

DISCUSSION PAPER: BILATERAL SYMPOSIUM ON RUSSIAN-DUTCH RELATIONS

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In recent years, the bilateral relations between the governments of the Netherlands and Russia have been – to put it mildly – somewhat cool. However, there is no direct correlation between this poor relationship at state level and the views that Russian and Dutch citizens have of one another. People in Russia may well not know a lot about the Netherlands, but they do have a largely positive image of Dutch society, according to a sociological study that Leiden University and knowledge platform Raam op Rusland commissioned the Levada Centre to carry out. Dutch people, for their part, set great store by respectful and above all realistic relations with Russia.

In short, the citizens of both countries are aware of the at times fundamental differences between their countries, but they also appreciate the nuances. What does this mean for our bilateral relations in the coming years, both at diplomatic government level as well as people to people? This discussion paper is intended to offer some guidance for forming an opinion on these relations.

1. Truth is more important than money: The Netherlands through Russian eyes

The image countries have of one another is important for the bilateral relations between states. What image does the Netherlands currently have in Russia? Until recently we could only hazard a guess at this, but now the situation has changed. We commissioned the Levada Centre in Russia to carry out quantitative and qualitative research on Russian public opinion about the Netherlands. Never in recent history has such a study been conducted. The results constitute a baseline measurement and cannot be compared with impressions held in the past.

The Levada Centre conducted a personal survey with twenty questions, asked personally in home interviews, and through discussions in four focus groups, questioning a representative group of more than 1,600 adult Russian citizens about their image of and views on Dutch society in general and a number of topics in the relations between the two countries.

This is the impression that emerges from this representative sample:¹

- a) *General.* Around two-thirds of Russian citizens have a positive view of the Netherlands. They have this impression mainly due to positive images about the Dutch welfare state (education, health care and social security) and cultural characteristics (freedom of religion, human rights), and much less from internationally familiar legislation on narcotics or same-sex marriage.
- b) *Cause of deteriorating relations.* A large minority attribute the deterioration in bilateral relations to Dutch criticism of the human rights situation in Russia. A third do not see any relationship

¹ Levada Center.

between the two, and among highly educated working people as many as 40 per cent see no link between the two.

- c) *Information.* Many Russian people have no real idea of socio-economic relations in the Netherlands. Disproportionate importance is attributed to tourism and the dairy and flower sectors, while the high-tech and service sectors are undervalued. The economic importance of the Netherlands for Russia is also underestimated. The fact that, after China and Germany, the Netherlands is Russia's third most important trading partner, is relatively unknown, and the Dutch-British oil concern Royal Dutch/Shell is also virtually unknown.
- d) *Economic relations.* The policy of Russian companies to register in the Netherlands, for financial and/or civil rights reasons, is inexcusable for two-thirds of Russians. An equal number find it unacceptable that by registering in the Netherlands, these Russian concerns are subject to Dutch civil rights jurisdiction.
- e) *MH17.*² Unlike the international Joint Investigation Team (JIT) and the Public Prosecutor's Office in the Netherlands, a large majority (three-fifths) of the Russian population believe that Ukraine is guilty of causing the crash of the Malaysian MH17 passenger aircraft. This coincides with the view taken by the Russian authorities so far. It is striking, however, that almost ten per cent of Russians suspect that pro-Russian separatists or Russian soldiers are responsible for the disaster, and a quarter are unwilling to pass judgement. Finding the truth is also important for many Russians. Surprising enough, a majority of those questioned believe that, if the international community determines on the grounds of the JIT study that the 'Russian side' is responsible, Russia ought to pay compensation to the relatives of the victims. A large majority reject the idea of a more covert deal with the Netherlands (compensation in exchange for lifting sanctions), while only a quarter of those questioned would support such an arrangement.
- f) *Variations.* Public opinion in Russia is coloured by socio-economic and socio-cultural factors, with ideas about the Netherlands seeming to be based partly on personal experience, age and living environment, as well as on the level of education and income. Young people up to the age of 24 are more interested in immaterial values, such as civil rights, and tourism in the Netherlands. A sharp contrast can be seen between young and old regarding the question of responsibility for the M17 disaster. Should the question of guilt be established at some point, almost three-quarters of young, highly educated people are in favour of compensation being paid. The same can be said about the Netherlands as an offshore zone for Russian concerns: highly qualified employees and students express fewer objections to companies removing themselves from Russian jurisdiction.

