

**Why the Dutch Voted No**  
**Anatomy of the New Euroscepticism in ‘Old Europe’**

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The smoke of the spectacular result of the Dutch Referendum has not yet cleared away. Not in Europe as a whole, nor in Holland itself. This morning I left a country still in shock: politicians licking their wounds; commentators, analysts and opinion leaders still looking for causes and explanations. The over-all interpretation is still unclear, foggy and open for discussion.

I just start telling you a simple story. A story about a train journey in the Netherlands.

Indeed: To clarify in simple terms why the Dutch voted no the metaphor of a thundering train can be used. The fact of the matter is that the Dutch public perceive the actual European Union as a blind train which is running far too fast. A train just ‘enlarged’ with a lot of new railway carriages. It’s not sure if and how many new carriages will be coupled and if this will endanger the stability and security of the train as a whole. Aboard the train there is great confusion: the passengers don’t know the exact direction and final destination of the train. What causes irritation is that some humble passengers had to pay a much more expensive ticket than other passengers, especially the big, blunt and noisy ones. Within the train a French-looking President (disguised as a conductor) just gave the passengers a quick glimpse at a new timetable and new established house rules (the Constitutional Treaty), a completely unreadable and incomprehensible ‘phone book’ of articles and protocols, vague and multi-interpretable, just producing distrust and suspicion. There are wild rumours that the passengers have to stay in the train forever, and that they might never return home and will therefore lose their identity and individuality.

The passengers at wit’s end decide to use the emergency break to have a pause for reflection, to make up one’s mind about the speed, the direction and the length of the train. They want to deliberate if the journey is still a responsible and wise one, not becoming too risky.

This train journey is what the Dutch referendum was all about.

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It was always thought that the Netherlands, being one of the Founding Fathers of the European Community, was a stable pro-European force. Now it seems to be the case, that the elitist character of the Dutch political party system for long covered up an undercurrent of Euro-scepticism. Ambivalent European sentiments have been increased considerably by the radical acceleration of the European Project in the last decade (enlargement, EMU & the euro, liberalisation). The referendum gave, for the first time, an opening for the Euro-sceptics and those who are ambivalent towards the actual speed and direction of European integration.

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I just want to remind you of the shocking numbers of the Dutch Referendum again:  
The final referendum results of the Dutch vote were:

**No-vote : 61,6%**  
**Yes-vote: 38,4%**  
**Turnout: 62,8%**

This can only be characterised as an ‘anti-establishment landslide’, because all mainstream political parties (from conservative-liberals to the Greens) and the majority of Dutch civil society (trade unions, the media, conservation and ecology movement) were supporting the yes-campaign for the Constitution. What happened?

The facts first: some early exit-poll research has been done.

#### **Who were the no-voters?**

- employees earning average incomes with relatively lower education
- Protestant Christian fundamentalists
- right wing populists (Wilders, LPF)
- left wing populists (SP)
- half of the constituency of the social-democratic PvdA
- half of the Greens constituency
- half of social-liberal constituency (middle income groups; lower and middle class)

#### **Which motives for the no-vote:**

- the Netherlands is paying too much to the EU (the problem of being the highest net contributor)
- The Netherlands is no longer boss in it's own country

- Netherlands has too little influence in Europe compared to other countries
- Netherlands is losing its identity
- Netherlands is becoming too dependent of the EU
- Because of Brussels bureaucracy
- Because of the bad influence of the Euro
- Because the Dutch lose jobs to foreigners

These results lead already to one important conclusion:

The Dutch no-vote was about Europe, it was not a verdict on the Dutch political situation at home. The main motives were about Europe, especially about the place of the Netherlands within Europe (especially this sentiment of fear of losing national identity), which has both a domestic and an international dimension: interlinked complex.

I think in the end we have to do with a complicated, multi-layered story.

A more fundamental analysis of the Dutch no-vote in the referendum on the European Constitution is a story with two faces:

It's a story about the political identity crisis of the Netherlands; and a story about the 'imperial overstretch' of the European Project.

