



Mathieu Segers

# The Netherlands and European Integration, 1950 to Present

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*Mathieu Segers*

*Translated by  
Andy Brown*

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# Contents

<b>Preface</b>	7
<b>Prologue: Dinner in Laeken (1989)</b>	13
Kohl's great leap forward	17
The surgeons of French <i>realpolitik</i>	22
Exploiting Franco-German reconciliation	27
The Netherlands between the Anglo-Saxons and the Teutons	35
Journey to the continent	38
<b>1 American concepts: Building Europe (1947-1949)</b>	41
Eternal division	51
<b>2 Magical realism (1949-1951)</b>	57
Putting the country's mental stability to the test	59
The Germany memorandum	63
Atlantis and bloc formation within the Western bloc	67
The Netherlands taken by surprise	76
Manufacturing a tranquillizer	84
<b>3 The Beyen Plan (1951-1954)</b>	89
The letter from 'the Ten'	90
Red versus Catholic	97
From Europe	99
A game for insiders	104
<b>4 Around Cologne cathedral (1954-1957)</b>	107
Adenauer's <i>Abendland</i>	109
Coordination through Europe's back channels	113
With the Benelux to Sicily	119
Rebirth as a market	123
The latest trend	127
The Treaties of Rome	133
<b>5 A Europe of conspiracies (1957-1968)</b>	139
Faust in Paris	141
Rhetoric and intrigue	146
Market expansion by a gentleman farmer	158
Silence is golden	165

<b>6</b>	<b>At home in the Basel biotope (1968-1974)</b>	<b>169</b>
	American dreams	170
	An alternative loan circuit	176
	Holtrop's logic	182
	Masters of the interim stage	187
<b>7</b>	<b><i>Sturm und Drang</i> (1974-1982)</b>	<b>197</b>
	Late conversion	201
	The monetary trilemma	206
	Failure for Duisenberg	209
	The stick of free movement of capital	218
<b>8</b>	<b>The hand of French-German friendship (1982-1989)</b>	<b>225</b>
	A community united by blood	226
	Celebrating success and earning money	236
	Work in progress	243
	The Delors Report	250
<b>9</b>	<b>After Strasbourg: A different party than expected (1989-1992)</b>	<b>257</b>
	Piet's work of art	259
	The consequences	266
<b>10</b>	<b>European realities: Defining Europe after the Cold War</b>	<b>271</b>
	The direction of integration	275
	The 1990s and after	280
	The tragedy of Maastricht and Amsterdam	285
	A rediscovery	292
	<b>Epilogue: The call of Calypso</b>	<b>297</b>
	<b>Abbreviations</b>	<b>313</b>
	<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>315</b>
	<b>Sources and references</b>	<b>317</b>
	<b>Index</b>	<b>329</b>
	Index of names	329
	Index of subjects	331

## Preface

Why did the Netherlands take part in the process of European integration from the beginning? How did that happen and what consequences did it have? These are the core questions addressed in this book.

The answers to these questions are encapsulated in a history that is often dominated by misconceptions. The history of European integration is regularly and grossly oversimplified. The incomprehension, the controversy and the amazement that the integration process so often invokes call for the development of concepts and theories to explain how it is possible that things go the way they go in 'Europe'. The process has always led to heated debate and sharp differences of opinion, not to mention an overfull international library of documentation, which continues to expand. But exactly what European integration is we do not (yet) know.

If – after substantial study in that international library – one thing becomes clear, it is that in the history of European integration, very little is what it seems to be. If possible, that applies even more to the Netherlands' role in that process. This is perhaps because the shelves in the library annexe dealing specifically with Dutch policy are relatively empty. But perhaps it is also because, in the years following the Second World War, the Netherlands focused more on international cooperation that reached beyond Western Europe. At that time, it was more enthusiastic about transatlantic organisation and free trade than European integration.

