CHARLES UNIVERSITY

FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

Institute of Political Studies

Department of Security Studies

Master's Thesis

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Propaganda on Social Media: The Case of Geert Wilders

Master's thesis

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Year of the defence: 2018

Declaration

1. I hereby declare that I have compiled this thesis using the listed literature and resources only.

2. I hereby declare that my thesis has not been used to gain any other academic title.

3. I fully agree to my work being used for study and scientific purposes.

In Prague on 8 May 2018   Bc. Kateřina Záhorová

References

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Abstract

This thesis aims to explore the spread of populist propaganda on social media on the case of the Dutch politician Geert Wilders and Twitter. The research questions of this thesis focus primarily on the message that is being spread by Mr. Wilders and his followers, the way his followers react to this content and the attempt to securitize Islam through populist propaganda. The thesis uses the methodology of discursive thematic interpretation to analyze the narrative that is being spread. In order to collect data for this analysis, the analytical tool NodeXL Pro has been employed. This tool made it possible to not only collect data and identify the people interacting with a theme, but also visualize their position within the network. The thesis uses datasets collected by NodeXL for the discursive thematic interpretation of data. The analysis itself is divided into different sections, first analyzing the content shared by Geert Wilders and identifying the themes and reconstructing the narrative. Next, the analysis moves on to more specific subsections, such as important hashtags or examples of active users from Wilders' proximity. NodeXL was also helpful in modelling the networks and discovering the echo chambers formed around Geert Wilders.

Abstrakt

Tato práce si klade za cíl zkoumat šíření populistické propagandy na sociálních médiích na příkladu nizozemského politika Geerta Wilderse a Twitteru. Výzkumné otázky práce se zaměřují na to, jak Geert Wilders používá Twitter k šíření své rétoriky, jak s tímto obsahem dále nakládají jeho podporovatelé (odběratelé) a jaká témata se kolem Wilderse šíří a jak se Geert Wilders snaží o sekuritizaci islámu a přistěhovalestství skrze tuto propagandu. Tato diplomová práce používá diskurzivní tematickou interpretaci jako hlavní metodologický rámec pro analýzu dat. Data byla sbírána analytickým programem NodeXL, který rovněž umožňuje vizualizaci pozice zachycených uživatelů a jejich interakcí. Analýza samotná je pak rozdělena do tří částí. První část se věnuje tomu, jaký diskurz šíří Geert Wilders a jaký obraz sebe sama i společnosti buduje. Další část se věnuje výrazným hashtagům, které Geert Wilders používá; poslední část se pak věnuje analýze příkladových uživatelů, kteří jsou zapojeni do Wildersovy sítě. NodeXL umí také odhalit přítomnost tzv. „echo chambers", s jejichž konceptem tato práce rovněž pracuje.

Keywords
Geert Wilders, far-right populism, propaganda, social media, securitization

Klíčová slova
Geert Wilders, extrémní pravicový populismus, propaganda, sociální media, sekuritizace

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Propaganda on Social Media: The Case of Geert Wilders

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Introduction

Geert Wilders is one of the most outspoken anti-Islam politicians in contemporary Europe and the leader of the current second biggest party in the Dutch House of Representatives. Since the establishment of his party, he has been classified as a populist repeatedly. This is due to his anti-Islam, anti-EU and anti-elitism rhetoric.[1] However, Wilders himself refuses such categorization and claims to be the voice of the common Dutch people who are otherwise overlooked by the elites.[2]

It is alarming and puzzling at the same time that Wilders managed to stay relevant among the political elite for over a decade in a country as tolerant towards immigration as the Netherlands. Wilders proved to be an inspiration to populist politicians from other countries, as we could see on the case of the Czech politician Tomio Okamura (Freedom and Direct Democracy), who drives the populist train and quotes Wilders as his "very good friend".[3] Focusing on the case of Geert Wilders can therefore offer valuable insights into how populist propaganda works and how it gets disseminated through the relatively new platform of social media.

This thesis presumes that social media offer an opportunity to share any propagandist message in an environment that does not necessarily support critical reflection. Besides, users may often find themselves to be isolated from other narratives present online and become vulnerable to the information they receive (even false propaganda masked as objective news). It may seem irrelevant to the field of security studies to research populist propaganda on social media, but we need to remember that such propaganda fuels the division in society and supports radicalization. And as Ole Waever puts it, "radical security problems are likely to be the biggest risks for the security community because they drive

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[1] Koen Vossen, "Populism in the Netherlands after Fortuyn: Rita Verdonk and Geert Wilders Compared," *Perspectives on European Politics and Society* 11, no. 1 (2010): 22–38; Daphne van der Pas, Catherine de Vries, and Wouter van der Brug, "A Leader without a Party: Exploring the Relationship between Geert Wilders' Leadership Performance in the Media and His Electoral Success," *Party Politics* 19, no. 3 (2013): 458–76.

[2] "Telegraaf Interview Met Geert Wilders: Harvochtig? Het Gaat Om Overleven," Partij voor de Vrijheid, accessed May 5, 2018, https://www.pvv.nl/36-fj-related/geert-wilders/9738-telegraaf-interview-met-geert-wilders-hardvochtig-het-gaat-om-overleven.html [In Dutch].

[3] Tomio Okamura, "Tomio Okamura: Můj Přítel Geert Wilders ve Včerejších Holandských Volbách Uspěl, Skončil Na Druhém," SPD - Svoboda a přímá demokracie, accessed April 28, 2018, https://www.spd.cz/novinky/tomio-okamura-muj-pritel-geert-wilders-ve-vcerejsich-holandskych-volbach-uspel-skoncil-na-druhem [In Czech].

states to override rules".[4] Besides, previous research has shown that social media are fertile grounds for spreading misinformation and different forms of propaganda, which once again can make radicalization easier.[5] This thesis also argues that Geert Wilders uses social media to find an audience in order to securitize Islam and migration. The thesis will seek to answer the questions of how Wilders uses his Twitter account to further his agenda, how do his supporters react to the content he shares and what themes resonate around Geert Wilders on Twitter.

Populism is not just a problem of the Netherlands and it is not confined to Europe either. In fact, the rise of populism has been so poignant in the last few years, that it did not only attract attention of the academia, but also caught the eye of various NGOs and think-tanks, who perceive populism as a security threat.[6] Populism, including the far-right populism of Geert Wilders and his PVV, has a dividing effect on society and fights strongly against the established order on both national and international level. If we consider populism a threat to the established democratic order and to security, it becomes important not to dismiss it lightly.[7]

The thesis is structured into three major chapters, each focused on a different aspect of the topic of propaganda on social media. The first theoretical chapter examines the different concepts needed for a better understanding of the issue of propaganda on social media, populism and other concepts needed for a successful analysis. It also provides context in regards to Geert Wilders and his background, the establishment of his party and the party's history in the Dutch House of Representatives. The second chapter introduces the methodological framework used in this thesis, including an explanation of the methodology used as well as the methods of data collection and analysis. The chapter also provides insights into the analytical software used. The third chapter focuses on the analysis of the dataset, especially discursive thematic analysis of the content shared by

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[4] Ole Waever in Michael Barnett and Emanuel Adler, *Security Communities: Whose Security?*, *Cooperation and Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 69–70.
[5] Ines von Behr et al., "Radicalisation in the Digital Era: The Use of the Internet in 15 Cases of Terrorism and Extremism," *RAND Europe*, 2013, 24–30,
https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR400/RR453/RAND_RR453.pdf.
[6] Kenneth Roth, "The Dangerous Rise of Populism: Global Attacks on Human Rights Values," Human Rights Watch, accessed April 25, 2018, https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2017/country-chapters/dangerous-rise-of-populism; Judy Dempsey, "Populism Will Undermine the West's Security," Carnegie Europe, accessed April 25, 2018, http://carnegieeurope.eu/2016/11/15/populism-will-undermine-west-s-security-pub-66200.
[7] Christina Schori Liang, "Europe for the Europeans: The Foreign and Security Policy of the Populist Radical Right," *Europe for the Europeans: The Foreign and Security Policy of the Populist Radical Right*, 2007, 1–32.

Geert Wilders and his followers and revealing the topology of the network. Finally, the thesis is concluded in a summary that sums up the findings of the analysis and provides answers to the research questions.

This thesis is from the most part built upon scholarly literature found in peer-reviewed journals and primary sources, including materials issued by the Dutch government, Party for Freedom. Most of all, the thesis is built on the analysis of the official Twitter account of Geert Wilders and its content as well as the content shared by his followers. NGO and think-tank reports were also used as support literature for the theoretical conception of this thesis. A large portion of the sources is only available in Dutch, which is clearly given by the topic of the thesis and the nature of the analysis. For clarifying context where needed, trustworthy Dutch media were cited. Three different software tools were used in making of this thesis, including NodeXL, SocialBearing, TinEye and Google Reverse Image Search. These tools helped with the collection and sorting of the dataset and visualization of the collected data.

1   Theory and Context

This chapter discusses the establishment and evolution of Geert Wilders' political party and its proclaimed goals. Further along, the chapter also explores the theoretical concept of securitization and its possible use in populist discourse and propaganda. Another section focuses on social media as a platform for sharing propagandist materials in order to secure votes in future election. The goal of this chapter is to provide useful theoretical basis for the analytical part of the thesis.

1.1   Geert Wilders and Party for Freedom

Geert Wilders is a Dutch politician and founder of the far-right Party for Freedom (in original *Partij voor de Vrijheid*, abbreviated PVV). He entered the field of politics as an assistant of the Dutch politician Frits Bolkestein in the 1990s, but eventually worked his way up to the candidate list of the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (in original *Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie*, abbreviated VVD) and in 1998 he got elected into the House of Representatives (*Tweede Kamer*). In 2004, Wilders parted ways with VVD due to differences in opinions, especially since Wilders started publicly speaking against Islam in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. He established his new party, the PVV, in the same year on the anti-Islam platform. PVV was not the first anti-Islam party in the Netherlands and as such it followed in the footsteps of its predecessor – the Pim Fortuyn List (in original *Lijst Pim Fortuyn*, abbreviated LPF).

The LPF caught the eye of the Dutch prior to the 2002 election, especially thanks to its charismatic leader Pim Fortuyn and his calls to protect the Dutch culture from outside influences, especially from migrants from Muslim countries.[8] However, a few days ahead of the election, Pim Fortuyn was assassinated by an animal rights activist Volkert van der Graaf. Van der Graaf later claimed, that the murder was motivated by the anti-Muslim populistic rhetoric Fortuyn was using to gain extra credit with the voters.[9] Nevertheless, the murder shocked the country and Pim Fortuyn became a symbol of the dangers of radical Islam. In the 2002 election, LPF acquired 26 out of the 150 seats in the House of

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[8] Stijn van Kessel, "Explaining the Electoral Performance of Populist Parties: The Netherlands as a Case Study," *Perspectives on European Politics and Society* 12, no. 1 (2011): 74–79, https://www.sussex.ac.uk/webteam/gateway/file.php?name=epernnetherlands2012.pdf&site=266.

[9] Ambrose Evans-Pritchard and Joan Clements, "Fortuyn Killed 'to Protect Muslims,'" The Telegraph, accessed April 21, 2018, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/netherlands/1425944/Fortuyn-killed-to-protect-Muslims.html.

Representatives. However, the support for the party declined slowly over the next four years and in the 2006 election the LPF did not make the cut anymore.[10]

In the meantime, Geert Wilders was working on his own party's program, very similar to Fortuyn's party. After the murder of Pim Fortuyn, Wilders had a very shocking and very real event to point to when talking about the dangers of Islam and multiculturalism. Besides, the murder of the filmmaker Theo van Gogh, another Islam critic, happened in 2004. This tragic event left Geert Wilders scared for his life. Wilders' name appeared on a list of Islam critics that was left at the scene of the crime by the perpetrator. Wilders still talks about the "price on his head" and being "marked for death" by radical Islamists and this topic even now, fourteen years later, still resonates with his supporters.[11] It has become a vital part of his narrative of Islam as a violent religion from which he wants to protect the Netherlands and his fellow citizens.

As I have already mentioned, LPF did not do very well in the 2006 election without Pim Fortuyn. PVV on the other hand picked up the anti-Islam and anti-multiculturalism rhetoric and turned it into 9 seats in the House of Representatives. In the next four years, PVV continued promoting its program and gained larger support, resulting in acquiring 24 seats in the next election in 2010. After months of deliberation, PVV became a supporting partner to a minority government lead by VVD's Mark Rutte. In the next two years, Wilders came up with different proposals such as banning *hijabs*, *Quran,* or a travel ban on people from Muslim countries. His ideas were not met with enthusiasm and in 2012, PVV officially stopped supporting the government during budget cuts debates, causing the collapse of the government.[12] In the 2012 pre-election campaign, PVV largely focused on criticizing the EU and its influence on the Dutch economy.[13] However, this strategy did not pan out, resulting in PVV losing 9 seats in comparison to 2010.[14] After the premature

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[10] "Lijst Pim Fortuyn," Parlement & Politiek, accessed January 2, 2016, http://www.parlement.com/id/vh8lnhrp1wzo/lijst_pim_fortuyn [In Dutch].
[11] @PVelleAntiJihad, "Retweet by Geert Wilders, 16.4.2018," Twitter.com, accessed April 8, 2018, https://twitter.com/PVelleAntiJihad/status/985782470565122048 [In Dutch]; Aryeh Eldad, "The Dutch War on Islam," Geert Wilders Weblog, 2014, https://www.geertwilders.nl/87-english/news/1874-the-dutch-war-on-islam.
[12] Peter Hylarides, "The Netherlands and Its Minority Government," Contemporary Review, 2011, accessed February 20, 2018, http://www.thefreelibrary.com/The+Netherlands+and+its+minority+government.-a0258916714 .
[13] Koen Vossen, "Classifying Wilders: The Ideological Development of Geert Wilders and His Party for Freedom," *Politics* 31, no. 3 (2011): 184.
[14] "Tweede Kamerverkiezingen 2012," Parlement & Politiek, accessed April 23, 2018, https://www.parlement.com/id/viyyadlrltn1/tweede_kamerverkiezingen_2012 [In Dutch].

election of 2012, PVV was not asked to become a part of the government or support it in any way and became an opposition party instead.

