

# **The impact of the downing of Flight MH17 on Dutch foreign policy towards Russia**



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Master thesis

6 August 2020

International Relations: European Union Studies

Faculty of Humanities

# Abstract

The downing of Flight MH17 in July 2014 constitutes a major crisis and a critical juncture in Dutch foreign policy towards Russia. This critical juncture created the conditions under which a significant change in Dutch foreign policy towards Russia became possible as institutional constraints were suddenly loosened. By using process tracing this thesis studies the changes in Dutch foreign policy and the causal mechanism behind them following the downing of the airplane. The Dutch government initially took on a cautious position as it was hoping Russia could be convinced to cooperate with the investigation. However as the Kremlin continually spreads disinformation about Flight MH17 and consistently seeks to discredit and undermine the investigations, the Dutch government started to use more confrontational and less accommodating diplomatic tools. This is evidenced by the way in which the Dutch government exposed the foiled OPCW hacking attempt by the GRU as well as how it criticised Russia's behaviour surrounding the downing of Flight MH17.

## **Acknowledgements**

First of all I would like to express my gratitude to Dr Maxine David for the excellent supervision that allowed me to go beyond anything I have ever done in my academic career. Second I would like to thank my partner Yaroslav Kozak for the support provided while I was writing my master thesis. Finally, I would like to thank my former colleagues at the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Ukraine, who were eager to discuss my ideas for my thesis with me.

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# Abbreviations and acronyms

AIVD – General Intelligence and Security Service of the Netherlands

CEE – Central and Eastern Europe

DPR – the so-called Donetsk People’s Republic

DSB – Dutch Safety Board

EU – European Union

FSB – Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation

GRU – Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation

JIT – Joint Investigation Team

LPR – the so-called Luhansk People’s Republic

MH17 – Malaysia Airlines Flight 17

MIVD - Military Intelligence and Security Service of the Netherlands

OSCE – Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe

RT – Russia Today

SBU – Security Service of Ukraine

UN – United Nations

UNSC – United Nations Security Council

# 1 Introduction

The downing of Flight Malaysia Airlines 17 was one of the defining moments for the Netherlands in the 2010s. Flight Malaysia Airlines 17 (hereafter Flight MH17) was a scheduled passenger flight from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur, which crashed in the Donetsk region in Eastern Ukraine on 17 July 2014, killing all passengers on board (Dutch Safety Board 2015, 27). The Netherlands was deeply affected by the crash as 193 out of the 298 passengers were Dutch citizens (ibid.). In the Donetsk and Luhansk regions (or Donbas), Russian-backed separatists were and still are engaged in an armed conflict with the Ukrainian Army. Soon after Flight MH17 crashed, it became clear that this was no mere accident, with the separatists and Russia being suspected of shooting down the airplane (UNSC 2014A, 5-6). Investigations later confirmed that flight MH17 was shot down by a surface-to-air missile launching system belonging to the Russian Armed Forces (NOS 2018A). The fact that the Russian government is responsible for the downing of a civilian airliner with mostly Dutch passengers had a tremendous impact on Dutch-Russian relations. The hypothesis put forward in this thesis is that the downing of Flight MH17 constitutes a turning point or critical juncture which would enable the Dutch government to significantly alter its foreign policy in response to this incident. Specifically, the research question of this thesis is **how did the downing of Flight MH17 change Dutch foreign policy towards Russia?**

Researching the consequences of the downing of Flight MH17 will provide meaningful insights into Dutch foreign policy, which, as will be shown below, remains an understudied subject. Furthermore, the case of the downing of Flight MH17 elucidates how the Netherlands, as a relatively safe and small country, becomes a key player in a severe crisis and adjusts its foreign policy in response to it. The downing of Flight MH17 was a major crisis for the Netherlands that shook it to its core (Melissen 2014). In 2013, during the anniversary of 400 years of Dutch-Russian relations The Hague had gone to “great lengths to keep the peace with Putin”<sup>1</sup> but the downing of the Flight MH17 as a major crisis could trigger policy change and therefore constitutes a critical juncture in Dutch foreign policy towards Russia (ibid.).

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<sup>1</sup> The Dutch-Russian 400 years of relations anniversary was marred by diplomatic incidents including the arrest of a Russian diplomat in The Hague and the subsequent assault on a Dutch diplomat in Moscow (NOS 2013A; Koens 2013). The visit of President Putin to the Netherlands also sparked protests over the human rights situation in Russia (NOS 2013B). In the end the Dutch government ended the diplomatic issues by apologising to the Russian government (NOS 2013C).

It is the purpose of this thesis to analyse how exactly the downing of Flight MH17 changed Dutch foreign policy towards Russia. This thesis also seeks to identify the causal mechanism behind these changes and examine whether the impact of the downing of Flight MH17 is equally felt across different spheres when it comes to Dutch-Russian relations (i.e. economic relations versus political relations).

As of June 2020 there is almost no academic literature written on the impact on the downing of Flight MH17 on the relations between Russia and the Netherlands. The topic is only dealt with sporadically in studies looking at the relations between Russia and the EU following the outbreak of the Ukrainian Crisis, which then include brief subsections on the foreign policies of the individual member states towards Russia (see Vitkus 2015). In fact, the amount of scholarly literature on Dutch-Russian relations prior to the outbreak of the Ukrainian Crisis and the downing of Flight MH17 is also limited. The two notable exceptions are Casier (2013) and Gerrits (2013) whose studies will be outlined in the literature review below. It is evident that there is a gap in the literature on the impact of the downing of Flight MH17 on Dutch foreign policy towards Russia and on Dutch-Russian relations in general. This thesis aims to fill in this gap by providing an assessment of the changes in Dutch foreign policy towards Russia following the downing of Flight MH17. Besides, by drawing on the concept of a critical juncture in a somewhat unconventional manner, this thesis aims to contribute to the theoretical understanding of critical junctures themselves and how they may be applied to case studies.

This thesis will be structured as follows: first, foreign policy analysis will be introduced and the existing literature on Dutch foreign policy and Dutch-Russian relations be consulted in the literature review. Second, the concept of a critical juncture and the process tracing method will be operationalised in the methodological chapter. Third, the downing of Flight MH17 itself will be briefly outlined. Fourth, Dutch international relations at the supranational (EU) and international level following the downing of Flight MH17 will be analysed. Fifth, the investigations into the downing of Flight MH17 and the Russian response to it will be examined and finally a conclusion will be provided.

At this stage it is to be expected that the downing of Flight MH17 prompted the Dutch government to take on a harder line towards Russia. However, it is likely that these are not felt equally across all aspects of Dutch foreign policy with political relations being more affected than economic relations.

## 2 Literature review

Before a proper analysis of the changes in Dutch foreign policy towards Russia can be conducted, academic literature written on this topic as well as topics related to it must be examined first. Firstly foreign policy analysis will be studied in order to identify key actors and the appropriate levels of analysis for this case. Secondly, scholarly literature on Dutch foreign policy will be evaluated. Finally, literature on Dutch-Russian relations will be consulted, both prior to the outbreak of the Ukrainian Crisis and the downing of flight MH17 as well as after it.

### 2.1 Foreign policy analysis

In order to conduct a proper analysis of Dutch foreign policy towards Russia, the main actors need to be identified first. These actors, who are human decision-makers, acting either individually or in a group of people, play an essential role in either the formulation or the implementation of foreign policy (Hudson 2005, 1). The actors involved in the formulation of Dutch foreign policy include the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, its diplomats and the ministers in charge of it from 2014 onward. These are former the Ministers of Foreign Affairs Frans Timmermans and Bert Koenders and the current Foreign Minister Stef Blok. Besides the Foreign Ministry and its leaders, the Dutch Prime-Minister Mark Rutte as the head of the Dutch government also plays a crucial role in this process. It is the task of the Dutch government to formulate the foreign policy of the Netherlands.

The actors that are involved in the implementation of the foreign policy of the Netherlands towards Russia in this case include the Dutch Public Prosecutor and the Dutch National Police, which conduct the investigations into the downing of Flight MH17 and the Dutch Secret Services which consist of the *Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst* (or AIVD) [Intelligence and Security Agency] and the *Militaire Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst* (MIVD) [Military Intelligence]. The AIVD and MIVD are also involved in Dutch foreign policy towards Russia, especially in the context of intelligence gathering on Russian covert operations in the Netherlands (e.g. the OPCW hacking attempt). Finally, the Dutch court dealing with the MH17 criminal court case, which technically is an independent institution, is also involved in the implementation of Dutch foreign policy as it carries out Dutch foreign policy by trying those who are accused of downing Flight MH17.

Besides identifying the main actors in this process, the levels of analysis that will be focused on must also be clarified. International Relations scholars have identified multiple levels of analysis, the most common of which are the international system level, which focuses on the



interaction between states in the international arena and how their interaction is influenced by constraining foreign policy norms and the distribution of power; the state level, which focuses on different political structures and cultures of states and how domestic actors and institutions contribute to the formulation of foreign policy; and the individual level which focuses on individuals such as politicians and leaders and their role in the decision-making process of foreign policy (Singer 1961, 80-84; Ruckert et al. 2016, 63-62; Temby 2016, 730; Isaak 1974, 264). This thesis will be a multilevel study of Dutch foreign policy towards Russia examining Dutch foreign policy at the international level, supranational or (i.e. EU level) and the domestic or state level (Kaufmann and Witteloostuijn 2018, 652; David et al. 2011, 183-184) . At the international level, the efforts of the Dutch government in the United Nations (UN) will be analysed. At the supranational or EU level the Dutch foreign policy towards Russia through the EU or related to the EU will be evaluated and at the state level the investigations into the downing of Flight MH17 as well as the Russian response to the investigations will be analysed.