2. Too big and too different for us to point the finger: Russia through Dutch eyes

Without any comparable quantitative study in the Netherlands, we have no clear idea of what kind of image the Dutch currently have of Russia and the Russian people, although some indicative conclusions can be drawn from a number of studies carried out in recent years.

In 2018, Maurice De Hond surveyed the development of public opinion on the MH17 disaster. In 2019, Explore Ferro carried out a 'qualitative, exploratory study' via three focus groups in which barely 20 people took part. Later in 2019, Kantar Public (formerly TNS NIPO) carried out a survey among just under a thousand respondents to gauge their opinions about peace and security. The

² As an extra check Levada Center has carried out a second survey with the four questions about MH17 only. The results of this second poll will be available around February 10th.

survey was commissioned by the Netherlands Atlantic Association, which wanted to test its own campaign for the Western alliance.

The following conclusions can be drawn, based on the findings from these three studies:

- a) *Information*. Dutch people have little factual knowledge about Russia. The big themes (MH17, Crimea, Skripal, hackers) are well known, but they evoke relatively little emotion.³
- b) *News media*. Although the Dutch press is often regarded as more independent than the Russian press, the Dutch themselves consider the Dutch media to be somewhat subjective, which, according to the respondents, comes at the expense of good information.⁴
- c) *Inequality*. The idea that Russia is a strong power and that the country exploits its position on the one hand evokes admiration and fascination for Putin, and on the other hand generates anxiety that the Netherlands is powerless to defend its own interests.⁵
- d) *Sense of reality and self-interest*. For the Dutch, the idea of 'giving in' to Russia is unpleasant. They want to maintain good economic relations, but without losing self-esteem. This is not a political, but a communication issue: do not approach human rights in an aggressive and patronising way, and keep an open mind for Russian norms and values.⁶
- e) *Security*. The idea that Russia represents the biggest threat to European security has diminished in 2019: from 55% in March to 48% in November of last year. This significant reduction is the same across almost all age categories.⁷
- f) *NATO*. Three-quarters of Dutch people believe membership of NATO is still necessary, but they no longer expect to rely on the US for national security. A large majority would prefer a common European defence organisation.⁸
- g) *MH17*. The belief that the Russian military was involved in shooting down MH17 has grown significantly in recent years, almost tenfold compared to 2014. A slight majority hold Russia responsible, whereas shortly after the disaster, three-quarters blamed Russian separatists. The number of Dutch people that hold Ukraine responsible has remained small, at a maximum of 5 per cent. The uncertainty surrounding this issue has increased: slightly more than one in five (22 per cent) say they don't know, compared to one in eight (13 per cent) in 2014.⁹

3. Dead end, or maybe not? Some hot issues

The figures and opinions outlined above have had a major influence on bilateral relations between the Netherlands and Russia since 2013/2014. Since then, the relations have deteriorated at numerous levels, from indifferent to cold, with each of the two parties laying the responsibility at the door of the other. See the appendix below.

³ Explore Ferro.

<https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/binaries/rijksoverheid/documenten/rapporten/2019/07/23/rapportage-focusgroepen-rusland/rapportage+focusgroepenRusland+DEF2.pdf>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Atlantic Commission.

https://www.atlcom.nl/upload/publicaties/Campagne_effect_meting_Atlantische_commissie.pdf

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Maurice de Hond. <https://www.noties.nl/v/get.php?a=peil.nl&s=weekpoll&f=2018-05-27.pdf>

The question of guilt is, of course, highly relevant. However, it is pointless to wait until this important question has been resolved before thinking about the relationship between the two countries. In the meantime, there are a number of current hot issues that, in spite of the turbulent relations, can already be addressed.

