



DANUBE
INSTITUTE

What should a 21st-century
conservative renewal look like.

Dániel Horváth

Oct 2023

What should a 21st-century conservative renewal look like.

Dániel Horváth

A Dutch way?

Elections are coming up in the Netherlands in a few weeks, so it's a timely to consider the implications of an interview Dutch FvD party leader Thierry Baudet gave to *The European Conservative* a few weeks ago.^a FvD is the largest party in the Netherlands by number of members.^b The theme of the interview was the future of conservatism. The challenges of the 21st century are pushing political conservatism towards an unprecedented transformation, but the main direction of this transformation is still not clear. Thierry Baudet is a Dutch politician and a former student of the late Sir Roger Scruton. He believes that politics is, as Bismarck once said, the art of the possible, even now in the 21st century. In his view, the path that public conservatism has followed in recent decades has failed because it has been too trapped by the need to accommodate dissent. Modern conservatism's focus should not be on conforming to the mainstream establishment, but on the goal of building as broad a coalition as possible.

Today, there are many alternatives available to conservative politics. The dominant European perspective, advanced by the German Christian Democrats, has followed a path of consensus and moderation over the last two decades, and in the spirit of consensus-building, they have sought to build broad coalitions. They have often governed in grand coalitions with parties at the other end of the political spectrum, establishing as broad a social consensus as possible. Decades of cooperation with ideologically different parties has inevitably diluted any

^a **Fantini, Alvino-Mario** – *Friend or Foe?* An Interview with Thierry Baudet
<https://europeanconservative.com/articles/interviews/friend-or-foe-an-interview-with-thierry-baudet/>

^b **Fitzgerald, Emma** - *FvD remains by far the strongest member, BBB and BvNL growing significantly*
<https://thenationview.com/politics/161658.html>

distinctively conservative policies. The continued willingness to compromise marked a developmental path in which the abandonment of the conservative side's own views, or at least the dilution of them to a degree acceptable to its partners, became the main point of alignment.

In the United States of America and Hungary, we have seen a different trend unfold. In the United States, the Tea Party movement of the late 2000s, or the alt-right movement of the mid-2010s, can be seen as attempts at renewal and a search for a new path for political conservatism. Baudet argues that one of the most striking differences between the modern right and left is that while mainstream left-wing political forces are able to integrate their own radicals into the mainstream of their ideological world, conservatives routinely dismiss those who advocate a populist and critical agenda.

However, new ideas are only born when old answers and new explanations are in tension. Boudet doesn't hold back in his criticism of the current state of mainstream conservatism. Terrified of thoughts and ideas that the establishment has 'outlawed,' conservatives have completely internalized the 'rules of the game' that their progressive opponents have imposed. And, in doing so, they have implicitly conceded the very points they wanted to make in the first place. 'This is why they can never win'. In short, today's conservatives shy away from *all* the fundamental fights and instead spend their time submissively avoiding being associated with—or being called out as—'fascists.' It should be remembered that, although Thierry Baudet is an academic who wrote his dissertation under the supervision of Roger Scruton, his arguments should be read primarily as political statements.

Three issues that continue to pose profound challenges for Europe, show the effectiveness of today's European conservatism. Immigration and demographic composition, foreign policy and EU relations, and systemic economic challenges are the issues that show the shortcomings of Euro conservatism. The word *conservative* entered the English language as a loan word in the fourteenth century. The expression *conservatif* was borrowed from an Old French word which was in turn derived from the Late Latin term *conservare*.

Conservare meant to keep intact, preserve, or guard. But preserve, guard, or keep intact *what*? The prefix *con-* gives us a hint. In Latin *con-* means together or with.”^c

Immigration and population composition

To preserve, guard and protect the original character of the country.

If this is the stated goal, then legal migration must be rejected to the same extent as illegal migration. If our aim is to maintain the country's previous characteristics unchanged, it is pointless to consider whether or not some immigrants are coming to work, legally or illegally, because in each case the cultural and ethnic composition of the host country will change, and if we regard this as an asset to be preserved, it will require other solutions to the labour shortage problem.

According to Baudet: „If the price of *not* being controversial is *not* actually making the argument you want to make, then that price is too high. Take immigration: rather than making the point that we do not want the ethnic and cultural composition of our societies dramatically changed—which I believe is the fundamental point—conservatives emphasize the distinction between ‘legal immigration’ and ‘illegal immigration’—as if *that* were the issue, as if the problem of immigration is *how* immigrants enter!”

Foreign policy and EU relations

To preserve, guard and protect the sovereignty of Europe.

