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# **Draagvlak migratiebeleid**

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# Summary

The high influx of asylum seekers in 2015 has made migration a central issue in societal debates. Opponents and proponents of migration differ strongly in their opinion. This research focuses on public support for various aspects of Dutch migration policy. With 'public support' we mean acceptance, understanding and support in society. This research project investigates which factors determine and influence the degree of public support for various aspects of migration policy in The Netherlands, and to what extent these factors can be mobilised to maintain or to strengthen public support. The research consists of three parts. The first part is a literature review in which we analyse which processes determine public support for migration policy. The second part consists of a survey examining public support among a large sample of Dutch participants. The third part consists of interviews of 80 survey respondents, the goal of which was to enhance our understanding of the reasons for people's opinions on migration policy and its implementation.

## Part 1: Literature review

Which processes determine public support for migration policy? In the literature review we made a distinction between research insights about public support for the presence and arrival of migrants, and insights about public support for policies of the government. There is a large literature on the factors that determine public support for the presence and arrival of migrants. The literature review shows that at least three factors can be distinguished that are all relevant to public support. Public support can decrease because of *incompatibility* between groups and cultures, the idea that "we" cannot live together with "them". There is a tendency to assume that a person's nationality implies a core of unchangeable properties, that make group members into what they are. These ideas can lead to an important role for nationality in interpersonal relationships: people with a different background than "ours" are at risk that they will remain "strangers".

Furthermore, public support is likely to come under pressure when people perceive that "we" are *in competition* with "them". The degree of acceptance of migrants decreases if people think that there is competition for scarce resources (such as housing, public services, and economic gains) between the own group (such as Dutch people) and migrants. Competition with migrants is stronger when people experience "relative deprivation": a feeling that others are better off than the own group. The literature also suggests that societal and economic instability can induce hostility towards migrants. Instability can take the form of either an increase or a

decrease in economic welfare. If welfare deteriorates, the perception of competition will increase, but if welfare improves rapidly, this can raise fears of a future decline.

A third factor that can influence public support for migration, is the idea that “they” are a *threat* to “us”. This threat can be cultural, if one is afraid that migrants form a threat to Dutch culture and customs, as well as more physical, through fear of, for example, terrorist attacks. This experienced threat is associated with negative attitudes about the other group and with a decline in public support for their arrival or presence.

In contrast, public support for migration can be strengthened when people have more humanitarian considerations about the presence or arrival of migrants. By (re)humanising migrants, the sharp distinctions between “us” and “them” will be nuanced or strongly reduced. Moreover, this opens people to appreciating the positive sides of pluriformity and diversity. This can also be achieved by calling on compassion, empathy, and understanding from and for others, for example by enhancing knowledge about personal circumstances and motives of migrants. Contact with migrants can increase public support for the arrival and presence of migrants. Another factor that has a large influence on public support for migrants is communication about and coverage of policies. In this communication, it is wise to take the values into account that are at the foundation of certain policies, to carefully choose words that are used to describe target groups of the policies (for example the use of neutral terms and the avoidance of description that imply threat or that are dehumanising), and to take into account how policies and the problem itself are portrayed (is the government “in control?”).

The abovementioned factors that influence public support for migration policies specifically concern migrants. Resistance seems to be originating from the thoughts about migrants themselves and thoughts about the influence they (can) have on “us”. A broader literature about public support in other domains than migration suggests that the thoughts about the government itself and the way it implements policies may also influence public support for policies and their implementation in this domain. Trust in government and satisfaction with the current state of society play a major role in this regard. Specifically, a general societal discontent could influence how people think about concrete problems in society, such as an increase in the number of migrants.

## **Part 2: Survey among citizens**

From the literature study we conclude that it can be useful to make a distinction between public support for migration and public support for policies and their implementation. To study this, we conducted a survey among 2601 people that form a representative sample of Dutch citizens aged 18 years and older.

The first goal of the survey was to investigate whether “public support for migration policy” is a unitary concept. We investigated which aspects of public support for migration policy are distinguished and how much public support there is for these aspects. The public support for migration policy indeed consists of several aspects. A distinction should be made between the degree of agreement with policies and whether the policies are *implemented* well by the government. In this sense, people evaluate policies with regard to shelter for and integration of refugees, as well as their policies for voluntary and involuntary return rather positively, but they are dissatisfied with how the return and integration policies are *implemented*. Regarding the degree of public support for various aspects of migration policy, a large majority indicates that refugees should be given shelter, that refugees who have been denied asylum should leave the country, and that those who have been given asylum should integrate. A majority of the respondents believe that labour migrants should be able to receive a work permit. The aspect of migration policy that people are most negative about, is the free movement of EU-citizens.