In the last national election in the Netherlands (March 2017), it seemed like the populist far-right PVV was on the verge of a major breakthrough as the surveys predicted a historical win for the party. However, the traditional Dutch parties were also playing around with populist rhetoric prior to the election. In 2004, Cas Mudde published an article arguing that populism has become a part of general political discourse and can be seen in most political parties and their campaigns.[15] According to experts, some voters felt like Prime Minister Rutte and his government did not adopt a strong enough stance towards the EU during the refugee crisis. However, Geert Wilders and his party offer a very strong stance on migration the entire time, which persuaded some voters lean towards the far-right PVV. Finally, in the spirit of the omnipresent populism described by Mudde, Mark Rutte issued a statement proclaiming that if some people do not plan on adapting to the Dutch standards, they should simply relocate.[16] It was very clear to the Dutch public that the Prime Minister was talking about minorities; this populistic stunt lead to VVD attracting its voters back from PVV. In the election, PVV won 20 seats and became the second biggest party, right behind VVD with 33 seats.[17]

Until recently, Party for Freedom could only participate in two municipalities (The Hague and Almere). This was caused by the uniquely restricted structure of PVV: the party only had two official members, effectively rendering it impossible to run in more than two municipalities. The two members are Geert Wilders himself and The Geert Wilders Foundation, others could become supporters of PVV, but they could not be full members. This way, Wilders controlled the party completely and held uncontested power over who represents his party in the House of Representatives.[18] However, Geert Wilders has apparently decided that PVV should become more active on the local level and recruited new candidates ahead of the March 2018 municipal elections. As a result, Party for Freedom could join the local election in 30 municipalities. Moreover, the party did not

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[15] [In Dutch] "Rutte: Ga Weg Als Het Je Hier Niet Bevalt," De Telegraaf, accessed January 12, 2018, https://www.telegraaf.nl/nieuws/1310788/rutte-ga-weg-als-het-je-hier-niet-bevalt.

[16] Cas Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist," *Government and Opposition* 39, no. 4 (2004): 541–63.

[17] "Dutch Election Result: Mark Rutte Sees off Geert Wilders Challenge as Netherlands Rejects Far-Right," Telegraph, accessed April 21, 2018, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/03/15/dutch-election-results-geert-wilders-andmark-rutte-vie-power/; "Tweede Kamerverkiezingen 2017," Parlement & Politiek, accessed April 23, 2018, https://www.parlement.com/id/vk1wljxti6u9/tweede_kamerverkiezingen_2017 [In Dutch].

[18] "Party for Freedom (PVV)," The Democratic Society, accessed April 23, 2018, http://www.demsoc.org/2014/05/11/party-for-freedom-pvv/.

only participate, but actually won seats in each region it ran in, which without a doubt means a success for Geert Wilders.[19] Social media played an important role in the hiring process, since Wilders looked to recruit the new party members from the ranks of his Twitter followers.[20]

1.2   Securitization and Populist Propaganda

In the past decades, security studies have largely expanded beyond the traditional military understanding of security. Nowadays, security studies are not only concerned with the military security of states, but also with political, cultural or environmental issues in relation to various referent objects (not only states, but also societies, ethnic groups or even individuals).

One of the most widely criticized aspects of security studies is that anything can be securitized, even if it is not a security issue in the traditional sense.[21] According to the Copenhagen school, issues become securitized through a "speech act", when a securitizing agent proclaims them a threat. If the act is successful and the audience accepts the narrative, the issue can be treated as a security threat.[22] There are obviously many different reasons for securitizing a topic; however, they all seem to have one in common: securitization enables the securitizing agent to use extraordinary measures which would otherwise be considered unthinkable. Once a topic is securitized and considered a security threat (to national security, cultural identity, etc.), the use of extraordinary measures is suddenly made possible, even necessary.[23] In the hands of populists, securitization can be used to make immigration or various religious groups into security threats, in an attempt to justify using extraordinary measures that are often contained in the populist parties' programs. For example, Geert Wilders is trying to securitize the Islam and immigrants as a threat to the Dutch culture and identity and he proposes a series of radical measures that would come into place, should he be successful: banning the Quran, banning burkas and

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[19] "Uitslagen Verkiezingen Gemeenteraad 2018," RTL Nieuws, accessed April 23, 2018, https://www.rtlnieuws.nl/verkiezingen?dnaId=709&electionCode=GR18 [In Dutch].
[20] Geert Wilders, "Status Update 20.1.2018," Twitter.com, accessed February 10, 2018, https://twitter.com/geertwilderspvv/status/954683882150027264 [In Dutch].
[21] Colin McInnes and Simon Rushton, "HIV/AIDS and Securitization Theory," *European Journal of International Relations* 19, no. 1 (2011): 116.
[22] Thierry Balzacq, "Constructivism and Securitization Studies," in *The Routledge Handbook of Security Studies*, ed. Myriam Dunn Cavelty and Thierry Balzacq (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 59–62.
[23] Barry Buzan, "Words , Images , Enemies : Securitization and International Politics," 2003, 514.

hijabs, mosques, or banning Muslims from entering the country, unless they give up their faith.[24]

Securitization of Islam became relevant after the 9/11 attacks, when President George W. Bush gave an address in which he condemned terrorism "as an attempt to destroy the US way of life and its freedom", leading to extraordinary measures including the imprisonment of over 5000 people.[25] In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, Islam became intertwined with terrorism, even though the elites made sure not to use the terms interchangeably. However, ultimately it was not terrorism that was securitized; it was Islam as a whole. Even now, the connection between Islam and terrorism prevails and even though we often hear politicians talking about the distinction between "good Muslims" and "bad Muslims", the narrative of Islam being a danger to security of the West has already been set.[26] As various scholars point out, the Western countries have since referred to various Islamic rules as a threat to the Western civilization's culture or democratic principles.[27] Such rhetoric is often used by populists, who use cultural differences to construct two distinct identities (simply put, they design a group of "us" and an opposing group of "them"). Later, they proceed to warn that "they" pose a threat to "our" cultural heritage, national state and identity. Therefore, extraordinary measures are needed in order to prevent the potential damage that the out-group could inflict to the in-group.[28] Naturally, far-right populists such as Geert Wilders try to securitize various topics in their campaigns. This phenomenon is not new – what is relatively new, however, are the modern tools available to the populists for their "speech act". These new tools include the social media, a rather recent way for populists to share their propaganda and approach and possibly influence or even radicalize large audiences.[29]

Propaganda is generally defined as spreading lies and covering up the true nature of things in order to sway the public opinion in a certain direction.[30] The propaganda is more

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[24] Vossen, "Classifying Wilders: The Ideological Development of Geert Wilders and His Party for Freedom," 184; Tweede Kamer Der Staten-generaal, "Deelneming Aan Internationale Strijd Tegen ISIS - 2. 10. 2014," 2014, 1–35.

[25] Luca Mavelli, "Between Normalisation and Exception: The Securitisation of Islam and the Construction of the Secular Subject," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 41, no. 2 (2013): 164.

[26] Ibid., 165.

[27] Ibid., 175.

[28] Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical-Right Parties in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 63–64.

[29] Vir Bala Aggarwal and V. S. Gupta, *Handbook of Journalism and Mass Communication* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 2002), 303.

[30] Florian Zollmann, "Bringing Propaganda Back into News Media Studies," *Critical Sociology*, 2017, 6.

effective, when it is based on observations and almost scientific calculations: who is the audience, what bothers them and how can they be manipulated?[31] Whether propaganda will be persuasive or not thus depends on psychologic and sociologic calculations. The conditions for successful dissemination of working propaganda can therefore be seen on the societal level:

> "When societies are unjust, for example, in the distribution of wealth, we can expect the emergence of flawed ideologies. The flawed ideologies allow for effective propaganda. In a society that is unjust, due to unjust distinctions between persons, ways of rationalizing undeserved privilege become ossified into rigid and unchangeable belief. These beliefs are the barriers to rational thought and empathy that propaganda exploits."[32]

If a belief exists in the society that there is some form of injustice (in welfare, health system, etc.), it opens up space for propagandist twists and exploits. Over time, as the propagandist learns about their audience, they become more skillful in their craft. Furthermore, the deeper they dig into their propaganda, the deeper the proverbial hole gets: ultimately, everything becomes a calculation and there is no way out other than building up on the original disinformation.[33]

When examining propaganda, it is important to not focus exclusively on text and speech. As we know from the interwar period, one of the most appealing types of propaganda is the visual kind. Images hold great power to rally citizens rather quickly, often without any previous rational reflection.[34] However, images evoke different things with different audiences and are often accompanied by a caption that can stir the audience in a certain direction.[35] We could observe images "speaking security" for example in the securitization of the 2001 war in Afghanistan, when a strong response to pictures of Afghan women prompted the United States to act against the Taliban.[36] A framework for analyzing visual propaganda in its complexity will be constructed in the methodological part of the text.

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[31] Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, *Vintage Books* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1973), 4–6.
[32] Jason Stanley, *How Propaganda Works* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2015), 3.
[33] Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, 4–5.
[34] Lene Hansen, "Theorizing the Image for Security Studies: Visual Securitization and the Muhammad Cartoon Crisis," *European Journal of International Relations* 17, no. 1 (2011): 52.
[35] Michael C. Williams, "Words, Images, Enemies: Securitization and International Politics," *International Studies Quarterly* 47, no. 4 (2003): 527.
[36] Matthew Kearns, "Gender, Visuality and Violence: Visual Securitization and the 2001 War in Afghanistan," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 19, no. 4 (2017): 491.

According to a 1988 book by Chomsky and Herman, mass media play an important role in disseminating propaganda.[37] Of course, in the current environment propaganda is not targeted against communists but rather against Muslims or other minorities and the mass media have been largely substituted by new media, including social media. If propaganda is described as dissemination of an untrue message with the ultimate goal of manipulating people into a certain direction and right-wing populism is defined through opposing certain ideas (Islam, EU, elites); then populist propaganda should be defined as a divisive and often untrue message disseminated with the intention to manipulate people into voting for the propagandist. Furthermore, it can be expected that the populist propaganda around Geert Wilders relies on a good understanding of his audience, since he has been promoting the populist message for almost quarter a century now.

Literature also mentions unintentional sharing of propaganda can occur due to misunderstandings, misinformation or self-deception.[38] This aspect of propaganda is especially crucial when discussing propaganda on social media.

1.3 Social Media, Networks and Their Relevance

The core of this thesis is formed by social media analysis; thus, it is important to supply information on what social media are and why are they of any interest to international relations and security studies. Social media is one of the forms of new media that came along with the overall increased computerization and digitalization of our everyday lives. Thanks to new technologies and their fairly easy accessibility, anyone can now make the news: the only thing needed is a phone with a camera and internet access. [39] It often happens that events are first reported through new media (especially through social media, such as Twitter) in the form of status updates, images or videos from the scene. These reports are later picked up by traditional media and shared across the traditional media platforms (TV, newspapers). This is caused by the fact that social media allow users to share news in real time directly from their location, which the traditional media simply cannot compete with. However, social media do not only allow the users to share their own news, it also allows users to connect and interact, thus forming a social network.

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[37] Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), 1.

[38] David Miller, Piers Robinson, and Vian Bakir, eds., "Propaganda and Persuasion in Contemporary Conflict," in *Routledge Handbook of Media, Conflict and Security* (London: Routledge, 2016), 308–20.

[39] Hansen, "Theorizing the Image for Security Studies: Visual Securitization and the Muhammad Cartoon Crisis," 52.

