

## Summary

### The Netherlands in a European perspective

#### Satisfaction, trust and opinions

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#### S.1 The Netherlands in Europe

Europeans are having to engage with each other more and more, as a number of developments in 2015 have yet again made clear. Whether the issue is the end of the economic crisis, whether or not to help Greece with its debt burden, or what to do about the refugees from North Africa and Syria trying to enter Europe, the discussions touch on the very heart of European integration and unity. How far are citizens and countries in Europe, both within and outside the various partnership agreements, willing to help each other and show solidarity? An important underlying question here is to what extent Europeans share similar norms and values. In this publication we look at shared and unshared opinions, norms, values and attitudes in Europe. Our primary focus is on the Dutch population, though they are consistently compared with other Europeans.

Many international comparative studies use factual data, for example the state of the economy (GDP) or the unemployment rate, health status, crime rates or the education level of the population. Relatively little attention is devoted to comparisons based on subjective data: how satisfied or dissatisfied are people with their situation? Do the Dutch have more or less trust in politics or in other people than people living in other countries? What are people's views on how men and women should divide work and household tasks? How satisfied are they with their lives?

This report is therefore not based on factual data, but on subjective opinions: we compare the mood in the Netherlands with that in other European countries. To do this, we draw on data from the *European Social Survey* (ESS), a large-scale survey that is held every two years and that focuses on people's opinions and values. We do not study one central question or problem, but rather attempt to gauge the mood of the people on the basis of three key themes: views on migrants, political trust and the role division between men and women as regards work and household tasks. These are themes that crop up regularly in the public and political debate in Europe. They are also topics which may be related to the economic crisis: for example, has trust in Spain, which was hard hit by the crisis, developed differently from in the Netherlands? We discuss these three themes extensively and in depth. We also look more broadly at the mood in Europe based on the following topics: opinions on democracy; trust in non-political institutions and in other people; opinions on migrants; and satisfaction with life. We look in slightly more detail at happiness in Europe: how have

people's feelings of happiness developed? What differences are there between different population groups? And what impact has the economic crisis had?

## 5.2 Negative opinions about migrants are associated with Euroscepticism

In this publication we specifically explore the relationship between opinions on migrants and opinions on further European integration. The ESS data show that the level of resistance to migrants and to further integration within the European Union is average in the Netherlands, and changed little between 2004 and 2012. The two views are also found to be closely correlated in the Netherlands: the more someone perceives migrants as a threat, the more negative they are about European integration. This association strengthened further after 2008. People with a lower education level are found to perceive migrants as more of a threat and also to be more strongly Eurosceptic than those with a higher education level. However, the association between the two views is just as strong for low and highly educated people: where people with a high education level do perceive migrants as a threat, they are almost as Eurosceptic as the lower-educated.

The finding that negative opinions about migrants are closely associated with Euroscepticism also extends to an association with support for nationalist/populist parties. Parties have arisen everywhere in Europe over the last decade which emphasise both the need to curb migration and the drawbacks of membership of the European Union. Examples in the Netherlands include the LPF and later PVV parties, in France the Front National and in the United Kingdom the British National Party. In this study we investigated the extent to which the rise of such parties coincides with a stronger relationship between views on immigration and on European integration. Our findings show that in countries with a relatively high level of support for nationalist/populist parties, the association between negative views on migrants and the EU is stronger. But this is not the whole story, because it is not the case that the relationship is stronger among supporters of nationalist/populist parties than supporters of other parties. If voters for other parties see migrants as a threat, they combine that view with Euroscepticism just as often as those who vote for nationalist/populist parties.

## 5.3 Political trust more dependent on national economy than own financial situation

The debate about trust in politics has always been with us and is frequently heard. At the present juncture, political trust in the Netherlands is not felt to be very high. Moreover, there is a sense that the financial and economic crisis has led to an acceleration in the decline of that trust, and has therefore led to a crisis of political trust. Reference is often made to mass unemployment, rising poverty and protest movements in countries hit by the euro crisis, but also to dissatisfaction with measures taken to save the euro and austerity measures imposed by 'Brussels'. National and European politicians are accused of failing to act effectively in response to the crisis and offer hope to the population, and consequently of rapidly losing legitimacy.

In the first place, however, we show in this publication that there is no evidence of a continual decline in political trust in all European countries. There are of course differences between countries: the Netherlands is characterised mainly by fluctuations, but in countries which have been badly hit by the consequences of the economic crisis, trust has declined sharply since 2008. It is not surprising that political trust is associated with perceived and expected prosperity. An interesting question here is whether people assess politics mainly on the grounds of their personal circumstances and prospects, or on the grounds of the state of and prospects for the national economy. In this publication we show that citizens do not judge politicians primarily on the basis of their own financial situation, but more on the basis of what they see on the television or in the newspapers about the country in which they live. Political trust is more closely associated with satisfaction with the national economy than with people's own financial vulnerability. We also find that opinions on the national economy play a bigger part in political trust when the economy is doing badly, but that this does not apply for the influence on people's own financial situation.

It is difficult to determine precisely how the relationship between political trust and assessment of the economic situation should be interpreted: which is the cause and which the consequence? For example, it is unclear to what extent citizens feel that the government is genuinely responsible for the economy. It is also unknown how personal experiences and information obtained via the media should be interpreted and linked to government action. It is for example possible that a person's opinion about the economy and about their own financial position is determined by their attitude to politics: if someone believes that politicians have made enough effort, they may be willing to accept high unemployment figures and scarce financial resources, based on the argument that if the government had done nothing the situation might have been even worse. This could explain why, unexpectedly and counterintuitively, we found in this study that a high level of unemployment (as well as an increase in unemployment) is associated with more political trust. However, it is wise to bear in mind that, while the economy is an important indicator for trust in politics, and one that appears to be growing in importance at present, it is not the most important indicator. Political trust is primarily an opinion about what happens in the political sphere.

#### 5.4 The Dutch endorse equal role division between men and women

How do people feel about the role division between men and women as regards paid employment and household tasks? This question is important in the light of the present economic crisis, in which unemployment is rising, but also in the light of population ageing, with a threatened shortage of labour. The question that arises then is whether women give up work sooner as a result of the crisis, and how roles are divided between men and women who are both in employment when combining work and care tasks. Having an insight into the *views* on this role division is relevant because it says something about the *actual* role division between men and women and, more specifically, provides a framework

for understanding developments in relation to the female labour participation rate. Role divisions are not influenced only by social norms in relation to role stereotypes (for example due to upbringing) and the opportunities that men and women perceive (for example on the labour market), but also by their own opinions on these matters.

Our results show in the first place that it has become more commonplace throughout Europe in recent decades for women to work, but also that the Netherlands occupies a special place here. Over the last 30 years, the Netherlands has transformed from a country with a very low female labour participation rate to a nation in which women are the most active participants in the labour market. On the other hand, a key difference compared with other European countries is that women in the Netherlands more often work part-time.

Dutch men and women relatively often endorse an equal division of roles. We base this assertion on the relatively low support for the view that a woman should be willing to do less paid work in order to look after her family, and the equally low support for the view that men have more right to a job than women if there are not enough jobs available. The existing view of gender roles in the Netherlands closely resembles those in Sweden and Germany. There are however differences within the Netherlands between different population groups: lower-educated people and those not in work have more traditional views on gender roles than those with a higher education level and people in work. The views of men and women with a highly educated or working mother or partner are also more egalitarian. This shows that education and the labour market are important institutions which can serve as vehicles for modernisation and change in views on gender roles.

It is often assumed that views on women with school-age children doing paid work are more traditional in Southern and Eastern Europe than in Scandinavia. The findings in this publication support this view: views in Eastern Europe (Poland) are more traditional, while those in the North (Sweden) are more egalitarian. At the same time, there is a clear trend towards more egalitarian views on gender roles in all countries. The biggest changes in the Netherlands actually took place between 1990 and 1999, since when views on gender roles have barely become any more egalitarian. The differences between countries in views on gender roles are found to be related primarily to gross domestic product (GDP), an indicator of economic prosperity. As national GDP rises, views on the roles of men and women in that country also become less traditional. But political power, measured by the number of seats held by women in the national parliament, is also found to be strongly related to endorsement of more egalitarian views in this regard.

## 5.5 Sentiment in Europe: Nordic countries the most positive

In this publication we also provide a more general impression of the mood in Europe, based on attitudes and opinions drawn from the *European Social Survey*. We look at opinions on democracy, public trust in institutions and in other people, views on migrants and how satisfied people are with the lives they lead. We do this on the basis of nine different indicators about which information was collected in 28 countries. For most topics, respond-

ents were asked to give a score out of 10. If we rank the countries on the basis of these scores, the Nordic countries (Scandinavia and Finland) clearly lead the field, followed by Switzerland, with Eastern European countries at the bottom. The Netherlands resembles Germany in many ways and the two are often found together just below the top ranking. It is also notable that the Netherlands does not come in the top three for any of the topics.

The Dutch give a 'satisfactory' score (6.9) for *how democratic the Netherlands is*. This puts the Netherlands in seventh place out of the 28 European countries which took part in the ESS in 2012. Denmark and Switzerland recorded the highest scores, at around 8. Although the Dutch do not have a great deal of *trust* in politicians, political parties or parliament (with an average score for these three together of just over 5), that score puts the Netherlands only just below the countries with the highest averages. The Danes award the highest score, at 5.5. In all countries, trust in the legal system is higher than trust in politics. Trust in other people is relatively high in the Netherlands, and together with the Nordic countries and Switzerland, is markedly higher than in other countries. This social trust correlates positively with political and institutional trust. The majority of Dutch citizens believe that only a limited number of *migrants* should be admitted. Only a small percentage believe that lots of migrants or, conversely, no migrants at all should be admitted. The Netherlands resembles Denmark, Finland and Switzerland in this regard. Overall, the Dutch are fairly happy: according to the most recent ESS figures, the Dutch give an average life satisfaction score of 7.9. Only the Danes are significantly happier, while the other Nordic countries plus Switzerland are comparable with the Netherlands.

The general picture concerning the mood in Europe is one of a rough division between Northern, Southern and Eastern Europe. The Nordic countries give the highest scores, with the Netherlands mostly either just in this group or just below it.

## 5.6 The economic crisis has not led to less happiness everywhere in Europe

It can be deduced from the general picture outlined above that there is a fairly strong association between the different topics: countries where people have more political trust are generally also countries where people trust each other more, think more positively about migrants and are more satisfied with their lives. What explanations can be given for differences in happiness, and has the economic crisis had a discernible effect?

A good deal of international comparative research shows the Dutch to be among the happiest people: study after study reveals inhabitants of the Scandinavian countries, supplemented by the Finns, Swiss and Dutch, to be the happiest. The figures in this publication show the same picture. The impact of the economic crisis is not unambiguous; there is in any event no evidence of an across-the-board decline in happiness. Developments in life satisfaction in recent years tend to show a variable picture – sometimes satisfaction increases (for example a very slight increase in the Netherlands and a sharp increase in Poland), sometimes it stays the same (Spain), but nowhere has life satisfaction fallen substantially

over the last ten years. There was a turning point in Spain in 2008, however, at the onset of the economic crisis: until that time, happiness had been rising, but thereafter it fell slightly. Regardless of which country we consider, people who are unemployed or who have a low income are less satisfied with their lives than people in work and people with a high income. The relationship between age and happiness is more complex: we find a U-shaped curve here, with both younger and older people being happier than people in middle age. This pattern emerged in all countries studied and would thus appear to be a universal phenomenon. There are hardly any differences between men and women. Another striking finding is that, if we take into account all manner of individual characteristics, the differences by education level are not significant: in other words, people with a low education level are just as happy or unhappy as those with a high education level.

The differences in happiness between the European countries studied in this publication have almost nothing to do with national characteristics. We looked at economic statistics (such as unemployment figures or national prosperity), at a number of freedoms (such as freedom of association and freedom of expression) and at the perceived effectiveness of the government. Only the last of these indicators shows a relationship with happiness: the more effective the government is seen to be, the greater the level of happiness in the population. People measure this effectiveness on the basis of important factors such as the quality of public services, quality of the civil service and the quality of policy formulation and implementation. The Netherlands scores relatively highly on this indicator, coming sixth out of the 28 ESS countries in 2012. Individual characteristics such as health and labour market position are of course important elements in life satisfaction: people who are in paid work and good health are happier than people without work and in poorer health.

## 5.7 Conclusion

In this publication we present a picture of the mood in Europe. To do this we draw on data from the *European Social Survey*, for which the most recent figures date from 2012. This means we are not able to investigate developments that have held Europe in their grip in 2015, nor the consequences of those developments for sentiment in Europe. We will have to await new figures for this, which will become available at the end of 2015 (ESS round 7). It is also unfortunate to note that Greece did not take part in either the 2012 or 2014 rounds of the ESS.

However, for the 28 European countries which took part in the 2012 ESS, we do show in this publication which differences and correspondences there are in attitudes and opinions. This is important because politics as well as the economy are acquiring an increasingly European dimension. Knowledge of the views in the Netherlands and other European countries can serve as a basis for trying to avoid overly simplistic judgements, and can provide an insight into potential sensitivities in other countries. The moves towards growing integration and cooperation within Europe also lead to recurrent debates. It can help in those debates to know whether opinions and attitudes in the Netherlands are different

from those elsewhere in Europe. Finally, of course, it is by no means clear whether economic and political integration go hand in hand with a rapprochement of values, attitudes and opinions, or whether there is in fact a divergence.

The picture that emerges from this publication is not one of equal values, attitudes and opinions, but one of clear differences in those variables – differences which, if we look a-squint, can be placed along a geographical line which runs roughly from the North via the West to the South and East. In the North, trust in institutions and in other people is higher than in the East and South, people are more satisfied with the functioning of democracy, more tolerant towards migrants and ultimately more satisfied with their lives as a whole. In this sense, the Netherlands is a typical Western European country, which consistently comes just below the Nordic countries; it. The Netherlands is never found in the top three; this implies that the views of the Dutch are neither highly exceptional nor pronounced on any topic. The Netherlands often resembles Germany, and the two countries are frequently found close together on many of the topics studied in this publication.

This publication above all holds a mirror up to the Netherlands and the Dutch: do the attitudes and opinions of the Dutch differ strongly from those of other Europeans? That is found very much not to be the case. The differences compared with Southern and Eastern Europeans are sometimes considerable, but are fairly small when compared with other Western European and Scandinavian countries. If we may draw one overarching conclusion from this study, it would be hard to find a better way to end than with the observation that the Dutch are among the happiest Europeans.