

# Social Discontent and Public Administration



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**Our Western democracies are confronted with a growing feeling of social discontent characterized by a perceived downturn of society and the expectation that the future will be less promising than the present. In this paper we analyze contemporary literature and research to clarify whether this current feeling of discontent is different to previous periods of discontent in recent history and how it might affect the functioning of the Netherlands' public administration.**

**With this strategic study we want to examine the nature and significance of the social discontent among citizens. By doing so, we want to contribute to the discussion on this social phenomenon and the consequences thereof for the public administration. As a consequence, we do not regard this study as an end product, but rather as an initial document which is intended to lead to a more in-depth understanding.**

This study is not a reflection of our own research into social discontent, but an overview of the latest thinking about this social phenomenon. In this study we analyse, first and foremost, the current social discontent in the Netherlands, but we also look back at history and at the social discontent in surrounding countries. After all, looking back and across the borders may help us understand our current situation. We conclude this study with a number of focus areas for action for central government and then, in particular, for the Netherlands' Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations.

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# 1. Definition of social discontent

Social discontent is a complicated and controversial phenomenon. In the context of everyday use, the term refers to the feeling that people have that the deterioration of society is out of control and therefore cannot be stopped. That feeling is frequently linked to the question of whether people believe that they can have it as good as their parents, or whether their children will have it as good as they themselves (RMO, 2011; RMO, 2013; Dobbs et al, 2016). Social discontent also relates less to people's individual situations and more to society as a whole (Dekker & Ridder, 2011; Bles, 2015; Steenvoorden, 2016). Put more scientifically, it can be asserted that social discontent is a latent feeling of anxiety among citizens about the precarious state of society and consisting of a perceived deterioration of five aspects of that society: (i) a loss of confidence in human capabilities, (ii) a loss of ideology, (iii) a loss of political power, (iv) a loss of a sense of community, and (v) increasing socio-economic vulnerability (Steenvoorden, 2016: 247). In this definition, social discontent consists of three elements. In first place it concerns a latent attitude on the part of citizens. Moreover, the feeling of anxiety among citizens is related to the precarious state of society. Lastly, it consists of the perceived deterioration of the five aspects of society mentioned above.

Social discontent is not a phenomenon which is typical of modern times. The feeling of collective deterioration also existed in antiquity and in the Middle Ages. However, having said that, these days the feeling is more powerful than it used to be. That has to do with a linear view which is related to a belief in continuous progress. This progress facilitated an increase in, and spread of, personal freedom, free markets and prosperity. As a result, the perceived deterioration is having a

**Social discontent is not a phenomenon which is typical of modern times**

greater impact, all the more so given that there is no hope of a better future (Van Bavel, 2016 Elchardus, 2015). Social discontent is a latent attitude. It is an undercurrent in society and there too lies the difference for us with phenomena such as social unrest

or anger (NSOB, 2017). As far as some sections of the population are concerned, social unrest or anger is an extension of this discontent and the people in question feel more rage and have more negative opinions of developments and greater resentments (Steenvoorden, 2016). Social unrest or anger occurs when the discontent comes to the surface and becomes the overcurrent in society.

The latent anxiety about the precarious state of society is evident among many groups in society. The feeling of discontent may also be more acute in one social group than in others. The scale is definitely gradual, without there being any antithesis in society between those who are 'comfortable' and those who are 'uncomfortable'. Background characteristics which are relevant as regards variations in social discontent are the level of education, gender, age, religious conviction and place of residence (Dekker, Noije & Ridder, 2013). More than anything, people with a lower level of education appear to experience greater social

discontent, particularly if that coincides with absolute deprivation (Abts, 2015). This is nothing new. The level of education is an important ‘sorting’ factor for other social phenomena (Bovens, 2010). People with a higher level of education have a different world value orientation (high level of confidence in themselves, the future and institutions, a cosmopolitan outlook and a feeling of ‘grip’ on their own lives) to people with lower levels of education (low level of confidence in institutions and ‘the elite’, need for individuality, borders and smallness of scale). It has also transpired that people with low levels of education are confronted more frequently with real events, such as unemployment and the scaling down of social provisions which reinforce their social discontent. However, it is important that we realise that social discontent does not just affect social groups facing absolute deprivation. It also affects groups which are scared that they will lose out or which are confronted by relative deprivation (Abts, 2015).

**Education, gender, age, religious conviction and place of residence are important characteristics**

## 2. Causes of social discontent

Below we explore the various causes which are generally put forward in connection with social discontent, we want to emphasise that the discontent is the result of a combination and convergence of various causes. The causes referred to also affect each other and, as a result, exacerbate the consequences. Nevertheless, for the purposes of the analysis, we have distinguished three causes and these are socio-cultural, socio-economic and political causes. The three causes are the result of actual global developments. Research has revealed that social discontent is based on real social, political and economic developments (Steenvoorden, 2016; Elchardus, 2015).



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### a. Socio-cultural explanation

Recent socio-cultural developments in society have created a substantial breeding ground for social discontent. In general terms, the socio-cultural developments can be interpreted as a transition from organised modernity to liquid modernity (Abts, 2015; Bauman, 2007). Organised modernity was a period of relative stability and well-being, in which everyone had a clear identity. In liquid modernity, this homogeneous community, with a shared identity, ceases to exist. This is due to four key developments.

