

*THE NETHERLANDS, WILDERS'S ASSAULT TO THE EU'S BULWARK
THE POPULISTS ARRIVE IN THE PROVINCE OF MAASTRICHT*

The face that Maastricht shows to the tourists is one of perfect compliance with the European standards, from the Hoge Brug to Plein 1992. The city is a celebration of the level of integration the EU had reached with the Maastricht treaty.

What the majority of those travellers still does not know is that the province is one of the most euroskeptic areas in the whole country. And euroskepticism in the Netherlands means PVV. Geert Wilders, leader of the party, appeared to have gained in the polls 17% of the votes, in light of the European Parliament elections. However, after the "Moroccan accident", it is uncertain to predict the outcome of Wilders's success in May.

Euroskeptic positions, though, are not supported by the intelligentsia of Maastricht, yet by the lower-class. For instance, merchants in the city complain that the enlargement of the EU made the Euro weaker, and it is difficult to support less wealthy member states.

According to Chris Aalberts, a political communication scientist and author of "Behind the PVV", there are three reasons behind the success of the party: a clear and active political programme; a strong sense of duties and values, such as fighting against fraud and criminality, particularly appreciated in the Southern regions; the issue of immigration and integration. Against the EU, Wilders bases his arguments on the fact that in the last 20 years Dutch politicians relied on Brussels to issue norms and policies, and now the immigration wave of the last decades serves his purpose even more.

The motivations for casting the vote on the PVV help to draw a map of the supporters of Wilders, rather than an identikit of the voter. The main followers of the PVV can be found in Rotterdam and Den Haag, in some areas of Amsterdam and in the Southern regions.

Jean Bruijnzeels, who works in the Department of Economic and Social Affairs in the municipality of Maastricht, denies that the city gets labelled as euroskeptic. "The problem comes from the region itself, which is not able to spread information on the EU. Since the Treaty, Maastricht has incredibly benefited from the Union, in terms of tourism, internationalisation, and the growth of the university."

Euroskepticism in the Netherlands is strengthened by the weight of the financial crisis. Frank van Buren holds that the country is still rather wealthy, in contrast to what the populists want the voters to believe. Nevertheless, van Buren suggests not to overestimate the influence of populist parties, even though their rise is worrisome. Concerning the *Nexit* report, van Buren states that it has no scientific value, and should not be taken into consideration.

Though, what is to be expected for the PVV and for Europe in the next EP elections? "We cannot foresee the numbers of the results- says Patrick Bijsmans, director of studies of the Bachelor *European Studies* at Maastricht University- the existing trend hints at a rise in euroskeptic parties, although it still remains uncertain whether they will be able to form a compact group in the EP (Wilders allied with Front National in November). Concerning the EU, I think it will survive, even though there will be a general slowing-down in the integration process."

An employee holds that Europe is a good thing. "Together we are stronger, but the single member states need to solve their own problems first."