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THE NETHERLANDS AND EUROPEAN INTEGRATION. FROM 'PRO' TO 'NO'

When you break it, you own it!

On 1st June 2005, 61.6% of the Dutch electorate rejected the draft European Constitution. It was for the first time in Dutch parliamentary history that a referendum was organized. Together with the French, who had also torpedoed the Constitution, the Dutch stalled the progress of further European Integration.

In April 2006, the Italian Prime Minister Prodi pleaded for a core group of 'Pro-European nations' that would take the lead in the further integration of Europe². This group would include all EU's founder-countries, except the Netherlands. By itself, Prodi's remark had no direct political implications, and within a few days the Italian Prime Minister tried to calm down the agitated Dutch politicians by claiming he had been misquoted. But still, the image remained that the Dutch were obstructing further European integration and should not be regarded anymore as one of the motors behind European integration.

This February it was Barroso, Chairman of the European Commission, who subtly urged the Dutch Government to move towards a more proactive approach to the problems caused by the Dutch 'no'. Barroso emphasized the fact that in 2004, the Dutch government signed the Constitution Treaty. This means that the government has a responsibility to have the treaty ratified.

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² B. Lanting, *EU-kopgroep werkt alleen maar averechts*, "Volkskrant", 19 April 2006.

Many commentators and politicians from other European countries expressed their concern over the reluctant attitude the Dutch displayed to solve the problems they had caused. As in the Pottery Barn rule: "When you break it, you own it!"

Dutch Ambivalent attitude towards Europe: the electorate

The Dutch population seems to be confused about Europe. Now, after the referendum, we know that the majority of the electorate is against the European Constitution, but how exactly should we interpret this 'no' vote? In many newspapers the outcome is interpreted as a proof of an emerging Euro skepticism in the Netherlands, but the results of several surveys studying the Dutch attitude towards Europe point at another conclusion.

The *Eurobarometer* measures the public opinion of the European population on various topics. In these surveys, the Dutch respondents continuously have shown a clear support for the European Union over the years. An indicator for support can be found in the answers to the question whether the respondent thinks that the EU membership is a good thing or not³. Without exception the Dutch respondents were far more positive than the European average (Table 1).

Table 1. EU Membership is a good thing

	1976 spring	1986 spring	1996 spring	2006 autumn
Netherlands	75	83	78	72
European average	53	62	53	53

The same can be said about the response to the question if the EU membership is beneficial for the country or not⁴ (Table 2).

Table 2. EU Membership is beneficial for our country

	-	1986 spring	1996 spring	2006 autumn
Netherlands	-	68	64	62
European average	-	46	42	54

There seems to be a constant level of support for the European Union as such. No drop in support was measured in the period after the referendum on the constitution. On the contrary, there is a slight increase in the trust Dutch people have in (European) democracy. The explanation for this is that the electorate noticed that their voting behaviour mattered and made a difference⁵. Looking at these outcomes

³ The Question in the Eurobarometer survey was: 'Generally speaking, do you think that (our country's) membership of the European Union is a good thing?'

⁴ The Question in the Eurobarometer survey was: 'Taking everything into consideration, would you say that (our country) has on balance benefited from being a member of the European Union or not?'

⁵ Forum, *Verkiezingstijd goed moment voor visie op Europa*, "Volkskrant", 1 June 2006.

we cannot come to the conclusion that the 'no' vote coincides with, or is indicating an increase in Euro Skepticism⁶.

Dutch Ambivalent attitude towards Europe: the political elite

Before 2005, 'Europe' was never really an important political issue in the Netherlands. The issue of Europe was more or less depoliticised, hidden under a blanket of consensus. Ever since elections to the European Parliament are held, the voter turnout has been lower than in national, local and even district elections⁷. Europe has never played a major role in parliamentary election campaigns. Even major developments, like the 2004 enlargement of the union, the treaty of Maastricht, the introduction of the Euro occurred without much political struggle or debate.

