

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Europe, Great Britain > Fascism, extreme right, fundamentalism (Europe) > **Meet Thierry Baudet, the suave new face of Dutch rightwing populism**

Meet Thierry Baudet, the suave new face of Dutch rightwing populism

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The far right's rising star has come to prominence by convincing voters he's not as crude as Geert Wilders.

For the past decade, the face of Dutch populism has been [Geert Wilders](#), notorious for being anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant, anti-establishment, anti-intellectual, anti-pretty much anything with three syllables or more.

But last month, about half of his voters jumped ship. When the Netherlands held elections to provincial assemblies – which indirectly elect the upper house of parliament – Wilders' Party for Freedom party lost half of its seats [to Forum for Democracy](#) (FvD), the party, launched in 2016, of political newcomer Thierry Baudet. FvD even won one more seat than the current liberal governing party, the VVD.

Baudet's midnight victory speech was one of the bigger WTF moments in recent Dutch political life ([first line](#): "The owl of Minerva spreads his wings just before nightfall"). Baudet spoke about the "oikophobia" – broadly, self-hatred – of the governing classes, whom he believes prefer all other cultures before their own. Europe lives in a "cultural and spiritual vacuum" and has forgotten that western civilisation once "confidently spread to every corner of the world", he said. He was keen to point out those academics, journalists, artists and politicians who threaten "our boreal world". Boreal means "northern" and is usually seen as a euphemistic way of saying "white".

In other words, it was the familiar mixed bag of nostalgia, xenophobia, climate-change denial and other national populist zingers that Wilders has been coming out with for years – just with more obscure words.

So what happened? That Dutch voters got bored by Wilders is understandable. He had become the establishment of anti-establishment parties. Baudet, on the other hand, is a fresh face. He was born in 1983. He's got sharp features, good hair, appears kinda buff in his tight suits, and usually always looks like he's about to audition for the part of Patrick Bateman, the investment banker who hides the darker side of his personality from his co-workers in Bret Easton Ellis' novel [American Psycho](#).

Compared with Wilders he is also surprisingly elitist. He started his maiden speech in parliament in Latin (which prompted classicist Mary Beard to step in to [correct his many mistakes](#)), he frequently quotes poetry, had a grand piano [installed in his offices](#) in the House of Representatives, and has published two novels. One is called Conditional Love and has a narrator who is a part-time intellectual, a part-time male prostitute and a full-time Baudet lookalike. Throughout the novel he goes on and on about how women want to be subjugated, in life in general and in the bedroom in particular. Baudet has claimed it was all fiction, but then went on to defend the notorious Swiss pick-up artist [Julien Blanc](#) on national TV, whose "art" consists of making women feel bad about

themselves and then pouncing on their insecurities.

He has spoken out in favour of Donald Trump and Viktor Orbán's anti-immigration policies, made friends in France with Le Pen (father and daughter), and sided with Vladimir Putin over [MH17](#) – the Malaysia Airlines flight carrying 193 Dutch nationals that was shot out of the sky over Ukraine in 2014, probably with Russian involvement. He has been flirting with ["Nexit"](#) for a long time, constantly calling Brussels the root of all evil.

Baudet's thinking might be described as a combination of the German historian [Oswald Spengler](#) and the Canadian academic [Jordan Peterson](#). On the one hand, he sees a decline of the west – see Spengler's 1918 book *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* – because he feels the political and cultural elites are willingly trading in the "old values" for an atheistic, progressive cosmopolitanism. On the other hand, he talks about the restoration of a nationalistic, masculine society, and the need to not apologise for – for example – colonialism or racist and sexist structures in society, but to straighten your back and walk tall. If you are conservative, affluent, educated, white cis-male, you're fine. If you're a woman or a minority, well, you're bad.

The media have been having a field day [debunking Baudet](#), and have been doing it so eagerly that he's dominated the news ever since his FvD party was elected to the House of Representatives in 2017 – with a mere [two seats out of 150](#). Baudet has been getting more coverage than leaders of parties 10 times the size. To a certain extent, the press frenzy was logical: Wilders was never available. He tweeted, but did no interviews, skipped debates, never claimed to read any political thinkers. Baudet, on the other hand, is all over the place: he writes books and visits all kind of (rightwing) intellectuals.

When the weekly magazine I work for, De Groene Amsterdammer, [published a piece](#) that suggested Baudet had never fully grasped the work of German philosopher Theodor W Adorno, Baudet himself was on the phone with our secretary within half an hour. He wanted to make clear he had read Adorno and he grasped it all perfectly well, thank you very much.

After these recent elections, the term "landslide" was used a lot. That might be pushing it. The [Netherlands](#) has not turned into a haven for rightwing extremism. Out of 75 seats in total, Baudet now has 13 in the *Eerste Kamer*, or upper chamber. That's a surge, but hardly a takeover. What's new is this: many voters who'd always thought Wilders to be too crude or uncivilised now feel they have someone they can vote for without feeling crude themselves.

Baudet wants people to think he's all about high culture, putting a veneer of intellectualism on his meteoric political rise. But here's the twist. As much as he claims to love culture, Baudet only really embraces that which is classical and 19th-century-ish. He dislikes anything that's modern. He says he's interested in philosophy, but quotes only those philosophers whose ideas can be used to construct a regressive worldview. He uses his highbrow knowledge to mask his ignoble instincts.

We tend to think that what binds Europe is centuries of culture and civilisation. What we're seeing with Baudet is someone who is attempting to use that legacy to tear [Europe](#) apart. It is hard to stomach.

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