Eight of these are mentioned below for the sake of reflection:

- a) *Mutual knowledge*. In both Russia and the Netherlands, societal impressions are dominated by clichés and have too little basis in factual and verifiable information. Accusations about social media campaigns, disinformation, anti-Western propaganda or Russophobia are not directly the result of this, but a lack of knowledge does foster a climate in which these accusations can thrive. The promotion of knowledge, both in the two countries and in exchanges between them, should therefore be valued as a goal worth pursuing, regardless of the interpretations and differences of opinion that are an intrinsic part of such knowledge.
- b) *Political dialogue*. In view of Russia's territorial size, its (twentieth-century) history, the nature of its (closed-off) imperial past and its present-day military might, the political relations between Russia and the Netherlands are *a priori* unequal. However, given that Russia and the Netherlands have joined forces in various political and geopolitical alliances that compete with one another but are not necessarily hostile to one another, showing mutual respect is clearly possible. A condition is that dialogue should not be limited to zero-sum thinking.
- c) *Differences in level*. The Netherlands is a small nation, while Russia is a major power. Partly because of this, the Netherlands thinks in terms of international law, while Russia defines itself more in terms of military-political categories. Just as the Netherlands has to recognise that Russia pursues its own interests in line with its status as a superpower, Russia has to accept that the Netherlands maintains its own equal relations with states that until 1992 were under the sphere of influence of Soviet Russia.
- d) *East and West*. The Netherlands is a member of the EU and NATO. There is no fundamental disagreement about these allied relations in the Dutch political representation. There are, however, increasing differences of opinion about the future of these two organisations, fuelled in part by the policies of the US government. Meanwhile, Russian society broadly agrees on the desirability of a (nuclear) superpower status for Russia. A return to the Yalta Conference or the Concert of Europe that followed the Vienna Congress has, however, become practically inconceivable. Dreams about this have a destabilising effect in Europe and negatively impact the interests of both Russia and the Netherlands.
- e) *Economic relations*. The mutual dependencies, symbolised by Russia's prominent role as a commodity-exporting power and the corresponding position of the Netherlands as a transit zone for goods and services, mean that the interests of both parties have to be recognised. So far, the close trading relations show few signs of negative effects from the prevailing dual morality, according to which sanctions and counter-sanctions are practised in public at the state level but the parties enjoy *de facto* privileges and services in closed circles at the civil rights level. However, if this double standard is maintained, little more is possible than short-term business deals and fiscal-legal protection constructions. For the two countries to have an investment climate in the longer term that boosts mutual trust and confidence, different conditions should be met, such as: transparency about stakeholders in bilaterally operating companies, a reduced role for state organisations in day-to-day economic life, and respect for independent civil law structures.

- f) *Scientific collaboration.* One of the achievements of the end of the Cold War is the increase in free academic exchanges and bilateral scientific collaboration. The Russian Academy of Sciences states – and not without reason – that these achievements are under threat from the new guidelines from the Russian Ministry of Education and Sciences regulating international contacts of Russian scientists.¹⁰ The Dutch government can in turn contribute to international scientific and educational collaboration by giving Nuffic/Neso a relevant position in Russia. The new Science Diplomacy Fund of the Dutch Research Council (NWO)¹¹ can also play a role in this regard. Collaboration with the Russian counterpart of NWO, the Russian Science Foundation, is an obvious scenario here. Fields of potential collaboration include language, culture and history, and political, anthropological, and social science research.
- g) *Cultural contacts.* In periods of frosty diplomatic relations, cultural exchange is often a last resort. The question is: which contacts are the most fruitful? Art exchanges in a narrower sense, such as appearances/tours by performing artists or museum exhibitions? Or cultural exchanges in a broader sense, such as joint projects and cultural breeding grounds?
- h) *Non-governmental exchanges.* The study by Levada Centre shows that citizens who are socially active in Russia tend to have a more open attitude towards the Netherlands. Similarly, Dutch citizens who are more broadly informed than average tend to be more interested in Russia. Bringing together active citizens from both countries around mutually recognisable social issues can be a means of strengthening these people-to-people exchanges.

