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Netherlands Institute of International Relations



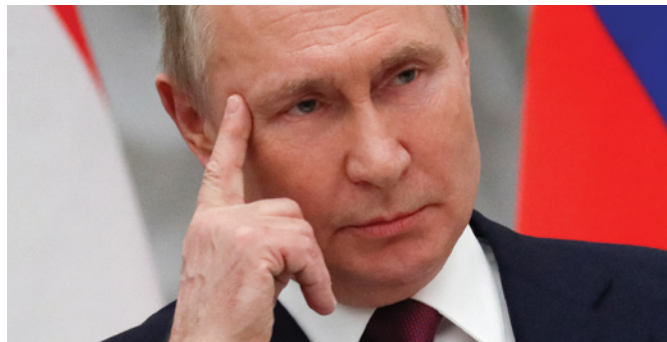
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Polarisation of attitudes towards Russia in the Netherlands

The rise of communitarian thinking in foreign policy



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New dividing lines

Tensions are running high between the West and Russia, but they are being perceived differently by various groups in

Dutch society. There is much debate in the media about Russia's demand that other countries respect its sphere of influence in Eastern Europe. Dutch dependence on Russian gas is also in the spotlight at a time of soaring energy prices. Dutch prime minister Rutte and foreign minister Hoekstra have signalled the new government's clear position by visiting Ukraine. But what do the Dutch people themselves think?

* The authors are very grateful to Mark Elchardus for his close involvement in the research. They would also like to thank in particular André Krouwel, Tom Etienne and Laura van Heck of *Kieskompas* for the data gathering and Hugo Klijn and Peter Haasbroek for their valuable comments and ideas.

Research by the Clingendael Institute at the beginning of 2021 revealed a polarisation of Dutch attitudes towards Russia, in contrast to Dutch attitudes towards China, where there is considerably more consensus.¹

A year later, with Russia again in the geopolitical spotlight, the question is how Dutch attitudes towards Russia have evolved, whether the division of views in Dutch society has continued and, if so, what are the factors behind the division?

In this Alert we present the findings on Dutch attitudes towards Russia, measured in two representative samples in January 2021 (N = 9,300) and the second half of December 2021 (N = 4,800). The findings show that the division in Dutch views on Russia has persisted, even at a time of mounting geopolitical tension. The rise of communitarian thinking in society is creating a new dividing line in politics. People's attitudes towards foreign relations are guided by their judgements about the way in which the Russian government treats its own community. On the one hand there is a significant minority of people who sympathise with Russian demands and have an affinity with Russia's promotion of traditional conservative values and national pride. At the other end of the political spectrum is a group calling for international cooperation to be halted on the basis of their negative judgement of Russia's handling of domestic criticism. In both cases the geopolitical attitudes are therefore informed mainly by sociocultural factors rather than conventional socioeconomic factors or *realpolitik*.

Sphere of influence

The year 2021 saw the re-emergence of the term 'sphere of influence' in international relations, culminating last December in Russia's demand that NATO halt its eastward expansion and withdraw all NATO troops from countries that joined the alliance after 1997. How do Dutch people view what President Putin presents as a list of security guarantees to ease tensions in Europe?

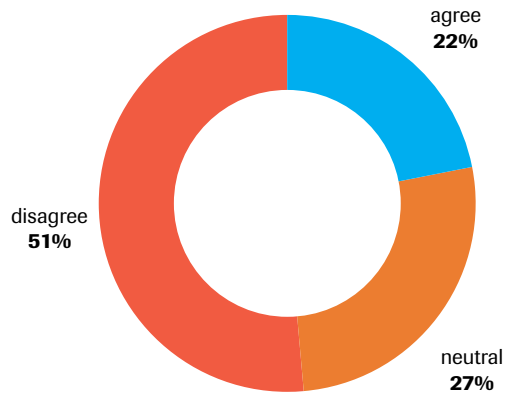
Just over 50% of Dutch people reject the idea of a Russian sphere of influence. However, around 20% of respondents think the Netherlands should understand Russia's desire to maintain a sphere of influence in countries such as Ukraine and Belarus. It is striking that these percentages remained practically unchanged in 2021 amid mounting geopolitical tensions with Russia.