### *1. The story of the Netherlands*

To start with the first story: the story of the Netherlands itself.

One could say that an overall distrust in politics, politicians and political institutions is one of the key-ingredients of the new eurosceptical mood in the Netherlands.

The yes-campaign unintentionally fuelled this fire of negative doubt.

Not only, like in France, this campaign was led by a ruling government (under PM Balkenende) which is extremely unpopular (welfare state reform without any inspirational mobilization and weak political leadership), but also the campaign suffered from still a strong populist anti-establishment current in the Netherlands; the post-Pim Fortuyn era, which represents a deep distrust between political elites and citizens.

My country still faces a crisis of trust, a crisis of identity, a crisis of self-confidence. All to do with the political climate: distrust between political elite and the people, crisis of representation. Came to the surface with the populist revolt of the citizens, of the Pim Fortuyn movement, growing worse with the murder of this Pim Fortuyn by a radical environmental activist. And later we got a new political killing in the Netherlands on the filmmaker Theo van Gogh by a fundamentalist Muslim, which shocked our relatively quiet and peaceful country again.

These grave incidents added to a more general feeling of discontent and fear. Western Europe is in the grip of a political identity crisis. The disrupting effects of globalisation and the permanent retrenchment of the welfare states are accompanied by fundamental changes in the political party system: the triumph of the floating voter, i.e. the unprecedented rise of electoral volatility, and the spectacular jump in the political arena of neo-populist movements.

The traditional mass parties that have ruled the region at least since the end of the Second World War have lost members, voters, élan, and a monopoly on ideas. Because they are the pillars of both the party-oriented parliamentary system and the welfare state, their slow but steady decline affects European societies as a whole. Due to changes in labour, family and cultural life styles, the Christian Democratic and Social Democratic pillars of civil society are eroding away, leaving behind “people’s parties” with shrinking numbers of people. This erosion of political representation eats away at the foundations of the European welfare states and European party democracies.

The second ingredient of the European crisis is what might be called the paradox of the Holocaust trauma. Europeans seem unable to cope with the question of ethnic diversity. Intellectual discourse was long characterized by a species of political correctness which praised multiculturalism and ‘The Foreigner’ as enriching society while turning a blind eye to the *de facto* segregation of many new immigrants and the stress they placed on the welfare system in many nations. These problems did much to provoke a populist-xenophobic reaction. In this respect, Europe is facing two dilemmas: 1. how to maintain its ‘communitarian’ welfare states under conditions of permanent immigration?; 2. to what extent the integration patterns in Europe will be determined by multiculturalism or assimilationism?

A third ingredient of the crisis is widespread unease over the process of European integration. What should be a proud achievement of cosmopolitan cooperation between nations has become, instead, a cause of increasing insecurity and national alienation. This discontent with the European Union propelled considerably by the uncertain, unintended effects of the so-called European enlargement: the arrival of a series of 10 new East-Central European member states to the EU.

The fourth component is the fact that all this discontent is channeled through the rise of right wing populist movements and in Europe, totally unlike the American tradition, populism is more or less associated with fascism. This in itself adds up to the sense of crisis.

The representation problem of the traditional political party system; the widespread discontent with the rapid, radical and unprecedented ‘multiculturalisation’ of European societies and the growing unease with the European integration process (not a shield against globalization, but instead the ‘visible face’ of globalization) fuel the political and electoral potential of (right wing) populist movements.

Populism can be defined as a particular style of politics, referring to ‘the people’ as a homogeneous entity against ‘a corrupt elite’ and in this sense the neo-populist citizens’ revolt in Europe can be understood. This revolt is rooted into the perception that the people are ‘betrayed’ by the ruling elites. They feel not represented in, but victimised by, the great transformation of (post)modern society, in particular the processes of postindustrialisation, multiculturalisation and Europeanisation. ‘Populism can be read as a fever warning which signals that problems are not being dealt with effectively, or points to the malfunctioning of the linkages between citizens and governing elites’.

