Impacting government policy on European integration in the Netherlands

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Introduction

Throughout the twentieth century the Netherlands was one of the countries that most embraced the idea of a United States of Europe. However, since the early 2000s, there have been landmark shifts in the perception and approach of both Dutch public opinion and the Dutch political elites with regards to the European integration project. With the rise of (successful) populism, largely accredited to Pim Fortuyn and later Geert Wilders, also came a wave of Euroscepticism that appealed to much of the Dutch population. However, other developments also contributed to Eurosceptic parties to be successful in gaining support, and influencing, government policies related to the EU. The research question in this paper is: “what are the factors that affect a government party’s influence on the government policy concerning the EU”?

The aim of this paper is to identify the political climate in the Netherlands with regards to European integration since the early 2000s and to identify preliminary factors that appear to play a role in the way government parties might exert influence in particular cases. The focus will be on three Dutch cabinets since 2003,

- Cabinet Balkenende II, consisting of the CDA, VVD and D66 - 05/2003-06/2006
- Cabinet Balkenende IV, consisting of the CDA, PvdA and CU - 02/2007-02/2010
- Cabinet Rutte I, consisting of the VVD and CDA, with permanent parliamentary support of the PVV - 10/2010-04/2012

The paper consists of three main parts. Firstly, as a way of introduction, Euroscepticism in the Netherlands since the 2000s will be sketched. Then the likely factors to impact the influence a political party exerts on the European integration project will be explained. Thirdly, the positions of the government/permanent support of the government parties with regards to European integration will be described. The Rutte I cabinet will receive special

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attention as it is the more striking case, with a far-right hard-Eurosceptic party giving permanent parliament support to the government. Lastly, some conclusions as to how the aforementioned factors impacted policy changes will be attempted and what the next steps are in this project.

Euroscepticism in the Netherlands

From the 1950s up until the early 2000s, the majority of the political parties in the Dutch parliament (Tweede Kamer, literally the “Second Chamber”) were supportive to very supportive of European integration. What is more, until the 1990s, the Netherlands was disappointed in the speed, and more importantly the depth, of the European integration process. The Dutch were the strong proponents of supranationalist integration rather than the intergovernmental way the EU started to develop into in the 1960s, not least due to French President Charles de Gaulle’s campaigns.

Euroscepticism had found its roots in the Dutch parliament in the early 1990s, with the vocal criticism towards the EU of the party leader of VVD, Frits Bolkestein (Harryvan and Van der Harst, 193). He pledged for the emphasis on national interests in foreign policy-making, for a strict implementation of the EMU criteria, for a decrease in the Dutch contributions to the EU and was against extensive European competences, particularly with regards to security policy (Ibid.) However, despite his hawkish rhetoric, his party had voted in favour of the all European treaties. In Dutch politics, in the 1990s and 2000s, the term for speaking loudly against an idea but then supporting it in the end, has been named after him “een Bolkesteintje” (Ibid., 293).

It was not until the early 2000s that on a broader scale criticism was uttered regarding the European Union. Reasons were the 9/11 attacks against the United States, a stagnating economy and the rise to prominence of the highly charismatic and critical Pim Fortuyn. This consequently led most parties to argue that the EU was ‘done’, a finished project (Harryvan and Van der Harst, 294). The character of Pim Fortuyn deserves more attention.

Fortuyn was able to mobilise a large constituency in a very short political life. Having taken the stage in 2001 with his own political party, the party won no less than 17% of the votes in the parliamentary elections of 15 May 2002, making it the second largest party, only after CDA. These elections were largely, if not completely, overshadowed by the
The assassination of Pim Fortuyn nine days earlier. LPF entered into government after their electoral success, but this cabinet was able to hold office for 87 days, after a period of massive internal unrest in the party and cabinet (Akkerman and de Lange 2012, 591-594).