## **2.2 Dutch foreign policy**

Before looking into the Dutch relations with Russia, the nature of Dutch foreign policy itself will be examined. The amount of scholarly literature on this topic is limited and most of it studies human rights protection, which it sees as a “cornerstone” of Dutch foreign policy (Schrijver 2010, 220)

In the 1970s Dutch government invented the *gidsland* [guiding country] principle as it strived to set moral standards in international relations and wished to “guide other countries in the proper direction” (Herman 2006, 860). This approach incorporated elements such as development cooperation and the promotion of international law, human rights and humanitarian action (ibid.). The Netherlands even incorporated two articles in its Constitution on the duty to promote international law, order and humanism through its foreign policy. However, this never developed into a coherent foreign policy strategy (Herman 2006, 860; Ter Haar 2014, 456). Besides the promotion of human rights, the Dutch government also sought to penalise countries that violate human rights. The Dutch government’s 1979 Memorandum on Human Rights and Foreign Policy stipulates that “grave and systematic violations of human rights may under certain conditions constitute grounds for restrictions on economic relations with the country in question” (qt. in Baehr et al. 2002, 997-998). However, such measures should not “disproportionately damage Netherlands’ interests” (ibid., 998). From the 1980s onward the prominence of human rights promotion in Dutch foreign policy started to diminish

as the Dutch government increasingly started emphasising Dutch economic interests (Baehr et al. 2002, 1009).

### **2.3 Dutch-Russian relations**

Before delving into the literature on Dutch-Russian relations, it should again be noted that the academic literature on this topic is scarce. There are very few articles that deal with this topic exclusively, but there are a few studies that focus on the positions of all individual EU member states towards Russia. These provide useful insights, but here the ties between Russia and the Netherlands are only a small subsection. Therefore, in order to support the analysis of Dutch-Russian relations, this thesis will also draw on some work produced by think-tanks.

Prior to the collapse of communism in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) in 1989-1991, there was no Dutch foreign policy strategy towards this region (Hellema 2009, 335). In 1990 the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs initiated its first development cooperation programmes for CEE which aimed to support both the transition to a market economy and the establishment of democratic institutions (ibid., 336). Dutch interaction with the region “seems to have been largely determined by self-interest” and “aimed at the promotion of Dutch exports and investments” (ibid., 337). When this pragmatic approach started receiving criticism, the Dutch government decided to split the development cooperation aid into two separate programmes: one for economic affairs and one for the promotion of ethical issues such as human rights and the rule of law as well as anti-corruption and democratisation efforts (ibid.). The Dutch government assumed that the needs of CEE countries went hand in hand with the economic interests of the Netherlands (ibid., 338).

This pragmatic attitude has also been prominent in Dutch foreign policy towards Russia (Gerrits 2013, 109; Leonard and Popescu 2007, 42). The Netherlands attaches great value to its economic interests in Russia, especially in the field of energy cooperation, but at the same time is not afraid to criticise Russia on its poor human rights record (Casier 2013, 121-122, 124; Gerrits 2013, 103; Leonard and Popescu 2007, 42, 47). Nevertheless, there is a clear hierarchy between matters related to the promotion of ethical issues such as human rights and democracy versus economic interests, with the latter clearly taking precedence over the former (Casier 2013, 122, 124). Since Russia hardly made any progress in the field of human rights protection in the 2000s, the role of human rights and democratisation has been diminished as the development assistance programmes running in Russia were phased out (Gerrits 2013, 104). Instead, the Netherlands started focusing on the promotion of the rule of law. The underlying

reasoning behind this shift is that focusing on the rule of law also helps Dutch businesses operating in Russia which in turn again shows a greater emphasis on economic interests in Dutch foreign policy towards Russia (Gerrits 2013, 104-105). As for the coordination of foreign policy vis-à-vis Russia on the EU-level, the Netherlands favours a selective approach: it prefers to operate bilaterally, especially when it comes to economic and energy cooperation and seeks a supranational solutions only “when a national approach does not lead to the optimal promotion of the interests of Dutch society” (qt. in Casier 2013, 121). The articles by Casier and Gerrits are rare scholarly contributions to the topic of Dutch-Russian relations. They both describe Dutch foreign policy towards Russia as dominated by economic interests.

When studying the downing of Flight MH17, scholars tend to focus on the international law aspects of prosecuting the perpetrators (see Gosling and Ayres 2015; Gibney 2015; Ramsden 2016) and its implications for the conflict between Russia and Ukraine (see Toal 2018). The impact of the downing of Flight MH17 on Dutch foreign policy towards Russia remains an understudied topic in academic literature and is only dealt with sporadically, for example, in a reassessment of the foreign policies of the EU member states towards Russia following the Ukrainian Crisis (Vitkus 2015, 8-9). The Netherlands initially did not seek to play a significant role in this crisis: it condemned Russian violations of Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity but sought to follow Germany’s lead (Vitkus 2015, 12). The Dutch government was initially reluctant to impose restrictive measures or economic sanctions on Russia in spite of Russia’s violations of international law in Ukraine (Volkskrant 2014; Natorski and Pomorska 2017, 59; Melissen 2014). While the Russian illegal occupation and annexation of Crimea was unfolding in early March 2014, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte claimed it was too early to impose sanctions on Russia and that he preferred finding a “political solution” to the conflict (NOS 2014A). However, that changed with the downing of flight MH17, which “fundamentally changed Dutch society’s approach towards the Russia-Ukraine conflict” (Vitkus 2015, 12). The Dutch government could not ignore this change and thus became a vehement supporter of imposing economic sanctions on Russia, despite the large impact it could have on the Dutch economy (ibid., 10, 12). It can thus be concluded that the shutdown of flight MH17 had a profound impact on the relations between Russia and the Netherlands and that it constitutes a turning point or critical juncture in Dutch foreign policy towards Russia (ibid.).

The pre-existing literature has shown that the promotion of human rights forms an important component of Dutch foreign policy. However, starting in the 1980s, the Dutch human rights promotion efforts became less prominent as economic interests got prioritised. As for Dutch

relations with Russia, the Netherlands also primarily sought to advance its economic interests, particularly in the field of energy. While the Dutch government would occasionally criticise Russia's poor human rights record, it would only deliver criticism in a way so that it does not harm its own economic interests. When it comes to foreign policy coordination at the EU level, the Netherlands prefers to operate bilaterally and is only willing to coordinate foreign policy towards Russia with Brussels when it is in the interests of the Netherlands. Following the outbreak of the Crisis in Ukraine, the Netherlands did not seek to play a prominent role and intended to follow Germany's lead. The Dutch government condemned Russia's illegal military interventions in Ukraine but was reluctant to resort to sanctions. However, the downing of Flight MH17 drastically altered the Dutch position on the conflict and prompted it to become a staunch supporter of imposing economic sanctions on Russia, in spite of the damage it could do to its own economy. The downing of Flight MH17 was a turning point or critical juncture in Dutch foreign policy towards Russia. Critical junctures are a key concept of this thesis that can be used to contextualise why changes in Dutch foreign policy could occur. The way in which the concept of a critical juncture will be used in this thesis will be outlined in the next chapter.

### **3 Methodology**

This chapter consists of two parts in which the methods utilised to analyse how the downing of Flight MH17 changed Dutch foreign policy towards Russia will be outlined. Critical junctures were already identified as a key concept in the literature review. First, it will be explained how a critical juncture can be applied as a contextualising concept in the case of Dutch foreign policy towards Russia. The way in which critical junctures are commonly used (as a part of the historical institutionalist approach) will be contrasted with the way in which it will be applied here. Second, process tracing as a method to identify changes in Dutch foreign policy towards Russia following the downing of Flight MH17 as well as the causal mechanism behind these changes will be examined.

#### **3.1 Critical junctures**

Before applying the concept of a critical juncture to the case of Dutch foreign policy towards Russia following the downing of Flight MH17, it must be precisely defined. A critical juncture is a theoretical concept that is associated with the historical institutionalist approach in the social sciences (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007, 341). Institutionalists emphasise the impact of institutions (i.e. formal and informal rules and norms) on structuring human behaviour (Steinmo 2008, 123-124). In the political decision-making processes, institutions influence “who participates in a given decision and, simultaneously, their strategic behaviour” (ibid., 124). What historical institutionalism adds to institutionalism is its focus on how a turning point or crisis (i.e. a critical juncture) in the past can set in motion a path-dependent trajectory of events that has a “crucial impact on outcomes later in time” (Capoccia 2016, 89). A critical juncture itself can be defined as “a situation in which the structural (that is, economic, cultural, ideological, organisational) influences on political action are significantly relaxed for a relatively short period” (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007, 343). This has two main consequences: first, it provides political actors with a substantially wider range of choices of how to respond to the sudden change and second the choices made during this time period to achieve a particular outcome are “potentially much more momentous” (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007, 343). A critical juncture provides political actors with additional room for manoeuvre during the decision-making process, the results of which are likely to be much more far-reaching (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007, 343). This in turn would allow political actors to embark on a track that diverges significantly from the priorly institutionalised practices. It is important to bear in mind that when studying critical junctures, one should pay attention to identifying

specific units of analysis (i.e. which particular institution will be studied) for a critical juncture may occur within one particular government body but not in others (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007, 349).