Although the Dutch may live in one of the wealthiest and best-organised countries in the world; being relatively happy; they are living increasingly hectic lifestyles that involve struggling with time to maintain wealth and participate in the good life; discovering that new sacrifices are necessary in order to maintain a trimmed welfare state; worrying about the future of the economy in a globalising world; worrying about growing ethnic pockets of poverty and isolation in the bigger cities; worrying about decreasing security; experiencing a

gradual slipping away of control over one's life; becoming more and more anxious about the world in which one's children and grandchildren will grow up.

This complicated cocktail of mixed feeling is topped up with an equally complicated attitude towards the ruling establishment. On one side, sky-high demands on what the government should do to tackle the risks and grab the opportunities; on the other, almost total lack of confidence in the ability of the government to deliver.

It was this potentially explosive mix that was first skilfully tapped by Pim Fortuyn, the flamboyant publicist-turned-politician slain in May 2002; it is this same mix that produces so much volatility in voting behaviour on the European constitution in one of the founding nations of the European Union. (Cf. Theo Veenkamp at 'Open democracy').

To conclude: Politics in general is nowadays confronted with an electorate of citizens in quite a bad mood. This also applied to the referendum.

Especially because it turned out to be a very bad campaign by the, already very unpopular, government. The dynamics of the campaign became an independent factor of explanation. The yes-campaign of the government and the political establishment as a whole, including my own party, was one of aggressive-defensive intimidation. In fact the referendum was presented as a command just to vote yes. Voting no was considered to be dangerous and stupid.

There was no connection made whatsoever with people with doubts (Europe-agnosticists), people who are in favour of European integration and cooperation to a certain extent, but who fear the idea of a Super state Constitution or are worried about new steps towards an 'ever closer union'... Very bad campaigning. The political elite was completely surprised by the no-sentiments. So clear that this Constitution was much better than Treaty of Nice. They thought that they could count on natural loyalty to European integration process and fully underestimated the increasing irritation, alienation and sceptical mood about 'the ever closer' Union.

The strategy to form a massive political-intellectual 'cordon sanitair' around the no-vote worked out counterproductive.

Within this context, a referendum especially on the abstract, far away issue of Europe (where in itself by scale there is democratic deficit and problems of representation) is asking for big trouble. And so it turned out to be. The referendum on the European Constitution became a referendum on the whole package deal of Europe, on the opinions people have about European Union in general, in all aspects, (which is not illegitimate in my opinion). For the first time in say fifty years the people now have been asked about their opinions on the European integration. Before it was a plaything of the elites, Europe is metapolitics, *Politikerpolitik*, as the Germans call it: politics for politicians, not for ordinary citizens. With this referendum, and it was engineered for that purpose, it was the idea to close the gap between European Project and the people (Laeken Summit, Convention).

Instead, it demonstrated, proved this gap to be reality. The Eurocrats gambled, but lost.

2. Therefore, a Second story: it's also about Europe itself. The referendum asked a mandate of trust for a rapidly changing Europe, for a Europe in transformation. The Eurocrats act as if there is a natural, straight development line from the Europe of Schumann and Monnet to nowadays Europe, all to be defended by the old mantra of 'never war again', but in the meantime a silent metamorphosis took place. The acceleration of the European process (the seemingly endless enlargement, EMU, euro, geopolitical entity) made the European Project

in stable, non-transparent, unpredictable and a easy prey for nationalist and right wing populist counter mobilization.

What are the main problems of Europe, as perceived by the Dutch?

### *1. The Betrayal of Europe*

The story of the European propaganda is that the European Union is an alternative to the hard-boiled, unrestrained globalisation process, against the further Americanisation of European societies. But instead Europe is perceived/felt by people as a transmitter or even accelerator of the globalisation process. Instead of being the shield or the filter against disrupting and dislocating globalisation and liberalisation, the EU (with its internal market dynamics and the social en cultural ‘collateral damage’) acts as a agent of Anglosaxon globalisation (with polarising and divergent consequences for different groups and sectors in society and economy).

