

A victory for Geert Wilders in the Netherlands' European Parliament elections would not put Dutch EU membership at risk

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11/02/2014

Recent opinion polls in the Netherlands have shown strong support among Dutch voters for Geert Wilders' radical right Freedom Party (PVV). Ahead of the European Parliament elections in May, **Stijn van Kessel** assesses what a victory for the PVV would mean for the Netherlands' EU membership. He argues that although current polls suggest the PVV will gain the largest number of seats in the country, this does not necessarily signal that Dutch voters support leaving the EU.



As in 2009, when it won 17 per cent of the vote, the populist radical right Freedom Party (*Partij voor de Vrijheid*, PVV) of Geert Wilders is expected to perform well in the upcoming European Parliament (EP) elections in May. Even though the electorate's **pessimism** concerning the effects of the Eurocrisis and wariness about deeper European integration probably contribute to the PVV's electoral performance, the results should in all likelihood be analysed primarily as outcomes of a 'second order' election. It is questionable, furthermore, whether Geert Wilders' unequivocal pleas to end Dutch EU-membership will ever bear much electoral fruit.

Unlike various other Dutch right-wing populist contenders in the past, Geert Wilders' Freedom party has proven to be very resilient. Despite a loss in the Dutch parliamentary election of 2012 (in which it received 10.1 per cent of the vote, compared with 15.5 per cent in 2010) and intra-party conflicts leading to the dismissal or defection of several MPs, the PVV tops recent **opinion polls**. As the Table below shows, if a national election were to be held today the PVV would be predicted to gain 12 seats on its showing in the 2012 elections, and be the largest party in the Dutch parliament.

Table: Seat projections for Dutch House of Representatives based on opinion poll average (February 2014)

<i>Party</i>	<i>Predicted seats</i>	<i>Seats at 2012 election</i>	<i>Change in seats</i>
Freedom Party (PVV)	27	15	+12
People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD)	23	41	-18
Socialist Party (SP)	22	15	+7
Democrats 66 (D66)	20	12	+8
Labour Party (PvdA)	17	38	-21
Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA)	17	13	+4
Christian Union (CU)	7	5	+2
GreenLeft (GL)	5	4	+1
Reformed Political Party (SGP)	4	3	+1
Party for the Animals (PvdD)	4	2	+2
50 Plus	4	2	+2

Note: Elections to the House of Representatives use a national party list form of proportional representation. It is therefore common for opinion polls to articulate results as seat projections rather than vote shares. The figures in the table stem from De Peilingwijzer of

political scientist Tom Louwerse, who calculates an average of the four political polls that are held regularly in the Netherlands: TNS NIPO, Peil.nl (Maurice de Hond), de Politieke Barometer (Ipsos Synovate) and De Stemming (EenVandaag). Source: Nederlandse Omroep Stichting.

Wilders will be the most vocal opponent of European integration in the upcoming EP election, as was the case in the past campaigns for both European and national elections. The difference with five years ago is that Wilders has sharpened his opposition to 'Europe' and now favours a Dutch withdrawal from the EU. His EU-related discourse radicalised in the run up to the [2012 parliamentary election](#), and European integration also became a more prominent issue for the Freedom Party. In its [manifesto from 2012](#) (titled '*Their Brussels, our Netherlands*'), the party railed against the 'unelected multi-culti Eurocrats', and highlighted the socio-cultural and socio-economic threats of the sovereignty-undermining 'holy Great-European project'. At the same time, Dutch politicians were blamed for slavishly complying with the 'diktats from Brussels' and handing out money to untrustworthy countries such as Greece and Romania.

With more than three months to go to the EP election, Wilders has already started a new tirade against Brussels – for instance with short anti-EU videos distributed through his party's online newsletter. On the 6th of February, Wilders attracted attention when results were presented of a PVV-initiated study by the British consultancy Capital Economics about the economic consequences of a Dutch withdrawal from the EU. Perhaps rather unsurprisingly in view of the [consultancy's reputation](#) as a 'leading voice for Eurozone break-up', but to the delight of Wilders, [the report](#) argued that a 'NExit' was likely to benefit the Dutch economy.