Over the years, the gap between the political elite and the electorate over Europe grew. If the parliament would have decided over the European Constitution it would have been ratified without any doubt (127 members of Parliament were in favour, 22 were against, one member could not make up his mind). However, it was decided that a referendum was to be organised.

The parties represented in the government coalition at that time (CDA, VVD, D66), as well as the largest opposition party (PvdA) and a smaller opposition party (GroenLinks) tried to explain to the electorate why they should support the Constitution. They did not find the right tone, nor the convincing arguments, contrary to the parties that attacked the Constitution (SP, CU, LPF, SGP and Group Wilders).

Among the parties that supported the Constitution, a gap emerged between party elites and their electorate (Table 3). The electorate of PvdA and VVD disagreed with the pro-Constitution campaign of their leaders and there was only a slight majority of 'pro' voters in the electorate of the other three parties that were in favour for the Constitution.

Question: How did you vote in the referendum?⁸

	TOTAL	CDA	PvdA	VVD	GroenLinks	D66
YES	38	53	37	49	54	51
NO	62	47	63	51	46	49

⁶ This conclusion is supported by the outcome of a large scale survey performed by the Dutch government as a reaction to the referendum. According to this survey no less than 65 per cent of the respondents support the EU-membership (source: Nederlandineuropa.nl. Executive summary, July 2006, The Hague).

⁷ The lowest voter turnout for the European Parliament so far was 30.0% in 1999 (source: CBS, statistics Netherlands, www.cbs.nl).

⁸ European Commission, *The European Constitution: post-referendum survey in the Netherlands*, Brussels 2005, p. 12.

Why did people vote no?

Right after the Referendum, commentators and analysts tried to explain the rejection of the Constitution. The European Commission ordered a post-referendum survey to find answers⁹. The many articles and surveys published after the referendum gave insight into the arguments the electorate had used to vote against the Constitution. Interestingly, most of these arguments were only indirectly related to the Constitution itself: a) lack of information, b) the introduction of the Euro in 2002, c) the net contribution to the European Union, d) the diminishing influence within the EU as a result of the enlargement, e) future enlargement, and f) domestic disenchantment.

There is a logical explanation for the fact that most of the arguments mentioned above are not directly related to the European Constitution, since this was the first occasion for the Dutch electorate to directly express its opinion on a European issue. It seems that the Dutch electorate took this opportunity to broaden the question and include many other European elements and issues as well.

a) Lack of information

The EU post-referendum survey indicates that lack of information was the main cause for the 'no' vote. No less than 32% of the participants in this survey names lack of information the reason to vote 'no'¹⁰. The '*NederlandinEuropa.nl*'-survey indicates that only 21% of the respondents felt 'well informed' about Europe¹¹.

It is remarkable that lack of information proves to be the top ranking argument to vote against the Constitution, since information was available in all the feasible forms. The text of the constitution was available in Dutch in printed versions as well as on the internet, and every eligible voter was sent a brochure with a summary of the text to their homes. Furthermore, all the media paid plenty of attention to the Constitution and covered arguments both for and against.

Nevertheless, the question whether all this information eliminated the distrust to what this Constitution would really mean for the Dutch remains. When the respondents label 'lack of information' one of the main reasons to vote against the Constitution, they might mean that they were not convinced why they should vote in favour of the Constitution. The EU post-referendum survey shows that 5% of the respondents explicitly give this reason for their 'no' vote¹². Besides this, 50% of the Dutch think that a European Constitution is not essential to pursue European Construction¹³.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ European Commission, *The European Constitution: post-referendum survey in the Netherlands*, Brussels 2005, p. 15.

¹¹ *Nederlandineuropa.nl*. Executive summary, July 2006, The Hague.

¹² European Commission, *The European Constitution: post-referendum survey in the Netherlands*, Brussels 2005, p. 15.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 21.

b) *The introduction of the Euro in 2002*

There is no link whatsoever between the introduction of the Euro in 2002 and the draft Constitution. But still, the disenchantment over the Euro echoed in the referendum. The Dutch population has an overall negative feeling towards the adoption of the Euro. A Eurobarometer survey¹⁴ shows that the Dutch are more negative about the Euro than the European average. Only 38% of the respondents think there has been an overall advantage, 43% perceive an overall disadvantage.