The EU is the nasty face of globalisation. Take for example the liberalisation policies towards the public sector (energy market; public transport, housing). The digital market-state-approach of the EU/European Court is harming the classical hybrid public-private arrangements of strong civil society Holland.

There is no trust that the European Union will defend the ‘European Social Model’.

### *2. EU: a razor blade of uniformization*

The European Union seems not to be the umbrella under which the rich European diversity is flourishing, but instead acting as a razor blade making member states, national cultures and traditions and societies uniform, having not much respect for multicoloured diversity and differences. (a Europe against Spanish bull-fighting, Buttiglione, Haider). This is the sentiment of Brussels, becoming a new Leviathan, a new centralised Super State, with its directories.

The lack of prudence, of modesty of the European regulation machinery, which sometimes have deep consequences for national, regional and local practices. It’s about the penetration and intervention of European regulation (directories).

(This fear of a Super state is increased by the word Constitution, by concept of a ‘European State’( with flag, hymn, President) vis-à-vis a ‘European People’ of European Citizens (as a new element of legitimacy, next to the sovereign nation states).

Although there is lot of rhetorical talk about the principle of subsidiarity and the lie that Europe restricts itself only to border crossing issues and problems, the day-to-day real world of Brussels points in another direction: jurisdiction of the European Court had deep technocratic uniforming and penetrating effects, so does the logic of the level playing field of the internal market. The gap between the propaganda (Europe is restricting itself just to cross-border problems like terrorism, crime, immigration and environmental pollution) and the Brussels technocratic day-today-reality, fuels feelings of euroscepticism.

### *3. Insecurity about the future direction, identity and scale of Europa*

The fact that Europe in all dimensions is infinite, boundless, without borders (a project sui generis) is in itself causing unease, discontent. The more because it’s presented as a deterministic one-way-route only. There is no other way to go then European ever closer integration. The new world order, both economic and geopolitical, urges the formation of a strong European block versus China, India, the US. There is No alternative (European TINA). The nation states are over, are too weak a player, can not survive. This is a very threatening

message to people in societies in flux and insecurity, due to welfare state reform, massive immigration, in which the national identity is one of the last safe havens..

The post-national cosmopolitan elites speak careless, inconsiderate about further enlargement, disrupting the already very fragile cohesion of the European Union (former enemies France and Germany, Holland, UK).

Experts (especially foreign policy experts) only use geopolitical arguments to support further enlargements towards 30 or 35 countries. But what will be the effects for the European Project as a whole?

Will the EU only become a free trade zone, without trade barriers. Or a political union, with cohesion and common identity, as a coherent actor in the global arena? There are limits to both concepts: or in terms of political ambitions or in terms of enlargement.

The new Euro scepticism in the Old Europe not necessarily is scepticism about the EU as a whole. Most people are still in favour of forms of European integration and cooperation. They support the European model of welfare policies, of human rights, but they are worried about the wild acceleration of Europe in the last period: Big Bang, EMU, Presidential System, technocratic regulations, irresponsible enlargement of Romania, the overbalanced neo-liberal market approach, the unpopular promises to Turkey....

Lack of respect for national cultures and traditions, lack of respect for democracy and the non-informed public.

This all culminated in the Referendum of 2005 on the Constitution.

It's not about the multi-interpretable text of the Constitution itself. It's about the course and direction and speed of the European Project and the way in which this is argued and defended.

The American writer Jeremy Rifkin recently stated: "the process of European Integration is the most strange political experiment in history. So it's natural that there is confusion and ambivalence about this process".

The basic problem is that the Eurocratic establishment does not give any time and space for reflection, second thoughts and criticism about the way Europe is developing. This in itself is what makes the European Project very un-European, birthplace of intellectual self-criticism and reflection.