



The road to Nexit

A look into Dutch Euroscepticism

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FINAL EXAM PROJECT

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On the road to Nexit

Brexit caused a shock to the process of European integration and has left many Eurosceptic parties with the idea that an exit from the European integration project is possible after all. In the Netherlands a new party is advocating for a Nexit. Forum for Democracy has set its sights on the exit door, but to leave the Union they have another challenge first: convincing the Dutch.



Daniel Hannan, British Conservative and Member of the European Parliament, came to speak about 'Brexit, and the opportunities for the Netherlands'. Photo: Sofyan El Bouchtili

“I drank champagne on the morning of the results of the referendum”, says one of the youths as he congratulates British Conservative and Member of the European Parliament Daniel Hannan on Brexit. Brexiteer Daniel Hannan was invited to an event at the Red Hat in Amsterdam on 25 May. The renowned debating center in the heart of the historic center of the city was the venue of choice for Forum for Democracy to talk about ‘Brexit and the opportunities for the Netherlands’.



A mixed crowd of young and older people awaits Daniel Hannan anxiously. Photo: Sofyan El Bouchtili

When Daniel Hannan reaches the stage a wave of excitement goes through the crowd. As he repeats one-liner after one-liner, each statement emphasising the success of a self-governing United Kingdom is met with loud approval. “All of the dire predictions we were given during the campaign have been shown to be nonsense.”, Hannan proclaims adamantly.

According to Daniel Hannan, the Brexit has been covered differently on mainland Europe. He frames the Brexit debate between a willing British side and the European Union that tries to hurt British interest as punishment. “If the EU was convinced of its own idea, then leaving would be it’s own disaster”, Daniel Hannan says. People nod confirmingly. Someone in the back yells “SHAME!”, showing support for Daniel Hannan’s claims.

But progress of the Brexit negotiations between the UK and the EU has frequently halted, not in the least due to practicalities and more delicate issues like sorting out the Irish Border. And the UK has yet to leave the EU on 29 March 2019.



Daniel Hannan was one of the main figures behind the Leave-campaign that led to Brexit. Photo: Sofyan El Bouchtili

Over 400 people showed up on a hot Friday night. Most of the people in the room are convinced that the Netherlands should follow in their footsteps and leave the EU. Online more than 28.000 people joined in to listen to what Daniel Hannan had to say.

Even before it started, the event had already caused an uproar online and in the media. Shattered windows, superglue in the locks and graffiti on the wall that reads 'fuck FVD' (Forum for Democracy) and 'no fascism'. That is how the day began. A group of antifascists claimed the vandalism on debating center The Red Hat. The reason: giving a fascist movement a space for gathering.

And on top of that, another protest took place. It was organised by a different group under the name of 'Bezorgde Amsterdammers' or 'Worried Amsterdammers'. They gathered in front of the entrance while people stood in line for the event. In the background, the windows were being fixed and the paint removed.

The protesters held signs that read “Forum for Democracy: racists-nationalists-sexists”. Some people waiting to go inside got visibly upset, some even confronting the protestors. And of course local and national news were there to register the confrontation. It is clear that the newly formed party does stir up the public debate.

All of the dire predictions we were given during the [Brexit] campaign have been shown to be nonsense.

Daniel Hannan, British Conservative Member of European Parliament

In all this commotion, Forum for Democracy got free publicity for their event. Next it was talk of the day, online and offline. Hosting Daniel Hannan has a clear purpose for Forum for Democracy. One of their main electoral agenda points is taking power back from Brussels to The Hague: “It is time to quit the monetary union, to close the open borders and then to leave the EU.”



