Blaming Brussels

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It is a favourite pastime of national politicians and an effective demagogic ploy: blaming Brussels. When things go wrong, or when one faces a difficult choice: blame Brussels.

Lees dit artikel in het Nederlands: Brussel de schuld geven

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It's the fault of those 'unelected bureaucrats' who decide how much a State government may spend and how products may enter the market.

Europe's ills

People making these claims ignore that those in charge at every level of government, including at the European level, have been entrusted with their task by popular vote or by appointment subject to parliamentary vote. Even the men and women who stand for 'Brussels', whether they be in the European Commission (appointed with the consent of the Member States' highest government officials and the representatives of the people of Europe, and accountable to the latter, assembled in the European Parliament) or in the Council of (national) Ministers (and, thus, accountable to State parliaments).

Unfortunately, such claims are not only made by principled nationalists and extreme euro sceptics, but also by reasonable members of national governments. The Dutch prime minister is among them. Recently, in a speech in Berlin, Mark Rutte was at it again, blaming all kinds of ills of Europe, whilst he has been there at the helm, together with other heads of government, who have the ultimate say in EU decision-making. Earlier this week, fellow European law professor Tom Eijsbouts rightly criticised Rutte's approach.

Decisions

'Blaming Brussels' impulses are hollow. Voters will see through them, ultimately. Rules that we agree at EU level, have been subject to lengthy preparations, including consultations with the public and interested parties (granted, the occasion for a lot of lobbying by mighty industry interests). Rules are adopted in a process that is not less democratic than the adoption of a State law on health insurance coverage, a regional decision on the building of a road, or a municipal decision on the sale of land to real estate developers. Often, these are opaque decisions that are difficult to scrutinise for citizens. But, these decisions are taken democratically, at the European level like at other levels of government.

Far-reaching decisions are taken at European level: on the accession of new Member States, giving their nationals access to jobs across Europe, on the adoption of the single currency, on the organisation of the supervision of banks, on the cost of using mobile devices across Europe or on the reach of personal data protection. Such decisions involve myriad interests and require highly technical expert input.

Confidence

Constant blaming of the European political process does not restore the link between citizens and politicians. Nor is it credible if those same decision-makers first agree on policies in Brussels and afterwards indulge in easy finger pointing at EU decision-making, which most people see as an abstract phenomenon anyway.

Should we wish to restore confidence, in politics, in the European project, or in a well-functioning society, we need to reflect on the failings of our systems and repair these. Humans are bound to make mistakes, and societies, as well. Open acknowledging and, where possible, repairing them helps, finger pointing does not. Citizens might also benefit from impartial and factual reporting on societal issues, preferably from a perspective of what binds us, as humans in this corner of the globe.

And we need a story that binds us: why do we have 'Europe', or the nation State. Blaming Brussels is not going to help. Nor is it worthy of prime ministers.