

Dutch referendum produces majority against EU-Ukraine Association Agreement

By Johannes Stern
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In a referendum held in the Netherlands on Wednesday, a clear majority of 62 percent of the voters rejected the Association Agreement between the European Union and Ukraine. Just 38 percent of voters voted in favour. Voter participation was 32 percent, meaning the referendum result is valid; the law requires a minimum of 30 percent voter participation.

The result deepened the political crisis in Europe and provoked extremely nervous responses from political and media circles. Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, who had called for a “yes” vote, felt compelled after the result to declare that the ratification of the EU agreement would have to be reconsidered. “If the referendum is valid, we can’t simply ratify the agreement as it is,” he said on Dutch television.

In January, European Commission head Jean-Claude Juncker warned in an interview with Dutch newspaper *NRC Handelsblad* that a “no” vote in the Netherlands on the Association Agreement “could open the door to a major continental crisis.” In early March, Juncker reiterated his warning in The Hague, saying a “no” vote would lead to a destabilisation of Europe. The day after the result, he announced through his spokesperson that he was deeply “saddened.”

Herman Van Rompuy, who participated in the drafting of the agreement with Kiev as President of the European Council, declared in an interview with Dutch newspaper *Trouw* that a “no” vote would be a “disgrace” for The Hague.

Van Rompuy referred to the fact that the Dutch government had already accepted the agreement and that a “no” would make the country a less reliable partner. The Netherlands was one of the EU’s founding members and currently holds the rotating EU Council presidency.

Top German European politician and leader of the conservative European People’s Party, Manfred Weber, attacked the Dutch government claiming that Rutte had not done enough to promote support for the EU-Ukraine deal and had “kept a low profile, just like many of the elites.”

According to Weber, the referendum was not just about the deal with Ukraine. “It was anti-Rutte, it was anti-Europe, it was anti-migration, it was anti-everything.”

In its initial commentary, Spiegel Online spoke of a “double rebuke for the EU.” The referendum was not only “about any free trade agreement,” but “rather that deal which in November 2013 triggered an uprising in Ukraine.” That the Netherlands now rejected this agreement so clearly was of “symbolic value.” It was “not only a victory for Russian President Vladimir Putin, but also a victory for all of those who would prefer to see the EU break up today and not tomorrow.” In addition, nobody should console themselves by assuming “that the 70 percent of Netherlanders who did not take part in the referendum have a more friendly attitude towards the EU than the others.”

The legal basis for the referendum was a law passed in the Dutch parliament in July 2015 on the holding of so-called consultative referendums. This permits the holding of a plebiscite on already adopted laws if, within six months, 300,000 signatures from registered voters can be collected. The Association Agreement between the EU and Ukraine was thus called into question.

The activist group GeenPeil announced on July 10 it would gather the necessary signatures for the referendum, receiving, according to their own figures, 30,000 within the first 24 hours. In October 2015, it was officially announced that more than 427,000 valid signatures had been received and that the government had to call the referendum.

GeenPeil is a partnership between the GeenStijl website and citizens initiatives Burgercomité-EU and Forum voor Democratie, which are supported behind the scenes by right-wing political forces.

The founder of Forum voor Democratie, Thierry Baudet, is seeking to bring about a conservative revolution and the dissolution of the EU, according to his own proclamations. His dissertation published in 2012 carried the programmatic title “The significance of borders,” and it is a right-wing plea for the nation-state.

GeenStijl (without style or civility) is a multi-media blog

in existence since 2003 which describes itself as “politically incorrect” and has been repeatedly criticised due to “xenophobic and extreme comments,” according to Wikipedia. Since 2010, the website, which belongs to the conservative *Telegraaf* newspaper group, has produced its own television programme with their own reporters that above all targets politicians they portray as part of the “left-liberal opinion-making elite.”

The referendum was also supported by Geert Wilders’ Islamophobic Party of Freedom (PVV) and the Socialist Party (SP). The SP was founded in 1972 as a Maoist group and is today a right-wing social democratic party which is almost as nationalist and xenophobic as the PVV.

Already in the 1980s, the SP demanded in a pamphlet titled “Foreign Labour and Capital” that foreign workers adapt to the language and values of the country, or leave. The SP and its chairman, Emile Roemer, responded to the recent terrorist attacks in Brussels by demanding a massive strengthening of state security forces.

The line-up of these elements against the Association Agreement does not mean that everyone who voted “no” in the referendum supports these right-wing forces. The video through which GeenPeil mobilised support for the referendum pointed to the connection between the Association Agreement with Ukraine, the right-wing coup in Kiev orchestrated by the western powers, and the subsequent civil war.

At one point it states, “The negotiations led to violent demonstrations on the Maidan and now ultra-nationalists with Nazi symbols have seats in parliament.” The video also refers to the 198 Dutch victims of flight MH17 which was shot down over Ukraine and warns of the dangers of a geopolitical conflict between the EU and Russia. It states, “The EU is coming ever closer to the Russian border. All three countries, [Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova], were formerly part of the Soviet Union and now the EU and NATO are trying to incorporate them.”

The forces behind the “no” campaign have, of course, nothing in common with an anti-imperialist movement against the EU and NATO from the standpoint of the working class. Instead, they represent a faction of the Dutch ruling elite which considers a conflict with Russia under current conditions to be undesirable and believes that the Netherlands could pursue its strategic interests more effectively outside of, or at least with greater national independence from, the EU.

One telling point of criticism raised by the “no” camp was that the Netherlands’ influence on EU foreign policy is continually decreasing with EU enlargement. At one point in the video it states, “Does that mean that we should leave these three countries [Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova] to the

Russian bear? Of course not. But one has to ask the questions, how did these agreements come about and at what price? And why was the opinion of the majority of the population ignored?”

At the end of March, the chairpersons of the Burgercomité-EU group told *NRC Handelsblad* that they were not concerned with Ukraine, but to bring about a “Nexit,” an exit of the Netherlands from the EU.

Arjan van Dixhoorn, who leads the alliance, said, “We’re not really bothered about the Ukraine, you have to understand that.” And further, “A Nexit referendum has not yet been possible. Therefore we are using all opportunities available to us to increase pressure on the relations between the Netherlands and the EU.”

The initiators celebrated the outcome of the referendum with Baudat boasting, “The result can’t just be ignored.” Now, a “discussion about another EU” would begin. Wilders tweeted, “Large majority of voters is against, that is fantastic,” and prophesied, “This is the beginning of the end of the EU.” The chorus was joined by right-wing populists across Europe, including the chair of the right-wing UK Independence Party, Nigel Farage, who is leading the campaign for a British exit from the EU in a referendum in June.

Despite the gloating of these reactionary forces, the majority of the Dutch population was of the opinion that there was no “lesser evil” in this vote, and abstained. The *Financial Times* commented, “But the numbers who stayed at home were so high, at least by the standards of Dutch national elections, that the safest conclusion is that abstention was the real choice of the Dutch people. For some voters, who correctly sensed that the referendum was in many respects not about Ukraine at all, abstention was a tactic designed to invalidate the entire exercise.”

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