sometimes denigrating way.

***I guess you are referring to their report on the welfare state and immigration. There are still concerns around this, and some question whether it involves some sort of xenophobia.***

There were some xenophobic elements. There were some people at that time in left-wing parties who really condemned the SP for what they did. At that time, talking about problems of immigration was a big political taboo. The SP, as a populist party, were saying, 'We are saying what the people think.' However, the way they wrote it down was certainly not subtle. However, I do not think that they adopted a truly xenophobic position.

***Was this more of an effort to represent certain already existing discontents within society?***

I think so. They were also saying, 'What we propose is also the best for these immigrant workers.' At the time, they were following a flawed communication strategy and lacked experience. They were a tiny party and I do not think that they would make such a mistake nowadays. If you look at their programme, the SP wants to spread immigrants over the country in order to avoid geographical concentration and the problems resulting from this. They are opposed to what we call 'black schools' or 'black neighbourhoods.' They oppose ghettoization and segmentation. They want inclusiveness, distribution over the whole of the Netherlands in order to incorporate these people within society, and to share the burden. They want to give

them the opportunity to participate and to develop. I would not call that xenophobic at all, and that is their main point of view.

***So, the first differentiating element could be inclusion versus exclusion.***

The second is organisation, which we mentioned before. Jan Marijnissen is still very important within the SP, but, if something were to happen to him the party would not disappear. If something happened to Geert Wilders there is a big chance that the PVV would run into trouble. Its continuity would be at stake.

***Dows this mean that the SP is less leader-centric?***

Yes and no. The SP is still very leader-centric. Although Jan Marijnissen is not the frontman any more, he is still the chairman of the party.<sup>3</sup> I would say that no lever moves in the party without his consent. In my opinion, Jan Marijnissen is involved in every important issue within the party. I think it would be very difficult to change something if he were opposed to it. So, the way the SP operates is still very leader-centric. But, there is a stable organisation and other capable people in the party. I do not believe Jan Marijnissen will quit. However, say hypothetically that he leaves. The party will not suffer. It will not collapse. There are other people available, and there is organisational strength and capacity to continue. The party would survive the disappearance of Jan Marijnissen whereas Wilder's party, just like Pim Fortuyn's party before it, is so centred around one person, and is so organisationally weak – without any continuity or structure –, that it would certainly run into big problems without him.

***In academic literature we see different emphases on the element that defines the appeal to the people. In right-wing discourse, emphasis is placed on the cultural element, or the 'nativist' element, whilst on the other side of the spectrum we see the emphasis being placed on the socio-economic element. Do you think that this is a defining characteristic that separates Wilders from the SP?***

In Wilders' view the people is defined along nationalist or ethnic criteria. With the SP, this is not the case. The SP talks about the 'common man', but this man can be an immigrant. They do not exclude immigrants from being common men.

***This means that immigrants are included in their appeal to the people?***

They could be. Not explicitly. They do not exclude immigrants, on the contrary: the SP also nominates them as candidate MPs. The party takes it for granted that

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<sup>3</sup> Voerman clarifies here: In the Dutch political system, the top candidate of a party at the national elections is also the leader of the party. After the elections, he (seldom she) will become the leader of the parliamentary group, or – if the party takes part in government – the prime minister or vice-prime minister (sometimes he stays in parliament as leader of the group when his party is in government, but this is quite unusual). The chair of the extra-parliamentary party organization is in the Dutch situation usually of secondary importance.

immigrants are part of the people. This is the key question with inclusionism and exclusionism: who belongs to the people and who does not? Wilders has a limited view based on ethnicity and national identity. In the SP it is less defined. It is just 'the people', the 'common man' or the 'man in the street'.

***This is very interesting, and it can lead us to another issue. There has been some recent research which suggests that parties labelled as populist, such as Geert Wilders' or Marine Le Pen's or Jörg Haider's, are primarily nationalist or nativist. Populism, it is said, is a secondary characteristic of their appeal to the electorate. Would you agree with this view with reference to the Netherlands? I think that you could, somehow, approach and understand Wilders leaving aside the element of populism, but you could never understand him without taking into account the element of nativism and exclusionism. If we had to choose one category to conduct our analysis would you agree that Wilders is primarily nativist and xenophobic, or would you say that he is a populist?***

That is a good question. You can say that there are three varieties of populism. There is right-wing populism, which is nationalistic, nativist, and exclusionary. There is left-wing populism, like the SP, which is a merger of socialism and populism. Then you can have pure populism, which we had here with *Liveable Netherlands*. It did not survive for long. It won two parliamentary seats in 2002.