Where Bolkestein’s Euroscepticism was predominantly in parliament and did not resonate beyond the political elite, Fortuyn’s critical attitude towards the European Union, as one of the components of his anti-establishment campaign, found wide footing among the public (Mudde 2007). Pim Fortuyn introduced populism on large scale to Dutch politics (Lucardie 2008, 164), and Wilders may be considered as his populist successor. However, there is ambiguity about how well Wilders actually fits in the populist frame; “although it is increasingly possible to discern the features of populism in opinions and performances of Geert Wilders, the label populism proves to be not entirely appropriate. The near absence of a clear glorification of the people, his half-hearted preference for direct democracy and his background as a passionate, professional politician conflict with populism too much. Wilders is very much focused on conflict, but the main conflict he perceives appears to be not so much a national conflict between the people and the elite, which is the core of populism, but an international conflict between Islam and a Western society that is weakened by left-wing relativism” (Vossen 2010, 30).

Important to note though is that Pim Fortuyn was not against the principle of the EU. Rather, the current form and shape of the EU as a bureaucratic bulwark, with its strong lack of democratic accountability, was the content of his criticism. The party program of LPF in light of the 2004 EP elections closed with a quote from Fortuyn’s 1997 book - Soulless Europe, “I love Europe, I love its multitude of people, cultures, landscapes, weather conditions, languages and human beings. I sometimes hate the euro-elite [sic] in its arrogant negligence. In short, I want a Europe of the people, of the human scale. A Europe for you and me!” (as quoted in Mudde 2007) LPF was, in that sense, a soft-Eurosceptic party, principally favouring the existence of a European Union, but strongly opposed to the functioning of the EU, where the political elites and bureaucracy fail to serve the interests of the public.

Placing the above into the context of the Eurobarometer polls, the mood in the Netherlands does not seem as bleak among the public as one is inclined to believe with the rejection of the European Constitutional Treaty in 2005’s referendum. Judging from the question that poses which image the EU conjures to the respondent, we can even see an
increase in the gap between the positive and the negative perceptions after 2005 in the Netherlands. The change in perception however comes after 2008. After that year, there is both an increase in the percentage of the Dutch who conjure a fairly negative image of the EU and a decrease in those with a fairly positive image. The tides actually change in 2013, after restoring in 2014.

In the case of the Netherlands, as contrasted to the other two Low Countries (Belgium and Luxembourg), the political debate about European integration has become particularly polarised after 1991. (Rihoux et al. 2014, 82) This can be explained by the inception of the Freedom Party (PVV) in 2007, which gained significant support and has a hard-Eurosceptic\(^1\) agenda.

In the parliamentary elections in 2012, the European Union had become a much more politicised topic than it was in the 2010 elections. On average, around double the amount of attention was attributed to the EU (Van Dorp and Hoekstra 2012). “The [2012 parliamentary debate] was not as much about being in favour or against Dutch membership of the European Union, despite the intention of the PVV, but much more about the specific choices that had to be made in the framework of Europe, such as the tasks and size of the ESM debt rescue fund and whether and how a maximum government debt of 3\% ought to be achieved” (Harryvan and Hoekstra 2013, 53).

Factors of influence for a party to affect the government’s policies towards the EU

Through of the inductive approach to research, the following factors are expected be important to the degree of influence political parties might exert on the policy-making process of government. Some factors might be context specific. For instance, consensus politics is characteristic of how negotiations in Dutch politics are conducted, but may not hold in others.

Note that the below descriptions are not conclusive, and that actual testing still needs to be done, so as to discard some of the below mentioned factors or identify other factors.

