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The Hague – “Code Orange” sparks a new Dutch controversy over floods of immigrant workers

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‘Code Orange’ has a particular significance for the Dutch; it’s the warning that’s issued when there’s a serious risk of flooding. And it was employed in the late summer this year when Lodewijk Asscher, social affairs minister co-authored with British commentator David Goodhart an op-ed in the *De Volkskrant* newspaper arguing that immigrant labour from the EU’s eastern European members into countries like the UK, the Netherlands and Germany is crowding out local job seekers and is also leading to the exploitation of migrants by rogue employers as well as the abuse of social security systems by some of them. The article’s plea was for the EU to rethink its commitment to the free movement of workers.

Dutch political reactions were mainly domestic. Asscher’s ‘Partij van de Arbeid’ is suffering from dwindling popular support and municipal elections next March are looming. The article in *De Volkskrant* made no explicit reference to next January 1, when people from Bulgaria and Romania will be able to work in the Netherlands with no restrictions, but the “Code Orange” call seemed designed to take the wind out of the sails of Geert Wilders and his right-wing PVV party. When

Wilders established in 2012 a national hotline so people could complain of nuisances allegedly caused by Polish workers, that gained Wilders considerable support and embarrassed the Dutch government internationally.

If Asscher's call was intended as a pre-electoral move, it was an effective one because Wilders now appears rather marginal to the current debate. Asscher followed up in September by hosting a 'summit' in The Hague on labour migration that attracted civil society representatives and local and national politicians, as well as the Romanian labour minister, Mariana Câmpeanu.

But there has also been criticism that Asscher's claim "the dykes are on the point of breaking" is greatly exaggerated. On the crowding out issue, the evidence is very mixed. There is research to show that crowding out effects are generally small, because most migrants accept jobs that Dutch workers refuse to do, especially seasonal agricultural jobs. And immigrant labour's contribution to the Dutch economy is at the same time estimated to be fairly positive. The opposing view, though, is that in some sectors, notably transport, there has been large-scale crowding out.

The other issues brought up by Asscher included the exploitation of migrant workers and abuses of social security, have unfortunately not been much debated. So far, the response from the EU institutions in Brussels, at which Asscher's call was primarily directed, has lacked in depth. László Andor, the Hungarian Commissioner whose portfolio is social affairs, seemed to dismiss Asscher's article as being largely driven by electoral concerns. And the EU's Dutch Commissioner Neelie Kroes belittled Asscher as a modern-day Hans Brinker, the boy who famously plugged his finger in the dyke.

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