***Did they positively embrace populism, openly saying: 'We are populists'?***

As far as my recollections go, they did not mention that. They did not say that they were populist, but they really fitted in our definition of populism [he refers to the definition put forward with Paul Lucardie]. They had, of course, some liberal elements and some socialist elements, because such a programme has to be broad. However, it was different both from Wilders and from the SP. I would say that right-wing populist parties are a merger of nationalism, nativism, and populism. If you ask whether they could do without any one of those, the problem is that right-wing populists are opposed to the elite, and often are also opposed to a certain enemy within society. It is very difficult to deconstruct because they are generally intertwined. I think populism is both a kind of strategy and a partial ideology. For it to be durable it has to mix with some other 'full' ideology. One reason why *Liveable Netherlands* did not really survive is that it was not attached to a more concrete ideological framework. Populism cannot exist by itself. Nearly every new party takes a populist approach in order to convince the voters that they are needed. They say, 'Vote for us because they don't listen to you. You should vote for us because we are going to represent you in Parliament. Your voice will be heard through us', and so on.

***So is this something that can be seen as a rather opportunistic strategy? Ernesto Laclau wrote about this in his book *On Populist Reason*.<sup>4</sup> He observes that the right question to ask is not whether a political party is populist or not, but how populist a party is. In a democratic system all parties can be more or***

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<sup>4</sup> Laclau, Ernesto, *On Populist Reason*, London: Verso, 2005.

***less populist at some time or employ a populist strategy, even if it is in an opportunistic way.***

This reminds me of what you wrote about PASOK,<sup>5</sup> the Greek labour party, saying that it was populist during a certain period. It is very difficult to say the same thing for the Dutch Labour party. If the antagonistic relationship to the elites is the decisive trait of populism it becomes more difficult to label a party as a populist party when it becomes part of the elite. For instance, when a party is governing and is part of the establishment, like the Dutch Labour party or the Liberal party, it is hard to call it populist. An interesting question would be, 'Can a party that belongs to the political establishment also be a populist party?'

***There is a relevant discussion in Latin America regarding the populist parties that came to power. It seems like there is still a need to find an enemy which can be conceived of and denounced as an 'elite'.***

Well, one can refer to the 'banking elite' or the 'economic' and 'financial elite', and so on.

***What about the uses of 'populism' as a designation in public discourse? Do parties use this as a characterisation against each other, as we often see in other countries as, for example, in Greece?***

I would say that is not the case in the Netherlands. The term 'populism' definitely has a negative connotation in the Netherlands. However, I would not say that the elite tries to label parties that they do not like as 'populist'. What they say instead, and they advanced this against Wilders after the Spring 2012 crisis in the cabinet, is that they are irresponsible. 'You are acting irresponsibly. We have a crisis and you walk away. Explain that to your voters.' Wilders utilises his own frames, and these are Islam and European Integration. He changes, according to the situation and the circumstances. In the Netherlands it is not so much about populism, it is about responsibility. This is what Labour says, 'Difficult times, but we are responsible. What you are saying is easy talk.'

***I'm sure you are familiar with the long discussion about the 'third way' turn of the Labour Party in the Netherlands, and the critique that they are now closer to some ideas that could be called neoliberal. If I am not mistaken, the Dutch Labour Party is right now the most unpopular centre-left party in Europe, alongside the French Socialists of Francois Hollande. Yet it seems as though the SP is unable to capitalise on this crisis, which is very strange.***

Both the Labour party and the Liberals are not doing so well in the polls, though the Liberals are doing comparatively better than Labour. Labour had 38 seats and now has 15 [at the polls], and this shows the volatility of the Dutch political system. The Liberals are also losing, but they are faring better than Labour. The big question is why does the SP not gain from the collapse of Labour? Labour has lost more than 20 seats, and yet the SP has only won a few more seats. Most of the losses from Labour

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<sup>5</sup> Voerman refers again here to Stavrakakis & Katsambekis, *op. cit.*, Ref. 2.

seem to go to the left-liberal party D66, and this party is not as anti-neoliberal as the SP. Of course, there are also disappointed Labour voters who have decided not to vote at the coming elections.

***So, Labour is supposed to be losing power because it has implemented neoliberal measures and yet its voters do not go to, let's say, a more properly social-democratic party like the SP. The SP, after all, is trying to present itself as a 'traditional' social-democratic force right now.***

Yes. It is tradition in a radical form. The SP compare themselves to social democracy and Labour in the 1970s. Labour was relatively radical at that time, like the other Labour parties in Europe. The SP says: 'That is the Labour party we want to be like; the Labour party of the early 1970s.' Of course, at that time, as a Maoist sect, they were really condemning the Labour party. Everything develops.

