

# Dutch EU policy after the November elections

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On 22 November 2006, the Dutch voters went to the polls to elect a new parliament. These elections had to be called as a result of a governmental crisis which emerged in the summer when the small left-wing liberal party D66 left the coalition cabinet of prime minister Jan Peter Balkenende, leader of the Christian Democratic Party (CDA). The election results were anxiously awaited in the Netherlands, where the big question was whether the Social Democratic Party (PvdA) would be able to cash in the victory the opinion polls had predicted. But also abroad the Dutch elections raised quite some attention, particularly in the other member states of the European Union.

After all, following the overwhelming 'No' vote in the Dutch referendum on the European constitutional treaty of 1 June 2005 it was evident that from the Dutch side not a single move to break the European constitutional deadlock could be expected until after the elections. For the government-in-office the European Constitution was 'dead and buried'. How to tackle this Constitutional stalemate is therefore primarily a matter for the next Dutch cabinet to address. In this respect it should first of all be noted that there is little cause for optimism anyhow for those hoping the Netherlands will still ratify the European Constitution in the second resort, given that all political parties have made it abundantly clear that even after the elections the constitutional treaty in its present form is unacceptable.

What then, given the outcome of the November elections, may we expect as far as the Netherlands's attitude towards the European Union in general and towards a new constitutional treaty in particular are concerned? That is, after all, the key question. If the constitution is dead, what are the alternatives?

As a first remark in this respect it should be emphasised that 'Europe' was not at all a topic during the run up to the elections. The electoral contest was dominated by discussions about persons and issues of domestic politics. The topic of Europe was anxiously avoided; the European constitution was taboo. For the pro-European political parties, given the current Euro sceptic climate in the Netherlands, this was not a issue with which to win votes; it rather constituted an electoral risk. Yet, the hush up of this theme was remarkable given the fact that immediately after the June 2005 referendum the political parties were unanimous in their opinion that 'Europe' needed to be politicised. And what better opportunity for this politicisation than the upcoming elections! But, alas, it turned out to be an inconvenient moment.

Secondly, the result of the November elections in fact turned out to be a repetition of the outcome of the June 2005 referendum. Although Europe was no topic, the Euro sceptic parties on the left as well as on the right of the political spectrum, the same parties that led the No-campaign in the run up to the referendum, won many seats, while the big parties in the political centre all suffered defeats. As the latter parties have traditionally been the pillars of the Dutch pro-European course in the past, this implies that the continuation of such a pro-European course will be more problematic.

And to this observation may, thirdly, be added the notion that the formation of a new coalition cabinet will only be possible when (at least) one of the Euro sceptic parties (left-wing or right-wing) is included. This means that a Dutch acceptance of the European constitution in the second resort is definitely out of the question. The European room for manoeuvre of the new cabinet, when established, will anyhow be limited. All these factors make it more difficult for the Netherlands to play a pioneer role in the upcoming European constitutional debate.

Fourthly, the result of the elections means in all likelihood that it will take some time before a new government is established. In the Netherlands, the formation of a new cabinet is traditionally characterised by laborious negotiations between the parties. Given the defeats suffered by the big political parties as well as the mutual distrust the formation of a new government could take an even longer time, while one may cast serious doubts about the political stability of such government when established.

If on top of that one takes into account the fact that - as recent research has revealed - the Euro scepticism among the Dutch population has by no means decreased but instead - as far as European issues such as the enlargement and the constitutional treaty are concerned - has become stronger, one can come to no other conclusion than that a more reserved position of the Netherlands within the European Union is likely - a restraint, for that matter, that was noticeable anyhow in the Dutch policy towards Europe of the past years.

What does this mean for the European Union and the other member states? This question is of relevance in the light of the ambition to actively resume the process towards a European constitution under the current German EU Presidency. Of equal importance in this respect is the initiative of the sixteen member states that have already ratified the constitution to close ranks and thereby increase the pressure.

Except for the view that the European constitution is dead, a more substantial contribution to the debate on institutional reform may not be expected from the Netherlands at this stage. Depending on the duration of the cabinet formation the Hague may keep silent for quite some time, which may entail a real danger for the Netherlands of becoming isolated as regards this important part of European integration. Assuming a new Dutch governmental will be able to formulate a European policy, it will also exercise restraint, in particular with regard to a new treaty. In this respect there is no guarantee that were a new treaty established it can count on the support of the Dutch population. And this reality also the other EU member states have to take into account.