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The Dutch Election: Populism Loses a Round, but Democracy Is Still in Trouble

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The Dutch parliamentary election of 2017 has exposed the ongoing crisis of Western democracy. Not so much in the surge of anti-liberal democratic and populist parties, but rather in the continuing fragmentation, decreasing legitimacy and erosion of the political foundation underneath Western welfare states.

On 15 March, political pundits across the globe sighed with relief, after yet another political disaster in the West was diverted. Last year, Brexit and Trump shook the belief in democratic systems, as lies ('alternative facts'), fake news and a continuous outpouring of misinformation resulted in the UK population voting with a (slight) majority to leave the European Union, and Americans opting for Donald Trump to be their next President.

Anti-establishment forces rejoiced because of these uprisings. In Russia, Hungary and other autocratic states, the people's choice was welcomed. In France, the spokesperson of Marine Le Pen tweeted: 'as their world crumbles, ours is being built.'

Would 2017 be just as bad for liberal democracy as 2016? With elections looming in Germany, France and the Netherlands, a domino-effect was feared that would push the pendulum from TINA (There Is No Alternative) to the Alt-Right.

Yes, you have a choice, people, the populists in the three founding nations of the European project stated. Go for Frexit, Gexit, Nexit. Release yourself of those chains of globalisation and the European super state. Protect your welfare state. Distrust the immigrants.

No wonder that media across the globe watched with great interest what was happening at the next stage for the domino theory: the Netherlands. With the last general election in 2012, the Dutch would be able to have their say on five years of harsh reform executed by a kind of bizarre coalition government, consisting of 'just' two parties: the conservative liberals teamed up in the Union for Freedom and Democracy VVD, and the classic social democrats of the Labour Party PvdA. In the meantime, Geert Wilders' Freedom Party PVV kept hammering hard on the 'dismantling' of the welfare state, the flux of migrants ('We want less, less Moroccans in Holland, and I will take care of it' said Wilders – echoing Joseph Goebbels, and being convicted of racism because of this statement), and of course the bloody EU, eating away our sovereignty. At the end of 2016, he was firmly leading in the polls, though his election programme consisted of just one A4 sheet.

Two elections in the Netherlands

'There are two elections in the Netherlands,' tweeted one observer in March. 'One for the foreign media, and one for the Dutch population.' Indeed, how the Netherlands was portrayed in the foreign press didn't really match reality. Only Wilders' party was in favour of a Nexit referendum, along with a handful of new parties that were completely unknown until the start of the election campaign. So a possible exit of the Dutch from the EU was not a serious political option, also because almost four in five Dutch citizens is positive about European integration. Plus none of the mainstream parties wants to slam the brake on cooperation within the EU.

And then there is Wilder's popularity. Actually, it never got much beyond twenty percent of the *total* share of voters, and that is important because the Netherlands does not have an

election threshold. A mere 70,000 votes is enough to get you into Parliament as one of the 150 members of the Second Chamber. So twenty percent of the vote will never be enough to get close to a majority.

In fact, in March no parties were polling over 17 percent, which meant that a coalition government would become difficult. The Dutch always have had coalitions, and are used to having ten parties in Parliament (including one for pensioners, one for animals and one for right-wing Christians), but this election seems to have led to an even greater fragmentation of the electorate. More about that later, because for me this is the real crisis and showstopper of democracy.

Geert Wilders, a firebrand in Dutch politics since decades (and since 2004, on his own after he left the VVD to found the PVV), was effectively barred from governing after a government with him, the VVD and the Christian Democratic party CDA collapsed in 2012. It was Wilders who pulled the plug on this coalition which was based on a programme that, according to Prime Minister Mark Rutte, was 'a finger-licking sensation for the right-wing part of the Netherlands' ('waar rechts Nederland zijn vingers bij kan aflikken').In the ensuing election Wilders was punished with a loss of 9 seats. After that traumatic experience for VVD and CDA, the only two parties potentially interested in cooperating with Wilders, they excluded him explicitly as a coalition partner.

And now in the 2017 election, Wilders scored lower than in 2010, with a mere 20 seats in total.

So the fuss about the Dutch election was much ado about nothing, right? The Dutch economy is one of the fastest growers in the EU, unemployment is very low and the Dutch are the richest population in the Union (after, well, Luxembourg).

Powerless state

'We' in the lowlands, with our culture of pragmatism and cooperation, may have halted the rise of populism for now. It seems as if the disaster-scenarios can also be brushed off the table in France and Germany, with Marine Le Pen polling third in the first round of the presidential elections and with the race in Germany being all about a contest between the centrist giants of the Christian Democrats (Merkel) and increasingly popular Social Democrats (Schulz).

Still, our societies are in ever more troubled waters. And that has to do with a range of continuing processes that undermine the nation-state and weaken the foundation for (liberal) democracy. I have written several books on this development, coining the process in Dutch as *De machteloze staat* (The Powerless State) in 2012. I was predicting an end to the left-right paradigm in politics, to be replaced by a new division between cosmopolitans and sovereignty-seekers. Boy, did I get that right! A bit sooner than expected, though.

So why is the state becoming powerless? This has to do with four 'megatrends': globalisation, European integration, the IT revolution and horizontalisation. These trends have gained speed and traction in the last two, three decades, especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. The advent of internet (in 1994) and the spread of mobile phones (this year more than five billion people in the world will have a mobile in their pockets, half of them being a smartphone) helped to empower people through the massive distribution of information and building new networks, turning borders and old institutions redundant.