4. Who will take up the gauntlet? Some conclusions

A difficult relationship cannot be improved at a stroke. However, the following thoughts could play a role in keeping the relations as open as possible.

- a) *Avoid mixing state and society.* The fact that the governments of Russia and the Netherlands interpret one another's policies geopolitically does not mean that bilateral relations are only possible if they serve a political aim. Certainly, contacts between non-government organisations, academic institutions or people-to-people can have their own intrinsic value. The governments in both countries can and must foster more opportunities for such contacts.
- b) *Open reciprocity.* Although the countries have very different histories and equally different social systems – and also have different political values and norms – a renewed social dialogue offers numerous opportunities. One precondition for this is that there should be no double standards in this dialogue, where the behaviour of one party is condoned or trivialised, while the same behaviour on the part of the other party is condemned. Open recognition and discussion of one another's views and interests is crucial if mutual relations are to be improved.
- c) *Trial and error.* It has to start somewhere. Two examples: a bilateral research project on a historical or sociological theme, which could lead to an exchange at university level, could serve as a pilot project to investigate which barriers and/or opportunities can have removed or utilised. Exchanges at the level of civil society can offer insights into the opportunities for citizens to learn societal initiatives from one another.

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¹⁰ https://www.gazeta.ru/science/2019/10/23_a_12772424.shtml

¹¹ <https://www.nwo.nl/actueel/nieuws/2019/12/vooraankondiging-science-diplomacy-fund-call-for-ideas.html>

Appendix

1. Some facts and figures

Some key figures about the Russian Federation, the Netherlands and their mutual relations.

- a) *Territory*. In terms of land area, Russia is 407 times larger than the Netherlands. Russia: 17,100,000 km². The Netherlands: 42,000 km².
- b) *Population*. In terms of population, Russia is 8.4 times larger than the Netherlands. Russia: approx. 145 million inhabitants. The Netherlands: 17 million inhabitants.
- c) *Economy*. Russia: 1.8 x the Netherlands. Russia: \$ 1,650 bln. The Netherlands: \$ 915 bln per year.
- d) *Prosperity*. National income per head of population: the Netherlands 4.75 x Russia. Russia: \$ 11,250 pp. The Netherlands: \$ 53,250.
- e) *Education*. Expenditure as % of state budget. Russia: 11.9%. The Netherlands: 12.0%.¹²
- f) *Healthcare*. Expenditure as % of state budget. Russia: 8.2%. The Netherlands: 19.3%.¹³
- g) *Defence*. Military expenditure as % of state budget. Russia: 11.4%. The Netherlands: 2.9%.¹⁴
- h) *Trade*. Balance of trade. Russia: + 7.3% of GDP. The Netherlands: + 8.9% of GDP.¹⁵
- i) *Joint trade*. Balance. Russian exports to / investments in the Netherlands: € 31 bln per year. Netherlands exports to / investments in Russia: € 3.5 bln.¹⁶
- j) *Investment climate*. Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) per year. Russia: In: \$ 13 bln. Out: \$ 36 bln.¹⁷ The Netherlands: In: \$ 70 bln. Out: \$ 59 bln.¹⁸ Via the Netherlands in Russia: 9.2% (Central Bank of Russia) or 6.5% (UNCTAD estimate).¹⁹

2. Reciprocal policy doctrines

Both countries have made strategic analyses of one another over the past ten years. In Russian policy documents, the Netherlands has been expressly downgraded since 2008. In Dutch policy documents, there has been a two-track policy since 2015, which can be summed up with the words 'pressure' and 'dialogue'. In addition, the reciprocal attitude/mood can be illustrated by social activities and media reports.

- a) *Special interest for Russia in 2008*. The Netherlands was still given an explicit and positive mention in the 2008 Russian Foreign Political Doctrine²⁰: "The development of reciprocal bilateral contacts with Germany, France, Italy, Spain, Finland, Greece, the Netherlands, Norway and a number of other Western European states is an important vehicle to promote Russian interests in European and international affairs and the shift of the Russian economy to an innovative development track."

