



## Netherlands - No Game Changer in European Elections?

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The election in the Netherlands will be the first in a series of European elections in 2017. But while expectations are running high and concerns are growing for good reasons, the Dutch election is not expected to be a game-changer in European politics.

While Geert Wilders's populist, anti-immigration and anti-EU Freedom Party (PVV) had been leading the polls for many months, new polls show that the conservative-liberal, ALDE-affiliated Popular Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) of Prime Minister Mark Rutte is heading for the first place, while the PVV finds itself in a pre-election dip.<sup>1</sup>

In the Netherlands we have not observed a huge [upsurge](#) of anti-establishment attitudes and prejudices as in several other EU countries. The Freedom Party had already underperformed in the election to the European Parliament, when they were expected to come first, but only came third. Also, the chance that Wilder's party will cause a great surprise is diminished by the fact that Wilders is no longer a newcomer in politics, but someone who has been in the parliament for almost two decades. While still able to play the anti-establishment character with some conviction, he is not a novelty like Donald Trump in the United States or AfD in Germany.

In the highly fragmented Dutch party political landscape, the chance is high that the election results will lead to a fragile coalition. Needless to say that Rutte's coalition potential is incomparably higher than that of Wilders. While in a previous (minority) government Rutte relied on Geert Wilders's support in the parliament it is highly unlikely that this will happen again. Among the [post-election scenarios](#) of VoteWatch, there is only one in which Geert Wilders can become a governmental player. In the meantime, Geert Wilders has already pushed the mainstream, especially Rutte, towards a more Eurosceptic, anti-immigration position. Finally, even if the next Dutch government continues the opposition of the current one against further integration and, especially, against the enlargement of the European Union, this would not represent a dramatic, sudden change, but just a continuation of the present policy of the currently most Eurosceptic 'EU core country'.

Furthermore, populism in the Netherlands is not entirely typical for the 'populist Zeitgeist'. As [Cas Mudde](#) put it: '*Geert Wilders is a unique politician, who shares some features with Trump, others with Le Pen and Co., and a few with none at all.*' The PVV is more liberal than several of its populist European counterparts. Neither do they share the strong admiration of Vladimir Putin's Russia with other populist players in Europe. Austria's FPÖ and Italy's Lega Nord have recently made coordination and/or cooperation agreements with the governmental United Russia party in Russia, and Marine Le Pen's FN famously received a loan from the First Czech Russian Bank, which has close connections with the Kremlin. They praise Vladimir Putin's regime, support the annexation of Crimea, and participate in so-called 'electoral observation missions' in Russia, Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, responding to Moscow's call.

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<sup>1</sup> Though it remains to be seen whether Wilders will be able to profit from this weekend's commotion about the obstructed attempts of Turkish cabinet ministers to campaign in the Netherlands for the April referendum about the expansion of Erdogan's presidential power and the continuing diplomatic row between both countries.



We do not see similarly deep personal, political let alone financial ties between Wilders's party and Russia. While Geert Wilders is a frequent guest on Russia Today, the Kremlin-controlled international Russian TV-network, and the party's Members of European Parliament frequently support Russian positions on [Russia or Ukraine-related votes](#), Wilders is rather reserved in his position towards Putin. He, for example, [blamed Russia and the West alike](#) after the Crimean conflict – while his comrades put all the blame on the latter.

While there are obvious attempts by Russia to influence the results of the election in Germany (toppling Merkel and pushing AFD and Die Linke) and in France (the 'anti-Macron' strategy), we do not see similar systemic attempts in the Netherlands, neither similarly strong pro-Russian networks. While one interpretation of the referendum results in 2016, when more than 60% of the Dutch voters (with a turnout of just slightly higher than 30%) rejected the association agreement between EU and Ukraine, was that the results were the consequence of [strong Russian influence and propaganda](#), another interpretation seems to be more plausible. The referendum results were more likely the manifestation of Euroscepticism and welfare chauvinism or a combination of the two, responsible for fears that the enlargement of the European Union can cause a flood of immigrants from Eastern European countries. (A similar fear was behind the Brexit results.)

While there have been obvious attempts by pro-Russian groups and NGOs to shift the political positions and there were [worries concerning election hacking](#), Russian influence does not seem to have a huge impact on Dutch politics overall.

Interestingly, there are well-documented influences from another direction: the United States. Conservative, [Right-Wing Islamophobic groups](#) in the United States are financing Geert Wilders's party, and some Americans close to Trump seem to be willing to support [alternative news sites](#) in their attempt to help populist forces in Europe. One of them, Gatestone, is edited by Dutch journalists. While this phenomenon might be connected to the fact that Wilders (unlike for example, Marine Le Pen) keeps his pro-Atlanticist line, and does not share the deep hatred towards the United States of many among Europe's populist radical right. But also, there might be a broader pattern here, with increasing attempts of resourceful American groups to interfere in European elections in order to help to spread Donald Trump's populist 'revolution'. This does not mean of course, that these will be decisive factors on Election Day.

All in all, it seems that the Dutch election can move the country towards a bit more uncertainty, towards a slightly more Eurosceptic position - but no dramatic change should be expected.