

# State of the Disunion as 60th anniversary celebrations approach



Photo by Christopher Lotito



No doubt there were huge sighs of relief in Brussels that fewer Dutch voters than expected supported Geert Wilders' anti-establishment PVV in the country's recent General Election and that the VVD (Liberal) party, led by Prime Minister Mark Rutte gained the most seats.

A few days before the European Union's 27 remaining members meet to celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of Treaty of Rome, they can breathe more easily – at least for now. However, Mr Wilders was never going to become Prime Minister due to the multiplicity of political parties in the Netherlands, virtually all of which ruled out going into coalition with his party. If the PVV had become the largest party in the Dutch Parliament, it would have nonetheless emboldened anti-EU parties in France and Germany, where elections are also due later this year.

Even so, next weekend's festivities cannot disguise the harsh fact that the EU is becalmed, with no clear sense of direction. Eurosceptic parties may not yet be on the verge of forming governments in Western Europe, but their support is growing steadily. In response, Jean-Claude Juncker, the President of the European Commission, has recently published a white paper offering five different future scenarios for the bloc's future.

In a nutshell, these range from pressing on with ever closer

union (Scenario 5) at one extreme to a reduction to nothing more than a Single Market (Scenario 2) at the other. The other three options are a two-speed Europe (Scenario 3), with some countries integrating faster than others, "Doing less more efficiently" (Scenario 4) and "Carrying on" (Scenario 1).

The ever-closer union option is unlikely to gain much favour in Eastern Europe, especially Poland and Hungary. The current Polish government is a supporter of repatriating power from Brussels and the recent reappointment of Donald Tusk, a member of Poland's biggest opposition party, as President of the European Council against the wishes of Poland's government, is not going to improve relations between Warsaw and Brussels. Poland's foreign minister, Witold Waszczykowski said that his country will "play a very rough game" in the European Union.

Hungary has no appetite for interference in its internal affairs by Brussels. The European Commission has criticised the construction of a razor wire fence on the border with Serbia, but Hungary has ignored the criticism and pressed on regardless.

Then there are Greece's problems. Our friends in EPAM, a Greek Eurosceptic organisation, are organising protests against austerity outside several Greek embassies, including one in London, on Saturday 25th March. The organisation claims that austerity has bitten so deep into Greece's fabric that lives are being lost as the country's health service has reached the point of collapse. One article recently brought to our attention claims that *"The country is rotting inside the EU and the eurozone. The Greek people have crashed economically. Greek cities, because of massive illegal immigration, look less like cities in Europe and more like cities in Afghanistan. Banks have begun the mass-confiscation of residences. The people are on the verge of revolt."*

Of course, it is the Euro, one of the EU's flagship policies, which has put Greece into its current straitjacket. Until

recently, however, support for both the Euro and EU membership was remarkably strong. Almost two years ago, at the height of the last financial crisis, over 69% supported remaining within the Eurozone, with 56% wanting to keep the single currency even if it meant harsh austerity measures being imposed.

Such statistics act as a reality check to those of us in the UK whose dislike of the EU is so intense that we find it hard to figure out why other countries are not preparing to follow us out of the exit door. We have never been keen on pooled sovereignty and for us, the EU's "Ring of death" flag is a badge of shame. Across the Channel, things are viewed differently. Member states which suffered years of Soviet rule or military dictatorships view EU membership as a symbol break with a past they are all too keen to forget. While not all the EU's leading lights are such gushing federalists as the Belgian MEP and former Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt, there are still plenty of enthusiasts for the project. For instance the Spanish MEP Esteban González Pons who called Brexit "selfish", claimed that the EU was the "only alternative" in an increasingly globalised world and expressed the hope that one day, we would one day "come home" – re-join the EU in other words.

Such sentiment seems almost laughable given that others in the EU clearly view Brexit as a great opportunity to press on with closer union now the pesky foot-dragging Brits are going their own way. We will no doubt hear much about how wonderful the EU is during next weekend's celebrations, but once the festivities are over, the leaders of EU-27 will have to look long and hard at Mr Juncker's five options for the EU's future and coming to a consensus isn't going to be easy. Geert Wilders may not have achieved the breakthrough for which he hoped, which in turn has made Marine le Pen's already difficult path to the Elysée Palace even harder, but the EU has only won a short-term reprieve. A big fireworks display in Rome cannot disguise the fact that it faces a serious identity crisis

which it shows little sign of being able to resolve.

Photo by Christopher Lotito 