

Euro-enthusiasm, Euro-rejection, and various shades of grey:

The 2014 European Parliament election campaign in the Netherlands

Stijn van Kessel

With less than a month to go to the European Parliament (EP) election in the Netherlands on May 22nd, the campaign has barely kicked off. It remains to be seen whether the campaign will address concrete EU policies in a palatable way and whether all parties are able to present clear visions about the future of the European Union. The traditional mainstream parties (the Christian Democratic CDA, Liberal VVD and Social Democratic PvdA) all agree that EU membership is essentially beneficial to the Netherlands, but are careful to stress the shortcomings of the EU in its present form. The parties outside the traditional three that can be expected to do well adopt a more outspoken position on European integration. These include the pro-European Democrats 66 (D66), the Eurosceptic Socialist Party (SP), and the Euroreject Freedom Party (PVV). Yet, reasons for their success should probably not be sought mainly in their positions on European integration, but rather more in the unpopularity of the incumbent parties and the ‘second order’ character of EP elections.

Party political context

The incumbent government, a coalition between the VVD and PvdA that has been in office since November 2012, has never been very popular. Recent opinion polls suggest that the PvdA, in particular, has lost a great deal of support. If elections for the national parliament were to be held now, the party is projected to lose almost two-thirds of its seats (see Table 1). The popularity of the VVD has also dropped substantially since the installation of the second cabinet of Prime Minister Rutte. Most opposition parties, not least the social liberal D66, appear in better electoral shape. Mid-term opinion polls are admittedly not a very good predictor for the eventual outcome of the next parliamentary election, but they do provide an indication of the popularity of the Dutch parties in the run-up to the EP election.

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Stijn van Kessel is Lecturer in Politics at Loughborough University and currently an Alexander von Humboldt Foundation postdoctoral fellow at the *Institut für Deutsches und Internationales Parteienrecht und Parteienforschung* (PRuF) at the Heinrich-Heine-University Düsseldorf. This paper is the sixth in a series of Commentaries by EPIN researchers, aimed at examining the European elections in May 2014 from an EU perspective and considering the outlook for the elections in various member states.

Table 1. Projection of Dutch parties' popular support on 20 April 2014

	Predicted no. seats national parliament	Current no. seats national parliament	Difference	Current no. seats Europ. Parliament
D66	26	12	+14	3
VVD	24	41	-17	3
PVV	24	15	+9	5
SP	20	15	+5	2
CDA	18	13	+5	5
PvdA	14	38	-24	3
CU*	7	5	+2	1
50PLUS	5	2	+3	0
GL	5	4	+1	3
SGP*	4	3	+1	1
PvdD	3	2	+1	0
<i>Total</i>	150	150	0	26

* CU-SGP competed in a joint list for the 2009 EP election, and will do so again in 2014.

Source: Peilingwijzer, 20 April 2014 (<http://nos.nl/dossier/606102-peilingwijzer/>). Since a pure proportional system is used for national elections, party support in opinion polls is normally projected in terms of seats rather than vote shares.

The trends visible in recent opinion polls were confirmed in the municipal elections of March 19th. These were first of all marked by vast losses for the PvdA, which failed to become the largest party in traditional strongholds such as Amsterdam and Groningen. Coalition partner VVD also suffered a large number of defeats, while D66 and the radical left SP, along with a wide variety of local parties, performed well. The populist radical right PVV of Geert Wilders only fielded candidates in two municipalities, illustrating Wilders' wariness about having to fill too many local council seats with potentially incompetent and unmanageable candidates. As in the last local elections, the PVV became the largest party in Almere and second-largest in (the Dutch political capital) The Hague.

Strikingly, despite the PVV's limited nationwide role in these municipal elections, the public debate largely revolved around Wilders' remarks in Almere on the eve of the election. In his speech to an audience of PVV supporters, Wilders asked the crowd whether they desired more or less PvdA, Europe, and Moroccans. After the audience shouted "less" to all three, Wilders assured his supporters that his party would "take care of that". The "fewer Moroccans" question provoked considerable public condemnation and appeared to backfire when a number of PVV politicians distanced themselves from Wilders' remarks or even left the party. Among the deserters were two MPs and Laurence Stassen MEP, who was delegation leader and the prospective top candidate for the EP election. Substitute delegation leader Lucas Hartong subsequently declared that he was not available for a new term, since, as he later explained, he refused to cooperate in an alliance with extremist elements from the French National Front (FN) and the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ). Despite these organisational problems, public support levels for the PVV did not decline dramatically and even seemed to pick up again in the most recent opinion polls.

