

The Dutch Migration Obsession

How and Why the Dutch Turned Migration into the Most Divisive Issue of Our Times

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Abstract

Despite its long history as a migration society, the Netherlands increasingly frames migration as an unprecedented crisis and the central problem of contemporary politics. This article conceptualizes this paradox as a *migration obsession*: a persistent and emotionally charged fixation on migration that is largely immune to historical knowledge and empirical evidence. Rather than reflecting migration dynamics themselves, this obsession expresses deeper anxieties about globalization, social change, and the perceived erosion of national control. The article identifies several mechanisms driving this obsession: the symbolic role of migration as shorthand for globalization; a shift from consensus-oriented consociational politics to confrontational populism; media logics that privilege dramatization and crisis framing; structural inequalities that marginalize migrant voices; and declining trust in institutions, expertise, and democratic governance. Migration thus functions as a revelatory case, exposing not a crisis of migration but a broader struggle within Dutch society to cope with complexity and political uncertainty.

Introduction

Migration is nothing new in the Netherlands. The work of historians like Lucassen and Lucassen¹, Lucassen and Penninx² and Obdeijn and Schrover³ has been essential in reminding Dutch public and political debate on the country's long history of migration (immigration and emigration). Migration has always played an important role and has largely mirrored several broader social transformations the Netherlands has gone through, from a colonial power to an industrializing country and now a country that is centrally located in global economic relations. In such a small country with an open and strongly globalized economy, there has always been migration.

Yet, in public and political debate in the Netherlands, there is a persistent myth that migration would be a relatively new and historically unique phenomenon. This idea of exceptionalism around current migration is key to a sense of 'crisis' around the topic of migration. In politics and media, the idea of a migration crisis has surfaced as the single most contentious issue in Dutch politics of these times.⁴ It has fueled attention to migration as a problem that needs resolution. Moreover, besides problematizing migration, problems also tend to become 'migranticized', connecting issues as health, housing, security and welfare to "the migration problem".⁵

It seems like the Dutch have, in spite of their long history of migration, become obsessed with migration and the idea of "migration crisis".⁶ What I will describe in this article as the Dutch 'migration obsession' is a political manifestation of what is known in the literature as a moral panic⁷ that occurs when a historically developed "national container

1 J. Lucassen and L. Lucassen, *Vijf eeuwen migratie. Een verhaal van winnaars en verliezers* (Amsterdam 2018); L. Lucassen and J. Lucassen, *Winnaars en verliezers. Een natiegeschiedenis van migratie* (Amsterdam 2011).

2 J. Lucassen and R. Penninx, *Nieuwkomers, nakomelingen, Nederlanders. Immigranten in Nederland 1550–1993* (Amsterdam 1999).

3 H.L.M. Obdeijn and M. Schrover, *Komen en gaan. Immigratie en emigratie in Nederland vanaf 1550* (Amsterdam 2008).

4 P. Scholten, 'The precarious politics of Dutch immigration and immigrant policy', in: A. Louwse, S. van Lange, and P. 't Hart (eds), *The Oxford handbook of Dutch politics* (Oxford 2024) 747-764.

5 M. Schrover, *Om de meisjes, voor de meisjes. Een historisch perspectief op problematisering en bagatellisering van onderwerpen die te maken hebben met migratie en integratie* (Leiden 2011); M. Schrover, 'Pillarization, multiculturalism and cultural freezing. Dutch migration history and the enforcement of essentialist ideas', *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review* 125:2-3 (2010) 329-354.

6 P. Scholten, *De migratie-obsessie. Hoe een thema het debat blijft bepalen* (Amsterdam 2025).

7 S. Cohen, *Folk devils and moral panics. The creation of the mods and rockers* (London and New York 1972).

view”⁸ clashes with the growing complexities of contemporary globalizing society. Such obsessions are increasingly typical for contemporary post-truth societies⁹ and seem driven by a mélange of factors including a politics of fear,¹⁰ growing institutional complexity in the risk society,¹¹ and declining trust in institutions like the rule of law, democracy, the state, higher education, and media. Migration appears to be a revelatory case for how moral panic about global complexities contributes to an obsession with “migration problems”. This moral panic is a term that Schrover and Lucassen themselves also already used with reference to the Dutch case of migration.¹²

In the Netherlands, this obsession is manifested in compulsive attention to migration in politics, policy, and media, producing and reproducing the myth that migration is new and unique. Migration nowadays constitutes the central issue around which elections unfold, bringing down several government coalitions and contributing to political polarization in the Netherlands (as in various other countries). The obsession is also clearly manifested in persistently high levels of media coverage on migration and various forms of ‘migration crisis’, including traditional media but also new media that provide echo chambers for the polarization of views on migration. It is also evident in the irrational nature of this attention. Regardless of all the knowledge on “how migration really works”, myths about how migration would work, what would drive migration, and how it would impact society, seem rather immune to such knowledge and information.¹³ Also, as any obsession, the migration obsession is seemingly irresolvable. It is something that has a grip on public debate and politics, rather than policy and policy having a grip on migration.

This paper discusses how and why the Netherlands developed this obsession with migration and how this has confused the Dutch’ understanding of their own migration history. Several mechanisms behind the obsession will be identified and analyzed. These mechanisms show how the migration obsession is about much more than about migration per se, explaining its irrational and irresolvable

8 U. Beck, *Risk society. Towards a new modernity* (New York 1992).

9 J. Friedman, ‘Post-truth and the epistemological crisis’, *Critical Review* 35:1-2 (2023) 1-21.

10 R. Wodak, *The politics of fear. What right-wing populist discourses mean* (New York 2015).

11 Beck, *Risk society*.

12 M.L.J.C. Schrover, J.P. van der Leun, L. Lucassen and G.C. Quispel, ‘Illegale migratie vanuit een genderperspectief’, in: *Kritiek. Jaarboek voor socialistische discussie en analyse* (2009) 11-36.

13 H. de Haas, *Hoe migratie echt werkt. Het ware verhaal over migratie aan de hand van 22 mythen* (Amsterdam 2023).

character. Rather, it is about the much broader process of globalization, about a much broader transformation in Dutch political culture, about how media work, about inequalities and about fear, uncertainty and distrust regarding democracy and the functioning of government today. This situation also turns migration into a revelatory case study for understanding how societies like the Netherlands struggle to come to terms with the growing complexity of society. The migration-obsession provides a unique look into the social dynamics of an insecure, rapidly changing, strongly diversified, and complex country today.

The Netherlands as migration society

To understand an obsession, one first needs to understand the context in which it emerged, especially as it is often a situation of moral panic about developing complexities. There is nothing wrong with attention to migration and diversity per se, as mobilities and diversification have been 'normal' processes throughout the history of the Netherlands. Historians have revealed how there have been periods of immigration (such as the seventeenth and early eighteenth century), some more periods of emigration (eighteenth and nineteenth century), and then back again towards becoming a country of immigration in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.¹⁴ Such histories tell the story of how people from a great variety of origins nowadays make up the majority of Dutch cities, with Amsterdam, Rotterdam and the Hague having a population of which about 55 percent has a first or second generation migration background. Nationally, more than 1 in 4 Dutch have a first- or second-generation background, and this percentage is much higher when counting earlier generations as well. The Netherlands is a migration society and has been so for centuries.¹⁵

Besides highs and lows in levels of immigration and emigration, it is also important to distinguish between types of migration. Nowadays, labor migration and family migration are the largest types of immigration. However, throughout history, there have been waves of humanitarian migration as well, such as the Huguenots from France and more recently refugees from Ukraine. Furthermore, as a former colonial empire, the Netherlands received substantial post-colonial

¹⁴ Obdeijn and Schrover, *Komen en gaan*; Lucassen and Lucassen, *Vijf eeuwen migratie*.

¹⁵ Ibid.; R.J. Kleinhans, M. van Ostaijen and K.A. Seibel, *De migratiesamenleving. Migratie en diversiteit als gordiaanse knoop* (Amsterdam 2022).

migration from its former colonies such as Suriname and present-day Indonesia.

However, what elicits questions, is not so much that there is attention to migration, but how, how much, and in what ways. This fixation includes the constant reproduction of the ‘myth’ that immigration is historically unique or unprecedentedly high. The fact that migration is a historical normality raises the question why it is framed as an abnormality. Furthermore, there seems to be little understanding of the composition of migration flows. In particular, attention seems to go to asylum migrants, whereas they comprise a relatively small part of immigration to the Netherlands when compared with labor and family migration. This focus further raises the question as to why this distorted focus on asylum migrants emerged. Additionally, what explains the excessive amount of attention to migration as the central issue in Dutch political and media attention for decades now already?

Furthermore, the normality and longevity of migration and diversity seem to be covered by a discourse of ‘crisis’, creating the image that migration is not only unique but also largely disruptive for society. This view trumps historical evidence of accommodation or even assimilation of migrant communities that came to the Netherlands.¹⁶ In 2004, a parliamentary inquiry even ‘officially’ concluded that the integration of migrants into Dutch society was largely successful.¹⁷ Furthermore, it trumps evidence about migration levels, which are not only historically ‘normal’ but also relatively modest when compared with surrounding countries. Clearly, there seems to be no reason for a sense of crisis, which raises the question of why there is such persistent crisis talk when it comes to migration and integration.

Migration as symbol for globalization

One initial mechanism behind the obsession with migration and the persistent belief that migration is new and unique, is that migration has become a symbol for the impact of globalization on Dutch society. This phenomenon already starts with the role of “migration language” Whereas migration can involve any form of mobility, it is mostly socially constructed as international migration, putting the nation-state at the

¹⁶ Lucassen and Penninx, *Nieuwkomers, nakomelingen, Nederlanders*.

¹⁷ Tijdelijke Parlementaire Onderzoekscommissie Integratiebeleid, *Bruggen bouwen. Eindrapport van de tijdelijke parlementaire onderzoekscommissie integratiebeleid* (The Hague 2004).

heart of its definition. It also applies to the concept of integration which is mostly defined in terms of national citizenship and belonging, along with the need of migrants to 'integrate.' This depiction differs from the more classical Durkheimian definition of integration from the field of sociology, which always refers to integration at the level of social systems, as well as the need for mechanisms to preserve such forms of societal integration. The application of integration uniquely to how migrants adapt to national social systems, is already a very selective interpretation.

However, globalization does not necessarily mean more international migration. In fact, most migration is still domestic, and global levels of migration seem historically rather stable around 3.6 percent of the global population.¹⁸ Yet, globalization does mean more and more global interconnectedness and interdependencies. This condition involves economic interdependencies, but also new information and communication technologies that increasingly connect people from all over the world, as well as enhanced transportation opportunities for people to travel. This situation increasingly has a postcolonial character as well; globalization is not only the Europeanization of the world, but increasingly also the globalization of Europe. It is also very manifest in the Netherlands as not only a previous colonial empire but also as a country with a relatively open and highly globalized economy. Globalization brings migrants to the Netherlands, such as labor migrants or 'knowledge workers' to work in Dutch industries of the past or the Dutch high-tech sector of today (such as ASML). Yet, globalization also means that the global operations of Dutch companies can affect root causes of migration all over the world, such as by their impact on inequalities abroad, on climate change and on cultural transformations.

Migration has become the symbol particularly for the implications of globalization on Dutch society today. It triggers what Schinkel has described as "social hypochondria" in thinking about migration as a challenge to the state as a clear identity with clear boundaries and full sovereignty.¹⁹ Migration becomes a pathology as perceived from the old (and still remaining) global order of nation-states. This hypochondria manifests itself in 'crisis' talk around migration, such as discussions on the 'refugee crisis' or 'border crisis', though also on the "crisis of multiculturalism". This crisis does not say as much about the evolution of underlying problems, as it does on how these developments are

18 M. McAuliffe and L.A. Oucho (eds), *World migration report 2024* (Geneva 2024).

19 W. Schinkel, *Denken in een tijd van sociale hypochondrie. Aanzet tot een theorie voorbij de maatschappij* (Kampen 2007).

perceived as a challenge to the state. The same goes for the frequent ‘moral panics’ that have spread across the Netherlands, such as those concerning the growing visibility of Islam in Dutch society or the growing discontent around global conflicts that now have become more manifest in the Netherlands, such as the Palestinian genocide. Whereas such problems have much to do with the impact of globalization on society, they tend to be migranticized (that is, related to migration) and thus not domestic issues.

However, besides the crisis talk and moral panics, there is a further socio-economic implication of globalization which also gets connected to migration. Bauman already referred to the idea that there would be “winners” and “losers” with globalization.²⁰ Globalization has a significant impact on inequalities in societies, but this impact seems to be strongly differentiated for the highly paid and often highly educated class versus the low-paid and often occupationally educated class. Although it does not necessarily mean that international migration has a negative impact on ‘lower’ socio-economic classes (see De Haas²¹ who shows the opposite, especially for an open economy like the Netherlands where everyone seems to benefit from globalization), migration does seem to have become an object of uncertainty and anxiety for certain segments of the population.

Finally, the anxiety about globalization and the obsession with migration are turning increasingly against a range of international treaties to which Dutch policies are bound. Here we have seen a very clear turn in Dutch government policy from being one of the pioneers behind treaties as the UN Geneva Convention and the European Charter of Human Rights, though also in the development of a common immigration policy for the EU. However, similar to other countries as with the EU, the anti-immigration agenda is increasingly connected to an anti-EU and anti-treaties agenda. Almost without exception, populist and anti-migration parties exist elsewhere as well.

From Dutch consociationalism to confrontationalism

Another mechanism behind the obsession with migration is a broader transformation in Dutch political culture; migration has become the focal point for a historical change in Dutch politics. The Netherlands

²⁰ Z. Bauman, *Globalization. The human consequences* (London 2018).

²¹ De Haas, *Hoe migratie echt werkt*.

was traditionally known for what the political scientist Arend Lijphart described as consociationalism, which involves a strongly consensus-oriented culture where organized interests work together to ameliorate societal problems.²² This consensus orientation was also manifested in how the Dutch Ethnic Minorities Policy was originally developed in the late 1970s and the 1980s. It involved a key role for the organized interests of migrants as well as a strong reliance of policy development on scholarly policy advice, such as from the Scientific Council for Government Policy. Importantly, this situation did not mean that migration and integration were not on the political agenda, but it did mean that political debate followed the ‘rules of the game’ for Dutch politics in those times.

Whereas the position of migrants in Dutch society improved gradually, something changed in public attitudes towards migration and diversity around the turn of the millennium. Although there had always been some voices of concern about socio-cultural aspects of ‘integration’ (such as the liberal Frits Bolkestein in the 1990s), by this era the main focus of policies and public debate was on socio-economic aspects of integration and on migration as an inevitable aspect of the Dutch open economy.

This picture changed quite radically when in 2002 the first radical right political movement emerged which managed to bring migration into the mainstream, namely, under the leadership of the charismatic populist Pim Fortuyn. Significantly, he put migration on the agenda not only by calling for restrictions on migration and for reinforcing integration but also by focusing his attention in particular on Muslims and on migration from Muslim countries. This propensity triggered what Prins has called a “new realism” in Dutch politics in which parties do not seek to ameliorate problems by exerting the ‘courage’ to articulate them.²³

Fortuyn opened a new path in Dutch politics that was continued by other populist or radical-right parties such as the Forum voor Democratie but most notably the Freedom Party led by Geert Wilders.²⁴ Confrontation around migration and around Islam became the main axes for the rise of these parties which would dominate elections in the following decades and would contribute to further party-political

22 A. Lijphart, *The politics of accommodation. Pluralism and democracy in the Netherlands* (Oakland (CA) 1967).

23 B. Prins, *Voorbij de onschuld. Het debat over de multiculturele samenleving* (Amsterdam 2000).

24 C. Mudde, ‘Europe’s populist surge. A long time in the making’, *Foreign Affairs* 95:6 (2016) 25-30.

polarization. It would bring political nationalism back into the heart of Dutch politics, feeding the obsession with migration. Research has shown that this rise of populist parties did not respond as much to negative attitudes toward migration, as it created an opportunity for more negative attitudes to emerge.²⁵ It is against this background that we have to understand why there would be so much attention in the Netherlands toward various asylum ‘crises’ in the 2020s in spite of relatively low numbers of asylum migration, or how the moral panics arose around the establishment of centers for asylum seekers or the access of refugees to housing.

The strength of populist parties in reframing the Dutch history of migration and the implications of the current migration society, however, has also been enabled by the reluctance of mainstream parties to provide a narrative on migration. Mainstream parties have always been (and largely remain) rather ambivalent or even internally divided on migration.²⁶ The Dutch social democratic Labor Party (PvdA) has been caught in the classic ‘progressive’s dilemma’ between relatively progressive views on migration and international diversity on the one hand and working-class anxiety about migration on the other. For the Dutch Liberals (VVD) migration is important for business (especially but not only labor migration), which contradicts the more culturally conservative discourse that they have embraced as well (like liberal parties in many other countries). And for the Christen Democrats (CDA) there is the difficulty of connecting the discourse of religious tolerance with the increasing religious pluralism and rise of Islam in particular.

As a result of these ambivalences, Dutch attitudes toward migration have not been able to develop a foundation for mainstream political narratives, and were instead highly subjected to ‘new’ migration narratives from populist parties. What is important is that research has also shown that politics – rather than simply responding to public attitudes and sentiments – it actively produces and reproduces such attitudes and sentiments as well.²⁷ Rather than viewing public discontent on migration as a cause of politicization, it must also be seen

25 G. D’Amato, D. Ruedin, W. van der Brug and J. Berkhout, ‘The politicisation of migration’, in: T. Caponio and M. Borkert (eds), *The Routledge handbook of the politics of migration in Europe* (London 2015).

26 Scholten, *De migratie-obsessie*; A.M.E. Fermin, *Nederlandse politieke partijen over minderhedenbeleid 1977–1995* (Amsterdam 1997).

27 A. Alrababah, A. Beerli, D. Hangartner and D. Ward, ‘The free movement of people and the success of far-right parties. Evidence from Switzerland’s border liberalization’, *American Political Science Review* (2024) 1–20.

as a consequence of politicization. This situation makes the absence of strong narratives from mainstream parties in the Netherlands even more severe; their weakness has meant that public attitudes toward migration could be strongly influenced by populist narratives alone.

Media logic

An obsession has everything to do with attention and the inability to measure this attention rationally. Whereas research often focuses on the role of politics, understanding this seemingly uncontrollable amount of attention for migration also involves understanding how media work, as well as how media interact with politics. The media are not only about giving attention to certain topics, they are also about how to channel and frame this attention and how to select topics that do or do not get attention. And this role, we know from media studies, has changed over time from a role focused on monitoring and controlling politics toward a role that is more commercialized and has a more prominent role in social and cultural transformations in society.

Media logic seems to be an important factor in the migration obsession. Media logic says something about how (new and traditional) media work, how they select and portray topics. Migration seems to bring about a very powerful dynamics in terms of media logic.²⁸ One aspect of media logic is dramatization. It is manifest in the talk about crisis around migration, though also for instance in the persistent focus on migration as new and unique: news must be new. Another aspect is personalization, as manifested not only in dramatic portrayals of migrants, but for instance also in personalized stories of visualizations of anti-migration demonstrations, such as those around the establishment of centers for asylum seekers in the Netherlands. Media logic also involves a focus on incidents rather than more structural developments or processes. A structural story about how figures indicate that migration is decreasing will trigger less attention than an incident that focuses attention for instance on security issues around centers for asylum seekers. This focus triggers fragmentation in reporting rather than more objective reporting on broader trends. Finally, media logic has a certain anti-authoritarian bias, as it prefers to blame someone for

²⁸ R. Vliegthart, *Framing immigration and integration. Facts, parliament, media and anti-immigrant party support in the Netherlands* (Amsterdam 2007); R. Dekker and P. Scholten, *Tsunami of tragedie? Media-aandacht en de framing van immigratiebeleid* (s.l. 2015).



Illustration 1 Migration in the media

crisis or drama. A clear illustration in the Netherlands is how reporting consistently tries to blame past policies for the ‘integration failure’, regardless of whether the portrayal of such policies is correct in any way.

How media portray migration also relates to what is portrayed (and what not). Here, the rise of social media adds another dimension to media logic. Social media tend to function as ‘echo chambers’ that amplify the views that someone has, connecting only with people with similar or possibly even stronger views. This phenomenon has turned social media into key sources of disinformation on migration, further feeding distrust regarding other information channels. Leading Dutch political figures like Wilders and Baudet also recognize this ‘channeling’ of social media, and have used X as their main dissemination platform, while discrediting mainstream media for being ‘biased.’ Additionally, around Europe there is growing evidence that various countries actively use social media to unbalance politics in other countries, which derailed presidential elections in Romania in 2024, for example .