A quarter to a third of respondents express no view, possibly because they do not feel sufficiently informed or engaged. In the January 2021 survey, over 46% of respondents said they were not well informed about Russia's international role, while over 30% stated a 'neutral' view. That means fewer than a quarter considered themselves well informed.

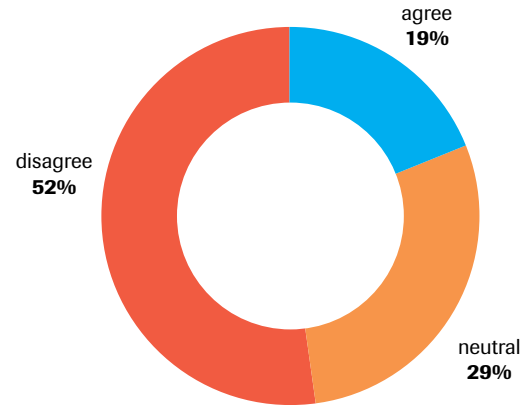
1 [Barometer_Alert_Rusland_def_0.pdf](#)
(clingendael.org)
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The Netherlands should understand Russia’s desire to maintain a sphere of influence in countries such as Ukraine and Belarus.

January 2021



December 2021



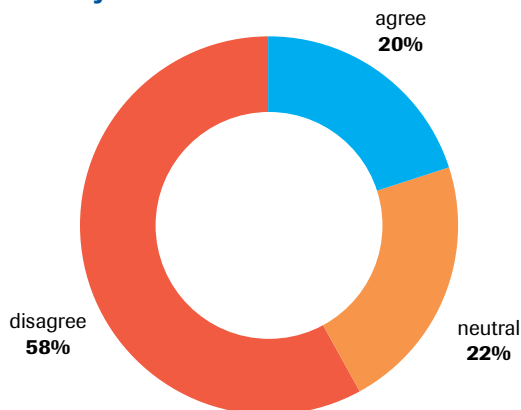
Interests

A more immediate question is whether Dutch imports of Russian gas are acceptable, even if they lead to the Netherlands becoming more dependent on Russia. Minister Hoekstra of Foreign Affairs recently described the Netherlands’ continued dependence on Russian gas as “difficult to sell”.² After all, if Russia were to invade Ukraine, triggering tough sanctions, Moscow might retaliate by cutting off gas supplies.

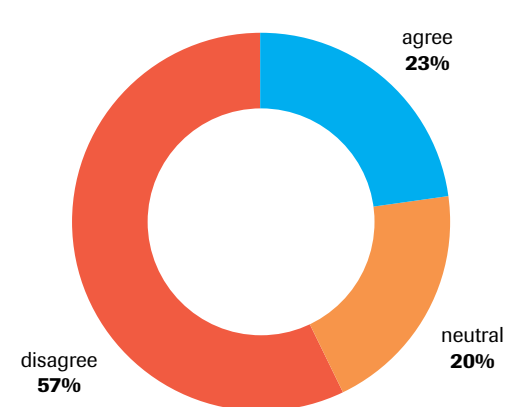
A majority of 58% of Dutch people (57% in January 2021) agree with Hoekstra that such dependence is undesirable. Over 20%, however, believe it poses no problem. On this question that directly affects Dutch interests, the percentage of people stating a neutral view is smaller.

It is not a problem if the Netherlands imports Russian gas, even if it makes our country more dependent on Russia.

January 2021



December 2021

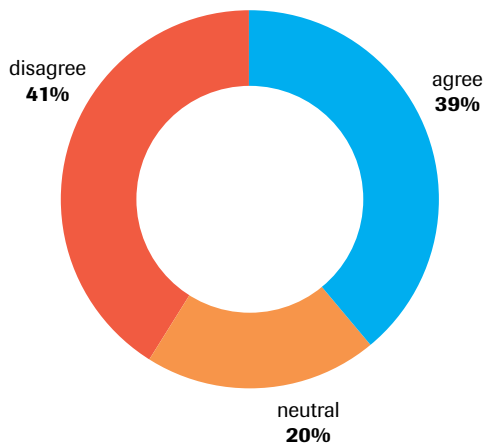


2 Minister of Foreign Affairs Wopke Hoekstra on the *Beau* TV programme, 25 January 2022. See: <https://www.gids.tv/tv-gids/uitzending-gemist/beau/6264171>

Barometer Alert

It is clear that some Dutch people see rising energy costs as an important factor. At the end of December 2021, when energy costs in the Netherlands were rising, 39% of respondents said the Netherlands should buy more Russian gas if it would lead to lower energy costs. 41% disagreed.

