

Russian-Dutch relations: Business as unusual

*How did the different issues of Russian-Dutch relations develop
in the communiqués published by both governments over the
period 2013-2015?*

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Executive summary

According to both the Dutch and Russian governments, the relations between the two countries have deteriorated since 2014 (Dutch MFA 2015d, 12; Shulgin 2016). This study examines how the relations have developed over the period 2013-2015, as reflected in both the phraseology used and topics discussed in the published communiqués. The main research question of the thesis is: how did the different issues of Russian-Dutch relations develop in the communiqués published by both governments over the period 2013-2015? The four sub-questions to answer this are: what are the most discussed key issues of Russian-Dutch relations? How can these issues be analysed? What was the general trend in Russian-Dutch relations? How do the most discussed topics relate to the general trend in relations?

The existing literature on Russian-Dutch relations looked at the topics of trade, energy, human rights and the policy on common (EU-Russia) neighbours (Leonard and Popescu 2007; Casier 2011; Gerrits 2013). They chose and examined these topics using personal experience, interviews with officials, other academic literature and sometimes a government document. Contrary to the literature, this study selected the subjects that were discussed most frequently by the two governments. It examines all the communiqués from the Russian and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and their head of state or government, as they are the representatives of the countries abroad. The topics that were raised in 15% or more of one year's communiqués are the key topics and chapters in this thesis. These are: MH17, the Ukraine crisis, Crimea's incorporation, the shared neighbourhood, diplomatic incidents, trade, energy, sanctions and human rights.

In order to analyse the issues and the general trend, each communiqué is allocated an overall value. Additionally, the study distils the topics discussed in each communiqué and gives these a value as well. The values range from '-2' (very negative) to '+2' (very positive). The value assesses how both countries talk about each other. It is assessed as being 'positive' when it contributes to building a constructive partnership and 'negative' when it damages such a partnership. This gives a less subjective account of the developments for each topic and relations in general. The less arbitrary method to assess the state of relations, and the detailed documentation on which communiqués this is assessed, can be seen as the main contribution of this thesis.

The accumulated values of all the communiqués can be seen as a reflection of the relations between both countries. This accumulated value shows the statements on each

other in the communiqués became more negative and this thus confirms the deterioration in the relationship. The accumulated score of the communiqués went down to ‘-45’ in December 2015. Furthermore, the accumulated value presents the general trend in relations. The general trend in Russian-Dutch relations was that it started positive in 2013, and became more negative with Crimea’s incorporation in March 2014 and even more negative with the downing of MH17 in July 2014.

However, not all topics followed this trend exactly and their discussion developed independently from the general trend. The topics that were addressed more negatively from the moment of Crimea’s incorporation were: the Ukraine crisis, energy and after three months also Crimea’s incorporation itself. After the downing of MH17 the topics ‘the shared neighbourhood’ and ‘sanctions’ were discussed more negatively. The discussion on the other subjects took a negative turn in the beginning of 2015. These were MH17, human rights and political incidents. The discussion on trade, however, is one topic that did not deteriorate.

To answer the main research question, the different issues of the Russian-Dutch relations developed separately from each other, but the general trend was that the statements on each other deteriorated after Crimea’s incorporation and the downing of MH17. These two events resulted in more negative communications on each other, because the Netherlands increasingly saw Russia as a threat to the EU’s neighbourhood and its own security, and therefore the focus returned to the primary national interest to ensure the safety of the state and its citizens.

Table of Contents

Executive summary	i
1. Introduction	1
2. Literature review	3
2.1 <i>Russia-EU relations</i>	3
2.2 <i>Russian-Dutch relations</i>	4
3. Methodology	8
3.1 <i>Research subject</i>	8
3.2 <i>Operationalization</i>	9
3.3 <i>Determining priorities</i>	11
3.4 <i>Research limitations</i>	12
4. General development of relations	14
5. Security	17
5.1 <i>MH17</i>	17
5.2 <i>Ukraine crisis</i>	20
5.3 <i>Crimea's incorporation</i>	23
5.4 <i>Shared neighbourhood</i>	27
5.5 <i>Diplomatic incidents</i>	31
6. Economic relations	35
6.1 <i>Trade</i>	35
6.2 <i>Energy</i>	37
6.3 <i>Sanctions</i>	39
7. Ethical concerns.....	43
7.1 <i>Human rights</i>	43
8. Conclusion	47
Bibliography	51
Appendices.....	63
<i>Appendix A: Annual scores all topics</i>	63

1. Introduction

Russia in its 2013 Foreign Policy Concept specifically mentioned the Netherlands as a country it wanted to “boost mutually beneficial relations” with (Russian MFA 2013d, par. 60). However, in its 2016 Foreign Policy Concept the Netherlands had been dropped (Russian MFA 2016). Did this mean relations were not mutually beneficial anymore? Russian ambassador to the Netherlands Alexander Shulgin, mentioned relations with the Netherlands were “going through uneasy times” (Shulgin 2016). Not only Russia, but also the Netherlands said relations were difficult and they were no longer ‘business as usual’ (Dutch MFA 2015d, 12). Russia and the Netherlands mention the Ukraine crisis of 2014 as the cause of the strained relations, but are not clear on what this means for the relations and how they changed. This study analyses what aspects of the relations changed, looking at the content of the communiqués issued by both. It gives a detailed account of the developments in relations, looking at separate topics over the period 2013-2015.

This thesis looks at the communiqués of the Russian and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (henceforth called MFA) and their head of state or government, because they are the representatives of the countries abroad. A communiqué is defined as “an official announcement or statement”, they are the official documents published by a government. They are a useful and available source for examining the governments’ position. Examining the statements concerning the key issues through close reading shows the changes in the how the governments assess each other. Furthermore, the content of the communiqués can be seen as a reflection of the state of relations, and subtle changes in choice of words can signify larger changes in relations. The central question to map the changes in relations is: how did the different issues of Russian-Dutch relations develop in the communiqués published by both governments over the period 2013-2015?

The four sub-questions to answer this are:

- What are the most discussed key issues of Russian-Dutch relations?
- How can these issues be analysed?
- What was the general trend in Russian-Dutch relations?
- How do the most discussed topics relate to the general trend in the relations?

In the following chapter the existing literature on EU-Russia relations and Russian-Dutch relations is discussed, in order to see how these developed according to the literature and what were the most key issues according to them. The methodology explains the selection of topics used in this study. Additionally, it discusses the method to analyse the selected

issues. Next a chapter describes the overall trend in the communiqués, to later draw connections between the developments of the separate topics and the overall general trend of the relations. Then the study is divided into three broader themes. These are security, economic relations and ethical concerns. Security includes the topics: MH17, the Ukraine crisis, Crimea's incorporation, the shared neighbourhood and diplomatic incidents. Economic relations concern trade, energy and sanctions. Ethical concerns hold the topic 'human rights'. By grouping the topics together into themes, connections between them can be made. The goal of this study is to create greater understanding of the Russian-Dutch relations.

2. Literature review

2.1 Russia-EU relations

EU-Russian institutional framework

Relations between the Netherlands and Russia cannot be seen outside the context of EU-Russia relations. The EU sets the framework of cooperation between the EU member states and Russia. It creates the legal and political basis, on which member states can develop their bilateral relations. The most important agreements are the Partnership for Cooperation Agreement (PCA), Human Rights Dialogue, and the Partnership for Modernization. The relations between Russia and the EU are institutionalized to a large extent. Most of the agreements focus on economic cooperation or on conditions that make doing business more stable, such as strengthening the rule of law and anti-corruption measures.

Russian approach to EU member states

How Russia deals with the EU member states is useful to compare with the way it treats the Netherlands. According to Lo (2015, 3), the Kremlin believes the international environment acts in Hobbesian terms: a tough place where the strong rule and the weak get used and beaten. In this world great powers dominate, here geopolitical influence and hard power are important (Ibid.).

The Russian government believes we live in a multi-polar world: a world with a couple of great powers (Monaghan 2013, 5; Lo 2015, 3; Lo 2012). These are the USA, China and it believes Russia is or is becoming a major pole as well. This rests on the assumptions that the 'West' is in decline and that there is a shift towards the 'East' (China, India and Russia), as appears from the Russian MFA's Foreign Policy Concept (Russian MFA 2013d, par. 4, 6).

Russia is said to play a divide-and-rule game between the EU member states (Jong 2016). This was mentioned to be the general conception, but not everybody agreed with this idea (Gerrits 2013; Lo 2015). According to Leonard and Popescu, Russia made bilateral deals because it is in its best interest, not necessarily to play others off against one another (Leonard and Popescu 2007, 14). It charms the bigger players, while it coerces the weaker ones. Lo argued Russia does not think so much in divide and rule tactics, but considers the EU as a useless political player because too many different (national) interests play a role in EU policy (Lo 2012, 5). He thought Russia only takes the EU serious as a trade bloc (ibid.). It

does seem to be true Russia prefers to deal with countries at a bilateral level to a multilateral level, depending on the issue. However, while Russia sometimes applies 'divide and rule' as a tactic, it has no clear strategy to divide and rule the EU member states; it acts pragmatically. It is interesting to see whether this tactic can be seen in Russian-Dutch relations.

2.2 Russian-Dutch relations

Russian-Dutch relations

Leonard and Popescu identified five different categories for EU member states, based on how they approach Russia. These five approaches are: Trojan horse; strategic partner; friendly pragmatist; frosty pragmatist; and new cold warrior (Leonard and Popescu 2007). These are useful for positioning the Dutch approach in a broader perspective. Leonard and Popescu put the Netherlands in the 'frosty pragmatist' category. They argued that the Netherlands did not put the Russian concerns above a common EU eastern-neighbourhood policy, regardless of the strong economic ties. They argued that the Netherlands was willing to raise human rights as long as it did not endanger trade (Leonard and Popescu 2007, 45). Casier argued the latter as well (Casier 2011, 240-243). Putting his findings into the five categories, the Netherlands would apply a 'frosty pragmatic' approach too.

However, according to Gerrits the Netherlands was a pragmatist, but not a frosty one. He argued, human rights were being raised less and less in the years leading up to 2010, while the human rights situation in Russia deteriorated (Gerrits 2013, 103). He believed the Netherlands left the difficult issues to the EU and focused on the success stories in bilateral relations (Gerrits 2013, 96). It is interesting to examine how this developed after this period.

In the literature different topics were used to research the relations between Russia and the Netherlands. The main topics that come back in them are trade, energy, human rights, and the policy on common neighbours.

Trade

The literature examined trade because the Netherlands and Russia were important trade partners of each other, as the Netherlands was one of Russia's largest export destinations (Leonard and Popescu 2007; Casier 2011; Gerrits 2013, 102). When talking about the significance of Russian-Dutch trade, however, it has to be taken into account that this is partly because of the port of Rotterdam, where many products are re-exported and never

leave their container in the Netherlands (Leonard and Popescu 2007, 45; Dutch MFA 2013d, 7; Gerrits 2013, 102).

Another reason why they used it is because trade promotion is a responsibility of the EU member states. The national governments pursue business contracts with Russian companies and authorities, set in a EU-Russia framework. Hence, it is useful for examining the bilateral relations.

Even though energy is part of trade in terms of trade figures, it got a specific section in the literature. This is because energy accounted for a large part of the EU-Russian trade and because energy exports were important for Russian state revenue (Leonard and Popescu 2007). Energy is important for the EU because some countries – especially in eastern Europe – are almost completely dependent on Russian energy (European External Action Service 2016). It is used as a key issue of Russian-Dutch relations because several large Dutch companies are very active in Russia and because of the Dutch desire to become a gas hub for north-western Europe (Casier 2011, 242-243; Gerrits 2013, 102).

Human rights

The topic 'human rights' is another aspect often discussed when examining the relations between Russia and the Netherlands. This is because the Netherlands sees itself as a defender of human rights on the international stage (Gerrits 2013, 103; Dutch MFA 2016). Furthermore, Russia and the EU differ on their view of human rights. This also appears from Russia's Foreign Policy Concept where it stated one of its basic goals to be "...promoting, in various international formats, Russia's approach to human rights issues" (Russian MFA 2013d, par. 4g).

The existing literature looked at how critical the Netherlands was on human rights in Russia. Gerrits argued, human rights had become less important in bilateral relations with Russia, because the Netherlands did not believe it brought the desired results and because of general budget cuts (Gerrits 2013, 104). Furthermore, he argued that the Dutch government believed human rights were best improved through international organizations that Russia is part of, such as the Council of Europe (ibid.).