¹² <https://countryeconomy.com/countries/compare/russia/netherlands>

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ <https://www.rvo.nl/sites/default/files/2018/10/Handels-en-investeringscijfers-Rusland-Nederland-oktober-2018.pdf>

¹⁷ https://unctad.org/sections/dite_dir/docs/wir2019/wir19_fs_ru_en.pdf

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2019-11-06/where-russia-s-foreign-investment-really-comes-from>

²⁰ <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/news/785>

- b) *Devaluation in Russia in 2016*. In the 2016 Foreign Political Doctrine²¹, the Netherlands is no longer mentioned specifically. With regard to relations with EU countries, the only comment is: “Reciprocal beneficial bilateral contacts with Germany, France, Italy, Spain and other European states are an important vehicle for promoting Russian interests in European and international affairs.”
- c) *Mood in 2019*. At the end of November 2018, the state newspaper Rossiyskaya Gazeta wrote:²² “The crisis in Ukraine has given rise to anti-Russian hysteria in the Netherlands. [...] Today, the Netherlands is the only EU country to have curtailed the political dialogue with Russia [...] Against the background of this Russophobia, it is absurd to expect any objectivity from the JIT regarding the MH17 crash. [...] Moscow is interested in restoring pragmatic, business and equal relations with Amsterdam. However, this seems unrealistic as long as the political establishment in the Netherlands persists in relying on its own non-existent myths and stereotypes.”
- d) *Turning point 2013-2014*. The special Netherlands-Russia year in 2013 took place against a backdrop of tense relations. A protest action by Greenpeace in the Barents Sea area under the Dutch flag, the ‘anti-homo propaganda act’ and other legislation in Russia regarded as repressive, plus the controversial visit of President Putin to Amsterdam all made their mark on this jubilee year. Then, the MH17 disaster, which was technically investigated in accordance with international consensus under the leadership of the Dutch Safety Investigation Board and legally prosecuted by the Netherlands Public Prosecution Service, seriously disrupted bilateral relations, partly because the Russian authorities have consistently disputed the professionalism and objectivity of the Investigation Board and the Public Prosecution Service.
- e) *Netherlands cultural policy up to 2016*. Russia is one of the ten countries given priority in Dutch policies to promote the so-called Common Cultural Heritage²³. However, in 2017 Russia was not part of the group of eight ‘focus countries’ for the Netherlands’ international cultural policy. Russia now stands at a lower level alongside a number of Mediterranean countries, such as Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, the Palestinian Territories and Turkey.²⁴
- f) *Netherlands-Russia strategy 2020*. The Netherlands government published its new policy memorandum in mid-December 2019²⁵. One of the statements in this memorandum reads: “Russia’s evolving stance since 2015 gives no reason to assume that the country will take any concrete steps in the next few years to return to compliance with the international legal order and European security order that we have jointly developed since the end of the Cold War. [...] If Russia oversteps our boundaries (whether in terms of security or other areas), the Netherlands will make its position known and respond appropriately [...] At the same time, Russia is a significant geostrategic player on the European continent. It is therefore crucial to continue engaging in dialogue, seeking to connect and, where possible, working together in areas where we share common interests.”

²¹ <http://static.kremlin.ru/media/acts/files/0001201612010045.pdf>

²² <https://rg.ru/2019/11/21/pochemu-niderlandy-ne-mogut-byt-arbitrom-v-dele-o-katastrofe-mh17.html>

²³ <https://www.cultureelerfgoed.nl/onderwerpen/gedeeld-cultureel-erfgoed/programma-gedeeld-cultureel-erfgoed>

²⁴ <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/beleidsnota-s/2016/05/04/beleidskader-internationaal-cultuurbeleid-2017-2020>

²⁵ <https://app.1848.nl/static/pdf/eb/b7/ebb74bd4321dcfa8c107462d07c28e1b55a5e564.pdf>