Party positions on European integration

It remains to be seen to what extent the campaign for the EP election will change the fortunes of the various Dutch parties, and whether voters will be able to distinguish clearly between the various contenders' positions on European integration. By tradition, in their EP election manifestos all three traditionally dominant parties (VVD, PvdA, CDA) speak about shared European values, the benefits European integration has brought in terms of peace, security and welfare, and the EU's importance in

dealing with cross-border problems. Yet they are also careful to criticise the shortcomings of the EU, albeit for different reasons.

The VVD's manifesto is titled "Europe where necessary" and outlines a pragmatic approach to European cooperation. For the economically liberal VVD the completion of the free market is a priority, and the party assumes that public trust in European integration will be restored if the EU can deliver concrete economic results.¹ According to the VVD, the EU should focus on its core business without creating an excessive amount of regulations, and refrain from interfering in policy areas such as social security, education, and the housing market. For coalition partner PvdA securing social justice and creating jobs are core themes, as well as the implementation of stricter regulations for the financial sector.² The Social Democrats are more critical of the free market and assert that a social race to the bottom should be prevented by protecting the rights of employees and national welfare states. Even though the PvdA recognises the decline of public trust in European integration, the party appears less concerned than the VVD about EU regulations and defending national sovereignty. The attitude of the CDA towards European integration more closely resembles the VVD line, as the party similarly emphasises that 'Europe' must focus on core issues rather than those best dealt with at the national or local level.³ The Christian Democrats take a more centrist position on the internal market, stressing its benefits for the Netherlands as a trading nation, but also expressing the need to correct excesses caused by the free movement of labour.

Of the main contenders outside the traditional three, the social liberal D66 presents the most Euro-enthusiast programme. The party desires a "full-grown, more democratic, transparent political union with far-reaching competences for cross-border problems".⁴ Although D66 speaks of a lack of democracy and transparency in the EU's current institutional format, the party is clear about its desire to eventually establish a "European federation", and further expresses explicit support for the completion of the single market. The Socialist Party, on the other hand, is much less enthusiastic about the economic consequences of European integration and about transferring decision-making power to the European level. The SP objects to the increasingly powerful 'European super state' as well as its neo-liberal character and promotion of financial capitalism.⁵ The party intends to give autonomy over social-economic policies back to the member states and is wary about the consequences of the free movement of labour. The opening of borders for Bulgarian and Romanian job-seekers, for instance, is considered a "colossal blunder".⁶

The SP's position on this latter matter bears some resemblance to the stance of Geert Wilders' Freedom Party, which is also very much opposed to labour migration from East European countries. Yet the PVV goes one step further in supporting a Dutch withdrawal from the European Union. In past years, Wilders' PVV has clearly presented itself as the most radical opponent of the EU, often denouncing European integration as an undemocratic, multiculturalist, and elitist project.⁷ Its single-

¹VVD, *Europa waarnodig*, [Europe where necessary] European Parliamentary Election manifesto 2014 (http://files.vvd.nl/verkiezingsprogramma_ep2014.pdf), p. 3.

²PvdA, *Vooreen Europa datwerkt* [For a Europe that functions], European Parliamentary Election manifesto 2014 (www.pvda.nl/data/catalog/13/s1/2539/25399/4/PvdA_Verkiezingsprogramma_Europa_1502104.pdf).

³CDA, *Naareenslagvaardig Europa* [Towards an effective Europe], European Parliamentary Election manifesto 2014 (www.cda.nl/fileadmin/CDA/Documenten/2014/VKPEU_2014_.pdf).

⁴D66, *De Europese Unie Moet Beter* [The European Union must do better], European Parliamentary Election manifesto 2014 (www.d66.nl/europa/de-europese-unie-moet-beter).

