

The Left of the left, running favourite in the Dutch general elections.

Corinne Deloy

Translated by helen Levy

Analysis
1 month before
the poll

On 25th April last Mark Rutte, the Dutch Prime Minister (People's Party for Freedom and Democracy, VVD), handed in his government's resignation to Queen Beatrix – in addition to the latter this comprised the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA) and the Reformed Political Party (SGP). In the Netherlands there have been frequent resignations and they have become even more frequent over the last few years: the last six governments have indeed resigned before the end of their term in office and the country has seen five different governments over the last ten years. In all, since 1945 only five coalitions have remained in office for their entire term.

The country's political landscape is increasingly unstable. The three "main" traditional parties – Christian Democratic Appeal, the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy and the Labour Party (PvdA) – which rallied 90% of the vote in the 1950's now attract less than half of the electorate. New political parties emerged in the 1960's which overturned the political playing field and led to a new distribution of the vote. In the 1990's the economic crisis, which severely affected the Welfare State, since it clouded the lines of division between the parties, further accentuated the instability of the Dutch vote. Although the two left/rightwing movements still rally an equal number of voters, the latter increasingly swap sides or move over to another party in the same camp. Finally the emergence of populist parties in the 2000's – or rather new politicians including the forerunner of these, Pim Fortuyn, murdered just days before the general elections on 15th May 2002 – have further weakened the loyalty of the Dutch electorate towards their political parties.

The first consequence of this fragmentation is that there is no longer any dominant party, either on the right or the left, which makes the formation of a sound, coherent government coalition difficult. Until the 1990's government comprised two parties. This figure has risen to three over the last twenty years. Now four and even five parties are required to guarantee a parliamentary majority. After the general elections on 9th June 2010, it took Mark Rutte four months to negotiate the formation of a government coalition, the first to be led by a liberal since 1913 and the first minority government since the Second World War. In exchange for its support, the Freedom Party (PVV) led by populist Geert Wilders, achieved the adoption of several measures included in its programme, notably the ban on the full veil and the reduction of development aid.

In all 22 parties are running in the general elections on 12th September next, including 12 new ones, featuring 50 Plus, the Anti-Europe Party, the Pirate Party and the Democratic Political Turning Point, which formed after a merger between Proud of the Netherlands led by former Immigration and Integration Minister (2003-2006) Rita Verdonk and the Independent Citizens' party founded last April by Hero Brinkman, a former PVV MP.

The Political Crisis

On March 5th 2012 the government parties started

negotiations over the reforms required to reduce the country's budgetary deficit (4.7% of the GDP in 2011, i.e. 28 billion €). According to the Central Planning Bureau (CPB), the government has to save around 16 billion € in 2013 in order to meet the standards set by the EU's Stability and Growth Pact. Amongst the measures planned for in the draft 2013 budget were a 2 point rise in the VAT, the freezing of civil servants' salaries, a reduction in the budget allocated to the health-care sector and aid for developing countries.

On 21st April Geert Wilders walked out of the negotiations refusing to approve the "measures dictated by Brussels, which are damaging Dutch buying power too

much. "From the start we said that we did not hold the 3% rule sacred," declared the populist leader. "My loyalty is primarily towards the Netherlands and not to Brussels. We are masters in our own home, in our country. This project is not in the interest of Freedom Party voters. We do not want to submit our retirement pensions to bloodletting caused by the Brussels diktat. I cannot accept that old people will pay for the absurd demands issued by Brussels (according to Geert Wilders, the measures put forward would lead to a 3% loss in buying power on the part of the elderly). "We are not going to allow our elders to pay for the Greek cheats. A package of measures has to be presented that will bring order to public spending and which will reduce the stranglehold on the citizens," maintains Geert Wilders, who condemns the reforms which he qualifies as a hindrance to growth saying that they will lead to a rise in unemployment. In reality, since he is aware that an acceptance of the reforms on his part would certainly lead to a loss of votes, the PVV leader has preferred to destroy his alliance with the government parties rather than risk being chased from it. "Geert Wilders' departure is clearly a bid to attract voters, it is a bet he is placing on the elderly so that they believe he is worried about their problems," stresses Rene Tissen, professor of economic policy at the University of Nyenrode. "It is the last chance for Geert Wilders to strike hard," maintains Alfred Pijpers, professor of Political Science at the University of Amsterdam. "He prefers to leave the government coalition rather than lose his credibility by supporting the painful cuts that have been demanded by Europe," stresses Costas Gemenis of the University of Twente.

The European Commissioner for Digital Strategy, Neelie Kroes (VVD) said she was "shocked by Geert Wilders' irresponsible behaviour". "It is not a question of applying rules set by Brussels or of talking about the "Brussels diktat". The Dutch government has been very clear about its support to budgetary goals. The Netherlands are absolutely convinced, and quite rightly, that there has to be a plan for sustainable funding for all of Europe," she declared.