However, before the concept of a critical juncture can be applied to this case, the way in which it is usually employed in academic research must be examined first. Historical institutionalists study critical junctures in their historical context and analyse how they initiate political or social change (Steinmo 2008, 118, 127). Particular attention is being paid to the path-dependent trajectories that stem from these critical junctures in the past and how they step-by-step led to a particular result later in time (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007, 341-342). For example, scholars studying regime change would try to identify the moment in the past in which decisions were made by key political actors that set in motion a trajectory of path-dependent sequences with regime change as the end result. Historical institutionalists then employ counterfactual analyses to identify what could have happened if other decisions would have been made during this particular time period that constitutes a critical juncture and compare that with the actual outcome (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007, 355-357).

Moreover, historical institutionalists also draw on comparative politics to make macro-level comparisons between the differences and similarities of the institutional development of states (Steinmo 2008, 124-125). For example, they would ask why some states developed into democracies and why others did not. They will try to identify particular moments in the past of these states (i.e. critical junctures) that set in motion path-dependent trajectories that would later result in the establishment of democratic or authoritarian types of government. They will then draw parallels between the institutional development trajectories of these states and base their conclusions on these findings.

Nevertheless, here the concept of a critical juncture will be used somewhat differently from the typical historical institutionalist approach. Scholars often study critical junctures that occurred several decades ago (Hogan and Doyle 888-891). In this thesis, however, the event that serves as a critical juncture occurred only six years ago. Therefore the timeframe under consideration, which ranges from 2014 until 2020, is significantly shorter than the timeframe that historical institutionalists would usually study. Second, instead of relying on comparative analysis at the macro-level, the purpose of this thesis is to study the micro-level. That is to say that while historical institutionalists would study the institutional development trajectories of different states, this thesis focuses on the changes in the foreign policy of one particular state.

These differences do not render the concept of critical juncture any less useful for this thesis as it will provide meaningful insights into the foreign policy of the Netherlands and its relations with Russia. The downing of Flight MH17 as a critical juncture in accordance with the aforementioned definition should provide the Dutch government and in particular the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs with a wider-ranging amount of policies to choose from with significantly less influence of institutionalised constraints. Due to the ‘shock’ that was caused by the downing of the airplane, the institutionalised practices that constrained their behaviour previously are suddenly loosened which in turn provides them with more room for manoeuvre to adopt diverging policies in response.

This would entail several expectations regarding the subsequent course of the Dutch foreign policy. First, the Dutch government would need to adjust its economically-driven foreign policy towards Russia. Political issues related to the downing of Flight MH17 should gain prominence besides the economic interests the Netherlands has in Russia. Second, a change in the attitude of the Dutch government vis-à-vis Russia needs to be identified with more confrontational and less accommodating language coming from The Hague.

### **3.2 Process tracing**

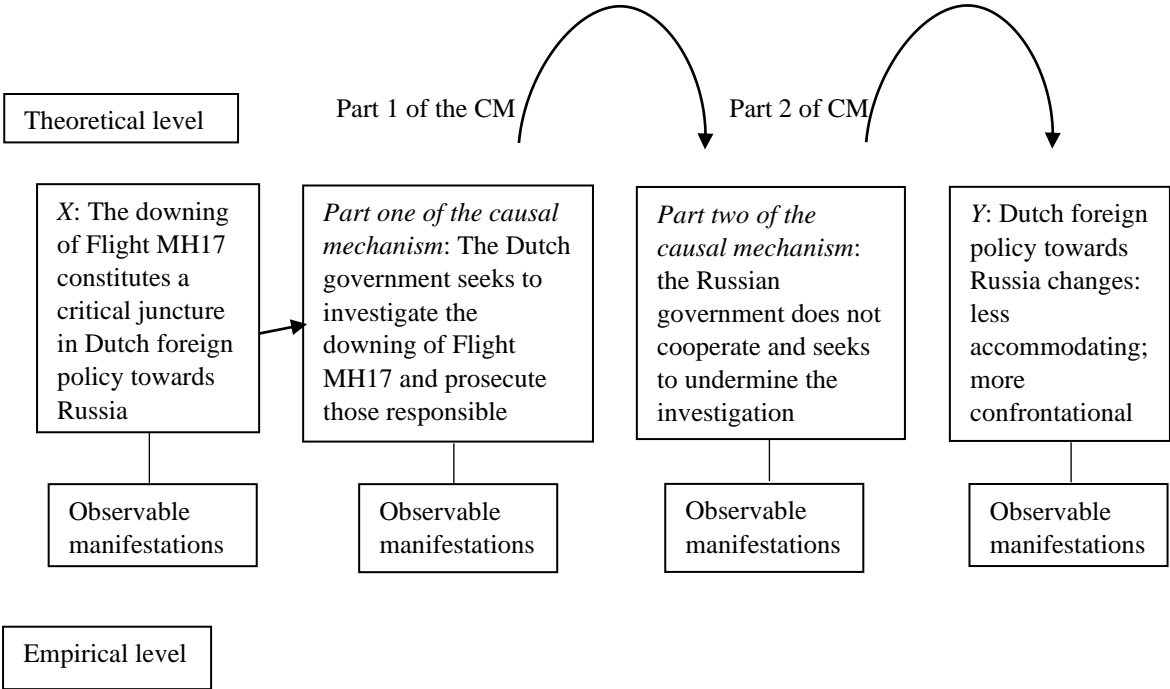
When analysing how Dutch foreign policy towards Russia changed following the downing of Flight MH17, it is essential to study what exactly happened surrounding this issue in the past 6 years. This is where process tracing comes in, which is a method in the social sciences that is considered a “fundamental tool of qualitative analysis” and centres around identifying causal mechanisms (Collier 2011, 823). Such a causal mechanism can be defined as “a complex system which produces an outcome by the interaction of a number of parts” (Beach and Brun Pedersen 2013, 1). Process tracing essentially entails “the use of evidence from within a case to make inferences about causal explanations of that case” (Bennett and Checkel 2014, 4). The main purpose of process tracing is to identify the causal process between independent variables and the outcome of the dependent variable (Beach and Brun Pedersen 2013, 1). This in turn allows scholars to make “strong within-case causal inferences about causal mechanisms based on in-depth single-case studies” (ibid., 2). Process tracing requires “careful description” of the intervening variables as well as the sequencing of independent, dependent and intervening variables (Collier 2001, 823). So what process tracing essentially does is establish links between independent variables which allow for the identification of key moments and the causal mechanism that impact the outcome of the dependent variable.

This thesis will rely on theory-testing process tracing in order to assess how Dutch foreign policy towards Russia changed following the downing of Flight MH17 and identify the causal mechanism behind these changes. When applying theory-testing process tracing, both X (i.e. the independent variable) and Y (i.e. the dependent variable) are known (Beach and Brun Pedersen 2013, 14). In the case of Dutch foreign policy towards Russia, X is the downing of Flight MH17 constituting a critical juncture (or the independent variable). Y is the change in Dutch foreign policy towards Russia (dependent because it is theorised to depend on the downing of the airplane and the occurrence of a critical juncture). In order to apply the process tracing method to the case of Dutch foreign policy towards Russia, two steps must be taken. First, the causal mechanism between X and Y and the intervening steps between them must be hypothesised (George and Bennett 2005, 207). The hypothesis put forward in this thesis is that the downing of Flight MH17 constitutes a critical juncture that allowed for the Dutch government to change its foreign policy towards Russia. The Dutch government sought to investigate the downing of Flight MH17 and requested Russia's assistance but the uncooperative and dishonest behaviour of the Russian government led to the Dutch government becoming frustrated with its Russian counterpart and prompted it to take on a less accommodating and more confrontational line towards Moscow. This hypothesised causal mechanism is illustrated in figure 1 below. The next step involves finding the observable manifestations of these hypothesised steps. Besides looking at these intervening steps, other important aspects of Dutch foreign policy towards Russia must also be examined in order to provide a thorough analysis: for example, Dutch-Russian energy relations and the EU sanctions policy. The key moments or processes that will be used to analyse the change in Dutch foreign policy towards Russia include moment:

- when key decisions were made by the Dutch or Russian government related to the downing of Flight MH17 (e.g. in the UNSC or the EU) as well as Dutch-Russian relations;
- when crucial findings surrounding the downing of Flight MH17 were announced (e.g. in the investigations) as well as the way in which Moscow and The Hague responded to those findings.



**Figure 1: Theory-testing process tracing scheme**



Source: based on model presented in Beach and Brun Pedersem 2013, 15

In figure 1 the independent variable is the downing of Flight MH17 constituting a critical juncture. The intervening variables are the Dutch attempts to investigate the downing of the airplane and initiate the prosecution as well as the Russian attempts to discredit and undermine the investigations and prosecution. The dependent variable is the changing nature of Dutch foreign policy: more adversarial and less accommodating. In the next chapters these steps will be thoroughly analysed.

Official documents and webpages from the Dutch government, the UN and the EU as well as media reporting will be consulted in order to analyse the key moments and processes related to Dutch foreign policy towards Russia following the downing of Flight MH17. Both English, Dutch and Russian sources will be used. Relevant information from sources in Dutch or Russian will be translated by the author.

This thesis will use the concept of a critical juncture to contextualise the changes in Dutch foreign policy towards Russia following the downing of Flight MH17. The concept of a critical juncture will be applied here somewhat differently from how it is usually approached by historical institutionalists: instead of a examining a critical juncture and its results that occurred decades ago, an event that took place only six years ago and its impact on the foreign policy of the Netherlands towards Russia will be analysed. The process tracing method will be utilised to study the steps that the Dutch government undertook following the downing of the airplane

and how its Russian counterpart reacted to those steps which forms the hypothesises causal mechanism that eventually facilitated the changes in Dutch foreign policy towards Russia. However, before doing so the downing of Flight MH17 will be studied first.