⁵SP, *Superstaat Nee. Samenwerken Ja. Nee tegendeze EU* [Superstate No. Cooperation Yes. No to this EU.], European Parliamentary Election manifesto 2014 (www.sp.nl/europa/2014/europees-verkiezingsprogramma-SP.pdf).

⁶Ibid., p. 23.

⁷ See S. van Kessel, "A victory for Geert Wilders in the Netherlands' European Parliament elections would not put Dutch EU membership at risk", LSE EUROPP blog, 11 February 2014 (<http://bit.ly/1lq4kSV>).

page manifesto for the upcoming EP election again expresses the desire to leave the EU and the euro.⁸ The PVV argues that leaving the EU would increase levels of welfare, rid the Netherlands of obligations to aid southern European countries, and grant the country sovereignty again over economic, monetary, and immigration policies.

Finally, the smaller parties competing for the 26 Dutch EP seats are all in favour of Dutch EU membership, but each have their own critical remarks. The smaller Christian parties (CU and SGP) compete in a joint list and express support for European cooperation, speak of the shared (Christian) values of European nations, but very much oppose a political union and a federalisation of the EU.⁹ The Greens (GreenLeft, GL), who are traditionally in favour of European cooperation, praise the EU's progress concerning energy and climate policy, but are more critical of the way in which the economic crisis was handled. According to GreenLeft, multinationals rather than citizens have been the main beneficiaries of EU policies, while the gap between rich and poor in Europe has increased.¹⁰ The Party for the Animals (PvdD) condemns the EU's undemocratic character and thoughtless enlargement, but its manifesto focuses above all on environmental protection and measures to improve animal rights.¹¹ The 'elderly' party 50PLUS is clear about its desire to stay in the EU, but would like to organise a non-binding referendum about the current EU Treaty and, unsurprisingly, focuses on the interests of the not-so-young generation.¹²

Public opinion on European integration

The position of most Dutch parties; essentially a (cautious) pro-European cooperation stance, makes sense if one considers broader public opinion on European integration. Past Eurobarometer surveys have always indicated that a clear majority of the Dutch electorate supports EU membership. The autumn 2013 Standard Eurobarometer also reports that 71% of the Dutch were in favour of a "European economic and monetary union with a single currency, the euro", while 27% were against.¹³ This does not mean, however, that most Dutch people are also enthusiastic about the current state of the EU. Results from a recent international Ipsos survey suggest that only 21% of the Dutch wish to leave the EU, but that 47% of those who wanted to remain inside thought that attempts should be made to reduce the power of the EU.¹⁴ Only 9 and 10%, respectively, favoured the establishment of a European government or an increase in the EU's power. In addition, the study found that a clear majority of Dutch respondents believed the EU was heading in the wrong direction, and that the EU had a negative influence on matters such as the economy, employment levels, public finances, and daily life in general. These figures indicate that a large segment of the Dutch population combines –

⁸PVV, *Verkiezingsprogramma Europees Parlement 2014*, European Parliamentary Election manifesto 2014 (www.pvv.nl/images/stories/NB/PVV-verkiezingsprogramma_EP_2014.pdf).

⁹CU-SGP, *Samenwerking JA, Superstaat NEE* [Cooperation YES, Superstate NO], European Parliamentary Election manifesto 2014 (www.christenunie.nl/1/library/download/626727).

¹⁰Groenlinks, *Ons Europa* [Our Europe], European Parliamentary Election manifesto 2014 (<http://start.groenlinks.nl/euverkiezingsprogramma/#notendop>).

¹¹PvdD, *WeerwoordaanBrussel* [Retort to Europe], European Parliamentary Election manifesto 2014 (www.partijvoordedieren.nl/downloads/2014/04/1397489038_PvdD_verkiezingsprogramma_Europa_2014_voor_web_high_res.pdf).

¹²50PLUS, *Onze toekomst in Europa. Geef 50-plussers STEM IN EP* [Our future in Europe. Give the over-50-year-olds a VOICE IN EP], European Parliamentary Election manifesto 2014 (www.50pluspartij.nl/50plus/images/PDFs/50Plus_verkiezingsprog_A5staand_d.pdf).

