Ongenoegen, migratie, gastvrijheid en maatschappelijke onrust
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Summary and reflection

In the summer of 2015, the number of asylum applications in the Netherlands peaked and, according to citizens, migration became the most important social problem in society. Politically, migration also became a controversial issue again. In this context, the Scientific Research and Documentation Centre (WODC) asked us in 2016 to carry out a more in-depth study for the Ministry of Justice and Security into attitude developments regarding the arrival of asylum seekers in the Netherlands. Moreover, the WODC's request is to relate these attitudes to social unrest, escalation and possible threats to national security.

The background to these questions is that, in the course of 2015, security was compromised by a number of migration-related incidents. In Germany at that time, a lot of violent crimes were committed in connection with asylum seekers centres. In the Netherlands, information evenings have been disrupted and administrators have been physically threatened and attacked. In this context, it is relevant to ask: can this put (national) security under pressure?

In answering that question we pay a great deal of attention to the relationship between national themes and local ones. In many cases where dissatisfaction leads to protest, there is a mixture of local issues and incidents with national issues. This mixing works both ways. Local incidents can be translated and interpreted as a symbol of a national problem. Conversely, national (political) problems surrounding migration may have repercussions on the escalation of local events.

Opinions on the government's migration policy are not only determined by what one thinks of migrants, but also by what one thinks of the government and what one thinks of the country as a whole. A majority of the Dutch population is pessimistic about the state of the country and has little trust in political institutions. One of the objectives of the research was to try to disentangle the interplay between the specific dissatisfaction with migration on the one hand, and the more general social dissatisfaction with the state of the country on the other hand.

The overarching question, therefore, is whether and how dissatisfaction with migration policy could develop into a broader social conflict that, in the extreme, threatens national security. The idea is that both dissatisfaction with asylum seekers and migrants as well as broader dissatisfaction with the government and society as a whole can play a role in this.
Research questions

The central research questions are:

- What are the opinions of Dutch citizens on migration issues? We look at the acceptance of asylum seekers, behavioural intentions (from assistance to refugees to protest to support for civil disobedience and active resistance to the state), but also at societal discontent.
- What is the effect of proximity to an asylum seekers centre on the opinions of Dutch citizens on migration issues?
- How do these opinions develop during the period that we measure them? If there are changes, which factors are responsible?
- What is the relationship between acceptance of asylum seekers, social dissatisfaction and different types of behavioural intentions?
- What are the views of staff of official bodies, asylum seekers themselves and local residents on the factors and processes that play a role in causing unrest about the reception of asylum seekers at specific locations in the country? How do they experience the relationship between local incidents and/or escalations and the national and international context?
- How do local residents relate to asylum seekers? How do they view local inconveniences and nuisances? What is the relationship between local issues and their opinions on migration and refugees, as well as their behavioural intentions?
- What implications do the findings have for national security?

Research

The investigation consisted of three parts. Between February 2017 and February 2019, we conducted four surveys among a representative group of Dutch people (2,601 in 2017 and 1,239 in 2019, see chapter 2). Secondly, we carried out qualitative research in three local case studies (chapter 8). In three municipalities where an asylum seekers centre is located, we spoke to COA employees, security personnel at the AZC, local residents, asylum seekers, the municipality and the police. Thirdly, we conducted a door-to-door survey in a municipality where an asylum seekers centre is located (chapter 7). We received 160 completed questionnaires.

Changes in public opinion 2017-2019

At the time of the first wave of the survey at the beginning of 2017, Dutch citizens considered migration to be the most important social problem. By the end of the survey in 2019, this is no longer the case. However, if you look at the opinions that Dutch people hold privately, on average they are more positive than negative towards asylum seekers. An important point to note in this respect is that it matters a lot what exactly you ask people. A large majority supports
the temporary reception of asylum seekers and a majority supports the reception of asylum seekers in their own municipality. But at the same time, almost two thirds of the Dutch population think that asylum seekers threaten the housing of native Dutch citizens: in this respect, asylum seekers are more likely to be considered a threat than an enrichment.

During the course of the study (2017-2019), these opinions became less positive. The change is small, but clear. A growing number of Dutch citizens consider asylum seekers a threat rather than an enrichment, say they are less inclined to help asylum seekers, react with less positive emotions to the fact that the Netherlands receives asylum seekers, and reject government policy regarding the reception of asylum seekers.

This change is also visible in the impression one has of the opinion of others: people think that others would agree if they expressed a negative opinion about asylum seekers. Although negative behavioural intentions towards asylum seekers did not increase, the acceptability of moderate or radical protest against asylum seekers has increased. It is striking that more radical protest against asylum seekers is considered more acceptable than moderate protest against asylum seekers.

