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The Netherlands – Europe's New Obstructionist?

The Re-positioning of a Model EU Member State's European Policy

Kai-Olaf Lang / Joanna Majkowska

On June 1, the Dutch voters rejected the EU Draft Constitutional Treaty with a clear 62% majority. With this "No" vote, the Kingdom of the Netherlands put another stumbling block in the way of the ratification process. At the same time, the rejection reflected the Dutch citizens' displeasure, which has grown over the years, with the fundamental developments in the EU, in particular their supposed loss of influence, an increasing assertiveness of the big member states and an excessive financial burden on their country. The result of the referendum and the unyielding position of the Dutch with respect to the EU budget negotiations is an expression of the Netherlands' new attitude towards European integration. The founding member of the European Community is clearly pulling out of the "integrationist" camp, without however joining the "Euro-skeptics." Therefore, one should expect a new Dutch "Euro-realism." For the Netherlands to reassume its original role, the "big" member states, and not least Germany, would have to show increased sensitivity to the smaller EU member states with respect to fundamental questions of European politics.

The entire political establishment in the Netherlands came out clearly in support of the Constitutional Treaty: the government, the parties of the Christian-Liberal government (the Christian Democrats, CDA, the left-wing and right-wing liberals, D66 and VVD), the Social Democrats (PvdA) and the Green Left (GroenLinks), representing about 80% of the members of the second chamber (lower house) of the Dutch parliament. Only a few small groups from various parts of the political spectrum were opposed. The heterogeneous group of opponents to the

Constitutional Treaty included the Socialist Party, the traditional-protestant groups, the holdovers from the List Pim Fortuyn and the supporters of Geert Wilders, the Europe and immigration critic who was expelled from the VVD. Nevertheless, the Constitutional Treaty was clearly rejected.

The Causes of the "No" Vote

As in France, the Dutch „No“ vote was also the result of dissatisfaction with domestic politics: economic stagnation, declining

social cohesion, the highly charged immigration debate and the lack of an identity for the center-right government of the bland Prime Minister Balkenende provided fuel to the fire of the Constitutional Treaty's opponents. But just as in France, the rejection by the voters cannot be explained primarily by domestic political matters. The domestic situation played a role in the June 1 decision for only 8% of the Dutch citizens. In contrast, 60% were motivated by a fundamental "unease about the developments in the EU" and 31% by the substantive content of the Constitutional Treaty.

- ▶ The Dutch "No" vote was strongly motivated by a fear of becoming marginalized in the bigger EU. Given the widespread fear of a loss of influence and sovereignty, the slogans of the left wing and right wing opponents of the Constitutional Treaty were effective. In their view, after the coming in to force of the Constitutional Treaty, the Netherlands would be in danger of being reduced to a "powerless province in a European superstate."
- ▶ The Dutch, with their "No", have also expressed their displeasure with the current system of financial transfers in the EU, or more precisely, their country's role as the biggest "pay master" (on a per capita basis). The assertion that "the Netherlands pays too much to the EU," was the most commonly cited reason for a "No" vote.
- ▶ The vague "unease over the developments in the EU" stems from a series of concrete facts and trends in European politics, which are not actually connected with the Constitutional Treaty, but provide the Dutch citizens with a basis for their growing displeasure. Their vote can therefore also be viewed as a "posthumous judgement of the Euro, EU enlargement and the accession option granted to Turkey" (according to Rob Boudewijn of the Clingendael Institute in The Hague).

In contrast to France, however, the Dutch did not vote "No" because they feared a flood of neo-liberal policies. The

demand for a return to a "political" and regulated Europe and the vision of a special European social and economic model did not play anything like the role they did in the French referendum campaigns.

What was much more significant in the Netherlands was the anxiety over the loss of the possibilities for co-direction and control by a "big, small country" in a Union that has grown to 25 members. This perception has also been observed in other small and mid-sized countries. It is true that the supposed shifting of the EU's internal balance of power will hurt the Netherlands in particular, especially considering that it had, over many years, as an economically potent, financially generous and integration-friendly founding member, earned a reputation as a model EU country.

The Rift

The Constitutional Treaty was rejected by almost every level of society. It was a "No" from the socially weak, the insecure workers and the dissatisfied middle class. However, there was a significant socio-structural component. People with low incomes and a below average education were disproportionately represented among the people who rejected the treaty (82%). Moreover, the "No" camp was strongly represented in the strictly Calvinist "bible belt" of the Netherlands.

The core of supporters of the Constitutional Treaty consisted of two groups. One was the "new conservatives" in the Dutch society. According to the polling institute *Motivaction*, this group, classified as upper-middle-class, has a distinct belief in progress, great confidence in market forces and an "international perspective." In addition to these optimists of modernization, the older voters proved to be the biggest supporters of the Constitution: among all age groups only the over 65-year-olds voted "Yes" by a majority on June 1. Here, it is possible that the idea of the "EU as a project of peace" caught on with elderly people who experienced World War II and, as a

result, have a positive mood towards European integration.