¹³European Commission, "Public Opinion in the European Union", *StandardEurobarometer 80*, Autumn 2013, First Results (http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb80/eb80_first_en.pdf), p. 25.

¹⁴Ipsos Public Affairs, *Ipsos European Pulse*, March 2014 (www.ipsos-nederland.nl/images/documenten/Ipsos%20European%20Pulse.pdf), p. 32.

perhaps instinctive – support for EU membership with a sceptical stance towards the direction and effects of European integration.¹⁵

It should also be borne in mind, however, that European integration is not an issue that generates huge public interest, and that it has proven hard to encourage people to participate in EP elections. In European Parliament elections after 1989 the turnout has always been below 40%, with an all-time low of 30% in 1999. Even though the eurocrisis may have made ‘Europe’ more of a headline issue in recent years, there is little reason to suppose that voters are now more eager to make their way to the polls; an Ipsos ‘Political Barometer’ survey in late April indicated that almost nine in ten voters showed little or no interest in the upcoming EP election.¹⁶

Prospects for the campaign

Taking into consideration public attitudes towards Europe, it is unsurprising that most Dutch parties tread carefully when they speak about European integration – even though in particular D66 (Euro-federalist) and the PVV (Eurorejectionist) adopt more unequivocal positions. In their public appearances in the coming month most (relatively unknown) top candidates will express their qualified support for European cooperation, stress the benefits the EU has brought to the Netherlands, but declare their commitment to stand up against unnecessary EU regulation and to make the European decision-making process more transparent. Of the main contenders, particularly the VVD, SP and CDA will express the wish to limit the EU’s sphere of influence in certain policy areas. Even though parties all have their individual reasons to take a certain position on Europe, it is questionable whether the campaign will clarify what separates the parties competing for the ‘middle ground’, and whether a rather abstract ‘more vs. less Brussels’ debate can be avoided.

Even if the manifestos of some parties are quite elaborate, most voters will find it hard to absorb the technicality of the measures proposed – if they care to read the programmes in the first place. To be fair, making EU policies and complex decision-making procedures palatable is not an easy task. At the same time, however, most parties’ proposals to increase democracy and transparency in the EU – a typical one is giving national parliaments more oversight – tend to lack real imagination and ambition. It is also noteworthy how little parties say about how they envision achieving their aims through the current EU decision-making process, or how they plan to cooperate with their foreign counterparts in the various party groups. Remarkably enough, it is Geert Wilders who has appeared most active in forging cross-border ties with the FN and other (radical right) Eurosceptics and Eurorejects in the European Alliance for Freedom.

In view of the low turnouts at previous EP elections and the apparent lack of appetite for the upcoming one, the performance of the parties is also about their ability to induce their supporters to come out and vote. In the end, bearing in mind the fragmentation of the Dutch vote and the relatively low amount of seats up for grabs, the difference in EP seats will probably be small; it is quite possible that the seven largest parties will win either three or four seats each. It is nonetheless interesting to see that the two parties with the clearest stances on European integration, D66 and the PVV, can be expected to top the polls on May 22nd. Even though both parties presumably represent their supporters’ attitudes towards Europe, this prognosis is mainly based on the current, more general, popularity of the parties. Above all, the results are thus likely to confirm the ‘second order’ character of European elections, where turnout is low, governing parties – at the height of their unpopularity – are punished, and smaller (opposition) parties do well.¹⁷

¹⁵ Another indication of this was arguably the popular rejection of the Constitutional Treaty in a referendum in 2005, where 61.5 per cent of those who turned out voted against.

¹⁶ J. Kester, “Verdeeldheid over Europa in aanloop naar verkiezingen”, *Ipsos Politieke Barometer*, Week 16 – 17, April 2014 (www.ipsos-nederland.nl/content.asp?targetid=621).

¹⁷ See K. Reif and H. Schmitt (1980), “Nine Second Order National Elections: A Conceptual Framework for the Analysis of European Election Results”, *European Journal of Political Research* 8(1), pp. 3-44.