\(^1\) Hard-Euroscepticism refers to the outright opposition to the European Union, which the aim of leaving the EU.
Size

The size of party is likely to play an important role, though this might play out in two directions. In the case of the Netherlands, a small party is likely to have an initial impact in shaping policy in a particular case during the formation phase. In the Netherlands, the start of the post-election negotiation process is described by Andeweg and Irwin as follows: “The Queen does not form the new government herself, but she appoints a formateur or an informateur to preside over the negotiations between the prospective governing parties. Before making such an appointment, the Queen consults all parliamentary party leaders. If a likely coalition emerges out of these consultations, the Queen follows the advice of the party leaders and appoints a politician from one of the potential governing parties (usually the largest one) as ‘(in)formateur’ (that is, as either informateur or formateur)” (Andeweg and Irwin, 2009, 127). So, in the process, different possibilities of a government formation are looked at, with a parliamentary majority having been the rule, with the notable exception of the Rutte I cabinet - at the same time also one of our cases.

If the European Union is considered a salient issue in the election campaigns, and the politicisation of European integration is manifest - as has become the case in the Netherlands in the last decade (Van Dorp and Hoekstra 2012); then it might be that a smaller party, or larger party for that matter, strengthens her bargaining position by forcing a compromise on this issue, in return for support on other issues, as part of a package deal in the formation negotiations.

On the other hand, if a party is significant in size (second or third largest for instance), and is considered coalitionable (Topaloff 2012, 156-167), in that it is ideologically not too far from the biggest party, whose party leader is tasked to try and form a government, then its position in the negotiation phase might be strengthened in trying to pressure the issues it deems salient. However, not only the size of a party matters in the way a party might shape the EU policies of a country; all parties in parliament might shape the agenda, or the actual policies in a particular policy area. Also the extent of Eurocritical might play an important role in the role the party has in shaping policy.
Consensus politics / conventionalism

The Netherlands is widely considered to embrace cooperative politics, based on principles like consociationalism and neo-corporatism (Andeweg 2000, 697). For instance, in the case of defense policy, “the existence of strong consensus-making norms in Dutch politics enabled the deeply divided coalition governments to function with political restraint at home and abroad” (Hagan et al. 2001, 188). None of the government parties - “despite their political differences—sought to appeal aggressively to the wider public or challenge the political system itself” (Ibid., 188).

What if a political party goes against this conventional approach of consensus politics? With the high electoral volatility over the last two decades in the Netherlands, “most parties have recently adopted a more adversarial style of politics to increase their electoral appeal” (Vollaard 2010, 5). Rita Verdonk, Pim Fortuyn and Geert Wilders has been key figures in this (Vossen 2010).

Turning to coalition arrangements in the Netherlands, the enforcement of the coalition agreement, presented after the formation period has come to an end and the cabinet parties decided on their path for the four years to come plays an important role in Dutch cabinet politics (Timmermans and Andeweg 2003, 357). While coalition agreements are not binding, they tend to serve as important thread to which the cabinet considers herself responsible of; “legislative adventures with opposition parties are not tolerated, at least not if these are on politically important issues” (Timmermans and Andeweg 2003, 384). A key characteristic of decision-making in Dutch cabinets “is that all members are collectively bound by the final outcome. From this description it is clear that party government is not only dominant in the Netherlands with respect to policy-making but also appears to be well organised as a result of a number of formal and informal rules” (Keman 2008, 230).

The earlier mentioned the unconventional approach to gaining electoral support, through the use of an adversarial style of politics, might as such, in combination with issue politicisation - discussed later - strengthen the bargaining position of the party who goes against the convention.
Populism

Balfour et al. identify two developments in Europe which facilitate the coming to fruition of populism and which causes a lot of pressure on the parties in government, they liken them to a “rock and a hard place”. “The rock is made up of the growing number of binding and intractable mandates they have acquired from the EU ... and other external institutions ... to which national decision-making authority has de facto or de jure been transferred; a transfer of power which, according to many supporters of populist parties, has limited their country's sovereign ability to master some of the most pressing challenges facing them ... The hard place is made up of the electorate, now fragmented and volatile – and thus more difficult for politicians to read – but also more distrustful of political parties than of any other democratic institution, disengaged from conventional politics and political actors, who seem in many ways overwhelmed by the challenges they are facing” (Balfour et al. 2016, 24). This captures the essence of the problems mainstream parties face to maintain their footing in domestic politics.