Wilders has thus set the tone for the upcoming European election campaign – which is actually preceded by local elections in March – leaving his 'Euroreject' position unrivalled. The radical left Socialist Party has been wary of deeper integration and intra-EU labour migration, and criticised the presumed neo-liberal character of the EU. Yet the party also acknowledges the benefits of 'Europe' in terms of peace, security and prosperity, and supported stricter control over national budgets and the financial sector by the European Central Bank (ECB).

The traditionally (or previously) dominant pro-European mainstream parties – the Liberals (VVD), Labour (PvdA) and the Christian Democrats (CDA) – are likely to speak of the general benefits of EU membership, although they will probably do their best to avoid sounding too Europhile by criticising the alleged failures of the EU and conveying their reluctance to sacrifice national sovereignty. The most pro-European stance will be taken by the two culturally liberal parties GreenLeft (GL) and Democrats 66 (D66), the traditional antagonists of Wilders' Freedom Party.

At first sight, the Eurorejection of the Freedom Party may seem a risky strategy; Eurobarometer surveys throughout recent decades have shown that a great majority of the Dutch have supported EU membership and considered it to be beneficial to the Netherlands. Even though these figures have declined since the second half of the 1990s, opinions toward EU membership remained relatively positive, certainly in comparison with traditionally Eurosceptic



Dutch prime minister Mark Rutte and Geert Wilders, Credit: Machinarium (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

countries such as the UK, or crisis-struck countries such as Greece and Portugal, where support levels for EU membership have declined toward the end of the 2000s. Following the results of the [Standard Eurobarometer](#) from Spring 2013, 71 per cent of the Dutch disagreed with the statement that the Netherlands could better face the future outside the EU (compared with an average EU-wide figure of 56 per cent).

One should nevertheless be careful not to read too much into these figures. Even though most Dutch people remain convinced that the Netherlands is better off inside the EU, this does not mean that they are uncritical about the way it is designed or functioning. This was for instance shown by the popular rejection of the Constitutional Treaty in a referendum in 2005 (61.5 per cent of those who turned out voted against).

What is more, the Spring 2013 Eurobarometer results also showed that 58 per cent of the Dutch tended to distrust the EU (while only 37 per cent expressed trust), and that more people had a negative (34 per cent) than a positive (27 per cent) image of the EU – the latter figures denoting above average negativity compared with the EU27-mean. An October 2012 [opinion poll](#) conducted for the news show *Eén Vandaag* furthermore showed that only a quarter of the respondents desired shifting more responsibilities to the EU, while 55 per cent thought that giving the EU more influence over nation states' budgets in response to the crisis was a bad idea (against 33 per cent who thought the opposite).

Judging from these figures, there is certainly room in Dutch politics for parties with an outspoken Eurosceptic message. Bearing in mind the suspicion among the population about the EU and further integration, it is also no surprise that most essentially pro-European parties want to downplay their enthusiasm for European cooperation and shy away from presenting a clear vision about the future of Europe. The EP election campaign will probably again revolve around a crude and abstract 'more vs. less Brussels' debate, with Wilders now at least providing a clear choice.

Yet a good result for Wilders in the EP election will reflect primarily the fortunes of his party as it stands in the national context, rather than the electorate's rejection of EU membership. The results are likely to confirm the 'second order' character of European elections, where (smaller) opposition parties do well and governing parties – at the height of their unpopularity – are punished.

Even though the campaign will largely be centered on the theme of European integration, and even if many voters will use the EP election to express their apprehension about European integration, it is questionable whether the results are very indicative of the intensity of Eurosceptic sentiments among the Dutch electorate and the salience of EU-related issues. It is telling that – though there were also other reasons for the party's loss – the Freedom Party did not perform very well in the parliamentary election of 2012 after having placed so much emphasis on the EU theme. In first order national elections, which are (still) primarily about more salient domestic issues, a platform primarily built around an anti-EU appeal is not likely to attract a great number of voters.

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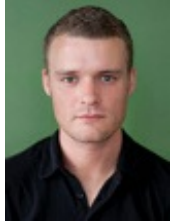
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