## 4 The downing of Flight MH17

On 17 July 2014 Flight MH17 took off from Amsterdam Schiphol Airport at 12:31 CET en route to Kuala Lumpur International Airport in Malaysia. The airplane disappeared while flying over Eastern Ukraine at around 15:20 CET when the Ukrainian air traffic controllers in Dnipro were unable to establish contact with its crew (Dutch Safety Board 2015, 23-26). Flight MH17 crashed at approximately 15:30 CET near the village of Hrabove in the eastern part of the Donetsk region in Eastern Ukraine with no survivors.<sup>2</sup> The area surrounding the crash site was occupied by the Russian-backed separatists who were engaged in heavy fighting with the Ukrainian Armed Forces (Wilson 2014, 139). The separatists of the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DPR and LPR) had already downed several Ukrainian military airplanes and helicopters prior to the downing of Flight MH17, most likely with Russian assistance (ibid., 140-141). Soon after the plane crashed, the Russian leader of the separatists boasted on social media that they had downed another Ukrainian military transportation plane but when they realised it was a civilian airliner, the separatists quickly deleted these messages (ibid., 141).

Following the crash the Trilateral Contact Group of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), which includes representatives of Ukraine, Russia and the OSCE itself, released a press statement in which representatives of the so-called DPR promised that they would provide “safe access and security guarantees to [...] international investigators [and] the OSCE monitors” (OSCE 2014). However the separatists initially prevented the international monitors from the OSCE from entering the crash site to inspect the wreckage (Walker et al., 2014). Moreover, reports emerged that the separatists were moving the bodies, removing the debris and seemingly tampering with the evidence (RFE 2014).

In the following days the Netherlands, Australia and Malaysia dispatched investigators and special forces to the crash site to help with the repatriation of the bodies of the victims and to gather information and evidence on the cause of the crash (NOS 2014B). This proved to be quite a challenge as the wreckage and the remains of the victims were scattered over an area of approximately 50 square kilometres (DSB 2015, 9). Yet in spite of the challenging circumstances, the investigators managed to repatriate almost all of the bodies of the victims

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<sup>2</sup> The casualties of Flight MH17 are as follows: Netherlands (193), Malaysia (43: 28 passengers and 15 crew members), Australia (27), Indonesia (12), the UK (10), Belgium (4), Germany (4), Philippines (3), Canada (1) and New Zealand (1), total (298) (Dutch Safety Board 2015, 27).

and transport them to the city of Kharkiv, from where they were flown to the Netherlands one week after the crash (ibid., 87).

Following the downing of Flight MH17 the Dutch government set out a three-step approach. The first priority was the repatriation and subsequent identification of the victims. Once this step had been completed the focus shifted to conducting a thorough investigation into what had caused Flight MH17 to crash. The third and final step included securing “justice for the victims and for those responsible” (UNSC 2015, 14). In order to conduct the investigation into the downing of Flight MH17 and subsequently prosecute those responsible for it, the Joint Investigation Team (hereafter JIT) was formed on 7 August 2014. It includes representatives from Australia, Belgium, Malaysia, the Netherlands and Ukraine (Cukier 2020). The second and third step of the Dutch three-step approach will be analysed in the following chapters. First, the way in which the downing of Flight MH17 changed and drove Dutch foreign policy at the supranational (EU) and international level will be analysed and then the way in which Dutch foreign policy towards Russia was impacted by the investigations of the Dutch Safety Board and the JIT and the way in which Russia and the Netherlands responded to those investigations will be examined.

## **5 The international and supranational level – Dutch foreign policy in the UN and the EU**

In this chapter the efforts of the Dutch government at the supranational (EU) and international levels will be analysed. This includes both the steps related to the EU sanctions policy and energy relations with Russia as well as the efforts in the UNSC to establish an ad hoc tribunal. The reason why these steps will be examined is because they either constitute key moments during which important decisions were made or because they relate to key aspects of Dutch foreign policy towards Russia. These topics will be presented thematically instead of chronologically as a chronological timeline would be too inconsistent with many intermingling processes occurring at the same time and numerous continually recurring topics. In the first part of this chapter the key processes related to Dutch foreign policy towards Russia at the EU level will be examined. Then Dutch foreign policy towards Russia at the international level will be analysed. This involved the UNSC sessions on the downing of Flight MH17 from July 2014 until July 2015. Finally, the changes in Dutch foreign policy towards Russia at the supranational and international level will be analysed.

### **5.1 The European Union**

#### **5.1.1 EU sanctions**

As mentioned in the literature review, the position of the Dutch government on imposing EU sanctions on Russia was the first indicator that a critical juncture had occurred and signal of changes in Dutch foreign policy. Therefore it must be further analysed.

The EU had imposed the first round of restrictive measures on Russia on 17 March following the illegal occupation and annexation of the Crimean Peninsula (Council of the EU 2020A). These measures include assets freezes and travel bans imposed on Russian and Ukrainian officials accused of undermining Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity (Council of the EU 2020B). In June and July 2014 the EU imposed additional restrictive measures over Russia's active involvement in the Armed Conflict in Donbas (Council of the EU 2020A). The Netherlands, alongside a few other EU member states, had initially been reluctant to support the imposition of economic sanctions on Russia (Volkskrant 2014; Natorski and Pomorska 2017, 59). But that changed with the downing of Flight MH17, which sent shockwaves across the Netherlands and Europe as a whole and prompted the Netherlands to become a staunch supporter of imposing economic sanctions on Russia (Vitkus 2015, 12). Several days after the

downing of Flight MH17, on 29 July 2014, the European Council<sup>3</sup> unanimously supported imposing targeted economic sanctions on Russia (Council of the EU 2020A). These sanctions include restricting access to EU capital markets for certain Russian state banks and corporations, an import and export ban on trade in armaments, an export ban for dual-use goods for military use as well as curtailing Russian access to certain sensitive technologies used for oil production and exploration (Council of the European Union 2020B). The Kremlin responded by imposing an embargo on food products from the EU, the US, Norway, Canada, Australia, Ukraine and other allies (Government of the Russian Federation 2014, 1). For the Netherlands, as the world's second largest exporter of agricultural and horticulture products, this was not without consequences. The Dutch fruit growing sector in particular suffered economic losses as a result of the retaliatory sanctions. For instance, Dutch pear cultivators were hit hard by the food embargo as approximately 20 to 30 per cent of their harvests were exported to Russia prior to the food embargo (NOS 2019; Kleinjan 2016). On multiple occasions Dutch agricultural organisations pleaded with the Dutch government to start lobbying in the EU for the lifting of the sanctions in the hope that Russia would allow the import of food from the EU (ibid.). Nevertheless, the Dutch government did not do so and keeps supporting the economic sanctions in spite of the harm it causes the Dutch economy (Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken 2019, 8). The EU tied the sanctions to the implementation of the Minsk Peace Agreement but since Russia has not genuinely committed itself to its protocols, the EU renews the sanctions every six months (Council of the EU 2020B).

### **5.1.2 Nord Stream II**

Another contentious issue related to the EU's and the Netherlands's relations with Russia is the Nord Stream II project. The Nord Stream gas pipelines directly connect the Russian gas pipeline system with the German and Dutch gas pipelines through the Baltic Sea (Siddi 2016, 109). The Nord Stream II pipeline is an extension of the first Nord Stream gas pipeline and has been politically contentious because it circumvents the traditional gas transit countries in CEE, including Ukraine (Zaniewicz 2019, 11). These CEE countries fear that the construction of the Nord Stream II pipeline will allow Russia to start using gas supplies as a foreign policy instrument without harming its commercial interests in Western Europe. As a result these countries are strongly opposed to the construction of Nord Stream II, which they regard as a threat to their regional influence and to the profits they generate from gas transit (Günther 2019). The US is also highly critical of the projects, arguing that it undermines EU energy

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<sup>3</sup> The European Council consists of the heads of state or government of the EU member states.

security by making Western Europe more dependent on Russian energy supplies (Goettig and Kelly 2018). The complexity of the geopolitics surrounding Nord Stream II goes beyond the scope of this thesis but the political nature of the Nord Stream II gas pipeline is relevant to Dutch-Russian relations following the downing of Flight MH17.

As mentioned in the literature review, energy relations are an important aspect of Dutch foreign policy towards Russia. In the past the Netherlands was able to extract the gas it needed from its own gas fields but in 2018 the Dutch government decided to reduce and eventually halt the domestic gas production due to the earthquakes that resulted from it (NOS 2019). Thus the Dutch government had to find alternative sources of natural gas. This is where the Nord Stream II gas pipeline comes in: the Netherlands would receive Russian gas through Germany via the Nord Stream pipelines. The Dutch government regarded the Nord Stream II project as the most viable alternative and therefore threw its weight behind the construction of the new pipeline with the Anglo-Dutch energy giant Royal Dutch Shell partly financing its construction (NOS 2019C). Despite the fact that the Netherlands lost 193 of its people when Flight MH17 was shot down, the Dutch government continued to support and defend the Nord Stream II project. For example, the Dutch government stated that while it is aware of the geopolitical tensions surrounding the pipeline, it still regards the Nord Stream II initiative as a purely commercial project (Knoop 2019). The current Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs Stef Blok believes that it when Russia “crosses the line”, appropriate measures should be taken but he also seeks to develop “normal” economic relations with Russia (Telegraaf 2019).

