

## Changing Identities and the Shift to Assimilationism in the Netherlands

### Synopsis

This project aims to analyse why seemingly progressive European immigrant societies, such as the Netherlands and the UK have shifted away from so-called 'liberal' and 'tolerant' attitudes towards immigrants, in favour of what appears the other extreme, demanding conformity, compulsion and seemingly undemocratic sanctions.

### Background

In recent years and in numerous European countries, there has been a widespread moral panic about immigrants and ethnic diversity. A backlash has occurred in policy and in public discourse, with migrants being blamed for not meeting their responsibility to integrate and for practicing 'backward religions'. Why is it that some immigrant countries that had, until recently, reasonably progressive settlement policies for immigrants are now shifting to coercive and assimilationist policy and public discourse? In other words, how can such 'liberal' and 'tolerant' societies go to the other extreme and demand conformity, compulsion and seemingly undemocratic sanctions towards immigrants?

The **aim** of this research (analysing statistical data and secondary research) is to understand why and how a country, such as the Netherlands, which has institutionalised the acceptance of difference and has a reputation for its high levels of 'tolerance', can shift to what is perceived as a coercive and assimilationist policy and public discourse? Furthermore, what factors are leading to migrants being blamed for lack of responsibility in the integration process and for practicing a 'backward religion'? Similar issues are being raised in many countries of immigration world wide, and in many respects, the same analysis could be applied. The Netherlands however is an interesting starting point simply because the shift in policy and the popular backlash appears more extreme than in many other places.

The **relevance and significance** of this analytical project is threefold. First, it begins to examine key conceptual issues currently used in Europe in immigrant incorporation discourse; second, it calls into question conceptual and policy issues about immigrant inclusion, such as: diversity, identity, multiculturalism and integration. Finally, it lays the foundations for further work analysing directly social cohesion, diversity, identity, multiculturalism as universal themes within Europe.

### Key Findings

#### I. Policy Changes

- In the new century, policy discourse reflects a 'neo-conservative ideology' that is more restrictive, based on tests and sanctions. Integration is presented as a one-way process – immigrants should integrate into Dutch language, culture and history.

The ESRC Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford conducts high quality research in order to develop theory and knowledge, inform public opinion and contribute to policy debates on migration.

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## 2. The Public Discourse - The public discourse has become more inflammatory:

- Multiculturalism leads to welfare dependency.
- Immigrants and ethnic minorities have not taken the responsibility to integrate;
- The Dutch have been too lenient, but they have also been too detached and permissive in respect of minorities by not expecting them to learn the Dutch language, culture and history.

## 3. Institutional marginalization of immigrants:

- Ethnic minorities are still comparatively poorly educated, particularly for some groups, Turks, Moroccans and Surinamese.
- There is a large disparity in unemployment rates between ethnic minorities and the native Dutch. Moreover, ethnic minorities who were schooled in the Netherlands and with higher vocational and university qualifications still have double the unemployment rate to the native Dutch.
- Recruitment and selection methods in the labour market continue to be discriminatory.
- There is the routine discrimination in terms of policies and programmes that do not achieve their stated goals.

## 4. Racism and its denial

- The Dutch prefer not to use the term racism. They use 'minorization' or the overarching term 'discrimination'. This is problematic because it does not deal with specific racialization as experienced by immigrants and ethnic minorities. It does not differentiate between this form and other forms of discrimination such as gender discrimination.
- Everyday and institutional racism are not recognised. If racism is recognized at all, it is seen as a problem of individual error, not as an institutional problem.
- There is a 'politics of avoidance'. Dutch academia does not much deal with the phenomenon of racism as a social phenomenon or as a theoretical concept. Thus it is taken out of the process of understanding discrimination and othering.
- A dominant feature of Dutch national identity is its claim to liberalism and tolerance. Tolerance, as a characteristic of national identity, is problematic because it sets up a dichotomy between the dominant and subordinate person, groups or culture.
- The modern ideology of tolerance emerged with pillarization leading to the idea that the Dutch are a 'very tolerant people'. However, this dominant ideology of tolerance allowed a politics of avoidance in which there was no need to engage with real difference. Moreover the ideology of tolerance blinded many to sustained inequality, as well as to institutional and everyday racism. An assumed tolerance is likely to break down and lead to a demand for assimilation

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