Networks are traditionally described as "structure[s] through which things circulate".[40] While studying networks, we are above all interested in the position of actors and their links to others within the network. In previous network research, a trend of homophily has been uncovered. This means that we can often find individuals resembling each other forming ties and groups. Reasons for the emergence of these homophilic groups range from voluntary preference or need to simple consequence of the system (our address and job influence who we form ties with).[41]

However, recent research shows that in the case of online social networks, one's ties with people with similar interests and opinions are being amplified to the extent that they become isolated in an "echo chamber". Echo chambers appear due to personalization of social networks: based on a person's interests an algorithm selects content that seems relevant and is likely to capture the target's attention. Inside of the personalized bubble, users are not confronted with opposing views, rather with encouragement and support their opinions. Filter bubbles were first discovered and described almost a decade ago by Eli Pariser.[42] Not much research could have been conducted on the phenomenon, especially due to the companies' secrecy concerning their filtering algorithm. Prior to the US 2017 Presidential election, there has only been one noteworthy research paper stating that the filter bubbles are non-issues and if they exist, they are completely voluntary. However, this research was sponsored by Facebook and therefore cannot be taken seriously.[43] Especially when faced with the storm that came after the US Presidential election. Social media and their filtering mechanisms (causing emergence of echo chambers filled with fake news and controversies) became a target for criticism and got largely blamed for Donald Trump's electoral victory – something that Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg has refused categorically.[44] Twitter is not immune to spreading misinformation either and has been criticized for allowing users to share xenophobic or misogynist content.[45]

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[40] David Lazer, "Networks in Political Science: Back to the Future," *Political Science and Politics* 44, no. 1 (2011): 61–68.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding from You* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2011), 7–16.
[43] Eytan Bakshy, "Exposure to Ideologically Diverse News and Opinion on Facebook," Science, 2015, http://science.sciencemag.org/content/early/2015/05/06/science.aaa1160.full.
[44] Kalev Leetaru, "Why 2017 Was The Year Of The Filter Bubble?," Forbes, 2017, https://www.forbes.com/sites/kalevleetaru/2017/12/18/why-was-2017-the-year-of-the-filter-bubble/#40085aeb746b.
[45] Mike Isaac and Sydney Ember, "For Election Day Influence, Twitter Ruled Social Media," The New York Times, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/09/technology/for-election-day-chatter-twitter-ruled-social-media.html.

However, from a scientific perspective being locked in a filter bubble means not being confronted with different opinions, only with the "echo" of our own ideas. Research shows, that when not faced with multiple information sources, people tend to be more perceptive to the information they are getting from the source they are connected to, giving the information source power to control them.[46] Echo chambers are essentially networks in which the participants are cut off from diverse information, therefore giving the influencers control over what narratives get shared and acknowledged. This phenomenon can be very problematic, especially when propaganda is shared in the echo chamber and due to the filtering; its consumption within the echo chamber is not disrupted by different narratives. In extreme cases, being a part of an echo chamber can even lead to radicalization. In fact, the RAND Corporation has recently published a detailed study into the ties of echo chambers and radicalization and came to the conclusion that not only are echo chambers present on social media but can also support radicalization of individuals.[47]

Social media are the ideal tool for politicians to connect to their supporters in a very accessible and quick manner, perhaps even attracting new supporters through sharing bold statements and opinions. Twitter is especially good at this, due to its simplicity.[48] Such use of social media to engage (especially young) audience can be summed up as seeking "viral engagement". This term is used by Fung and Shkabatur's research to describe "a political message or campaign that spreads quickly, reaches large audiences, and calls for action".[49] Viral engagement through social networks makes it more effective to distribute information to people across the globe, as it is easy, extremely fast and not costly at all. Furthermore, the accessibility of the conveyed message to practically everyone on the network gives the message a chance to gain significant momentum and become wildly shared ("go viral"). Viral engagement gives anyone on social media a chance to voice their opinion on the message. At the same time, it also can also expose users to manipulation and propaganda in an environment that makes people into an easy-to-manipulate crowd.[50] All in all, social media provide a platform for sharing political messages to large audiences that can be (due to filtering mechanisms and echo chambers) easier to manipulate than if

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[46] Lazer, "Networks in Political Science: Back to the Future," 62.
[47] von Behr et al., "Radicalisation in the Digital Era: The Use of the Internet in 15 Cases of Terrorism and Extremism," 24–30.
[48] Derek Hansen, Ben Shneiderman, and Marc A. Smith, *Analyzing Social Media Networks with NodeXL: Insights from a Connected World* (San Francisco: Morgan Kaufmann Publishers, 2010), 143.
[49] Archon Fung and Jennifer Shkabatur, "Viral Engagement: Fast, Cheap, and Broad, but Good for Democracy?," in *From Voice to Influence: Understanding Citizenship in a Digital Age*, ed. Danielle Allen and Jennifer S. Light (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 155–56.
[50] Ibid., 156.

they were faced with said message in the real world. Therefore, social media are the perfect platform for disseminating misinformation and propaganda, including populist propaganda – as explored in the analytical part of this thesis.

2 Methodology

This thesis uses discursive thematic interpretation as its methodology. Discursive thematic analysis focuses on finding patterns in a large corpus of data in order to draw conclusions in the form of identifying common themes and their meanings.[51] Data analyzed will include individual tweets and profiles placed on important places in the topology provided by the data collection tool Node XL Pro.[52]

2.1 Discursive thematic interpretation

The character of this thesis requires a flexible methodological approach that would allow both the thematic analysis of the collected dataset and analysis of the discourse. Discursive thematic analysis allows thematic sorting of the dataset as well as the analysis from the discursive perspective. Discourse can be explained as an act of constructing social reality: therefore, reality can be shaped and manipulated to suit the person behind the discourse.[53] Discursive analysis looks into how people construct their own understanding of the world around them through interacting with different incentives. For the purposes of this thesis, critical discourse analysis (CDA) will be especially useful. CDA examines text from different perspectives, starting with the linguistic means used and construction of the message itself, highlighting the crucial importance of context and the intertextual links and the impact of the message on society.[54] The discursive thematic interpretation approach in this thesis is inspired by CDA and aims to explain the message of each analyzed piece of data in its own context as well as a part of the larger thematic group.

2.2 Analyzing the visual

Images and photographs are a convenient way to make the audience feel a certain emotion. Different images evoke different emotions and the same picture can bring up different emotions with different audiences. What reaction the audience will have to a certain image depends on the audience. There are a very few examples of visual references that are understood the same universally. For example, probably the most hated symbol in the history of mankind, Nazi swastika, is exclusively tied to negative emotions throughout

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[51] Catherine Kohler Riessman, *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences* (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2008), 56–78; Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 79.

[52] Social Media Research Foundation, "NodeXL Pro," n.d., http://nodexl.codeplex.com/.

[53] Teun Van Dijk, "Discourse and Manipulation," *Discourse and Society* 17, no. 2 (2006): 373.

[54] Norman Fairclough, *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research* (London: Routledge, 2003), 36–39.

most of the contemporary world.[55] This example illustrates how powerful images can be: they are not simply images, they include discursive circumstances, context and memories attached to the visual references.[56]

Images used in propaganda or securitization cannot be analyzed out of context. Hansen suggests that a framework for studying visual securitization should be focused on four main components: "the visual itself, its immediacy and ambiguity, and the strategies of depiction it employs; and the constitution of the image itself".[57] What is the context? Who is the audience and what are the contemporary issues that concern the audience? How does the image relate to the audience? What does the image depict and how? What is the reaction the image is supposed to bring up in the audience? These are the questions that need to be answered when attempting empirical analysis of images.

2.3   Analytical tools used

Data collection for the purposes of the thesis was carried out by an analytic tool NodeXL Pro.[58] The tool is limited by inner mechanisms of Twitter, which only make it possible to collect data from a limited period of time (seven days). The data collected for the purposes of this thesis were therefore collected over the period of over a year (starting before the 2017 Dutch Parliamentary election and ending in April 2018). Data was collected throughout the year around various important events (9/11 anniversary, Winter Olympics, regional election, etc.). That way it is possible to acquire a more detailed picture of user interactions, activity and ultimately map out the spread of propaganda better. For example, from the collected data it is possible to see which users are actively supporting Wilders in spreading his message over this period. NodeXL Pro is also capable of revealing the possible formation of an echo chamber around Wilders.

NodeXL Pro is capable of collecting data based on a given feature (such as a hashtag) and organizing all the users in the network based on their mutual ties. The final structure of the network is then visualized in a graph form, from which additional data can be seen. For example, we can see the direction of the relationship or how many interactions which actor accumulated. Each user is represented by *node/vertex* (circle) and connected to other users

[55] W.J.T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005).
[56] Lene Hansen, "The Politics of Securitization and the Muhammad Cartoon Crisis: A Post-Structuralist Perspective," *Security Dialogue* 42, no. 4–5 (2011): 55, https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010611418999.
[57] Ibid., 69.
[58] Foundation, "NodeXL Pro."

with *edges/ties* that symbolize the nature and direction of the interaction between the users. In the graphs used in the analysis section, the important nodes were made larger in order to improve orientation within the graphs. The edges appear red and interacting nodes blue.

The graphs were made using two basic modelling algorithms: Harel-Koren multiscale algorithm and Fruchterman Reingold algorithm. In the Fruchterman Reingold algorithm we can locate the most important nodes in the center. Centrality of the node is given by the number of interactions with each node (more important nodes will be in the center, because other nodes tweet at it, mention it or retweet the node's statuses). In the Harel-Koren multiscale algorithm, we can see the formation of echo chambers. There will be a few influencers that we can locate based on the betweenness centrality: they are located outside of the echo chamber, basically between the nodes of the echo chamber and the rest of the network. These influencers are the source of information in the echo chamber and as such are of great importance to this thesis. For the purposes of the analysis, relevant nodes were chosen based on their relevant place in the topology of the network around Geert Wilders (the influencers of the echo chamber).

For analyzing longer periods of data, Social Bearing tool was used, however this tool is also limited by inner mechanisms of Twitter to the maximum of approximately 3200 tweets retrievable.[59] Google Reverse Image Search and TinEye were used to analyze some images used in the propaganda to find the original image and explain its original meaning.[60]

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[59] Social Bearing, "Social Bearing," accessed March 23, 2018, https://socialbearing.com/.
[60] Google, "Google Image Search," accessed May 5, 2018, https://images.google.com/; TinEye, "TinEye" (Toronto), accessed May 5, 2018, https://www.tineye.com.

3   Analyzing Geert Wilders' Twitter

The PVV leader knows the power of social media and uses it very often. Out of all the platforms available, a Wilders use Twitter the most frequently and has accumulated a decent number of followers on this network (948 thousand followers as of mid-February 2018, at the same time he only had 263 thousand people following his official Facebook page). In the period from May 2009 to February 2018, Wilders has shared over ten thousand tweets and re-tweets, many of which contain party propaganda including catchy anti-Islamic slogans. Surprisingly enough, Wilders only follows one account – the profile of his cats, Snoetje and Pluisje. This account was founded a week before the March 2017 Dutch elections, and has amassed ten thousand followers since.[61] Geert Wilders usually uses rather conservative hashtags to accompany his tweets, such as #stemPVV (vote PVV) or simply #PVV, but he does have some more intriguing hashtags under his belt too. One of the latest hashtags he has been engaging with is the #Kaag, referring to Sigrid Kaag's visit to Iran (Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation) or #WhiteWednesday(s) referring to the anti-hijab movement in Iran. His followers, however, do not refrain from using such radical hashtags as #WhiteGenocide.[62] Furthermore, his name itself also became a widely used hashtag (#GeertWilders or #Wilders), along with the names of other European politicians (such as #macron or #Orban).

3.1   World According to Geert

The Party for Freedom, like other populist parties, largely stands on its leader and Geert Wilders is certainly aware of this. He uses his Twitter page to promote himself and the party through various status updates and image uploads. It is worth noting that while Wilders doesn't use hashtags with all his posts about Islam and other topics, he makes sure to always use the hashtag #StemPVV (vote PVV) on updates promoting the party. The following infographic (hashtag cloud) retrieved in late March 2018 depicts the frequency with which Wilders used the #StemPVV hashtag in comparison to other hashtags (based on an analysis of his latest 3221 tweets from a period of 370 days: this period includes both the March 2017 House of Representatives election and the March 2018 regional election).

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[61] "Geert Wilders," Twitter.com, accessed February 20, 2018, https://twitter.com/geertwilderspvv?lang=cs;
"Geert Wilders," Facebook.com, accessed February 20, 2018, https://www.facebook.com/geertwilders/;
"Snoetje En Pluisje," Twitter.com, accessed February 20, 2018, https://twitter.com/wilderspoezen?lang=cs.
[62] @EliseNijmegen, "Status Update, 16.1.2018," Twitter.com, accessed February 12, 2018,
https://twitter.com/EliseNijmegen/status/953261670066991104 [In Dutch].

