

Corinne Deloy

Translated by helen Levy

D-7
7 days before
the poll

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

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 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*

General Elections in Netherlands 12th September 2012

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.

See all of our publications on our site:
www.robert-schuman.eu

Publishing director : Pascale JOANNIN

THE ROBERT SCHUMAN FOUNDATION, created in 1991 and acknowledged by State decree in 1992, is the main French research centre on Europe. It develops research on the European Union and its policies and promotes the content of these in France, Europe and abroad. It encourages, enriches and stimulates European debate thanks to its research, publications and the organization of conferences. The Foundation is presided over by Mr. Jean-Dominique Giuliani.