Gerrits and Casier argued (until 2011), the Netherlands did raise human rights in dealing with Russia, but did so only when it did not endanger its economic interests (Gerrits 2013, 103-104; Casier 2011, 241). Casier raised an interesting observation about the difference in statements of the Dutch ambassador to Russia in an interview with The Moscow Times in 2009. In it, the Dutch ambassador said relations were as good as they had

ever been and there were “no real issues”, but in the same answer said there was room to discuss “controversial issues” (Moscow Times 2009; Casier 2011, 241). This shows the controversial issues (e.g. human rights) were no obstacles for good bilateral relations.

In 2004 the Dutch minister of foreign affairs was critical of how Russia handled the Beslan hostage crisis. These remarks caused political incidents where Russia banned flower imports from the Netherlands and possibly explain the restrictive measures against Shell (Gerrits 2013, 100). Possibly, such a relation between economic measures and criticism occurred later as well.

Policy on common neighbours

The policy of the Netherlands and Russia towards their common (EU-Russia) neighbours is another topic discussed in the literature when examining bilateral relations (Leonard and Popescu 2007; Gerrits 2013). Support for integration into Western structures of EU and NATO opposed to Russian structures of Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) could be seen as a source of conflict.

The common EU-Russia neighbours were an important issue for both the Netherlands and Russia because this common neighbourhood was crucial for their security architecture. According to Gerrits, the EU and the Netherlands viewed the Eastern Partnership (EaP) and European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) as mutually beneficial projects and a means to create a ring of stable countries surrounding the EU (Gerrits 2013, 106). The Netherlands saw the EaP and ENP as a way to expand its (EU's) alleged universal norms of human rights, rule of law and democracy (ibid.). However, Russia viewed the EaP as an attempt of the EU to diminish Russian influence in these countries. Russia saw this neighbourhood as its ‘near abroad’ where it has special interests.

Leonard and Popescu examined whether a country followed a ‘Russia-first’ policy in the EU's eastern neighbourhood (Leonard and Popescu 2007). Gerrits (2013, 106-107) argued the Netherlands actively supported the EaP, and did not follow a ‘Russia-first’ policy in the neighbourhood. Leonard and Popescu (2007, 47) also argued the Netherlands did not put Russian concerns above a common EU eastern neighbourhood policy, but only as long as it did not endanger economic relations with Russia. Thus, they hold a more balanced conclusion that the Netherlands favoured eastern Europe, but only to a certain extent. Casier, however, who focused on European integration in these countries, argued the Netherlands held a Russia-first policy because it did not support EU integration of eastern European countries (Casier 2011, 240). However, Casier's parameter tells more about the

Dutch EU-enlargement policy in general, than about its willingness to cooperate with these countries. A EU member state can oppose EU membership of the EaP countries, but still favour cooperation and integration with European values, rules and integration in its economic structures.

So far, we know that the existing literature mainly focused on the interplay with the EU and it only examined the Russian-Dutch relations until 2011¹. Therefore one could argue, the academic writing on the Russian-Dutch relations is underdeveloped and more recent research in Russian-Dutch relations is needed. Moreover, it can be concluded that the literature examined the topics trade, energy, human rights and policy on common neighbours, in order to analyse Russian-Dutch relations. The methodology examines what the key topics were after 2011 and discusses how these are selected and analysed in this study.

¹ The article of Gerrits was written in the end of 2010 or beginning 2011, despite it being published in 2013. He mentioned the 2008 invasion of Georgia was “only two years ago” and the most recent sources cited in his article are from December 2010 (Gerrits 2013, 95).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research subject

Research objective

The objective of this study is to create greater understanding of Russian-Dutch relations. It maps out how the relations have developed since 2013, up to and including 2015, and pinpoints the key changes. Additionally, it explains how they view each other within a political context over a set period of time.

The period 2013-2015 has been chosen because it revolves around the alleged turning point of 2014 in Russian-Dutch relations. To examine how the relations changed since 2014, it is necessary to set a baseline for how relations were before it and compare this with the way relations were after. The year 2013 is a good starting point to analyse how relations deteriorated later, since it was the 'Russia-Netherlands Year' that was supposed to highlight the excellent relations.

Topic selection

This study discusses several topics to answer the research question. In contrast to previous literature, the findings of the research select the topics. The literature argued key issues of the Russian-Dutch relations were trade, energy, human rights and the policy on common neighbours. This thesis does not simply copy these specific topics, because it examines what both governments communicate to the public. By only looking at human rights, trade, energy and policy on common neighbours the study would be too focused on the Dutch interests, as the choice of the parameters would largely decide the outcome. Furthermore, much has changed since the last academic literature of 2011 and other issues have become more pressing. The findings formed the selection of the key subjects used in this study, because some topics were important one year, but not the other. The topics that were raised in 15% or more of one year's communiqués are the key topics and chapters in this thesis.² These are: MH17, the Ukraine crisis, Crimea's incorporation, the shared neighbourhood, diplomatic incidents, trade, energy, sanctions and human rights. In the appendix a list of all the topics and their annual scores can be found.

² With the exception of 'energy', which is included because of its close relation to trade but separate development.

The above literature, researched the relations drawing on personal experience, interviews with officials, other academic literature and sometimes a government document. This study examines the relations by looking at government communiqués. How governments talk about one another can be seen as a reflection of the state of relations. This study looks at all the communiqués and gives numerical values in order to make the operationalization as objective as possible.

In order to do so the websites of the governments are researched systemically by year and by communiqué. Looking for references of either Russia or the Netherlands in statements, speeches, publications, Q&As, press releases and other documents. The documents of the ministries of foreign affairs (MFA) and the heads of state or government form the core sources of this thesis. Since a choice had to be made because of space and time limitations, only the heads of state or government and the MFA's are used. The ministries of foreign affairs, which include the embassies, and the head of state or government are the primary representative of a country abroad. Other ministries, such as the ministry of economic affairs, play a role abroad as well. However, the former present a more comprehensive foreign policy, more representative of the government as a whole.

3.2 Operationalization

Subject analysis

As is mentioned above, the findings of the research shape the topics and chapters. The topics are grouped together in broader themes. These themes are security, economic relations, and ethical concerns. Each subject is structured as follows: first, the topic is briefly introduced. Then each chapter identifies the developments in statements regarding each topic over time. These developments are presented chronologically and form the sub-chapters of each issue. Examples from the communiqués clarify the developments in how both countries talk each other in their communiqués. These developments are analysed throughout the chapters by looking at what else happened at the moment in bilateral relations.

Research operationalization

Each communiqué is allocated an overall value. Additionally, the study distils the topics discussed in each communiqué and gives these a value as well. The values range from '-2' to '+2'. A score of -2 means the communiqué is very negative; -1 is negative; 0 is mixed or neutral; 1 is positive; and 2, is very positive. The value assesses how both countries talk

about each other regarding the topics. It is assessed as being 'positive' when it aids in building a constructive partnership and 'negative' when it is detrimental to such a partnership. Even a disagreement or incident can be discussed in a positive manner. These values are used to construct all the tables that show the developments for each topic by year and the overall developments of relations through the years. I specifically developed this method for this research, in order to make general 'positive' or 'negative' assessments of relations less arbitrary

The general criteria adopted for the values are crucial to the research. They are based on standard diplomatic and legal phraseology or commonly used terms. If the content of a communiqué falls within the criteria provided, it is given a corresponding value. Other words and phraseology are also used in the communiqués. When the meaning or the content of the statements comes close to or matches the criteria, it is allocated the same value.

The general criteria for the values are as follows: a topic is described as being 'very negative' when a country strongly condemns, expresses great concern or refers to something as being unacceptable. It is described as being 'negative' when a country expresses (regular) concern, condemns, or is disappointed by an action. However, the 'mixed or neutral' value is given in the case: positive and negative statements are combined; an action is disapproved but understood; or when an assessment is absent or avoided. A subject is described as being 'positive' when parties agree with or support each other on the subject or the desire to cooperate is expressed. A topic is 'very positive' when it is praised, the excellent or good state of the topic is emphasized and nothing critical or negative is said.

Figure 1: General criteria for assessing the communiqués

Value	Criteria		
Very negative	Strongly condemn	Express great concern	Refer to something as being unacceptable
Negative	Condemn	Express concern	Express disappointment
Mixed or neutral	Combination of positive and negative statements	Disapprove, but understand	Assessment absent or avoided
Positive	Support	Agree with	Express desire to cooperate
Very positive	Praise	Emphasize excellent or good state	(precondition) Nothing critical is stated

Source: author's table

The websites of the Dutch MFA, the Russian MFA, the Dutch prime minister (the Ministry of General Affairs) and the Russian president (the Kremlin) provide the documents used in this study. Search terms for Russia were “Netherlands; Dutch; Rutte” and for the Netherlands “*Rusland; Russische Federatie; Poetin*”. A document is used when it has at least a section directly discussing or appertaining to the other country, not when it is only mentioned. The study does not take into consideration the press releases that state a meeting will take place.

The communiqués are collected and used to create a dataset. This dataset is used for examining the general trend in Russian-Dutch relations and for the developments of each topic. I compiled a database of 162 communiqués from the Russian and Dutch governments from the period 2013-2015, applying the above-mentioned selection process. From this data, I constructed tables and graphs. Using this numerical operationalization and visualization, makes it easier to evaluate the developments.

3.3 Determining priorities

First and second order issues

The literature often used the distinction between first order and second order issues to explain the hierarchy in interests of EU member states, in relations with Russia (Casier 2011; Gerrits 2013; Leonard and Popescu 2007). This in turn would explain what issues a EU member state raised in statements about Russia, and which issues it would leave to the EU to discuss. According to this division, countries tend to deal with first order issues – national interests and security – at the bilateral level (Casier 2011, 243). The second order issues are ethical concerns, which are dealt with multilaterally. This way tensions based upon ethical concerns, such as human rights, do not damage the bilateral relations. Only when first order interests are not at risk, will a EU member state raise second order issues at the bilateral level (ibid.). However, according to Gerrits (2013) this hierarchy in determining interests does not always hold true. He argued national governments attach political weight to issues, based on other aspects such as specific economic interests, historical and cultural ‘sensitivities’ (Gerrits 2013, 101). Most authors who have written about Russian-Dutch relations, have done so within the context of Member State-EU relations. This study does not examine the relation between the ‘EU member state’ and the EU. Hence, a different but similar theory seems to fit.

Primary and secondary national interests

Another approach to view the distinction between primary and secondary national interests. It is more useful in explaining changes in a country's attitude towards Russia, since it leaves more room for discussing shifting priorities within the 'first order issues'. The 'first-order issues' discussed above, include primary and secondary national interests.

The concept of primary-secondary national interests has many difficulties and it is not in the scope of this study to discuss these.³ Nonetheless, a 'simple' definition from the realist school of international relations is used, because it helps understand changes in how both countries talk about each other in the communiqués. In this common definition, primary national interests of governments are: to protect its citizens, ensure the continuation of the state, protect the state's territorial integrity and to protect the main political institutions (Knapen, et al. 2011, 46). These features of the definition are mostly agreed upon (ibid.). Other interests are said to be 'primary' as well, but are left out here because they are contentious. Secondary national interests can be seen as all non-primary national interests. Within these there is also a hierarchy. Economic interests for example are sometimes seen as primary national interests, but can also be seen as important secondary national interests (Knapen, et al. 2011, 48). Normative or ethical interests (second order issues) can be seen as non-national interests, since they do not directly involve a state's citizens, institutions or territory. The distinction between primary and secondary national interests clarifies developments in how both countries report on each other, since it helps to explain changes in priorities.

3.4 Research limitations

Limitations

The study of Russian-Dutch relations needs further research because it is out-dated and the assessments that have been made are quite arbitrary. The research operationalization explained above is less arbitrary. As with any research, however, this study has its limitations. By clearly stating these it is easier to improve the research and see how its limits are minimized. Because of language limitations, Russian-language sources are not included. However, the Russian government publishes much in English, and the choice of what to translate can be seen as a selection of what is important to the government. Further research with Russian-language knowledge could still strengthen the analysis of Russian-

³ Who decides what the interests of a country are? Is the interest a goal or means of influence? Is an interest long- or short-term? Can the protection of citizens of other states be a national interest?

Dutch relations. Note that the Dutch quotations are personal translations. When the Dutch government is quoted as saying something, it is the author's translation and for practical reasons the original Dutch text is not provided on each occasion.