For months the tension between the PVV and the government parties has grown, to the point that many were relieved about the end of the experiment undertaken by this rightwing government that has received the support of the populists. The Populist Party has shown that it is neither stable nor responsible in this time of crisis and its – vital – support to the government finally led to its collapse.

After the resignation of Mark Rutte's government, five political parties – the People's Party for Freedom

and Democracy, the Christian Democratic Appeal, the Democrats 66, the Green Left (GL), the Christian Union (CU) – finally signed the agreement on 26th April which enabled agreement on the 2013 austerity budget. Amongst the measures feature an increase in VAT (from 6% to 7% and from 19% to 21%) (4 billion € in savings planned); the reduction of the healthcare budget (which represented 10% of the GDP in 2012), notably with an increase in the deductible from 200 to 400€ (leading to savings of 1 billion €) and the reduction in the reimbursement of medicines; greater flexibility in terms of dismissal (in exchange for the upkeep of the duration of unemployment benefits); an increase on the tax on tobacco, alcohol and fossil fuels; a review of the university grant system; the progressive rise in the legal retirement age as of 2013 (this is due to rise from 66 in 2020 to 67 in 2025); the freezing of civil servants' salaries and social services (for a two year period); the reduction in international cooperation spending and a twofold increase in new banking taxes. These reforms are due to cause a drop in buying power of Dutch households.

The agreement (3.6 billion € in savings and 8.3 billion in additional revenue in the shape of taxes and heavier contributions on the part of households) will make it possible to meet the requirements set by Brussels for one year and to achieve 12 billion € in savings.

The political forces

Like all European countries the Netherlands has to stabilise its public spending, and notably its budgetary deficit. However, along with Germany, Luxembourg and Finland – the country is one of the only EU Member States to enjoy an AAA rating with the ratings agencies. Its public debt is under control (65.52% of the GDP in 2011), GDP growth lay at 1.1% last year and unemployment, that totalled 5% one year ago, lay at 6.2% in April 2012. The Netherlands is in recession however and business investments and household consumption are down. Socio-economic issues and notably the choice of sectors in which spending has to be cut are therefore the heart of the electoral campaign.

In its programme the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) plans for further savings, notably in the area of social protection (9 billion €), healthcare (7 billion), the civil service (8 billion) and development aid (3 billion). For example, the party wants to raise the healthcare deductible and apply it to GP consultations and also reduce the duration of unemployment benefit payments. It is also planning for investments in education, infrastructures, security and a reduction in charges (to a total of five billion €). The VVD is the only

party that is planning to reduce the budgetary deficit over one term in office. Outgoing Prime Minister Mark Rutte will lead the VVD list on 12th September next.

Labour leader, Diederick Sansom, regrets that the government holds on to the 3% threshold set by the Stability and Growth Pact. The PvdA believes that the reduction in the budgetary deficit from 4.6% to 3% of the GDP in 2013 is bad for the population and also for the Dutch economy. Labour has set the goal of achieving a budgetary deficit of 1% in 2015, placing emphasis on measures that take on board inequalities in income and greater taxation on the highest salaries. They are against any budgetary cuts in the education sector. Diederick Sansom took over from Job Cohen (former mayor of Amsterdam) at the beginning of the year as head of the PvdA. On 20th February the latter announced his resignation saying *"the PvdA's task is to offer people prospects, especially during this time of crisis. As a political leader you have to resign when you cannot achieve this effectively."* This statement has not made his successor's task an easy one. Diederick Sansom has adopted a policy to draw closer to the Socialist Party (SP) that lies on the left of the left. *"Look at Brabant, Nimegen and then many other towns, the Socialist Party has shown that it can lead,"* he declared. Both of these leftwing parties quite clearly differ however regarding international and European issues. The Labour programme in the general elections, running under the slogan *"a more social, stronger Netherlands"* focuses on growth and employment. It is planning for the cancellation of the increase in VAT, a 60% tax on revenues over 150,000€, the restructuring of the banking sector, the restriction of bonuses, the creation of a national investment bank for SMEs, a 30% deductibility on mortgage interest payments. *"This crisis cannot be fought outside of the European framework,"* maintains Diederick Sansom.