Opinions have become slightly more negative among a large number of demographic groups; there are no differences in age, gender, income, or education. It is striking that especially among people who felt a lot of anger towards the opponents of the reception of asylum seekers at the beginning of 2017, this anger has decreased in the following two years.

Although on average there is a slight shift, opinions on asylum seekers and individual policies are very stable during the two years that we followed them. People with a relatively positive attitude towards asylum seekers at the beginning of 2017 (compared to others) still have this attitude two years later. The same applies to people with a negative opinion. The observed change of opinion is therefore not due to the fact that there are people who suddenly become negative about the reception of asylum seekers: supporters and opponents become slightly more negative, but within these groups there are few people who revise their original position.

All in all, the conclusion is that people who were positive about asylum seekers in 2017 will be slightly less so in 2019. People who were already negative in 2017 will be slightly more so in 2019.

An asylum seekers centre (ASC) in the neighbourhood

News reports about asylum seekers centres (ASCs) often concern nuisance or frictions. Nevertheless, our survey shows that citizens in neighbourhoods where an ASC is located or where a new ASC is to be set up, have a slightly more positive view of asylum seekers, on average (chapter 3). There is no decisive evidence that the establishment of new ASCs is the
cause of more positive attitudes, but we can rule out the possibility that citizens develop more negative attitudes about asylum seekers if an ASC opens near them.

There are a number of explanations for these results. An obvious explanation is that people in the neighbourhood have very few problems with the ASC and its residents. If the hosting of asylum seekers goes smoothly, this can contribute to a positive impression of them. This effect can be further reinforced by the fact that negative expectations that might have existed before the ASC came, did not materialise. The fact that people in the neighbourhood are not bothered by the ASC is supported by the door-to-door survey (chapter 7) and the qualitative research in three municipalities where an ASC is located (chapter 8).

When selecting the municipalities with an ASC for the qualitative case-studies, we specifically looked for municipalities where there were negative stories in the press or on social media about incidents that had taken place there. In our own study, however, we found almost exclusively positive and neutral opinions about these ASCs. The aim of the study was to give different parties the opportunity to speak about the ASC, relationships, incidents and possible unrest. Even though there was initial resistance from local residents at some locations, all the case-studies indicate that the relationship between the ASC and the neighbourhood is predominantly positive (or at least not negative). In all three cases, we found that, in the eyes of local residents, ASCs cause few serious problems in the neighbourhood where they are located (chapter 8). The fact that local residents and residents of the ASC usually lead separate lives also plays a role in this. The contact that does exist is predominantly positive.

The door-to-door survey also shows that a majority of residents are positive about the ASC in their municipality (chapter 7). Two thirds agree with the decision to open an ASC and only twenty percent are worried about the ASC. When local residents are asked whether there are conflicts between asylum seekers and local residents, only five percent said that there are local conflicts, while more than a quarter thought that there were conflicts between Dutch citizens and asylum seekers at the national level.

A second possible explanation for the fact that people living near an ASC are more positive towards asylum seekers is that the local government, due to the arrival of the ASC, pays more attention to the neighbourhood. In view of the strong relationship between trust in the government and the attitude towards asylum seekers, it is not inconceivable that a government that pays extra attention to local residents will temper the negative attitudes towards asylum seekers. The case studies indeed show that municipalities pay extra attention to the neighbourhoods where an ASC is located (chapter 8). Good relations between the ASC and local residents do not seem to develop by themselves: The ASC and the municipality emphasise that they invest a lot of time and energy in a good dialogue with local residents and try to pay as much attention as possible to the problems and wishes of local residents.
All in all, the research shows that an ASC does not lead to major problems in the neighbourhood. The reactions of local residents are neutral or positive. This is evident from a survey with a nationally representative sample, from a local survey in a municipality with an ASC, as well as from qualitative research in and around three ASCs. The fact that the results of all these studies clearly point in the same direction, gives us confidence in the conclusion that the local reception of asylum seekers in ASCs (1) does not lead to major problems and (2) is not at the basis of any negative attitudes towards asylum seekers. It follows (3) that it is unlikely that national security will be compromised by poor relations between the residents of the ASC and the neighbourhood.

**Behavioural intentions towards asylum seekers**

In our research, we distinguish four types of behaviour. There is behaviour in favour of asylum seekers, such as helping them by teaching them language, and there is behaviour that is directed against asylum seekers, for example by demonstrating against the arrival of asylum seekers. We also investigated more radical behavioural intentions, such as behaviour to correct asylum seekers, if necessary by force. We also investigated behaviour aimed at the government, such as overthrowing the entire government system.

