

Is a Nexit now on the cards? What the UK's referendum means for the Netherlands

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*One of the issues raised by the UK's decision to leave the European Union is the effect it could have on Eurosceptic movements in other countries, with other referendums on EU membership a possibility. **Simon Otjes** considers the impact Brexit is having in the Netherlands. He suggests that while there will now be far greater scrutiny over European integration, it is highly unlikely that the country will hold a referendum on EU membership.*



The Netherlands is currently President of the Council of the European Union. During this half-year period, two referendums on European issues have led to anti-integration results. First, the Dutch referendum on the EU-Ukraine association treaty in April and now recently the European Union membership referendum in the United Kingdom. The last time that two EU-related referendums led to two anti-integration results was in 2005 when the French and the Dutch voted against the European Constitutional Treaty. All these developments lead to an obvious question: when will the Dutch hold a referendum on their EU membership?

The victory for the Leave Camp in the United Kingdom was quite a shock for the Dutch government. The Liberal prime minister, Mark Rutte, has already expressed his displeasure at the vote. The reasons for this displeasure are obvious: the Dutch and the British share a common Atlantic orientation and a commitment to free trade. Therefore, the Dutch strongly favoured the entry of the UK into the European Economic Community in the 1970s to counterbalance the French and the Germans.

The Netherlands also has strong economic ties with the United Kingdom exemplified by British-Dutch companies such as Royal Shell. The independent economic forecaster CPB has predicted that a Brexit could lead to a 1% drop of Dutch GDP due to a drop in trade between the two economies. In order to limit the economic fall-out to the Netherlands, the Dutch might be inclined to offer the British a sweeter deal than other European actors are willing to give.

In the practice of European decision-making in recent years, the liberal Rutte and the conservative British prime-minister David Cameron have become like-minded allies, working for a less regulated and more market-oriented European Union. In this sense, the Dutch government will lose an important ally in the Council. The main reason for the dismay, however, is that the British result fuels calls for the Netherlands to now holds its own referendum on EU membership.

Calls for a Dutch referendum on EU membership were made long before the British referendum. One of the groups that organised the petition to call for the [referendum](#) on the Ukraine-EU agreement, the Citizen Committee on the EU, said publicly that they did not care about this specific agreement, but rather about the nature of EU integration in general; and that they would prefer to hold a referendum on Dutch EU membership.

The call for a referendum on EU membership has now been taken up by the [Party for Freedom](#), led by Geert Wilders, an anti-immigration party that campaigned against the EU-Ukraine treaty: Wilders said "The [British] liberation from the European Union is a huge leap. Now it is our turn". The other party that participated in the 'no'-campaign, the left-wing [Socialist Party](#), has indicated that rather than a referendum on EU membership they would want a referendum on a new slimmed down European treaty, for instance a treaty that would eliminate the European Commission. Opinion polls indicate that a majority of the Dutch voters would be interested in a referendum on Dutch EU membership and that although there is still a majority in favour of EU membership, the support is much lower than it has been in previous years.

The chance that the Netherlands will hold a referendum on EU membership in the coming years is, however, extremely low. The referendum law that was adopted last year, which allowed for the referendum on the EU-Ukraine treaty, only allows for advisory referendums on bills passed by parliament, and not on issues that are already decided. To allow for a referendum on Dutch EU membership both houses of parliament would need to accept a revised referendum bill or a special bill allowing for a referendum on Dutch EU membership. Currently only the Party for Freedom and independent MPs that have left it, are opposed to Dutch EU membership.

The Party for Freedom currently leads in all polls for the 2017 Lower House elections. However, even if these polls become reality, the party is unlikely to enter government as all major parties currently have said that they do not want to govern with the Party for Freedom after anti-immigrant statements made in 2014. Even if the Party for Freedom did enter

government, an EU referendum is unlikely. The EU is an instrumental issue for the party, as Geert Wilders is motivated primarily by his views on Islam, immigration and civic integration. They are much more likely to insist on a stricter policy regarding refugees than referendum on the EU.

The route proposed by the Socialist Party seems more likely: a renegotiation of the Lisbon Treaty following the British vote. Whether this would lead to deeper EU integration, a two-track EU, or would return sovereignty on some issues to member states is an open issue. In the wake of the British referendum most leading Dutch parties, pro-European and Eurosceptic alike, in and out of the government, have called for reform of the European Union. This new treaty could then be put to a vote by the government, or much more likely the same groups that petitioned for the referendum on the EU-Ukraine agreement would demand a referendum on it. Until then the threat of a potential referendum petition would loom over any EU related bill that the Dutch parliament approves.

In this sense, the British referendum on EU membership may not be the end of a set of referendums on EU issues. After the success of the Eurosceptic side in this referendum and the previous Dutch referendum on the Ukraine-EU treaty, the Eurosceptic forces in the Netherlands are likely to use the tool more often to obstruct EU integration.

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Geert Wilders, the leader of the eurosceptic Party for Freedom. Credits: Metropolico.org / Flickr.

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