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## Geert Wilders of the Netherlands reveals a resurgent far right in Europe

By [Anthony Faiola](#), Monday, April 30, 9:45 AM

AMSTERDAM — Europe's most controversial politician lives in a government safe house fitted with a panic room and guarded round the clock. A self-avowed foe of Islam who compared the Koran to Adolf Hitler's Mein Kampf and called for a ban on Muslim immigrants, he travels by bulletproof car and rarely talks with journalists — choosing instead to funnel messages directly to supporters via Twitter and a personal blog.

But when Geert Wilders — dubbed “Mozart” for his bleached-blond bouffant hair — brought down the Dutch government last week in an extraordinary show of force by Europe's resurgent far right, it wasn't over his high-profile war on Islam. Instead, it was part of his emphasis on another belief he and his Freedom Party now see as almost equally dangerous: an integrated Europe.

The rise of Wilders in the Netherlands is a cautionary tale for a continent in the midst of a [debt crisis](#), and where painful recessions, soaring unemployment and surging youth apathy are fueling the strongest swell of support in decades for anti-immigrant nationalists.

For more than a generation, European political elites have sought to fuse the region together by adopting the euro and a series of treaties that virtually erased national borders across a vast swath of the continent. But in the recent surge of the nationalist far right, and to lesser extent the far left, European leaders are confronting not only a backlash to a united Europe but also a troubling new hurdle in their efforts to resolve the 2<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>-year-old debt crisis.

From France to Austria, Greece to Finland, the popularity of nationalists is growing as politicians like Wilders tap into voter rage not only over the crisis itself, but also over the proposed cure being pushed by mighty Germany: harsh rounds of government cuts and difficult economic overhauls to restore investor confidence in Europe's governments.

That austerity crusade is already in danger of derailing, with even moderate leaders, including Italian Prime Minister Mario Monti, now saying deep cuts are driving Europe's economies into the ground. Other critics, meanwhile, are arguing the social pain from austerity is playing into the hands of politicians on the far right and left, who are portraying the cuts as part of a pattern that has seen European integration eat away at living standards across traditionally affluent Western Europe.

Even German Chancellor Angela Merkel has softened her rhetoric in recent days, playing up the need for policies that favor growth, though she continues to view fiscal discipline as a necessary tonic for Europe's troubles. European Central Bank President Mario Draghi, also a fiscal hawk, called last week for a “growth compact,” and European leaders appear likely to work out a series of modest policy changes in late June.

In the turmoil of the debt crisis, ideas long held by European radicals are going mainstream as centrist politicians seek to find their way in a sea of discontent. In France, for instance, Marine Le Pen of the National Front stunned observers by winning almost one out of every five votes in the first round of presidential elections a week ago on a platform that would have seen Paris withdraw from the euro and buck the German-led austerity drive. Now on the ropes against his Socialist opponent, President Nicolas Sarkozy is currying the favor of the far-right ahead of the decisive second vote, vowing to pull France out of the region's open-borders treaty if negotiations underway to stem the tide of transplants from poorer quarters of Europe do not succeed in the months ahead.

In crisis-devastated Greece, opinion polls ahead of the May 6 elections show the once-obscure Golden Dawn — which wants to plant landmines on the country's borders to protect against illegal immigrants — is on a surprise track to win seats in parliament. Austria's far-right Freedom Party is running strong in opinion polls and last year, Finland's nationalist True Finns Party took a record 19 percent of the vote.

“It is now only a matter of time before one of these parties gets into power and tries to pull the rug out from under the euro,” said Maurice de Hond, a leading Dutch political pollster. “If it doesn't happen in the Netherlands, it will happen somewhere else in Europe. I am sure of it.”

### **Tried for inciting hate**

Here in the Netherlands, Wilders, 48, rose from political obscurity during the past decade to become one of the most influential far-right politicians in Europe.

Wilders — who spent time in his youth on an Israeli kibbutz — is pro-Israel and staunchly anti-Islam. Describing Islam as a religion of violence and hate that wants to “enslave” the West, he has called for the closure of Muslim schools, made a high profile anti-Muslim film and wants forced registration of all Dutch citizens holding two passports.

In 2010, he was put on trial on charges of inciting hate, though observers say the perceived liberal bias of judges and his eventual acquittal only elevated his popularity. It served him well at the ballot box, with his six-year-old party winning so many seats in elections later that year that the center-right government required his support to stay in power.

His attempts to portray himself as a victim of the liberal elite has made him a darling of the right in the United States, where he has secured space on the Wall Street Journal's op-ed page. Wilders is now set to promote a new book published in the United States this week, *Marked for Death, Islam's War Against the West and Me*.

Yet he also defies easy political description. Wilders is, for instance, a strong supporter of same-sex marriage. And he has been nothing if not a savvy reader of the political winds. Earlier this year, political observers say he made the calculation to seize on Europe's debt crisis. The move seemed politically well timed, as the economically strong and fiscally conservative Dutch suddenly found themselves in recession and struggling to enact budget cuts demanded by European agreements.

“He is master at capitalizing on fear,” said Jozias Van Aarsten, mayor of The Hague and elder statesman from the Liberal Party, which Wilders broke with in 2004.

### **Targeting Poles**

In February, Wilder's party launched a Web site targeting the Polish immigrants who had come by the thousands as the Netherlands opened its door to more workers from poorer parts of the European Union in the mid-2000s. The site invited Dutch citizens to report Eastern Europeans for doing anything from

“taking your parking spaces” to “taking your jobs.”

Malgorzata Karczewska, who runs a Polish language news site in the Netherlands, said many Dutch seemed embarrassed by the move, but the Web site also brought latent animosity to the surface. One Polish migrant, she said, repeatedly had her tires slashed. Others were insulted in public for speaking Polish. A week after the site came out, Karczewska said a waitress accused her of stealing cutlery while dining at a fine restaurant. “After 9/11, he made all Muslims the scapegoat in Holland,” she said. “Now, it’s the Poles.”

In March, Wilders accelerated his anti-Europe line, openly calling for the Netherlands to abandon the euro. Positioning himself as a champion of the working class, he refused to sign on to budget cuts demanded by European leaders, causing the government to fall and forcing Prime Minister Mark Rutte to tender his resignation last week.

Though scrambling Dutch parties reached a key budget deal Thursday, analysts warned that the nation still faces months of political turmoil and a possible loss of its cherished AAA credit rating.

Opinion polls suggest that Wilders may have taken at least a temporary hit by forcing the fall of the government this week, but observers say he is banking on domestic anxiety over crisis to crest come early Election Day in September.

“We are against Europe,” Wilders, unbowed, said this week. “We are against the euro.”

Correspondent Michael Birnbaum in Berlin and special correspondent Marit Van Kooij contributed to this report.

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