First and foremost it is down to far-reaching individualisation and the accompanying deinstitutionalisation in society. That is the process in which people are bound less and less to permanent organisations and institutions. We are seeing that people are no longer linking to certain institutions in order to give meaning to their lives, such as the church, trade union or a political party. Previously strong

People increasingly define their own truth

identities, such as the working class or a religious group, no longer exist as a total identity which could integrate social discontent (Abts, 2015).

People are increasingly organising themselves into informal groups. They are assigning meaning

themselves to the world around them and no longer have any fixed anchors (Bauman, 2007). It is increasingly apparent, therefore, that people are defining their own truth. We can therefore conclude that individualisation has contributed to the idea that people are themselves responsible for their happiness in life.

This personal responsibility only has a limited effect on all the kinds of developments which can also influence people's lives (Siedentop, 2014; Elchardus, 2015). What is more, the individual is increasingly expected to come up with solutions which used to be provided primarily by the government (Held, 2006; Bauman, 2007). That increases the feeling of social discontent.

The second development concerns the changing demographic context of Dutch society. This means general developments like an increasingly ageing population but, in particular, the consequences of migration. The Netherlands has always been a migration country with figures showing migrants making up between four and eight percent of the population having been standard in recent centuries. Until the Second World War, the migrants coming to the Netherlands had primarily European, and then particularly German, backgrounds. After the Second World

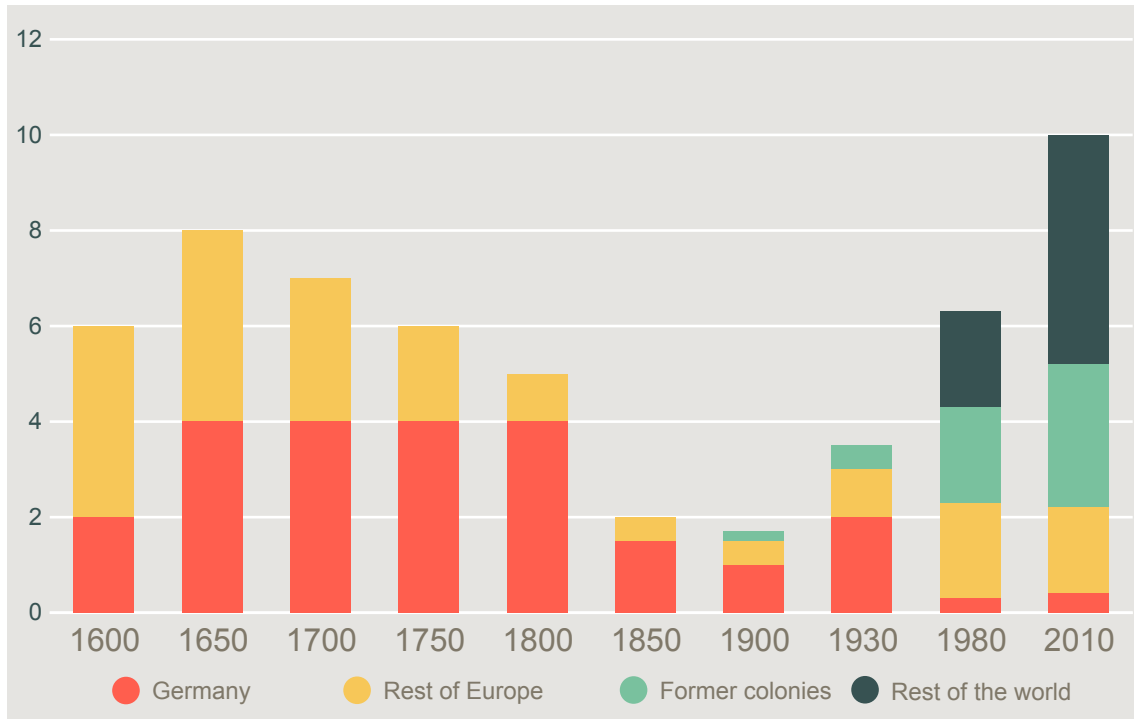
Social discontent is primarily related to feelings of loss

War, there was an influx of migrants from former colonies and, since the 1970s, many migrants from other parts of the world have also been coming to the Netherlands. In the period between 1980 and 2010, the percentage of migrants from

outside Europe rose from four to eight percent (Lucassen & Lucassen, 2011).

The feeling of discontent among residents with a Dutch background has to do primarily with feelings of loss (Smeeke and Mulder, 2016). The experience of many residents with a Dutch background is that – whereas newcomers have been allowed to retain their own culture – they themselves have actually lost their own

culture and identity. They also have the feeling that Dutch integration policy has failed in what has become known as ‘the multicultural disaster’. This relates to the widely-felt sentiment that large numbers of first and second generation non-Western ethnic minorities are not adapting to Dutch society.



The Netherland's migration background percentage (source: Lucassen & Lucassen, 2011)

The third development is the increasing new divisions in society (Tiemeijer, 2017) which are causing a lot of people to feel that Dutch society has lost its homogeneity. Although it is certainly not the case that Dutch society was strongly homogeneous in the past, everyone did know their place in that society (Abts, 2015). During the period of pillarization, the Netherlands was divided according to various pillars. The denominational pillars had little contact with the non-denominational pillars and people within the socialist pillar had little contact with the liberal pillar.