A second goal of this study was to investigate possible determinants (such as the acceptance of migrants and societal discontent) of different aspects of public support for migration policy. Extending the results of the literature study, the survey results indicate the importance of both acceptance of migrants, and societal discontent (which has been studied less often in the literature). Acceptance of migrants is a good predictor of how the labour migration policies and refugee policies are evaluated. Societal discontent only has an indirect effect on the evaluation of the latter policies in the sense that it correlates strongly with acceptance and acceptance, in turn, is strongly correlated with this aspect of public support. Societal discontent does have a direct effect on the evaluation of labour migration policies, but the effect of acceptance is still much stronger. However, the evaluation of the *implementation* of the return and integration policies is predicted less well by the acceptance of migrants, and just as strongly by attitudes about the state of society in The Netherlands. Thus, the policy aspect that people are most unhappy about, is also the one that is most strongly related to societal discontent.

In this survey we tried to distinguish between public support for the provision of local shelter for refugees (in local municipalities) and public support for national migration policy. However, for most respondents, there is little difference between the two. Moreover, there is no indication that living close to an asylum seekers centre or having contact with refugees is strongly related to public support. In this sense, the current results do not lead to new insights into local factors and events that can affect public support (locally or nationally).

### **Part 3: Telephone interviews**

In order to gain a better understanding of the factors that influence *changes* in public support, 80 respondents that had filled out the survey were contacted to take part in an in-depth telephone interview. They were explicitly asked to elaborate on and to explain their opinion on the implementation of government policy regarding return and integration of refugees, because the results of the survey indicated that people agree with the contents of these policies, but that a large majority is dissatisfied with their implementation. A second question in the interview was concerned with support for labour migration, again because the survey showed that this aspect of migration policy received the most negative evaluation.

Several overarching themes could be identified from the content of the interviews. Humanitarian considerations are one superordinate reason for strong public support. Being humane especially plays a role in the evaluation of policies regarding refugees and this was the most important theme in the conversations about refugee policies. This expresses itself in empathy and helping behaviour towards refugees. Furthermore, moral reasoning is an important aspect in these references to humaneness. A concrete aspect of a humane policy that was mentioned often, is that the procedure (of handling the asylum application) should be faster to provide certainty to refugees sooner. This is the most important critique of respondents about current government procedures (as they are perceived). What is often added to this, is that the procedure should allow for flexibility, taking into account the personal circumstances of refugees. This desire for more flexibility seems to be motivated by individual cases of involuntary return that draw (national or local) attention.

Regarding the reasons behind strong public support for labour migration policies, people indicate that legal labour migrants can be useful for the economy; for individuals or for companies.

A superordinate theme that goes together with a lack of public support is the idea of threat. In the case of refugee policies this concerns economic threat and the fact that there is no room for economic refugees or “fortune seekers”, while cultural or physical threat are only mentioned rarely. Regarding labour migration policy, the threat to jobs of Dutch people is mentioned a lot by respondents. People also explicitly refer to the difficult circumstances of many Dutch people: labour migrants should be treated equally with regard to employment to prevent unfair competition with the Dutch workers. Both refugees as well as labour migrants are seen as a threat where people think they negatively affect the welfare of Dutch people.

A fourth superordinate theme is the importance of integration and adaptation to the host country. This is mentioned by proponents and opponents of migration alike,

and in conversations about both refugee policies and labour migration policies. Almost a quarter of our respondents expresses that the government should be stricter with regard to the integration of refugees. Conversely, ten percent of respondents state that the government should do more to help immigrants integrate. Also with regard to labour migrants, some interviewees state that they should assimilate and adhere to Dutch norms and Dutch etiquette.

By comparing the contents of the telephone interviews with the responses on the survey, it appears that people who are dissatisfied with the implementation of return and integration policies have few concrete suggestions for improvement of these policies and that they do not have less empathy for refugees. They do see refugees more as a threat or believe that refugees should not come to the Netherlands. In addition, mentioning humanity in the interviews is correlated with a more positive attitude as measured in the survey. Furthermore, the mentioning of threat in the interviews correlates with a more negative attitude towards migrants in the survey. Lastly, people who were dissatisfied about the labour migration policy in the survey did mention more often in the interviews that it is necessary to treat Dutch and non-Dutch employees equally.

The interviewees were explicitly asked whether there was a certain reason, or event or moment, that had changed their opinion. Most interviewees indicated that this was not the case. When they did indicate a reason, it appeared that the media was the most important source for most people with a negative opinion about refugee policies, whereas for people with a more positive opinion, a personal experience was the most important source. In the conversations about labour migration policies, respondents rarely indicated specific moments or events. When they did, they most often mentioned personal experiences. Public support for the arrival of labour migrants seems to be less dependent on dramatic events that draw a lot of media attention, whereas public support for refugee policies seems more dependent on media coverage.

## **Conclusion**

The idea that public support for migration policy is determined by the extent to which foreigners are accepted, is a relatively straightforward prediction. That thought is confirmed by a large literature and is also confirmed by our survey. However, the survey also showed that societal discontent plays an important and somewhat neglected role in determining the degree of support for government actions in this domain among Dutch people. This research shows in what way societal discontent and public support for migration policies are linked. Especially with regard to public

support for the implementation of migration policy (the aspect citizens were most critical about), the influence of societal discontent is relatively large.