Two contradictory trends in Dutch foreign policy can be detected at the supranational or EU level following the downing of Flight MH17. First, when it comes to the EU economic sanctions and restrictive measures imposed on Russia following Russia’s military interventions in Ukraine, there was a drastic change in Dutch foreign policy towards Russia. The Dutch government was initially opposed to the imposition of restrictive measures let alone economic sanctions on Russia. However following the downing of Flight MH17 this standpoint was entirely reversed as the Dutch government became one of the strongest supporters of the sanctions in the EU (Vitkus 2015, 10). While the sanctions strictly speaking are measures implemented to deter Russia from launching further military incursions into Ukraine, they align with the interests of the Netherlands as the Dutch government sought to penalise Russia for its involvement in the downing in Flight MH17. The staunch support of the Dutch government for the EU sanctions signals a significant change in Dutch foreign policy towards Russia. However, there is also a clear sign that some aspects of Dutch foreign policy towards Russia less affected.

Namely, the continuing support of the Dutch government for Nord Stream II. The Dutch government attempts to defend the gas pipeline as a purely economic project but this opinion is not shared by CEE countries as well as the US.

## **5.2 United Nations**

On 18 July 2014 the UNSC convened to discuss the crash of Flight MH17 for the first time after the Ukrainian Permanent Representation to the UN called for an emergency meeting (UN News 2014; UNSC 2014A, 1). The meeting was attended by the members of the UNSC as well as the countries affected by the crash of Flight MH17. During the deliberations, the representatives of Australia, Canada, France, Lithuania, the UK, the US and Ukraine condemned Russia's role in the Armed Conflict in Donbas, argued that the separatists were behind the downing of Flight MH17 and that the weaponry used to down the airplane must have come from Russia (UNSC 2014A, 3-4, 5-8, 9-11, 16-17, 21). The Dutch representation, in contrast, was more cautious in its assessment of the crash as it did not accuse the separatists or Russia of being responsible for it (ibid, 19-20). Instead, the Dutch representation stated that if Flight MH17 was indeed shot down, then the Netherlands would "condemn that despicable act in the strongest terms and will demand that all those responsible, both directly and indirectly, be held accountable and brought to justice" (ibid, 19).

Three days later the UNSC convened again to deliberate and vote on Resolution 2166 (2014) which was drafted by Australia and co-sponsored by the Netherlands (UNSC 2014B, 1). In this resolution, which was unanimously adopted by the UNSC, the Council condemned the downing of Flight MH17, called for a thorough and independent international investigation into the incident and expressed "grave concern at reports of insufficient and limited access to the crash site" (UNSC 2014C, 2). The resolution also called upon the Russian-backed separatists to refrain from "any actions that may compromise the integrity of the crash site, including [...] destroying, moving or disturbing wreckage, equipment, debris, personal belongings or remains" (ibid). Finally, in the resolution the UNSC demanded that those behind the downing of Flight MH17 be held responsible and urged all states and actors in the region to "cooperate fully in relation to the international investigation" (ibid.). Russia had only been willing to support the adoption of the resolution after its text was toned down (to make it less accusatory towards the separatists) (Millar 2014). After the representatives had voted in favour of the resolution, the then Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs Frans Timmermans gave an emotional speech in which he expressed his anger and dismay at the behaviour of the separatists (UNSC 2014B, 12). The separatists' attempts to deny rescue workers access to the crash site as well as their disrespectful



handling of the victims and their belongings was particularly upsetting to him (ibid.). Timmermans also accused “someone here around the table” of playing a political game with the human remains of the victims, which he found “despicable” (ibid.). Finally, he called on “anyone with influence on the situation on the ground” to assure that victims’ remains could be brought back to the Netherlands (ibid., 12-13). During this session, the Dutch government took on a somewhat more confrontational approach: Timmermans explicitly condemned the conduct of the separatists at the crash site. Nevertheless, the Dutch approach towards Russia at this stage was still notably cautious and diplomatic, especially in comparison with the positions of its Western allies. This is because by behaving cautiously, the Dutch government hoped to convince Moscow to cooperate with the investigation (Deutsch 2015). The Dutch government hoped that Russia’s vote in favour of Resolution 2166 (2014) would also mean that Russia would commit itself to assisting the international investigation into the downing of Flight MH17 and the subsequent prosecution of those responsible for it. The Hague rightly assumed that without Russian cooperation, it would be impossible to bring the people responsible for the downing of Flight MH17 to justice.

The final step in the Dutch efforts to investigate the downing of Flight MH17 and prosecute those responsible for it at the international level was trying to establish an ad hoc international tribunal through the UN (UNSC 2015B, 2). The establishment of an international tribunal requires the backing of the UNSC, in which Russia holds veto power. Nevertheless the Netherlands, together with its JIT partners, lobbied for the establishment of such a tribunal (Righton 2015). In June 2015, one month before the voting session in the UNSC would take place, the then Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Gennady Gatilov spoke out against the establishment of a MH17 tribunal, calling it “not timely and counterproductive” and stated that the investigation into the downing of MH17 should be completed before a tribunal may be established (Agence France-Presse, 2015). In July 2015 President Putin himself referred to the proposed tribunal as “premature” and “counterproductive” (BBC 2015). One month later on 29 July 2015 Draft Resolution S/2015/562, which was authored by Malaysia in cooperation with the Netherlands, the other JIT partners and numerous other allies, was put to a vote in the UNSC. Draft Resolution S/2015/252 received broad support from the international community but could not be passed as Russia used its veto power to block its adoption (UNSC 2015A, 3). The then Russian representative to the UN Vitaly Churkin explained that it vetoed the draft resolution because Russia questioned the impartiality of the JIT investigation, on which the prosecutions in the purported tribunal would be based (ibid., 4-5). Moreover, Churkin stated

that Moscow felt excluded from the investigation as it had tried to provide the Dutch researchers with ‘evidence’ that was apparently ignored by the JIT (ibid.). Finally Churkin argued that establishing an international tribunal at this stage was premature as the JIT investigation into the downing of Flight MH17 was not yet finished. According to him there was no legal basis to establish an international tribunal since the downing of MH17 did not constitute a threat to international security (ibid., 5).<sup>4</sup> Russia’s use of its veto was a controversial move that was met with a lot of criticism from the representatives of Australia, Canada, France, Lithuania, the Netherlands, the UK and the US, as they accused Russia of reneging on its commitment to Resolution 2166 (2014) (UNSC 2015A, 7, 10-11, 13-18). By voting in favour of that resolution one year ago, Russia had expressed its commitment to the investigation into the downing of Flight MH17 and the need to hold those responsible for it to account. The Dutch government, represented by its then Minister of Foreign Affairs Bert Koenders, expressed its “deep disappointment” in Russia’s decision to veto the resolution and explained that he found it “incomprehensible that a member of the Security Council obstructs justice in a tragedy that has affected so many” (ibid., 14). Finally, Koenders states that “impunity will send a very dangerous signal and will threaten the safety of civil aviation” and vowed that the Netherlands would not stop in its pursuit to bring those responsible for the downing of Flight MH17 to justice (ibid., 14-15). Here the approach of the Netherlands towards Russia is notably different than when the UNSC convened to discuss the downing of Flight MH17 for the first time in July 2014. The Dutch government takes on a somewhat more confrontational approach as it clearly condemns Russia vetoing the draft resolution and explicitly accuses it of obstructing justice for the victims of Flight MH17. Russia vetoing Draft Resolution S/2015/562 brought an end to the aspirations of the Netherlands and its JIT partners to prosecute those responsible for the downing of Flight MH17 at the international level through an ad hoc tribunal.

In the immediate aftermath of the shootdown of the airplane the Dutch government took on a notably cautious and diplomatic approach as it refrained from blaming Russia and the separatists for the crash. However, the disrespectful and obstructive conduct of the Russian-backed separatists at the crash site led to strong reactions from The Hague. Moreover, the Dutch government implicitly accused Russia of playing political games with the bodies of the victims, which marks a change in its attitude towards Russia although it still did not explicitly call out Russia for its involvement in the conflict and its role as the main supplier of arms to the

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<sup>4</sup> The UN can only establish ad hoc international tribunals for situations that present a threat to international security.

separatist forces. One year later the Netherlands expressed great disappointment over Russia's decision to veto Draft Resolution S/2015/562, especially since Russia had previously supported Resolution 2166 (2014) through which it theoretically affirmed its commitment to assist with the investigation into the downing of MH17 and the prosecution of the culprits. This was a defining moment in this process as it was the first time that Russia openly demonstrated that it was unwilling to cooperate with the Dutch authorities (and the international community) in trying to uncover what happened to Flight MH17 and who was responsible for it. If the Russian government had instead supported the establishment of the tribunal, it would have had a positive impact on Dutch-Russian Relations. However, it was extremely unlikely that Russia would have done so because the establishment of an international tribunal with a UN mandate would undoubtedly have to deal with Russia's role in the Armed Conflict in Donbas.