**From vertical to horizontal divisions in society**

However, a major difference with modern divisions is that, back then, people were represented in every pillar by an elite which also managed to create mutual links. The new divisions relate to the axes of an open society

(cosmopolitans) and a closed society (nationalists), the axes of people with higher and lower levels of education. These are divisions which cut through society not vertically, but horizontally. This would appear to be leading to a feeling of permanent crisis among a section of the population (Beck, 1992; Bauman, 2000).

The final development we want to refer to here is the major role of (social) media in society. The influence of media on people's thoughts has increased. We also want to highlight two important mechanisms, the so-called Thomas theorem (Steenvoorden, 2016) and echo chambers. The Thomas theorem states that, "if men define situations

as real, then they are real in their consequences”. If people are continuously confronted with media images showing the deterioration of society, they will also experience that deterioration as real and act accordingly. A second mechanism is the echo chamber whereby people increasingly collect their news and information via media channels which broadcast a similar sound. In this way people’s views of society are continually confirmed. The effect of echo chambers and the personalised preconceived news offered by social media is expected to be significant and reinforcing (based on current information, without this having been investigated in more detail).

## b. Socio-economic explanation

In recent years, explanations of social discontent have focused more on the economy. This is in contrast to, for example, the first decade of this century in the Netherlands when the integration debate and criticism of the multicultural society were the focus of the discussion about social discontent. Structure and the economic climate run side-by-side in economic explanations. In recent years, a great deal of research has been published about *structural* developments which have already been taking place for several decades and which are having a major influence on those relationships in society. These developments are globalisation and free trade and the related pressure on employment and wages, particularly those paid to industrial workers in Western countries. Labour migration and the free movement of workers within the EU are causing pressure on wages and employment in, for example, the transport, logistics and construction sectors. Another important point is increasing inequality as a cause of dissatisfaction and all kinds of other undesirable social outcomes (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2011). Institutional changes are also examined, such as the deregulation and increased flexibility of, for example, employment relations. Lastly, technological developments such as automation and digitisation have resulted in the ‘erosion’ of medium level jobs in Western economies (Autor, Katz, & Kearney, 2006; Goos & Manning, 2007).

Besides structural changes, the economic climate also plays an important role in the economic explanation of social discontent. The Great Recession (2008) resulted

### It’s the economy

in sometimes huge (youth) unemployment, cuts and economic uncertainty among certain groups in society. It is too early to draw any definitive conclusions, but a provisional conclusion may be that a number of structural developments have become more acute as a consequence of the economic crisis - albeit not across the board - and have therefore increased in importance. Incidentally, there are also indications that certain developments, such as increasing inequality, have temporarily slowed down in the years following the Great Recession.

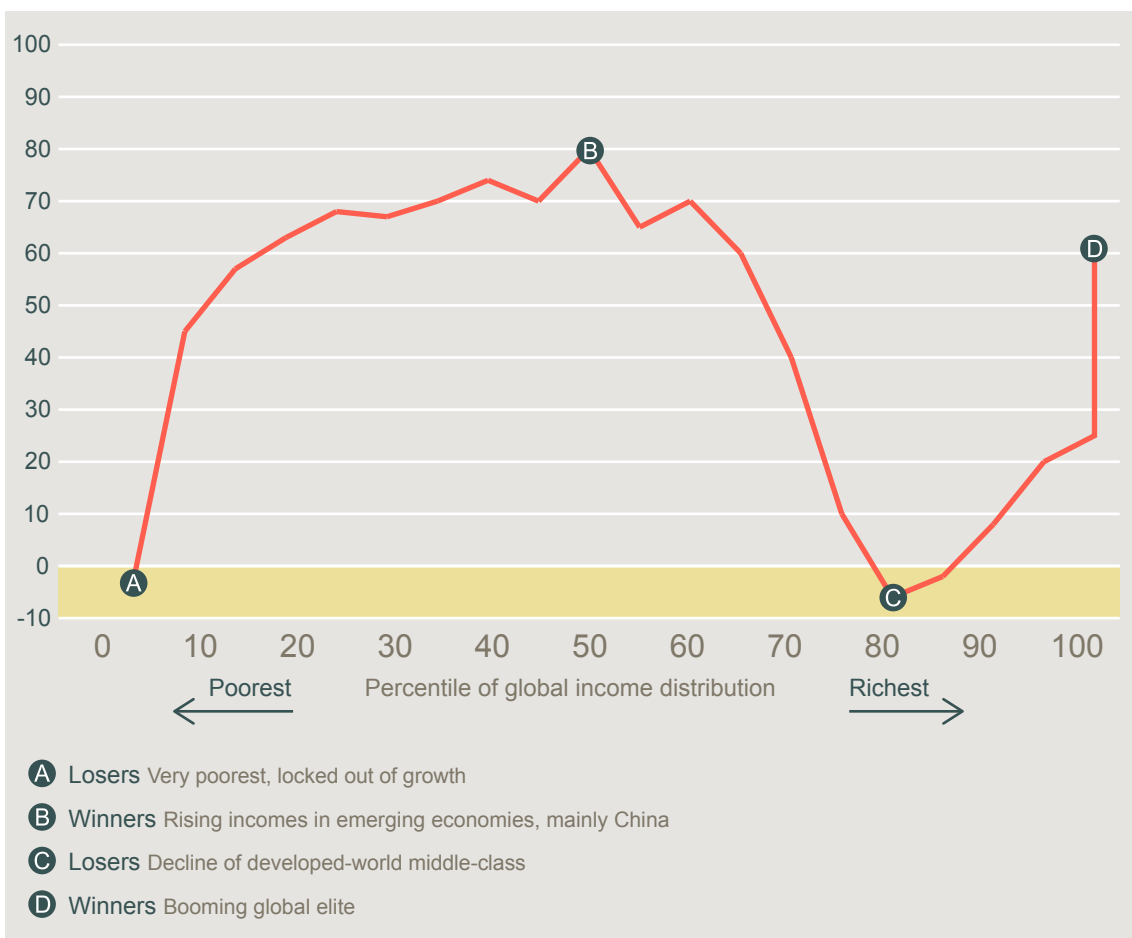
In this paragraph we want to highlight the consequences of globalisation as an important structural economic explanation of social discontent. The basic argument is that, although globalisation has resulted in a huge increase in