GRAPH 1: Hashtag cloud of Geert Wilders, March 2017-March 2018, based on an analysis of 3221 tweets from this period. Analysis performed on March 23rd, 2018.[63]

As we can see from the cloud, Wilders' most used hashtag was by far #StemPVV, encouraging people to support PVV in the 2017 and 2018 election. These efforts are also supported by the simple PVV hashtag. We can also see a certain amount of what seems to be self-promotion, as Geert Wilders seems to have been using the hashtags consisting of his name (#GeertWilders and #Wilders) rather frequently. This can be explained by Wilders' retweets of other users' updates that contained these hashtags. Another hashtag, #Halllistán refers to the newly published Hungarian translation of Wilders' book Marked for Death, which he has been actively promoting.[64] Another interesting hashtag aimed at the election is the #gr2018, which stands for *gemeenteraadsverkiezingen* 2018 (municipal elections 2018). Hashtag #Efteling clearly refers to the theme park located in Limburg, where Wilders took some of his fans in order to promote his party prior to the 2018 municipal election.[65]

Next important category of hashtags is, of course, the anti-Islamic group of hashtags including simple #StopIslam, #NoMoreIslam, #Islam, #Deislamize and its Dutch version #Deislamiseren, #Ramadan or #Rotterdam. While most of these hashtags are self-explanatory, the #Rotterdam deserves an explanation. Rotterdam's has a significant Muslim minority and a Muslim mayor Ahmed Aboutaleb. Wilders disapproves of the mayor greatly and even talks about him as "Salafist Aboutaleb".[66]

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[63] Bearing, "Social Bearing."
[64] Geert Wilders, "Status Update 15.11.2017," Twitter.com, accessed May 5, 2018, https://twitter.com/geertwilderspvv/status/930910245462986752?lang=cs [In Dutch].
[65] Geert Wilders, "Geert Wilders Neemt Fans Mee Naar de Efteling," De Limburger, accessed April 20, 2018, https://www.limburger.nl/cnt/dmf20180202_00055279/geert-wilders-neemt-fans-mee-naar-de-efteling [In Dutch].
[66] Wilders, "Status Update 20.1.2018."

The hashtags #Nexit, #Europe and #TEHA are connected to Wilders' criticism of the European Union. The last mentioned hashtag, #TEHA, refers to The European House – Ambrosetti and its forum that Wilders attended in September 2017. Wilders delivered a speech on the conference regarding his skepticism on the matter of European integration, calling it his "worst nightmare".[67] Other hashtags present in the cloud such as #HLN, #WNL refer to news outlets Wilders has been sharing with his followers.[68]

GRAPH 2: Tweets over time, March 2017-March 2018, based on an analysis of 3221 tweets by Geert Wilders within this period. Analysis performed on March 23rd, 2018.[69]

In Graph 2, the number of tweets over time is depicted. By confronting this graph with major events that occurred in the year from March 2017 until March 2018 it is possible to see several moments of high tweet density. These moments occur around the elections: in 2018, we see a buildup to the municipal election. In September 2017 a spike that can be attributed to the 9/11 anniversary is visible. At the beginning of 2018, Wilders started campaigning for PVV again, this time because of the municipal election that took place in March, as he was not only promoting his party, but also looking for new members for the party. In February 2018, Wilders also took to Twitter to talk about the Winter Olympic Games during which he shared tweets supporting the Dutch speed skaters and celebrated their victories. [70] He also used the Olympics to build his image as a patriot, using the analogy of rooting for one's own nation. Wilders argues that during the Olympics, no one

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[67] Geert Wilders, "The Europe We Want: Speech from the Ambrosetti Conference," Gates Online Institute, accessed May 5, 2018, https://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/10928/the-europe-we-want.
[68] "Het Laatste Nieuws," HLN.be, accessed May 5, 2018, https://www.hln.be; "WNL - De Omroep van Wij Nederland," WNL, accessed May 5, 2018, https://wnl.tv/.
[69] Bearing, "Social Bearing."
[70] Geert Wilders, "Status Update 16.2.2018," Twitter.com, accessed February 20, 2018, https://twitter.com/geertwilderspvv/status/964472896281247744 [In Dutch]; Geert Wilders, "Status Update 11.2.2018," Twitter.com, accessed February 20, 2018, https://twitter.com/geertwilderspvv/status/962612697262182400 [In Dutch].

is accused of racism when they root for their own team; his anti-Islam and anti-EU rhetoric is then not racist, because he simply "roots for his own team" all year long.[71]

3.1.1 Promoting PVV

Geert Wilders is the pillar on which the entire Party for Freedom stands, and as such he is the face of all the promotional materials. Furthermore, Geert Wilders seems to subscribe to the idea that an image is worth a thousand words, which could explain why the majority of Wilders' Twitter updates contains pictures, posters and photos. The promotional activities on Wilders' Twitter account are no different: they typically consist of the PVV leader's face and a campaign slogan, such as the one shown on the picture below.

IMAGE 1: Promotional poster shared by Geert Wilders on Twitter.[72]

This image is a textbook example of PVV's propaganda: it features Geert Wilders' face, his quote, an anti-Islam hashtag and a small party logo on the bottom. It clearly shows that the leader is PVV's most priced feature. The slogan even says "I fight for our freedom" – not we, the PVV, but I, Geert Wilders alone. The poster showcases all the signs of populism: charismatic leader of the Party, anti-Islamic message and an emphasis on "our" freedom. This image clearly points to the perceived differences between the Dutch majority and Muslims and draws from the populistic and propagandist distinction between "us" and "them" as explained in the theoretical part of this thesis. Besides, the word choice suggests that something is being taken away from the Dutch people (their freedom), which can incite fear. The slogan also uses the word "fight", which has two meanings: freedom is

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[71] Geert Wilders, "Thank God for the Olympics," Gates Online Institute, accessed February 19, 2018, https://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/11906/olympics-patriotism#.WoIV3SrBNS8.twitter.
[72] Geert Wilders, "Status Update 28.4.2018," Twitter.com, accessed April 29, 2018, https://twitter.com/geertwilderspvv/status/990213987903180801 [In Dutch].

in danger and needs to be regained by any means necessary and simultaneously, Geert Wilders is fighting for it in the name of the Dutch majority. The wording of the slogan therefore conjures not only fear of Islam, but also attempts to cement the position of Geert Wilders as the defender of the common Dutch people. Once again, such rhetoric is in accordance with the populist and propagandist way of thinking.

IMAGE 2: Promotional poster shared by Geert Wilders on Twitter.[73]

"Nederland is van ons" (Netherlands is ours) is a variation on one of the most prominent catchphrases of the Dutch parliamentary election of 2017, "Nederland weer van ons" (Netherlands will be ours).[74] Once again, we can observe the combination of the recognizable face of the party leader taking the spotlight along with a populist motto, while the party symbol sits in the bottom corner. Besides that, the message is once again suggesting that something is being taken from the Dutch people (this time it is the country), invoking fear of losing the Dutch culture and identity to an outside influence. The dichotomy of "us" and "them" is utilized again.

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[73] Geert Wilders, "Status Update 9.4.2018," Twitter.com, accessed April 15, 2018, https://twitter.com/geertwilderspvv/status/983369370129793024 [In Dutch].

[74] Partij Voor de Vrijheid, "Concept - Verkiezingsprogramma PVV 2017-2021," 2017, https://www.pvv.nl/images/Conceptverkiezingsprogrammma.pdf [In Dutch].

IMAGE 3: Promotional poster shared by Geert Wilders on Twitter.[75]

This image was shared by Geert Wilders on the day of the 2017 general election and was accompanied by the already mentioned hashtag #StemPVV (vote PVV). The image does not contain the face of Geert Wilders this time, however it incorporates the Dutch flag alongside another variation on the "Netherlands will be ours" slogan. This time the poster claims that "Nederland is ons land" (Netherlands is our country), once again building on the populistic dichotomy and at the same time trying to evoke patriotic thinking among the voters through the connection of the slogan and national flag of the Netherlands. The party logo is again very small, seemingly unimportant.

IMAGE 4: Pictures from the tour over the municipalities, shared by Geert Wilders on Twitter.[76]

[75] Geert Wilders, "Status Update 15.3.2017," Twitter.com, accessed March 17, 2017, https://twitter.com/geertwilderspvv/status/841871151139852291/photo/1 [In Dutch].
[76] Geert Wilders, "Status Update 19.3.2018," Twitter.com, accessed March 28, 2018, https://twitter.com/geertwilderspvv/status/975712603577245696 [In Dutch].

These pictures showing Geert Wilders talking to "common people" are without a doubt a way of Wilders painting himself in a very good light as the "politician that cares". This is of course entirely in line with the PVV's anti-establishment and anti-elite rhetoric. Wilders is establishing himself as a politician that is not above meeting people and talking to them about their hopes and fears. These particular pictures were taken in the Limburg region and their caption suggested that Limburg is the most beautiful province of the Netherlands.[77] Photo-ops such as this one are rather common for Wilders, as he had similar pictures taken all over the country during the 2018 pre-election campaign.[78] On his visits to the regions, Wilders also met with disabled and elderly people.[79] It is arguably one of the downsides of building a party on the leader: without the leader, the party is not recognizable enough, which is why Geert Wilders had to personally visit all of the thirty municipalities in which Party for Freedom had a candidate.

IMAGE 5: Promotional graphic shared by Geert Wilders on Twitter.[80]

All the visits Geert Wilders made to the municipalities paid off, when candidates of PVV got into all thirty of them. This update reflects on the election success was accompanied by an excited exclamation that "PVV is growing!"[81] The picture feels like a thank you to the

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[77] Limburg is known to be the rural region of the Netherlands and coincidentally, it is also where Geert Wilders was born.

[78] Geert Wilders, "Status Update 9.3.2018," Twitter.com, accessed March 15, 2018, https://twitter.com/geertwilderspvv/status/972093923912019969 [In Dutch].

[79] Geert Wilders, "Status Update 14.3.2018," Twitter.com, accessed March 15, 2018, https://twitter.com/geertwilderspvv/status/973926252405981184 [In Dutch]; Geert Wilders, "Status Update 2 14.3.2018," Twitter.com, accessed March 15, 2018, https://twitter.com/geertwilderspvv/status/973917300620431361 [In Dutch].

[80] Geert Wilders, "Status Update 23.3.2018," Twitter.com, accessed March 28, 2018, https://twitter.com/geertwilderspvv/status/977154207613677570 [In Dutch].
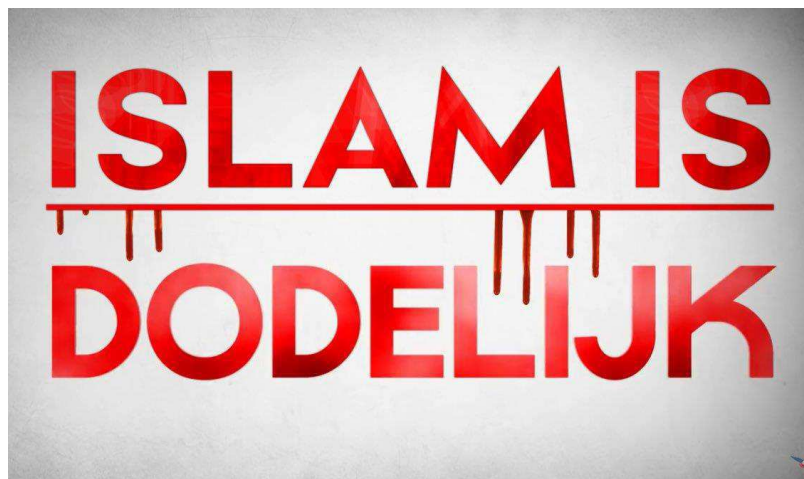
[81] Ibid.

voters and at the same time also like a promise that the party will grow further and continue to spread through the Netherlands' provinces.

The previous section offers five examples of how Geert Wilders promotes his party. It is rather obvious that most of the focus is on him personally, since other party members are not as well-known as he is. In the effort to get PVV elected into the municipalities, Wilders took it upon himself to make public appearances in all thirty of them to support the other PVV members. This is logical since Wilders even recruited new members for the party after years of keeping the party closed. The election success in the 2018 election suggests that Wilders' active involvement in the campaigning is a good working strategy. The dominant position of Geert Wilders within the party is also apparent from the usual composition of the promotional PVV materials that often contain Wilders' face and a quote or a slogan that frequently further highlights the importance of Geert Wilders to the party even further. A pattern in the slogans is apparent: anti-Islam quote that is meant to raise fear of the "others" while promoting Geert Wilders (and his party) as the answer to this fear. Last but not least, there is an underlying nationalist theme to the mottos.

3.1.2   Against Islam

A very large portion of Wilders' rhetoric is built around the notion that Islam is incompatible with the Dutch culture and Western civilization in general. In this section, I will examine the different ways that Geert Wilders shares his anti-Islam opinions on Twitter.

IMAGE 6: Promotional poster shared by Geert Wilders on Twitter.[82]

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[82] Geert Wilders, "Status Update 25.3.2018," Twitter.com, accessed April 1, 2018, https://twitter.com/geertwilderspvv/status/977812709667495936 [In Dutch].

The message of this image is very straightforward: Islam is deadly. Geert Wilders strongly believes that Islam is a violent religion and with this image, he attempts to convey exactly that message. The bloody appearance of the letters supports the message and helps to incite fear in the Dutch people who (according to Wilders) are already losing their freedom and their country on behalf of Muslim immigrants. Now, they should also fear for their lives, because Islam is violent and therefore it poses danger to the Dutch majority. This poster is also supposed to promote PVV, even though the PVV logo is barely visible.