Just like political attention, media attention should not simply be seen as a reflection of the public agenda; it also shapes this agenda. This feature makes the interaction between media and politics a key driver of the political spectacle that has emerged around migration. The Belgian sociologist Elchardus speaks of how the mediatization of politics and the politicization of media can contribute to what he defines as a

“drama democracy”.²⁹ Today, indeed, the migration obsession reveals many features of such a drama democracy, also explaining why it emphasizes dramatic events and ‘crises’ rather than historical trends and structures.

Inequalities

Another mechanism behind the migration obsession is that the obsession can go relatively unchecked and unbalanced because of persisting inequalities in society. The debate on migration has been largely a debate about rather than with migrants. This character makes the logic of policymaking and the logic of public debate fundamentally different from many other policy areas (such as social policy or agricultural policy), in which there is always a clear group in opposition with at least some power resources; for the migration obsession there is no counter voice. To the contrary, it is not only driven by inequality, but it also reproduces inequality where the voice of migrants is ignored.

This has not always been the case. For a long time, in accordance with the Dutch history of consociationalism, there was a structure in place that ensured at least some representation of migrant or ethnic communities.³⁰ Until the 1980s that largely took place through ‘fiduciary organizations’ acting on behalf of migrants, but since then also more and more organizations by and for migrant communities. These were brought together in consultative structures such as the National consultation-structure for Migrants (LOM), which was discontinued only in 2011.

The result has been a democratic gap in Dutch politics and policy making that seemingly enables the migration obsession. It is hard to identify a clear counter voice to the obsession. Partially, it comes from academics and from expertise centers who claim to act on behalf of migrants. Also, there have been some successes with the rise of migrant parties in local and national politics, most notably the DENK party which has five seats in the lower house of Parliament. Also, especially via new rather than traditional media, migrants do seem to speak up somewhat more strongly than before, as manifested in recent opposition to a parliamentary memorandum on monitoring cultural and religious beliefs on migrants. This memo would never have been

29 M. Elchardus, *De dramademocratie* (Tielt 2002).

30 Lucassen and Penninx, *Nieuwkomers, nakomelingen, Nederlanders*.

criticized and eventually retracted had it not been for a counter voice via social media.

What also does not help for inclusion is that being a migrant seems to be 'ontologically void'. People do not identify themselves as 'migrant', but are labelled as migrants by society, contributing to their 'othering' from this society. Furthermore, in the Netherlands this definition tends to be racialized and connected to class bias. Some 'migrants' are not called 'migrants', for instance because they would be 'expats' or 'knowledge workers' from Western countries such as Germany or the US.

The migration obsession is not only enabled by the absence of a clear voice for migrants, it also enables a further othering of migrants. Institutional but also more explicit forms of racism have surfaced in Dutch politics, such as a former minister of Asylum and Migration who openly supported the so-called displacement theory. The migration obsession plays an important role in reproducing racialized discourses on migrants, especially Muslim migrants, with an important alienating impact on Dutch people with a migration background.³¹ For instance, recent research has shown a growing apathy among people with a migration background towards Dutch politics,³² in addition to an increase in aspirations of repatriation among migrants.³³

Anxiety, uncertainty, and distrust

Finally, another mechanism behind the migration obsession is how migration has become the object of anxiety, uncertainty, and distrust toward institutions such as higher education, government, politics and democracy altogether. This attitude reflects a broader process of declining trust in institutions, which is not specific to the Netherlands. In the Netherlands, however, migration clearly became the main topic around which this distrust evolved.

Facts and scholarship on migration became themselves an important object of this distrust. Migration may be a complex social phenomenon, but this character does not mean that a lot is unknown; to the contrary, Dutch migration scholarship is relatively

31 L. El Hamidi, *Generatie 9/11. Migratie, diaspora en identiteit* (Amsterdam 2022).

32 J. Dagevos, F. Vermeulen, N. Geurts, J. Iedema, R. Koç and N. Spierings, *Is de politiek er voor iedereen?* (The Hague 2024).