According to 90.5% of Dutch respondents, the introduction of the Euro caused price increase. The European average for the belief that prices increased as a result of introduction of the Euro is 81.0%¹⁵. Objectively, however, there is less reason for the Dutch to complain than for the average European citizen. For the last three years, the Dutch inflation rate has been much lower than the average inflation rate in the Eurozone. Since 2003, prices in the Netherlands have increased by 4.8%, while the average price increase in the countries of the Eurozone was 6.9%¹⁶. These figures do not take away the belief deeply rooted in the Netherlands that we are worse off with the Euro than we were with the Guilder before 2002. The respondents seem to underestimate the positive consequences of the single currency for the Netherlands: an open economy with international trade as one of the most important economical sectors.

c) *Net contribution to the EU*

Until 1993, the Netherlands had often been a net benefactor of the EU. Mainly because of the massive agricultural subsidies the Netherlands received more money than they paid into EU's budget. But since that time the contribution of the Netherlands is greater than its returns. The Dutch government disagrees with the European Commission about what definition should be used to determine the net contribution. Contrary to the European Commission, the Dutch government believes that the custom-tax from the Rotterdam harbour should be included in the calculations¹⁷. In the light of this definition, the Dutch paid € 194 per capita in 2004 (which is 0.68% of the GDP), the highest amount per capita in Europe. According to the calculation made by the EU, the Dutch have a net contribution of € 125 per capita (which is 0.44% GDP). Even if the EU definition is taken into account, the Dutch pay the highest net contribution per capita¹⁸. Since 2007, the Netherlands has benefited from a reduction in their contribution of € 1 billion. This was the result of the negotiations among European government leaders in December 2005.

Prime Minister Balkenende pleaded for this reduction using the 'no' vote on the referendum as an argument. In 2007, the Dutch are still making the highest net

¹⁴ European Commission, *The Eurozone, 5 years after the introduction of Euro coins and banknotes; analytical report*, Brussels 2006.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 30, 91.

¹⁶ J. Walsehofs, G. van Steeg, *Inflatie Nederland al drie jaar lager dan eurozone*, webmagazine Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2006.

¹⁷ G. Gelauff, H. Stolwijk, P. Veenendaal, *CPB-document, Europe's financial perspectives in perspective*, The Hague 2005.

¹⁸ Ministry of Finance, website: press release, *De Nederlandse nettopositie en het 'Rotterdam-effect'*, 2005.

contribution according to their definition, but according to the EU-definition the Dutch pay about the average net contribution.

d) Diminishing influence within the EU

The Dutch are one of the six 'founding fathers' of European integration. In 1951, the Dutch, together with France, Germany, Italy, Belgium and Luxembourg, signed the treaty of the European Coal and Steel Community, normally regarded as the first step towards European integration. Even when the group of cooperating countries expanded, the Dutch managed to retain a greater influence in Europe than the country's size would justify. More than ever, the Dutch lost their political influence after the enlargement of 2004, when no less than 10 countries accessed the European Union. After 2004, the Dutch were only one of 25 members, and not even a big one. Furthermore, the bonus of being one of the 'founding fathers' gradually faded, especially since many of the new members have a different background. Until only a few years ago, many of the new members were still part of the Warsaw Pact¹⁹. For this reason, they do not share the same European history as the 'old' members experienced, and tend not to reward the Dutch for the important role they played in establishing the common European project.

