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1 Summary and conclusions

The Dutch context: things are going (reasonably) well now, but pessimism about the future

Politics and society in the Netherlands had to cope with a certain amount of turbulence in the first half of 2009. The economic crisis deepened, the confidence in the government which had just re-established itself evaporated and the parties with the most strongly defined positions - D66 and PVV, for or against the multicultural society, for or against Europe - enjoyed an electoral boost, culminating in major victories for these parties in the European elections and a substantial defeat for the mainstream parties, the PvdA in particular.

Financial crisis and political polarisation or not, the citizens of the Netherlands remain amongst the most contented citizens in the EU when it comes to their daily lives. Alongside the Luxembourgers and just behind the Danes (98%), the Dutch are still amongst the most contented Europeans (96%). They are also comparatively tolerant with regard to immigrants compared to the European average. Two out of three Dutch respondents agree with the statement that people from other ethnic groups enrich the cultural life of a country and that immigrants can play an important role in developing greater understanding and tolerance in the rest of the world, whilst, on average, (slightly over) half of Europeans support these statements.

Compared to the European average, the Dutch are positive about their own work situation, their own financial situation, their own job, the national economy and employment in their own country. However, confidence has declined substantially, particularly with regard to the latter two points. 50% are now positive about employment in their own country, whilst six months ago 88% of Dutch people were still positive. Now, half (51%) of Dutch respondents indicate that they have confidence in the national economy, whilst this applied to two out of three Dutch people (67%) six months ago.

The financial crisis has certainly had an impact on Dutch people's expectations for the future. This does not apply to *life in general*. Most Dutch people still do not expect their life in general to undergo significant changes over the coming year: in fact, there are fewer people who expect their life to worsen over the coming twelve months (14% six months ago, now 7%). A large majority of Dutch respondents also does not expect any changes over the coming year with regard to the *financial situation in the household*.

However, Dutch people have become considerably more pessimistic about the *economic situation* and *employment* in the near future. A majority of Dutch respondents foresee a further worsening of the economic situation in their own country over the coming year. Only the Latvians and Hungarians, who are very pessimistic (in virtually every area), are more sombre. In terms of expectations for employment over the coming twelve months, the Dutch are actually the most pessimistic of all Europeans: no less than 68% expect a deterioration. The Dutch are more inclined to think that things are getting worse rather

than better for the country – in the autumn of 2008, the optimists were still in the majority.

We also see this worry reflected in the issues which the Dutch feel to be most important. Moving up to number two is unemployment: cited by just 4% of Dutch people in autumn 2008, but now by ten times as many (40%). The economic situation is in first place. On average, Europeans find unemployment slightly more important than the economic situation. In the personal sphere, the Dutch attach particular importance to the economic situation, healthcare, rising prices and education.

The average European finds rising prices to be the most important issue that they have to deal with in the personal sphere. Issues which are not immediately tangible, such as healthcare and education, play a significantly more important role for the Dutch in the personal sphere than for the average European.

The substantial rise in confidence in Dutch politicians in the autumn of 2008 – which was inextricably linked to the government's performance during the financial crisis – has almost completely evaporated. In the autumn of 2008, 66% of Dutch respondents had confidence in the government, whilst this now applies to 56%. This is still slightly higher than in the autumn of 2007 and the spring of 2008, when roughly half of Dutch people had confidence in the government. Confidence in the political parties and the House of Representatives has also declined again to the level seen before the banking crisis. Confidence in the national government, parliament and political parties elsewhere in Europe is - on average - at an unchanged low level.

The Dutch are still comparatively positive about their quality of life and their personal financial situation, but they clearly have something to lose. A group which has grown rapidly fears what the coming year will bring: they expect increasing unemployment and a further deterioration in the economy.

The European Union: Europe can play a role, but the current role is not right
Confidence in the European economy continues to decline. In the autumn of 2006, 27% of Europeans were negative about the European economic situation. Now 68% of Europeans rate the economic situation as *poor*. People in the Netherlands are slightly more positive, but here, too, there has been a substantial rise in the number of pessimists. In 2006, 15% of Dutch people felt that the European economy was in a poor state - now 54% believe this.

The number of Dutch respondents who say that they know how the European Union works has remained unchanged: 55% of Dutch people say that they understand how the EU operates. The European average is lower at 44%.

The Dutch are familiar with the European institutions: 93% have heard of the European Parliament, 84% of the European Central Bank and 83% of the European Commission. The Dutch are better informed about the European institutions than the average European.

Confidence in the European Union is above average in the Netherlands compared to Europe as a whole, but has fallen over the past six months, from 64% to 58%. On average, almost half of all Europeans have confidence in the EU.