The success of populism of the far right has found to be connected to a combination of media coverage of political parties and the use of immigration cues and political cynicism (Sheets et al. 2015, 16). Sheets et al. studied the role of media cues on the support for the PVV, and found that there is a link between support for the PVV and having anti-immigration attitudes and being politically cynical (2015, 15).

According to Cas Mudde’s definition, populism is “an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people” (Mudde 2004, 543). While there is no full agreement on the different elements that make a party populist, this definition has broadly used to describe the term and will be used for this paper as well. The two main components of how a populist party approaches politics is by focusing “on the ‘people’ - whatever this term may refer to - and its sovereignty, and second, the antagonism between this ‘people’ and the ‘other’- whatever this ‘other’ may be, the elite in representative democracy, foreigners, or others” (Deiwiks 2009, 2)
Some forms of Euroscepticism may then be seen as using populist rhetoric with regards to the European Union. Cecile Leconte (2015) argues that Euroscepticism can be seen as a form of populism, where they are both seen as a discourses which aim to mobilise the citizenry in a “us versus them” fashion (257-259). The discourse of Eurosceptics would then be a “the nation-state versus the European Union”. As such, the analytical toolbox of populism can be employed, of which the Euroscepticism literature is in lack of. However, are all Eurosceptic parties inherently predisposed to use such rhetoric? It need not be difficult to find cases of soft-Eurosceptics that do are not populist and do not try to shape policy towards the European Union with populist “us versus them” rhetoric, for instance the ChristenUnie discussed below.

Marks and Hooghe argue that “[i]ndividuals with exclusive national identities are predisposed to Euroscepticism if they are cued to believe that love of their country and its institutions is incompatible with European integration” (Marks and Hooghe 2008, 13). This is an idea similar to what populist literature refers to by using social identity theory: “associating oneself with one group and distancing oneself from another group is a prerequisite for creating one’s own personal identity” (Deiwiks 2009, 3). Populists are thus able to go beyond the ‘people versus the other’ in the domestic context and liken the EU, and its institutions, to an ‘other’, and as such a threat to cultural identity.

**Politicisation**

The politicisation of European integration in domestic politics, particularly during election periods, has become evident in recent years (Evans and Butt 2007; Kriesi, 2007; De Vries 2010; Marks and Hooghe 2009; Rohrschneider and Whitefield 2016). This makes the study of the domestic politics of European integration relevant for understanding the dynamics and strategy of political parties in gaining support during election campaigns, but also with regards to the behaviour of parties in government when it concerns issues with high issue salience (Whitefield and Rohrschneider 2015).

Politicisation may be defined as “an increase in polarization of opinions, interests, or values and the extent to which they are publicly advanced towards the process of policy formulation within the EU” (De Wilde 2011). Beyond definitions, scholars have identified dimensions which are considered empirical indicators of politicisation (Risse 2015, 145):
The saliency of European questions in the various public spheres

“Growing polarization on EU-related issues among elites in the various public spheres”.

“The politicization of EU affairs is now in full swing and is probably irrevocable. The more Europe “hits home” in the domestic politics of the member states and beyond, the more EU affairs - both constitutional questions and policy issues - become salient in the various national public spheres. At the same time, as “news value” theories suggest, issue salience is directly linked to politicization because newsworthiness and issue cycles in the media are strongly correlated with polarization and political controversy” (Risse 2015, 142-143).

Without the politicisation of the European Union project-related issues, the influence of a Eurosceptic party will remain weak. Politicisation of the EU tends to be critical in the Netherlands. The 2005 referendum on the Constitutional Treaty is a well-known example where the approach of the political parties towards the EU changed fundamentally. The people has spoken their opinion and no less than 61% of the Dutch voters spoke out against the Constitutional Treaty, whereas the Dutch parliament voted with an overwhelming majority of 86% in favour of the same Treaty (Harryvan and Van der Harst 2013, 243-245).