IMAGE 7: Image shared by Geert Wilders on Twitter.[83]

One of the reasons Geert Wilders' criticism of Islam is so persistent and persuasive is that in 2010, Wilders was pronounced to be undesirable by an Australian imam due to Wilders' anti-Islam comments.[84] Since then, Geert Wilders has been using this platform to build his image of a protector of freedom, persecuted by Muslims who put fatwa on his head. He had since published a book (in English) called Marked for Death and often reminds the public of the fatwa through various means, including the image above.[85] The image itself calls for revenge against Islam critics including Salman Rushdie or Stéphane Charbonnier (who was killed in the 2015 Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris). Wilders' name is misspelled as "Girt", which does not seem to bother him in the slightest. The message is that when you criticize Islam (or as Wilders puts it, if you "speak truth about Islam"), your life is in danger and on top of that, "you will be taken to court, you will lose your personal freedom

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[83] Geert Wilders, "Status Update 27.3.2018," Twitter.com, accessed March 28, 2018, https://twitter.com/geertwilderspvv/status/978688523053289473 [In Dutch].
[84] Ben Berkowitz, "Muslim Cleric Calls for Beheading of Dutch Politician," Reuters, accessed May 2, 2018, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-dutch-wilders/muslim-cleric-calls-for-beheading-of-dutch-politician-idUSTRE68217920100903.
[85] Geert Wilders, *Marked for Death: Islam's War Against the West and Me* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 2012).

and the political elite will hate you".[86] This is exactly what Wilders has been building his image around and the constant reminders that an extremist called for his death during the events surrounding Theo van Gogh's death and then again in 2010, are extremely important for keeping the fear of Islam real for Wilders' supporters.

IMAGE 6: Promotional poster shared by Geert Wilders on Twitter.[87]

The image above is another PVV promotional poster using an anti-Islamic slogan and while the statement of the text itself is clear "Minder Islam, meer Nederland" (Less Islam, more Netherlands), the visual adaptation makes the final message very confusing. The picture is obviously trying to say that with PVV, there will be "more Netherlands" and "less Islam", however the positioning of the arrows tells a different story (more Netherlands and most likely also more Islam). This is an example of poor graphic design and it is interesting that Wilders shared such a flawed visualization of the PVV's rhetoric. However, the intent of the picture is clear despite the slightly amusing graphic error. There is a clear line between the cheerful and sunny Dutch town and the gloomy town with a mosque. Again, this is a statement of how different and incompatible Islam is with the Dutch culture.

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[86] Wilders, "Status Update 27.3.2018."
[87] Geert Wilders, "Status Update 4.3.2018," Twitter.com, accessed March 28, 2018, https://twitter.com/geertwilderspvv/status/970275241644740608 [In Dutch].

IMAGE 7: Photo shared by Geert Wilders on Twitter.[88]

This image shared with the caption "[The] Hague, Eurabia" shows a Muslim woman in The Hague. In the past, Wilders has repeatedly voiced his opinion that Muslim scarves and other clothing should be banned in the Netherlands. He has also repeatedly claimed that migration from Muslim countries is not in fact migration, but invasion.[89] This picture reminds his followers, that Muslims are already in the Netherlands and they are not assimilating into the society, since they keep their traditions (such as the way women dress). Pictures like this therefore remind Wilders' followers, that the "invasion" is happening and the Netherlands (and Europe) is turning into "Eurabia".

IMAGE 8: Images shared by Geert Wilders on Twitter.[90]

jskmrealx_jasintje_ Wollah
eertwilders jij stinkt kkr homo eh zebi kkr
emel als ik jou tegen komt dan hebt jij nog
en sec te leven wollah eh kkr zebi dikke kkr
emel wollah te ik sloop jou eh dikke jij mag
le kkr krijgen eh dikke vieze homo ik smek
ou naar de andere kant van de wereld eh
kr homo stinkerd ha jij bent gay haaaaaaa
ay wat heb jij tegen mij soort eh homo
ibey en heey vriend nog een keer stoer
oen ik sla jou

ser: https://www.instagram.com/xjskmrealx_jasintje

Wollah als ik daar was ik had op je gespuugd + poging gedaan vermoorden. Free Mohammed B.
ps://www.instagram.com/adilskoo.

We gaan aanslag plegen
ps://www.instagram.com/jw.015/

mors Ik ga m slachten
https://www.instagram.com/omedmors/

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[88] Geert Wilders, "Status Update 17.4.2018," Twitter.com, accessed April 20, 2018, https://twitter.com/geertwilderspvv/status/986304403329175552 [In Dutch].

[89] Yoruk Bahceli, "Wilders Tells Dutch Parliament Refugee Crisis is 'Islamic Invasion,'" Reuters, accessed May 2, 2018, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-europe-migrants-netherlands-idUSKCN0RA0WY20150910.

[90] Geert Wilders, "Status Update 19.2.2018," Twitter.com, accessed March 23, 2018, https://twitter.com/geertwilderspvv/status/965636532689350656 [In Dutch].

Geert Wilders also shares the threats and hate mail he receives on social media in the form of screenshots such as the ones above. Given how vocal Wilders in his criticism of Islam, he gets a significant number of messages like these. The content of these hate messages is shared by Wilders on regular basis, often captioned "today's mail" or "fan mail".[91] These messages usually contain very strong language and they support Wilders' narrative that Islam is a violent religion. Recently, Wilders has shared his intent to propose a new anti-Islam law to the Dutch Parliament soon, adding that this is necessary because "Islam is not a religion but a violent and totalitarian ideology".[92] This exact statement has also been recycled repeatedly by the Czech politician Tomio Okamura, who also claims that Wilders is his good friend.[93] Furthermore, Wilders supports the claims that there is a worldwide conspiracy against the critics of Islam. He supports this by the example of the English version of his anti-Islamic movie *Fitna* being blocked on YouTube. Wilders shared the news to his followers worldwide saying that they "are not allowed to see the truth about Islam".[94]

The previous section examined how Geert Wilders sees Islam and how he presents it to his followers. It is obvious that Wilders' stance is strongly against Islam and immigration from Muslim countries; however we can observe some other themes to the propaganda. Wilders claims that Islam is a violent religion (or an ideology) and as such is incompatible with the Dutch majority society. He uses different images to incite fear of Islam to incite fear in his followers, ranging from simple slogans written in bloody letters to screenshots of death threats and pictures of Muslim women in Dutch cities. The underlying theme here is not only that Islam is dangerous, but also that Wilders is the "saviour", only solution to the problem.

3.1.3 Good and Bad Politicians
Another important point on PVV's agenda is the European Union. Anti-EU rhetoric is rooted deep within the PVV and based on the most used hashtags shown at the beginning

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[91] For example: Geert Wilders, "Status Update 24.1.2018," Twitter.com, accessed February 13, 2018, https://twitter.com/geertwilderspvv/status/956250106621235200 [In Dutch]; Geert Wilders, "Status Update 3.2.2018," Twitter.com, accessed March 15, 2018, https://twitter.com/geertwilderspvv/status/959767400337084416 [In Dutch]; Geert Wilders, "Status Update 19.4.2018," Twitter.com, accessed April 20, 2018, https://twitter.com/geertwilderspvv/status/987012495742259200 [In Dutch].
[92] Geert Wilders, "Status Update 30.4.2018," Twitter.com, accessed May 1, 2018, https://twitter.com/geertwilderspvv/status/990931219159310336.
[93] Tomio Okamura, "Zákaz Islámské Ideologie," Tomio.cz, accessed May 6, 2018, http://www.tomio.cz/aktuality/zakaz-islamske-ideologie/ [In Czech].
[94] Geert Wilders, "Status Update 15.3.2018," Twitter.com, accessed March 20, 2018, https://twitter.com/geertwilderspvv/status/974376811009396736.

of this chapter, it is obvious that European Union is still a painful thorn in Wilders' side. Criticism of the Dutch government and political elites is linked to the European Union in PVV's discourse. This section will examine how Wilders talks about the EU and elites on Twitter.

IMAGE 9: Poster shared by Geert Wilders on Twitter.[95]

"The bottomless pit called EU", reads the text, "time for Nexit", it continues. Geert Wilders has said multiple times in the past that the Netherlands should leave the European Union, because of financial reasons. With this picture, Wilders reminds his followers what he has been saying for a long time now: Dutch taxpayers' money is sent to Eastern or South Europe and spent there (which is of no benefit to the Dutch people). Calling the EU a bottom-less pit is a typical part of PVV's populist discourse. Calling for Nexit (Dutch exit of the EU) is obviously inspired by Brexit and according to Wilders it would be a great way to save money for the Netherlands. According to Geert Wilders, the EU is not only an economic burden for the Netherlands; it also threatens the security of the country. Wilders blames the open borders of letting in Muslim immigrants, who according to Wilders came to take over the Netherlands (as discussed above). Therefore, perhaps inspired by the

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[95] Geert Wilders, "Status Update 21.2.2018," Twitter.com, accessed March 31, 2018, https://twitter.com/geertwilderspvv/status/966256070409752576 [In Dutch].

campaign slogans of the current U.S. President Donald Trump, Wilders proclaims that "The Netherlands must preserve its own identity, (…) Netherlands first".[96]

Wilders uses his position of an opposition party leader to blame the government for causing all the problems he sees as important. The government is responsible for the Netherlands remaining a part of the European Union and being a part of the Schengen area, which allows immigrants (or as Wilders calls them "criminal asylum seekers") to enter the country. The government is also responsible for the continuing freedom of religion in the Netherlands, which is why there are mosques in the country. The way Wilders portrays both Dutch and European political elite makes is that they are betraying the citizens and supporting the immigration over the Dutch majority.[97] In the past few months, Wilders takes to social media to criticize his colleagues from the House of Representatives. For example, he criticized Alexander Pechtold for irregularities regarding the politician's finances (this particular matter even got its own hashtag, #Pechtoldgate).[98] He has also accused Prime Minister Rutte of incompetence.[99] However, there are still politicians that are up to Wilders' standards: usually his fellow populist far-right colleagues from across Europe, but he does also find the current Russian president Vladimir Putin relatable, as discussed further in this section.

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[96] Geert Wilders, "Status Update 8.2.2018," Twitter.com, accessed February 20, 2018, https://twitter.com/geertwilderspvv/status/961623016089235456 [In Dutch].
[97] Geert Wilders, "Status Update 5.5.2018," Twitter.com, accessed May 7, 2018, https://twitter.com/geertwilderspvv/status/993002828665942016 [In Dutch].
[98] Geert Wilders, "Status Update 19.1.2018," Twitter.com, accessed February 20, 2018, https://twitter.com/geertwilderspvv/status/954268963202007040 [In Dutch].
[99] Geert Wilders, "Status Update 24.4.2018," Twitter.com, accessed May 5, 2018, https://twitter.com/geertwilderspvv/status/989016675302461440 [In Dutch].

IMAGE 10: Photo shared by Geert Wilders on Twitter.[100]

One example of a politician Geert Wilders can agree with is the Hungarian far-right politician Viktor Orbán. The caption of the photo reads: "Excellent meeting in Budapest with Prime Minister Orbán! Leadership still exists!"[101] The Hungarian PM is known for his anti-immigration stance and populist style, very alike that of Geert Wilders. It is possible that Wilders sees Orbán as inspiration in the terms of goals; after all, Wilders made it clear before that his ultimate goal in politics is becoming the new Dutch Prime Minister.[102] Sharing a picture of a foreign PM who is in many aspects very similar to Wilders could therefore also be a way of saying that Wilders could provide this sort of leadership to the Netherlands in the future. Other than his visit to Hungary, Wilders travels to meet other far-right politicians to discuss the future of their respective countries within the European Union.[103] It is also worth noting, that PVV's rhetoric was formerly also against Middle and Eastern Europeans and their migration into the Netherlands.[104] In the past few years, however, the party focuses solely on immigration from Muslim countries in its program.

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[100] Geert Wilders, "Status Update 29.1.2018," Twitter.com, accessed February 20, 2018, https://twitter.com/geertwilderspvv/status/957945476548046849.

[101] Ibid.

[102] "Wilders Wil Premier worden: 'Schoon Schip Maken,'" RTL Nieuws, accessed April 30, 2018, https://www.rtlnieuws.nl/nederland/politiek/wilders-wil-premier-worden-schoon-schip-maken [In Dutch].

[103] Geert Wilders, "Status Update 19.4.2018," Twitter.com, accessed April 28, 2018, https://twitter.com/geertwilderspvv/status/987020083582119938 [In Dutch].

[104] "40.000 Klachten Bij PVV-Meldpunt over Polen," de Volkskrant, accessed May 7, 2018, https://beta.volkskrant.nl/nieuws-achtergrond/40-000-klachten-bij-pvv-meldpunt-over-polen~be816f6c/ [In Dutch].