Thierry Baudet founded the party as a think tank in 2015. After a successful campaign to organise a referendum on the Association Agreement with Ukraine along with partnering citizen platforms, the think tank became a political party. Thierry Baudet cited the disappointment of the lack of impact the referendum had on the Dutch government’s action as a reason to become politically active. Photo: Sofyan El Bouchtili

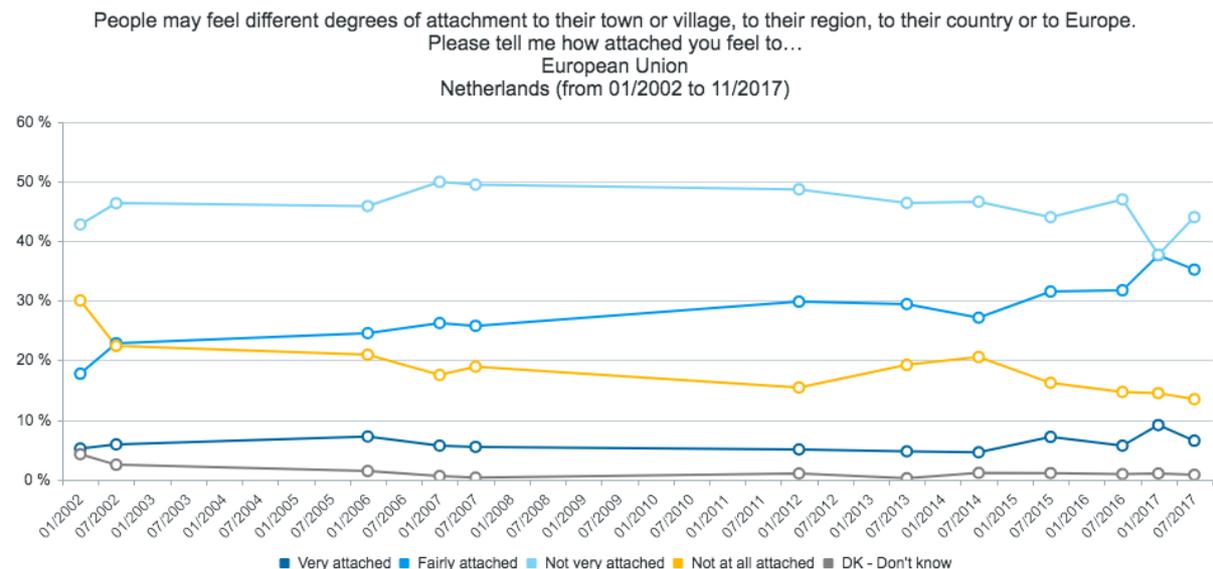
Thierry Baudet, leader of Forum for Democracy, is confident there is broad consensus to achieve a Nextit: “56% of the Dutch preferred a future for their country outside the EU. These figures are higher than the Brexit vote.” The poll he puts forward was commissioned to polling organization Peil.nl by the Eurosceptic British think tank The Bruges Group.

The poll was carried out under 1174 Dutch voters. The question that was posed included several options: 39% wanted to remain member of the EU, 23% preferred the so called

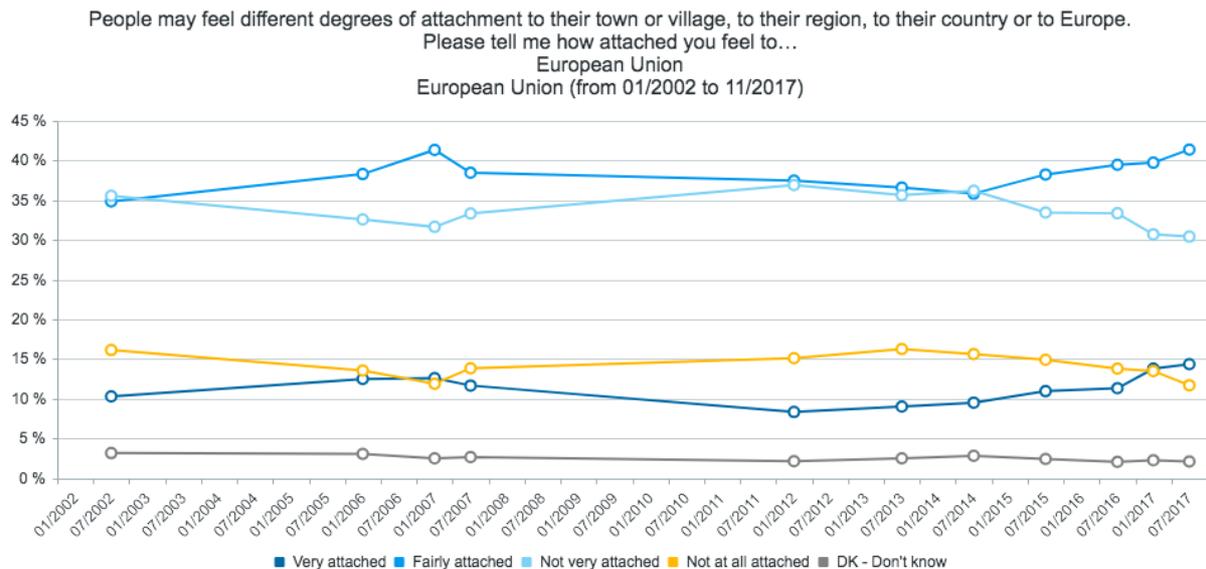
Norway-model, 27% think the Dutch should leave and make their own trade treaties and 11% had no idea. If you leave out the people saying they had no idea, then you reach an outcome that leaves 56% of the Dutch wanting to change their relationship with the EU.