Besides, being afraid that the Netherlands loses influence to other member states, the respondents of the post referendum survey also mention that they fear a loss of national sovereignty. Following 'lack of information', this fear ranks second in the list of reasons why people voted 'no' at the referendum²⁰. Another complaint was that all these changes happened far too fast. At least every other respondent believes that the speed of change within the EU has been too high²¹.

e) Future enlargement

Before the enlargement of the EU in 2004, the Dutch were more positive about accession of new member states than the average European. Over the years, the Dutch have become less enthusiastic about further enlargement. In 2006, a minority of 45% was in favour of further enlargement, a figure slightly lower than the European average (46%)²². The Dutch fear a further decrease of political influence within the European Union as well as an increase of their net contribution. The possible future entry of Turkey played an important role in the referendum campaign. People opposing the Constitution pointed at the enormous size of the country and warned for the extra costs its accession would incur. Besides the economical and political arguments against the accession of Turkey, other issues were raised as well. Turkey with its Muslim background might disturb the Christian-Judaic culture of Europe. For some segments of the Dutch population this would be undesirable. The issue of multicult-

¹⁹ With the entrance of Romania and Bulgaria on 1 January 2007, now all former Warsaw Pact countries outside the Soviet Union are member of the EU.

²⁰ European Commission, *The European Constitution: post-referendum survey in the Netherlands*, Brussels 2005, p. 15.

²¹ *Nederlandineuropa.nl*: 53% of the respondents find the rate of change in the European Union too rapid; 13% too slow.

²² European Commission, *Eurobarometer 66, public opinion in the European Union*, Brussels, Autumn 2006.

turalism has for a few years dominated the political agenda in the Netherlands. Especially after the murder of the political leader Fortuyn and the cineaste van Gogh, the religious and cultural tensions increased.

Within the conservative party VVD, the question whether Turkey could join the European Union in the near future or not, led to a clash, when MP Wilders refused to abide by the official party's position to support it. As a result, Wilders left his party but kept the seat in the Parliament to become one of the most pronounced critics of the European Constitution, employing the possible accession of Turkey to the EU as the 'horror scenario'. According to the survey organised by *NederlandinEuropa.nl*, a majority of 52% do not want Turkey to be a member of the EU, even if the country met all the conditions for the entry.

f) Domestic disenchantment

At the time of the referendum the government coalition led by Prime Minister Balkenende faced a very low approval rate. In opinion polls the government coalition lost 20 seats of the 78 they had in the Parliament. All three parties of the coalition lost seats in the polls²³. The government was unpopular because of its painful political reforms in order to improve the economic situation. According to the EU post referendum survey, 14% of the voters named domestic disenchantment as a reason to vote 'no'²⁴.

After the Constitution

After the referendum, the Dutch government introduced a period of reflection, just as the European Commission did after the 'no' votes in France and the Netherlands. The Dutch government organised public debates to discuss the future of the Dutch role in the EU, and carried out a large-scale survey in order to understand the public opinion.

The Dutch government tried to conciliate the critical population by playing hard ball in Brussels over financial issues concerning contribution and subsidies. In 2005, they were very successful in reducing the contribution, but at the same time fed the skeptical attitude of the population towards the EU.

The Dutch government interpreted the 'no' given in the referendum as a signal that the Dutch population felt estranged from the process of European integration²⁵. Europe, for that reason, must have benefits that are more clearly visible to the Dutch, and there should be a clearer distinction between issues that can be dealt with at the national level and issues that require a European approach. Furthermore, the Netherlands asked for a cautious approach to further enlargement.

²³ Website: *Politieke barometer.nl*; last poll before the referendum on 1st June 2005: 27th May 2005. CDA 33 seats (44 in parliament); VVD: 21 (28 in parliament), D66: 4 (6 in parliament).

²⁴ European Commission, *The European Constitution: post-referendum survey in the Netherlands*, Brussels 2005, p. 15.

²⁵ B. Bot, Minister of foreign affairs, *Staat van de Europese Unie 2006–2007*, Letter to the Parliament, 19 September 2006.

Right after the referendum, not only the coalition parties but most other political parties as well quickly changed their opinion on the EU towards a more skeptical and critical approach, because they were afraid to alienate the electorate further.