IMAGE 11: Image shared by Geert Wilders on Twitter.[105]

Wilders also paid visit to Russia, where he discussed his concerns about the EU with Russian officials.[106] These talks have triggered criticism from all sides for undermining the official position of the Dutch government and the EU on the annexation of the Crimean peninsula by the Russians and the events around the shot-down flight MH17, in which Russia is believed to have played a role. Wilders' visit to Russia (specifically his visit to the Russian parliament and meetings with Russian officials) became public thanks to tweets published by Wilders himself, including the one above. This image was very controversial, since Wilders proclaimed Dutch-Russian friendship, while the official stance of the Dutch government on Russia is different for obvious reasons. Wilders was then forced to defend himself in the Dutch parliament.[107] Furthermore, the families of the MH17 flight victims have demanded a public apology from the PVV leader.[108]

This section examined the way Geert Wilders views and presents the elites of both the European Union and his own country. The content he shares on his Twitter profile is very critical of the European Union due to various reasons including helping Greece and other South European countries out of the financial crisis or permitting asylum seekers to come to Europe. The Dutch government receives criticism over various issues, including friendly policy towards the EU and immigration or various personal affairs and qualities of

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[105] Geert Wilders, "Status Update 27.2.2018," Twitter.com, accessed March 6, 2018, https://twitter.com/geertwilderspvv/status/968508646593388544 [In Dutch].
[106] Geert Wilders, "Status Update 1.4.2018," Twitter.com, accessed April 3, 2018, https://twitter.com/geertwilderspvv/status/980308467645845504; Wilders, "Status Update 27.2.2018" [In Dutch].
[107] "PVV-Leider Wilders Uitgenodigd Door Het Russische Parlement," NOS, accessed May 1, 2018, https://nos.nl/artikel/2217147-pvv-leider-wilders-uitgenodigd-door-het-russische-parlement.html [In Dutch].
[108] Bas Paternotte, "Nabestaanden MH17-Aanslag Willen Excuses van Geert Wilders," The Post Online, accessed May 3, 2018, http://politiek.tpo.nl/2018/02/28/nabestaanden-mh17-aanslag-willen-excuses-geert-wilders/ [In Dutch].

different members of the governmental coalition. Wilders clearly wants to use this narrative of incompetent leaders who have no idea what they are doing to gain support for his shot at leadership.

3.1.4   World According to Geert: A Summary

The previous section offers an overview of how Geert Wilders presents his version of reality to his followers. In this narrative, everything is closely tied to Islam and immigration. Even his criticism of the government and European Union is focused on Islam, as he claims that the EU and the Dutch elites let Muslim immigrants come to the Netherlands to endanger the Dutch society. Islam is, from Wilders' perspective, an evil and violent ideology, that is not compatible with the Western civilization. Wilders supports this vision by sharing different images or status updates describing how violent Islam is, including death threats and hate mail he receives from different individuals.

It is also noteworthy that Wilders, being the best known PVV politician, has been very busy during the examined period. Leaving the 2017 Parliamentary election aside, Wilders decided to expand PVV from the former two members to thirty-two, in order for the party to be able to compete in more municipalities in the 2018 election. Since Wilders has always been the main pillar of his party, he needed to promote it in person in all the municipalities in question. These trips around the Netherlands have given him an opportunity to share promotional pictures from around the country and at the same time spread his narrative in person. He has also shared his vision of what "real leadership" looks like: it looks like Orbán's Hungary or Putin's Russia.

Wilders paints a grim image of both the Netherlands and European Union as overrun by dangerous Muslim immigrants and governed by incompetent bureaucrats and elites that do not care about the citizens' wellbeing. At the same time, Wilders reminds his followers that he spent the last quarter of a century speaking against Islam, European integration and the top politicians. He offers himself as an alternative to the traditional parties and offers easy solutions to the fear of otherness he stirs up in his followers. One of these solutions to the fear of immigration can be all-covering ban of Islam Wilders is planning to propose in the Dutch Parliament. The content Wilders shares presents a manipulated version of reality focused on Islam as the main danger to the Dutch society's culture, identity and last but not least, its bare survival.

Wilders' updates on Twitter may seem quite harmless up to this point. However, his message takes on a much more aggressive tone among his followers, who take this propaganda and share it further, even more passionately than Geert Wilders. This phenomenon will be further examined in the following sections of the thesis.

3.2   Important Hashtags

Based on the data of Graph 1 (see page 18), it is possible to identify the most frequently used hashtags of the period from March 2017 to March 2018. The overall themes have been identified by the previous analysis and some hashtags (e.g. #StemPVV or #gr2018) have been explored within the previous section. However, some of them require more detailed analysis and some other interesting hashtags did not make the graph, which leads us to the content of this section. Three separate hashtags will be discussed, starting with the very present #StopIslam, followed by #knettergek and last but not least, #Kaag. The first two hashtags were chosen based on their prominent position within the hashtag cloud and their different themes (#StopIslam is connected to anti-Islamic rhetoric and #knettergek is especially connected to criticism of government and the EU). The last hashtag, #Kaag, is important because of its theme (connection between criticism of Islam and the elites) and because it also reacts to an event that took place in February 2018.
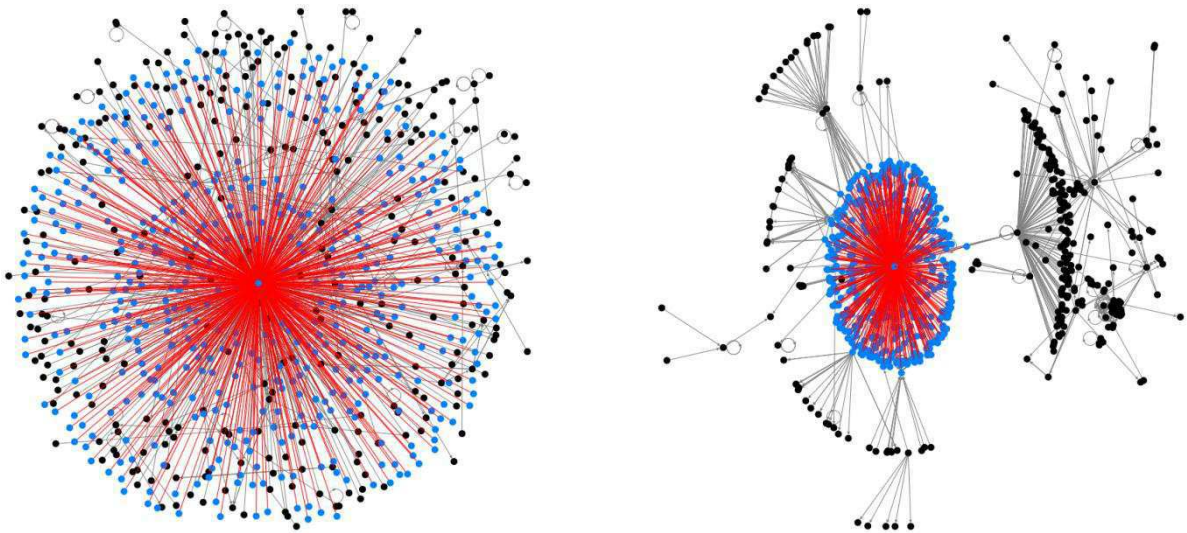
3.2.1   #StopIslam

Based on the graph presented earlier in the thesis, this is one of the most popular hashtags in Geert Wilders' tweets in the examined period from March 2017 to March 2018. Thanks to the wording of the hashtag, it is not solely confined to the Netherlands, but is rather international. We can therefore see Geert Wilders and his supporters on the same graph as the current U.S. President Donald Trump. The meaning of the hashtag is self-explanatory and is used by people who subscribe to the idea of Islam presented by the populist far-right. On the day the analysis was performed (30th April 2018), NodeXL retrieved 934 unique nodes interacting with the hashtag; 546 out of that interacting with Geert Wilders.

Consequently, 30th April was also the day Geert Wilders made his intent to ban Islam public, as discussed earlier in this thesis already. This move gained him a large momentum, when people retweeted his update and made him into the most important node

of this international hashtag's topology. His followers praised him for the move, some even calling him "the best European leader".[109]
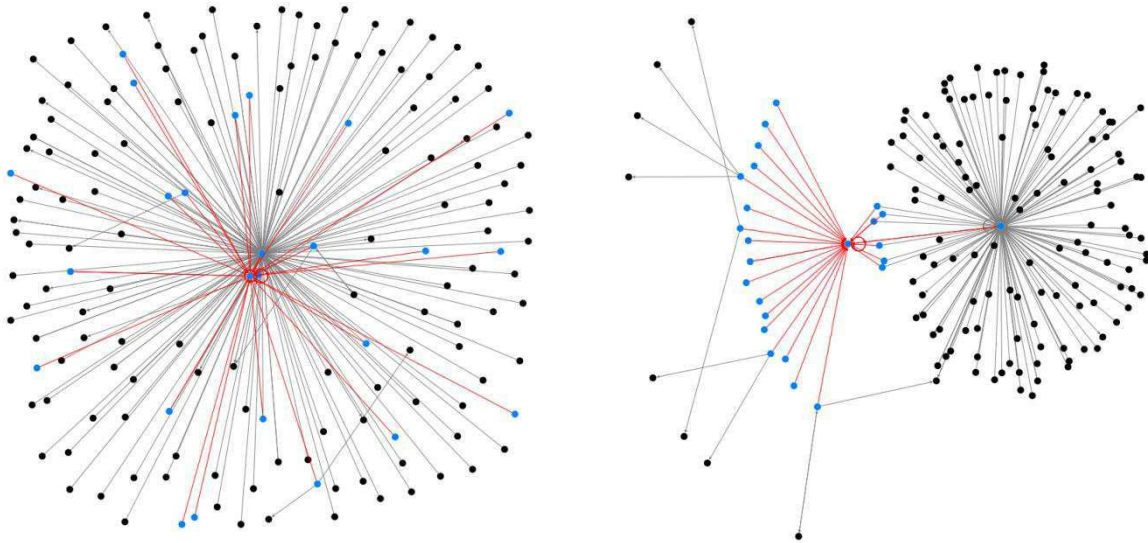
GRAPH 3: Analysis of the #StopIslam performed on April 30th 2018 in NodeXL, Fruchteman-Reingold algorithm (left) and Harel-Koren Fast Multiscale algorithm (right).

Wilders' position in this visualization shows how big the impact of his announcement was. However, since the #StopIslam is one of the most used hashtags of Geert Wilders, I have performed data collection before as well. The following graphs show the same hashtag, only ten days earlier. This visualization only contains 150 unique nodes, out of which 26 belong to Wilders' group. In the Harel-Koren algorithm it is possible to observe the formation of Wilders' small private echo chamber.

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[109] @RealYogeshDhami, "Response to Geert Wilders, 30.4.2018," Twitter.com, accessed April 30, 2018, https://twitter.com/RealYogeshDhami/status/990923937277202432.

GRAPH 4: Analysis of the #StopIslam performed on April 20th 2018 in NodeXL, Fruchteman-Reingold (left) algorithm and Harel-Koren Fast Multiscale algorithm (right).

The prevalent discourse does not change much over the ten days; the only difference is the easier observability of an echo chamber's presence. The content shared within it remains highly repetitive and reflects the message already discussed in the section dedicated to the analysis of Geert Wilders' Twitter page. The difference between the content shared by Geert Wilders and that shared by his followers is in the level of sophistication of the anti-Islam statements. While Wilders argues that Muslims are a danger to the Dutch culture, his followers simply call Muslims "idiots".[110]
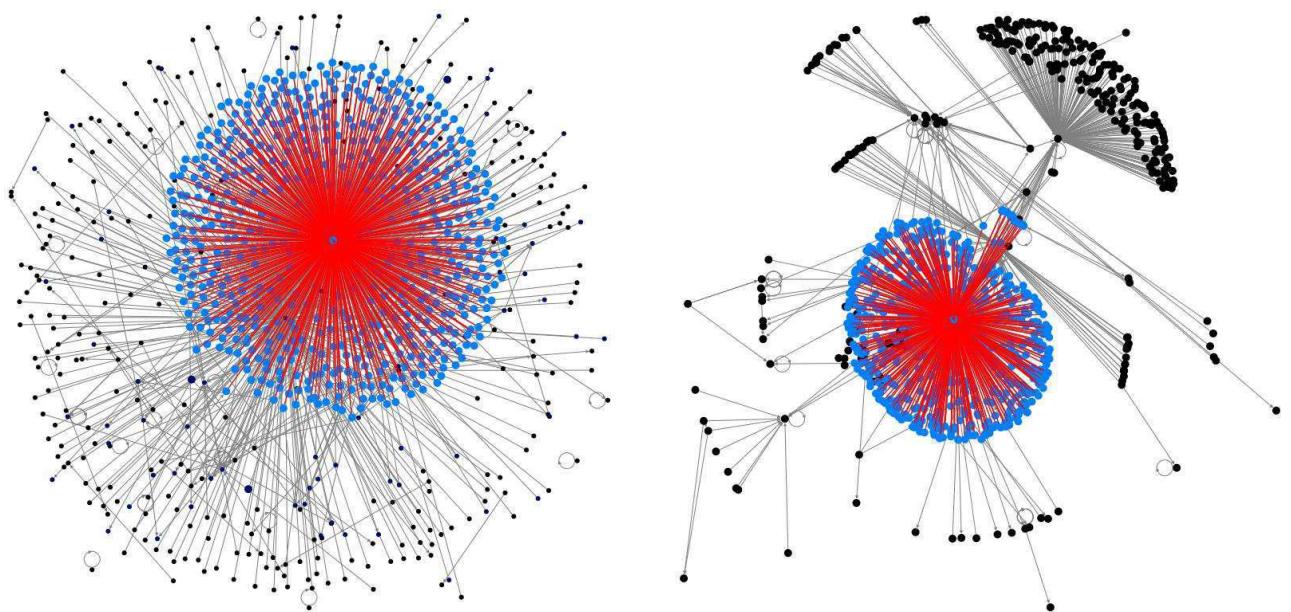
3.2.2 #Knettergek

The word *knettergek* (Dutch for "absolutely crazy") is one of Wilders' favorite comebacks to anything that he doesn't agree with. The word itself gets used by Wilders as a hashtag from time to time, but does not get used massively by his followers like in the case of #StopIslam and #Kaag (which will be examined later in this section). That doesn't mean that there is nothing interesting associated with the hashtag. Most recently Wilders used it to criticize the Dutch Minister of Justice Ferd Grapperhaus for meeting an Imam. Wilders tweeted out that the Minister is absolutely crazy ("*knettergek*") and totally out of his mind

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[110] @BarthCarlo, "Status Update, 19.4.2018," Twitter.com, accessed April 20, 2018, https://twitter.com/BarthCarlo/status/98070794642657286 [In Dutch].