According to Thierry Baudet, the Dutch can not be out of the EU soon enough, as he explains to a reporter from the PanAm Post at the launch of the Conservatives International conference in Florida, United States. In international media, Thierry Baudet clearly tries to portray his country as if it were on the verge of a Nexit. In doing so, he is trying to change the once so Europhilic image of the Dutch.

According to the Eurobarometer, the Dutch have long been among the more positive members of the European Union and have long been a largely Euro-optimistic nation. However, in recent results a part of the Dutch show more estrangement from the EU. It shows 44% of the Dutch feel 'not very attached' to the EU and 13% feel 'not at all attached' to the EU. A small 1% is undecided or doesn't know. This in contrast to 35% who feel 'fairly attached' and 6% that feel 'very attached'. In other words, the Dutch are divided on their future in the EU.



Eurobarometer results for the Netherlands (question above) , as of November 2017, Source: Eurobarometer, published by European Commission



Eurobarometer results for the European Union average (question above), as of November 2017, Source: Eurobarometer, published by European Commission

The Eurobarometer is not the first sign to show that division. In a referendum in 2005 the Dutch, along with the French, rejected the treaty on establishing a constitution for the European Union. In 2014 in another referendum that was called for by several citizen platforms—including one that was formed by Thierry Baudet himself—the Dutch voted against the EU Association Agreement with Ukraine. Both instances were a loss of face for the Dutch government in the EU.

The Dutch government went ahead with both anyway. In the case of the Constitutional Treaty it was amended and then instead of being put to a referendum, it was passed by the Dutch government in the form of the Lisbon Treaty. The Association Agreement with Ukraine, meaning the first step for the country towards EU membership, was passed in a bill by the Dutch House of Representatives and the Senate last year.

But it would be wrong to assume that these instances of rejection of European Union politics show a clear negative attitude of the Dutch towards the EU. Both of these occurrences were also influenced by what was playing out on the political stage on a national level. For example, a poll by Maurice de Hond showed that in 2005 support or rejection of the ruling Cabinet Balkenende II had an effect on the voting result.

“What I notice is that as soon as the EU is criticised, it is described as Euro-scepticism”
 Hans Vollaard, Assistant Professor in Dutch and European politics

Hans Vollaard, Assistant Professor in Dutch and European politics, does not assess the Dutch political debate to be so polarised. That’s why he thinks that a Nexit is unlikely to happen anytime soon. Among his current research topics are European disintegration and Euro-scepticism in the Netherlands. “In the Netherlands, there’s often criticism on the Association Agreement with Ukraine, or on a certain country joining the EU: but that is normal politics.”



Hans Vollaard is specialised in Euroscepticism in the Netherlands, he wrote a comprehensive historical overview with colleagues called 'From attacking! to defending'. Photo: Sofyan El Bouchtili

“What I notice is that as soon as the EU is criticised, it is described as Euro-scepticism”. He argues that we should carefully assess this kind of criticism before we label it. “It is just criticism on the basic principles of the process of European integration and sharing sovereignty and influence on the market order.” And thus we should view it first in the context of normal political debate.

This criticism is also reflected in the changing attitude of the Dutch governments towards the EU. Initially the Dutch government is hesitant but afterwards, the following catholic and socialist coalition governments strongly defend European integration. As long as the Dutch interests were aligned with those of their European counterparts.