Wilders: “It was a wonderful day yesterday! The Dutch voter spoke out. A large majority said no. I am proud of the Dutch voter, because he said no to the European constitution of the elite in Brussels, who are light away from the regular man and woman” (Tweede Kamer debate 2 June, 2005). This marked a shift towards a more reserved approach to the European integration project; only the D66 remained as positively supportive as before.

Putting politicisation in the context of the influence of Eurosceptic government parties on the policies of the EU; whether an issue related to the European Union is politicised or not matters. If an issue is put high on the agenda and receives much media attention, then the bargaining power of the Eurosceptic party might be strengthened. The public will take note of the event on the news, and this will raise public awareness. This however would have to be in combination with the presence of a successful populist rhetoric.
Causal mechanism

The below figure is an attempt to show how the different factors might be causally connected. The bargaining position of the government party is determined by a multitude of contextual variables, of which the aforementioned are likely to be the most relevant in the Dutch case.

Presence of Eurosceptic party in government → bargaining position → Change in government's EU policy

- size
- consensus politics
- populism
- politicisation

These factors appear to be individually insufficient conditions for a strengthened bargaining position of a party in government when it tries to shape EU policies. Populism is however not a necessary condition, but, if present, facilitates their influence.

The political climate on European integration in the Netherlands since the early 2000s

27/05/2003 - 07/07/2006 Balkenende II (CDA, VVD, D66)

During the Balkenende-II cabinet, the Constitutional Treaty was under negotiation, and the Netherlands was already considered to be a ‘dissatisfied nation’ (Hellema 2014, n.p.). Reasons for this perception were the tough position with regards to the formal status of the Netherlands within in EU, but also the emphasis on Dutch self-interest and the growing resistance over the transfer of competences on the EU level (Ibid.).
In October 2002, a week after the fall of the CDA-VVD-LFP cabinet, the politicised enlargement debate took place in Parliament. VVD positioned itself particularly critical to the accession of the 10 member states that were supposed to join the EU in 2004. Party leader of the VVD, Gerrit Zalm, was against the default accession of the ten countries in 2004, arguing that the Common Agricultural Policy should not extend contributions to the new member states, and also that four of these countries - Poland, Slovakia, Latvia and Lithuania - should have to be re-evaluated as to whether they comply with the acquis communautaire (Harryvan and Van der Harst 2013, 218-219).

The VVD’s position towards enlargement changed however; it 2005, it supported the accession negotiations with Turkey and later it was in favour of the accession of Romania and Bulgaria in 2007 - the least developed countries to join the EU (Harryvan and Van der Harst 2013, 231-234). This is dependent on the influence of public opinion and the constituency, as well as the person who in the party holds the key positions on the topic of European integration. Whereas Hans van Baalen was strongly committed to the start of the accession negotiations with Turkey in 2005, Gerrit Zalm was particularly critical of the 2004 enlargement.

The party of the prime minister Jan-Peter Balkenende, CDA, was a supporter of a European federation until the 1990s, but the difficult negotiations leading to Maastricht, forced the party to reposition itself more towards a course of rather intergovernmentalism than supranationality (Vollaard and Voerman 2015, 108-109). The shift towards a more democratic European Union, and taking off federalism from the political agenda of the party came, unsurprisingly, after the 2005 no vote against the Reform Treaty (Ibid. 109). This brought about a period where the PM Balkenende fought for a decrease in Dutch contribution to the EU budget, voted in favour of the 2004 enlargement but against the 2007 one (Ibid. 110). Also the candidacy of Turkey and Western Balkan countries could only feasibly be