prosperity, it is also exerting a downward pressure on wages and the employment of employees with a lower level of education in Western economies. For example, Milanović (2016) used his now famous ‘elephant chart’ to illustrate that trade and

**The emerge of a new dividing line between the winners and losers of globalisation**

globalisation are the basis of a global redistribution by which the position of the lower middle class in the Western economies has worsened in relative terms, while the position of the middle-class in emerging economies has significantly improved.

Dani Rodrik (2016) argues that numerous economists have failed to focus sufficiently on the negative consequences of free trade (such as loss of income, job insecurity and distribution problems), resulting in a loss of credibility. A new structural dividing line is emerging between what we call ‘globalisation winners’ and ‘globalisation losers’ (Kriesi in SCP/WRR, 2014: 59).



Percentage of global income growth, 1988-2008 (source Milanovic, 2016)

The contrast between globalisation winners and losers also applies to the Dutch situation. Social discontent primarily exists in groups that have experienced declining social protection and is felt particularly by the non-immigrant Dutch members of these groups. These are people with few resources and people who are afraid of a deterioration of the situation (Vrooman, 2016). It has transpired that the income security of 18 to 64-year-olds has decreased by 34 percent from 1980 onwards. This decrease was also accompanied by a 27 percent drop in job security. This is due primarily to the considerable growth in the number of self-employed people during that period, including lone, independent entrepreneurs.

Furthermore, uncertainty has mainly been increasing since the 1990s (Vrooman, 2016). Incidentally, there is no easy answer to the question of whether the welfare state has, overall, been less generous in recent decades (Pierson, 1995). Certain measures such as, in the Dutch context, the raising of the retirement age, the abolition of the early retirement scheme, and pre-pension and cuts to the Dutch Social Support Act (Wet Maatschappelijke Ondersteuning) may, of course, add to the feeling of a steady decline in public goods and services.

**Social discontent primarily exists in groups with declining social protection**

Besides the increase in economic uncertainty, real incomes are also under pressure in the Western world. The real incomes of two-thirds of households in the US and Western Europe stayed the same or decreased in the period 2005 - 2014. This is a new phenomenon. Between 1993 and 2005 only 2 percent of households experienced a stagnation or deterioration in their real income. This stagnation or deterioration mainly affects young people and those with a low level of education. In the Netherlands, the financial situation of 70 percent of Dutch households either failed to improve or deteriorated in the period 2005-2014 (McKinsey, 2016). A relevant point as regards the economic explanations of the discontent is that respondents whose income is under pressure appear to be significantly more pessimistic about their own future and that of their children. This group also appears to have the most negative attitude about trade and immigration (for example, respondents from this group agreed with the following statement twice as often as respondents in other groups: 'Legal immigrants are ruining the culture and cohesiveness in our society'. On top of this, the group is more likely to vote for populist parties such as the Front National or, in the case of the UK, to be in favour of Brexit (McKinsey Global Institute, 2016).

### **c. Political explanation**

Lastly, in this study, we want to reflect on developments in the political domain as an explanation of people's social dissatisfaction. The fact that national politicians are gradually losing their grip on society and the declining importance of all-encompassing ideologies in politics are exacerbating the feeling of discontent among citizens. This applies, in particular, to the group that is more strongly dependent on politics in order to structure their own lives.

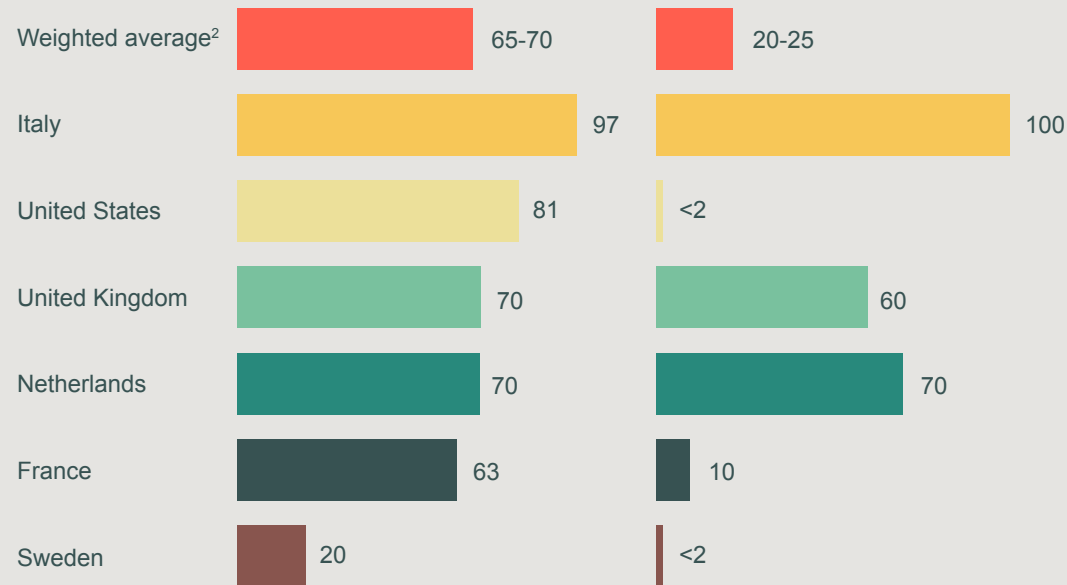
**Europeanization and globalisation limit the influence of national politics**