If Europe is to regain its international autonomy and become an active player in global politics, then further steps must be taken to strengthen the strategic autonomy of the European Union. Baudet goes even further, arguing that the stakes of the Russia-Ukraine war are not Ukraine's sovereignty, but the victory of NATO, the expansion of the US "deep state", "wokeism", LGBT propaganda, climate protection goals and the implementation of mass immigration.

„I believe the ‘old Europe’ is the thing we should try to ‘bring back.’ Ever since the First World War, our continent has rapidly lost its global impact and self-

^c **Murphy, Peter** – *On the word conservative*

https://www.hungarianconservative.com/articles/culture_society/on-the-word-conservative/

confidence. It has gone down the wrong path and is now in a state of collapse. Everyone can feel this. Europe has experienced terrible decline—in the arts and architecture, in music and education, in birth rates and economic power. I think conservatives should be fighting to *reverse* this decline—and bring about some kind of European Renaissance. (...) Ukraine has been governed for years by the U.S. State Department, not only to launder money—as the ‘Biden documents’ have shown—but also to besiege and ultimately crush Russia, the last vestige of ‘old Europe.’ This American ‘deep state’ is the primary vehicle of the Left-liberal globalist establishment—in other words, it is the enemy of conservatives. Our movement, I feel, should be conscious of this reality.”

Systemic challenges of the economy

To preserve, guard and protect the European social achievements and welfare services threatened by globalisation.

Since the 1970s, in the context of globalisation, the size and income of the middle classes in the developed Western countries, particularly in the United States, have been shrinking, leading to increasing latent tensions. The energy and inflation crises that have unfolded in the wake of the pandemic and the war between Russia and Ukraine have hit the poorest and middle classes particularly hard, with energy and food costs accounting for a significant share of their expenditure. To varying degrees, most states have set up compensation mechanisms to reduce the burden on the population. Baudet offers the following thoughts on a conservative rethink of market regulation:

„As a conservative, I am convinced that markets are never truly ‘free,’ because they depend on social, cultural, and legal pre-conditions which markets themselves cannot generate. The simple truth is that *properly* functioning markets require nation-states. And strong and independent nation-states, in turn, require healthy societies. Free trade and the free market are entirely different things. Cosmopolitan international capitalism creates wealth for those who possess assets: business owners, investors, etc. They can minimize their costs while benefiting from artificially high profits that can be made from cheap products imported from places like Malaysia or Gabon, where environmental standards are

practically non-existent, and wages are incomparably lower than here. As a result, our countries are flooded with cheap commodities—while taxpayers must bear the costs of unemployment and de-industrialisation. Mind you, I am not against international trade per se, but I believe it is imperative to maintain tariffs to balance the inequalities otherwise arising from the different standards that exist across the world—and even within Europe. Are these not sensible conservative considerations? I would argue that free traders are not *true* conservatives but rather liberals—Marxists masquerading as conservatives!”

Baudet also has a very low opinion of the Great Reset. In his view, it is nothing more than a corporatist merger of multinational corporations and supranational institutions, a vision of the World Economic Forum and other progressive globalist institutions. In his view, the Western states have essentially become the executors of a global agenda driven by a network of administrative and 'deep state' actors - as well as Big Pharma, Big Tech, global capital and charitable foundations such as Bill Gates and George Soros.

The intellectual work to be done and successful adaptation

The strategies which Thierry Baudet proposes are undoubtedly radical, but it can be said that the complexity of the issues and questions he raises can definitely contribute to a deeper reflection by conservative opinion formers on how to transpose the values they wish to promote into the context of the 21st century. Modern conservatism, alongside our contemporary system as a whole, needs serious reform. Baudet argues that this is because the relationship between rulers and governed has been disrupted by the emergence of a supranational political class that is completely detached from the concerns of ordinary voters.

Conservative political forces that are able to redefine their vision of the world in the face of new challenges, while upholding traditional values, still have a chance to succeed. Significantly, the Hungarian government is one of the most successful in Europe in political terms. The success of the governing conservative party, which won its fourth election in a row by a huge margin, is in large part due to the fact that the intellectual groundwork had been laid to sustain and develop the conservative message to meet the latest international challenges . Any

conservative parties who fail to do this work risk failure and defeat. There are very significant differences between contemporary Hungarian and German conservative practice that have led to an estrangement of relations, but changes in German and Hungarian public opinion are increasingly indicative of which recipe leads to success and which to continued decline.

In conclusion, while the radical right approach to renewing conservative politics may be unconventional, it remains a subject of scholarly interest and debate. In the ever-evolving tapestry of democracy, even the most divergent viewpoints play a role in shaping the future. Thus, through rigorous examination and evidence-based discourse, we can glean valuable insights and perhaps discover policies and practices that lead to a more genuinely inclusive and balanced political discourse, ultimately strengthening democracy.