## **6 The domestic level – investigating the downing of Flight MH17**

Following the successful repatriation of the victims to the Netherlands the focus of the Dutch government shifted to investigating what had happened to Flight MH17. The first part of this chapter will focus on the investigations into the downing of Flight MH17 which were carried out in the Netherlands. Immediately after the airplane had crashed in Eastern Ukraine the Dutch Safety Board (hereafter DSB) launched an investigation into what had caused the plane crash (DSB 2014, 8). The DSB is a Dutch organisation that conducts investigations into major accidents and disasters independently from the Dutch government (DSB 2020). The criminal investigation conducted by the JIT builds upon the findings of the DSB to also uncover what happened to Flight MH17 and additionally seeks to identify the culprits and gather the evidence that can be used to prosecute them. The criminal investigation carried out by the JIT is still ongoing as of July 2020 (Openbaar Ministerie n.d.; Rijksoverheid n.d.). The second part of this chapter will look at the start of the court case against those suspected of being involved with the downing of Flight MH17. Finally, the response of the Russian government to investigations, the findings and the court case will be analysed. While studying the investigative process into the downing of the airplane, special attention will be paid to the key revelations of the investigations and how the Dutch and Russian governments responded to them.

### **6.1 Findings of the investigations into the downing of Flight MH17**

The first step in the investigation occurred in September 2014, when the DSB released a preliminary report on Flight MH17. In its report the DSB concluded that, based on photographs taken of the wreckage of the airplane at the crash site, it could be established that Flight MH17 was downed due to “high-energy objects” that had punctured the aircraft from the outside and caused it to break apart mid-air (DSB 2014, 24). This meant that Flight MH17 did not crash as a result of an accident and that it had in fact been shot down. The next major step in the investigation took place in October 2015, when the DSB concluded that Flight MH17 was hit by a warhead launched by a BUK surface-to-air missile launching system (DSB 2015, 256). The DSB report also ruled out the possibility of the airplane being shot down by another airplane, thereby debunking the Russian theory that Flight MH17 was downed by Ukrainian jet fighters (DSB 2015, 258; Toler 2018). The DSB had not been able to determine from what location the warhead was fired, as that went beyond its mandate (*ibid.*, 147).

Instead, the criminal investigation conducted by the JIT built upon these findings to determine from where and by whom the warhead was fired. The first major step in the JIT criminal investigation occurred in September 2016. The findings of the JIT, which were announced by Dutch Public Prosecutor and the Dutch National Police, included two crucial steps in the criminal investigation. First, the JIT identified a patch of farmland in the vicinity of the village of Pervomaiskyi, which had been occupied by the Russian-backed separatists when MH17 was downed, as the site from where the warhead was launched (Nationale Politie 2016). This was an important discovery as Russia and the Russian-backed separatists had claimed that the missile was launched from the territory that was controlled by the Ukrainian Army (Toler 2018). Second, the JIT had also uncovered that the Buk missile launcher had been brought into Ukraine from Russia and that it had been brought back to Russia a short time after it had been used to shoot down Flight MH17 (Nationale Politie 2016). The JIT investigators also stated that they had already identified approximately 100 individuals that could be linked to the transportation of the BUK missile launcher from Russia to Ukraine and back as well as people involved with the downing of Flight MH17 itself, indicating that the investigation into the suspects was well underway (ibid.).

The next step in the criminal investigation occurred in May 2018 when the JIT announced it had discovered that the BUK missile launcher that was used to down Flight MH17 belongs to the 53<sup>rd</sup> Anti-aircraft Missile Brigade of the Russian Armed Forces (Nationale Politie 2018). These findings established a clear link between Russia and the downing of Flight MH17: the JIT had proven that the Russian Army had supplied the missile launcher to the separatists which was then used to shoot down Flight MH17 (Radio Free Europe 2018). This discovery, beyond any doubt, implicates the Russian state as being indirectly responsible for the downing of Flight MH17. The Dutch and Australian governments responded to these findings by together officially holding Russia accountable for the downing of Flight MH17 (Rijksoverheid 2018). They explicitly accused Russia of violating international law and urged Russia to take responsibility and cooperate with the JIT investigation (ibid.). Officially holding Russia accountable would allow the Dutch government to initiate “judicial proceedings” against Russia which it did in July 2020, when the Netherlands lodged an inter-state complaint at the European Court of Human Rights against Russia over its role in the downing of Flight MH17 (Rijksoverheid 2018; Government of the Netherlands 2020).

## 6.2 Initiation of the prosecution

On 5 July 2017 the Netherlands and the JIT partners announced that they had decided to prosecute those responsible for the downing of Flight MH17 in the Netherlands under Dutch law (Government of the Netherlands 2017). Two years later in June 2019 the JIT criminal investigation entered into its final phase when it was announced that it would seek to prosecute four people accused of being responsible for the downing of Flight MH17 (Nationale Politie 2019). Three out of the four people accused by the JIT are citizens of the Russian Federation and have extensive ties with the Russian state. These Russian suspects include Igor Girkin, a former FSB colonel, who was the ‘Minister of Defence’ of the so-called DPR in July 2014 when Flight MH17 was shot down. He is regarded as one of the main instigators of the occupation and annexation of Crimea and the Armed Conflict in Donbas (Yekelchuk 2015, 147). The second individual is Sergey Dubinskiy, a former GRU<sup>5</sup> (Russian military intelligence service) operative who was the head of the intelligence service of the so-called DPR and acted as a liaison between the separatists and the Kremlin. The third individual is Oleg Pulatov, another former GRU officer, who acted as the deputy head of the intelligence service of the so-called DPR (Nationale Politie 2019). The only Ukrainian suspect, Leonid Kharchenko, was the leader of a combat unit operating in the Donetsk region when Flight MH17 was shot down (ibid.). Kharchenko is suspected to be involved with transporting the BUK missile launcher from Russia to Ukraine and back to Russia following the downing of Flight MH17 (Bellingcat 2019A). The Dutch Public Prosecutor now seeks to prosecute three Russian citizens, who are all closely connected to the Russian military and the Russian secret services. However, the whereabouts of the Ukrainian suspect are currently unknown and the Russian suspects reside in Russia (Van Huis 2020; Sauer 2020). Since the Russian Federation does not extradite its own citizens (Nationale Politie 2019), it is likely that the suspects will have to be tried in absentia which renders the court case largely symbolic. The court case against the aforementioned individuals started on 4 March 2020 and is still ongoing as of July 2020.

Another individual that the Dutch prosecutors were eager to speak with is Volodymyr Tsemakh, who had been the commander of the ‘air defence unit’ of the so-called DPR in the town of Snizhne when Flight MH17 was shot down. Tsemakh had been identified as a key player in the case of the downing of Flight MH17 after a video surfaced on the internet in which he boasted about having been involved in the transportation of the BUK from Russia to Ukraine and hiding

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<sup>5</sup> The Main Intelligence Directorate or GRU is the foreign military intelligence agency of the Russian Armed Forces.

the BUK in Russia following the downing of Flight MH17 (Bellingcat 2019B). Therefore on 27 June 2019 SBU<sup>6</sup> operatives secretly entered territory of the so-called DPR to abduct Tsemakh from Snizhne (Miller and Omelianchuk 2019). The mission was dangerous as the SBU agents had to go deep into enemy territory while passing through mine fields. Nevertheless the SBU managed to abduct Tsemakh and bring him to Kyiv where he was imprisoned (ibid.). However, in September 2019, when it became clear that Tsemakh was being held in Kyiv, Russia suddenly demanded he would be released in the prisoner exchange that Moscow and Kyiv had been negotiating (ibid.). The Ukrainian government delayed the prisoner exchange so that Dutch and Australian prosecutors were able to interrogate him while he was still in Ukraine (Blok 2019, 2). However, since the prisoner exchange had been an important objective of the Ukrainian government, The Hague was unable to prevent Tsemakh's release in Russia (Miller and Omelianchuk 2019). Dutch Foreign Minister Blok stated that he was disappointed that Russia had pressured Ukraine into releasing Tsemakh and reminded Russia of its obligations under Resolution 2166 (2014). Following Tsemakh's arrival in Russia, the Dutch authorities sent Russia a request to extradite him, which Russia refused (Gotev 2019). Later, during the court case against the aforementioned suspects, the Dutch Public Prosecutors accused Russia of deliberately trying to obstruct the criminal investigation by refusing the request from the Dutch authorities to arrest and extradite this key witness Tsemakh (Pieters 2019A) Other ways in which the Kremlin tried to obstruct the investigation and prosecution include seeking to intimidate key witnesses and paying people to submit false testimonies to the JIT (Stoker en Thijssen 2020; RTL 2020).

The findings of the JIT investigation clearly implicate the Russian government in the downing of Flight MH17. The fact that the BUK missile launcher was supplied by the Russian Armed Forces prompted the Netherlands to officially accuse Russia of being responsible for the downing of Flight MH17. Yet in spite of the fact that Russia instigated an armed conflict in Ukraine that eventually resulted in the downing of Flight MH17 and the deaths of 298 innocent people, these revelations did not lead to a diplomatic rows between Moscow and The Hague. Instead the Dutch government called on Russia to accept the findings of the JIT and start cooperating with the investigation. This clearly indicates that while the investigation without a doubt established that Russia was complicit in the downing of Flight MH17, it did not immediately prompt the Dutch government to openly confront the Kremlin. The fact that the Dutch Prosecutors announced that they would seek to try three Russian citizens with close links

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<sup>6</sup> The SBU is the Security Service of Ukraine.

to the Russian Military and Intelligence did not lead to any serious diplomatic conflicts either. Even the Kremlin's efforts to pressure the Ukrainian government into releasing a key witness in the JIT investigation only led to the Dutch government expressing its disappointment over Russia's behaviour. While the Dutch government eventually decided to use more confrontational diplomatic tools against Russia by launching an inter-state complaint at the UNHC, it was still notably cautious following the incriminating revelations of the JIT. As will be shown below it was the Russian attempts to spread disinformation and discredit the investigation that really led to the Dutch government toughening its stance vis-à-vis Russia.