Confidence in various European institutions is also above average in the Netherlands and has been rising since the autumn of 2005. However, confidence in the European Central Bank in particular has taken a hit amongst the Dutch over the past six months. The European Central Bank still enjoys most confidence compared to the European Parliament and the European Commission (67% of Dutch people have confidence in this European institution), but, in the autumn of 2008, that confidence was a lot higher (79% of Dutch respondents). Dutch respondents' confidence in the European Parliament has remained unchanged at 58%. Confidence in the European Commission is slightly higher (59%).

Dutch people have become more negative about the EU in general than in the autumn of 2008. Then, 52% of Dutch respondents were positive about the European Union on balance; now, the figure is 45% (in the EU-27 countries, an average of 38% are positive).

Despite the (comparatively) positive attitude with regard to the European Union as a institution, Dutch people are negative about the prospects for the European economy in the near future (within one year from now): 55% think that things will get worse for the European economy. Dutch respondents are equally negative with regard to the global economy; 52% think that things will get worse for the global economy. The Netherlands is more negative in this regard than average Europeans of whom 28% are pessimistic about the European economy in the near future and 30% negative about the future of the global economy.

Most support for membership of the EU can be found in the Benelux countries, as well as in Spain and Ireland. Nearly three-quarters of Dutch respondents believe that membership is a good thing. A small majority of Europeans are of the same view. For Dutch people, the European Union means the freedom to be able to travel, work and study anywhere in the EU, the euro, peace and a greater influence in the world.

That membership of the EU benefits the Netherlands is still the view of a majority. Three-quarters of Dutch respondents think that the Netherlands benefits from its membership, whilst the same number believe that the Netherlands enjoys greater economic stability as a result of the country being in the euro zone. Three-quarters of Dutch respondents also believe that the Netherlands' voice is heard in the EU. Yet fewer than half the Dutch respondents believe that the EU takes sufficient account of the Netherlands' national interests.

Dutch people believe that the European Union should give priority to combating crime and economic issues. According to the average European, the emphasis within the European Union should – apart from economic issues – be on social issues and immigration.

According to the Dutch, the EU's most important foreign priority should be freedom of expression, followed by combating racism and discrimination and children's rights. For the average European children's rights are the most important, followed by economic rights and combating human trafficking.

A vast majority of Dutch people want more European decision-making in the fight against organised crime (90%) and fighting terrorism (89%). It is not just the Dutch but also the vast majority of Europeans on average who are in favour of European decision-making in a host of policy areas. Only with regard to more European decision-making on agricultural subsidies is there no majority support amongst the Dutch respondents (42%). The performance of the EU in these areas is rated less highly. The Dutch give a rating of six or above to *guaranteeing safe food* and *collaboration in the area of research and innovation*. The average European does not give the EU a six or above in any area, and rates the European handling of unemployment remarkably poorly (3.9). The average Dutch person still gives this area a rating of 5.1.

Six out of ten Dutch respondents believe that globalisation is having positive effects for business, and half of them believe that the European Union can protect the member states from negative effects of globalisation. People in Europe are a lot more pessimistic: 42% are positive about the economic consequences of globalisation and 47% expect the European Union to be able to protect the member states from negative effects.

Economic crisis: the Dutch do not fear for their future pensions (yet)

Europeans – and the Dutch in particular – recognise the impact of the global economy on their national economy. No less than 85% of Europeans and 96% of Dutch respondents believe that the national economy is significantly or somewhat affected by the global economy.

A majority of the Dutch think that the European economy is doing better than the American economy and the Russian economy. Compared to other Europeans, the Dutch have a remarkably high level of confidence in the European economy when compared with the American economy. Half of Dutch respondents believe that Europe is doing better than Brazil and less than half think that Europe is doing better than India, Japan or China.

Almost half the Dutch respondents believe that the G20 should take the lead in combating the economic crisis, whilst the average European cites the European Union most often.

The Dutch also think differently about the crisis measures to be implemented. Almost half the Dutch respondents believe that the key lies in investment in education, training and research, whilst the average European most often cites support for small businesses.

The Dutch have above-average confidence that their pension is still in safe hands. Two out of three Dutch people are confident that their pension is safe. The average European is a lot more worried: only 39% have confidence in the future of his or her pension, whilst more than half (57%) do not.

Just like the average European, the Dutch are very divided about the right measures to safeguard the future of pensions. One in three Dutch respondents opts for keeping the retirement age unchanged and increasing social security contributions; a quarter opts for working and contributing for longer; and just under a quarter of respondents opts for keeping the retirement age the same and simply accepting that the level of the pension will fall. One in ten Dutch people finds none of these options acceptable.