The Green Left list (GL) will be led by Jolande Sap who, with 84.9% of the vote, won the most recent primary election that took place in the spring against Tofik Dibi. Amongst other things the ecologist programme proposes a 19% VAT rate on meat, the abolition of the deductibility of mortgage interest payments, payment into to the basic retirement pension on the part of

those with the highest revenues and an income based assessment of health insurance payments. The Green Left also hopes for the introduction of a minimum 30% quota on the percentage of women employed in companies that are floated on the stock exchange, the exclusion of civil servants who refuse to marry same sex couples and finally the launch of a railway link between Almere and Utrecht-Breda. Of course the ecologist programme emphasises energy saving measures (estimated at 3% per year) and hopes that the country will have a 100% clean energy application in 2050. The Green Left has declared that it wants to govern with Labour and the Socialists.

The Democrat 66 programme is basically pro-European. *"The crisis provides an opportunity to undertake reform after years of stagnation,"* says D66 literature. D66 defends *"true European political union"*. However D66, just like the Green Left, may pay on 12th September for its support of the spring agreement signed last April.

The Christian Democratic Appeal has been constantly losing ground in the ballot box over the last ten years. On 18th May Sybrand van Haersma Buma, the leader of the party's parliamentary group, was elected as its head by 51.4% of the vote. In his book *"Together we shall do more"* he acknowledges that although the populist parties do not provide solutions the society's problems, they perceive perfectly the population's discontent. In response to the present difficulties the CDA is suggesting a reform of the banking system (increased responsibility on the part of the bankers) and the creation of a governing council for this profession.

The Populist Threat

The Netherlands is special and it is unusual in Europe, since it has two populist parties, one on the left and the other on the right, which are both gaining ground in the polls (notably the party on the left) just a few weeks before the general elections.

The Socialist Party (SP) has indeed become the country's leading political party over the last few months. This phenomenon can be explained by the popularity of its leader Emile Roemer, who was appoin-

ted leading politician of the year and the most popular personality in the country by the weekly *Hp/De Tijd*. The Socialist breakthrough in the polls has been to the detriment of Geert Wilders' PVV. The two parties indeed share the same electorate, ie the most vulnerable socio-professional categories who feel excluded and who are against any reform to the Welfare State and the EU, which they blame for their problems. The SP also attracts many employees from the public sector and those working for the unions or associations and a share of the country's intellectual elite.

The socialist programme plans for a 65% taxation rate on people who have more than 150,000€ savings – an operation which the party believes will help it recover 3 million € - and the introduction of allocations and healthcare insurance according to individual revenues. The SP is demanding the freezing of civil servants' salaries who earn twice the average salary and the investment of 3 billion € in the maintenance of infrastructures to create jobs. It is promising to protect the buying power of the middle classes (around 30,000€). The SP may very well make a breakthrough in the general elections on 12th September but many wonder whether it will be able to govern. Emile Roemer said he is ready to form a coalition, and if necessary, he will do so with the Liberals.

At the beginning of August one of the SP's co-founders, Remi Poppe, warned the members of the SP: *"If ever the Socialist Party achieves a result above that of Labour in the next general elections on 12th September the party cannot afford to be ousted once more by the Social Democrats,"* he stressed. In his opinion Labour is over confident about the market and its ability to settle problems. But he added, *"We cannot continue to be against everything. If a party wants to govern it is important to adopt a positive attitude. We shall continue to be against liberalism and against those who believe unfailingly in the law of the market. But we have to be pragmatic."*

The Freedom Party (PVV) is specific in that it lies on the far right regarding security issues but on the far left regarding the defence of the Welfare State and on social issues. Above all it is against the European Union, which it believes a threat to the Welfare State and beyond that to Dutch society and its identity. After

motivating its electorate for a long time over the rejection of what it calls the Islamisation of the Netherlands, its leader, Geert Wilders, has changed his stance and has now made his opposition to the European Union his battle cry. By positioning himself as the spokesperson of the people against the political elites, he is attempting to take advantage of euro-scepticism and intends to turn these general elections into a true referendum on Europe. Its programme is clear: *Hun Brussel ons Nederland (Their Brussels, our Netherlands)*.

A referendum on Europe?

The PVV is against the single currency, which in its opinion has affected the country's economic growth and the Dutch buying power, and it is fighting for the introduction of a new Florin (NLG). Geert Wilders, who signed an agreement at the end of 2010 with the government parties setting the maximum budgetary deficit at 2.8% of the GDP and who never opposed the measures which pushed for greater integration, rejects the European Budgetary Pact (called the Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance) signed on 2nd March 2012 in Brussels by the heads of State and government of the 25 EU Member States (all except the UK and the Czech Republic). The populist leader qualifies the text as anti-democratic, of it being *"a 40 billion € blank cheque from the Hague to Brussels"* and says that it will oblige the Netherlands to transfer further sovereignty over to Brussels and that it goes against *"the interests of the Dutch people."* Geert Wilders would like to repeat the referendum campaign on the treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe in 2005 when his party defended the "no" vote to the European text. The euro, the European Stability Mechanism, bureaucrats who are not elected the diktats on the part of Brussels regarding the budgetary cuts and immigration – these are the issues that the PVV wants to see at the heart of the campaign. In Geert Wilders' opinion the Netherlands must *"exit from Europe"*. *"We must free ourselves from the prison in which Brussels has placed us,"* he declared.

