

Minority and migration policy in the Netherlands: a compromise solution

-with reference to the article “ Beeldvorming over Nederland in het buitenland” by H. Dijkstal, 1997-

Much has been already said, discussed, approved or opposed referring to the Dutch approach towards the multicultural society, in particular with focus on the minorities-migration issue. It is probably one the hottest if not the principal argument within the social dimension of the Netherlands and many voices from inside as well as from outside the country have let themselves be heard in vivid debates. The hereby paper will treat shortly this theme using as reference the main points in a speech from 1997 by one of the Dutch political personalities, H. Dijkstal¹.

It is generally appreciated that the structure of the Dutch society is very flexible and that all the minorities are treated with more than care. Indeed, as also emphasized in the article much has been achieved within the Netherlands concerning the minorities' status. The overall public interest regarding official policy programs for the minority groups started back in 1983 by the first official policy report of the academic advisory council of the government (WRR), the so-called “minderhedennota”. Together with the second official policy note, the “countourennota”, these two documents issued by the WRR represented the first and essential step in adopting and adapting the rights and obligations of the minorities and the immigrants in the Dutch legal system. It has to be underlined that a great consensus was reached in the Parliament and thus the law proposals and most of the reform proposed found in the end a real legal background. The questionable issue however remains whether the legal background is also interrelated to a moral societal base.

We will further argue in this paper that the main directions of the Dutch policy-program for minorities follow a compromise solution between an unavoidable intolerance within the social context and the liberal reforms that a highly democratic and progressive, social welfare based state, would necessarily have to enact. Of course the Dutch Constitution refers to the equal rights and respect of human rights for all inhabitants of the Netherlands, as it upholds the Universal declaration of the Human Rights. It is not out purpose in this paper to dwell upon the fundamentals. We will instead analyze closer the already famous triangle “assimilatie-integratie-segregatie”. It is not a secret that the Dutch people, especially the new generations, are regarding with high criticism the differences between themselves and the minority groups. Different habits, different traditions, different tastes, different mentalities, different social attitude and many others gathered in a latent intolerance. “Ik wil hem niet” is an existing and circulating opinion and there are not few people that want the option to refuse any social tangency with specific minority groups. In response to this attitude what could the Dutch government do then create a compromise between the direct and unconditioned rights of the minorities and newcomers and this socially opposing attitude? By all means it seems that the compromise is desirable: from a

¹ H. Dijkstal is the former leader of the Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie (VVD), the Dutch Liberal Party

social viewpoint it is a necessary solution, politically is a strategic solution and in general it is a very smart solution.

Firstly, the minorities and all newcomers are required to assimilate the Dutch culture, the Dutch values. They have the right to enter any of the special programs created for them in this sense² and they have the obligation to pass successfully through these programs. Secondly, the assimilation program is nothing but the necessary background for integration. Even if the multicultural society is a syntagm widely used the correct approach is given by the integration. Every newcomer and certainly every minority group is constrained to integrate as much as possible in the Dutch society, even if the “multiculturele maatschappij” should actually permit them to keep their own identity in the measure that they want to. There is no question, the minorities have and can keep their own identity and there is clear respect for their own cultures but the visible direction is towards integration in very high proportion. Moreover, keeping their own identity, habits, standards, social life as a whole would actually lead to complete isolation of the respective minorities from the Dutch society. And this is the third corner of the triangle, the segregation. The Dutch official rules regarding minorities and migration are in so way formulated that they leave enough place for the discretion in their implementation by certain groups so that the choice of personally accepting/ rejecting minority groups can still be taken. One of the existing examples of the segregation process is for instance the fact that sometimes people in a given neighborhood buy an entire new building just because they do not want certain minorities or asylum seekers or other “outsiders” to leave there; as also presented by Dijkstal, some Dutch hate the existence of the minorities’ “portiekwoning” even next to their houses. Even if officially these closed neighborhoods might not be possible, nobody enforces these rules. There is no doubt that this is done with knowledge; as stated before in this text, everything is part of the compromise solution that the Dutch adopted. The assimilation-integration-segregation triangle is the actual side of the Dutch multicultural society.

We certainly do not criticize the Dutch way of dealing with the minority groups and with the newcomers in general. As a matter of fact the compromise solution is to be admired in the Dutch context and so far we do not see any other policy that could have given better results, that could have achieved more consensus. It is true, there still are adverse opinions, there still are vivid debates on the theme but so far this “middle way” has been working and nobody can claim to be entirely dissatisfied.

² The official program that any aspirant to a Dutch identity is subjected to is the “Wet inburgering nieuwkomers” (WIN)