If imports of Russian gas lead to lower energy costs, the Netherlands should buy more Russian gas.

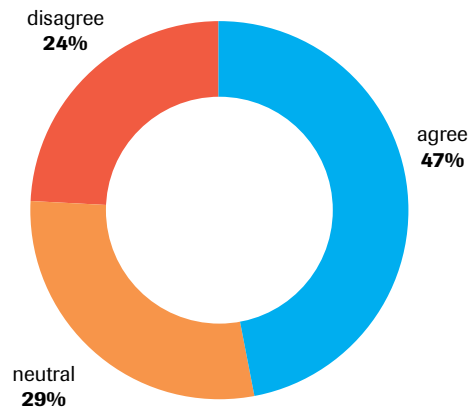


Values

The extent of the Dutch divide in attitudes towards Russia becomes clear when respondents are asked whether cooperation with the Russian government is desirable given the growing repression meted out to opponents of government policy. At the end of 2021, when opposition leader Aleksei Navalny was imprisoned and his supporters, critical media and Russian civil society organisations encountered

growing repression, 47% of Dutch people concluded that cooperation with the Russian government was no longer desirable. Value judgements about the Russian government's domestic policy therefore weigh very heavily in the opinions formed by almost half of the Dutch population on Dutch foreign policy. As in the questions about a Russian sphere of influence and undesirable dependence on Russian gas, 24% of Dutch people take a different view.

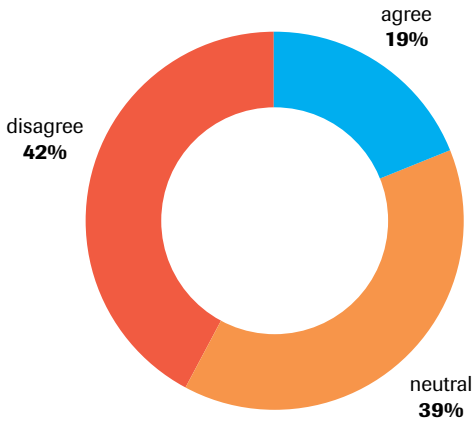
We should stop cooperating with the Russian government, because critics of government policy in Russia are increasingly being repressed.



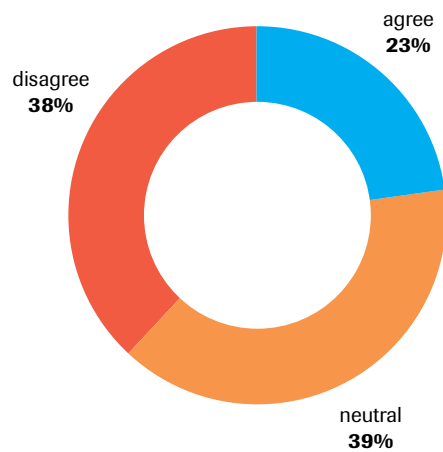
Asked about the promotion of traditional conservative values and national pride in Russia, 23% of Dutch people say it is a good thing (up slightly on January 2021, when 19% approved). 38% therefore disagree (a small decrease compared to the 42% in January 2021). Once again, around 20% have an affinity with the Russian position.

I think it is good that traditional conservative values and national pride are promoted in Russia.

January 2021

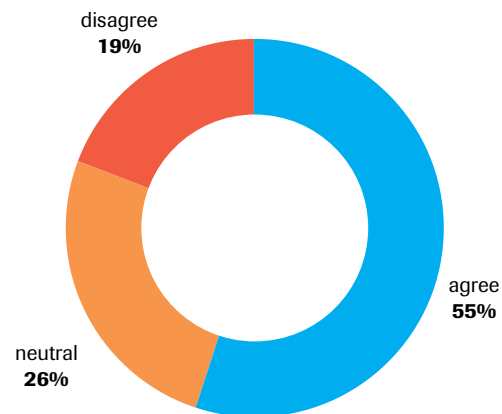


December 2021



It should be noted, however, that a majority of people in the Netherlands (55%) believe Russia should be free to choose its own values without interference from the Netherlands. 19% disagree.

Russia should be able to choose its own values. The Netherlands should not interfere.



The rise of communitarian thinking in foreign policy

It is striking that attitudes towards Russia remained fairly stable in 2021 and that the Netherlands remains divided on policy towards Russia. Breaking down the respondents by political party preferences,

we also see a clear relationship between party preference and attitudes towards Russia.

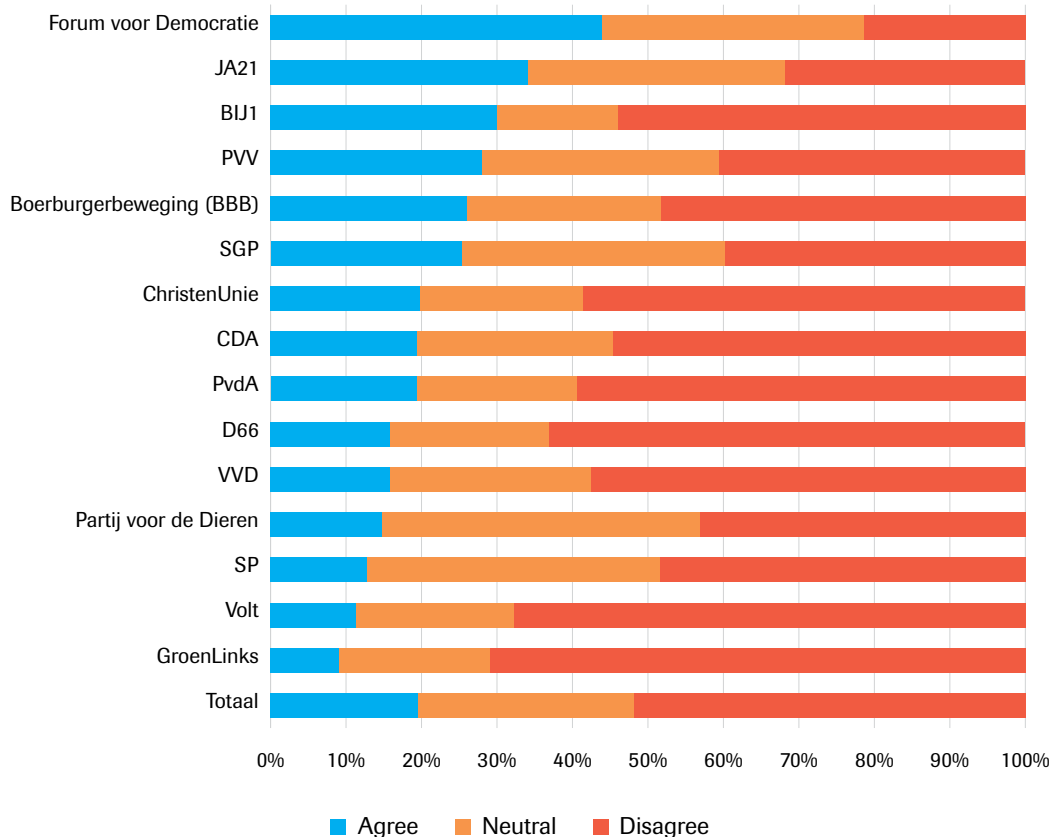
At one end of the spectrum we mainly find supporters of Forum voor Democratie, JA21, PVV, Boerburgerbeweging (BBB) and SGP, who are significantly more positive about Russian demands and perceive Russia (and dependence on Russia) to be less of a threat. At the other end of the political spectrum, GroenLinks and Volt supporters are much more critical towards Russia. People with a party preference for BIJ1 are generally in the latter group, except for their opinion on the Russian sphere of influence, about which they are outspoken but very divided. VVD, CDA and PvdA supporters are generally critical towards Russia, but each group of supporters includes a significant minority who show more understanding of Russia's desire to maintain a sphere of influence and want to cooperate with Russia despite the growing repression. Asked whether the Russians should be able to choose their own values, VVD supporters respond with opinions that are not far from those of Forum, JA21, PVV and BBB supporters, possibly because of their attachment to sovereignty. The same may apply to Volt supporters, who are much closer to GroenLinks and BIJ1 supporters on many other issues.