"More of Brussels is not the solution to emerge from the euro zone crisis," says Emile Roemer. Although the SP is not against the European Union, it is profound-

ly euro-sceptic. It rejects the austerity that is being forced on the populations believing that the European Union is forcing them to make major sacrifices whilst it shows clemency towards the banks. Emile Roemer is against European budgetary discipline which limits the budgetary deficit to 3% of the GDP and which, in his opinion, impedes recovery and increases unemployment. He hopes to achieve two more years to bring the deficit below the 3% demanded by the European Stability and Growth Pact (2015). The Socialist Leader is also against European integration which he believes too rapid. *"I shall stand quite clearly against Herman van Rompuy (the present President of the European Council) who wants to transfer more and more power over to the technocrats in Brussels, without any democratic control and which grants a major importance to the financial sector. This type of issue has to be presented for the people's approval. If the people say "yes" by referendum, I of course adopt this trend,"* he indicated. The SP is against a "ridiculous" austerity programme to bring the public deficit within the European limits of 3%, maintained Emile Roemer on 19th August last. *"It is very important that we do not start to make savings in an absurd manner."*

The socialists believe that the recovery of growth will only be possible if the financial markets are placed under State control. They support the introduction of protective measures and are demanding the democratic control of the European Central Bank (ECB), which apart from regulating inflation, should be called upon to stimulate the economy and create jobs. They are also fighting for Brussels' signature of further agreements over the conditions for economic recovery and social protection.

The Dutch Political System

The States General is a bicameral Parliament. The first chamber (Eerste Kamer der Staten-Generaal), the Senate, comprises 75 members elected every four years by indirect suffrage by the members of the assemblies of the kingdom's 12 provincial States. The Second Chamber (Tweede kamer der Staten-Generaal), the Chamber of the States General comprises 150 MPs elected every four years within 19 constituencies from totally proportional lists, a system which fosters the existence and represen-

tation of a great number of political parties.

The seats are distributed nationally between the lists that have won at least 0.67% of the votes cast. The number of votes on each lists is divided by a national quota, which is achieved by dividing the number of valid votes won nationally by the number of seats available i.e. 150. The seats that have not been attributed after this first operation are then awarded according to the de Hondt system of the highest average.

Any party that wants to have candidates in the general elections must find a minimum of 30 declarations of support in each of the 19 constituencies i.e. a total of 570 signatures and if the party is not represented in the lower chamber of parliament it has to pay a deposit of 11,250 € which is reimbursed if the list achieves at least 75% of the national quota.

10 parties are represented in the present chamber of the States General:

- the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), created in 1948, led by Mark Rutte. It has 31 seats;
- the Labour Party (PvdA), founded in 1946 and born of the union movement is the main opposition party led by Diederik Samsom with 30 seats;
- the Freedom Party (PVV), a far right movement created in 2002 by Geert Wilders has 24 seats;
- the Christian Democrat Appeal (CDA), centre right party born of the merger in 1980 of three parties: the People's Catholic Party (KVP), the Anti-Revolutionary Party (ARP) and the Historical Christian Party (CHU), led by Sybrand van Haersma Buma with 21 MPs;
- the Socialist Party (SP), an extreme leftwing party led by Emile Roemer, has 15 MPs;
- Democrats 66 (D66) which rallies the reforming centre-left liberals. Led by Alexander Pechtold, it has 3 MPs;
- the Green Left (GL), a leftwing ecologist party led by Jolande Sap - it has 10 MPs;
- the Christian Union (CU), a party born of the merger in January 2000 of the Reformed Political Federation (RPF) and the Reformed Political Alliance (GPV), led by Arie Slob has 5 seats;
- the Reformed Political Party (SGP) founded in 1918 is led by Kees van der Staaij and rallies an orthodox protestant electorate (strict Calvinists) with 2 MPs;
- the Animals Party (PvdD) founded in 2002, is led by Marianne Thieme and has 2 seats.

