
DUTCH VOTERS REJECT EU-UKRAINE ASSOCIATION

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EurActiv

Dutch voters on Wednesday (6 April) rejected a European pact with Ukraine in a referendum seen as a barometer of anti-EU feeling, dealing an embarrassing blow to the government in charge of the rotating EU presidency, sending shockwaves throughout the Union.

In a result swiftly hailed by eurosceptic groups, the Dutch news agency ANP said that with 99.8% of the votes counted the No camp had won the day with 61.1%. Only 38% voted in favour of the two-year-old treaty with Kyiv.

After initial doubts, ANP also projected that 32.2% of the electorate had turned out, passing the 30% threshold, meaning the ballot is valid and must be taken seriously by the coalition government of Prime Minister Mark Rutte.

The referendum is non-binding, but overlooking the voting results would be highly embarrassing for the government, and would provide ammunition to Dutch populists.

It looks like the Dutch people said NO to the European elite and NO to the treaty with the Ukraine. The beginning of the end of the EU, far-right Dutch MP Geert Wilders crowed late Wednesday.

Voters were asked if they supported the European Unions association agreement with Ukraine, which aims to foster better trade relations with the war-torn country and former Soviet satellite.

But organisers admitted the non-binding ballot was essentially about pushing a broader anti-EU agenda - humiliating at the very time that the Netherlands holds the rotating EU presidency.

The vote was being closely watched by Europe and Moscow, and could prove an important yardstick only months ahead of the UKs Brexit referendum in June.

The Netherlands is now the only member in the 28-nation EU not to have ratified the EU-Ukraine association agreement, which has already been given the thumbs up by both the upper and lower houses of the Dutch parliament.

Euromaidan was about EU association

Ukrainians took to the streets and ultimately ousted the then-President Viktor Yanukovich for his refusal to sign this same EU-Ukraine association agreement. The EU-Ukraine rapprochement which followed after the Euromaidan revolution led to an undeclared war by Russia against its neighbour, the annexation of Crimea, the occupation of Donbas by separatists, and at least 9,000

documented deaths.

These developments prompted the West to impose sanctions on Russia and to provide support to the government in Kyiv, who struggles to reform the country and re-orient its economy and trade toward the EU.

European Commission chief Jean-Claude Juncker said in January that a rejection by the Dutch of Ukraines EU association could open the doors to a continental crisis.

The Dutch No may pose a major headache for the European Union, as it also gears up for the ramifications of a possible British exit from the bloc.

Vote could boost far-right

Rutte agreed that the No camp won convincingly.

And he was forced to concede that if the turnout is above the (30%) margin then this accord cannot be ratified as is.

He had earlier urged voters to vote in favour of the pact with Kyiv saying we have to help Ukraine build up a judicial state and its democracy.

Europe needs more stability at its edges.

It remains unclear what will happen next, with Rutte vowing a step-by-step approach in full consultation with the government and Brussels. Official full results are only due on 12 April.

The vote is non-binding. But it could mean that the coalition government □ already under fire due to the refugee crisis □ will seek to opt out of certain provisions of the EU-Ukraine deal to satisfy the voters.

Ukraine was expecting the Commissions proposal for allowing visa-free travel for its nationals to the EU borderless Schengen zone. But such a decision needs a unanimous backing by the member states.

The referendum result could also boost Wilderss Freedom Party (PVV) which is already riding high in the polls due to his stand against refugees.

Sun setting on EU

The leaders of the Netherlands six largest parties all agreed on Wednesday that the country could not just ratify the agreement with Ukraine.

The accord cannot just be ratified. We have to take into account this No vote, said Diederik Samsom, the leader of the Labour Party, which is Ruttess junior ruling coalition partner.

The No camp had highlighted concerns about corruption in Ukraine, and continuing separatist unrest in the east, among reasons to refuse closer ties with Kyiv.

The Panama Papers revealed that Ukraines President Petro Poroshenkos confectionary company Roshen had set up an offshore company to avoid taxes, in August 2014, during a peak in fighting between Ukraine and pro-Russian separatists.

Ukraine had actively campaigned for a Yes vote, acknowledging that Dutch citizens had also lost their lives in the crash of MH17, the Malaysia Airlines Boeing 777 that crashed on 17 July 2014, after being shot down over Eastern Ukraine by Russian-backed forces.

But the message appeared to have fallen on deaf ears.

I voted against because I dont think the accord is a good thing for the Netherlands, said Nik Tam, 65, adding there were already too many countries in the EU.

Leave EU, one of the main pro-Brexit campaigns, proclaimed the Dutch ballots message.

Nobody could accuse the Dutch of not being good Europeans, but they have no willingness to open their borders to more migrants and pick up the tab for Ukraines problems, just like most UK voters, said Leave.EU spokesman Brian Monteith.

The vote was a signal to the British to follow suit, he said, adding: The sun is now setting on the European Union.

Kaynak/Source: