

The diplomatic conflict between The Hague and Moscow: interests and values

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On 5 October, the Dutch police broke into the flat of the Minister-Counsellor of the Russian embassy in The Hague and detained him for several hours on charges of abusing his own children. This gave rise to a serious diplomatic conflict, with Moscow reacting at the highest level. On 8 October, President Vladimir Putin publicly demanded apologies, explanations and for those responsible to be brought to account. The minister of foreign affairs, Sergey Lavrov, suggested that Russia's relations with the Netherlands will depend on the Dutch government's handling of the incident. The Russian MFA deemed the official apologies (on 9 October) from the Dutch minister of foreign affairs to be insufficient and insisted on further explanations; the Dutch ambassador in Moscow provided these two days later. Moscow still refused to regard the incident as closed and insisted on the policemen involved being punished. On 9 October, Rosselkhoz nadzor, the Russian agency for phytosanitary control, suggested that imports of Dutch flowers (worth US\$0.9 billion) could be stopped, and announced two days later that the list of Dutch producers authorised to export dairy products to Russia would be reduced. In turn, unidentified perpetrators stormed the flat of the Deputy Chief of the the Dutch Embassy in Moscow and beat him up on 15 October.

Commentary

- Behind the diplomatic conflict is the dispute between the Netherlands and Russia over the interpretation and legal evaluation of the action by Greenpeace activists who on 18 September climbed Gazprom's drilling rig at the Barents Sea in the Russian economic zone. The Russian authorities arrested the activists and their ship, charging the former with piracy. Holland asked for the ship to be released and for the charges to be mitigated. When the Russian side refused, the Dutch government initiated a case against Russia at the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea. The opinion that ecological organisations in general, and Greenpeace in particular, are being used by foreign corporations and countries to prevent Russia from exploring the Arctic Sea shelf is a view widely held among the Russian establishment. Greenpeace's action is thus seen as an intentional attack on Russia's critical interests, which requires a decisive reaction to deter possible imitators.

- The Russian government elite are most likely convinced that the attack on the Russian diplomat was not accidental and that it was intended to serve as pressure on Russia in the Greenpeace issue. A strong reaction was therefore necessary to demonstrate that Russia would not yield to such pressure. Since the standards of the protection of children's rights in Russia differ from those applicable in the Netherlands, it is unlikely that the references to these rights by the Dutch side to justify the police action will be understood. This will instead be interpreted as merely an obvious pretext. Given this context, it can be assumed that the attack on the Dutch diplomat was a 'tit-for-tat response' to the incident in The Hague.
- The conflict between The Hague and Moscow is an illustration of how strongly the differences in mentality and political culture can exacerbate conflicts in EU-Russia relations resulting from the clashing interests of the two parties. In the case of the row between The Hague and Moscow, these differences have been revealed in the perception of ecological organisations, which Russian politicians suspect of having mercantile interests. Differences can also be seen in the approach to actions taken by the law enforcement agencies: the Russian ruling class treats them simply as an instrument to be used for political purposes. It is also typical of Russia to use access to its market as an argument in a political dispute.