Reminder of the general election results of 9th June 2010 in the Netherlands

Turnout: 75.4%

Political Parties	No of votes won	% of votes won	No of seats won
People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD)	1 929 575	20.5	31
Labour Party (PvdA)	1 848 805	19.6	30
Freedom Party (PVV)	1 454 493	15.5	24
Christian Democrat Appeal (CDA)	1 281 886	13.6	21
Socialist Party (SP)	924 696	9.8	15
Democrats 66 (D66)	654 167	7	10
Green Left (GL)	628 096	6.7	10
Christian Union (CU)	305 094	3.2	5
Political Reformed Party (SGP)	163 581	1.7	2
Animals Party (PvdD)	122 317	1.3	2
Others	103 241	1.1	0

Source: http://www.houseofrepresentatives.nl/members_of_parliament/parliamentary_parties

Just one month before the elections on 12th September next the Socialist Party is forecast to win by the latest polls. According to Synovate it is due to win 32 seats against 31 for the VVD led by outgoing Prime Minister Mark Rutte. The Maurice de Hond Institute credits the Socialists with 37 seats and 31 for the Liberals. Freedom Party is due to win 17 seats; Democrats 66, 16; the PvdA, 15 and the CDA, 14. According to the daily *Telegraaf*, 60% of those who support the Socialist Party are against

the party's participation in a government coalition with the VVD and half of those close to the liberals would be against their party governing with the socialists. Hence there is little chance that the elections on 12th September next will lead to the constitution of a sound parliamentary majority. "Any new government coalition will encounter the same problems as the outgoing government," says Kees Arts, professor of political science at the University of Twente.

The Socialists lose ground in the polls just one week before the general elections in the Netherlands

D-7
7 days before
the poll

In all twenty-two parties are standing in the general elections that will be taking place in the Netherlands on 12th September next. These follow the resignation on 25th April of the government led by Mark Rutte (VVD) which rallies the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA) and the Reformed Political Party (SGP) after the failure of negotiations on the reforms required to reduce the country's budgetary deficit (4.7% of GDP in 2011).

Although the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) and the Socialist Party (SP) lead in the polls, the most recent surveys reveal however that the Labour Party (PvdA) is recovering ground.

Europe at the heart of the electoral campaign

"Europe will be the focus of these general elections," indicates André Krouwel, political expert at the Free University of Amsterdam. Interviewed on the issues that seem primordial on the eve of the election, one quarter of the Dutch quote Europe; the theme comes fourth, after the economy, healthcare and social security. However when they are asked to designate the main threat from an international point of view, the euro crisis is quoted by nearly half of those interviewed pulling ahead of the rise of China, natural disasters and international terrorism.

"Last May 61% of the Dutch thought that Greece should quit the euro zone. Now that the storm over Athens has died down, this percentage has dropped to 51%. Alongside this unstable attitude, the voters' enthusiasm for European cooperation has declined. Although in May 19% of the population supported European cooperation this percentage now lies at 13%. At the same time, the number of people that want certain competences to be returned to the Member States has increased from 27% to 37%," indicated Peter Kanne at TNS-Nipo. The most recent figures, in a survey undertaken by the Maurice de Hond institute, published at the end of August, revealed that half of the Dutch (48%) believe that their country's economy would suffer under further austerity measures.

In this context the more moderate parties that are traditionally pro-European are being outrun by the populists, the PVV on the right and the SP on the left. Hence all of the candidates running for the post of Prime Minister say they are determined to challenge the Netherlands' commitments regarding the European Union. *"We are worried about having to pay for these subsidies to the countries in the South of Europe whilst at the same time we are having to make budgetary cuts in our own country,"* indicates Marcel Boogers, a political expert at the University of Tilburg.

Populists both on the left and the right: "NO to Brussels"

The Socialist Party which is extremely Eurosceptic rejects the austerity policy, believing that the European Union is forcing major sacrifices on the people whilst it is showing clemency towards the banks. Emile Roemer, the SP's leader, is against the European budgetary disciplinary policy (which limits the budgetary deficit to 3% of the GDP) and which, in his opinion, is preventing economic revival and increasing unemployment. The Socialists want two more years to bring the deficit below the 3% demanded by the European Stability and Growth Pact. They are planning to introduce an investment programme of 3 billion additional euros to revive the Dutch economy.

The Socialists support the introduction of protectionist measures and are requesting the democratic supervision of the European Central Bank (ECB), which should be called upon to stimulate the economy and create jobs. Against the introduction of the European emergency fund, they are fighting for the signature of new agreements in Brussels on the conditions required to revive the economy and regarding social protection. The SP wants to ensure that the approval of any transfer of competence *"towards the technocrats in Brussels"* is approved by a referendum.