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The recurring pattern of divisions between party supporters invites further research into the reasons for the positions they adopt. An initial interpretation appears to be that the continuum of attitudes towards Russia is determined not by conventional socioeconomic left/right preferences, but mainly by communitarian thinking. On the international theme of migration, the definition and identity of the community was already a key driver of Dutch attitudes towards foreign policy, as exemplified by the rise of the PVV, and the same can now clearly be seen in attitudes towards Russia.

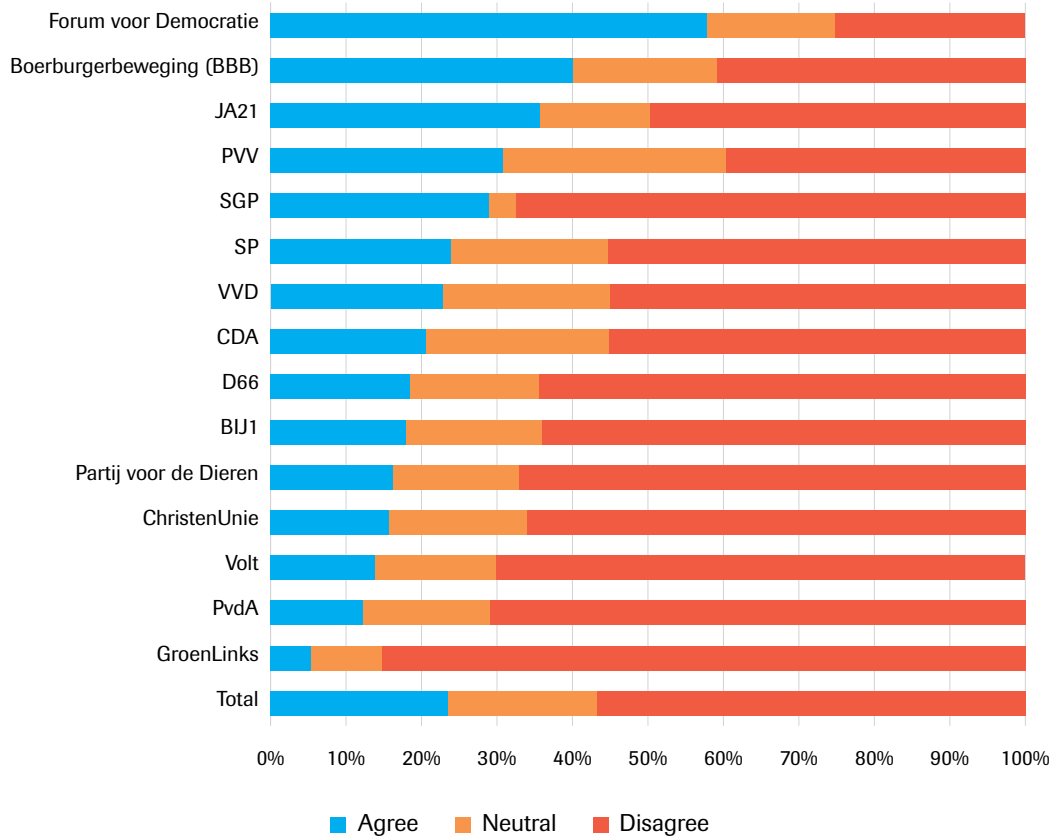
In particular the position of Forum voor Democratie supporters, who are systematically at one end of the continuum, recalls the fact that in the initial phase after its formation this party presented itself as a fervent opponent of the European Union-Ukraine Association Agreement around the time of the consultative referendum on this issue in 2016. It is also striking that Forum, PVV and JA21 supporters on the one hand and VVD supporters on the other hand are very far apart on the key issue of a Russian sphere of influence, even though all these parties are popularly referred to as 'right wing'. It is clear that this description based on the socioeconomic policy position is no longer adequate.

The Netherlands should understand Russia's desire to maintain a sphere of influence in countries such as Ukraine and Belarus.