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2 The reason the cabinet fell on 16 October 2002, after governing for only 87 days, was due to internal disagreements between the Christian Democrats and Liberals on the one hand and the populist List Pim Fortuyn - without Pim Fortuyn, who was assassinated two weeks before the general elections, on the other hand. As an example, the first state secretary to step down was LPF’s Philomena Bijlhout, eight hours after having taken office, because it was revealed that she had participated in the people’s militia of Desi Bouterse, President of Suriname, longer than previously thought. This was only one of the crises that haunted the LFP in the months to come. The confidence in LPF’s participation in the government was lost in mid-October 2002 by the CDA and VVD. The opposing view of further European integration, was only of secondary importance. (http://www.parlement.com/id/vh8lnhrptxx1/kabinetscrisis_2002_lpf_crisis)
considered after the integration of the EU from 15 to 25 member states was successful (Ibid. 110).

D66, the most pro-European party in the Dutch parliament, during the EP elections in 2014 stated the desire for a European federation which would “make the Netherlands stronger” (D66, 2014). As such, it positioned itself in favour of the enlargements of 2004 and 2007, and the candidacy status of Turkey in 2005. If it had any influence, then it ought to have been by affecting the Dutch government’s position towards more EU integration, rather than allow from it.

22/02/2007 - 14/10/2010 Balkenende IV (CDA, PvdA, CU)

The ChristenUnie (CU) has been considered to be a soft-Eurosceptic party, but in fact has balanced between being euro-pragmatic and soft-eurosceptic (Vollaard and Voerman 2015, 122-125). On various issues regarding the European Union it is particularly critical, while on others it is not; it was in favour of the accession of Romania and Bulgaria to the EU, but against Turkey’s candidacy, it was fiercely against the Constitutional Treaty but embraces the Lisbon Treaty, it is in favour of close cooperation within the EU but against a political union, and the some within CU were against the financial bailout of Greece (Vollaard and Voerman 2015, 118-126). Again, there are push and pull forces within the party that position themselves quite strongly in favour or against further European integration. Party leader Arie Slob states in 2012 that “a monetary union may very well work without a political union”3, while in the same year MP Gert-Jan Segers “has absolutely no principle objection to a United States of Europe” as long as it a organic process, built on values (Vollaard and Voerman 2015, 126-127).

As mentioned above, the Christian Democrats became more critical from the mid-2005s; their previous federalist approach was definitely let go of. Also, for the CDA Turkey did not belong in the EU and Romania and Bulgaria had to be seen as a next step in case the 2004 enlargement could be considered a success.

The Labour Party (PvdA) has been a europhile party since the 1990s, embracing federalism, but has been critical of the overemphasis on the market and the negative consequences which this might have for social wellbeing (Vollaard and Voerman 2015, 137).

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3 Own translation
PvdA was one of the three parties that initiated the 2005 referendum on the Constitutional Treaty, being a proponent of the Treaty - just like almost every other party in Dutch parliament. The crushing vote against the treaty thus came as a blow to the party and its Europe policy. The party manifesto for the 2006 general elections focused on winning back the confidence in the European integration project by emphasising that only those policy areas should be a EU competence when the individual member states cannot deal with these issues as effectively (PvdA 2006). Nevertheless, the emphasis is also on solidarity between countries, “in order to offer everything chances for a better future - whether that is by supporting the poorest regions in Europe, or via a foreign policy that focuses more on human rights, international development cooperation and conflict prevention - is an essential part of European cooperation”(PvdA 2006).

14/10/2010 - 05/11/2012 Rutte I (VVD, CDA, PVV)

While the Rutte I cabinet was considered in 2010 to change course with regards to the EU, from Balkenende’s cooperative tone to Rutte’s minimalist approach, in fact there appears to be more continuity than change. “During [the] Balkenende IV cabinet, the Netherlands already had the intention to negotiate for a €1 billion reduction in payments to the EU. Over the years, as a reaction to the ‘no’ vote against the Constitutional Treaty, the Netherlands had also already become much more reluctant towards enlargement”; such that the Netherlands completely isolated itself with its particularly staunch position regarding the EU candidacy of Serbia (Rood et al. 2010). Lastly, Balkenende pulled the strings during the negotiations of the Lisbon Treaty to limit the transfer of competences from the Netherlands to the European Commission (Ibid.).

