

English

English > Current Affairs > Archive by region > Europe

EU voters don't have Turkey on their minds

By Perro de Jong*
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To one voter, the forthcoming European Union elections are a veiled referendum on Brussels as Big Brother. To another, a veiled referendum on Turkish EU membership. Or on immigration. Who's right?

A selection of remarks from the Dutch campaign:

- *"If it's a choice between torture or saving civilian lives, then I say torture"* - Eline van den Broek of Libertas.
- *"The interests of the Netherlands always take priority"* - Hans van Baalen of the conservative VVD party.
- *"Turkey: never in the EU"* - Barry Madlener of the rightwing Freedom Party.

If politicians can't agree what the European elections are about, no wonder the voters are turning away in confusion. But ask the same voters to say what they see as important themselves, and it turns out they do have clear priorities.

EU profiler

At the multilingual [EU Profiler](#) website, European voters can find out how their opinions match the programmes of the parties fielding candidates in the EU elections. And not only can they indicate their opinion on a particular statement, they can also rank the issue according to their perception of its importance.

Take terrorism, for instance. To the pan-European Euro-sceptic party Libertas, it's evidently a crucial topic. So much so that Eline van den Broek, who heads the party's candidate list in the Netherlands, dares to skate on thin ice by defending the use of torture. And indeed, the acceptability of restricting civil rights turns out to be among the top three priority issues of many visitors to the EU Profiler. For the Czechs, it's actually the most important issue.



Turkey

An issue that doesn't make it into the top ten, or even the top twenty, is a big favourite among populist parties like Geert Wilders' Freedom Party in the Netherlands: whether as a Muslim country Turkey should be allowed to join the EU. One of the makers of the EU Profiler, Amsterdam political scientist André Krouwel, is not surprised that political parties should have different priorities from the electorate.

"Well, surprise surprise: the elite thinks that other things are important than the masses. What else is new in politics? Mr Wilders, for example, has been in parliament for twelve years so he's clearly part of the political elite. He's trying to frame an issue that for a certain group of voters - say ten, twenty per cent - is very important. But overall, that is not the most salient issue."

Sustainability

So what is important to the people who fill in the EU Profiler? Firstly, the promotion of sustainable energy, even if it means higher energy prices. Here there seems to be quite a degree of unanimity in Europe, because the issue scores highly in nearly every country.

On other topics, opinion is divided. For example, on the desirability of health care privatisation. In the Netherlands this is barely matter for debate, but in Sweden, Italy, Poland and Austria it heads the list.

Euthanasia

In the Dutch EU Profiler top three, sustainable energy has strong competition in terms of priority from an issue that can safely be described as a Dutch hobby horse: euthanasia. André Krouwel sees the reason in the commonly-held view of Brussels as Big Brother.

"They think, because in general that's always said, that Europe has enormous influence on our policies. And they're afraid that this policy, which they support in large numbers, will be taken away from us. That it will no longer be possible to have euthanasia as a policy. That's why they show in large numbers that they want to keep that policy."

Key issues

Nevertheless, Mr Krouwel disagrees with Hans van Baalen when he says that national interests should always take priority. He sees key European campaign issues as being those that have national impact, but on which decisions have to be taken at international level. Issues like energy prices, government support for banks, and immigration - another favourite Freedom Party topic that actually does matter to the electorate.

Particularly in the Netherlands and Hungary, the statement that immigrants should be obliged to accept European values is ranked highly in terms of importance. Mr Krouwel thinks the politicians need to shift their attention to issues voters actually care about.

"Immigration and the environment are what they should talk about, absolutely. They shouldn't talk about institutions and whether there should be one or two foreign ministers for the European Union, or a president, or whatever treaty. It's about national or even personal issues that are being internationalised, then they become salient. Otherwise, Europe doesn't matter to voters that much."

**RNW translation (mb)*

Tags: Angela Merkel, Barry Madlener, Dutch Prime Minister, Eline van den Broek, EU Profiler, Europe, European parliamentary elections 2009, Hans van Baalen, Jan Peter Balkenende, Libertas, The Netherlands



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