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OPINION



The riots in Loosdrecht are part of an international movement

The arson attack in Loosdrecht was absolutely not an isolated incident, argues Jelle Postma. According to him, the riots surrounding asylum seeker centres are fuelled by populist politics, social media and far-right networks. And politicians are deliberately staying silent about the refugees who were inside the building.

Jelle Postma

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On Tuesday evening in Loosdrecht, a crowd blocked firefighters from reaching an asylum seeker centre that was on fire. There were fifteen people inside - refugees and COA staff members. Some in the crowd were actively preventing the emergency services from doing their job.

That same evening, Dilan Yeşilgöz, Minister of Defence and VVD party leader, posted on X: "Unacceptable. Attacking a building with fireworks, then blocking firefighters from extinguishing the fire and assaulting police officers. Keep your hands off our emergency workers." Other politicians echoed this framing.

It is deeply problematic to frame this as though the violence was directed only at emergency workers. It was directed primarily at the people inside the building – the asylum seekers.

This was not a one-off. Apeldoorn. Den Bosch. IJsselstein. Loosdrecht (on more than one occasion). Explosives that some still insist on calling fireworks. A bomb pushed through the letterbox of a D66 office in The Hague while dozens of young people were inside. The Public Prosecution Service is now investigating whether there was a terrorist motive, while the AIVD has opened an investigation into the group behind the protests. These incidents form part of a pattern moving in only one direction.



This political climate was manufactured.

What is happening on the streets today is the result of years of politics that have deliberately stoked fear around migration, identity, security and culture. It comes straight from the playbook of authoritarian movements worldwide: find an enemy (or create one), amplify the fear, feed the crisis, harvest the anger. Then rinse and repeat, until the goalposts have shifted so far that no one remembers where they started.

Meanwhile, the problems are real and complex. But populism does not sell complexity. It sells enemies and solutions that do not simply exist. And this goes beyond PVV or FvD - though those parties are at least straightforward about their aims. For them, polarisation is not a side effect; it is the point. Earlier this year, De Volkskrant and a group of researchers showed that FvD's youth wing had invited guests with direct ties to the international identitarian movement to its Christmas gala. Party leader Lidewij de Vos called the investigation "a waste of her time."

But politics are only a part of it. Social media algorithms reward outrage because outrage generates more clicks – and for the platforms, that is simply good business. At the same time, national media also adds fuel to the fire. Talk show editors continue to invite the same provocative voices because it drives ratings. Newspapers like De Telegraaf have no hesitation in turning up the heat. And Ongehoord Nederland structurally violates journalistic standards and demonstrably spreads false information without correction (as a report published this week made clear).

The media's job is to challenge this populist dynamic, not feed it.

Polarisation as a business model

Behind the local unrest lies an organised structure, both in the Netherlands and abroad. Justice for Prosperity published a report last week on Identitair Verzet (IDV), the Dutch branch of a pan-European far-right network with neo-fascist characteristics. The symbol used by this movement, a lambda, has now appeared in Loosdrecht, Engelen, IJsselstein, Tilburg and, on Tuesday, in Hillegom. IDV is not there to represent local interests. Instead, it comes to recruit, to grow, and to gradually normalise extreme ideas.

The Austrian extremist Martin Sellner, who received money from the Christchurch terrorist Brenton Tarrant, launched the Institute for Remigration earlier this year, an organisation whose stated policy goal is the forced deportation of non-ethnically European residents, including people with a residence permit or passport. Behind this network sits an ideological infrastructure of think tanks and movements that intellectually legitimise ethnic nationalism and spread it internationally. Dutch Eva Vlaardingbroek, who emerged from FvD circles, helps promote the anti-AZC (asylum seeker centres) protests internationally and speaks at Sellner's Remigration Summit.

The riots in the Netherlands are not a fringe phenomenon. They are part of a coordinated European project - one that feeds on local unrest to expand its influence. The people who demonstrated out of genuine concern often had no idea who was standing next to them. But when that happens often enough, it starts to feel normal - which is exactly the intention. For these networks, social tension is what keeps the engine running.



What is missing

On 9 October 2015, around twenty masked men stormed an emergency shelter in the Snellerpoort sports hall in Woerden and threw fireworks bombs inside. Inside were 148 refugees, including 51 children, mainly from Syria. Mark Rutte visited the site the next day. His words were clear: "Refugees and staff must feel safe. Keep your hands off people."

He named them. The refugees, the staff and everyone inside the building. That was ten years ago, and it was the accepted standard.

Deputy Prime Minister Yesilgöz has said nothing about the refugees and nothing about the COA staff members. To omit such groups is a clear choice.

Yesilgöz is not alone in this. Other politicians are equally careful with their words, reserving them for LinkedIn posts aimed at their own supporters. Fifteen people were inside a building while a crowd threw burning torches at it. Apparently, that does not warrant a mention on X, where public debate now largely takes place.

On Pauw & de Wit, I recently discussed the social temperature with VVD parliamentary leader Ruben Brekelmans. He kept steering the conversation toward the flow of arrivals. But that is a different question from what to do about people who are already here.

My greatest concern is for the parties described as moderate or centre-right. The ones who say they defend democracy and who are seen as reasonable and experienced in government affairs. They represent a large electorate and carry a responsibility that extends beyond a carefully worded tweet. When they normalise inhumane behaviour and ideologies, including through their silence in the moments that matter, they erode the standard by which everything else is judged. You cannot credibly claim to defend democracy while staying quiet when it stops protecting people. That is a choice they are making.

What we need now

There can be a legitimate and valid debate to be had on asylum and migration. But two things are being systematically conflated that need to be kept apart: the question of how asylum policy should work, and the basic duty of care towards people who are already here and have a right to safe shelter. When those two things blur together, it becomes possible to treat people in burning buildings as an acceptable consequence of a political position.

Mayors are bearing the brunt of this. They are responsible for upholding the law, maintaining order and keeping communities together - without clear support from national government. That is not a sustainable position to put them in.

Everyone knows what is at stake. The question is whether the parties that say they stand for democracy will do so when it actually costs them something. Because when they stop drawing a line between what is acceptable and what is not, the problem is no longer just one of public order. It becomes a problem for democracy itself.

"Refugees and staff must feel safe. Keep your hands off people."

That should still be our standard.