That preference did not make the Netherlands' starting position in Europe any easier and has been a complicating factor in the history of its involvement in European integration. It is a history that has continually been played out in an extensive twilight world between dream and reality – a world that mostly remains hidden, overshadowed by the apparent logic of rationalisations made with hindsight. That is partly why that world has received little attention in existing explanations of the how and why of Dutch engagement in Europe. It is relatively simple to explain with hindsight why the Netherlands had little choice in taking part in the process of European integration: the material benefits were (and still are) enormous and disproportionate. That is easy to say looking back from where we are now but, at the moment the decisions were made, Europe was often much more complex.

The history of European integration is made even more impenetrable by the thick mist surrounding its final goal. That vagueness makes ideal types and blueprints seem much more realistic than they actually are. And that not only leads to much teleological debate about the future of

the EU and the deterministic models in which it is framed (a federation, superstate or nation-state); it also makes it difficult to analyse the history of integration, which can only be achieved if historical facts can be clearly distinguished from the rhetoric surrounding the final goal – and that is no simple task. Attempts to do so have a chance of succeeding only if they include a study of the primary sources: sources that can tell us something about the circumstances and ideas prevailing at moments when decisions were made to take important steps towards integration – or not.

Most relevant primary sources are accessible to researchers only after thirty years. Consequently, international research into the history of European integration did not really start until the beginning of the 1980s (it now extends up to the end of the 1970s/early 1980s). Since then, time and time again, one conclusion proves inescapable: none of the parties involved – the governments of the member states, European institutions and their predecessors, the business community, lobbies, political parties, individuals, etc. – have ever been able to control the integration process, let alone dominate it, not even for a short time. The process has been uncontrollable from the very beginning, even for the United States.

The ‘normal’ situation in the history of European integration comes close to one of chaos. In the midst of the unpredictable circumstances that such a situation generates, emotions, coincidence and intrigues have often been (and still are) more decisive than policy choices made on the basis of rational consideration. That makes the history of European integration, in the first place, political: it is the art of achieving what is possible in unforeseen circumstances. Some of those involved have had better command of that art than others. It is often difficult to predict how political processes will develop, especially if there is great uncertainty and when a large number of widely varying actors are involved. For the different actors in Europe, therefore, it is more often a matter of responding and anticipating than creating.

For the Netherlands, as for the other member states, the integration process was primarily something that happened to the country. It was, at crucial moments, even overwhelmed. That had much to do with the gaping hole between the European reality and how it was presented in The Hague.

In the Netherlands, it was long believed – and asserted – that the final destination of the whole European integration project could not be understood within the borders of continental Western Europe. Although this is exactly how integration proceeded from the start of the 1950s onwards (and would continue to do so until the early 1970s), the Netherlands still had its sights set elsewhere. Its future was to be Atlantic. At the same time, however,



its reality became increasingly continental European, and especially more German. In the post-war period, the Netherlands kept up this pretence, with one foot in reality and the other in its interpretation of that reality, for an alarmingly long time. It is this delicate balancing act that is central to the history of Dutch involvement in European integration.

And that is where the Netherlands differs from its European partners. Like the other five founders of the European project, from 1950 the Netherlands embarked on a journey to the continent – away from a past of world wars and global ambitions to a much smaller world of Western bloc-forming and, especially, Western European cooperation. But mentally, the Netherlands travelled somewhere else. It wanted to go to a different destination than the one it was heading towards ‘physically’, i.e. economically and politically.

This book is about the history of those two journeys – the mental one and the physical one. The account of those journeys is at the heart of the book. It is a story full of drama. But that drama is mostly hidden away in technical policy dossiers – behind their dry and rational exterior, the most unpredictable political battles have been fought out. To make the journey, therefore, the reader also has to plunge into the dossiers and become familiar with the economic and monetary methods found within them. That can often be more exciting than you might imagine. Reading between the lines in the policy dossiers reveals unexpected facts. And, at least as important, a close reading of the dossiers often provides a deeper understanding of the political processes behind them.

