

Reflective Note

These Days

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*The overload of discontent
The constant burden of making sense
It won't relent, it won't repent
The Yard Act (2022)*

These are the days of the malcontent. Most of us still remember the numerous demonstrations and street riots in Dutch municipalities in January 2021 and again in November 2021 – in reaction to the COVID-19 curfew and other lockdown measures imposed by the national government. But these days, public discontent is not limited to the participants in these highly visible manifestations of frustration and outrage.

In a recent report, for example, an inter-university research consortium of twelve Dutch social scientists, have sounded the alarm as regards the dramatic decline in the trust of the citizens in their (national) government between April 2020 and September 2021. On the basis of their research these scholars claim that during the corona-crisis The Netherlands became a “low-trust society”.¹ Other social scientists were quick to squabble about the interpretation of these trends, and claimed – probably rightly so – that the decline in trust is **political** in nature, and primarily related to people’s evaluation of the **national government**.² Therefore, the conclusion of a transformation into a **low-trust society**, is probably overstated.

Moreover, in her recent dissertation, Dominika Proszowska (NIG-graduate) shows that conclusions about the emergence of a *permanent* transformation of societies as a consequence of crises, may be **premature**.³ She demonstrates that in the period 2008-2019 the negative impact of the economic crisis during the Great Recession on political trust in 28 EU-member was only temporary. After an initial ebb, in most countries, the decline in trust was quickly followed by a recovery, when the economy after the crisis started thriving again. This strongly suggests that political trust is more resilient than some colleagues fear, when sketching their gloomy prospect of a low-trust society. But whether under the current circumstances trust will once again prove to be resilient, remains to be seen. After all, even the strongest elastic may be overstretched!

¹ For the research report see: <https://www.impactcorona.nl/laag-vertouwen-samenleving/> (in Dutch only).

² See: Tom van der Meer & Josje den Ridder, *Wantrouwen geldt niet de samenleving maar de politiek*, (NRC- 21-11-2021): <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2021/11/21/wantrouwen-geldt-niet-de-samenleving-maar-de-politiek-a4066267>.

³ Dominika K. Proszowska, *How people trust their governments: Trends, patterns and determinants of trust differentiation in multilevel polities*, <https://research.utwente.nl/en/publications/how-people-trust-their-governments-trends-patterns-and-determinan> (chapter 2).

This proviso is especially relevant in the Netherlands as there are reasons to believe that the decline in political trust here was not only the result of the COVID-19 crisis. Of course here, just like elsewhere, this unprecedented calamity forced governments to grope for effective policies; leading to numerous trials and inevitably also many errors. Just like everywhere else, inevitable failures made in this process, will doubtlessly have exacted their toll.

In the Dutch context, however, *specifically domestic issues* have probably tested citizens' political trust even more severely than abroad. Some of these domestic issues are corona-related. One of the most salient problems to be considered after the pandemic – as far as I am concerned – is the incapacity of our public health system to adequately respond to the COVID-19 crisis. In the early days of the pandemic, politicians, administrators and health care professionals were unanimously confident - and sometimes even complacent - about their capacity to provide flexible and quick responses to the new challenge. But in practice once and again – notwithstanding the prolonged admirable efforts of the health sector workers during the two-year crisis -- it proved impossible to quickly respond to the ever-changing moods of the COVID-19 virus.

There are still other factors, however, that may have put pressure on Dutch citizens' political trust. To begin with, many citizens – in the midst of the country's worst crisis since WWII – were “not amused” by the seemingly endless negotiations (taking 299 days) and “politicking” during the formation of a new cabinet. Another, major reason for citizens' dissatisfaction is the dramatic failure of previous cabinets under the leadership of the old (and new) prime-minister Mark Rutte - to deal with two big scandals: the Child Benefits Scandal and the compensation of the victims of the gas-extraction-related earthquakes in Groningen. In both cases over many years the Dutch politico-administrative system failed to provide effective, responsive and fair administration to many of its most vulnerable citizens.⁴

In its Policy Declaration the new cabinet frankly admits previous fiascoes and promises to establish a more simple and fair system of allowances and offer adequate compensations for victims of both cases of maladministration. Moreover, the cabinet also pledges in more general terms to “bring back the human dimension in the implementation of its policies”. But concrete initiatives in this latter respect are not mentioned.⁵

Many of these specifically Dutch challenges raise questions about the trustworthiness of our government as a provider of essential public services, especially to its most vulnerable citizens and the adequacy of the organization and implementation of these policies. A key issue here is whether the adoption of the maxims of SMART governance, BIG DATA analytics and LEAN administration may have contributed to the numerous **excesses of inconsiderate, and at times even merciless and mean government**. This is a challenge for the members of the new cabinet and their staffs, who promised to rebuild trust lost in previous years.

Answering this nagging question, however, should also be of concern for us, as academics.

⁴ See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dutch_childcare_benefits_scandal and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Groningen_gas_field. The chaotic evacuation of the Afghan staff and their family of the Dutch embassy in Kabul (after the Taliban seized power in Afghanistan) was another example in which the Dutch government failed to assist vulnerable people depending on its protection. As a consequence of this failure two cabinet ministers resigned.

⁵ There is not even in an intention to critically evaluate recent failures in the organization and management of the public service. For example, the national government fails to announce a comprehensive evaluation of the health-care system during the COVID-19 crisis. And likewise, it also fails to announce an evaluation of the impact of the recent decentralization of many social policies to the municipalities. This latter evaluation is desirable because there is widespread doubt as to whether local governments received adequate funding for their new tasks and are able to provide effective, responsive and fair social services for citizens.