

EVENT REPORT

BÖLL LUNCH DEBATE

'Creating a Union that Connects' – but How? The Dutch EU Council Presidency and the Harsh Realities of a Crumbling Union¹

On 1 January 2016 the Netherlands embarked on what will probably turn out to be the rockiest of its twelve EU Council Presidencies. Among its four guiding principles the intention to 'create a Union that connects with civil society', seems to be if not the most ambitious certainly the most essential and the hardest to put into practice. Since: how do you (re)connect the EU institutions with the European citizens amidst the overwhelming problems which seem to pull the Union more apart every day? Due to the terrorist threat and the migration crisis the Schengen system is as good as dead whereas European governments are still vehemently disagreeing on a common solution of the migration issue. Poland is following Hungary on its road to 'Putinisation' with Croatia almost unnoticed in its slipstream. The euro crisis, though not much talked about these days, is far from being solved and the BREXIT-referendum forecasts its shadow. And, as if this wasn't bad enough, the Dutch government will have to wrestle with all these difficulties with one hand tied behind its back as on the domestic front it has to fight for its political survival against the spectacular growth of Geert Wilder's right-wing populist and Europhobic PVV. Half-way through its presidency, on 6 April, it will also have to win an advisory referendum on the approval of the Association Agreement between the EU and Ukraine which in case it's a 'no' will create another problem for the Dutch government, its EU Presidency and the progress of the Eastern Partnership. Whereas one used to say about former EU Presidencies that they were 'at the helm of the Union', the Dutch Presidency looks more like a battered crew on a leaky rubber boat desperately trying to avoid the fatal impact of merciless waves which could make it sink any time. What is clear is that the Dutch cannot succeed in their mission to 'create a Union that connects' without the undivided political will of the other EU governments to support their aims, but seen the current state of the Union this seems unlikely. And what about the citizens – how much do they want to be (re)connected with a Union which many have come to see as a threat rather than as the promise it was meant to be? Time to find answers to this existential question is running out quickly – not only for the Dutch Presidency.

Although the Netherlands are very experienced as far as council presidencies are concerned – they have proven their skills in 1991, 1997 and 2004 – the critical situation in which the European Union currently finds itself poses almost insoluble problems on the presidency. In 1992 and 1997 the Netherlands was in charge of crucial treaty negotiations, resulting in the Treaties of Maastricht and Amsterdam. In 2004, the Dutch succeeded in opening accession negotiations with Turkey. But in all those years the mood was one of 'more Europe', not 'less' and the aim of enlargement was a driving force behind the EU, even at the time of the 2005 Dutch referendum, when a majority rejected the idea of a European constitution.

¹ The event took place on 24 February 2016. Guest speakers were: Joop Hazenberg, Eu Watcher, Mark Kronenburg, journalist NRC Handelsblad, The Hague, specialised in Foreign and European Affairs; Julian Rappold, programme officer at the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP) and Judith Sargentini, Member of the European Parliament (Greens/EFA). The debate was moderated by the director of the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung European Union, Klaus Linsenmeier. The opinions expressed do not necessarily represent the opinions of the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung.

Vague priorities

This time the Dutch took over the presidency at a moment that could hardly be more inopportune. It is perhaps for this reason that the presidency itself is not a subject of public debate in the Netherlands at all. Only few people know that their country has to deal with this rather delicate task since the beginning of the year. To put it plainly, in the best case, Dutch citizens are not aware of their country's presidency, in the worst case they are complaining about it. There seems to be nothing to 'win' for the Dutch government in this period of presidency in terms of a successful and publicly appreciated project.

It is therefore not surprising that the agenda presented by Prime Minister Mark Rutte resembles pretty much the so-called Juncker plan, with a focus on economic issues and job creation. Among the other priorities, as set out by the Dutch, is a vague 'focusing on the essentials', which can be regarded as a concession to those Member States that feel overregulated by the EU. On the other hand, they want to create a 'Union that connects', since there is the general feeling that the Member States are inexorably drifting apart and that there is dangerous gap between European institutions and citizens. Besides these rather theoretical and blurry key points (a contradiction in itself), there are also matters of real politics, which concern the current crises. Yet all in all, for the Dutch government this presidency is mere 'homework', something they want to get 'rid of' as soon as possible, and hand it over to the Slovaks in July. One can only hope that the Dutch Presidency will be able to at least broker a deal on the refugee issue, as Slovakia's approach to solving the refugee crisis is to say the least 'different'.