This socio-demographic set up, as well as a mixture of growing criticism of Europe and the elite, and fear of the future resulted in considerable differences between the parties of the “pro” camp and their supporters. While the “no-parties” mobilized between 80 and 95 percent of their sympathizers, the voters of the CDA, the D66, VVD and the Green Left followed their parties only hesitantly or not at all. In any event, there were strong groups which voted against the Treaty (between a fourth of the CDA and the D66 supporters and 43% of the VVD and the Green Left supporters). Above all, the Social Democrats were not able to convince their supporters to vote “Yes” – 57 percent of the potential PvdA voters rejected the Constitutional Treaty. It is now a question how, in the coming months, to bridge this oft-described rift between the pro-European establishment and the critics of a European society.

A Euro-skeptical Realignment?

The Dutch rejection of the Constitutional Treaty should not be misinterpreted as a renunciation of European integration per se. As in France, the motivation for the Dutch “No” vote was also “pro-European”. Whereas the French rejection reflects the desire to continue the “old 15 member EU” given the enlargement process and the increasing pressure of globalization, the Netherlands did not vote to “preserve the system”. It is more likely that the price for agreeing to reform was made clear: further deepening, but not too fast, not too expensive and not to the detriment of one’s own political influence.

With this vote the country has certainly removed itself, at least temporarily, from the “pro-European” camp. One can agree with the left wing liberal member of parliament van der Laan, that the close relationship of the Netherlands to the EU, at least from the point of view of the Dutch public at large, has ceased to exist. But how will

the political establishment react to the result of the referendum?

Without a doubt the pro-European parties in Den Haag must tackle the disenchantment with Europe within Dutch society. In the wake of the referendum, a new, strong Euro-skeptical parliamentary party, with the group of Geert Wilders, will presumably be established in the medium term. Considering the significance of the shock of the referendum as well as the presence of dynamic, Euro-critical protagonists on the political stage, the established parties cannot continue with business as usual.

The “escaping forward” scenario, the game which imagines a core Europe, is also out of the question because the Netherlands is not interested in participating in a core, however it may be designed, in which the relative importance of Germany and France would be substantially larger than within the context of the 25 member states. Moreover Den Haag would have doubts about such an arrangement’s transatlantic orientation and its commitment to a market economy. As a result it is no wonder that the Dutch Prime Minister rejected a meeting of the founding members in reaction to the ratification process crisis.

Adopting Euro-skeptical positions is likewise not a realistic option for the Dutch. A strategic alliance with opponents of deepening would amount to a complete revision of Dutch policy on Europe and decouple the country politically from key partners such as Germany and France, as well as Belgium and Luxembourg. Despite all the criticism of some mechanisms and results of European policies, the Netherlands will not break with the fundamental goals of Europe in order to become a supporter of a flattened integration or an unconditional ally of the UK.

The Netherlands also hopes for “the economic and political continuation of the European integration process” with the participation of as many member states as possible; an integration which “is embedded in strong common structures” (Fred van Staden and Jan Rood, *Volkskrant*,

May 30, 2005). The “No” vote on the Constitutional Treaty does not mean that the country will simply devolve into a group of Euro-skeptics. Presumably there is no realignment of the Netherlands’ European policy underway, but a new realism about European policy is becoming apparent.

In order to rebuild domestic and European policy-related confidence, and, as announced by Prime Minister Balkenende, in order to “bring politics closer to the citizens and to better incorporate the citizens into politics,” the government in Den Haag will, with respect to serious issues for the Dutch population, emphasize its national interests more heavily. The first sign of this shift is the Netherlands’ tough stance on EU financial negotiations. With respect to discussions on enlargement, the country will also demand that more “care” be taken (Balkenende). In the near future there could even be a discussion about a referendum on Turkish membership in the EU.

Altogether the Netherlands will not become destructive, but rather put a stronger focus on national concerns than on the “European public welfare”. The criticism of Europe by the Dutch voters, as demonstrated by the referendum, could be exploited by the Dutch government in order to apply pressure in negotiations with its European partners.

German policy should focus on supporting the Dutch government’s new pragmatic approach to European policy. It should be important to Germany to reactivate the close partnership with the Netherlands, which is based on multiple, parallel interests. This would also be a signal to other smaller and medium-sized member states which feel neglected by Germany and are unsure of the, in their view, excessive attention paid by Germany to other “big” states. At the same time it should be in Germany’s interest for the Netherlands not to drift any further off course in a Euro-critical direction. In this context, an intensification of the dialogue between Germany and the Benelux Countries, a kind of „Blaesheim-process light“ (i.e. an analogy to the

series of frequent Franco-German meetings at the highest level established in 2001), might be beneficial. Such a rather informal forum could be useful for the general discussion of important bilateral and European topics and the coordination of the European policy decision-making of the participating countries. This forum would also contribute to reviving the Benelux group, which has atrophied into a purely ceremonial exercise following the war in Iraq, the ratification process and other events. This would be desirable not only because it would be, for the Netherlands, a strong reminder of its *Founding Father* identity; but also because—in addition to being a forum for the clarification of policy positions among the three countries—a newly-invigorated Benelux group would serve as an example of a functioning sub-regional cooperation group within the bigger EU.

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