The study says more on the Dutch position than the Russian position. By looking at the English sources of the Russian MFA and other official government sources that publish in English this effect is reduced. On some of the topics Russia said nothing about the Netherlands. For these the Russian view on the topics in general is used, to see how it differed with the Dutch view. Furthermore, total objectivity is impossible, since I have grown up under certain contexts and conditions and even choosing what to research and not to research is already a political choice.

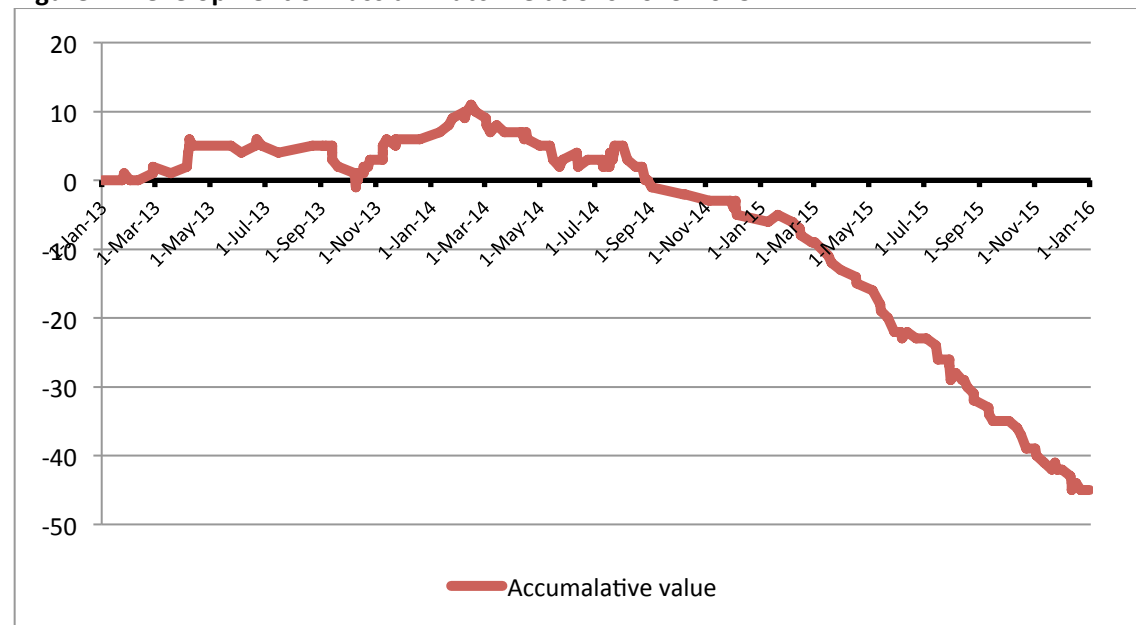
An important issue for this study is that communiqués are usually diplomatic, politically correct and disagreements are not openly raised. Hence, the statements take close reading to discover developments and deduce the reasons of the changes. Furthermore, when a communiqué is critical, it says even more about the gravity of it or on the general state of relations. For the purpose of this research it is not necessary to judge what is 'true' or who is right, but its purpose is to present the changes in how critically or friendly they talk about each other and give possible explanations for these. Before examining the key topics, first the general development of the relations is described, in order to later see how the topics differ from the most important turning points in Russian-Dutch relations.

4. General development of relations

Graphic visualisation

Figure 2 below depicts the overall development of relations over time. The starting point, 0-value, of the graph is 1 January 2013. The graph accumulates the values of each communiqué, to show the developments in each country's attitude towards, or reaction to, changes in policy or current events. This is the state of relations over the years, based on all the selected communiqués. The communiqués are added or subtracted from the previous communiqué, depending on their value. This results into an accumulated value that can be seen as a reflection of the developments in Russian-Dutch relations.

Figure 2: Development of Russian-Dutch relations 2013-2015



Source: Author's graph based on values of all communiqués

The graph is based on the overall score of each communiqué, not the separate topics. Using only the overall score of each communiqué is a better representation of the state of relations at that moment. Additionally, some topics discussed are so closely related, weighing them separately would distort the results, for example human rights and LGBT. These two were usually discussed in the same communiqué, but LGBT rights correlates with human rights. Related topics are categorized separately in order to gain more insight in the elements that influence the broader topics. All communiqués are given the same weighting. Some events are more important than others for the relations, but because these are discussed more often their importance is incorporated in the results this way.

General trend

The general trend was that communiqués could be described as being ‘positive’ in 2013 and they became more negative after the incorporation of Crimea in March 2014 and a while after the downing of MH17 in July 2014. The developments mentioned in this chapter are explained in more detail in the chapters below.

The relations were improving until April 2013, because the positive communications in light of the 2013 Russia-Netherlands Year, which celebrated 400 years of relations between the two countries. In the beginning of 2013 the relations between the two were described as friendly (Kremlin 2013c), but many incidents happened that strained the relations. Therefore, from April until September 2013 the value remained steady instead of going up. There were several incidents, but at the same time the discussion on human rights was neutral. In September 2013 the relations deteriorated because of the Arctic Sunrise incident. However, both countries believed the year should not be overshadowed by the incidents and stated their commitment to move past the incidents (Dutch Ministry of General Affairs 2013b; Kremlin 2013c). This can be seen in the general development of the relations in figure 2, as by the end of the year the trend became more positive.

During 2014 the Russian-Dutch relations deteriorated. The average annual value of the communiqués deteriorated from 0.13 in 2013 to -0.25 in 2014. In figure 2, this is reflected with the accumulated score going below zero for more than a month for the first time. Until February 2014, the government communications on each other could be described as being positive and the relations were still friendly. In February the Russian president stressed the visit of the Dutch prime minister was an important sign of the longstanding and good relations (Kremlin 2014a). Moreover, it shows the turbulent Russia-Netherlands year did not damage the relations much. However, this visit in February 2014 was the last visit between the Russian president and the Dutch prime minister. A couple of weeks later Crimea’s incorporation occurred and since then they only had contact by phone. The fact that the two only had contact over the phone, and no meetings, shows relations had already cooled somewhat after Crimea’s incorporation. The cumulated score of relations reached its high in February 2014. The entry of Russian troops into Crimea in the end of February and the following incorporation was the start of the deteriorating relations.

The fall went on until halfway through July. When MH17 crashed in July 2014, the statements on each other in the communiqués initially became positive, because Russia and the Netherlands had much contact to discuss how the investigation was to be conducted

and were in agreement that peace was needed (Kremlin 2014b). About two weeks after the crash a steep fall in the bilateral relations began, because Russia was seen as inciting the conflict in Ukraine, in which MH17 was downed. Regarding MH17 they talked about each other positively, but on other topics the communiqués became negative.

In 2015 the communiqués continued to be negative and a wider range of topics were discussed in a more negative way. The average annual score of the communiqués went down from -0.25 in 2014 to -0.66 in 2015. Figure 2 shows that the statements on each other became more negative in the communiqués and the score deteriorated further to an accumulated value of -45 in December 2015.

A large drop occurred in May-July 2015. In May 2015 the largest drop occurred, not because of one specific event, but because the Dutch MFA published many negative communiqués on several topics regarding Russia this month. Furthermore, an elaborate Dutch MFA document on relations with Russia was published and it emerged that three Dutch parliamentarians had an entry-ban for Russia. The second largest drop was in the end of July 2015 when the Netherlands tried to establish a tribunal for the prosecution of those responsible for downing MH17 and Russia vetoed this in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). After this the leaders of the two countries completely ceased contact. The following chapters describe the topics in more detail and explain how the discussion about each developed. They draw possible relations between them and explain why some followed a different path. The topics under each theme are not necessarily the most significant or all the aspects of this theme. They are the issues that come up in the Russian and Dutch communiqués on each other the most. Other topics or themes might have had a big impact on the relations as well.

5. Security

5.1 MH17

The downing of MH17 is possibly the most important event for the Russian-Dutch relations. Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 was a civilian aircraft that got shot down on 17 July 2014 in eastern Ukraine. There were 298 casualties, of which 196 were Dutch nationals. Considering the number of Dutch fatalities it was an important event for the Netherlands. Tony van der Togt of the think tank Clingendael argued the downing of the plane was a game changer in the Dutch-Russian relations, which convinced Dutch actors, including the business community, that a response was needed (van der Togt 2015). The MH17 crash was significant for Russia as well. In 2015, 71% of the Russian communiqués regarding the Netherlands were about MH17. MH17 is discussed the first of the issues because it was important to the relations and had effect on the other topics.

Figure 3: Communiqués regarding MH17

Year	Percentage of communiqués in which discussed	Average value
2013	-	-
2014	23%	0.25
2015	31%	-0.63

Source: Author's table⁴

In 2014 the crash was discussed in 23% of both countries' communiqués, which can be seen in figure 3. Concerning the crash, both parties talked about each other slightly positive with a value of 0.25. This changed in 2015 when both countries became more critical of each other. This can be seen in the average score of -0.63 in 2015, on a scale from '-2' (very negative) to '+2' (very positive).

Joint expression to cooperate

In 2014 the communiqués show both a neutral and positive attitude towards MH17 by both countries. The days after the crash, the Russian president had several telephone conversations with the Dutch prime minister to stress the importance of independent investigation into the crash, and both parties agreed on this (Kremlin 2014b). The communications on each other concerning MH17 remained friendly in 2014. The Russian

⁴ The author has compiled the data in all tables.

communiqués in 2014 were slightly more positive at 0.38 than the Dutch communiqués with an average score of 0.

In the first half of 2015 the statements to cooperate continued and the two countries talked about each other neutrally regarding MH17. They agreed on the need for an independent investigation. On all questions asked by journalists, the Dutch government refused to comment on who they might or might not suspect as being involved in the crash, because this could affect an independent investigation. As the Dutch prime minister said on 27 February 2015, by showing possible suspicions the one(s) who will be accused by the investigation, could then say the investigation was not independent (Dutch Ministry of General Affairs 2015b). Not talking about possible suspicions was the best strategy to maintain international support for the next step of the investigation, prosecution. If the investigation was politically influenced from the start it would have lost credibility and the Dutch government wanted to make the chance of prosecution as high as possible (Dutch Ministry of General Affairs 2015b).

While the Dutch government awaited the results of the ongoing investigation into who were the alleged perpetrators of the downing, it did note that the crash took place in the context of a conflict that would not have happened without Russian support for separatists in eastern Ukraine (Dutch MFA 2015d, 6). This shows the crash played a role in the bilateral relations, since the Netherlands holds Russia at least partly responsible for creating the context in which MH17 was shot down.

Disappointment in the MH17 tribunal and investigation

After 29 July 2015 the manner in which they talk about each other changed when the Netherlands tried to establish a tribunal for MH17 and Russia vetoed it in the UNSC. The Netherlands, together with a couple other countries, put forward an UN resolution to establish a tribunal for the prosecution of those who brought down flight MH17. Russia exercised its veto powers in the UNSC to block the resolution. Russia argued the tribunal was “untimely and counterproductive” (Kremlin 2015a). Russia stressed its concerns that it was not fully part of the investigation and the Russian experts were denied full access to the evidence (Kremlin 2015b). This communiqué issued by Russia was very negative for a presidential level (ibid.), since it could be seen as containing ‘hidden’ accusations. For example, the Russian president warned for politically motivated leaking of stories of the events or investigation (ibid.). This was an indirect accusation that the Netherlands did so or was willing to do so.

The Dutch prime minister was “disappointed” that the UN-resolution to establish a tribunal was not accepted, but he also stated that he was not surprised (Dutch Ministry of General Affairs 2015d). In his reaction he focused on the determination to prosecute the ones responsible for the crash and was not negative about Russia (ibid.). However, the day Russia vetoed the resolution was the last time the Russian president and Dutch prime Minister had any contact.⁵ This highlights the impact MH17 had on Russian-Dutch relations.

In the joint statement, Malaysia, Australia, Ukraine, Belgium and the Netherlands said they were “deeply disappointed” in Russia’s veto (Dutch MFA 2015q). In its own statement the Dutch government said it was “disappointed”, leaving out ‘deeply’ (Dutch Ministry of General Affairs 2015d). It is possible to assume that the Netherlands was less critical in the individual statements, because it was more vulnerable without the international support.

Russian disappointment

After the Netherlands tried to establish the tribunal and Russia blocked it, Russia became more openly critical of the investigation. Because Russia’s points were not heeded, it deemed the final report into the cause of the crash biased and incomplete (Russian MFA 2015b).