On 20th August last Emile Roemer declared that he doubted that the euro would survive the present crisis *"given the negative austerity measures which are being taken at the moment,"* adding *"I am not sure that we shall be able to solve all of the problems. I cannot say that we shall be able to maintain the euro, even though I do hope so because our worries will be even greater if we fail."* In his opinion *"Europe must exist for the people, not for the multi-nationals and the financial sector. We shall make different choices. It is not the pace of austerity that counts but its quality."* *"I am against Herman van Rompuy's road map which grants even greater powers to the Brussels' technocrats, without there being any democratic supervision, and which works in collusion with the financial sector,"* he added. He says that if he is elected the Netherlands will not pay any fines to the European Union for not respecting the rule of a 3% budgetary deficit minimum. *"People are more important than petty rules and if they threaten us with a fine I will politely explain to*

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Brussels and to Europe that we are facing a situation which means we have to invest," he declared adding, "Brussels has nothing to gain in a fight with one of the main net contributors to the European Union."

"If the Socialist Party enters government with at least two or three other leftwing parties, the Netherlands will no longer follow Germany which is just pushing for the adoption of austerity measures," says political expert, André Krouwel.

The Freedom Party (PVV) is against the European Union which it deems a threat to the Welfare State and beyond that, to Dutch society and identity. Its leader, Geert Wilders, believes that the general elections will be a true referendum on Europe. *"Brussels is an anti-democratic monster, a vampire that will feed off us until we become an insignificant country within Greater Europe,"* he declared, adding, *"we need our own borders, our own currency and our own future. We need to be our own boss, the boss of our own country."* The PVV's programme includes two main measures: quitting the euro in favour of the florin, the former currency and closer collaboration by the Netherlands with Switzerland and Norway, two countries that are linked by a free trade agreement. Geert Wilders is trying to distinguish himself from his leftwing rival, Emile Roemer, whom he qualifies as the "greatest Dutch Europhile" and who he likes to remind of his request for extra time to reduce the budgetary deficit and unlike him, is not suggesting quitting the European Union.

However Geert Wilders seems to be paying dearly for his withdrawal from the negotiations on how to reduce the country's budgetary deficit in April last. Outgoing Prime Minister Mark Rutte has accused him of having placed his own interests before those of the country. The PVV's leader might attract liberal voters who are disappointed by the outgoing government's policy. *"I would not exclude Geert Wilders benefiting from the eurosceptic vote. If you are on the right and against the European Union then you will end up by choosing the PVV,"* maintains Chris Aalberts, a political expert at the Erasmus University of Rotterdam. Other political analysts believe that the PVV's leader has reached his limits. *"His problem is that this election is not focused on immigration, integration, the veil and the mosques; these general elections are about the euro.*

Geert Wilders is trying to make the euro the focus of his programme but he is not the only one doing this," indicates André Krouwel.

Moderate Parties: "YES ... but"

The Peoples' Party for Freedom and Democracy led by outgoing Prime Minister Mark Rutte, is the only one to be planning for a national budgetary deficit reduction over one term in office, and is suggesting making further savings, notably in the sectors of social protection, healthcare and the civil service amongst others. He is also anticipating investments in education, infrastructure, security and a reduction in charges (to a total of 5 billion €). Finally Mark Rutte has promised to grant those in work a tax rebate of 1,000€. *"It is clear to us that those who are working have to feel the benefit of this in their pockets. We have to reduce taxes and not increase them,"* he indicated. *"The Netherlands has always been a nation of traders and this is why I am fighting in Europe for a real European market and a strong European currency,"* he declared. He is promising to work *"for all of the Dutch"* and warns his fellow countrymen against the catastrophe, which in his opinion, would be the rise to power of the socialists. Forced to acknowledge the increasing hostility towards the reforms requested of their country by the European Union, the liberals are challenging the slowness of the implementation of the reforms in Greece whilst The Hague is being forced to apply a severe austerity plan. Defenders of an identical austerity plan for all, the VVD is not asking for *"more Europe but a better Europe"* and is against granting any further financial aid to Athens. *"We have helped the Greeks twice, it is now up to them to show that they want to stay in the euro. The Netherlands has suffered greatly from the debt crisis and the only solutions available are to reduce taxes, bring order to public finances and to facilitate investments,"* maintained Mark Rutte, who has promised to impede any further aid to Athens if he stays in power on 12th September next.

According to its leader Sybrand van Haersma Buma, employment, the family, social cohesion these are the priorities of the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA). *"The real solutions will not come from the extremes. At the end of the day solutions will be found in the*

centre, from a well thought out, reasonable policy. We are opting for an active, participatory society. In times of crisis we depend more on each other. This requires a new type of moral code, with less State control, fewer rules and more opening towards others, personal and also local initiatives," he declared. In regard to Europe the CDA's programme is asking for greater budgetary discipline, the appointment of a European Commissioner responsible for this, the independence of the European Central Bank and the European supervision of the banks. Sybrand van Haersma Buma is however sceptical just one week before the election. He says that his party's recovery, which has constantly lost ground in the ballot box over the last ten years, will take several years. In an interview given to the newspaper NRC-Handelsblad, he forecasts the electoral defeat of the CDA (a loss of between five to ten seats). The Christian Democratic leader ruled out working in a government coalition which included the Freedom Party (PVV).