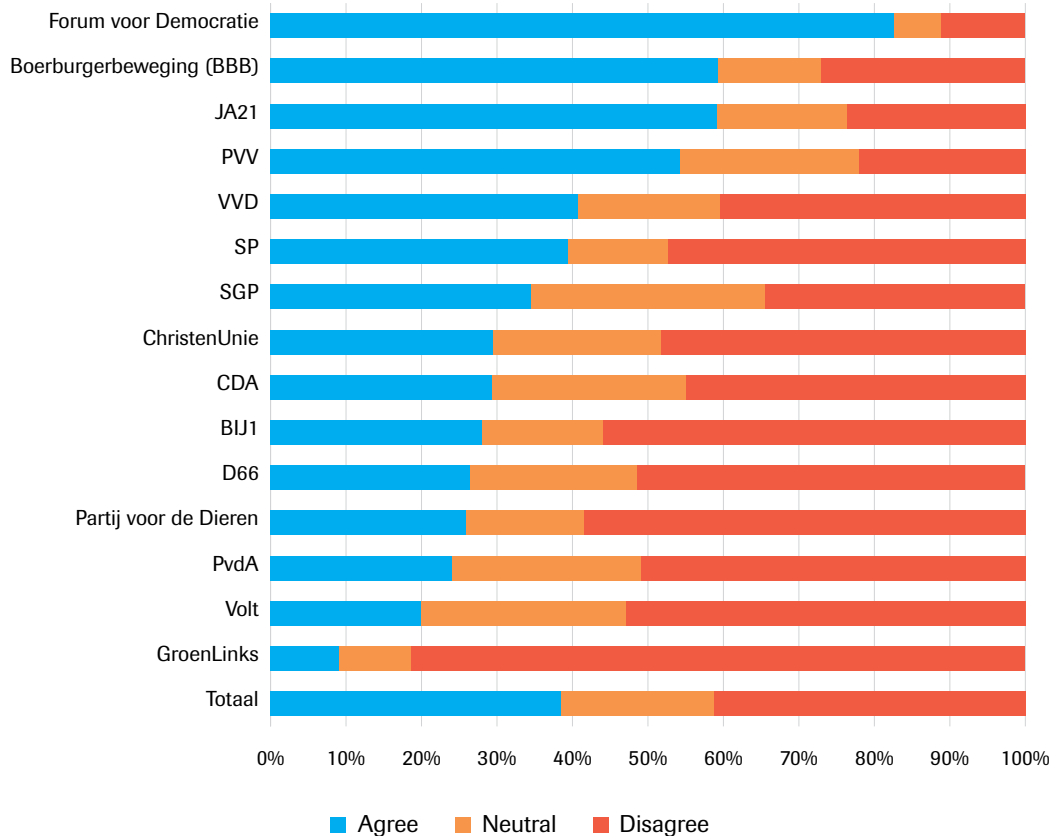


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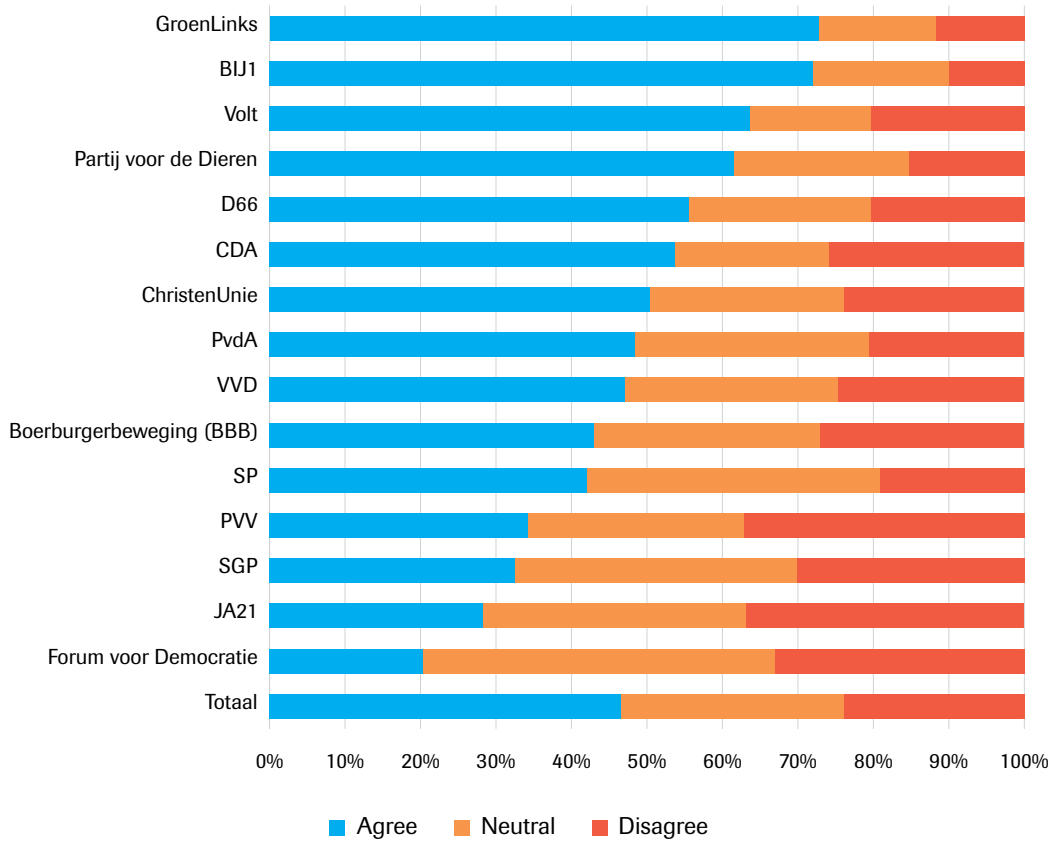
It is not a problem if the Netherlands imports Russian gas, even if it makes our country more dependent on Russia.