("*total de weg kwijt*") for meeting with someone that promotes Islam.[111] The graph below depicts the #Knettergek network in the week leading up to April 1st 2018. The highlighted group of nodes connected to Geert Wilders contains 634 unique nodes and forms a directed subgraph, as all updates in the group are aimed at Geert Wilders. The entire graph (including nodes not in Wilders' group) contains 2068 unique nodes.

GRAPH 5: Analysis of the #knettergek performed on April 1st 2018 in NodeXL, Fruchteman-Reingold algorithm (left) and Harel-Koren Fast Multiscale algorithm (right).

The hashtag #knettergek may have been used by Wilders to criticize a concrete step of the government in this instance and share his typical anti-Islam propaganda; his followers however seem to care mostly about the anti-Muslim part. The dataset collected by NodeXL is filled with anti-immigration propaganda much more radical than the original tweet shared by Geert Wilders. A large number of people also decided to simply retweet Wilders' original tweet, which explains his position in the graphs.

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[111] Geert Wilders, "Status Update 27.3.2018," Twitter.com, accessed April 1, 2018, https://twitter.com/geertwilderspvv/status/978884543355768832 [In Dutch].

IMAGE 12: Less, less, less! Image shared by @Blankedixie on Twitter, acquired through NodeXL analysis.[112]

One of the most popular responses to Wilders' status included a visual nod to a 2014 speech, in which Wilders asked a crowd of PVV supporters if they want more or less Moroccans in the Netherlands. The crowd went on to chant "less, less" (*"minder, minder"* in Dutch), to which Wilders replied that he will make it so. The Hague court later decided that Wilders is guilty of hate speech but left the decision on a potential punishment to a higher court. Wilders immediately proclaimed the verdict to be absolutely crazy, using his catchphrase term *knettergek*.[113] The above picture is a nod to the said speech and the promise of less Moroccans in the Netherlands. Furthermore, the colors clearly signify the national flag of the Netherlands, creating a nationalist feel to the "minder, minder" movement and giving Geert Wilders a patriotic halo.

What is puzzling is that even despite all the legal drama, Wilders can't seem to stay away from the "minder, minder" speech that caused the scandal. He even shared a very similar image on his page in February, encouraging people to vote PVV in order to have less Moroccans.[114]

3.2.3   #Kaag
An official picture taken during the February 21st, 2018 meeting of the Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs and Iranian President Hassan Rouhani was published and caused public

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[112] [In Dutch] @Blankedixie, "Answer to Geert Wilders 28.3.2018," Twitter.com, accessed April 1, 2018, https://twitter.com/Blankedixie/status/978908927441227776.

[113] Marcel Haenen, "Wilders Schuldig Aan Aanzetten Tot Discriminatie, Geen Straf," NRC.nl, accessed April 1, 2018, https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2016/12/09/volg-hier-het-vonnis-in-minder-minder-zaak-tegen-wilders-a1535780 [In Dutch]; "Wilders Schuldig Zonder Straf," De Telegraaf, accessed April 1, 2018, https://www.telegraaf.nl/nieuws/18359/wilders-schuldig-zonder-straf [In Dutch].

[114] Geert Wilders, "Status Update 12.2.2018," Twitter.com, accessed February 20, 2018, https://twitter.com/geertwilderspvv/status/984507094140366848 [In Dutch].

uproar over the scarf covering the Dutch Minister's hair. Sigrid Kaag, in an apparent attempt to respect the Iranian culture, put a light scarf over her hair when meeting Rouhani to discuss Iranian nuclear program and the current situation in the Middle East.[115] In the meantime, Minister Kaag is defending herself by saying that she was negotiating on very difficult topics such as human rights, and the cultural differences represented by a scarf should not overshadow the overall goal of the talks.[116] Geert Wilders then was one of the first to take the fight to Twitter to say that Minister Kaag's behavior is "betrayal of all women, that are trying to keep the scarf off their heads", using the hashtag #Kaag.[117] The hashtag has gained quite a momentum among Wilders' followers, who use it to criticize the Minister's behavior, saying for example that if she had gone to Nazi Germany, she would even participate in the Nazi greeting ritual.[118] The data used for the analysis of the hashtag #Kaag were collected four days after the initial tweet of Geert Wilders. A total number of 2005 unique users have used the hashtag within this period, creating over 2600 interactions. Out of this number, 543 users were solely confined to the echo chamber around Geert Wilders. Another important node in this graph represents Fons Lambie, an RTL News journalist, whose echo chamber slightly outnumbers those of Geert Wilders.
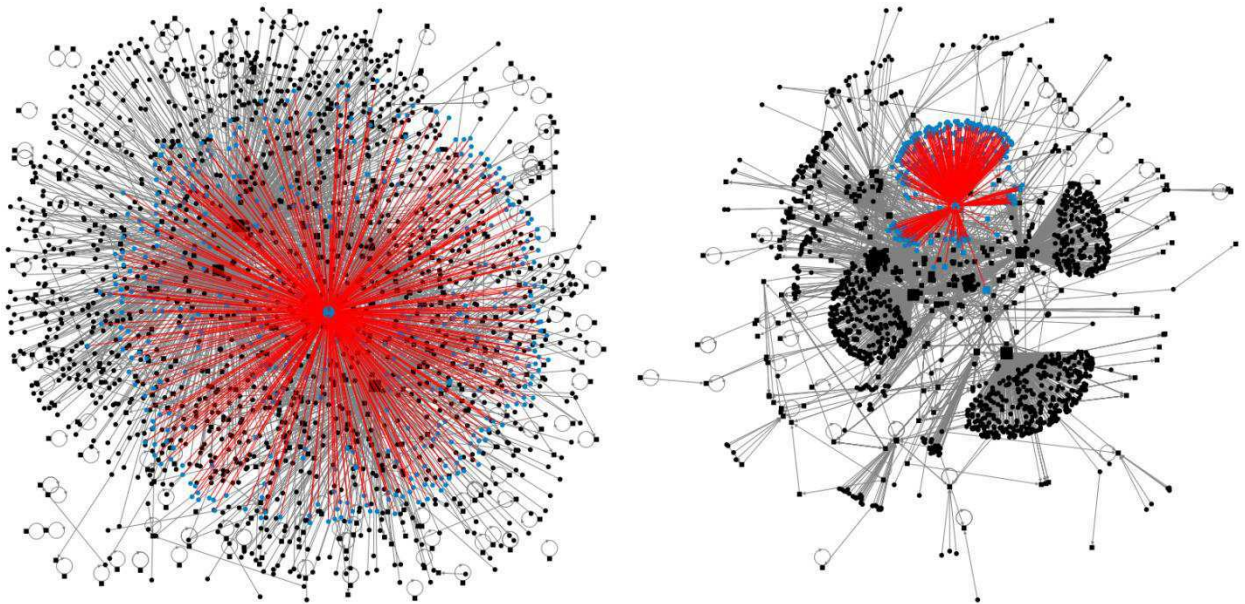
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[115] "Minister Kaag Draagt Hoofddoek in Iran, Spreekt van 'Verraad,'" RTL Nieuws, accessed February 25, 2018, https://www.rtlnieuws.nl/buitenland/minister-kaag-draagt-hoofddoek-in-iran-pvv-spreekt-van-verraad [In Dutch].
[116] "Kaag: 'Hoofddoek Was Zakelijke Afweging,'" De Telegraaf, accessed February 25, 2018, https://www.telegraaf.nl/nieuws/1706157/kaag-hoofddoek-was-zakelijke-afweging [In Dutch].
[117] Geert Wilders, "Status Update 21.2.2018," Twitter.com, accessed February 25, 2018, https://twitter.com/geertwilderspvv/status/966436690721214464 [In Dutch].
[118] @JacquesBrisant, "Status Update, 22.2.2018," Twitter.com, accessed February 26, 2018, https://twitter.com/JacquesBrisant/status/966644268797497344 [In Dutch].

GRAPH 6: Graph showing the scale of #Kaag and the central position of Geert Wilders in the Fruchterman Reingold algorithm (left) and his influential position in the Harel-Koren fast multiscale algorithm.[119]

The central position of Wilders in the Fruchterman Reingold visualization is caused by the fact that people tweet at him, retweet his initial tweet and/or comment on it, making Wilders one of the most central and important) nodes in the graph. This Harel-Koren visualization allows us to see Wilders' betweenness centrality and the echo chamber that has formed around him.

The discourse among Wilders' followers was unsurprisingly insulting towards Minister Kaag, calling her a coward or pro-Islamic traitor.

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[119] NodeXL analysis of Twitter, #Kaag, 25. 2. 2018.

IMAGE 13. First, a wildly shared side by side comparison of Sigrid Kaag and Melania Trump's clothing style in presence of leaders of Muslim countries.[120] Second the full image of US President Donald Trump and his wife on a state visit to Saudi Arabia.[121]

Images that were meant to debunk the defense that Sigrid Kaag launched were circulated. The most popular comeback to Kaag's claims that she was merely abiding local traditions were challenged by claims that Melania Trump did not undertake such steps as covering their hair, as they are not afraid of Islam. After reverse searching the picture in question, it is obvious that the picture of Melania Trump was originally taken during a state visit to Saudi Arabia in 2017. While Muslim women are required to wear a scarf in Saudi Arabia, foreign women only need to wear an *abaya* (basically a long dress covering their legs).[122] Therefore, Melania Trump did not break any taboo by not wearing a scarf on her visit and the comparison of her evening outfit to Kaag's clothes from Iran is ultimately just comparing apples to oranges. It is, however, a fine example of how propagandist content gets shared without previous reflection among social media users.

3.2.4   Important Hashtags: A Summary
The previous section provides analysis of three different hashtags used by Geert Wilders and his followers. Two hashtags were chosen to represent two different themes from the hashtag cloud of Geert Wilders. The third hashtag was chosen based on an important event

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[120] @frenkie4allll, "Status Update 22.2.2018," Twitter.com, accessed February 25, 2018, https://twitter.com/frenkie4allll/status/966770095904247810 [In Dutch].
[121] President Trump, "In Pictures: President Trump Travels to the Middle East and Europe," Share America, accessed April 15, 2018, Group of people walking down red carpet (White House/Shealah Craighead)%0Ahttps://share.america.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/P20170520SC-1659.jpg.
[122] "Saudi Arabia's Dress Code for Women," The Economist, accessed April 15, 2018, https://www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2015/01/economist-explains-20.

that caught the eye of Geert Wilders. The analysis has proved that there echo chambers do form around Geert Wilders and they are being filled with populist propaganda that people are responsive to. As demonstrated on the example of #StopIslam, the hashtag is international, but Geert Wilders knows how to attract enough attention to become relevant in the topology. The hashtag #knettergek has proved that Wilders' followers are willing to participate in any activity that even slightly criticizes Islam or the government. And finally #Kaag has shown that the propaganda is shared impulsively and without much deliberation, perhaps because the entire matter is also connected to Islam. Overall, these examples prove that Geert Wilders knows his followers and knows how to make them interested in his content.

3.3 Inside the Echo Chamber

This section will focus on some of the most active people in Wilders' network. These people share the PVV propaganda with great conviction and frequency and therefore occupy important places in the overall topology. They are vital parts of the echo chamber around Geert Wilders and at the same time serve as influencers to other people around them through dissemination of the populist propaganda. Two separate accounts will be examined in this section. Each of these accounts appears repeatedly in the analysis of Geert Wilders' surroundings on Twitter and as already mentioned they all occupy important places in the topology.

3.3.1 @LoveIsrael8

Based on the analysis of #Kaag, it was possible to select an important node from the topology for further analysis: one of the most active followers of Geert Wilders (in terms of retweets of Wilders' updates) is a user with the @LoveIsrael8 handle, who claims to be (much like Wilders himself) „ex-VVD".[123] He supports PVV and Geert Wilders, because he believes that they can help restore democracy in Europe. This user has joined Twitter in June 2014 and has since shared almost eighteen thousand tweets and re-tweets, meaning he is way more active than Geert Wilders himself.[124] He believes the elites are disengaged from the people and don't care about the hardworking middle class.[125]

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[123] "Twitter User Profile @LoveIsrael8," Twitter.com, accessed April 15, 2018, https://twitter.com/loveisrael8.
[124] Ibid.
[125] @LoveIsrael8, "Retweet, 6.5.2018," Twitter.com, accessed May 7, 2018, https://twitter.com/VolkRegeert/status/993228340168445952 [In Dutch].