Contrary to what one might expect after the political turmoil of the referendum, Europe did not play an important role in the parliamentary election campaign in November 2006. For most political parties it was difficult to explain their sudden change on the European issue. For those parties that maintained their pro-Europe attitude it was risky to face the electorate that had so clearly said 'no' to the Constitution.

Apparently, contrary to the political establishment, the electorate did not forget the question of Europe. All five parties that had supported the Constitution (CDA, PvdA, VVD, D66, GroenLinks) lost seats in the election of 2006. It goes without saying that there may have been other explanations for this loss as well, but most analyses of the election results suggested a correlation²⁶. The parties that took the lead in the 'no' campaign won multiple seats (the Socialist Party increased its position from 8 to 25 seats, the Christian Union from 3 to 6 seats, and PVV (Wilders) from 1 to 9 seats).

The Netherlands and the EU, now and in the future

The Dutch government claims that the gap between the EU and its people is not just a Dutch phenomenon, but a Union-wide problem. Bot, the Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs in the previous government, strongly disagreed with the label of 'Euroskeptics', claiming that 'Eurocritical' would be a better term to describe the attitude of both the Dutch people and government²⁷. Still there is criticism of other member states about the somewhat passive approach of the Dutch government after the 2005 referendum. Ever since the French and Dutch voters rejected the Constitution in their referenda, Europe has been stymied. Most member states have already ratified the treaty, but rejection of the Treaty by only one member state, blocks the Constitution. The Dutch government felt the pressure to break the stalemate, but there were several problems preventing an easy way out:

First, a new cabinet was formed in February 2007. As usual, the cabinet was formed by a coalition of different political parties. The current government includes two parties that were in favour of the Constitution (CDA and PvdA), but also one junior member (Christian Union) that was prominently against the Constitution. Maybe it is because of this political disagreement that there was no clear comment about the future of the European Constitution in the government's policy statement.

Another problem is that Europe, or more specifically the European Constitution, played hardly any role in the election campaign²⁸. Most political parties did not

²⁶ W. Munchau, *The Dutch are leading a popular rebellion*, "The Financial Times", 27 November 2006.

²⁷ B. Bot, *Niet eurosceptisch, maar eurokritisch; Nederlandse regering doolt niet zonder kompas rond in het laagland*, "NRC Handelsblad", 31 May 2006.

²⁸ O. Ruding, *Urgente onderdelen EU-grondwet behoeven alsnog uitvoering*, "Volkskrant", 28 November 2006.

express clearly what they thought should happen with the European Constitution. The cabinet struggled with two alternative options, neither of them very attractive.

The first option, to hold another referendum about the altered version of the Constitution, was favoured by PvdA and Christian Union, as well as by most of the opposition parties. From the democratic point of view this seemed a logical thing to do. The people rejected the first version, so let them decide if the second version is acceptable or not. But only if the proposal were much different from the original one from 2005, a majority of the people might support it. However, there is absolutely no guarantee for a 'yes'. As mentioned earlier, there are many other arguments and sentiments determining voting behaviour in a referendum like this.

The other option, supported strongly by CDA, was to have enough changes in the second proposal to make another referendum unnecessary. Therefore the proposal of the Constitution had to be tuned down to a normal European treaty similar to the many we had in the past. There was a lot of pressure exerted by other member states on the Netherlands to avoid another referendum with all the risks of a second rejection. Its brunt was felt most strongly by Prime Minister Balkenende and the Minister of Foreign Affairs Verhagen (both from CDA).

The Netherlands was not the only country who seriously hesitated about the Constitution as proposed in 2005. More countries wanted changes, and behind closed doors a new proposal was being prepared. The semantic changes might have been the most important ones. The word 'Constitution' was surrendered, as well as the European anthem and flag. Instead of a new Constitution replacing former treaties, the new proposal was called a treaty, adding several elements to the existing ones. To some there is hardly any real political difference between the first and second proposal. One difference is that the new proposal is totally unreadable compared to the draft for the Constitution because it refers to numerous former treaties rather than replacing them by a new text. Countries that already ratified the Constitution tend to minimise the differences between the two proposals. In the Netherlands, however, the Cabinet emphasises the changes.

