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Russian Bear Looms Over Dutch Referendum

By Eva Hartog

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Ukrainian activists stand outside the Dutch Embassy in Kiev holding signs that say: “Don’t listen to Russian propoganda,” ahead of the Dutch referendum on April 6.

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When the Netherlands introduced a new referendum law in July 2015, few expected it could one day play into the hands of the Kremlin. Or that it would be used to force a national vote on the more than 320-page-long European association agreement with Ukraine.

Yet less than a year later, on April 6, the Dutch will have to answer with a Yes or No the question of whether they favor the bloc's association deal with Kiev. Recent opinion polls suggest it will be a neck-and-neck race between the two sides.

Although the vote is advisory and has no direct influence on EU policy, it has caused a scare

in The Hague and Brussels. European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker has warned that a Dutch No vote will "open the door to a big continental crisis" with only one winner. "Russia would pluck the fruits of an easy victory," he told the Dutch NRC newspaper.

A Revolutionary Text

The dull language of the long text of the association agreement belies its explosive potential. For years, it has been the source of a tug-of-war with Moscow as Kiev tried to move out of its former Soviet ruler's orbit into the arms of the EU.

In late 2013, when former Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovych backtracked from signing the deal under pressure from Moscow, the document sparked a revolution. Following police repression, a handful of protestors on Kiev's Maidan Square became hundreds of thousands. Yanukovych was toppled and his successor Petro Poroshenko swiftly put his signature under the agreement, ending the negotiation saga — though conflict between Russia-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine and the new Kiev government continues to this day.

In autumn last year, the agreement resurfaced in The Hague when a Eurosceptic citizen's platform gathered more than 420,000 votes in support of a referendum on the issue, making use of a new law. The campaigners argued in a video that Brussels had undemocratically committed Europe to closer ties with "a geopolitical hornet's nest" and warned of a revival of the Cold War country still coming to terms with the downing of MH17 passenger plane over eastern Ukraine in 2014. Two-thirds of the victims were Dutch.

Suspicions

The choice of the EU association agreement as a topic for the Netherlands' first bottom-up referendum caught much of the country by surprise.

"This is not the EU's first association agreement," says Kees Verhoeven, a Dutch politician and one of the central figures in the Yes campaign. "But Putin is now trying to derail this process at the eleventh hour."

Verhoeven's suspicions increased after a British media report cited the Dutch referendum in an article about clandestine Russian funding of European anti-establishment parties.

Russia has a history of lending financial support to fringe far-right parties such as France's Front National. But the Dutch Foreign Ministry said in a statement there was no reason to believe Russia had been directly involved in the lead-up to the referendum, aside from "the structural presence of Russian intelligence and security services in the Netherlands."

"The fact that some of the No campaigners are echoing Moscow's propaganda does not mean they are being supported by Russia," says Tony van der Togt, researcher at the Clingendael Institute, a Dutch think tank. "There are enough 'useful idiots' who in all honesty share the same views."

Political scientist Martin Rosema, who has done research into the psychology of Dutch voters, says that in reality the No camp is less motivated by Moscow than by antagonism toward Brussels and fears over chaos in Ukraine. He says any rhetoric on Russia is likely to be

"a rationalization of previous preferences."

"Ukraine is seen as a country that differs from the European Union in terms of democracy and rule of law. [The No voters think] the Ukrainians should figure that out by themselves first," he says.

Thierry Baudet, one of the referendum's organizers and a central figure in the No campaign confirms that view. "I'm no 'Putin-boy.' [...] I'm making my own, autonomous choice. Is the association deal beneficial to Ukraine or to the Netherlands?" he told NRC. "The answer is 'No.'"

Misinformation

Even without the Kremlin's direct involvement, its specter looms large over the vote.

Poroshenko, the Ukrainian president, has said the referendum has made the Dutch, possibly unwittingly, Putin's pawns and "hostages in a political game." During a recent visit to the Netherlands, Vladimir Klitschko, the brother of Kiev's mayor and a central figure in the Maidan protests, urged the Dutch not to turn their backs on those who had "given their lives" for Maidan.

Back in the Netherlands, a media campaign that never strays too far from Moscow is reaching its peak. A local company named Rasputin spent tens of thousands of euros producing toilet paper printed with arguments against the EU deal. On the other side of the divide, the youth branch of a Dutch leftist party printed posters of Putin engaged in a kiss with Geert Wilders — the leader of the Eurosceptic, anti-immigration Party for Freedom. Wilders struck back by labeling the activists "young Stalinists."

Some critics have also pointed to what they see as classic Russian misinformation tactics to influence the outcome of the referendum.

Earlier this year, a YouTube video surfaced that reportedly showed members of the far-right paramilitary Ukrainian Azov battalion threatening the Dutch with a terrorist attack if they voted No. Another video quickly followed, this time by the "real" Azov group, denouncing the video as a fake.

And this week, Ukraine's U.S.-born Finance Minister Natalie Jaresko on her Twitter account shared a copy of a fake letter she had supposedly written to top U.S. diplomat Victoria Nuland. The letter, which was circulating widely on Russian Internet forums, asked the United States to delay the Dutch referendum.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova has dismissed suspicions of Russian involvement as "total paranoia." But she has been quick to point out the Dutch referendum's supposed flaws in order to undermine the West's criticism of another popular vote — one staged by Russia in March 2014.

"The way in which The Netherlands is 'properly preparing' the referendum is meant to serve as an example of how the referendum should have been staged in Crimea," she said in a February statement on the ministry's website. "So: reducing the number of polling stations,

massive funding of those supporting the authorities' point of view. The way this is being carried out is raising big questions," she said.

Winners

The virulent media campaigns on all sides of the debate have had an effect. A study published by the Dutch polling agency I&O Research in March showed that more than half of those planning to vote in favor of the EU deal thought that a majority No vote would be a victory for Putin. In turn, almost half of the No voters, 44 percent, thought a Yes vote would antagonize the Netherlands' relations with Russia.

"The image of Ukraine sketched by Putin is a twisted version of reality, but a large group of Dutch people see it as true," says Dutch politician Verhoeven.

"In that sense, the Kremlin has already reached its goal. Russia's spin-doctors can watch the referendum play out from their armchairs."

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