### **6.3 Russian reactions to the investigations**

Before any conclusion can be made about how Dutch foreign policy towards Russia changed, the Russian reactions to the investigations must be examined as well. The Russian government had supported the adoption of Resolution 2166 (2014) in the UNSC, which became a legally binding document that called on all states to cooperate with the investigation into the downing of Flight MH17. However, as will be shown below, the Russian government did not cooperate with the investigations and in fact sought to actively discredit and undermine them.

#### **6.3.1 Disinformation**

One day after the crash President Putin stated that the state on whose territory the tragedy took place (i.e. Ukraine) bears the responsibility for it. He also blamed Kyiv for escalating the hostilities in Donbas, which according to him resulted in the crash of Flight MH17 (RIA Novosti 2014). The Russian authorities and the Russian state-controlled media produced a barrage of disinformation and conspiracy theories which aimed to shift the blame on to Kyiv and create an image that Western countries involved in the investigations are driven by "Russophobia" (Toler 2018; Rietjens 2019, 211; EUvsDisinfo). The main purpose of this disinformation campaign is sowing "great levels of confusion amongst politicians, journalists and the general public about the integrity and objectivity of the investigations" (Rietjens 2019, 212). Several days after the crash the Russian Ministry of Defence held a press conference in which it claimed that the course of Flight MH17 had been deliberately altered by the Ukrainian authorities so that it would fly over the conflict zone and used doctored images to 'prove' that the Ukrainian Armed Forces had a BUK missile launcher deployed in Donbas and that Ukrainian jet fighters had been spotted in the vicinity of Flight MH17 (RT 2014; Toler 2018). Russian officials and Russian separatists leaders did not provide coherent explanations of what had happened to MH17, instead they came up with several contradictory accounts of what caused the plane to crash: the Russian Ambassador to Malaysia Lyudmila Vorobyeva claimed



that the Ukrainians might have shot down the airplane because they thought it was Putin's presidential airplane while the separatists' leader Igor Girkin (who was later accused by the JIT prosecutors of involvement in the downing of Flight MH17 himself) stated that most of the bodies of the victims "had not been fresh", implying that the passengers that been dead before the airplane crashed (Toler 2018; Russian Spring 2014). Another fabrication used by Russian officials was the story of a Spanish air traffic controller named Carlos, who claimed to have spotted two Ukrainian fighter jets while working in Kyiv. Russian politicians and media picked up the story with the then Russian Deputy Minister of Defence and even President Putin himself referring to the Spanish air traffic controller (Schreck 2017). The story was later debunked as Carlos the Spanish air traffic controller turned out to be a Romanian imposter who received \$48.000 from Russia for starting the hoax on Twitter (Toler 2018; Bouma 2018). These stories, in spite of their inconsistency, were eagerly picked up by the Russian state-owned media and broadly disseminated both within Russia and abroad by networks such as Russia Today and Sputnik (Szoldra 2014). The typical pattern through which these theories are spread is that they are suddenly picked up and promoted by Russian officials and the Russian state media and then abruptly abandoned. Eventually almost all of these stories were dropped (and debunked) (Toler 2018). The only exception is the theory that Flight MH17 was downed by a BUK missile launched by the Ukrainians as this explanation seemed most suitable to discredit the findings of the DBS and JIT (ibid.).

The Dutch government is aware of the attempts of its Russian counterpart to disseminate false information on the downing of Flight MH17 in the Netherlands. In November 2017 the Dutch Minister of Internal Affairs Kajsa Ollongren informed the Dutch Parliament that the Russian intelligence services are structurally seeking to influence decision-making and public opinion in the Netherlands (Ollongren 2017, 2). She referred to a website made in Russia that was set up to look like an official webpage of the Dutch government that contained disinformation on Flight MH17. Minister Ollongren stated the Dutch government would respond to these threats by increasing government spending on cybersecurity (ibid.).

In November 2018 the Dutch government announced that earlier that year in April, a Russian cyberattack attempt on the Organisation for the Prevention of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) in The Hague had been thwarted by the Dutch Military Intelligence Service (MIVD) with the assistance of the British intelligence services (Government of the Netherlands 2018). Four Russian GRU operatives were caught red handed while trying to hack into the OPCW, which had been investigating the poisoning of a defected Russian spy and his daughter in Salisbury,

UK as well as chemical attacks carried out in Syria (NOS 2018B). The MIVD deported the four GRU operatives but confiscated their equipment (ibid.). The laptop of one of the GRU operatives showed that they had previously been used in Malaysia, where the hackers had targeted the Malaysian Public Prosecutor and the investigation into downing of Flight MH17 (ibid.). The Dutch Minister of Defence Ank Bijleveld stated that the Dutch government felt it was necessary to inform the public of this plot in order to expose the modus operandi of the GRU (ibid.). The Dutch government even publicly identified the four GRU operatives by showing their names, photos and diplomatic passports during the press conference (ibid.). It was also announced that the GRU operatives were accompanied by a diplomat from the Russian Embassy in The Hague and that the Russian Ambassador had been summoned to the Dutch Foreign Ministry (ibid.). During the press conference Minister Bijleveld even referred to the GRU as a “threat” and called on the Russian government to stop carrying out cyberattacks and undermining the work of international organisations (ibid.). The Russian government responded by summoning the Dutch Ambassador in Moscow and claiming that it had been a “misunderstanding” and that the four men were supposed to test the IT capacities of the Russian Embassy in The Hague (Wintour and Roth 2018).

### **6.3.2 Discreditation**

Besides spreading disinformation and conspiracy theories, Russian officials have also sought to discredit the investigations and the findings of the DSB and the JIT. The Russian government consistently questions the objectivity and integrity of the investigations and the investigators. For example, when the DSB released its final report into the downing of Flight MH17, the Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov responded by calling the findings biased and accused the Dutch investigators of “carrying out political orders” (Stubbs and Lowe 2015; RIA Novosti 2015). Russian officials also accused the JIT investigators of ignoring the ‘evidence’ provided by Russia and lamented the fact that Russia had been excluded from the investigation. For instance, in September 2016 when the JIT investigators identified the launching site and the origin of the BUK, the spokeswoman of the Russian Foreign Ministry Maria Zakharova stated that the investigators had ignored evidence presented by the Russian Ministry of Defence, that the investigation had been biased and politically motivated and accused her “Western colleagues” of relying on “arbitrarily laying blame and wishful thinking” (Euronews 2016). The Russian government also questioned the integrity of the JIT investigation and claimed that its findings were “made up” (NOS 2016A). Russian officials blamed Ukraine and its Western allies for politicising the crash of airplane and called the accusations of Western leaders and diplomats

(like in the UNSC mentioned in the previous chapter) against the separatists and their Russian backers baseless and untrue (Toler 2018).

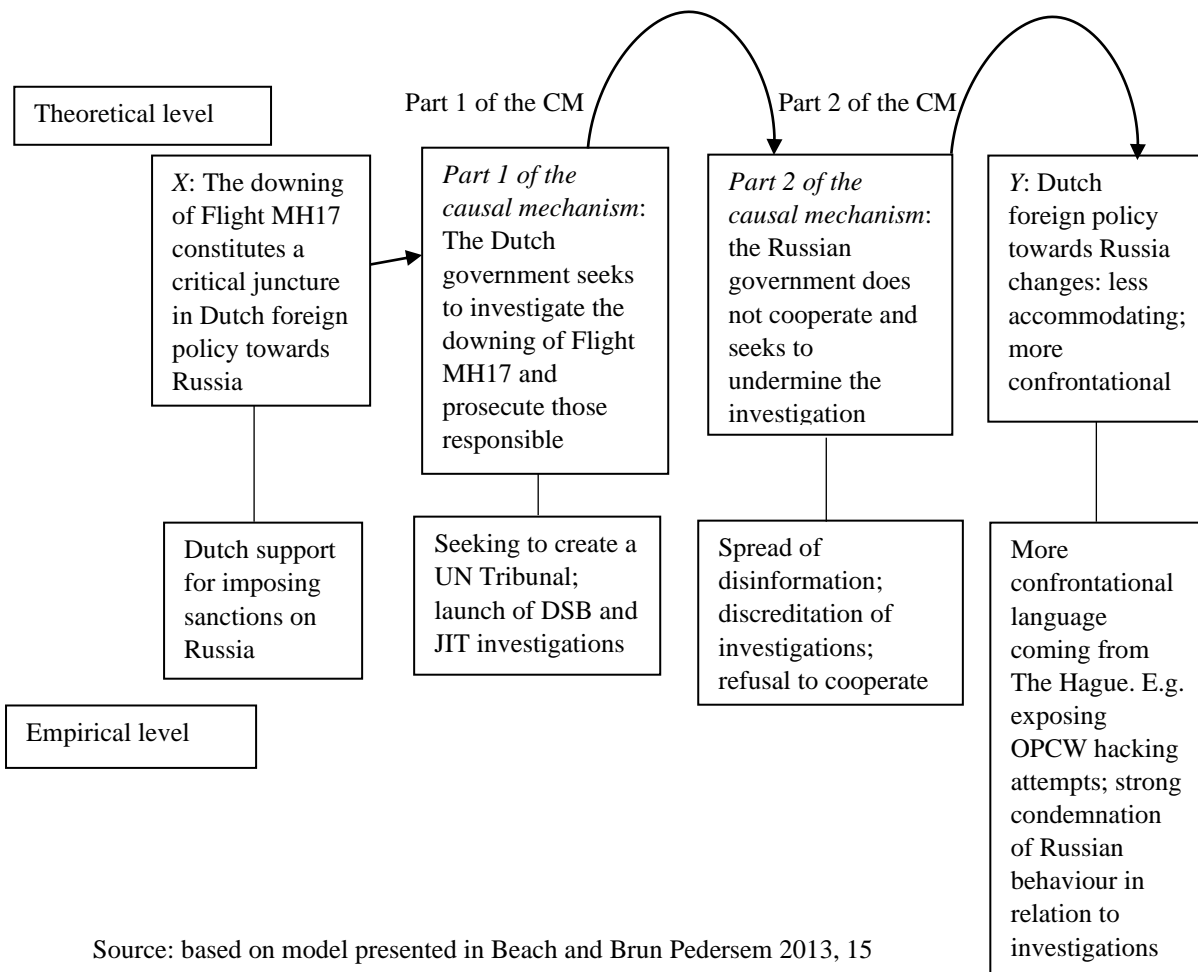
The Dutch government in turn responded by calling on Russia to stop “spreading nonsense” about the investigation (NOS 2016B) and summoned the Russian Ambassador to the Dutch Foreign Ministry to convey that that the Dutch government would not accept the “unfounded criticisms” (NOS 2016C). When the JIT concluded that the BUK missile launcher belonged to the Russian Armed Forces, President Putin replied that the Russian government would study the findings of the JIT but that it would not accept them until Russia would be allowed to fully participate in the investigative process (Kommersant 2018). While the Russian government continually complained that the evidence it had presented was ignored by the investigators, the JIT announced that on several occasions it had requested information from the Russian Ministry of Defence regarding recovered missile parts. The Russian government had ignored these requests and in August 2018 it notified the JIT that it should cease requesting information since the Russian government would not cooperate in any case (Netherlands Public Prosecution Service 2018). The Dutch Minister of Justice later announced that “diplomatic steps” were taken against Russia at the request of the Dutch Public Prosecutor but did not specify what they entailed (Pieters 2019B).