On 21st September 2007, the Dutch cabinet decided that there will be no referendum about the new treaty²⁹. The cabinet follows the advisory opinion issued by the Council of State³⁰. The formal argument is that the new EU treaty will have no impact on the national constitution, contrary to the first proposal. Besides this formal argument, the cabinet suggested that a referendum was not needed, since the second proposal awarded the objections put forward by the people in the referendum in 2005. This second argument is disputable, since we can only guess why exactly people rejected the Constitution. Studies to find out what the 'no' meant, and how it needs to be interpreted result in a very complex set of objections. It is impossible to confirm that this second proposal takes away all or most of these objections.

Now, after the Treaty of Lisbon was signed on 27 October, it is the Dutch Parliament that will decide about the ratification. Many will surely see this a blow to

²⁹ I. Traynor, *Dutch PM faces defeat over EU treaty vote: Referendum issue splits country and coalition*, "Guardian", 22 September 2007.

³⁰ European Report, *Treaty of Lisbon: Ratifications could start in December already*, 23 October 2007.

democracy. It indicates that the Dutch government is willing to ask the people's opinion, but will only respect the decision as long as it finds it convenient. It will not be very helpful for the somewhat problematic relation between the political elite and the people. This gap is not unique for the Netherlands. A recent survey showed that in the five large member states there is a vast majority in favour of organizing a referendum about the Lisbon treaty, varying from 63% in France to 76% in Germany³¹. The political leaders however will do anything to prevent any more referenda. In Lisbon, the political leaders of the 27 member states finally agreed on a new treaty. But the disagreement between them and their people is certainly not diminishing.

One way or another, there will be a treaty. This is not the first time that Europe has faced problems concerning further integration or enlargement. So far Europe always survived these problems, even the far more trying ones. However, the underlying problems cannot be denied. The Netherlands is not the only European country where people complain about the problem of legitimacy. Not all the arguments the Dutch electorate used to vote against the Constitution were directly linked to the Constitution itself, but most of them displayed a distrust or cynicism towards Europe. There are no indicators that this problem will just fade away by being ignored.

One way of dealing with this growing discontent about Europe is counterbalancing it by focusing on the undeniably positive aspects of European Integration.

Positive effects of European Integration for the Netherlands

Looking at the public debate in the Netherlands before and after the referendum, it may seem that Europe brings hardly any advantages. Yet, actually, there are many. Most importantly, the European Union has several economic advantages. The Netherlands is an extremely open economy. As no other country, the Dutch have profited from the integration of the European market and the dismantling of trade barriers. Looking at the cumulative growth of trade within the European Community, in the period 1960–2000, the Dutch export grew by 1485.0%³² (average for the European Community for the period was 1292.0%). If you compare this with the growth of the export to the rest of the world in the same period (862.0% for the Netherlands, with the European Community's average of 734.0%), it becomes clear that the export to countries within Europe grew much faster than the export to countries outside Europe. European integration is a crucial determinant for this growth³³. The figures also show that the Netherlands profited even more from European integration than the European average.

The same can be claimed about enlargement of the Union. The expansion from 6 to 27 member states determined the economic growth, as described earlier. It is

³¹ M. Kranenburg, *EU wil in Lissabon nu een punt zetten achter verdrag Lissabon*, "NRC-Handelsblad", 18 October 2007.

³² H. Badinger, F. Breuss, *What has determined the Rapid Post-War Growth of the Intra-EU Trade?*, February 2003.

³³ *Ibidem*.

interesting therefore that the more recent enlargements were criticised so heavily by the Dutch, who focused merely on the effect it might have on the net contribution to the EU and left aside the bigger picture of further economic growth resulting from these enlargements. Furthermore, it is because of the enlargements, that the EU is now the world's largest economic and trade bloc.

