English summary

THE ELUSIVENESS OF GOVERNING MIGRANT INTEGRATION: *WHY FITTING COMPLEXITY IN BOXES DOES NOT WORK*

Immigrant integration has attained much attention in public and political discussions. In the Netherlands, we have witnessed a policy change towards a stricter and more aggressive approach to influence behavior of migrants. This policy change is accompanied with a harshened tone regarding migrants. In order to encounter integration of immigrants, governments – both on a national and local level – attempt to intervene in the behavior of migrants, using a simplified narrative that exudes the belief in government steering by command and control. This narrative contrasts with the empirical reality in which integration of migrants develops. My dissertation focuses on migrant integration as a governing problem and approaches the issue from an empirical point of view. Many existing studies are characterized by a top-down approach that do not sufficiently take in account the perspective of local reality. I will focus on governing responses by local actors, and unlike many other studies – my starting point lies with those government workers who are actually confronted with migration-related challenges. Such an approach is needed in order to understand the elusive nature of governing migration-related diversity and subsequently to come to policies that respond to this local reality.

In chapter 2, I show – on a macro-level - how bureaucratic contacts between migrants and governments take place in a chain of reinforcing or dampening feedback loops that eventually influence the attitude and willingness of migrants to comply and adapt to Dutch society. The successful integration of migrants is hence not merely a result of one single and isolated interaction with the government or a certain policy intervention that migrants "undergo"; rather it is strongly connected to a full range of interactions distributed over a long period of time in which different governments all *can* play a distinctive role. I found that these different encounters come together differently in almost every story, because each pathway may exist of a combination of encounters, with different consequences and different specific local conditions. As a result, integration policies are followed by both expected and surprising, favorable and unfavorable outcomes. In addition, I found that mainly the first years in which migrants arrive and settle in the country of destination, is an important moment for the further steps that people take on their pathway. I found that individual attention and notice by a street-level bureaucrat, who was willing to go the extra mile, was always a major impact on the motivation and hence the willingness of migrants to participate in society.

In chapter 3, I hence focus on the micro-level of these street-level bureaucrats: integration coaches, integration teachers and client managers, who are actually responding to migrants in their day-to-day confrontations. These street-level workers are on the hand

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expected to obey the uniform rulings from integration policies, but on the other hand see the diversity of migrant' stories. These workers are hence constantly confronted with all kinds of dilemmas: should I strictly follow the rules or is there any discretionary room to take in account the personal distress of migrants which is blocking their compliance? Despite organizational restrictions, workers would increase their discretionary power or reject policy rules in the case of motivated clients, who were going through difficult circumstances in their personal lives. However, this was only the case when the perceived policy rulings would be judged by the street-level workers as unfair and unpractical. This *combination* of conditions were important in explaining how street-level workers respond, which again contrasts with the simplified narrative dominant in debates on migrant integration.

In chapter 4 of this thesis, I have focused on the question of how second generation youth are active on the web and under which conditions this leads to inter-ethnic contact. I show that ethnicity is only one of the many topics that migrant youth discuss on social media. However, engagement in intra-ethnic online communities is partly motivated by struggles with identity and lifestyle, which is in line with other studies that have shown that youth use social media to negotiate their identities. My work also showed that bonding with migrant communities by second-generation youth via social media is less orientated at the home-country, but is rather focused on the home *culture* and on how to combine that with everyday life in the Netherlands Again this indicates that the tendency in public debate - to reduce identification process to only the 'box' of ethnicity - is invalid: the experienced identification of migrants is multi-dimensional and transcends boundaries of home-country or ethnicity.

Lastly, in chapter 5, I zoom in on the question of how and why two Dutch cities are dealing with migration-related diversity in their city branding policies. My research shows how both Rotterdam and Amsterdam acknowledge migration-related diversity as a key characteristic of the city's DNA. However, due to the political and discursive setting around migration-related diversity – cities are reluctant in using diversity in actual brand communications. It is hence mainly used in the background or is depoliticized away from the broader public and political debates on migration-related diversity, by using mainly an economic perspective to diversity. Branding professionals feel they need to avoid interference of politicians and policy makers by not getting involved too much in 'politics'. These findings show how the negative discourse on migrants does not only lock public debates in a negative cycle, but also impact on other policies apart from integration policies itself. Nevertheless, branding professionals are aware of the highly contested and politicized nature of the issue and try to stay away from it.

Based on my 4 studies I come to the conclusion that the highly oversimplified narrative that politicians use to 'short-cut' the complexity of integration processes clearly does not fit the reality of how integration develops in everyday life. In this narrative, migrants are often blamed for their "failed" state of being, while governments are blamed for applying too soft policies.   Immigrant policies are not failing, because of unwillingness of migrants nor because of policies that are too soft. Rather, the governing of migrant integration in essence is an elusive phenome, as it is a dynamic system that responds to many incentives, while the outcomes are sensitive to various (mutual) relationships that are changeable over time. Interactions between local governmental actors and migrants are hence cumulative in their effects, and cannot be interpreted in an isolated manner. This does not mean that integration policies are necessarily bound to fail, however it shows the importance of a deep understanding of the intricate workings of integration as a system.

In addition, this thesis also shows the struggle that local governing actors are experiencing, which best can be described as a sense of discomfort, frustration or even resistance with how one (is forced) to respond to migration-related diversity. A coping strategy that often followed was that implementers would avoid too much confrontation with migrants, holding on to the policy instructions, which structure and simplify the complexity of the situations that they encounter into "boxes". Nevertheless, this feeling of discomfort would not leave them. Similarly, branding professionals that were reluctant in involving diversity in brand communications – were struggling with this decision, as they knew that avoiding the sensitized and political discussion on diversity was probably not congruent with the social transformations that the city has experienced in the last decades.

In conclusion, I argue that governments should become aware of the systematic reality in which migrant integration develops: there is no such thing as an ultimate cause or one ultimate set of instruments which will bring about migrant integration. This downplays the idea that governments are able and necessary to fully influence integration of migrants. Secondly I argue that the understanding and experiences of local actors – such as policy implementers, policy makers and migrants themselves – are central to the comprehension of migrant integration. This localized and embedded experience is not fully known (n)or used or considered in policymaking. In addition, studies on how local governments are dealing with migrant integration rarely use a systematic view that zooms in on interrelated interactions patterns.

Building on the findings of this thesis, I would argue that branding policies are an example of 'soft' instruments – an alternative to harsher in command-and-control based instruments - which possibly can help to develop an alternative narrative that speaks both to natives as migrants. The potential of branding lies in the fact that branding policies require

a holistic approach. In addition, branding in essence is about identity, community building and belonging, a central aspect of the political and social debates on migrant integration. Research – including my thesis – shows that migrants are actually struggling with identity related questions, and that the negative national discourse on migrants negatively impacts on the identification with the Dutch nation but does not automatically extend to the local level. Breaking the simplified narrative regarding migrant integration would *allow* to explore such softer and more holistic policy instruments that potentially can improve feelings of belongings of migrants.