In Labour's opinion the Netherlands needs more time to recover budgetary balance. In their opinion this should be achieved by 2017. The party's leader Diederik Samson said that he supported the renegotiation of the European Budgetary Pact to which he would like to add growth measures. "I have moved from Euro-optimism to Euro-realism. The previous political generation sometimes accuses us of not being idealistic enough but this generation has been too naïve. Some measures have to be taken urgently to stabilise the whole, so that the next generation can continue towards unification. There is a certain consensus about the path to follow. We must move towards banking union, European supervision, a resolution fund for failing banks and finally a European deposit guarantee scheme," he declared. Moreover he believes that his rivals will be forced to review their promise not to give any further aid to Greece. "Personally I think that Athens needs more time. But if Greece defaults the Netherlands will not be able to let this country down," he said. The Labour Party (PvdA) hopes to win 20 seats in the Chamber of the States General on 12th September. Twenty-five seats would undoubtedly enable it to take part in the next government.

Democrats 66: salvation via Europe

Alexander Pechtold, the Democrat 66 leader, who favours greater European integration and a Federal Europe ("We need a powerful Europe. A single currency and a single economy cannot do without a single management," he declared), criticised Prime Minister Mark Rutte severely for having "ruined our international reputation and the Netherlands' interests," and for having "enabled the Eurosceptic interests of the People's Party for Liberty and Democracy to prevail over the national interest." "Mark Rutte embodies the inertia of the last few years. Emile Roemer has a negative outlook. Like this he is excluding himself. The Netherlands needs a progressive centre. Europe is a reality. Of course it is not complete. Twenty-five years ago Europe faced the issue of East-West relations, now North/South relations are the heart of the matter. A European supervision of the banks will be established so that we won't have to believe that the Spanish are acting in good faith. There is a great deal of work ahead: we have to transfer 40 billion euros of subsidies from agriculture over to research and innovation. It is easy to be cynical. This is not my position," declared Alexander Pechtold. He warns that the Netherlands could not afford to experiment on the left after the failure of the right. "Our country cannot do with another period marked by populism, whatever its colour," he indicated in the daily Volksrant. He hopes that the Netherlands will have a stable coalition and repeats that the vote in support of Democrats 66 is the best way to achieve a government like this.

The polls undertaken over the last few weeks all put the VVD liberals and the socialists (SP) in the lead; they differed however over the party that will win the election on 12th September. But Labour (PvdA) recently marked a rise in the polls, notably thanks to the results achieved by its leader, Diederik Samson, during the TV debates when he faced the other political leaders.

In a poll published on 3rd September the institute, Synovate credits the VVD with 35 seats, the PvdA 30, the SP with 24, the PVV with 18, the CDA and the D66 with 14 each. The Animals Party (PvdD) led by Marianne Thieme and the Christian Union (CU) led by Arie Slob are due to win four seats each; the Green Left (GL), led by Jolande Sap, 3

and finally the Reformed Political Party (SGP), led by Kees van der Staaij, and 50 Plus, with 2 seats each. "Given the state of things we will not have a new

government before the New Year. It will take time to form a coalition that, to the boot, will probably be unstable," indicated André Krouwel.

Victory for the pro-European parties in the General Elections in the Netherlands

Results

The People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), the liberal party led by outgoing Prime Minister Mark Rutte came first in the general elections on 12th September in the Netherlands. The party won 26.5% of the vote, the highest score in its history and won 41 seats (+10 than in the previous elections that took place on 9th June 2010). "It is an exceptional victory because he is the leader of the biggest party in office. There are many European countries in which the leaders lost the elections as this crisis rages," analyses Andre Krouwel, a political expert at the Free University of Amsterdam. The liberals took a slight lead over the Labour Party (PvdA) led by Diederik Samsom, which won 24.7% of the vote and 39 seats (+9).

At first the electoral campaign, which focused on the crisis, turned to the advantage of the most radical opposition forces, and those most hostile to the European Union (Socialist Party and the Freedom Party). Over the last few days however the situation developed further and the pro-European forces recovered ground. Together the Liberals and Labour rallied 80 seats, i.e. an absolute majority in the States General, the lower chamber in the Dutch Parliament.

The populist parties suffered a clear rebuttal. On the right the Freedom Party (PVV) won 10.1% of the vote, taking 15 seats (-9). "Our battle is necessary now more than ever in the Netherlands. The problems will just grow and the best years of the Freedom Party are yet to come," declared its leader, Geert Wilders. The Socialist Party, a far left movement led by Emile Roemer won 9.6% of the vote and 15 seats (=), well below the score which the polls had forecast just a few weeks ago.