Russia feared some states wanted to use the tribunal as a pretext to put pressure on Russia for political purposes. However, the Russian minister of foreign affairs said this did not include the Netherlands, and he said that the Netherlands sincerely wanted to find the truth (Russian MFA 2015d). Furthermore, Russia felt it was blamed for the downing of MH17. As the Russian foreign minister pointed out, the largest set of sanctions were imposed days after the downing of MH17 (Lavrov 2015a). The minister argued, the blame of the crash was immediately put on the separatists in eastern Ukraine and Russia was deemed to be complicit, because it was believed to have helped these “self-defence” forces (ibid.).

Conclusion

The Russian and Dutch communiqués regarding MH17 did not become negative in 2014, as the general trend would suggest. Once Russia in the second half of 2015 felt it was being blamed for the downing, it critiqued the objectivity of the investigation and these communications became negative. When the Netherlands tried to establish a tribunal and Russia prevented it, the statements about each other became even more critical. It is

⁵ There still has been no contact at the time of writing in March 2017.

remarkable that once the crash happened the Dutch government became more critical on other subjects vis-à-vis Russia, while it did not mention Russian involvement or responsibility in the crash. The Dutch statement that Russia created the context in which MH17 was shot down can possibly explain this. Additionally, its priority to prosecute the ones responsible for the crash offers an explanation. To do this it tried to keep the investigation objective and therefore did its best not to mention its 'possible' suspicions, to prevent influencing the investigation.

5.2 Ukraine crisis

This issue concerns the Ukraine crisis in general, and involves the conflict in eastern Ukraine and the Minsk peace Agreements, separately from Crimea's incorporation. Figure 4 shows the topic is mainly discussed in 2014, because this is when the conflict escalated. In 2013, tensions in Ukraine rose with the sudden decision of the Ukrainian president not to sign the Association Agreement with the EU. This decision led to protests, which grew stronger when they were harshly repressed, and eventually led to the ousting of the president in February 2014. Existing tensions rose and Crimea became incorporated by Russia. After this, separatists in eastern Ukraine declared independence and took up arms. This conflict is ongoing even until the day of writing. This is the 'Ukraine crisis' in a nutshell.

Figure 4: Communiqués regarding the Ukraine crisis

Year	Percentage of communiqués in which discussed	Average value
2013	2%	0
2014	34%	-0.5
2015	16%	-0.5

There was a difference in how both countries talked about the topic in relation to each other. From the Russian side it was mainly discussed positively or neutrally, stressing that both the Netherlands and Russia agreed on the importance of a ceasefire (Kremlin 2014c). The average value of the topic in Russia's communiqués of 2014 is 0.6. However, the Netherlands in its 2014 communications, regarding Russia's role in the Ukraine crisis, has an average score of -0.92.

Russia on Ukraine

The Russian government denied responsibility for the crisis and said the EU and actors in Ukraine caused it. The Russian minister of foreign affairs argued the export of European values triggered the Ukraine crisis, and said especially the export of democracy caused problems (Lavrov 2017).⁶ Russia saw the revolution in Ukraine as a coup and argued the EU backed this coup (Lavrov 2015b). The Russian president argued Ukraine attacked the Donbass region and the “self-defence units” there were only defending themselves (Putin 2014b).

Furthermore, the Netherlands and Russia differed in opinion on Russia’s involvement in the Ukraine crisis. The Netherlands condemned Russia’s use of military forces, while Russia denied the use of forces in eastern Ukraine. The Russian president argued the Russian volunteers fighting there were following their heart and were fulfilling their duty (Putin 2014b). In December 2015 he said “we’ve never said there were no [Russian] people there who deal with certain matters, including in the military area, but this does not mean that regular Russian troops are present there” (Putin 2015). In other words, Russia did not deny Russians were involved in fights in eastern Ukraine, it just emphasized they were not sent there by the government and did so voluntarily – thus denying any responsibility.

Suspension of criticism for a ceasefire

The Netherlands reported negatively on Russia’s role in the Ukraine crisis since it escalated in the beginning of 2014. It argued Russia was needed for a political solution, but condemned Russia’s actions in eastern Ukraine (Dutch MFA 2014i). The crash of MH17 did not cause an increase in negative communiqués on Russia’s role in the Ukraine crisis immediately. Quite the contrary happened and after the crash both countries had much contact with each other and agreed on the need for a ceasefire (Kremlin 2014c). They were not negative about each other. Probably the statements were positive between the two because cooperation was needed to satisfy the special interest of the Netherlands to repatriate the bodies of flight MH17’s casualties. For this a ceasefire was needed around the crash site in eastern Ukraine. Russia could use its influence on the forces in eastern Ukraine to assure a ceasefire. Therefore, the Netherlands temporarily suspended its criticism of Russia’s role in the Ukraine crisis.

⁶ More recent sources are used to explain Russia’s position on the topic when it did not mention the Netherlands in relation to the topic. These sources are not included in the data.

The positive communiqués by Russia were in June and July 2014, after the MH17 crash. Cooperation to solve the crisis in Ukraine was discussed together with the investigation into the MH17 crash (Kremlin 2014c). Possibly the Russian government agreed on the need for a ceasefire, because it feared it would be held responsible for the plane crash, as it kept emphasizing the importance of independent investigation.

Revelations and accusations

The Dutch government sometimes stated cooperation was needed to solve the crisis, but overall it was critical of Russia's role in the crisis. The Dutch government became more critical, and talked about Russia's involvement more often, when the Russian president in March 2015 said Russia had made plans for Crimea's incorporation on 22 February 2014 and Russian troops were involved (BBC 2015). This was weeks before the disputed referendum on separation from Ukraine was held. The revelation made the Dutch more confident to openly state its suspicions.

In the letter of 13 May 2015 the Dutch MFA for the first time openly expressed Russia played a central role in the creation of the conflict in eastern Ukraine. It said Russia maintained the conflict by actively supporting the separatists with weapons, military personnel, financial and political support (Dutch MFA 2015c, 5). It went beyond suspicion and the Dutch government accused Russia of direct involvement. The Dutch MFA said it was no longer possible to maintain the same good relations with Russia as before its interference in Ukraine (Dutch MFA 2015c). These are serious statements that show a deterioration of the relations. It is likely the Netherlands, with the Russian president's confession, felt secure enough to also point to Russia's actions in eastern Ukraine.

However, at the same time the Dutch government emphasized other actors condemned Russian actions as well. So did the Dutch MFA write that Russia continuously undertook provocative actions in eastern Ukraine, such as providing the disputed 'humanitarian' convoys without permission of Ukraine (Dutch MFA 2015f). The Netherlands together with the EU condemned these actions and urged Russia to use its influence among the separatists to adhere to the Minsk (II) Agreements. A possible explanation why the Netherlands stressed others have condemned Russian actions as well, can be that the Netherlands tried to minimize the retaliatory damage of these statements and create credibility for its statements.

Furthermore, in May 2015 the Dutch government mentioned that a rift ("*waterscheiding*") between Russia and the Netherlands had developed. The Dutch minister

of foreign affairs said 2014 was the changing point (Dutch MFA 2015). He argued the 'annexation' of Crimea and military involvement in eastern Ukraine showed that Russia did not recoil from violating the international rule of law (Dutch MFA 2015r). This is another example of the Netherlands being more critical in 2015 of Russia's actions in Ukraine.

Conclusion

Thus, the Netherlands was critical of Russia's role in Ukraine from the moment Crimea was incorporated, which is in line with the general trend. For a brief moment it paused its criticism when cooperation was needed to repatriate bodies and recover plane fragments of flight MH17. However, the Netherlands became more critical after the Russian president's statement that the plan to incorporate Crimea was made weeks before the disputed referendum. From that moment on, the Netherlands felt secure enough to accuse Russia of involvement in eastern Ukraine.

Russia published most of its positive communiqués in the short period after the crash. It declared its desire to have peace in eastern Ukraine to the Netherlands, probably because it feared it would be held responsible for the conflict in eastern Ukraine and therefore indirectly for the downing of MH17. The anger of the international community would have been worse if Russia had actively obstructed a cease-fire on the crash-site or had refrained from contributing to it. Russia presumably knew anger over MH17 could (and did) cause the European countries to unite in responding to Russia's involvement in Ukraine. The downing of MH17 created unity in the EU to impose sanctions. EU countries could no longer ignore the conflict and oppose sanctions now EU citizens had fallen victim in the conflict.

5.3 Crimea's incorporation

The topic 'Crimea's incorporation' concerns the incorporation⁷ of Crimea by Russia. The subject 'Crimea's incorporation' is separate because the incorporation in March 2014 was a big event in the relations between the two countries and the manner in which they talked about each other on the subject developed separately from the Ukraine crisis. On 27 February 2014 unknown troops without insignias appeared in Crimea. While initially unclear, later the Russian government confirmed these were Russian troops. Two weeks later, on 16 March, there was a disputed referendum on separation from Ukraine in which a majority voted to separate. Two days later Crimea announced its independence and joined Russia.

⁷ Incorporation is used as a neutral term. It is not the aim of this study to judge who is right or not.

Figure 5: Communiqués regarding Crimea's incorporation

Year	Percentage of communiqués in which discussed	Average value
2013	-	-
2014	21%	-1
2015	8%	-1

Crimea was discussed in 21% of the communiqués in 2014, with an average negative score of -1, presented in figure 5. Only the Netherlands discussed Russia in the context of Crimea. Russia did not discuss the Netherlands in connection to Crimea's incorporation.

The return of Crimea

Despite the fact that Russia did not raise the Netherlands in the context of Crimea, it is useful to briefly discuss Russia's position on Crimea, in order to see how it differed from that of the Netherlands. Russia viewed Crimea as its little brother, an intrinsic part of greater Russia, and its incorporation was seen as the "return" of Crimea (Putin 2014a). Initially, Russia denied planning the incorporation (ibid.). A year later the Russian president said the plan to incorporate, or "return", Crimea was made days before forces were sent there and weeks before the disputed referendum (BBC 2015).

Russia saw the referendum to separate from Ukraine as legitimate and democratic. The Russian ambassador to the EU, Chizhov, said it had no choice but to accept that Crimea "chose freely" to join Russia (Chizhov 2014). Russia argued Crimea freely chose to leave Ukraine because the Russian population was under threat of the new Ukrainian government. The Russian foreign minister said the "freely expressed will of the people of Crimea" to separate from Ukraine and join Russia was a response to the anti-Russian policy of "ultranationalists" (Lavrov 2015b).

Tacit condemnation

There are two stages in how the Dutch government assessed Russia's role in Crimea. The Netherlands was quick to condemn Russia's "actions" in Crimea and called the incorporation an 'illegal annexation' tacitly through the EU. However, it took three months before the Netherlands called it an "illegal annexation" (*"illegale annexatie"*) in its communiqués.

The first stage was condemning Russia's use of forces and agreeing through the EU to call it an 'illegal annexation'. On 2 March 2014 the Netherlands was critical of Russia's role in Ukraine and condemned Russia's use of forces in Crimea (Dutch MFA 2014e). The

Netherlands reminded Russia, that Russia itself often stressed the importance of international law, sovereignty and international organizations (ibid.). The Dutch MFA saw Russia's actions in Ukraine as unacceptable, but still believed dialogue with Russia was needed for a solution (ibid.). On 7 March 2014 the Dutch prime minister called the situation in Crimea extraordinarily precarious (Dutch Ministry of General Affairs 2014f). He still did not call it an annexation and illegal. However, when journalists used "annexation of Crimea" in their questions he did not dispute this phrasing (ibid.). It suggests he at least did not oppose the term. This was days after Russian troops had entered Crimea. The Dutch government had a reason not to call it an 'annexation' at that time, because Crimea had not yet joined the Russian territory and the troops had only entered it. Technically it could not be called an 'annexation' yet. The first time it was tacitly called an "illegal annexation" is in the common report of the European Foreign Affairs Council of 20 March 2014 (European Council 2014).⁸ This is still a shared report of the entire EU and the Dutch individual position is not mentioned, even though it agreed by tacit consent.

On 18 March the Dutch minister of foreign affairs wrote on his social media that the incorporation was an "illegal annexation". This made it into several news articles, which all referred to his social media statement (Reformatorisch Dagblad 2014; BNR 2014). The statement was not published officially.⁹ The first time it was mentioned in government communiqués was on 12 June 2014. Thus, the Dutch minister made a personal statement that did not reflect the Dutch government's official opinion at the time.