“The minority cabinet Rutte I (CDA and VVD, 2010-2012) was compelled to great restraint in European affairs, at least domestically, due to her dependency on the permanent support of the PVV of Wilders” (Harryvan and Van der Harst 2015, 88).

The Freedom Party (PVV - Party voor de Vrijheid) became the permanent parliamentary supporter of the first minority cabinet in the Netherlands on 14 October 2010, and on 28 October the coalition agreement was presented, with a separate section about the permanent support of the PVV in the VVD-CDA cabinet. In the agreement, there is an
explicit reference to the disagreement which the CDA and VVD on the one hand, and the PVV on the other hand, with regards to the nature of Islam. The PVV treats it as a political ideology, while the other parties see it as a religion (Coalition Agreement VVD-CDA 2010, 4).

“Minority governments are a rarity in the Netherlands. This coalition agreement is the result of consultations between the VVD and the CDA. In addition, the VVD, PVV and CDA have concluded a parliamentary support agreement on immigration, integration, asylum, public safety, care for the elderly and the agreed package of cuts. The far-reaching decisions included in the support agreement have the support of the parliamentary parties of the VVD, PVV and CDA. The PVV may vote against proposals from the coalition agreement in parliament. However, it will not support motions of no confidence or censure that relating to measures in the coalition agreement” (Coalition Agreement VVD-CDA 2010, 5).

One should add that the VVD itself was a supporter of the EU, though with strict conditions; focusing on the need to make the EU more efficient, modern and effective. It did not want other countries to be accepted for candidate status before 2015 and want to keep the EU budget under 1% (VVD 2010). The VVD is in support of the European integration project, but striving for the most beneficial economic partnership, while fulfilling its duties and responsibilities in line with the Treaties. The CDA states in her 2010 election programme that “the CDA is a pro-European party.” All points made regarding the European Union imply a need for a deeper integration of the EU (CDA 2010).

After the elections it was the VVD who came out as biggest party, and thus automatically gets the first chance to form a government. Mark Rutte, VVD’s party leader, was thus given the first shot. The start of the Dutch post-election negotiation process is described by Andeweg and Irwin as follows: “The Queen does not form the new government herself, but she appoints a formateur or an informateur to preside over the negotiations between the prospective governing parties. Before making such an appointment, the Queen consults all parliamentary party leaders. If a likely coalition emerges out of these consultations, the Queen follows the advice of the party leaders and appoints a politician from one of the potential governing parties (usually the largest one) as ‘(in)formateur’ (that is, as either informateur or formateur)” (Andeweg and Irwin 2009, 127). In our case at hand, this was Rutte recommending to the Queen Uri Rosenthal as informateur. The Queen
pronounced after the election that “considering the difficult situation which our country is facing”, the aim should be to see which possibilities there are for the largest party (read VVD) and the biggest winner (PVV) to form a cabinet (Heymans 2010, 28). It appeared to be a preferred option for Mark Rutte to try and form a cabinet with PVV (Ibid., 28).

The Rutte I cabinet pursued a particularly strict policy in the EU when it came to further enlargement of Serbia and candidate Schengen member states, and the policy of the Netherlands with regards to European migration policy (Schout 2012, Harryvan and Hoekstra 2013). This stringent policy approach of the cabinet was considered to have been influenced by the PVV. “The problem of both agendas was that by the other European member states these policies were seen as an expression of the undesirable influence of Geert Wilders, who caused a lot of discomfort with his hotline against any disruptions by Central and East Europeans” (Schout 2012, 418).

The PVV is principally against further political cooperation in the European Union, as well as an EU beyond the mere strengthening of national economies. Testimony of this was when the PVV revoked its support of the minority government of VVD and CDA over the disagreement of having to cut on government spending in order to meet the criteria of the Growth and Stability Pact.