33 W. Belabas and P. de Jong, 'The unique nature of second-generation migration experiences. A case study of the Moroccan Dutch', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* (2024) 1-21.

well developed and knowledge accumulation on and consensus about “how migration really works” is very substantial.³⁴ Yet, myths tend to be reproduced persistently in politics and media, triggering uncertainty and anxiety. Moreover, Dutch media and politics frequently question or ignore scientific facts, as for example on the state of integration of communities, on the quantity of migration, or on the root causes of migration. Clearly, the migration obsession is largely immune to scientific facts. However, this invulnerability also contributes further its questioning the value of scientific knowledge, reducing scholarship to just another voice in public debate.

Another institution at stake involves government and its efforts to establish adequate migration and integration policies. Fed by the rise of populism and the anti-authoritarian bias of media logic, distrust toward the effectiveness of (though also the intentions behind) government policies is widespread. Knowledge on the extent to which, for instance, repatriation policies, labor migration policies and asylum reception work tends to be ignored.³⁵ A clear illustration is how knowledge on how the dispersal of asylum seekers across the country would work has been systematically ignored in favor of distrust toward dispersal policies, contributing further to the malfunctioning of the asylum system.

Here a ‘trust paradox’ seems to have emerged in the Netherlands, where distrust toward government is constantly combined with calls for firm government action. This plea often comes down to ignoring knowledge about what works in policies while choosing quick fixes that often reveal an unrealistic belief in the possibilities and capabilities of governments. This trust paradox only contributes further to a sense of crisis in policy making; it pumps up expectations of what governments should be able to do to unrealistic proportions, only to be followed by a discrediting of their policies for not being able to live up to these expectations.

In 1995, Penninx and Vermeulen already talked about “democratic impatience”, referring to how democratic expectations often exceed capabilities of government.³⁶ Clearly this democratic impatience has fed popular discontent about migration and integration. In 2004 a

34 De Haas, *Hoe migratie echt werkt*.

35 H. de Haas, M. Czaika, M. Flahaux, E. Mahendra, K. Natter, S. Vezzoli and M. Villares-Varela, ‘International migration. Trends, determinants, and policy effects’, *Population and Development Review* 45:4 (2019) 885-922.

36 H. Vermeulen, R. Penninx and H. van Hulst, *Het democratisch ongeduld. De emancipatie en integratie van zes doelgroepen van het minderhedenbeleid* (Amsterdam 1995).

parliamentary inquiry concluded that integration was quite successful, thanks to those directly involved rather than thanks to policies. By now we must conclude that this democratic impatience and the unrealistic expectations of government have been turned against government and increasingly against democratic institutions.

Conclusions: Beyond the migration obsession?

Despite all the historical evidence of the normality of migration and the longevity of the Netherlands as migration society, why are there such persistent myths that define migration as historically unique? Why does the Netherlands seem so obsessed with migration as something new and perhaps even as an abnormality? Why this urge to construct migration as 'crisis'? Therefore, the aim of this paper has been to uncover the mechanisms behind this migration obsession and the triggers of the 'sense of crisis'.

A key explanation lies in the fact that the migration obsession is not driven by migration itself, but by much broader anxieties and uncertainties about transformations in Dutch society. This paper shows that the migration obsession is driven by anxieties or 'moral panic' about globalization, for which migration has become a symbol. It also shows that migration became the centerpiece for populist and radical right parties in a transformation toward a confrontational culture in Dutch politics; the famous Dutch consensus politics, known as the *poldermodel*, has been buried under the migration obsession. Furthermore, migration presented a 'perfect storm' to media logic, contributing to dramatizing, personalizing and criticizing anything that could be connected to migration. And that this obsession could emerge so freely has much to do with inequalities, as there was and is no counter voice, and as the obsession has only further contributed to alienation and othering. Finally, migration has been made symbolic for anxiety and distrust toward institutions, including higher education, politics and democracy.

This situation indeed makes the migration-obsession an interesting object of study, more than ever. Yet, not for what it says about the long history of migration of the Netherlands, but for what it says about the historic transformations Dutch society is going through today; in sum, it says something about the Netherlands, though not so much about migration per se. Understanding the migration obsession better is key

for understanding how the Netherlands will, or will not, be able to come to terms with how it positions itself in a world full of complex global interdependencies.

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