Another challenge is to dissolve the myth about the Euro. As mentioned before, there seems to be a consensus in the Netherlands about the fact that the Euro has had a negative influence on the Dutch economy. However, facts about the lower inflation rates since the introduction of the Euro suggest a different conclusion. Shortly after the introduction, the Euro is now the world's second default currency.

Besides the economic advantages, there are other reasons why the Dutch should cherish the EU. Jeremy Rifkin³⁴ points at the extraordinary accomplishment of the European integration. It is unprecedented that within three generations a political, economic and cultural cooperation of such a size and form has been established. The EU has fulfilled every ambition it had at its establishment. It preserved peace and built a strong economy. Robert Kagan describes Europe as "[...] a post historical paradise of peace and relative prosperity, the realization of Kant's 'Perpetual Peace'"³⁵. It is interesting to see that the admiration for Europe seems to come from outside Europe rather than from within. For a small member state as the Netherlands the advantages mentioned before are especially important. Never in the history, has the Netherlands experienced such a long time of peace and military stability as in the period following the establishment of the European Community. Furthermore, the Netherlands still plays a larger political role within Europe than could be expected on the sheer basis of its size.

More focus on the benefits and accomplishments of the EU might counterbalance the complaints. Also the urgency of a strong Europe could be more strongly emphasised. After the end of the Cold War, with the implosion of the Soviet Union, Europe's role and position changed, and still continues to change. The United States and Europe are no longer default allies against the Communist enemy. The United States uses its unipolar moment to act more unilaterally than it used to during the Cold War. On the other hand, Europe has developed a more assertive attitude towards, and sometimes against, the United States. The political tensions between parts of Europe (especially France and Germany) and the United States were fairly visible during the first part of the Second War in Iraq. Because neither the United States nor the European countries thought it in their own interest to have this political conflict escalated, it faded away, and it seemingly did not harm fundamentally the long-standing friendly relationship. Yet the incident indicates that Europe should prepare for a changing balance of power in global politics. A strong and more strongly united Europe would be a better starting point than a Europe that is too preoccupied with internal discussions about future integration³⁶.

³⁴ J. Rifkin, *The European Dream: How Europe's Vision of the Future is Quietly Eclipsing the American Dream*, "Tarcher/Penguin", August 2004; *Europeanen mogen wel een feestje vieren*, "Volkskrant", 17 maart 2007.

³⁵ R. Kagan, *Power and weakness*, "Policy Review", June-July 2002.

³⁶ P. Chappatte, *Self-centered Europe*, "The International Herald Tribune", 20 June 2005.



There is also another reason for an increasing sense of urgency in an efficient and strong EU. The most trying problems European countries are facing today are of transnational nature. Therefore, they require international cooperation to be dealt with. Threats of international terrorism, environmental issues and migration are all examples of problems that need a European approach rather than an attempt at solving at the national level.

So far, the Dutch political establishment has been part of the problem and not part of the solution. Leaders of political parties are so afraid of losing the popular support that they hardly dare to face the people with unpopular ideas or proposals. The recent governments have almost blindly adopted the criticism of the people (Europe is too expensive, we have not enough influence in Brussels, the (future) enlargement alienates us from Europe etc.). In an attempt not to distance them from the popular vote, the Dutch government transformed from a supportive member state into a very critical and demanding member state. In the meantime, the popular discontent about Europe in the Netherlands only increased. The more assertive position of the Dutch Government only assured the people that they were right in their criticism. It became very unfashionable in the Netherlands to focus on the positive sides of the EU and further integration.

The current and future governments could invest in Europe by taking a position that is not dictated by the fear of losing popular support, but rather by what is strategically best for the Netherlands, pointing at the advantages that the EU gives the Netherlands. The outcome of public opinion polls shows that there is still sufficient support for the EU in the Netherlands to back up this strategy.

Besides showing courage in taking a more constructive pro-EU position, the political establishment should also place the EU, and the future of the EU, on a promi-

ment position in the political agenda. So far, the political elite got away with paying only marginal attention to this topic. But the discontent displayed at the referendum and the growing importance of the EU demand a more prominent place for Europe in Dutch politics.

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