Cautious explicit Dutch condemnation

In a letter of 12 June 2014, the Dutch MFA for the first time explicitly called the incorporation of Crimea an 'illegal annexation' by Russia (Dutch MFA 2014f). This presented the second stage in assessing the incorporation. Furthermore, the Dutch MFA said Russia's attitude towards Ukraine was unacceptable ("*onaanvaardbaar*") (ibid.). Calling one's actions unacceptable and illegal is not a light measure and it signified a deterioration in the Russian-Dutch relations. The reason why the Dutch MFA said it at that moment is not clear. Possibly it said so because many other governments had done so explicitly already. Furthermore, more accounts appeared that Russia did not do its best to de-escalate the conflict and hence European countries and the Netherlands had become more agitated.

⁸ In the annotated agenda of the EU Foreign Affairs Council the Dutch position is given. Therefore the annotated agendas are used for the research, and not the account of the meetings.

⁹ It would be interesting to examine how officials use their social media and personal websites. However, this study examines the official statements and therefore does not examine social media or personal websites any further. This example shows there can be a difference in official statements and statements on personal account.

After the downing of MH17 in July, Crimea's incorporation was discussed in only one communiqué in 2014. In it, the Dutch MFA said the "illegal annexation" and lack of deescalating measures had caused a rift in the relations with Russia (Dutch MFA 2014b). The Netherlands thus hardly discussed Crimea in the second half of 2014. However, the one time it did, it was negative and indicated it was the cause of a rift in relations. An explanation could be that the Netherlands did not discuss it much because it wanted Russia to cooperate on peace and this way ensure bringing back the bodies of the MH17 crash and parts of the plane for analysis. Limiting the statements on sensitive issues made cooperation more likely. That the Dutch government said it caused a rift, however, shows Crimea's incorporation was important for the government.

In 2015 the Dutch government continued to condemn the incorporation of Crimea, however, no new developments in how both countries discussed each other occurred. In figure 5 it can be observed Crimea's incorporation was discussed less in 2015, because as time passed other issues became more important. One remarkable finding in 2015 is that the Dutch prime minister for the first (and only) time called it an "illegal annexation" on 29 May 2015 (Dutch Ministry of General Affairs 2015c). He called it an "illegal annexation" in response to a question about three Dutch parliamentarians being put on a no-entry list by Russia. Possibly it was a slip of the tongue in his agitation when discussing the incident. Probably he did not call it so on other occasions because it is not protocol for a prime minister to give such an assessment on another country. There is one previous instance when the Ministry of General Affairs quoted him to have said so, but this was a translation error.¹⁰

The Dutch MFA often emphasized the international community called it the "Crimean annexation" as well (Dutch MFA 2015c, 5). In other words, the Netherlands highlights that it was not the only one to do so. Possibly this was done to bring a stronger case and prevent retaliatory actions.

Conclusion

The Netherlands and Russia differed in opinion regarding the legitimacy of Crimea's incorporation and the involvement of Russia in the process. Russia saw the incorporation as "the return of Crimea", while the Netherlands eventually called it an "illegal annexation".

¹⁰ In the Dutch translation of his English speech it is said 'without the conflict around the illegal annexation of Crimea and the destabilization of eastern Ukraine...' (*Zonder het conflict rond de annexatie van de Krim en de destabilisatie van Oost-Oekraïne...*) the passengers of MH17 would still have lived (Dutch Ministry of General Affairs 2014g). However, in the actual English speech he said they would still be alive "if not for the Crimea conflict..." (Dutch Ministry of General Affairs 2014h; UN 2014).

The Netherlands early on condemned the Russian “annexation of Crimea” by tacit consent in common EU-condemnation. It did so explicitly a few months later in June 2014. However, it was cautious in using the words “illegal annexation” in the second half of 2014. Possibly it did so for the same reason as it suspended its criticism on the Ukraine crisis, as it wanted Russia to cooperate on the MH17 repatriation and investigation. The Netherlands was not cautious in the words it used as it continued to call the incorporation an “illegal annexation”, but it was cautious in how often it said so. Additionally, it shows MH17 was not the only event that had a significant influence on how the Netherlands talked about Russia, since the statements concerning Crimea’s incorporation became more negative a month before the downing happened.

5.4 Shared neighbourhood

The issue of the ‘shared neighbourhood’¹¹ involves the shared EU-Russia neighbours. It analyses how both countries communicate on each other’s role there. It is not about the role in a specific country, such as Ukraine, but in the region as a whole. The topic includes how NATO’s role in the region is discussed, because this was often raised in the communiqués. Figure 6 shows the Netherlands and Russia discussed the shared neighbourhood in relation to the other country in only 4% of the communiqués in 2013, in a negative manner. In 2014 and 2015 the issue became more important and was raised in 21% and 23% of the communiqués, respectively. In both 2014 and 2015 the shared neighbourhood was discussed negatively with an average value close to -1.

Figure 6: Communiqués regarding the shared neighbourhood

Year	Percentage of communiqués in which discussed	Average value
2013	4%	-0.5
2014	21%	-0.73
2015	23%	-0.93

Only the Netherlands discussed the other country (Russia) regarding the ‘shared neighbourhood’ in these three years. Russia talked about its neighbours, but did not mention the Netherlands in its communiqués. This is probably because Russia did not believe the Netherlands played an important role in the shared neighbourhood. For the Netherlands, Russia was an important player in the shared neighbourhood. Hence, this

¹¹ The term ‘shared neighbourhood’ is used to designate the common EU-Russia neighbours as a whole, and not the individual countries or the ‘European Neighbourhood’ that includes the EU’s southern neighbours as well.

section discusses how the attitude of the Dutch government regarding Russia's role in the shared neighbourhood developed. However, in order to see how the Dutch view differed from the Russian view, the Russian position is briefly examined.

The Russian view¹²

The Russian government argued it wanted to cooperate with the EU. The Russian ambassador to the EU Chizhov argued, Russia wanted equal and shared responsibility of the shared neighbourhood (Chizhov 2015b). Russia has outlined the position that the Ukraine crisis and poor Russia-EU relations were caused by the EU's unwillingness to share this responsibility. The Russian government said the "unilateral EaP policy" did not include the Russian interests and largely provoked the Ukraine crisis (Russian Mission to the EU 2016a). Chizhov even argued the EaP was a soft-power substitute for NATO expansion in the post-Soviet space (Chizhov 2015b). Furthermore, he argued the EU's "imposing" of democracy in the region contributed to the instability (ibid.). Thus, the Russian government had quite a negative view of the EU's role in the shared neighbourhood. However, in bilateral Russian-Dutch relations these statements were not made in the public communiqués.

A more assertive Russia, but a partnership is needed

In the end of 2013 the Dutch MFA noted Russia became a more assertive geopolitical player in the world (Dutch MFA 2013d, 3). It argued that despite positive fields of cooperation, there was not enough mutual trust, mainly because of NATO-Russia relations (ibid., 5). In January 2014 both the EU and the Netherlands were critical of Russia's attitude towards the countries of the Eastern Partnership. However, the EU and the Netherlands were still seeking a new strategic partnership with Russia and stressed the importance of good relations (Dutch MFA 2014j).

Two months after Crimea's incorporation, the Netherlands was only slightly critical of Russia's actions in the shared neighbourhood and still wanted to build a partnership. In May 2014 the Dutch prime minister said he understood the worries of the Baltic States, but he did not believe Russia posed a real threat to the Baltics (Dutch Ministry of General Affairs 2014d). Nonetheless, the Netherlands sent extra forces to the Baltics as an additional NATO contribution, to reassure the eastern NATO partners (ibid.). In other words, the Dutch prime minister believed the Baltics and the shared neighbourhood wrongfully perceived Russia as a

¹² The statements in this paragraph are not included in the database, because they are not Russian statements on the Netherlands in specific and hence not the focus of this study.

threat. The extra forces were sent to acknowledge their concerns and improve the relations with these countries.

In June 2014 the Netherlands condemned improper (*“oneigenlijke”*) pressure from Russia on the shared neighbours of Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia (Dutch MFA 2014f). The Dutch government rejected the existence of dividing lines, where some countries belong to one sphere of influence or the other (ibid.). The Dutch government in the same communiqué recognized that Russia played a part in the shared neighbourhood and said that Russia is and will remain a strategic partner of the EU (ibid.). Thus, after the incorporation of Crimea in March 2014 the Netherlands became slightly more critical of Russia's role in the shared neighbourhood, but nevertheless encouraged the partnership.

Russian perceived concerns

The research shows the Netherlands discussed Russia's role in the shared neighbourhood more negatively in the months after the downing of MH17. So did they in September 2014 describe Russia as a threat to the shared neighbourhood and its own security (Dutch MFA 2014h). Thus, after the incorporation of Crimea the Dutch government was more critical of Russia's role in the shared neighbourhood, but still wanted to build a strategic partnership. After the downing of MH17 in July it became more critical and did not want a strategic partnership any longer.

In 2015, the Dutch government maintained its negative stance on Russia's role in the shared neighbourhood. It was the second most discussed topic of 2015, mentioned in 23% of the communiqués. In May 2015, the Netherlands said the security dimension had become more important in Russian-Dutch relations, because Russia had become more assertive and aggressive to its 'near abroad' (Dutch MFA 2015c, 4). It saw Russia as a threat to the stability of the European security architecture, and thus its own (ibid., 8).

Consistent with the increasing importance of security, the Netherlands was more outspoken against Russia's 'perception' of EU and NATO expansion as a threat. Russia saw the NATO and EU expansion towards its borders as a threat and leading to new dividing lines in Europe (Russian MFA 2016, par. 61, 70). The Dutch MFA argued that Russia's perceived threat was incorrect (Dutch MFA 2015c, 12). It argued, Russia had no right to dominate other sovereign countries and decide which organisations these countries are part of (ibid.). Furthermore, in March 2015 the Dutch minister of foreign affairs said Dutch people were rightfully concerned about Russia (Dutch MFA 2015L). The Dutch MFA argued that the

destabilizing actions of Russia in Ukraine and its assertive attitude had impact on the territorial security of the Netherlands and its NATO allies (Dutch MFA 2015h).

Together with this shift in opinion, another broader development can be observed. A shift occurred from a Russia-first policy in the region, towards a policy that favoured the countries of the shared neighbourhood. The Dutch foreign minister argued, that the EaP was more important than ever, because of Russia's incorporation of Crimea and its role in eastern Ukraine (Dutch MFA 2015m). However, he also emphasised closer cooperation between the EU and countries of the EaP should not be seen as a choice against Russia.

Finding the balance between deterrence and dialogue

In 2015 the discussion on the shared neighbourhood revolved around finding the balance between deterrence and dialogue. However, the communications focus more on deterrence against Russia than dialogue with it.

In February 2015, the Dutch minister of foreign affairs said safety guarantees were needed for Baltic NATO allies because of Russian provocations (Dutch MFA 2015k). The need for these guarantees increased because of Russian provocations, such as air space violations and its actions in Ukraine. These reassurances acted as a deterrence against Russian aggression. The Dutch MFA argued that the Russian assertiveness created a higher priority for collective security and therefore increased military strength and a higher military budget were needed (Dutch MFA 2015h).

Because the Netherlands considered Russia more as a threat, it had become more active in the shared neighbourhood. In September 2015 the Dutch MFA together with some other EU members promoted the plan to strengthen independent Russian-language media in eastern Europe, which was later implemented (Dutch MFA 2015g). It shows the EU, and the Netherlands as one of the initiators, had become more active in the shared neighbourhood, to counter the Russian state's 'disinformation' in these countries. Additionally, the Netherlands had sent more military troops to eastern Europe to reassure the eastern NATO allies (Dutch MFA 2015h).

However, in addition to deterrence, the Dutch government believed there should also be dialogue. It argued the NATO-Russia Council should meet again to prevent military incidents from happening (Dutch MFA 2015L). In December 2015 the Netherlands emphasized cooperation with Russia was needed on several issues, such as non-proliferation, the fight against terrorism, and reaching a peaceful solution in Syria (Dutch MFA 2015i). The Dutch government paid special attention to deterrence because of Russia's

increasing assertiveness. Probably it also mentioned dialogue because it did not want to completely break relations. By compartmentalizing the relations, the good cooperation in some areas prevented the rift in relations from worsening. Russia and the Netherlands were still cooperating on some issues and still trying to salvage what was left of their relations.