The rise of the *network society* (Manuell Castels / Jan van Dijk) can be regarded as an outcome of these four megatrends, which then slowly but decisively hollowed – and hollows – out national democracies. To throw a third name at you, Dani Rodrik calls this the inescapable *trilemma of the world economy*. Rodrik stated in 2007 that you can't combine democracy, the nation-state and globalisation in one system. One of the three has to go.

Yet, politicians in the West still try to combine the three. Once in power, they realise that national capitals can no longer 'steer' the economy or society, their central position within the country has evaporated. Remember drastic changes in governments in southern Europe, at the height of the eurozone crisis? Despite the rhetoric of freeing up their states, notably in Greece, they were forced to implement crisis measures, dictated by the EU and IMF (who were themselves, in essence, dictated by the invisible hand of the market).

Floating voters

Back to the Dutch polder. What happened at the latest election? A few notable things, that fit seamlessly in the theory of the powerless state.

First of all, the indecisiveness of the voters. In January, 70% of the electorate didn't know which party they were going to support. And just before the election, 40% still were hesitating between one, two, even three parties. The programmes of most parties are so much alike, and expectancies of *change* so low, that for many voters it was hard to form a solid opinion on voting preferences. The 'zwevende kiezer' (*floating voter*) is not a recent phenomenon but in this election they were markedly present, which meant that a party gaining (or losing) momentum just before the election, could enjoy the bandwagon effect.

This is exactly what happened to GroenLinks, a green-progressive-left party that went from 4 to 16 seats, also because it is led by a charming 30-year old with the looks of young Justin Trudeau, who managed to sell out enormous halls of up to 5,000 seats to speak – unheard of in the Netherlands.

Back in 2012, the PvdA had a similar surge, shooting up to 38 seats and nearly becoming the biggest party, while they were polling around 10-15 seats in the months before the May 2012 elections. The social-democrats have now been severely punished though, dropping from the 38 high to a mere 9 low, in fact an all-time low for the party which has been in (coalition) governments for decades and produced a number of statesmen-like Prime Ministers, such as Wim Kok in the 1990s.

So the electorate is very volatile and easily moves from the radical left SP to the radical right (or supposedly so) PVV. Or they switch from PvdA to Denk, a right-wing club of disgruntled pro-Erdogan Turks that gained three seats in Dutch Parliament. Also the Forum voor Democratie got two places in the Second Chamber, its leader being a young intellectual troublemaker, with close links to Trump's gang in America and Putin's mob in Russia.

Just as in other Western countries, centrist parties lose their appeal. Just as in recent years, a new Dutch government will only be able to push some handles up and down of the complicated system that's called the welfare state, but not bring back sovereignty. European integration will continue, more power will go to Brussels to save the euro and to increase our external border plus boost our common security. The real future of the Netherlands lies in the (invisible) hands of the EU, the market and the ongoing technological revolution.

So the margins for national policy makers and national politicians become smaller and tighter. And this cannot remain without a response. The void in power needs to be filled. We

can identify some striking examples, apart from the increasing appeal of populists and nationalists who claim that there *is* an alternative, that there *is* a third way in our globalising world.

- The European Commission is doing everything it can to *deliver results* for Europe's citizens: abolishing roaming charges for your mobile phone when travelling abroad, free train tickets for 18 year olds to discover Europe, while also putting some-sort-of-halt to enlargement and limiting the amount of new rules coming from of Brussels. By showing the added value of European integration to daily lives of ordinary Europeans, political strategists hope to re-win the minds for the good works being done in Brussels.
- Increasing assertiveness of cities and regions. Now that of the nation-state is under pressure, citizens look for new identity frames. One way is to 'buy local'. More and more people now read and watch regional media, cultural festivals of regions are also increasingly popular. Cities realise they can put an end to climate change if they work together, and start initiatives like C40 that aims to make the biggest cities in the world CO2-neutral in the next decades. Not unimportant as one realises that the overwhelming majority of the global population lives in an urban environment – and that is also where most CO2 is produced.
- Decentralisation of powers. This is a big trend, in which the national government gives a lot of responsibilities back to lower levels – in the Netherlands this process has already taken place in a drastic way, giving municipalities the lead in providing previously nationally planned provisions for the welfare state (healthcare, housing et cetera).
- Citizens discovering what it is to be a citizen. After most of its citizenship has been taken over by the state (no need to put Grandma in the attic, the government has built elderly homes), now the personal involvement in society is coming back. That can take many forms, from women's marches against Trump in the US to picnics on roads in Brussels to ask for pedestrianisation of the centre. Or from Cinque Stelle trying to tear down archaic political structures in Italy, to crowd funding for societal projects and raising millions in a matter of days, all over the world.

The show must go on

The decline of the nation-state is a gradual process and we need to wait if it can be reversed. Maybe we'll look back to this period in thirty years' time and regard the rise of Trump and Great Britain leaving the European Union, as no more than futile attempts, a swan song even, of politicians to keep in control of the nation. Unless, of course, they reject globalisation fully and go on the path of autarky. 'Poor but proud of our independence' would then be their clarion call.

Luckily, no such tendencies exist in Dutch mainstream politics. What the March 2017 election showed, however, is the realisation that politics do not really matter anymore apart from changing accents within the welfare state, or show moral leadership. Redefining what the nation-state is and does, and how it relates to regions, Europe and the world – those difficult questions have not been tackled at all in the Dutch election campaign. They will need to get a proper answer though, otherwise Wilders and the likes may be more successful in their next attempt to gain power.