The decreasing grip of politicians on society has to do with two elements. In the first place national politics is being eroded as a consequence of a transfer of authorities to the supranational level in the form of, for example, the European Union, and to the local level. The consequence of this is that the national parliament has less and less of a say on matters which directly affect people's lives. However, citizens still regard the national level as the most important level when it comes to political engagement. This is also linked to the political trilemma between hyper-



In the past decade 65 to 70 percent of income segments in advanced economies had flat or falling market incomes and 20 to 25 percent had flat or falling disposable incomes.

% of households in income segments with flat or falling income, 2005-2014<sup>1</sup>



1 For each country we use the latest year the data are available - France (2012), Italy (2014 disposable incomes, 2012 market incomes), the Netherlands (2014), Sweden (2013), United Kingdom (2014), United States (2013).

2 Population-weighted average of 25 countries extrapolated from six country deep dives.

Percentage of Households in segments with flat or falling income, 2005-2014.

(source McKinsey and Company, 2016)

globalisation, the nation state and democratic politics which cannot coexist. The wave of globalisation of the past three decades has had a detrimental effect on national democracy and the nation state (Rodrik, 2011). The consequence is that people have started worrying about what politics is capable of (Safranski, 2003). In the second place more important tasks are being shifted to the market. The wave of privatisations has caused people to feel that politics is now irrelevant. A good example of this is perspective are the Dutch Railways (NS). In that sense politics is being held partly responsible for this decline while, at the same time, there is an increasing belief that public administration can no longer provide a solution.

A second element that exacerbates social discontent is the decreasing importance of all-encompassing ideologies (Abts, 2015). In politics – and perhaps also more broadly – comprehensive narratives are a thing of the past. As a result, people cannot relate to an umbrella vision of the future. In the Netherlands this effect is perhaps even stronger due to the process of depillarisation. Up until a couple of

decades ago, Dutch society was strongly divided on the basis of pillars which were internally connected by a comprehensive ideology or narrative. The decreasing importance of ideologies is reflected in the volatility of the

**Comprehensive narratives are something of the past**

electorate. People make up their minds just a couple of days before election day. They fluctuate more and more when choosing and this means more and more seats

are lost and gained by the various different parties during elections. This is evident not just at national level but also at local level. People feel that ‘even’ politicians no longer have a meaningful, coherent vision of the future of society and that political parties are no longer able to offer any hope for the future (Elchardus, 2015).

The only parties that are able to do so are parties which exploit people’s desire for times gone by, ‘when society was still doing well’ (Lilla, 2016).

### 3. Social discontent in a historical perspective

During the past two centuries, there have been periods during which the sense of civilisation’s decline was stronger than in other periods. The *fin-de-siècle* period, in and around 1900, was characterised by an undercurrent of social discontent resulting from a combination of various causes which led to this broadly felt sentiment. This was a period during which mass consumption slowly but surely took hold and then led to a feeling of decadence, pressure was brought to bear on the traditional relationships between social classes in society, and the economy was impacted by a global crisis in 1873 and later in 1890. Hundreds of cultural pessimistic books and essays were published during this period. It was striking that, at the same time, there was an undercurrent of unbridled optimism, fuelled partly by new technological opportunities and increased mobility (Van der Woud, 2015). Oscar Wilde (1895) wrote, ‘[A]n optimist or a pessimist? Those seem to be the only two fashionable religions left to us nowadays’.

The twentieth century was also characterised by the alternation, or sometimes coexistence, of a belief in progress and pessimism. Certainly looking back, the period of the Trente Glorieuses (1945-1975) can be characterised as a period of economic prosperity and optimism. Nostalgic feelings for this period play a role in the current discontent. Western citizens have developed a nostalgic and utopian desire to return to this ‘lost Golden Age’ when ‘people did not need to lock their doors, there were no foreigners, and no threat of conflicts between ethnic groups’ (Elchardus, 2009). The economic shocks of the 1970s and the stagflation of the

Nostalgic feelings do play a role

1980s brought an end, for the time being, to the age of optimism. The process of depillarisation continued unchecked and gave way to a more individualised and deinstitutionalised society. The fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 introduced a new global idea of progress. The end of an era was heralded with

liberal democracy being declared the winner of the ideological duality of the Cold War (Fukuyama, 1989; Runciman, 2013). The economy again started to grow during the 1990s, certainly in the Netherlands, partly as a result of the increased participation of women in the employment market. During the two periods of government based on coalitions of liberals and social democrats (the Purple Coalition), the focus was on self-determination and freedom of choice.