Conclusion

The shared neighbourhood was barely discussed in 2013. The Netherlands discussed it more since the incorporation of Crimea in March 2014. In 2014 and 2015 statements regarding Russia were negative, with the downing of MH17 as the turning point. Contrary to the general trend, the communiqués did not become more negative after Crimea's incorporation. A change occurred in who's concerns were considered 'perceived'. 'Perceived' indicating that the Netherlands did not see them as legitimate. First the concerns of Russian aggression in some countries of the shared neighbourhood were labelled 'perceived' by the Dutch government. After the MH17 crash these concerns were seen as a rightful threat and Russia's concerns of NATO and EU encroachment were labelled 'perceived'. This change in opinion, of which concerns were considered 'perceived', shows the Netherlands was no longer eager to appease Russia at all costs. It presents a shift in preference from Russia towards the countries of the shared neighbourhood. Because Russia was now seen as a threat there was a focus on creating deterrence against possible Russian aggression in the shared neighbourhood.

5.5 Diplomatic incidents

Incidents are not registered as one issue because they are temporary, not reoccurring over the years and each was discussed separately. Hence, incidents each have their separate label in the research. They are included in 'security' because the most discussed incidents revolved around security issues of nationals abroad. The main incidents were the Arctic Sunrise, the Russian diplomat arrest and the Dutch diplomat assault.¹³ Here each incident represents a sub-chapter, unlike the other chapters where it is structured by development. This is done because the manner in which both countries talked about each other developed differently on each incident.

¹³ A couple of other incidents that happened, but are not included here, are: the suicide of the Russian Dolmatov in a Dutch detention centre, the Crimean gold incident, extradition of Drinkman to the US, protestors in the Netherlands during official visits, and other miscellaneous incidents.

Mutually negative on the Arctic Sunrise

The Arctic Sunrise was a remarkable incident in the Russian-Dutch relations, discussed in 23% of the communiqués in 2013 with an average score of -0.27. Unlike the other incidents, here both sides were negative about each other. In September 2013, Russia arrested the crew of the Greenpeace-ship *the Arctic Sunrise* whilst protesting against deep-water oil extraction in the Arctic on charges of piracy and later charged them with vandalism. The ship sailed under the Dutch flag and had two Dutch crewmembers.

Russia and the Netherlands both spoke about each other negatively regarding the incident. The Dutch government filed an arbitration procedure against Russia because of the arrest of the ship's crew (Dutch MFA 2013d, 7). Russia on its turn did not accept the jurisdiction of the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea in this case (Russian MFA 2013c). When the court decided upon the release of the ship and its crew, Russia failed to comply. However, the crew was released shortly after on a general amnesty.

The position of the Dutch prime minister on the incident is remarkable, because he refused to be critical of Russia in a Q&A. He said Russia and the Netherlands were in conflict, as good friends sometimes have conflicts (Dutch Ministry of General Affairs 2013d). This statement is in line with the desire of the Dutch government to move past the incidents of 2013. That the crew fell under this general amnesty most likely was no coincidence. Presumably it was a way for the Russian government to save face, because this way it did not have to give in to the court's ruling and no longer was under pressure from the foreign governments to release them. Maybe the governments even made an agreement to settle it this way. It would explain the Dutch prime minister's stance, to refuse to say anything critical about it. The two 'friends' both got what they wanted: Russia could show it did not listen to what international courts had to say on its decisions and the Netherlands got its citizens freed.

In 2015 it was discussed again as the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruled that Russia had breached international law and had to compensate the Netherlands for it. Russia believed the court ruling had no jurisdiction and refused to pay damages (Russian MFA 2015a). In response, the Netherlands said Russia's reaction was disappointing ("*onder de maat*") (Dutch MFA 2015p).

Anger on Russian diplomat arrest

In September the Dutch police in The Hague arrested a Russian diplomat. Russia was livid about the event because it ignored the diplomatic immunity of the diplomat (Russian MFA 2013g). The arrest of the Russian diplomat was talked about in 17% of the communiqués in 2013, with an average value of 0.

The Russian minister of foreign affairs said the treatment of the diplomat was unacceptable and a gross violation of diplomatic conventions (Russian MFA 2013g). The Netherlands acknowledged it had breached international law with the arrest and apologized for it (Dutch Ministry of General Affairs 2013a; Russian MFA 2013b). The initial Russian anger can be seen as part of Russia's priority of protecting its compatriots and citizens abroad. Whenever the rights or safety of a Russian is compromised abroad, the Russian government is quick and firm in its reaction. An escalation of the incident was prevented because the Dutch government was fast to acknowledge its wrong and apologized.

Discontent on Dutch diplomat assault

A week after the incident with the Russian diplomat, a Dutch diplomat was assaulted in his house in Moscow. The assault on the Dutch diplomat caused less of a rouse in the communiqués with it being discussed in 6% of the cases in 2013, with a value of 0.33.

The Russian MFA stated its regrets regarding the incident and promised to "use all means necessary" to arrest the perpetrators (Russian MFA 2013a). The Dutch government deemed it positive that the Russian minister of foreign affairs wanted a criminal investigation into the incident (Dutch Ministry of General Affairs 2013c). The Dutch prime minister said he understood it raised questions on the broader Russian-Dutch relations, but emphasized relations were best served with constructive contacts (ibid.). This shows the Dutch government in 2013 was not critical of incidents in order to foster friendly relations.

In 2015 the incident was raised again and this time the Dutch government was more critical. The Dutch government said it was not content with the Russian efforts on the case. It believed it had not used all its abilities to identify the perpetrators (Dutch MFA 2015j). This change in attitude shows the Netherlands was no longer committed to move past incidents. It reflects a negative development in the Russian-Dutch relations over 2013-2015.

Conclusion

The incident of the Arctic Sunrise shows Russia did not like to be dictated to. It wanted to be a sovereign pole in a multi-polar world. Furthermore, the incident shows the Dutch government was pragmatic, as it spoke in a diplomatic manner to come to the desired result of freeing the Arctic Sunrise's crewmembers. The incidents of the Russian and Dutch diplomats reaffirm Russia's priority to protect the rights of its citizens abroad. For the Netherlands it was also important, but the Netherlands had a different tactic and was less openly critical of it. Finally, the incidents present relations in general had deteriorated by 2015, as the Netherlands in 2015 was more critical on the incidents of 2013.

6. Economic relations

6.1 Trade

The issues discussed within 'economic relations' are trade, energy and sanctions. Trade was mentioned often in the Russian-Dutch relations because both countries account for a substantial part of the other's total trade. The Netherlands was the largest export destination of Russia. In 2015, trade to the Netherlands accounted for 11.9% of the Russian exports, including the CIS countries (GKS 2016). However, for the Netherlands the Russian share in its trade was less significant. Dutch trade to Russia accounted for 1% of the Dutch total exports and Russian trade to the Netherlands accounted for 3.65% of Dutch total imports in 2015 (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek 2016). The discussion about trade does not include energy and the sanctions because they were discussed in the communiqués as separate issues. Figure 7 shows trade was discussed positively in all the three years.

Figure 7: Communiqués regarding trade

Year	Percentage of communiqués in which discussed	Average value
2013	23%	1
2014	4%	1
2015	5%	0.67

Business as less usual

Trade was raised in 23% of the communiqués of 2013. In all of them it was discussed positively, with an average value of 1. In the communiqués of both countries the importance of each other's trade and investments were praised and the prospects to continuing growth were welcomed (Kremlin 2013c; Dutch MFA 2013d). Trade has this positive value because it is mutually beneficial. As figure 7 shows, trade was discussed in a relatively high percentage of communiqués in 2013. At the time, the countries were still committed to maintaining good relations, which changed in 2014.

Trade was not a controversial issue, as both countries wanted their economy to grow. However, some journalists asked the Dutch prime minister how trade influenced the willingness to be critical on Russia (Dutch Ministry of General Affairs 2013e). Following the logic that if a country would be too critical of another country, the latter could impose restrictive trade measures as a punishment and thereby prevent or halt criticism. Journalists

were the only ones in the communications who raised the potential use of trade in this punitive matter (Dutch Ministry of General Affairs 2013e). The government officials denied trade played a role in other areas. According to the Dutch prime minister, trade was no impediment to raising the human rights situation in Russia. He argued, because of good trade relations it was possible to change the human rights situation (ibid.).

Russia and the Netherlands still spoke positively about each other regarding trade in 2014 and 2015, when relations overall had deteriorated. It was spoken of as something separate from the sanctions and the Dutch government emphasized it continued to support Dutch companies to do business in Russia (Dutch MFA 2015c, 12).

Moreover, the Dutch government still talked positively about Russia when in the beginning of August 2015 Dutch flowers exported to Russia were being destroyed. According to Russia this was because of safety concerns, since a potentially dangerous bug was found in them (RT 2015). The Dutch prime minister did not speak out against Russia on the issue (Dutch Ministry of General Affairs 2015a). The destruction of the flowers most likely had to do with the Dutch desire to set up an international tribunal to prosecute those responsible for the downing of MH17. Russia ordered the destruction of Dutch flowers during the time the Netherlands tried to establish such a tribunal through the UN. As argued above, the attempt to establish a tribunal deteriorated bilateral relations, and the burning of Dutch flowers can be seen as retaliation for trying to establish the tribunal. The Dutch prime minister stated he did not see any connection between the destruction of Dutch flowers and the attempt of the Netherlands to create a tribunal (ibid.). However, it is claimed that Russia bans products as a political instrument more often (Cenusa, et al. 2014). Russia usually justifies these bans under the guise of public safety, claiming some products from a country are a danger to public health. It is noteworthy the Dutch prime minister refused discussing this as a possibility. It suggests the Netherlands was still willing to cooperate and cultivate good relations regarding trade.

Conclusion

The discussion regarding trade developed differently from all other topics, since Russia and the Netherlands discussed trade between the two positively in all the years. That this always-positive subject was discussed less in 2014 and 2015 indicates relations had deteriorated, even though the statements concerning the subject had not. Thus, it was still 'business as usual', but less usual than before March 2014. The continued positive communiqués regarding trade probably were because trade was still important for the

Netherlands, and protecting the Dutch business interests abroad is one of the MFA's key tasks. However, promoting economic interests and being critical can go together. A large trade dependence does however, create a vulnerability in dealing with another country. At what point are political interests more important than economic interests, in the case these are conflicting? The discussions about energy and sanctions give insight into this question.

6.2 Energy

Energy (gas and oil) made up a big chunk of the Russian exports to the Netherlands (Dutch MFA 2013d, 7). Energy is of special importance for the relations because it is crucial for security of the state and big business interests are involved. Additionally, a "significant" part of Russian oil is transported through Dutch ports (Kremlin 2013b). In 2013 the discussion on energy was positive with an average score of 1.33. Figure 8 shows the statements regarding energy became less positive in 2014 and this continued in 2015.

Figure 8: Communiqués regarding energy

Year	Percentage of communiqués in which discussed	Average value
2013	6%	1.33
2014	11%	0.17
2015	7%	0

Welcome cooperation

In 2013 both sides were pleased with cooperation in the energy sector and welcomed the possibility of growth (Kremlin 2013b; Dutch MFA 2013c). The Russian president said the Dutch company *Gasunie* was an important partner in the *Nord Stream* gas pipeline from Russia to Germany (Kremlin 2013b), which bypasses Ukraine and other eastern European countries and makes supply more reliable. He praised the "very positive and business-oriented relations" with the Dutch company Shell, which was an important player in energy projects in Russia (ibid.). Thus, in 2013 business was growing and relations were friendly. In 2014 this changed with Russian involvement in Ukraine.

Departmental discord to decrease dependence

The Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs wanted to decrease the EU's gas dependency on Russia, because of Russia's use of gas as a pressure tool (Dutch MFA 2014a). The Dutch minister of foreign affairs even called energy the biggest strategic vulnerability of the EU and

argued the Ukraine crisis showed reducing this vulnerability should be a top-priority (Dutch MFA 2014h). However, the dependence works both ways, and one could argue Russia is dependent on the EU for buying its oil and gas. The EU was and still is the most important consumer of Russian gas. Therefore Russia called creating an uninterrupted supply to EU markets a priority (Russian Mission to the EU 2016b). Bypassing eastern Europe with the Nord Stream would increase Russia's ability to use it as a political tool in that region, because its gas supply and relations with western Europe would not be hurt then.

Not all statements in the communiqués were negative or neutral. In April and May 2014 Russia send letters to EU members notifying them of Ukraine's gas debt. The Dutch government did not see this as contributing to a solution of the current problems between Russia and Ukraine (Dutch MFA 2014d). However, it appreciated Russia was willing to talk about stabilizing the economy of Ukraine and its willingness to talk on the gas supply (ibid.). In this communiqué there was nothing on the subject of Russia's role in Ukraine, because the different departments were not in agreement. This document was published by the Dutch MFA, but written by the Ministry of Economic Affairs in cooperation with the MFA. It shows there was a difference of opinion between ministries of the same government on how to deal with Russia.

