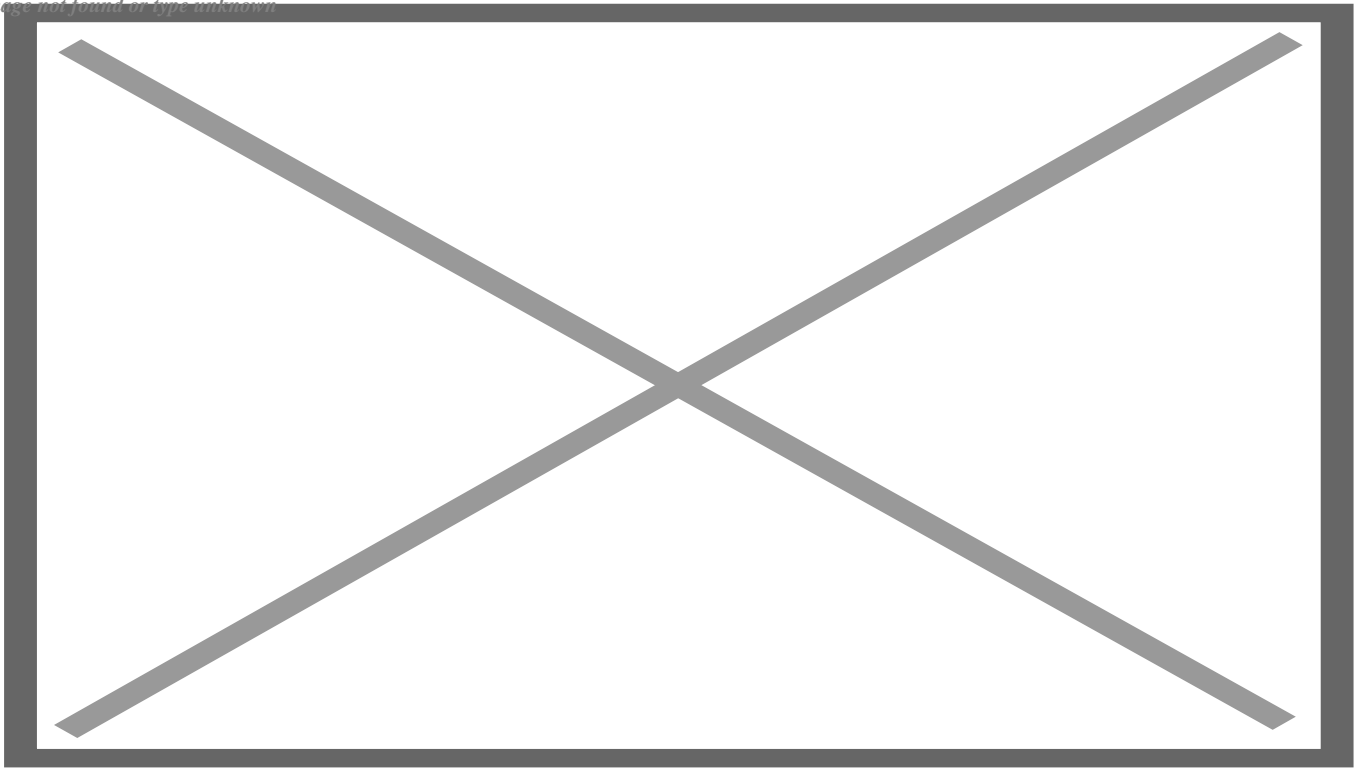


Left-leaning parties lead as far right surges in Netherlands' EU elections

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Ultra-right wing leader Geert Wilders of the PVV -- known as "The Dutch Trump"

Amsterdam, June 7 (RHC)-- Left-leaning parties in the Netherlands are projected to have narrowly won the most seats in the country's election for the European Parliament, even as the anti-immigration party of populist far-right nationalist Geert Wilders made huge gains.

The Labour/Green Left combination was projected to have won eight seats, slightly ahead of Wilders's Party for Freedom (PVV) on seven seats, according to a nationwide exit poll published on Thursday by broadcaster NOS.

The exit poll has an error margin of roughly one seat. The result suggests huge gains for Wilders following his victory in last year's national election, given that his party failed to secure a seat in the previous EU election and only got one after a reshuffle due to Brexit.

"This is a very positive sign and also a sign to the elites in Brussels that things will change," Wilders told reporters in The Hague. "A signal that at least many of the Dutch voters gave today that they want a different European Union and they want a stronger nation state. Not more transferring of powers to Europe, but exactly the opposite."

Labour leader Frans Timmermans said the results showed left-wing parties should not be written off for this election, despite the rise of nationalist parties throughout Europe.

"As pro-European parties we have shown the rest of Europe it's not a done deal that the radical right wins this election," the EU's former climate chief said.

Voting in the Netherlands kicked off four days of elections for the EU parliament across the 27 EU member states. It encapsulated the main internal political challenge facing the union: the rising popularity of nationalist and populist parties that want to dismantle the EU from within.

Wilders, known for his outspoken views on immigration and Islam, said on Thursday a good result for the nationalist parties should encourage them to unite in their bid to change EU regulations and return more powers to national legislatures.

The Labour/Green Left combination dropped one seat from their 2019 result, but seemed to have remained the largest overall after a campaign in which they constantly warned about the rise of nationalist parties.

The two left-wing parties ran on a joint ticket but will have separate factions in parliament after the vote. The actual result of the Dutch election will be announced after voting has closed in all 27 member states, on Sunday at 21:00 GMT.

The 720-seat parliament co-decides with the EU's 27 national governments on laws that govern the bloc's single market, its 1-trillion-euro (\$1.09 trillion) long-term budget, fiscal rules and laws to prevent climate change.

Surveys of voter intentions show the centre right is likely to win the largest share of seats, putting their candidate to head the European Commission, incumbent Ursula von der Leyen of Germany, in pole position to be appointed for a second term.

The new parliament will decide on the EU's next seven-year budget, which must be in place from 2028, with Ukraine, Moldova and countries of the Western Balkans all seeking membership.

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