



Anti-government protests in Kiev, 2014

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The Netherlands - From the Fringes of Europe and Back Again: Responses to the Crisis in Ukraine

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The situation in Ukraine is the subject of an intense discussion in the public sphere and the media across Europe. But what do we know about how our neighbouring countries are reflecting on the crisis, its historical background and its meaning for the relationship between our countries, Ukraine, Russia and the European Union? During 2014 and 2015 the Cultures of History Forum asked historians and sociologists from more than 15 European countries, the US, Israel and Turkey to reflect on the media coverage and public debates regarding the Ukrainian crisis in their countries. This article focuses on the Netherlands.

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In 2007, Dutch company Gasunie signed a multi-million Euro deal with Gazprom, which effectively meant that the country surrendered most of its energy supplies to the ups and downs of Russian state politics. Even more so, frankly, it meant that the Netherlands were now subject to the unpredictable workings of the mind of Russian president Vladimir Putin. At the time, activists and politicians expressed concern about the ongoing violation of human rights taking place in Russia, as well as the need to distance our country, a European nation famed for its long history of religious and social tolerance, from a nation in which such ideas and realities were repeatedly disrespected.

They were drowned out by voices coming from Den Haag that emphasized the fact that democracy in Russia was yet in its infancy, deserving patience, and center-right parties arguing that maintaining political and trade relations with Russia was a way to influence the development of a stable democracy there. That in the process the Netherlands would become dependent on Russian gas flow was considered a small price to pay. Needless to say, this approach was not only flawed, but it betrayed a naiveté as to the political instability lurking at the heart of post-Soviet society, as well as a slight overestimation as to the influence the Netherlands, a part of old liberal Europe, could exert on its giant eastern neighbour. Nevertheless, seven years ago the Netherlands opened its sublevel borders and attached itself to Nord Strom, the pipeline project pumping gas into western Europe from Russia and Norway by way of the Baltic Sea. Economic considerations, of course, as well as a small kernel of pride that stemmed from being a small nation, were what really pushed this deal to its conclusion.^[1]

At this time, few people were concerned with what was happening in Ukraine, a small country now free of the yoke of Soviet oppression. In 2004, for instance, during the Orange Revolution, Dutch political commentators and analysts engaged with the region and were adamant as to the sovereignty of the young nation. Public awareness of Ukraine, however, stayed where it always had been: at the fringes of people's minds, just as it was located on the map of Europe. Ironically, perhaps, European relations with Russia took precedence over the plight of a nation that was now, at least on the theoretical plane as a new democracy aspiring to become a member state, part of Europe.

Amid a flurry of protests, last year, 2013, was named the year of friendship between Russia and the Netherlands, celebrating four centuries of mutual relations. The year was off to a bad start when Putin's visit to the Netherlands was marred by a series of demonstrations, especially of LGBT-groups, who apparently made so much noise in front of the maritime museum where the delegation was dining that the entire set-up had to be moved to a different room. A no-show from the mayor of Amsterdam, who cited a "busy schedule" as a means to avoid welcoming Putin in person to his famously free-spirited city, also did not go by unnoticed. Yet as journalist Olaf Koens observed – Koens was among the first to report from the crash site of Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 in eastern Ukraine on 17 July 2014 – politicians remained committed to the idea that no real crimes were being committed in Russia. It was "a masterpiece of ostrich policy toward the outside world," Koens said.^[2] Den Haag insisted that Russia's infancy as a democracy should be taken into account as the year of friendship deteriorated further. It was to sincere public dismay – not to mention historical irony – that the Dutch government sent one of the heaviest delegations to the Olympic Games in Sochi. To make matters worse, Dutch king Willem

Alexander was photographed sharing a beer and a few cheers with Putin, who for the occasion was dressed in bright red ski gear, in the Olympic Heineken House. This display of bi-national friendship appeared at the same time as reports came in that Russian nationalists had beaten up a Dutch diplomat in his home in Moscow, apparently as retaliation for the arrest of a Russian diplomat in Rotterdam on charges of domestic violence. While our king supported the Dutch athletes in Sochi and our prime minister Mark Rutte stood idly by as Putin tightened the ropes, clouds gathered over Ukraine, and the Russian-Dutch year of friendship fell, as the Dutch saying goes, into the water.

In the shades of Flight 17

This was also the time when Ukraine came into focus in the Dutch media. In November 2013, protests erupted on Maidan Square in response to Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich's move away from a pending agreement between Ukraine and the European Union in favour of closer ties to Russia. In February 2014, when the protests turned violent after the Ukrainian government introduced the Anti-Protest Laws, Dutch commentators and politicians came to Ukraine's defense. Hans van Baalen, MP for the Liberal party VVD, for instance, travelled to Ukraine and personally showed his support to protesters in Kiev by climbing onto a stage and applauding the Europeans-to-be for their struggle for democracy. "We are witnessing history in the making on Maidan Square," Van Baalen said, rather pompously.^[3] "The will of the people has triumphed." Yet to Van Baalen and others on the conservative right, this proved that Ukraine now deserved full financial support from the EU.