The year 2015 saw a mixture of positive and negative communiqués on energy. The Dutch MFA continued to state its desire to decrease EU's energy dependency on Russia, because Russia showed willingness to use it as a political instrument, as it did so in its relations with Ukraine (Dutch MFA 2015n). At the same time, the Dutch government argued energy was a constructive element in relations (Dutch MFA 2015e). Again there was a difference in how ministries talked about approaching Russia. In July 2015 the state-owned Dutch company Gasunie made a deal (declaration of intent) with the Russian Gazprom (Dutch MFA 2015a). This was contrary to the statements of the EU and Dutch MFA to diminish dependence on a single supplier, which EU-wide is Russia. The Dutch Ministry of Economic Affairs¹⁴ argued it did not act against the EU's agreements, since the Netherlands was not dependent on Russian gas and it tried to secure energy provision for the Dutch people (Dutch MFA 2015a). While it was true the Netherlands was not dependent, it would raise EU dependence on Russia even further and went against the statements of the Dutch MFA to decrease the EU's dependence. Possibly, economic growth was a greater motivator for the Ministry of Economic Affairs than reducing dependence on Russia, since the Netherlands wanted to become a gas-roundabout for northwest Europe, for which Russian

¹⁴ Communiqué published by the Dutch MFA.

gas is an important source (Gas Unie 2017; Dutch Ministry of Economic Affairs 2014). Furthermore, big business interests were involved. Russian oil and gas were important for trade (re-export) in the Netherlands and some Dutch energy companies (e.g. Shell and Gasunie) have considerable interests in the Russian energy market (Dutch Ministry of Economic Affairs 2014).

Conclusion

Just as the general trend, the content of the communiqués on energy was positive in 2013 and deteriorated in 2014 and 2015. Since the Ukraine crisis in 2014 it became much less positive. The Dutch MFA together with the other EU countries wanted to decrease the EU's energy dependence on Russia, to reduce this 'vulnerability'. Examining the communiqués regarding energy has shown a departmental difference within the Dutch government. For the Dutch MFA political interests (of long-term stability and security) were more important than short to medium-term economic interests. For the Dutch Ministry of Economic Affairs economic interests (growth and stable gas supply in the future) were more important.

6.3 Sanctions

Sanctions are an interesting topic because in this area economic interests clash with political interests. In 2014 the EU imposed sanctions on Russia in reaction to its role in Ukraine. They exist of three tiers. The first tier of sanctions, implemented on 6 March 2014, is the suspension of bilateral talks between the EU and Russia on a visa agreement and the New Agreement that would replace the 1994 PCA (European Council 2017). The second tier are restrictive matters of travel bans and asset freezes of Russian and Crimean officials responsible for actions threatening the territorial integrity of Ukraine, imposed on 17 March 2014 after the incorporation of Crimea. The list of those involved has grown over time to 146 persons and 37 entities at the time of writing (ibid.). The third tier of sanctions consists of restrictive measures in specific Russian sectors, imposed on 31 July 2014. These include restrictions on capital, weapons and oil extraction technologies (European Council 2017). Additionally, there is a ban on importing products from Crimea, imposed in June 2014.

Note the statements regarding sanctions are discussed, not the fact the sanctions are implemented. Discussing sanctions positively means wanting them eased or lifted; when they are agreed with as they are, they are neutral; when they are considered not strict enough, it means the topic is discussed negatively. A communiqué is assessed as being

‘positive’ when it aids in building constructive Russian-Dutch relations and ‘negative’ when it is detrimental to such relations.

Figure 9: Communiqués regarding sanctions

Year	Percentage of communiqués in which discussed	Average value
2013	-	-
2014	26%	0
2015	11%	-0.71

The sanctions imposed by the EU on Russia are a topic in which a shift in attitude is clear. Sanctions are the second most discussed topic of 2014, talked about in 26% of the communiqués. This is because they were implemented in that year, while in 2015 it was the question whether they should be extended or not. Figure 9 shows the Dutch government talked about Russia and the sanctions more negatively in 2015 than 2014. The average value went from a neutral 0 in 2014 to negative in 2015 with a score of -0.71.

Wary of implementation

Within 2014 a change occurred as well, with August as the turning point. The Dutch government never stated its disagreement with the sanctions policy of the EU. However, it made remarks that indicate a difference in opinion. Initially it was wary about imposing new sanctions and emphasized dialogue was the solution. This can be interpreted as the Dutch government resisting the use of sanctions against Russia.

On 14 March the Dutch prime minister said the Netherlands did everything to prevent entering the second and third stage of the sanctions (Dutch Ministry of General Affairs 2014b). Meaning, he hoped Russia de-escalates the conflict and sanctions were not necessary. However, it shows the Dutch government was still reluctant to impose sanctions when troops had already entered Crimea. This poses the question as to whether trade interests played a role in this, because the Netherlands did not want its own business interests to be hurt.

The Dutch MFA on the 9th of July (eight days before the MH17 crash) still stressed no rash decisions should be made to expand the economic sanctions (Dutch MFA 2014c). Thus it still was against further sanctions. It believed the conflict could only be solved by a political agreement and sanctions would not contribute to this. However, in August 2014 the Dutch government changed its stance and argued the sanctions imposed were not strict enough.

Not strict enough sanctions

On 29 August 2014 the Dutch prime minister said possible extra sanctions should not be excluded (Dutch Ministry of General Affairs 2014e). This is a big difference from when he said the EU should be wary to impose new sanctions. For example, the Netherlands already supported the weapons embargo against Russia, but since August 2014 believed the embargo was not strict enough (Dutch MFA 2014g). While the Dutch government said this shift had nothing to do with the downing of MH17, it changed its positions on sanctions shortly after this incident. Furthermore, the Dutch MFA on 6 August said the MH17 crash speeded the EU's decision-making process of the sanctions (Dutch MFA 2014g). Apparently, the Netherlands became more in favour of sanctions against Russia after the MH17 crash.

In 2015 this trend continued and the Dutch government did not exclude additional sanctions. There was however, an additional point that dialogue had to remain open. The Dutch government believed sanctions had to continue because Russia played a crucial role in the conflict in Ukraine, but dialogue had to stay open to ensure Russia implemented the Minsk Agreements (Dutch MFA 2015o). Thus, the crash did not lead to a total break in relations.

However, the statements regarding the sanctions became more negative when a list of banned European politicians appeared. In reaction to the sanctions of the EU, Russia banned several European politicians from entering the country, including three Dutch parliamentarians. The Dutch prime minister condemned ("*verwerpen*") the countersanctions and emphasized the difference in reasoning. He argued the EU imposed sanctions because of the 'illegal annexation' of Crimea and continued interference of Russia in eastern Ukraine, while Russia imposed these sanctions without legal grounds (Dutch Ministry of General Affairs 2015c).

The Russian government argued the sanctions imposed by the EU were illegal, since the UNSC did not approve them (Russian MFA 2014b). Moreover, Russia argued its counter measures were legal, because they were a defensive reaction on the EU's illegal sanctions. Russia argued its ban on agricultural products from the EU were in fact not sanctions, but a measure to protect and compensate for the Russian agricultural producers that were hit by the EU's sanctions (Chizhov 2015a). Assessing the legal validity of these arguments is not in the scope of this thesis, but the open disagreement over the sanctions shows relations had deteriorated. The legal validity was debated in politics and not (solely) in court.

Conclusion

The Dutch position on sanctions shows an interesting development, because it differs from the general trend in relations. Initially, the Netherlands wanted to ease the sanctions, even when Crimea was annexed. Possibly Dutch business interests were more important than condemning Russia's actions. Once the primary national interest to protect its citizens was violated, the Dutch government was willing to compromise on the secondary national interest of business interests. From that moment onwards, it became more in favour of sanctions. Additionally, the more critical Russia became in 2015 of the objectivity of the investigation into the downing of MH17, the more the sanctions were openly debated in politics.

7. Ethical concerns

7.1 Human rights

Human rights were the most discussed topic in the government communiqués in 2013. It was discussed in 35% of the selected communiqués of 2013. Both Russia and the Netherlands have specific interests regarding human rights. For the Netherlands these were LGBT rights (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender). The specific LGBT rights were raised in 21% of the 2013 communications, always on Dutch initiative. Russia attached great value to compatriot rights, which concerns ethnic Russians and Russian speakers abroad. According to Shevel (2011, 195), the term ‘compatriot’ is made vague deliberately in order to apply it arbitrarily when it suits Russia’s needs, although it often applies to orthodox ethnic Russians living in post-Soviet countries. It differs from protecting the Russian nationals abroad, mentioned in ‘diplomatic incidents’. Compatriots involve the rights of ethnic Russians or Russian speakers abroad who do not necessarily have Russian nationality.

Figure 10: Communiqués regarding human rights

Year	Percentage of communiqués in which discussed	Average value
2013	35%	0.12
2014	8%	0.25
2015	11%	-0.86

The average score of ‘human rights’ was 0.12 (LGBT -0.40) in 2013. This is mostly because the Netherlands communicated neutrally regarding human rights in general, while it made negative statements regarding the LGBT situation in Russia. It should be noted this study is not an analysis of the human rights situation in both countries. It is an analysis of how they viewed each other’s record and how vocal they were about it.

Active – responsive

There was a difference in how active the governments were in raising human rights. Human rights were almost always raised on Dutch initiative. The Dutch parliament put much pressure on the Dutch government to discuss human rights with Russia. Therefore, the

communiqués discussing human rights were mostly of the Dutch government, in reaction to questions by the Dutch parliament.¹⁵

The specific issue raised most frequently by the Dutch side was the Russian law on prohibiting ‘propaganda of non-traditional relations’. The Dutch minister of foreign affairs asked the Russian Duma not to approve this “anti gay-propaganda” law (Dutch MFA 2013e). A minister asking a foreign parliament to not adopt a law is quite drastic. However, the minister added Russia had to respect its international obligations (ibid.). He did not attack the law directly, which made these communiqués less critical.

The Russian government usually discussed human rights as a response to an incident or in reaction to when the Netherlands raised it. For example, when the Russian minister of foreign affairs was asked about the rights of LGBT community in Russia, he raised the situation of Russian compatriots (in this case Russian speaking) in the Baltics whose rights were infringed (Russian MFA 2013i). The Russian minister of foreign affairs in 2013 raised its concerns on human rights in the Netherlands, in which it emphasized “nobody is perfect” (Russian MFA 2013f). The Russian MFA said there was an organization for paedophiles in the Netherlands and he raised a Dutch oppositional party’s restrictive position on women (ibid.). The Russian MFA said it would respect the Netherlands if its society wanted to live this way (ibid.). Thereby he suggested he wanted the Netherlands also to accept Russia’s choices of its society. It shows Russia was willing to listen to Dutch concerns, but was not willing to change anything.

Importance of international organizations

Both countries talked about human rights concerns, but they did not condemn it. They mainly ‘exchanged views’. For example, when the Dutch minister of foreign affairs asked about the human rights situation, the Russian minister of foreign affairs emphasized the two discussed human rights and agreed countries cannot lecture each other (Russian MFA 2013i). Furthermore, both agreed on the importance of a shared approach under international obligations (ibid.).

In 2013 the Dutch government said it did not want to force its values on Russian society and it acknowledged the differences (Dutch MFA 2013d, 2). The goal of dialogue on human rights was to remind each other of the international obligations Russia had entered in to (ibid.). An example is when, in response to a critical report of Amnesty International,

¹⁵ The study uses answers to parliamentary questions, because it shows the government’s (MFA’s) position on certain topics that are often controversial, thus it says more on the relations. Only the government’s positions are used and not the introduction or questions themselves.

the Dutch MFA did not judge the human rights situation in Russia itself. It acknowledged the concerns of the report, but focused its statements on the international obligations of Russia (Dutch MFA 2013a). In one communiqué, in April 2013, the Netherlands said homophobia and lack of acceptance of homosexuality was not new in Russia. The Netherlands argued, it therefore was not surprising that the ban on 'promoting non-traditional relations' or "anti gay-propaganda law" had common support (Dutch MFA 2013b). This shows the Dutch MFA tried to create understanding for Russia's decisions and different view. It was a rhetorically positive statement. However, the Netherlands was still critical of the LGBT situation and raised it in meetings with Russia, as when the Russian president visited the Netherlands on 8 April 2013 (Kremlin 2013a).