The current discussion about social discontent mainly surfaced at approximately the turn-of-the-century and is considered to be linked to a number of events such as the optimism about a new world order disappearing as a result of the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001, the integration of minorities being presented more and more in terms of a drama rather than an enrichment, and the automatic process of Europeanisation being challenged following the referendum on the European constitution in 2005. Questions have also been asked of people's belief in the market as the ultimate mechanism for organising the economy since the outbreak of the credit crisis in 2007. Although the discussion about social discontent has risen sharply to the surface, the question is whether this discontent has actually increased during the past two decades. Not a great deal of long-term research has been carried out which would enable us to answer this question. However, it is plausible, in any event, that this is the case (Dekker, Noijs & Ridder, 2013; Elchardus, 2015). In this context, reference can also be made to the Thomas theorem. In other words, the fact that the discontent is being discussed more frequently means that people have also started feeling it more.

#### 4. Social discontent in an international perspective

Social discontent is not a typically Dutch phenomenon, but may well be a typical characteristic of Western countries (Dekker, Noijs & Ridder, 2013; Steenvoorden, 2016). In this paragraph we briefly reflect on the thinking and debates about social discontent in other countries.

Social discontent is also an extremely topical theme in other western democracies. A media analysis which was carried out within the framework of this study shows that there is a need, in many Western countries, for an interpretation of an existing undercurrent in society which we have referred to here as social discontent. In other countries this phenomenon is referred to using different terms. For example, in Flanders people refer to the 'right-wing discontented suburbanite', in Denmark people call it the 'age of the dissatisfied', in Germany the term is 'angry citizens', and in the United States they refer to 'working class and middle-class whites' (NSOB, 2017). This discontent is expressed in other countries at set points in time, for example during elections or referenda, but can also manifest itself during protests and demonstrations (Krastev, 2014; Clover, 2016). What is particularly striking is the interdependence between various countries in the discourse about social discontent. Events in one country have an impact on discussions in another (NSOB, 2017). This is also a feature of the Dutch discussion. Analyses of the discontent in the Netherlands are linked to the rise of Trump, Brexit, or the attacks in Paris or Belgium (Heijne, 2016; Bles, 2016).

Foreign media is dominated primarily by two motives for the social discontent of citizens, namely a socio-cultural and a socio-economic motive (NSOB, 2017). In general it can be asserted that, over time, a shift has taken place as regards the dominance of one or the other motive. For example, at first the socio-economic

**Events in one country affect the public debate in other countries**

motive was dominant – partly due to the current economic crisis. However, the situation has changed and socio-cultural motives are now dominant, particularly during the last two years. Having said that, those motives differ per

country. In some countries, such as the United States, the socio-economic motives are dominant and focus particularly on the risk of social gains being lost (Hochschild, 2016). In other countries, such as Denmark and Germany, the socio-cultural motives are more important and focus primarily on migration issues and the resulting fear of losing one's own culture (NSOB, 2017).



*photocredit: REX*

The question then is how great the feeling of social discontent actually is in other countries. For example, do people in United States feel more social discontent than people in the Netherlands or indeed vice versa? Unfortunately social discontent as such has not been measured in international comparative research. However, studies have been done which provide an indication of how the sentiment in the Netherlands relates to other countries. If, for example, we look at which nationalities are happiest, we find that the Netherlands is in seventh place (Helliwell, Layard, Sachs, 2016). Another indicator of the social discontent is the electoral preference of voters because the discontent in many other Western countries translates into changes in the political landscape. This is expressed primarily in the emergence of populist left-wing and right-wing parties and leaders (Bles, 2016). If this is indeed the case, we can

cautiously assert that – partly in view of the rise in electoral popularity of populist parties – social discontent in many countries is on the increase.

## 5. Social discontent and the functioning of the public administration

The real question is how bad this social discontent actually is. Scientists have scarcely researched the significance of social discontent for the functioning of the public administration. In our opinion, social discontent not only has negative consequences, but can also have positive consequences for the public administration. Below we distinguish between four plausible consequences.