***So, why isn't the SP making more gains? Is it due to mistakes in their campaigns, or the rather poor performance of Emile Roemer?***

Well, the latter seems to be the case. It was clear in the campaign of 2012, and again just last week with the budget debates in Parliament. These are important debates, where the party leaders are expected to give their vision of how things should go. Here, Roemer failed. The PVV had been the biggest opposition party but, after a few defections, the size of the group diminished and now the SP is the biggest opposition party. So, the SP could start the debate. Everybody looked to Roemer and he failed, like he had failed in the core TV debates of the 2012 elections campaign. At that time, since the party was scoring high in the opinion polls, he was acting like a potential Prime Minister. But, people saw that this guy did not have prime minister qualities, that he lacked certain competences like composure and specific knowledge of the issues at stake.

***It seems then that the SP has a serious problem with their leader. Why do you think they are not doing anything about it? This is a problem that they admit too, and that has been under discussion for two years now.***

One thing is that Roemer took over in 2010, after Agnes Kant stepped back. She succeeded Jan Marijnissen in 2008, and what people said about her, and I agreed, was that she was too fanatical and hyperactive. Then Roemer came along and he was more laid back and easy-going: the smiling face of the SP. They did relatively well in 2010. The party lost seats but not as many as was expected, and Roemer was the new kid on the block. Then, in 2012 when the SP was the biggest party in the polls, all the attention was focused on Roemer and it turned out that as a person he did not have the required capacity.

***I have a thought here. According to some commentators, at the time that the SP reached its peak in the polls it sat back and became more moderate in its political communication; it became less oppositional/confrontational. Do you think that the problem was that, while initially a vote for the SP had been seen as an act of radical opposition against the 'establishment', at a certain point***

***the party stopped being oppositional with the same passion, and that, as a result, had its toll?***

This is the other thing I want to mention. The populist strategy works very well during election time. The SP went through this populist phase in the 1990s and they were worrying about taking part in government, but, as I said, the populist strategy was so successful in electoral terms that, at a certain point, the rank and file started to complain. They were saying, 'Fine, we are doing very well, but in certain municipalities where we are so big we should try to become part of the local administration.' They started losing, at a certain point, in municipal elections and they went to the voter, like the SP does, and the people said, 'it is because you are not in power'. The SP is adaptive, and they said that this needed to be taken into account. However, the problem that they had, and this is a structural problem that maybe they still have today, is that they have a populist style as electoral strategy, because they know that this works, and also a strategy aimed towards getting the party into public office and government. These two strategies can interfere with each other, and sometimes it is not clear whether the SP is oppositional or if it wants to present itself as a reliable and responsible partner that people can do business with and so on.

I think that Jan Marijnissen was excellent as a person and as a party leader at adapting himself to different circumstances. He could switch easily and naturally between different strategic roles, whereas Roemer does not have this flexibility. At the same time, at a certain point it becomes hard to avoid making a choice. If you are standing as a potential Prime Minister then you can no longer use this populist rhetoric. That would be very illogical, and you can see that Roemer is not able to cope with this problem, and neither is the rest of the SP. You cannot use a populist approach or strategy when it comes to elections and then after elections say, 'By the way we are going to take part in government'. At a certain point people will realise that there is something wrong. We have an expression in Dutch, 'The snake bites its own tail' and, in a way, this is what is happening with the SP. They are so successful with this populist electoral strategy, that it is difficult for them to do without.

***Thank you!***

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Transcription: **BERTIE VIDGEN**



**POPULIST DISCOURSE AND DEMOCRACY**  
**POPULISMUS**



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## POPULISMUS: POPULIST DISCOURSE AND DEMOCRACY

Populism is dynamically and unexpectedly back on the agenda. Latin American governments that dismiss the so-called "Washington consensus" and extreme right-wing parties and movements in Europe advancing xenophobic and racist stereotypes exemplify this trend. More recently, emerging social movements and parties in Southern Europe that resist the current administration of the global financial crisis and the Tea Party movement in the US have also been branded "populist". The POPULISMUS research project aims at the comparative mapping of the populist discourse articulated by such sources in order to facilitate a reassessment of the category of "populism" and to develop a theoretical approach capable of reorienting the empirical analysis of populist ideologies in the global environment of the 21st century. Building on the theoretical basis offered by the discourse theory developed by the so-called "Essex School", POPULISMUS adopts a discursive methodological framework in order to explore the multiple expressions of populist politics, to highlight the need to study the emerging cleavage between populism and anti-populism and to assess the effects this has on the quality of democracy. Through the dissemination of its research findings we anticipate that the synthetic analysis of populist discourse it puts forward and the emerging evaluation of populism's complex and often ambivalent relationship with democracy will advance the relevant scientific knowledge, also enabling the deepening of democratic culture in times of crisis.



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