

The Netherlands remains divided on the future of European integration between those wanting a ‘German’ federal Europe, and those in favour of an enlarged, but looser union.

by Blog Admin

Rene Cuperus examines competing opinions within the Netherlands over the country's approach to European integration. He argues that Dutch interests are balanced between those who look to Germany for inspiration, and those who favour a more ‘British’ approach which prioritises looser trade-oriented policies over closer political integration.



A few weeks ago, I participated in the German-Dutch Forum in Berlin, capital of Europe. The topic was the future of European integration. The forum is not world famous, but it may be the most effective diplomatic instrument of Dutch foreign policy, where, once a year, German and Dutch politico-academic-business delegations debate hot political topics of mutual interest. After all, the key for Europe's future lies in Germany. Timothy Garton Ash described the actual orientation of the European Union quite exactly, and with a nod to Thomas Mann, as: ‘eineuropäisches Deutschland in einemdeutschen Europa’ (a European Germany within a German Europe).

My thesis in Berlin was the following: only when Germany, supported by its partner member states, can find a wise and sustainable balance between the two notions of a European Germany and a German Europe, can the EU survive and flourish. This implies that Germany should not become ‘too European’, nor Europe ‘too German’. Germany, on the one hand, should not become too European: i.e. it should not orientate too far beyond its own national society. Such a move could put serious pressure on the domestic situation, on the German social market economy and its fragile post-war party democracy. Already now, in a flourishing German economy, alarming studies have revealed the squeezed position of the German middleclass in a globalised and polarised world order. The resonance of Thilo Sarrazin's books on [immigration](#) and [the euro](#) may be just the tip of the iceberg of populist discontent, which is lurking under the surface of German society.



The Netherlands, Credit: NASA (CC BY 2.0)

A report just published by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung about the breakdown of the German middleclass and its growing right-extremist convictions, points to alarm and vigilance, even when recognising the exemplary ‘Vergangenheitsbewältigung’ (dealings with the past) of post-war Germany. The good luck of contemporary Germany (and Europe) is that the German economy is still relatively booming because of the demand for Mercedes and BMWs among the upcoming Asian middle classes. But the construction of the EU and the eurozone must also be able to survive bad economic and social weather in Germany; it will need to be sustainable in the long run.

At the same time, Europe cannot become too German either. The warning by former Chancellor Helmut Schmidt that national superiority premonitions should never return to Germany must be taken very seriously. The same applies to the perspective given by the other great former Chancellor Willy Brandt: 'Germany should always remain a people of good neighbours'. And a neighbour country such as the Netherlands should help Germany in doing so. For this, the German-Dutch Forum is an important meeting.

Nevertheless, a question that is becoming more and more pressing for the Netherlands is how will they react to a possible "in or out" referendum in the UK? What would the Dutch position be regarding a British exit from the European Union? Here, Dutch interests, convictions and sentiments collide and clash. On the one hand, the Dutch cherish their economic connections with the German economy, and their mutual Triple A-bonds of good economic governance. On the other hand, the Dutch favour a certain Anglo-Saxon transatlantic distance to the European continent, both culturally and economically. Especially in corporate multinational circles, the Anglo-Saxon free-market philosophy is embraced, as well as liberal anti-statism.

There is also a widespread idea that the European cause is hampered by the fact that in Germany a great taboo still exists over speaking freely about the future of Europe. War guilt and the black scars of Nazism leave Germany with only one direction to follow: towards more Europe. More Unification. More Centralisation. More Federalisation. "Renationalisation", a natural protective instinct in smaller welfare democracies, such as the Netherlands, in reaction to the Total Union of Herman Van Rompuy, is a taboo-concept in Germany. For good reasons, a fear of the opening of the Diabolic Pandora's Box of nationalism and extremism dominates public discourse.

The existential question, however, remains whether electoral majorities can and will follow the Total Union course set by Van Rompuy. Or whether, as John Gray pointed out recently, the Total Union – as a failed Utopia – will provoke the forces of nationalism and extremism, which post-war Europe aimed to transcend. How feasible and desirable is a 'German' Federal Europe/eurozone, dictated by war guilt? Or should countries like the UK and the Netherlands tell Germany that the war is really over, and that Germany should relax and consider more options and a better balance between national democracy and European non-democracy? No European monster construction needs to be erected for good intentions, if it turns out that such a construction undermines national democracies and national welfare states, and therefore risks damaging the whole post-war European Social Model.

Hence, the question is: does the Netherlands choose a 'German Europe' or a 'British Europe'? Or has this choice long been made already for the Netherlands? By the Van Rompuy salami tactics of fait accompli regarding the rescue of the euro, and by its sheer membership of the eurozone.

Dutch politicians still seem to be divided about this urgent question. Some politicians – former Prime Minister Wim Kok and Europe-minister Dick Benschop (both PvdA) – broke a lance for a more 'British Europe': further enlargement including Turkey and the Ukraine to widen the free trade zone as an ultimate means of sparking new economic growth within the EU. On the other hand, there is the new PvdA-foreign minister, Frans Timmermans, who seems to have positioned himself on the more German-French-Polish Continental line.

Whatever the options, Herman Van Rompuy presented on 5 December 2012 his new version of Towards a Genuine Economic and Monetary Union. In this document, he formulated the following preconditions for the prosperity of the Great European Leap Forward: "Ultimately, these far-reaching changes undertaken by the European Union in general and the Economic and Monetary Union in particular require a shared sense of purpose amongst member states, a high degree of social cohesion, strong participation of the European and national parliaments and a renewed dialogue with social partners. The openness and transparency of the process as well as the outcome are crucial to move towards a genuine Economic and Monetary Union".

The blues of the European project are that none of these preconditions have been fulfilled so far, nor will they be fulfilled in the foreseeable future. That's true for a German Europe, a British Europe, or whatever other kind of Europe one can formulate. To reflect upon the gigantic mismatch of ambitions

and preconditions will be the main task for 2013.

This article is a contribution to the [State of the Left](#), a monthly insight report from Policy Network's Social Democracy Observatory

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics

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