People are much more inclined towards positive behaviour for asylum seekers than towards negative behaviour against asylum seekers (chapter 5). Furthermore, behaviour against the government received a remarkable amount of support from the respondents, certainly in view of the fact that this was about violent behaviour. Support for this behaviour is strongly related to societal discontent. This is a striking result that deserves further investigation. The strong-worded statements (with explicit reference to the use of violence), the relatively high level of support among the population (21-29% for the two most extreme statements), and the strong link between these intentions and societal discontent, suggest that there is latent support for converting dissatisfaction into radical actions, if an opportunity arises. This is a potential threat to national security.

It will be less surprising that acceptance of asylum seekers is linked to behavioural intentions towards asylum seekers. Here again, however, the more extreme behavioural intentions (correcting asylum seekers, including the use of violence) are also related to societal discontent (chapter 5).

The door-to-door survey in a municipality where an AZC is located offers new insights into the relationship between local factors, national factors, and behavioural intentions (chapter 7). The intentions for various forms of positive and negative behaviour towards asylum seekers are much more concrete here: it concerns the asylum seekers in their own municipality. These behavioural intentions are related to both national and local dissatisfaction. However, there are interesting differences. Intentions for positive or negative passive behaviour (smiling at asylum seekers or ignoring them) are related to both local and national dissatisfaction.
However, intentions for active negative behaviour towards asylum seekers (addressing and correcting them, if necessary by force) are only related to national dissatisfaction. This suggests that the breeding ground for this more extreme behaviour (with risks to national security) has to do with dissatisfactions that transcend the local level. When citizens have negative impressions of the country as a whole, they have more sympathy for the use of violence against asylum seekers, regardless of what is happening locally.

**Asylum seekers from safe countries**

Although citizens are generally very positive about the reception of asylum seekers in their own municipality, there is an important comment to be made about this. Asylum seekers from safe countries and Dublin claimants do cause nuisance, both within and outside the ASC (Chapter 8). They have often already applied for asylum in various European countries and the chance of a residence status is very small. The behaviour of this group is probably partly determined by their hopeless situation. The nuisance caused by this group outside the AZC is not limited to the neighbourhood in which the AZC is located. It is conceivable that the behaviour of asylum seekers from this group puts pressure on the public support for asylum seekers in general and for the local ASCs where they reside.

**Reflection on the results**

What have we learned about the original research questions? Is there an interpretation that can integrate the above results and make them understandable? In this last paragraph we give our views on this.

At the start of the research period, the Dutch still felt that migration, as a social issue, stood head and shoulders above all the social problems in the country. During the research period, the problem became less serious, people said. The research results show that attitudes towards migration are fairly stable. When asked, people appear to be quite nuanced about various aspects of migration. On the superficial side, there is a fairly large minority of Dutch people who have serious reservations about migration and policy (in particular about certain aspects of migration, such as the consequences of the free movement of persons within the EU and the consequences of the permanent reception of refugees, almost half of them consider this to be negative). A much smaller group has a strong aversion to migrants as human beings. The overall picture is that there is concern about the consequences of migration for the Netherlands and for our way of life. But most people have nothing against migrants and their culture.

There is a small group of Dutch people who are prepared to use violence against asylum seekers. A much larger group has the intention to help asylum seekers. But there is also a fairly large group (about 20 to 30%) that says they are prepared to use violence against the government: for them enough is enough and societal discontent is a central reason for this. This societal discontent among a considerable minority of the population is also an important factor.
that can give the impression that the resistance to migration is so widely supported. People who are really against migration and against migrants are joined on this subject by a much larger group of people who are seriously concerned about society, but for whom migration is not necessarily the greatest concern. For the latter, migration is only one of the facets of what goes wrong in the Netherlands: the core of their concern is that there is an extensive and broad social decline, a government that has lost control and is unable to turn the tide. This is a breeding ground for problems that can also threaten national security.

During the research period, there is periodic commotion about asylum seekers and asylum policy. In addition, there is political and media attention for issues such as the high influx of asylum seekers, the problem of asylum seekers from safe countries, or the deportation of Lili and Howick. But there are no large-scale unrests. What is particularly striking in the research is that there is no lack of incidents that could trigger local unrest. But this unrest does not actually arise, because it remains very small, both in time and in terms of the number of people involved. Why is that? Our impression is above all that people work very hard locally to make the most of it, to do so together with all the official partners of ASCs, residents and the neighbourhood. That usually works out very well. As a result, few problems are experienced locally with the ASCs and their residents. The conclusion is that when incidents occur at ASC locations, the parties concerned are able to solve things together. They themselves attribute this to the joint motivation to pay good attention to problems that arise and to concerns that may exist, for example, among local residents. For the time being, there is little mixture between national issues and local incidents.