Dutch media continued to follow the unfolding crisis in Ukraine. For some politicians, the annexation of Crimea was a clear sign that economic relations between Russia and the EU had to change. The issue was discussed on late-night TV shows, but as before, Ukraine seemed poised between Russia and the EU as a nation whose internal unity was constantly challenged by rivaling social factions, while her geographical borders were under threat from an unhappy and dissatisfied neighbour. The main debate, however, continued to focus on relations between Russia and the EU.

Perhaps the expectation would be that the conception of Ukraine as a struggling but far-away nation with European aspirations has changed since 17 July 2014, when Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 was probably shot down a few hours after it took off from Schiphol Airport and the sunflower fields of eastern Ukraine, bearing the remains of 298 people, suddenly became imprinted on people's minds everywhere across the Netherlands. This has yet to be seen. The news of the fate of Flight 17 dominated the headlines for weeks, and papers of all political spectra dedicated their best writers to covering it. The issue that received the most attention was twofold: on the one hand, the press and the Dutch government concentrated their efforts on (discussing) the repatriation of the victims' remains and the complicated process of their identification, while, on the other hand, critics discussed the ways in which the Netherlands mourned the victims in the wake of the crash. As the days passed, critics became increasingly weary of what they called the "nationalization" of the mourning process. For the first time since the death of princess Wilhelmina in 1964, the Dutch government pronounced a Day of National Mourning. Some journalists argued that this public orchestration of grief was a way to forge a collective identity based on the obligation to mourn and the simultaneous collective disapproval of those who did not do so, or who chose to mourn in private. We do not need another "us versus them," argued novelist Arnon Grunberg, whether it meant a schism between those in mourning versus those outside of these social parameters or an "us versus them" between the Netherlands and abroad, in particular, of course, Russia and eastern Ukraine.^[4] Others criticized the ways in which even the "intellectual" press, such as for instance NRC Handelsblad, played on human sentiments in reporting news of the crash. These

debates mainly reflected concerns internal to Dutch society, and as such they did not touch in too great detail on the subject of Ukraine.

At the same time, the earlier discussion about economic relations with Russia and the instability inherent in such relations was continued. According to Bas Eickhout, chairman of Groen Links in the European Parliament, the disaster with Flight 17 had given the Netherlands the moral authority to call for the creation of a European Energy Union, a common policy that would speed up initiatives for sustainable energy while at the same time minimizing Europe's dependency on Russia. Others, however, such as former Minister of Foreign Affairs Ben Bot, agreed with the need for more sustainable energy sources but argued that the "moral authority" of the Dutch would soon be forgotten, and that, in any case, this authority will be ineffective without the support of the other EU member states. Opinion pieces appeared discussing the mind of Vladimir Putin, which, according to one commentator, is engaged in an "existential battle" for the identity of his country, which has not yet found its bearings after the collapse of the Soviet Union.^[5] In addition, during the last week Dutch media have been concerned with the Russian blockade of European agricultural produce and have urged a call to support local farmers. Again, most of these discussions exclude detailed analyses of the situation in Ukraine.

The debate that touches most clearly on the subject of Ukraine proper is perhaps that of the behavior of Dutch leadership in response to the crash of Flight 17 and its political and human aftermath. In particular, the words and actions of Prime Minister Mark Rutte have come under scrutiny. While the heads of state of both Britain and Australia immediately and in harsh words condemned the downing of Flight 17 above the contested territory of eastern Ukraine, Mark Rutte displayed a remarkable lack of assigning blame or showing anger. He returned from his vacation and remained careful and composed as the grim details of the crash emerged. "Our first priority," he emphasized time and again, "is the repatriation of the remains of the victims."^[6] In this process, the safety of those special teams sent to the crash site had to be ensured, even if this meant a delay in access due to continued fighting between pro-Russian separatists and Ukrainian forces close to, or even inside, the large territory of the crash. Calls for the militarization of the special police forces dispatched to Donetsk came from a few voices in parliament, but Rutte's focus remained on the repatriation of the bodies, not on the military conflict or on a more aggressive political stand against Russia. Some critics accused him of having "velvet gloves" [fluwelen handschoenen], indicating weakness or even cowardice.^[7]

"...the right to choose the path..." - The insistence on sovereignty

In the eyes of some intellectuals the lack of immediate political action in the aftermath of the crash was indicative of a much larger problem. In an open letter to the EU that was published on 28 July in De Volkskrant, Adam Michnik and Peter Wolodarski placed Europe's lukewarm response to Russia in the context of other great "silences" of the twentieth century – the annexations of Austria, Czechoslovakia, and the Baltic States in particular, when European nations failed to respond and the consequences were dire. They concluded that it was the moral obligation of intellectuals to address the lack of a unified stance against Putin. "Ukraine has the right to choose the path of the European democracies," they wrote, "and Ukrainians have the right to live in an honest state. Perhaps the future of Europe will today be decided upon in Ukraine."^[8]