Severe challenges

One of the ambitions the Dutch Presidency expressed is to reconnect the EU institutions with the European citizens. Trust in the EU and in its institutions depends to a large extent in the capability of the latter to find appropriate solutions to solve the crises. But such common solutions are hard to find as long as Member States prefer their own national solutions, depending on their priorities and on the most pressing issues. Some of them are dealing with the refugee crisis in a rather destructive way. Suggestions to throw Greece out of the Schengen area and going for a 'mini Schengen' are not helpful. Neither is calling refugees (economic) 'migrants' or exaggerating rumours that the influx of refugees threatens the security of European society because terrorists might be hiding among them.

So far there is no rational and feasible plan for the distribution of refugees among EU countries. Most Member States are letting Germany down without assuming responsibility; in the meantime Germany has to deal with an extremely high number of refugees and Chancellor Merkel is under great political pressure.

It is, indeed, not an easy task to find a European solution to the current problems. Although the EU has endured several crises before, what is new is the multiplicity and the concurrency of serious problems threatening the continuation of the European project. It is also the first time that a crisis is really felt, not only in the southern countries, but also in the north, e.g. in Germany. When the Dutch prepared their agenda for the term of the presidency they might not have been aware that the political situation would develop in this direction and that the crises would accumulate in this way.

The role of the Dutch Presidency – between mediator and policy maker

In light of the fact that the current crises put the European project and its moral basis as a community of states bound in solidarity to the test, the question still remains whether the Dutch Presidency should have ambition or if one cannot expect more from them in these difficult times than being a mediator instead of showing political leadership. The complexity of the crises that the EU witnesses today would demand tailor-made solutions that materialise only in the long-run. EU leaders tend to deliver easy answers to difficult questions to the electorate; they need to respond quickly, which contradicts the requirement of long-term and sustainable solutions.

Nowadays political leaders are more and more trapped between what is politically desirable and what is practically feasible. This applies to the Dutch Presidency in an exemplary way. This self-reinforcing process which started with the euro crisis and is even more significant in the refugee crisis, has resulted in Member States putting their national interests first when it comes to presenting concrete proposals and taking action. There is a serious risk that this overall approach to responding to challenges in a nation-focused way will become permanent and that it will contribute to the erosion of European solidarity.

In the Netherlands, the government stopped campaigning for Europe. While the governing coalition of Christian democrats, liberals and social liberals had set out a broad campaign in the run-up to the referendum on a European constitution in 2005, the current government, consisting of liberals and social democrats, has given up explaining the EU to its citizens. The lack of connection between EU and citizens is obvious, and the Dutch government (like many others) seems to have accepted that situation, in spite of their 'connection' claim. The solutions that are currently on the table in Brussels are unsatisfactory; they are sensitive and problematic in a way that the Dutch cannot use them to their advantage. Cooperating with Turkey for example in the refugee dilemma could end in more refugees in Turkey and Greece and an increase in illegal manoeuvrings on the Balkan route. A 'mini-Schengen' would be financially ineffective, and removing Greece from the Schengen zone does not contribute to solving the refugee crises since the refugees usually leave Greece for a non-Schengen country and then try to re-enter the Schengen area. In the meantime, the social tensions in Greece are increasing and Premier Tsipras is facing serious pressure from society. While his country is one of the main actors in the refugee tragedy and at the same time suffering under the bailout programme, there is little hope that Greece can be a solution to the problem as it is too much of a problem itself.

As the Dutch presidency has little, not to say no scope of action, it can only be hoped that the Dutch will at least find some way to ensure a minimum of cohesion and integrity within the EU before the presidency is handed over to Slovakia and later Malta – countries that, at least in the refugee crisis, represent a rather controversial stance.