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April 6, 2016 8:43 am

# Dutch referendum on Ukraine seen as test of EU sentiment

Duncan Robinson in Brussels

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Dutch voters headed to the ballot box for a referendum on a controversial trade deal between the EU and Ukraine on Wednesday — with the latest polls pointing to a victory for those opposed to the move.

Although the vote is non-binding, a negative outcome is likely to complicate the implementation of the agreement with Kiev and would deal a blow to the Dutch government, which has a majority of one.

Since the campaign for a vote on the deal was launched last year by a satirical blog, the referendum has snowballed from a “yes” or “no” on an arcane trade deal between Brussels and Kiev into a plebiscite on a list of grievances, ranging from general anger at the EU to the Netherlands’ own relationship with Russia.

Peter Kanne, senior research consultant at I&O research, said: “The people who [will] vote against it are very critical of the European Union. The main reason people are deciding to vote against is fear of corruption in Ukraine. Another is the fear that this is the first step towards Ukraine’s EU membership. Also people don’t want to provoke Russia and Putin.”

Most polls suggest that the campaign against the Ukraine deal will scrape a narrow victory, with a low turnout expected to benefit the “no” camp. The referendum is the country’s first since 2005, when Dutch voters torpedoed plans for an EU constitution by voting overwhelmingly against the idea.

This time, however, both sides have had to contend with widespread apathy. Pollsters are not certain the turnout will breach 30 per cent — the level required for the government to take note of it. But opponents of the deal have a clear lead among those who say they are likely to vote.

Nearly two-thirds of Dutch citizens admit they have little to no idea what is contained in the 2,135-page deal with Ukraine. The referendum has instead become a lightning rod for other issues, leaving the “yes” campaign facing an uphill battle that has got tougher in recent weeks.

Allegations of corruption in Ukraine — a key plank of the “no” campaign — were this week heightened by the release of the Panama Papers, which ensnared the Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko, who was accused of using offshore accounts.

Even the weather has conspired against the “yes” campaign: the day of drizzle forecast is likely to put off the less impassioned “yes” voters, according to Mr Kanne, the pollster at I&O.

A defeat would cause headaches for the Dutch government, which is dominated by the Labour party and the centre right VVD, to whom the prime minister Mark Rutte belongs.

According to the latest polls, both parties lag far behind Geert Wilders’ anti-immigration and anti-EU party PVV, which has the backing of nearly 40 per cent of Dutch voters.

Even a comprehensive “no” vote is unlikely to blow apart the pact with Ukraine. Parts of the trade deal are already in place on a provisional basis and reversing this would require all 28 member states to unanimously agree.

EU lawyers have in the past examined ways of giving individual countries some form of opt out on measures such as sanctions. Previous compromises discussed have involved EU member states implementing the same agreement but on a bilateral basis, which would give a reluctant country a de facto carve out.

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