What resonated with this plea in Dutch society was the insistence on the sovereignty of Ukraine, something that Rutte also continued to affirm. Yet with his insistence on Ukraine's sovereignty came a set of expectations, in particular in regards to safeguarding security on the crash site and the "de-

escalation" of the violence, as US president Barack Obama called it. Doubts were expressed in Dutch parliament about the loyalty of Kiev in regards to keeping their word about enabling a safe investigation of the crash site, especially since all eyes in the west were now on Putin. Kiev, they said, had promised secure access to the site at the same time as they encouraged active resistance in the area, thus compromising security. Others argued that as a sovereign nation Ukraine had the right, if not also the obligation, to fight for its continued independence from Russia, and that as such, armed resistance was imperative.^[9] And the more sceptical commentators argued that as soon as the human remains had been returned to the Netherlands, Ukraine would once again fade from the main stage of European discussion and politics back into the eastern borderlands whence it came.^[10] Thus, in debates about what would be the correct response of one nation, the Netherlands, whose sovereignty had been harmed by an act of political violence of another, Russia, what came to the fore were ideas about the plight of the nation that was caught in between.

Conclusion

Out of a strange sense of guilt, perhaps, Dutch media have now begun to feature stories about life in Ukraine, discussing the plight of refugees from Eastern Ukraine in Kiev^[11] or that of local journalists reporting in the region^[12], the improvised battalions of the Ukrainian Anti-Terror Operation (ATO), or the state of mind of the average Russian who does not want war but seems to be caught in Putin's warmongering and indoctrination.^[13] These news stories are detailed examples of an interest in the human side of the conflict, as well as an effort to familiarize Dutch readers with daily life and struggles in Ukraine. They cannot, however, conceal the fact that the greatest priority at the moment seems to be the repatriation and identification of the victims' remains, the mourning process and questions of national identity that were conjured up in its wake, and debates about the fissures and failures of the European Union as a player in world politics. Catapulted with great force from the fringes of Europe into the center of public awareness in the Netherlands, it seems that, besides purely political discussions, Ukraine is already on its way back in the minds of most people, falling just outside the map of Europe, an embattled zone not yet close enough to change conceptions about what constitutes or even influences the identity of the European Union. But with the borderlands moving closer to the physical borders of Europe, and doing so in an increasingly violent manner, questions of what constitutes a sovereign nation ring closer to home than before the fatal day of 17 July. So do questions of the internal unity or disunity of the European Union, which is no stranger to expanding its borders. The hope is that by the time Ukraine comes up for ascension, it will have found its bearings and will no longer be caught in the shadowlands.

Footnotes

1. Thijs Broer and Harm Botje, Voorbij de gasdroom: onze ongezonde relatie met Rusland, Vrij Nederland (27 July 2014), retrieved 4 January 2016, URL: <http://www.vn.nl/Archief/Economie/Artikel-Economie/Voorbij-de-gasdroom-onze-ongezonde-relatie-met-Rusland.htm>.
2. Olaf Koens, I Slept Next to the Wreckage of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17. The crisis in Eastern Europe didn't really hit home. Until it did, New Republic (23 July 2014), retrieved 4 January 2016, URL: <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/118823/what-its-walk-through-wreckage-malaysia-airlines-fligh>.
3. We are witnessing history in the making at Maidan Square, Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe Party (24 February 2014), retrieved 4 January 2016, URL: <http://www.aldeparty.eu/de/news/we-are-witnessing-history-making-maidan-square>.
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5. See Juurd Eijssvoegel, Hoe Poetin denkt, NRC Next (9 August 2014): p. 19.
6. Parliamentary briefing on the situation in Ukraine, Government of the Netherlands (22 July 2014), retrieved 4 January 2016, URL: <https://www.government.nl/latest/news/2014/07/21/parliamentary-briefing-on-the-situation-in-ukraine>.
7. See Theodor Holman, Ik ben de rouwrand, de woede, de afschuw en nog zo veel meer, Het Parool (22 July 2014), retrieved 4 January 2016, URL: <http://www.parool.nl/parool/nl/508/THEODOR-HOLMAN/article/detail/3694953/2014/07/22/ik-ben-de-rouwrand-de-woede-de-afschuw-en-nog-zo-veel-meer.dhtml#.U9InF5eP7wM.facebook>.
8. Adam Michnik and Peter Wolodarski, Open brief aan EU. Europa moet een lijn trekken tegen Putin, De Volkskrant (28 July 2014): 21.
9. De EU bijt wel, NRC Next (30 July 2014).
10. NRC Next 2014.
11. Ibid.
12. Michiel Driebergen, Journalistiek in tijden van oorlog, Vrij Nederland (4 August 2014), retrieved 4 January 2016, URL: <http://www.vn.nl/Archief/Politiek/Artikel-Politiek/Journalistiek-in-tijden-van-oorlog.htm>.
13. NRC Next 2014, 8–9.