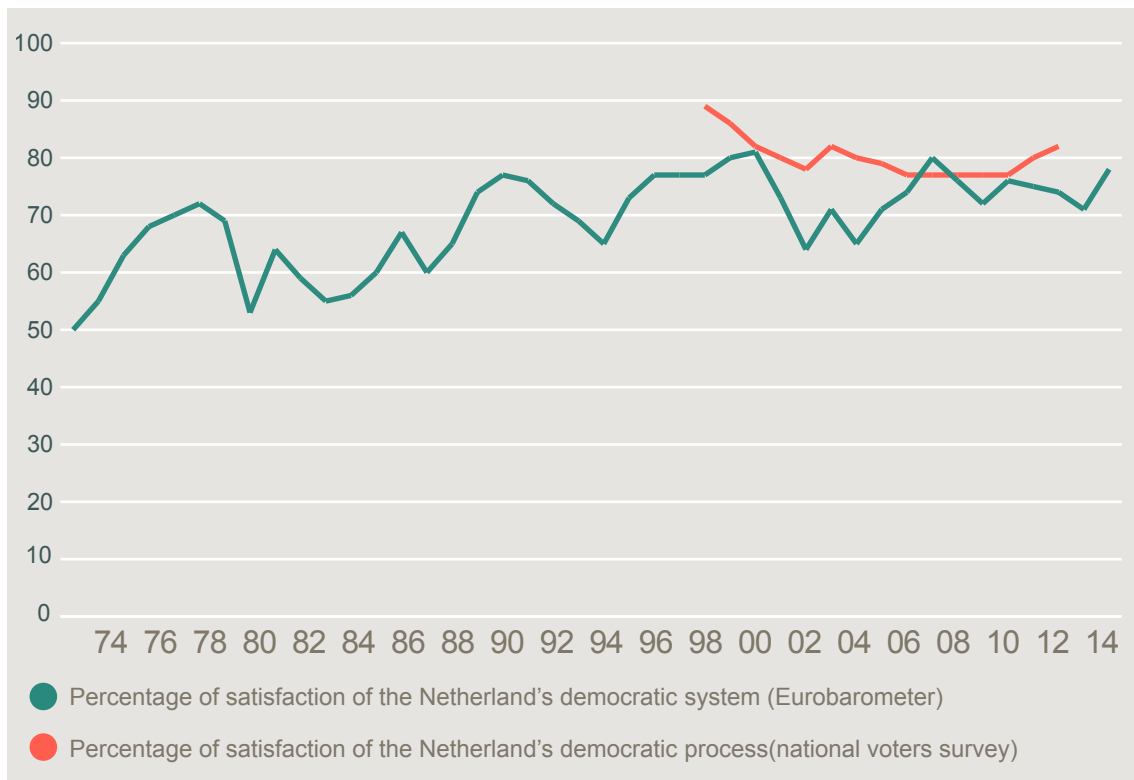
In the first instance social discontent puts pressure on the legitimacy of government action. Legitimacy is related to the degree to which the ‘will’ of a community is expressed in government action (Bekkers, 2007) and the degree to which citizens voluntarily accept that action (as regulatory power, enforcing authority or organising body) (Weyers & Hertogh, 2007). The legitimacy can affect various entities, such as the system (the political-administrative system, democratic

### Social discontent puts pressure on the legitimacy of government action

governance and public administration in a general sense), the players (authorities and responsible institutes) and the policy activities (the policy, including regulations, in various fields). As regards acquiring legitimacy, it is

helpful to distinguish between different phases in the policy process, namely input, throughput and output (Bekkers, Edwards & Fenger, 2007). The increase in social discontent primarily appears to be aimed at the legitimacy of a number of actors, such as political parties and political officials, as well as in the government and the parliament. In recent decades citizens have started losing their confidence in these players (Ministry of The Interior and Kingdom Relations, 2016; Ridder & Dekker, 2015). There is, with regard to these players, a legitimacy problem in all phases of the policy process. As regards the input legitimacy of the players, the main issue is the politicians that people have little confidence in, while citizens actually have a high degree of confidence in Democratic governance and the related institutions (also input legitimacy). It is less straightforward to assess this in the case of the legitimacy of the policy pursued (output legitimacy) because that depends very much on which policy is involved. However, in a general sense the government, as implementer of the policy, has a poor image (Bekkers, Edwards & Fenger, 2007).

This appears to have been confirmed by a recent study by the National Ombudsman (Vlugt, Hanse, Loois, 2016) in which 51 percent of the respondents stated that they had doubts about the expertise of government officials. However, in a European comparative study, Dutch citizens belonged to the group of nationalities that have a positive view of government functioning (Ridder & Dekker, 2015).



Satisfaction with the functioning of the Netherlands' democracy, 1973-2014.  
 (source: Hendriks, Krieken, Zuydam & Roelofs, 2016)

A second consequence for the public administration is that social discontent leads to a change in citizens' electoral preferences. People who experience significant social discontent have a greater electoral preference for parties that acknowledge the causes of this discontent. In such instances this means (a combination of) the aforementioned socio-cultural, socio-economic and political causes. Populist parties – and primarily right-wing populist parties – were the first to have a narrative of society coming under attack due to blaming specific exogenous factors (migrants, globalisation, powerful corporations, corrupt (EU) politicians) for the deterioration. In this narrative, a new party with a nationalist profile is often

**Social discontent leads to a change in citizens' electoral preferences**

regarded as the only player capable of recognising these injustices and of putting forward solutions. These solutions are typically based on the presentation of a society in which the people have a single identity and in which

social contradictions are denied (Lefort, 2016: 88). These parties are hopeful of improvement, even though this also appears to be inherent in the functioning of a political system aimed at maximising votes and influence. In recent years, populist parties have become a permanent feature of Western European politics. What is more, traditional political parties are increasingly focusing on protecting national interests and use terms such as civilised nationalism or anti-nationalist nationalism (Kesic & Duyvendak, 2016). The emphasis in the national political discourse as such is, for the time being, on offering solutions and the prospect of improvement. By contrast, in the European Parliament, change already appears to be taking place in the political discourse of populist anti-European parties that are propagating the

dissolution of the European Union or the Eurozone, or the exiting of their member state because they no longer believe in improvement.

The third consequence is that the social discontent contributes to a change in the political agenda. Politicians will refer to these as issues of concern due to the worries expressed by people in society. Social discontent will eventually lead to a change in policy and this will eventually cause the object of the social discontent to disappear, as a result of which the discontent itself will also decrease. We saw this,

**Social discontent contributes to a change in the political agenda**

for example, at the end of the nineteenth century in terms of the social problems of the time and suffrage (Kazin, 2016). The same happened in the Netherlands at the beginning of the twenty-first century when integration-

related problems were acknowledged. Before then there was a sense of optimism that the integration of newcomers had been relatively successful. Following the rise in popularity of populist Pim Fortuyn and the publication of the essay on 'The multicultural tragedy' (Het Multiculturele Drama, Scheffer, 2000), the problems relating to the integration of newcomers featured high on the political agenda.