IMAGE 14: Image retweeted by @LoveIsrael8, May 3rd 2018.[126]

The user @LoveIsrael8 takes on a strong anti-immigration stance with his retweets of content showing the "invasion" of Muslims into Western Europe. One example of such content can be this image contrasting Germany and Poland. The message of this image is that in Germany, Germans are being replaced by Turkish people. Tin Eye reverse search analysis revealed that the image presented as "present day Germany" is much older and most likely originates from 2008 and depicts Turkish flags being displayed in support of the Turkish football team at EURO 2008.[127] While there is without a doubt a large Turkish minority in Germany, this image does not carry any negative conotations. To paraphrase Geert Wilders, supporting one's nation is natural and it definitely does not mean the end of the world.[128]

This user is very active in terms of retweeting content shared by Geert Wilders, but also various untrustworthy media outlets, such as Fox News, OnlineMagazine or Voice of Europe (coincidentally, Voice of Europe was also the source of the previous image).[129] Furthermore, @LoveIsrael8 shares plenty of pro-Israeli sources including a Fox News

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[126] @V_of_Europe, "Status Update 3.5.2018," Twitter.com, accessed May 5, 2018, https://twitter.com/V_of_Europe/status/992123769975132162.

[127] "Du Zeigst Flagge," Designtagebuch, accessed May 5, 2018, https://www.designtagebuch.de/du-zeigst-flagge/comment-page-1/ [In German].

[128] Wilders, "Thank God for the Olympics."

[129] Examples of shared content: @LoveIsrael8, "Status Update, 1.5.2018," Twitter.com, accessed May 5, 2018, https://twitter.com/LoveIsrael8/status/991530882505826305; @OnlineMagazin, "Status Update 27.4.2018," Twitter.com, accessed May 5, 2018, https://twitter.com/OnlineMagazin/status/989872214211289088.

segment on the recent presentation of the Israeli PM Netanyahu concerning the Iranian nuclear deal.[130]

3.3.2   @EliseNijmegen

Another important node in Wilders' proximity is the user with @EliseNijmegen handle. This user has joined Twitter in May 2013 and has since shared over fourteen thousand tweets and re-tweets (making her also more active than Geert Wilders). The account is decorated with a Geert Wilders banner and a picture encouraging people to vote PVV. The owner of this account also promotes a book about "the truth" about what is happening to the Netherlands in relation to immigration.[131] This account has already been mentioned once in this thesis, in connection to the radical hashtag #WhiteGenocide.

IMAGE 14: Image shared by @EliseNijmegen on Twitter.[132]

This image, blaming all the Parliamentary parties with the exception of PVV of being "blind to the problem of Islam" is very similar to the propaganda shared by Geert Wilders: the political elites of the Netherlands are too friendly to Muslims, do not reject immigrants and therefore ignore the problem of Islam, which bothers PVV voters. Once again, the stance towards immigration and Islam seems to be the grounds for criticism of the government (just like shown in the case of Geert Wilders himself).

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[130] @FoxNews, "Status Update, 30.4.2018," Twitter.com, accessed May 5, 2018, https://twitter.com/FoxNews/status/991142121221607425.

[131] "Twitter User Profile @EliseNijmegen," Twitter.com, accessed April 15, 2018, https://twitter.com/EliseNijmegen.

[132] @EliseNijmegen, "Status Update 27.4.2018," Twitter.com, accessed May 1, 2018, https://twitter.com/EliseNijmegen/status/989956944499822597 [In Dutch].

IMAGE 15: Image shared by @EliseNijmegen on Twitter.[133]

This update opposes the idea of integration and multiculturalism by once again stipulating that migrants are not compatible with the majority society of Europe. This is done by contrasting the "optimistic" vision of diversity and images of various riots presented as the "real" version of diversity. The next image takes the narrative even further.

IMAGE 16: Image shared by @EliseNijmegen on Twitter.[134]

The image suggests that political correctness is costing the Netherlands their culture due to perceived racism of some Dutch traditions and traditional food. The image reads: "Hands off of Black Piet, white vla, negro kisses, gypsy sauce, Jewish cookies and Moors' cookies.

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[133] @EliseNijmegen, "Status Update 10.4.2018," Twitter.com, accessed May 5, 2018, https://twitter.com/EliseNijmegen/status/983779333331439616 [In Dutch].
[134] @EliseNijmegen, "Status Update, 16.1.2018."

Go do something more important."[135] The update is also accompanied by the hashtags #AntiRutte3, #PVV, #StandUpForEurope and the already mentioned #WhiteGenocide. The tweet was also directed at Geert Wilders and his party colleagues Fleur Agema and Martin Bosma. Given the position of this user in the echo chamber around Geert Wilders, we can observe the merger of all the ideas promoted by Geert Wilders (especially the overt political correctness and blatant incompetence of the European elites combined with the discourse of an Islamic invasion into Europe) and the fear evoked by these ideas. The Dutch culture (represented here by controversially named cookies and an arguably racist Christmas tradition) is endangered and parts of it could be lost according to this narrative, leading to the use of the highly radical hashtag #WhiteGenocide. White genocide is a conspiracy theory based on the idea that immigration will ultimately end in the "white" people's extinction.[136] The fact that such radical pro-PVV and anti-Muslim, anti-establishment propaganda gets shared inside of the Wilders echo chamber is definitely worrying. It does however serve as a proof that Wilders' propaganda works.

3.3.3 Inside the Echo Chamber: A Summary

The previous section has offered two detailed examples of what kind of discourse prevails among the Twitter followers of Geert Wilders. Two may seem like a very low number; however after analyzing dozens of accounts of Wilders' followers, I have recognized certain patterns in the content and themes they explore. It became clear that there is a prevailing discourse among the followers of Geert Wilders which is strictly in line with the propaganda Wilders himself shares and which has already been explored earlier in the thesis. Therefore, offering a vast analysis consisting of more of the same discourse did not seem relevant. Nevertheless, the two accounts whose analysis this thesis offers occupy important roles in the topology of the Wilders echo chamber. @LoveIsrael8 retweets basically everything Wilders shares and engages in discussions about the content with other users, making his account visible in all the analyzed hashtags. @EliseNijmegen does

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[135] Black Piet (*Zwarte Piet*) is the helper of St. Nicholas according to a Dutch Christmas tradition. The issue lies in the fact that Black Piet (Dutch person with blackened face) is a de facto servant to St. Nicholas, which leads to discussion over why is his face blackened? The public debate on whether this tradition is racist or not has been going on for a few years now. The prevalent narrative says that Black Piet is only "dirty" from climbing down the chimney, however this does not explain why he arrives in the country already "dirty", before climbing down any chimneys. However, this conversation is a very sensitive and controversial and often becomes an example of political correctness. All the other things mentioned are food items with controversial names (I used literal translations in order to sustain the possible racist undertone of the names; however these items may be known under different names in English).

[136] Barbara Perry, "'White Genocide': White Supremacists and the Politics of Reproduction," in *Home-Grown Hate: Gender and Organized Racism*, ed. Abby L. Ferber (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 75–78.

also retweet, but above all serves as the disseminator of news, the influencer. Needless to say, the propaganda she shares is often very radical. Both these users have been very active in terms of sharing propagandist content that perfectly corresponds to the narrative of Geert Wilders and they both prefer to share visual content. Furthermore, they both may be an example of unintentional dissemination of propaganda due to misinformation or self-deceit, as described in the theoretical part of the thesis; however this is not possible to judge solely from their online activity.

Summary

The aim of this thesis was to explore process of disseminating populist propaganda on social media by Geert Wilders and answer the research questions regarding how does Geert Wilders use his Twitter account to further his agenda, how do people react to the content shared by him and what kind of themes resonates around Geert Wilders on social media. In order to answer these questions, it is necessary to utilize the theory explained in the theoretical part of the thesis as well as the analysis conducted.

The theory suggests that successful propaganda requires profound understanding of the audience. Based on the analysis provided by this thesis it is safe to say that Geert Wilders has mastered this, as he seems to know exactly what his audience wants to hear. Furthermore, successful securitization requires an audience that believes the securitizing actor and his message. Wilders has found very perceptive audience on Twitter and he has crafted his message to suit his audience perfectly. He explores the typical populistic themes (anti-Muslim, anti-EU, anti-elites) in a way his audience understands, appreciates and shares further. His followers are often more active in terms of sharing the propaganda than Wilders and they can also be more radical and more direct than Geert Wilders (as seen on the example of #Kaag, where Wilders kept his criticism of Minister Kaag sophisticated, but his followers compared her to a Nazi collaborator and called her a traitor to the Netherlands). Wilders himself, on the other hand, is painted as the only politician that truly cares about what bothers the Dutch society and the only one to voice their fears. This is of course also built in the propaganda.

Having a perceptive audience is what Wilders needs in order to attempt to securitize Islam and migration as a threat to the Dutch national security. He has recently made his plan to ban Islam in the Netherlands public, which could be seen as one of the intended extraordinary measures Wilders would like to push through the Parliament. Such measures do not have a chance to pass at the moment in a democratic parliament where PVV does not have any partners, however the intent itself gives his supporters extra incentive to share his propaganda, which ultimately promotes PVV and increases the reach of the propagandist narrative.

Furthermore, the far-right populists take inspiration from one another (as shown in the analytical part of this thesis) and they copy each other's approaches. The fact that Geert Wilders has mastered the art of propaganda on social media can therefore mean that in the

future, other far-right leaders will use the same methods to support their cause. This is already observable in the way that other populists are using the exact same rhetoric and narrative that is also promoted by Wilders.

To sum things up, the topics that resonate the most around Geert Wilders on social media are completely in line with the propaganda Wilders has been sharing. There is a prevalent sense of fear of Muslims among the followers of Geert Wilders, sometimes manifesting through rather radical rhetoric. It is an example of how well thought out the propaganda Geert Wilders shares is. The high speed of interactions on Twitter do not require much deliberation, which ultimately plays in Wilders' favor, as his followers retweet basically anything he sends out and then even build on the narrative further, without Wilders' participation. Wilders is fully aware of this and steadily uses his Twitter account to secure the support of his followers and create a patriotic image for himself.

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Master's Thesis Project

Thesis title: Propaganda on Social Media: The Case of Geert Wilders
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About thesis

Social media's importance is growing as more and more public figures (e.g. President Trump) and institutions (e.g. European Parliament) become increasingly active on various platforms (e.g. Twitter). Social media proves to be an easy way to not only sell various products more effectively, but also to spread (fake) news and propaganda more effectively. Research has shown, that social media's mechanisms tend to group together people with similar ideas into so called echo chambers. There, users with similar opinions and worldview are shielded from users with different opinions, which ultimately hardens their opinions.

The aim of this diploma thesis is to explore the case of populist propaganda shared on Twitter with focus on the Dutch politician Geert Wilders. Mr. Wilders leads the currently second biggest Dutch party Party for Freedom (Partij voor Vrijheid) and is an avid Twitter user. His tweets are consistent with his party's manifesto and therefore are often aimed against Muslims, EU or the political elites in the Netherlands. His posts often accumulate a lot of responses from his followers, who further share the tweets, making them spread much further. This thesis aims to explore the structure of this net of followers (including the geographical location of people engaging in the interactions) as well as finding out what content gets the most attention (what is the form and message of the most popular content).

Data and methodology

Data collection for the purposes of the thesis will be carried out by an analytic tool NodeXL Pro. It is limited by inner mechanisms of Twitter. It is only possible to collect data from a limited period of time (7 days), therefore the data collection will occur several times over longer period of time. That way it is possible to acquire a more detailed picture of user interactions, activity and ultimately map out the spread of populist propaganda better. NodeXL Pro will help us understand the network surrounding Geert Wilders on Twitter and provide data for analysis.

The methodology used in this thesis will be discursive thematic interpretation of the data (individual tweets and profiles placed on important places in the topology).

The securitization theory will be applied to both written and visual statements to examine how Geert Wilders attempts to securitize the topics he is interested in.

Outline

1. Introduction
   – short introduction into the topic of social media and populist propaganda
   – research questions
      1. What topics resonate among the supporters of Geert Wilders?
      2. How does Geert Wilders engage with his followers?

2. Context
   – introduction of Geert Wilders, his party and his presence on social networks, namely Twitter
   – the role of social media in sharing propaganda and the underlying mechanisms (echo chambers, sorting mechanisms)
   – theory of securitization and its connection to populism
   – theoretical underpinnings of propaganda

3. Methodology and theory
   – introduction of the methodology used in the thesis as well as the tools and mechanisms used for data collection
   – theoretical background for analysing social networks

4. Analysis
   – the largest part of the thesis
   – analysis of Geert Wilders' Twitter account, including the network of his followers using NodeXL Pro
   – analysis of chosen hashtags used by Wilders and his followers
   – geolocation analysis of people engaging with Geert Wilders on Twitter
   – analysis of important accounts interacting with Geert Wilders (important nodes in the topology)

5. Summary
   – summary of the findings
   – answers to research questions

Figure 1: Tweet.[137] Example of a typical Geert Wilders tweet, expressing multiple attitudes at once: Islam restricts freedom of speech, Islam is a violent religion, Muslims do not belong in the Netherlands. The post gained quite a momentum, gathering 233 replies, over 1700 retweets and 2800 "favorites". This is an example of Wilders' propagandist craftsmanship and securitization of Islam.

Analytical tools

NodeXL Pro, Social *Media Research Foundation*, http://nodexl.codeplex.com/.

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