On 1 March 2012 the Central Planning Agency calculated that between 9 and 16 billion euro has to be cut from the government budget for 2013 in order to meet the European requirement of keeping government spending under the 3% mark. On 5 March, the PVV is willing to negotiate budget cuts as long as some deals can be made with regards to immigration and asylum policy (Nieuwsuur 5 March, 2012). Wilders as such combines the salient issues of his party (immigration policy and the European Union). It would imply that the study of PVV’s hard-Eurosceptic campaign cannot be seen separate from its anti-immigration agenda. Further supportive of this is the fact that the voters of PVV seem to be less supportive of continued European membership of the Netherlands in the EU, the differences between people in favour and people against Dutch membership is marginal (46% against versus 44% in favour in 2012). The more significant issue of PVV voters regarding the EU is not principled, but relates to the lack of understanding of the EU’s functioning, and the lack of democratic accountability (Aalberts 2012). Membership of the European Union seems to hold less issue salience for PVV voters to vote on that party than the topics of
immigration and “Islamisation”. In line with Akkerman and De Lange, “[r]adical right parties are characterized by their outspoken stances on immigration and integration issues and tend to present these as omnibus issues through which other concerns, such as crime and security, care for the elderly and health care, and European integration, can be funnelled” (2012, 579).

The PVV highlighted that the governing parties VVD and CDA and the permanent parliamentary support PVV “agree to disagree” on foreign policy issues like the European Union, and that the PVV will continue to raise its voice regarding spending that goes to the EU (Tweede Kamer 26 May, 2011 and NOS News 24 March, 2011).

Political scientist Adriaan Schout reflected in 2012 on the Rutte I cabinet’s policies towards European integration and concludes that all parties are in practice supporting further integration, even though they do not position themselves as such. With regards to the PVV, this “is the only [party] explicitly against the euro and further integration. This should be taken with a grain of salt. Wilders has, in the most volatile one and a half years of European history, accepted one step after another regarding strengthened integration and rescue funds. The question remains whether the PVV would really want to drop the euro or would rather prevent further economic chaos. As of now, the PVV is a saloon anti-European” (Schout 2012). Taggart and Szczerbiak argue the other way around when they say that “the influence of Wilders’ Freedom Party over the European position of the Dutch government – and, indeed, over its very survival – represents something of a ‘perfect storm’ of successful populist mobilization at a time of European and domestic economic crisis” (Taggart and Szczerbiak 2013, 33).

Conclusion and considerations

This exploratory paper aimed to set the stage for the next step in the research project, namely to identify actual cases where government parties influenced the policy-making process towards their position on European integration. A number of concrete politicised cases are readily available for the time time period under examination; for instance the parliamentary debates around the 2004 enlargement of the EU, the candidacy status of Turkey, the 2007 enlargement, the EU budget in 2010 and the bailout plan for Greece in 2011. Whether these
are cases where we can identify the way these parties influence government policy is at this point unclear though.

Whether government parties directly or indirectly impact government policy is not yet clear. A preliminary conclusion at this point is that the PVV, under the leadership of Geert Wilders, has been a particularly successful actor in the way the European integration project developed in the Netherlands. This indirectly pushed the government policy towards more restraint. While there were no concrete moves towards an exit from the EU, the party did manage to spur public opinion towards a more Eurocritical position. Populist rhetoric, coupled with the special role of permanent parliamentary supporter rather than an actual government party, seemed to have contributed to its success. It remains to be seen whether the PVV would actually have been a success actor in government. Irrespective of this, the PVV did lose in the 2012 elections, going from 24 seats to 15 seats in parliament.\(^5\)

\(^{5}\) On 29 May 2016, according to the polls by peil.nl, the PVV was prospected to receive no less than 37 of 150 seats, which would make it by far the largest party, with the VVD with 24 seats coming in second. (Peil.nl 2016)
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