One could therefore conclude that at the local level, around ASCs, the statement "wir schaffen das" appears to be applicable. On the one hand this is very reassuring, but on the other hand it is also slightly worrying. After all, although there have been no outbursts around ASCs, it has not diminished the societal discontent: "We are actually doing fine, but still the Netherlands has a major migration problem". That may seem paradoxical, but it can be explained, we think, when you realise that what is happening in your own neighbourhood says nothing about the problems at that very abstract level of "the country" and "the people". From our analysis that properly tackling the problems at the local level is no remedy for the persistence of discontent at the national level, it follows that it is unlikely that the solution to that discontent will be found on other local themes or other single issues. It is already the case that the reception of asylum seekers seems to be going well in the municipalities that we have investigated. However, violent behavioural intentions towards asylum seekers and the government are mainly related to dissatisfaction that transcends the local level. Therefore, we should not expect local authorities to be able to find a solution to this problem.
The fundamental question, in relation to that dissatisfaction, remains to be resolved. What is the origin of that discontent and how do we fight it?\(^1\) How can the government restore confidence that there is a government that has the best interests at heart, that has integrity and that has the ability to successfully tackle major tasks as well? The dilemma for governments: how do we convince this group ("we hear you, we understand your concern, we are dealing with it"), without merely fighting symptoms by tackling problems that do not exist?

Societal discontent is an international trend. We should be under no illusions that the Netherlands will become an island of optimism. Internationally, moreover, it is striking that it is manifesting itself in very different ways (yellow vests, pegida, brexit, podemos and in the Netherlands perhaps the farmer's revolution of 2019). In our view, however, an absolute must for dealing with this dissatisfaction is that as little mixing as possible takes place between the current incident, the event or the problem (a sensational assassination attempt, a migration or integration problem, a new economic crisis, or whatever) and the underlying fear and anxiety. It is essential to know the underlying fear and anxiety well, to recognise it, to name it and to give it sufficient attention as a separate subject. If there is a mix between specific issues and the latent fear of societal decline, then there is a chance that the specific and the general will reinforce each other.

These research results may unintentionally feed the fear that an army of dissatisfied people may rise up that is prepared to firmly intervene at the slightest incident, thus causing an explosion of societal discontent that threatens national security. The spectre of an indomitable horde that keeps the yellow vests within reach.

How to respond adequately is - still - a quest. Historically, it has been a well-known reaction of the elite, in times of social unrest, to try to channel and manage the alleged dissatisfactions.\(^2\) There are risks associated with this: an administrator or politician who thinks it is useful to make himself or herself the mouthpiece of concerned citizens runs the risk of undermining rather than sustaining the stability of society by seeking the superlative and by naming and interpreting the alleged concerns of 'ordinary Dutchmen'. Such, presumably well-meaning, attempts have been

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\(^1\) The superficial answer is that discontent is caused by negativity in the media or on social media. It has added value to look a little further. Part of the discontent can be fed by what Alain de Botton describes in his book "Status anxiety" (2008) as a characteristic of the middle class: the "fear of falling". It is an understandable kind of fear that is a logical consequence of consecutive periods of peace and prosperity: "we are doing fine here, but one can feel that this is coming to an end". Such a fear of decline, even in periods when prosperity is rapidly increasing, is not only a contemporary phenomenon.

\(^2\) In such a phase when the bourgeoisie was filled with fear of a popular revolution, Gustave LeBon wrote his immensely influential book "La foule" (1895): one of the first social psychological explanations for collective behaviour in which he portrayed crowds as irrational, emotional and unpredictable. The book proved to be a source of inspiration for dictators who used it to profile themselves as leaders of the people and to channel all that energy.
made several times in the recent past. Societal discontent would be a logical consequence of mass migration, of an understandable popular anger towards a self-enriching elite, or an unavoidable resistance against a government that is constantly failing. Such attempts confirm the idea that our society has a fundamental problem and that there are contradictions, polarizations and conflicts within society itself. But they in no way solve the dissatisfaction.

A curious feature of dissatisfaction is that it strengthens itself. The expression of displeasure is proof that it is justified. This is not only true for the "angry Dutchman" who, out of concern for the loss of our civilisation, behaves antisocially on social media and thus becomes the living proof of his own fear. It also applies to polarising counter-reactions, strong rejection or repression: after all, all these reactions illustrate that there is indeed an important conflict.

That is why it is good not to exaggerate the image of society as highly inflammable. There is a large group that is seriously dissatisfied with society as a whole and with the government, but there are few concrete actions expressing this. There is plenty of uproar, but there is not (yet) an activist movement such as the squatters' movement which, in the 1980s, put its money where its mouth is. Of course, it is important to be alert to events and movements that stir up, mobilise and harden the existing discontent. But it is also necessary to respond with care and understanding to the underlying concerns that feed societal discontent.

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3 In the Netherlands, attempts to interpret dissatisfaction are often a variant of the themes compiled and made explicit by Pim Fortuyn in 2002, see Van Herwaarden, 2017, p. 120 ff.