To analyse how the Netherlands responded to European developments, it is crucial to reconstruct European reality. And that is only possible by adopting a multinational perspective. This book is thus based on archive material not only from the Netherlands but also from elsewhere. The analysis rests, to a significant degree, on new or as yet unknown source material from within and outside the Netherlands. In addition, it ties in with recent insights from international research into the history of European integration. Any sources quoted in languages other than English have been translated where necessary, in the interests of readability.

This attention for the international and European context means that the account in this book is not only about the Netherlands and its role in European integration but also addresses issues like European power relations, the international economy and the ‘high politics’ of the Cold War. Consequently, to make it clear to the reader what situation the Netherlands found itself in, the discussion is often less directly about the Netherlands than the reader might expect. Much attention is also given to other states involved in the process of European integration, such as France, Germany, the

United States and the United Kingdom. That context is mostly indispensable in understanding why the situation developed as it did in the Netherlands, and in analysing the Netherlands' positions, choices and dilemmas.

Clearly, in a book like this, certain themes will be explored in greater detail than others. The choices I have made are derived from two main areas of attention. Firstly, I focus on the start of the integration process and the position originally taken by the Netherlands in relation to that process; much of what happened later can be traced back to that starting point. Secondly, I look at the actual steps and developments taken in the process of European integration: facts, treaties, failures, etc. – in short, things that were actually achieved or took place and were relevant to European integration between 1950 and the present day. Other approaches are, of course, possible and indeed desirable. It would be a welcome development if this book were to encourage more substantive debate and follow-up research on the Netherlands and Europe.

The history of European integration is still being written. The current episode in that history is dominated by crisis. That is raising pressing existential questions about how the integration process should move forward. The Netherlands is clearly grappling with these questions, and a book such as this can hardly ignore these developments as they unfold in front of our eyes.

The prelude to the current state of affairs is the main theme of the final chapter, which focuses on the 'new' post-1989 Europe, the old and new issues that this brings with it, and their significance for the Netherlands. Because primary sources for the most recent period are not yet or hardly accessible, this last chapter is somewhat more reflective. It is simply not possible to reconstruct the history of the past 25 years in the same way as that preceding it. The repercussions of many developments from the recent period, such as the substantial expansion of the EU with new member states from Central and Eastern Europe and as yet barely successful attempts by the EU to present a more united profile in the international political arena after the Cold War, cannot yet be clearly estimated.

What the last 25 years of European integration do force us to confront is the far-reaching significance of a Europe of the euro, the money and the banks. That Europe has actually been achieved. The deep grooves that the eurocrisis has gouged across the EU and its member states have pushed the history of that same EU towards other, new perspectives. It is difficult as yet to see what they are, but we can already conclude that the origins of the monetary dimension of European integration will perhaps prove even more important for the history of integration than was long asserted, believed or estimated. That is one reason why the history of the European

Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) and the euro is a central theme in this book. In many respects, that history remains under-researched and even less understood. This book, and chapter 6 in particular, therefore devotes considerable attention to the origins and development of the EMU.

The Netherlands' role in the history of European integration clearly shows how the pressure to deepen monetary cooperation drove the integration process long before the Treaty of Maastricht and the introduction of the euro. The pre-history of the EMU explains much of how and why the Netherlands resolutely persisted in keeping a foot in both the European and Atlantic camps, first until 1989 and even, under duress, for several years after that. In addition, the history of the EMU provides new insights into the tangled state of crisis in which the Europe of today (and tomorrow) finds itself.

The current state of Europe calls for an urgent re-interpretation of existing explanations of the integration process. What exactly are we facing? The history of European integration – including the Netherlands' part in that history – has become different since 1989 from what it seemed to be before. For the time being at least, European integration seems viable without the Cold War and the Pax Americana, and in the context of the unprecedented transatlantic rift. But is that really true, or just an illusion? And if it is true, how is it possible? These questions are the most important parts of the puzzle currently facing researchers of European integration. That is why this book not only ends with an epilogue on Europe and the Netherlands after the Cold War but starts with a prologue set in 1989, the most important historical turning point in the history of European integration to date.

*Mathieu Segers*

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