The Christian Democratic Appel (CDA) has recorded its lowest score ever: 8.5% of the vote and 13 seats (- 8). Its leader Sybrand van Haersma Buma had anticipated this defeat just a few days before the election indicating that the recovery of his party, which has been declining constantly in the ballot box over the last ten years, will take several years.

The Democrats 66 (D66) led by Alexander Pechtold

won 7.9% of the vote and 12 seats (+ 2). Finally the Green Left (GL), an ecologist party led by Jolande Sap clearly lost ground. It won 2.3% of the vote and 3 seats (- 7).

Turnout was slightly less than that recorded in the last general elections on 9th June 2010 (-1.6 point) totalling 73.8%.

And so the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) did not suffer its cohabitation with Geert Wilders' Freedom Party nor from the crisis. The liberal party (VVD), which showed greater firmness regarding the States in the south of Europe during the electoral campaign ("We shall continue to work closely with German and Finland to counter the euro crisis. Greece and the other must keep their promises or we shall no longer help them," declared Mark Rutte on September 12th), is still the most capable of leading the Nether-

lands and to command respect within the Union.

"Tomorrow we shall start work: a stable government has to be formed as quickly as possible in the Nether-

lands and I shall work with you so that the Netherlands emerges stronger from the crisis," declared the outgoing Prime Minister as the results were announced.

Reminder of the general election results of 9th June 2010 in the Netherlands

Turnout: 75.4%

Political Parties	No of votes won	% of votes won	No of seats won
People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD)	2 467 148	26.5	41
Labour Party (PvdA)	2 304 882	24.7	39
Freedom Party (PVV)	940 364	10.1	15
Socialist Party (SP)	899 319	9.6	15
Christian Democratic Appel (CDA)	796 208	8.5	13
Democrats 66 (D66)	735 949	7.9	12
Christian Union (CU)	291 883	3.1	5
Green Left (GL)	214 749	2.3	3
Political Reform Party (SGP)	196 187	2.1	3
Animals Party (PvdD)	178 699	1.9	2
50 Plus	175 323	0.2	0
Others	70 066	2.5	0

Source: Daily Volkstrant (<http://verkiezingen.volkskrant.nl/uitslag/resultaten.html>)

Labour leader Diederik Samsom won his wager of saving his party and finally came out ahead of the Socialist Party that had been forecast winner in the general elections for a long time. Before the vote he said he would relinquish his seat as MP only for the post of Prime Minister. However on Wednesday evening he maintained, *"The Netherlands needs a stable government as soon as possible. We want to participate as long as the results tonight are faithfully represented in the new government's programme."* *"Many doubted that the Netherlands would move over from populism to honesty in such a short time by acknowledging the difficult moments and choices that are necessary. We owe it to the electorate to work together. This country does not need polarisation but cohesion for the next five years. No divisions, but unity,"* he added. *"Totally unknown until a few weeks ago the new Labour leader revealed himself to be brilliant in the*

debate. He played on this "normality" as did French President François Hollande. He said 'Look at France ! It will be hard, but it is like that that we have to proceed,'" stressed André Krouwel.

Mark Rutte is due to retain his post as Prime Minister, a position that traditionally goes to the leader of the party that wins the election. We should note that Queen Beatrix, who until now appointed the "agent" - the person responsible to work towards the formation of the government after the general elections - was recently deprived of this competence which is now the responsibility of the Estates General.

Aged 45, Mark Rutte is a history graduate. He started his professional career with Unilever, where he was responsible for Human Resources before becoming the Secretary of State for Employment and Social Security in 2002 in the government led by Jan Peter

General Elections in Netherlands 12nd September 2012

Balkenende (CDA). In 2004, he was appointed Secretary of State for Vocational Training and Higher Education. In 2006 he took over as leader of the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy, which he led to victory in the general elections on 9th June 2010. Four months later, Mark Rutte became the first liberal head of government since 1913.

Before the election Diederik Samsom and Mark Rutte had ruled out the party of a violet coalition (the name given to the union of liberals and labour) but Wednesday's results make their rapprochement

and association in government almost inevitable "The union of the liberals and labour is probable at the cost of concessions regarding their electoral programmes. The Dutch want stability. The violet coalition was very effective from 1994 to 2002. In times of crisis it is more difficult but maybe this is the only way to impose major structural reform," stresses Andre Krouwel.

The liberals and labour do differ however over their view of Europe: the former support continuing the austerity policy and the latter criticise the austerity set by Brussels. In any case on 12th September the Dutch said a clear "yes" to Europe.

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