This stance remained. But as enlargement plans are formed and European cooperation becomes more complex, the dream of a politically united Europe fades. “In the eighties we see the Dutch government using the guideline ‘are we going towards a political union?’. And slowly but surely you start to see it shift in the nineties to ‘is our national interest being served by this?’ ”.

Euro-pragmatism

It was also in their own interest to push the membership of the United Kingdom in the 60s. “You can try to make me believe anything but not that the United Kingdom was a Europhilic country. It still isn’t”, says Vollaard. The United Kingdom could provide the Netherlands with a strong partner to face the German-French heavy weights. France had too much of a state-led economy, not liberal enough for the Dutch, and they wanted to make sure that European policy was not going to just serve the interests of the biggest economy, Germany.

Hans Vollaard calls this stance Euro-pragmatism; treating EU politics as a win-lose in relation to national interests. In order to understand Euro-pragmatism we need to nuance our idea of Euro-scepticism, explains Hans Vollaard. Euro-scepticism revolves around the idea that political power should reside in the nation-state. That is why these movements are sceptical about sharing sovereignty and influence in the order of the national economy.

But there are parties that want to completely leave the EU and become a self-governing nation. They are called hard Euro-sceptics. Then there are those that feel that the EU has clear advantages but that the process of integration has gone far enough and should not continue any further. They accept the status quo and are called soft Euro-sceptics. And next to that, there is Euro-pragmatism that continues European integration but uses a rhetoric that is very critical for the way it happens.

“You might be able to buy Euro-burgers in McDonalds, but I don’t think you’ll find any in the EU”. Frits Bolkenstein, the leader of the liberal People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), showed with this statement in the early 90’s that the belief in the idealistic notion of European political union had faded. And so even before the arrival of Geert Wilders and Thierry Baudet, on the Dutch political stage, a shift away from completing European political integration was clearly visible in the Dutch government’s attitude towards the EU.

“However, the most important development in the nineties, was a shift from the governing Europhilic parties like current prime minister Mark Rutte’s liberal party, the Labour Party and the Christian Democratic Appeal towards Euro-pragmatism” according to Hans Vollaard. This became even more clear after the referendum in 2005. That defeat was a strong signal for the Dutch government to reassess their support for the EU. “In this moment, they went from ‘a European political union is not feasible’ to ‘it is no longer desirable’”.



A group of protesters gathered outside of the Red Hat in Amsterdam on the day of Daniel Hannan's visit to Amsterdam. The protest was not so much aimed at the subject of Brexit and Nexit but at Forum for Democracy's hardline views on migration and multiculturalism. Many of these protesters were holding up signs that read 'socialisme.nu'. The site hosts messages, many coming from far left and radical left-wing. Ironically none of the protesters came in to debate with the rest of the crowd, even though many of them also do not support the European Union, according to one of the protest leaders. Photo: Sofyan El Bouchtili

Up until that moment, the Pacifist Socialist Party was the only party in parliament that pleaded for an exit from the European Economic Area. But this precursor of the current Green Left party went from being Eurosceptic to Europhilic when the Green Left was formed out of several left wing parties. They realised that their agenda on climate and environment would be best served with partners in a European context. An example of how the Euro-sceptic attitude transcends the left-right division in the political spectrum.

The scapegoat

A problem that has plagued the image of the EU in nation states is that Brussels is the perfect scapegoat in the event something goes wrong. The Netherlands are no exception to this trend. "Euro-pragmatic parties, such as VVD and CDA, especially in the electoral arena when there are elections, think twice to win over as many voters as possible. And they know they can do this to a part of the public that would otherwise vote for Forum for Democracy of Party for Freedom, because of their Euro-sceptic position."

That in itself makes the position of these governing parties on the EU unclear. Because they don't shy away to adapt their rhetoric depending on the agenda setting of Euro-sceptic parties. An example. According to Politico, Dutch Prime minister Mark Rutte is a respected

leader with a lot of influence in the EU that was able to fend off Geert Wilders' party during the national elections of 2017.

However, his national campaigning was more a show of *if you can't beat them, join them*. His party was one of many traditional parties that mimicked the critical opinion on the EU of Euro-sceptic parties in the 2017 elections.