In 2014 the statements continued that the two countries could not lecture each other on how to act. However, in 2014 human rights were no longer discussed the most. It was only mentioned in the beginning of 2014. The prime minister believed by engaging relations in different areas the human rights situation could be improved (Dutch Ministry of General Affairs 2014a). He did not give his opinion on the human rights situation itself.

Deteriorating relations between Russia and international institutions

In 2015 the communications on human rights were more negative than the year before. The average score of 2015 was -0.86, as can be seen in figure 10. In 2015 the Dutch government stated that promoting human rights in Russia was still of crucial importance (Dutch MFA 2015c, 7). It emphasized the international agreements Russia had committed itself to. Possibly the Netherlands did so, because this way it took less responsibility for statements, and carried less risk of retaliation. An alternative explanation could be it believed that reminding Russia of its agreed obligations was the most effective way to improve the human rights situation.

However, relations between Russia and the international organizations Russia is part of were under strain, which made it more difficult to promote human rights through these international organizations. The relations between the Council of Europe and Russia were under pressure. After the incorporation of Crimea, the Council of Europe suspended Russia's voting right in the Council. In reaction to this Russia withdrew from the Council's Parliamentary Assembly. On 14 July 2015 the Russian Constitutional Court decided the Russian constitution takes precedence over the rulings of the European Court of Human Rights. The Dutch government believed human rights were under pressure because of this decision (Dutch MFA 2015b).

Conclusion

The Netherlands and Russia had differing views on human rights. Especially the Netherlands was actively raising its human rights concerns, while Russia raised its human rights concerns in response to when the Netherlands did so, or when an incident had occurred with a Russian compatriot. It reaffirms Russia's priority to protect its compatriots, in addition to protecting Russian citizens abroad.

Despite the topic being discussed so often, it was an exchange of views and both countries did not believe the other had to change. A possible explanation of the Dutch insistence on the international obligations of Russia, is that it was a tactic to raise the concerns without offending Russia. Russia could hardly be angry with the Netherlands for reminding Russia of its own promises.

In 2013 both countries wanted to maintain the existing good relations, despite their human rights differences. However, in 2015 the relations between Russia and the international institutions that ensure human rights got worse. Similarly so, did the Russian-Dutch relations deteriorate. Because Russian-Dutch relations in general had deteriorated and the international institutions through which the Netherlands sought to influence human rights in Russia had become less effective there, both had reasons to make more negative statements on each other regarding human rights. Unlike the general trend in relations, the communiqués concerning human rights did not deteriorate in 2014 at the moments of Crimea's incorporation or the downing of MH17. However, human rights did get raised less since then.

8. Conclusion

The main question of this thesis is: how did the different issues of Russian-Dutch relations develop in the communiqués published by both governments over the period 2013-2015? The four sub-questions to answer this are: what are the most discussed key issues of Russian-Dutch relations? How can these issues be analysed? What was the general trend in Russian-Dutch relations? How do the most discussed topics relate to the general trend in the relations?

This study examined all the communiqués from the Russian and Dutch MFA and their head of state, or government, published over the period 2013-2015, in order to examine what the key issues were for both governments. The issues discussed in more than 15% of one year's communiqués are deemed 'key issues' in this study. These are the topics discussed above.

A value was given to each communiqué and each topic, from '-2' (very negative) to '+2' (very positive), in order to analyse how the issues developed over time. It is assessed as being 'positive' when it aids in building a constructive partnership and 'negative' when it is detrimental for such a partnership. From reading all the different communiqués, connections can be drawn between the developments of the different topics and the general trend in Russian-Dutch relations. This method for selection and analysis resulted into four main findings, which answer the last two sub-questions.

The first finding is that, overall the two countries talked about each other in a more negative way in the communiqués and this thus confirms the relations in general had deteriorated. This is confirmed by the general trend, which shows that the content of the communiqués became more negative after the incorporation of Crimea in March 2014, and again shortly after the downing of MH17 in July 2014. In 2013 the average value of all the communiqués was 0.13, in 2014 -0.25 and in 2015 it was -0.66.

The second main finding of the research is that the issues developed distinctly from each other, and changed at different points in time. In other words, they did not all exactly follow the general trend. The topics that were addressed more negatively from the moment of Crimea's incorporation were: the Ukraine crisis, energy, and after three months, also Crimea's incorporation itself. After the downing of MH17 the topics 'the shared neighbourhood' and 'sanctions' were discussed more negatively. The discussion on other subjects became negative in the beginning of 2015. These were 'MH17', 'human rights' and

‘diplomatic incidents’. The discussion on trade, however, is one topic that did not deteriorate.

It is remarkable however, that communiqués regarding ‘MH17’ and ‘Crimea’s incorporation’ did not begin to deteriorate until a later stage, considering they were the main events that caused antagonism between the two countries. The Netherlands initially discussed Russia and MH17 positively, probably because it wanted to ensure cooperation to repatriate the bodies. Regarding the Netherlands and MH17, Russia’s initial response was positive. However, this could be explained by the fact that Russia wanted to ensure an independent investigation. Russia became more critical of the Netherlands, regarding MH17, when it felt it was unjustly held to be complicit in the downing. The Netherlands did not call Crimea’s incorporation ‘an illegal annexation’ until many other countries had said so, and it believed Russia did not de-escalate the conflict in eastern Ukraine. Why the content of the communiqués changed is explained by the third key finding.

The third main finding is that security became a more important issue than economic interests. The literature until 2011 argued trade was the most important for the Netherlands; at this time security was not an issue. The Netherlands started to see Russia as a threat to the stability of the EU and its neighbours, and because of this, security began to play a more significant role in the Russian-Dutch relations. It could be said that, the Netherlands in 2013 held a Russia-first policy in the shared neighbourhood, where good relations with countries of the shared neighbourhood were possible as long as they were not at the expense of good relations with Russia. Since the beginning of 2015 this was no longer the case, and the EU and the Netherlands chose a ‘shared neighbourhood-first’ policy. This was probably done in the interest of those who really came first – the EU countries themselves. For an EU (and the Netherlands)-first policy they see a stable neighbourhood as essential, because it limits migration, secures border integrity and fosters economic growth. Russia was seen as a destabilizer in this region, and therefore was now counterbalanced by Dutch (and EU) condemnation, sanctions and increased military spending.

For the Netherlands the effects of an unstable shared neighbourhood became painfully real when MH17 was downed and 196 Dutch nationals deceased. This was a breach of the primary responsibility of the Dutch government – ensuring the safety of its citizens. It caused the Netherlands to re-evaluate its priorities and return the focus to its primary national interests. Together with this, repatriation of bodies and technical and criminal investigation of the crash became important. When Russia was critical of the objectivity and quality of the investigation, the bilateral relations deteriorated further. It was a strike

against one of the Dutch new top interests, to prosecute those responsible for the downing of MH17. When the priority to ensure the safety of its citizens is in conflict with the priority of economic interests, the former takes precedence, as can be seen in the Dutch position on sanctions.

Trade is a mutually beneficial area, but since the downing of MH17 the Dutch government became more in favour of sanctions towards Russia. The sanctions were a political tool in order to pressure Russia to deescalate the conflict in eastern Ukraine and to deter Russia from further destabilizing the shared neighbourhood. The Dutch sanctions and Russia's counter sanctions hurt both their economies, which shows political interests were more significant than economic interests. However, economic interests were not completely neglected, as the discussion on trade in general remained positive.

The fourth and final key finding is that ethical issues were mainly discussed when relations were friendly. The literature that analysed the relations until 2011, said the Netherlands raised ethical issues regardless of strong trade relations. The research has shown ethical concerns were raised at the same time trade was flourishing, and raising ethical concerns was no impediment to trade. However, only when relations were friendly, were ethical concerns raised. Furthermore, this was a mere exchange of views and both countries did not take the other's concerns to heart. When the relations were tense, communiqués focused on the difficult parts that strained the relations, and not on ethical concerns.

Thus in answer to the main question, it can be seen that the different issues of Russian-Dutch relations fluctuated, but the general trend, as revealed by the communiqués, shows a significant falling off after Crimea's incorporation and the downing of MH17. Due to these two events, security became more important in Russian-Dutch relations and the focus returned to the primary national interest to protect the state and its citizens.

Putting these findings in Leonard and Popescu's categories, as were discussed in the literature review, the Netherlands falls somewhere between the category of a very 'frosty pragmatic' or even a 'new cold warrior' in the period 2013-2015. The two were critical of each other, national leaders have ceased contact, diplomatic disputes were common and were followed with political and economic reactions – however, there was still dialogue between the two countries.

Russia's position towards the Netherlands reflects its desire to become a great power in a multi-polar world, wherefore it challenged the status quo. In this multi-polar world, the Netherlands was not one of the great poles and therefore often not included in

discussions on international topics. However, the research did not find any signs of a 'divide and rule' tactic towards the Netherlands. MH17 was the most important issue for Russia in which it mentioned the Netherlands. It increasingly felt it was being unjustly held responsible for the crash. The bilateral incidents were the second most discussed topics of Russia. Thus, the times the Netherlands mattered to Russia were reactions to incidents and few of its communiqués were on the structural features of the Russian-Dutch relations.

More could have been said about Russia's position towards the Netherlands if Russian-language sources were included, which is interesting for future research. Additionally, future research could examine other sources, such as other ministries, media or include public opinion. The most important contribution of this thesis is the detailed documentation of developments in Russian-Dutch relations and the less subjective method to assess this, where other academic articles and expert views were based on experience and more arbitrary assessment of the developments. The numerical operationalization to assess developments in the communiqués helps to study relations less arbitrarily. Additionally, this study contributes to academic research on Russian-Dutch relations, which was underdeveloped.

The Russian-Dutch relations deteriorated over the period 2013-2015 and were no longer 'mutually beneficial', as was stated in the 2013 Russian Foreign Policy Concept. Neither has it been 'business as usual', since they have become more critical of each other in the communiqués. There were no signs the countries wanted to move past the difficult relations in the end of 2015, and one could say this unusual business of negative communiqués has become the new 'business as usual'.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Annual scores all topics

2013

Topic	Percentage of communiqués	Average value
Human rights	35%	0,12
Russia-Netherlands Year ¹⁶	25%	1,17
Trade	23%	1,00
Incident; Arctic Sunrise	23%	-0,27
LGBT	21%	-0,40
Incident; Russian diplomat arrest	17%	0,00
Energy	6%	1,33
Importance international organizations	6%	1,00
Incident; Dutch diplomat assault	6%	0,33
Culture	6%	1,33
Incident; Dolmatov	6%	0,33
NGO foreign agent legislation	4%	-0,50
Shared neighbourhood	4%	-0,50
EU-Russia	4%	-0,50
Common history	4%	1,50
Magnitsky	2%	-1,00
Environment	2%	1,00
Ukraine crisis	2%	0,00
Migration	2%	0,00
Asylum	2%	0,00
Incident; burglary	2%	0,00
Investments	2%	2,00
Syria	2%	-1,00

2014

Topic	Percentage of communiqués	Average value
Ukraine crisis	34%	-0,50
Sanctions	26%	0,00
MH17	23%	0,25
Crimea	21%	-1,00
Shared neighbourhood	21%	-0,73
Energy	11%	0,17

¹⁶ The topic 'Russia-Netherlands Year' is used as a context with little content. It discusses the relations in general. Hence it is not used as a chapter in this thesis.

LGBT	9%	0,60
Olympics	8%	0,75
Human rights	8%	0,25
EU-Russia	8%	0,00
Importance international organisations	4%	0,00
Trade	4%	1,00
Russia-Netherlands Year	4%	1,50
Opening new consulate in the Netherlands	2%	1,00
Extradition Drinkman	2%	-1,00
Incident; Crimean gold	2%	-1,00
Incident; airspace violation	2%	0,00
Asylum	2%	0,00
Migration	2%	0,00
Culture	2%	2,00

2015

Topic	Percentage of communiqués	Average value
MH17	31%	-0,63
Shared neighbourhood	23%	-0,93
Ukraine crisis	16%	-0,50
Syria	13%	0,00
Sanctions	11%	-0,71
Human rights	11%	-0,86
Crimea	8%	-1,00
Energy	7%	0,00
Trade	5%	0,67
Russian counter sanctions	3%	-1,50
Incident; Arctic Sunrise	3%	-1,00
Incident; Crimean gold	2%	0,00
Extradition Drinkman	2%	-1,00
Incident; Dutch diplomat assault	2%	-1,00
Migration	2%	0,00
Asylum	2%	0,00
LGBT	2%	-1,00
Russia-Netherlands Year	2%	-1,00
Fight against international terrorism	2%	0,00