The fact that the Kremlin consistently spreads disinformation about the downing of Flight MH17 and seeks to discredit and undermine the investigations is the main catalyst in the worsening of Dutch-Russian relations. The Dutch government responded to this flow of disinformation by calling on its Russian counterpart to stop spreading nonsense and used diplomatic tools to clearly convey this message to the Kremlin. The Dutch government also made additional funds available for several Dutch Ministries and the AIVD to increase their cybersecurity capabilities and combat disinformation. The most obvious sign of the changed nature of Dutch foreign policy towards Russia following the downing of Flight MH17 is the way in which the Dutch government publicly exposed the averted hacking attempts of the OPCW. It should be noted that it is highly unusual for the MIVD to hold press conferences on counterintelligence operations. Prior to 2014 it would have been unthinkable that the Dutch government would openly confront Russia by seeking to expose the modus operandi of the GRU and reveal the identities of GRU operatives. The Dutch government even stated that the GRU poses a threat. The way in which the OPCW hacking attempt was exposed by the Dutch government indicates that a significant change in Dutch foreign policy towards Russia has occurred. Now the Dutch government is willing to use increasingly confrontational language to

address its Russian counterpart. Finally attempts to discredit the JIT and DSB investigations and question the integrity of the investigators were met with anger from The Hague. The Dutch government made it clear that it would not accept the attempts of the Russian government to discredit the investigations. Moreover, Moscow's refusal to cooperate with the investigators by providing necessary information was also met with condemnation in the form of unspecified retaliatory diplomatic measures.

Russian attempts to disseminate disinformation about the downing of Flight MH17 and to discredit the investigations and the investigators as well as Moscow's refusal to cooperate with the investigators triggered a strong reaction from the Dutch government. When the Russian government obstructed the establishment of an ad hoc UN tribunal The Hague mainly expressed disappointment. But when it became clear that Russia actively sought to undermine the investigation by spreading disinformation and questioning its integrity, the Dutch government truly started using a much less accommodating and more confrontational approach. As demonstrated in figure 2 manifestations of the independent, dependent and intervening variables confirming this hypothesis can be observed. It can thus be established that the causal mechanism behind the changes in Dutch foreign policy towards Russia is the Russian response to the downing of Flight MH17 and the Dutch attempts to investigate it and prosecute those responsible for it. If the Russian government would have behaved in a more cooperative fashion, then it is highly likely that Dutch foreign policy towards Russia would not change to such an extent.

**Figure 2: Finalised theory-testing process tracing scheme**



Source: based on model presented in Beach and Brun Pedersem 2013, 15

## 7 Conclusion

The main purpose of this thesis was to analyse how Dutch foreign policy towards Russia changed following the downing of Flight MH17. The downing of Flight MH17 constitutes a critical juncture and therefore enables the Dutch government to significantly alter its foreign policy towards Russia. The Dutch government sought to investigate the downing of Flight MH17 and prosecute those responsible for it. The Russian government's attempts to spread disinformation about Flight MH17 and discredit and undermine the investigations resulted in The Hague becoming more willing to criticise Russia and coming to adopt a more adversarial and less accommodating foreign policy towards Russia. However, the consequences of Russian involvement in the downing of Flight MH17 had an asymmetrical impact on Dutch-Russian relations with political ties being more affected than economic relations as evidenced by the continuing Dutch support for the Nord Stream II pipeline.

The concept of a critical juncture explains how Dutch foreign policy could have changed following the downing of the airplane. Prior to 2014 Dutch foreign policy towards Russia was dominated by economic interests and business opportunities. The Dutch government would occasionally criticise Moscow's poor human rights record but it was careful not to jeopardise its economic interests in Russia. Now, due to the occurrence of a critical juncture, the institutionalised constraints that previously structured Dutch foreign policy towards Russia were suddenly loosened, which allowed for political actors to initiate change. The first clear sign of this change was the reversal of the Dutch stance on the imposition of economic sanctions on Russia: the Dutch government had initially been extremely reluctant to support imposing sanctions or restrictive measures but completely changed its position following the downing of Flight MH17 as it became one of the strongest supporters of the sanctions in the EU. The Russian government initially affirmed its commitment to the investigation into the downing of Flight MH17 and the prosecution of the culprits by supporting Resolution 2166 (2014). However Moscow's subsequent decision to renege on its commitment by blocking the establishment of an ad hoc tribunal through the UNSC was met with great disappointment from The Hague. The investigation subsequently uncovered that Russia was involved in the downing of the airplane as it had supplied the weapon that was used to shoot Flight MH17 down. The Dutch government requested Russia's cooperation with the investigation, as mandated by Resolution 2166 (2014). But instead of cooperating with the JIT investigators, the Kremlin sought to actively discredit and undermine the investigations. It did so by spreading numerous false theories and disinformation about the Flight MH17 and by continually questioning the

integrity of the investigations. This in turn angered the Dutch government and eventually led to The Hague coming to adopt a tougher stance vis-à-vis Moscow while it had initially taken on a more cautious and diplomatic position as evidenced by its conduct in the UNSC. This change includes harshly criticising Russia's refusal to cooperate with the investigations and its attempts to spread disinformation about the downing of the airplane. The way in which the Dutch government announced the foiled hacking attempts of the OPCW by the GRU is the clearest indicator of the changed nature of Dutch foreign policy towards Russia. The Dutch government explicitly referring to the GRU as a "threat" and seeking to publicly expose its techniques and its operatives would have been unthinkable prior to 2014. Thus, it can be concluded that the downing of Flight MH17 as a critical juncture allowed the Dutch government to change its foreign policy towards Russia. It was the uncooperative and undermining behaviour of the Kremlin that resulted in the Dutch government taking on a harder and more confrontational approach.

While the statements and actions of the Dutch government clearly show that its foreign policy towards Russia has changed, it is important to bear in mind that not all information on Dutch-Russian relations is public. There is a difference between the public announcements of the Dutch government and what is said and done at the Ministry in The Hague, the Dutch Council of Ministers and at the Embassies in Brussels, Kyiv and Moscow. As MH17 remains a highly sensitive topic it is very likely that publicly available sources do not capture the entire picture of Dutch-Russian relations following the downing of Flight MH17. Furthermore, since this is an ongoing process with the prosecution of the first four suspects only having started four months ago, it is to be expected that other incidents related to Dutch-Russian relations will occur and that at this stage Dutch foreign policy towards Russia following the downing of Flight MH17 is not yet fully developed. However, the contours of the foreign policy of the Netherlands towards Russia since the downing of Flight MH17 are already visible as a detectable change did occur. As this is still an ongoing process scholars would have to revisit this topic in the future to evaluate how Dutch foreign policy will be further changed due to the downing of Flight MH17.

Dutch foreign policy remains a severely understudied topic. This thesis has sought to fill in the gap in the academic literature on Dutch foreign policy by providing its reassessment following the downing of Flight MH17. Thereby this thesis provides an up-to-date overview of Dutch foreign policy towards Russia. The downing of Flight MH17 is a one of the defining moments for the Netherlands of the 2010s and remains a hugely important topic as of July 2020.

Moreover, by approaching the concept of a critical juncture from a different angle than usual, this thesis also seeks to contribute to understanding of this theoretical concept, as it demonstrates that an event that occurred a relatively short time ago can also be classified as a critical juncture to help explain how it resulted in foreign policy change.



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