Lastly, social discontent can, in extreme cases, also cause some citizens to acquire a disregard for moral standards, often as a consequence of an incident or event (NSOB, 2017). The latent anxiety of people then surfaces, transforms from an undercurrent to an overcurrent and is, as it were, activated. In this publication (NSOB, 2017) we no longer refer to social discontent, but rather to social unrest. In the past this transition from the undercurrent to overcurrent led to rioting. In the last few decades, the government has managed to channel this discontent via organised demonstrations. Partly due to the decreasing degree of organisation and increased individualisation, riots and organised protests appear to be becoming more and more frequent (Krastev, 2014; Clover, 2016). Recent examples in the Netherlands were the protests against the setting up of asylum seeker centres, the discussion about St Nicholas' black companions, and the controversial death of the Aruban man, Mitch Henriquez, in The Hague.

## 6. Conclusions

'Personally things are ok, but society seems to be going downhill'. This is the memorable statement made by Paul Schnabel to indicate how citizens are feeling. It is a description of what we have referred to in this publication as social discontent: a feeling people have of an uncontrollable deterioration of society. Put more scientifically, it can be asserted that social discontent is a latent feeling of anxiety among citizens about the precarious state of society which consists of a perceived deterioration in five aspects of that society: (i) a loss of confidence in human capabilities, (ii) a loss of ideology, (iii) a loss of political power, (iv) a loss of a sense of community and (v) increasing socio-economic vulnerability.

Social dissatisfaction is not a modern phenomenon. During the past two centuries, we can identify many periods during which citizens were extremely uneasy about the course that society was taking. It is not possible to identify a single cause for this discontent. It probably has to do with the combination and coincidence of several causes which, in turn, led to an increase or decrease in the feeling of social discontent. Earlier on in this document we distinguished between socio-cultural, socio-economic and political causes of this social discontent. We have observed that, over the course of history, it was not always the same cause or series of causes that was at the heart of the social dissatisfaction at that time point in time.

The new millennium is characterised by a (growing) feeling of social discontent. We have observed that evidence of this increasing discontent is not so much provided by social-scientific research, but rather by the fact that it is being written and talked about in the media more and more often. In this day and age, we can see that the socio-economic causes and the socio-cultural causes are the most important.

The consequences of this social discontent are having a drastic effect on public administration. We have also identified four key consequences for the functioning of the public administration. In the first place we have observed that increasing

**Four key consequences for the functioning of the public administration**

social discontent is bringing pressure to bear on the legitimacy of the public administration. This decreasing legitimacy may eventually result in less effective and efficient public administration. In the second place we have observed that people who experience significant

social discontent change their electoral preference. They then tend to vote for parties that have acknowledged this discontent. In the third place we can conclude that greater social discontent and its expression can also have a positive effect on the incumbent political-administrative elite because they become aware of the injustices. After all, some of this discontent is based on fact. Lastly we have observed that increasing social discontent can change into dissatisfaction and unrest. During the transition from undercurrent to overcurrent, people can express their discontent in ways which fall outside the boundaries of common standards.

## 7. Focus areas for action for public administration

The question therefore is whether social discontent as such can be resolved and, if it has to be resolved, that task is primarily one for politicians. As long as social discontent exists in society, it will have an impact on the functioning of the public administration. We have used the insights and conclusions to examine the possible focus areas for action for the public administration. We regard the policy directions outlined as possible solutions. They are intended for further discussion. In that sense, the explicit goal of this strategic study is to stimulate and encourage the related discussion.





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***Links between public administration and society*** – Within the public administration there must be no illusion that the social discontent, as such, can be resolved. It is important that (new) links are created between the public administration and society to redefine its dialogue. These links must enable those in public administration to determine what is going on and what is topical within society. These links also serve as a set of instruments to see whether the execution of policy is having the desired effect.

***Treatment of citizens*** – Within the public administration the causes of social discontent must be interpreted as a reality. People's concerns must be taken seriously. This calls, in any case, for more understanding and empathy on the part of administrators, members of parliament, and civil servants for people's social discontent. This can translate primarily into the way in which contacts between the government and citizens are structured.

***Tackling real problems*** – The causes of social discontent are partially based on real problems such as inequality and the feeling of having no say. Incidentally, acknowledging these issues can be a goal in itself without there being the illusion that social discontent will disappear as a result.

***False solutions*** – There is a risk that measures will be taken for problems which only exist in a collective imagination. It is quite feasible that symbolic measures will

be taken without any actual mention of the real problems. As far as we are concerned, the risk of false solutions underlines the importance of *evidenced based* policy.

**Alertness** – Those in public administration – and democracies in general – are notoriously bad at predicting crises. It is essential to learn to identify *tipping points* which may arise if various trends come together and accelerate. Those who work in public administration must be alert to signals that the social discontent is changing into dissatisfaction and unrest, because that will threaten social stability.

**More research** – More research is needed into the causes of social discontent. In particular, there is a need for more attention for, and research into, the economic causes of social discontent (uncertainty, loss of income, erosion of medium-level jobs, inequality).

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### Any comment?

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