

European Conference  
**The European Union and the Promise of Democracy:  
What can Citizenship Education and Civil Society contribute?**

14-16 November 2013  
The Hague, the Netherlands

**Input**

**Workshop 2**  
**European Parliament elections 2014: How to increase voters' turnout?**

by Dr. René Cuperus, Wiardi Beckman Foundation (the Netherlands)

**Habermas versus Farage**  
**Euro-realists squeezed between federal radicals and anti-EU-extremists**

You should expect that, in the run off to the mother of all European elections - the forthcoming elections for the European Parliament in May 2014, about which everyone expect a giant battle between pro-EU and anti-EU forces -, political parties would come up with the best lists of candidates possible and the most daring and convincing party programme ever, as well.

For the Netherlands (and my own party, the PvdA), I am afraid to say, this is not the case. Even worse. A tragic trend/paradox seems to be at play in the last decade. The more important and powerful the EU-level and euro-zone matters become, the less quality parties seem to be able and willing to invest in European politics, in terms of personal and programme development.

Social-democratic parties preach that, by definition they are the internationalist pro-EU parties, but they do not practice this with their heart and soul to put it mildly.

Historically, not the best and brightest are active in European politics in Brussels and Strasbourg (I dare to say so, because I was an European candidate myself on the last PvdA-list, representing the not so good and bright ones). The strange thing, indeed, is that this does not seem to improve spectacularly, because now European politics are getting more and more centre-stage due to the financial-economic governance of the Currency Union and the (assumed) disappearance of borders in our post-national world.

I dare to break this taboo on personal political quality, because leadership candidates for the PvdA-group in European Parliament themselves did so, even in Dutch newspapers: "Sorry that it is us who stand for these elections, being not very well-known and experienced politicians at all. In fact, we need a guy of the standing and stature of Frans Timmermans, the current Dutch Minister for Foreign Affairs, to lead our campaign, but these kind of people are not available."

Unfortunately, this is totally true. Nobody likes to run for the European Parliament in the Netherlands. The EP is a very unpopular institution, with a bad reputation in terms of greed, corruption, inefficiency and symbol politics. In political debates in the Netherlands the negative stories about Brussels and Strasbourg are speak out loudly by the Eurosceptic parties. The EU in general can be defended with good arguments, but say the Strasbourg seat of the EP is totally indefensible in times of austerity and a *Populist Zeitgeist*.

In the narrative about the Europe Union and European Integration, the European Parliament constitutes "the weakest link".

It is true or not, the most vulnerable, controversial and disputed institution of the EU. The communicative tragedy (for mainstream pro-EU parties) is that many debates about Europe's future have to be channelled through the elections of the European Parliament. So fundamental discussions about the euro-zone make-up or subsidiarity are mixed up and polluted by negative stereotype discussions about the European Parliament, which in the end is what the elections are meant to be for.

Problematic on top of that is that European elections are second order elections of the most horrific nature. Voters are not turning out (democratically shameful scores of under 40% are no exception) or are experiencing laconically with their votes, not frustrated or hindered by any knowledge of European politics whatsoever. Europe "for the many, not the few" is far from our bed-elite politics.

This all seems to be radically different at the forthcoming elections in May 2014. We are facing a make-or-break moment for Europe. The European Union is storming toward a huge clash. A clash between two opposing camps of radicals: the Federal Radicals versus the Populist Radicals. This may result in an electoral bloodbath at the forthcoming European Parliament elections.

Two extreme camps stand against each other. One of them is the camp of anti-EU forces. For the European elections in May 2014 this is an unprecedented new strong alliance that has been formed by right-wing populist and (former?) far right parties. This alliance consists of parties such as the French *Front National*, the Italian *Lega Nord*, the Dutch Geert Wilders Freedom's party (PVV), the Austrian Strache party (FPÖ) and the Flemish *Vlaams Belang* party of Filip Dewinter.

Jointly they prepare an anti-EU campaign for the European Parliament elections and will explore forming a new radical-right grouping within the European Parliament. Geert Wilders has said that "our parties could make the Europhile elite sing a different tune". They are calling for a break-up of both the euro-zone and the European Union. Marine Le Pen, the leader of Front National, has vowed that the European Union would "collapse like the Soviet Union". She criticised the EU as a "global anomaly" and pledged to return the bloc to a "cooperation of sovereign states". She said Europe's population had "no control" over their economy or currency, nor over the movement of people in their territory. "I believe that the EU is like the Soviet Union now: it is not improvable," she said. "The EU will collapse like the Soviet Union collapsed."

Not that far away from the political goals of the new anti-EU alliance (but seriously keeping distance, especially from the Islamophobic and xenophobe image of the new right-wing populist alliance) is the UKIP-party of Nigel Farage in the United Kingdom. More complex will be the role of Germany's *Alternative für Deutschland* party, which criticises the make-up and governance of the euro-zone, but this is not anti-EU per se.

The other camp of federal radicals contains Brussels old boy's insider-networks such as the *Spinelli Group* of federalist MEPs (led by Guy Verhofstadt and Andrew Duff), or a new established group of eleven German economists, political scientists and jurists, the *Glienicker group*, which recently developed proposals for a deeper Europe. These groups, frontrunners and avant-garde of the European establishment, plea for a rapid and drastic deepening of the European integration – a federal leap -, to finally solve the contemporary Euro crisis. They plea for a new convention and a new treaty to form a federal political Union in which the European Commission is transformed into a EU constitutional government, or by which a Euro-government is formed a central government for the Eurozone.

What about the third camp, the camp of moderate Euro-realists? This camp, and this matters more complex and vulnerable, contains the majority of the European electorate and the majority of the mainstream political parties in Europe. This camp is neither 'anti-EU nationalistic' nor "Europistic-federalist".

The tragedy is, like mentioned above, that this third camp seems to be paralysed and squeezed in-between the more fanatic outspoken federal radicals and nationalistic extremists, and that they therefore suffer from weak candidates and weak programmes with hybrid positions.

As a result, not strong, experienced, common-sensical mainstream European politicians are leading the campaign for a reformed Europe, no: our great thinkers have been sent out to do that dirty job.

Intellectuals, as anti-populist and anti-neoliberal spokesmen. Jürgen Habermas is all over the place, defending a reformed transnational democratic European Union for a post-national world order. And Anthony Giddens just published his apology for Europe: "*Turbulent and Mighty Continent. What Future for Europe?*"

Habermas & Giddens versus Farage. & Le Pen. That is: fingers crossed for Europe.