Up until a few years ago, it was Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom that mainly embodied and fuelled the Euro-sceptic sentiment in the Netherlands. But the hard Euro-sceptic line of thought is not confined to Wilders' populist party. Thierry Baudet, Forum for Democracy's photogenetic leader, saw a clear vacuum between the Euro-pragmatic parties and Geert Wilders' hard Euro-sceptic party.

The distance, Thierry Baudet thinks, between these two sides of the spectrum is too big and has left some Dutch voters without a choice. "We have the main political parties that want to continue the project of gradual dilution of the nation state and on the other hand we have the populist response to it, Mr Wilders' party, which is not a realistic alternative. So there's a huge vacuum there, a huge niche" he told the PanAm Post.

And that is exactly where and how Forum for Democracy wants to position themselves in the Dutch political landscape. They aim to entice the right wing of the more traditional and conservative right-wing parties closer to the center and those who can't recognise themselves in the harsh rhetoric of Wilders on the far right. The first include the governing parties CDA, Christian Union, and prime minister Mark Rutte's liberal People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD). All of which have made a shift towards a more pragmatic stance on migration, eastern enlargement and European political integration during the last years.

In [recent polls of the National poll](#) (June 2018), the success of Thierry Baudet's party is clearly reflected. Prime minister Mark Rutte's party doesn't seem to be very affected, holding its place. But it is Wilder's Party for Freedom that takes a big hit, going from 20 to 14 seats. Remarkable winner in this is Thierry Baudet's Forum for Democracy that has seen an increase of seats, going from 2 to 16 seats in recent polls. But polls are not the same as election results. However the rise of Forum for Democracy with also the fastest growing youth department is undeniable.

Irreversible

"Sorry, I find this very naive". A man in the crowd stumbles to find the words as he's the only one who tries to confront Daniel Hannan with some pragmatic questions on the future development of the UK economy. Once again, Daniel Hannan points out that Brexit will remove constraints and allow the United Kingdom to seize better opportunities. A more concrete answer the Brexiteer did not have.



But Brexit has given new ground to the idea of going it alone outside of the EU. Even though this night was supposed to be about the lessons of Brexit for Next, not many concrete answers were given as to how the Dutch should prepare their Leave-campaign. Photo: Sofyan El Bouchtili

But Brexit has given new ground, in the Netherlands, to the idea of going it alone outside of the EU. What Daniel Hannan emphasised was that self-governing had democratic, constitutional and economic advantages. An argument frequently reiterated by Forum for Democracy in the Netherlands. Next to taking the power back to The Hague, the party advocates leaving the Eurozone.

That would only be possible by leaving the EU entirely. So they have a definite interest in making the common currency unpopular and indicate the flaws of the economic and monetary union regularly.

Mario Draghi, President of the European Central Bank was invited to The Hague to answer questions by Dutch members of parliament last year. Forum for Democracy-leader Thierry Baudet took the opportunity to ask if the Dutch would be reimbursed for their surplus in contributions if they would leave the Euro, just like the Italians would have to pay off their debt in case of an exit. Mario Draghi, visibly irritated, reminded Baudet that the Euro has been a success, especially for the Dutch economy. To that he added that leaving the Eurozone is not possible because of the signature on the Treaty of Maastricht.

The Maastricht Treaty came into force in late 1993 and formed the European Union out of the European Communities. Next to cooperation in security and defence and police and judicial cooperation it introduced a set of criteria that were meant to converge the economies of the union. It created an economic and monetary union laying the foundation of the central banking system and the Euro.

This was needed to make sure that all participating countries could benefit from the common currency. “Adopting the Euro is irreversible. That’s what it says literally. Ir-re-versible. It is one of the few clauses of the Treaty that is so unequivocal that you can’t interpret in three ways”. Speaking is Wim Boonstra, Special Economic Advisor to the RaboResearch Group and Professor in economic and monetary policy at Free University Amsterdam.

Wim Boonstra also rejects Thierry Baudet’s quid-pro-quo perspective that sees a creditor and debtor relationship between strong economies and weak economies. Also when it comes to the contributions made to the budget by each country, the debate is framed in this way.

“But if you look at those figures in terms of what Northern European integration has meant for the development for the harbour of Rotterdam, the enormous amount of European headquarters registered in the Netherlands, to arrange the distribution [of goods and services] throughout Europe, the monetary stability that we have had and trade flows... Then those administrative costs are only a fraction of what the European Union provides us.”

The coming of the economic and monetary union made different Member state economies become reliant upon one another. The Netherlands is a country with a strong favour for liberal economic policies. The euro has made solidarity between strong and weak, liberal and more state-led key in European integration plans, something that has always been a thorn in the side of the Dutch.

Dutch economic pragmatism

The Dutch sure show their pragmatic side when it comes to economic policy. Before the Euro, the Netherlands were a weaker economy depending on the strong German economy. They formed a strong monetary bond with the German currency, the German Mark. It’s something that other countries did not do until much later, in preparation of the Euro. “This means that the competitiveness of the Dutch business has always been a key issue in the policy agenda. As a result the Dutch economy has continued to focus to remain competitive.”

Being very reliant on international trade, the EU achievements of single market, custom’s union, common currency and further economic and monetary integration have been very important to the Dutch economy. As a small country it has managed to become the 17th biggest economy in the world, according to the IMF.

Arjo Klamer, Professor cultural economy at the Erasmus University of Rotterdam, still has strong objections to the EU economic and monetary policies we currently have. Since the eighties he has made a name for himself as a critic of European economic, monetary and political integration and more specifically the Euro.

During the time he was alderman for the Socialist Party (SP) in Hilversum, he was also a member of the Committee of Recommendation of Forum for Democracy.

He thinks there are structural errors in it and feels that it is against all his values and principles as a socialist. “I object to the label of eurosceptic. Because it means that I am negative and pessimistic and it suggests that the people in Brussels are positive and optimistic”, he claims.

In 1997, he was part of a group of 70 economists that criticised the plans for the establishment of the euro in an [open letter](#). But since the Euro has been established and used for almost two decades now, that front of critics has fallen apart. But he himself remained critical.

“And I still am [critical] because I think a currency needs a strong political union, which isn’t there right now, a strong political union needs a demos, a sort of common feeling, which is also absent. Europe is too divided, and so there isn’t enough solidarity.” He fears that this will cause the Euro to be a sort of Trojan horse that will erode the trust in European integration from the inside. He fears concretely that all the different European economies need their own currency to be able to face the modern economy.

“A splintered Europe will be out of the picture soon enough”

Wim Boonstra, Professor in economic and monetary policy Free University Amsterdam

Wim Boonstra does not agree at all. “If you just look at European integration in its entirety, then it is a great success story”. He argues that Europe goes full steam ahead. “Europe, as a whole, is now the biggest economy in the world. And in 50 years, Europe will still be in the top 3 economies world wide. That means that we have influence over everything that is important in life.”

“A splintered Europe will be out of the picture soon enough. And then it will be the Chinese and the Americans that decide the fate of the world. And I would not wish that for my grant children” he adds.



“A splintered Europe will be out of the picture soon enough. And then it will be the Chinese and the Americans that decide the fate of the world. And I would not wish that for my grant children” — Wim Boonstra — Photo: Sofyan El Bouchtili

As the audience flocks out of the main hall towards a drink and a bite in the cafe, their appetite for more information on why the Netherlands should leave the EU was not satisfied. The book stand was quickly overrun. Daniel Hannan and Thierry Baudet's books with signatures are highly in demand, as well as the obligatory selfie.

With titles such as *The Attack on the nation-state* (by Thierry Baudet), *How we invented Freedom and Why it Matters* and *Why Vote Leave* (by Daniel Hannan), these books are an example of the narrative of movements like the Leave-campaign and Forum for Democracy try to create.

And the feeling that remains in Red Hat that night is the lack of a EU counter-narrative. "What is disappointing to me is that the EU institutions are not able or willing to emphasise their success and carrying it out as such", says Wim Boonstra.

However, for these people, the debate on European integration has already taken a decisive turn towards the exit. And Thierry Baudet is aiming for an ever growing audience. He sees the Netherlands leaving the EU within 5 years. With European elections coming next year, it is up to the EU institutions and the Dutch parties to try and shape a new vision for Europe.