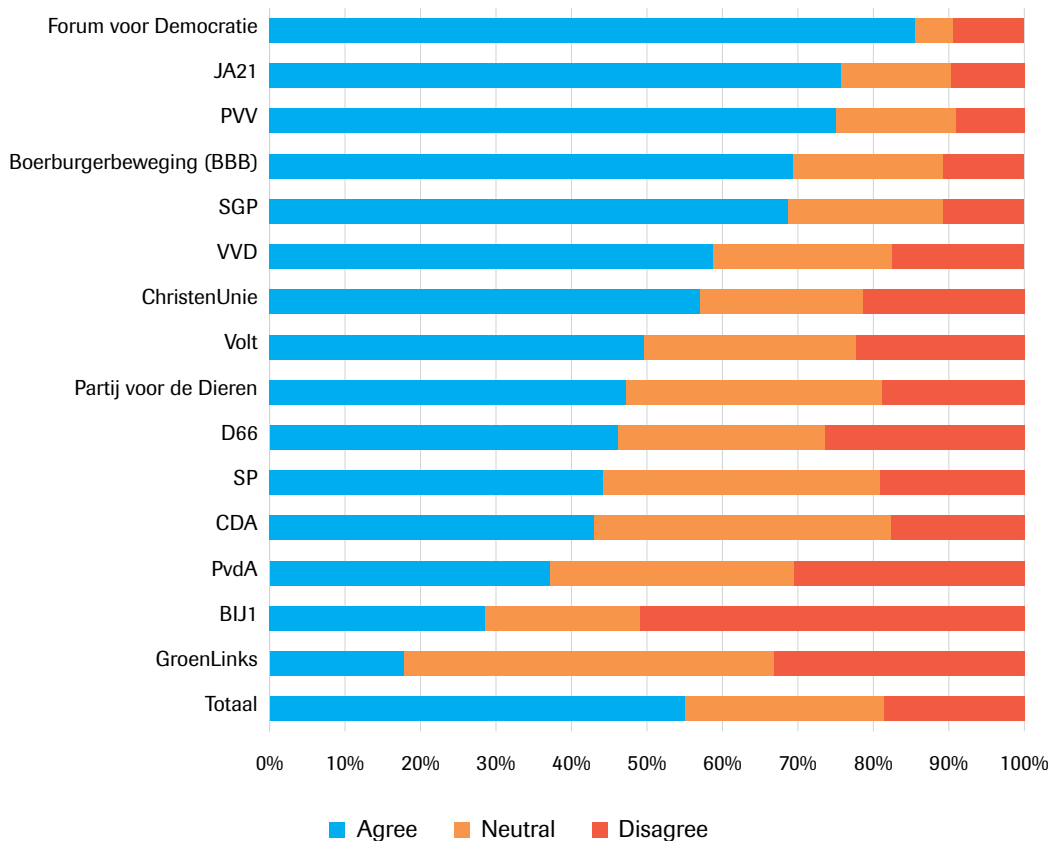
If imports of Russian gas lead to lower energy costs, the Netherlands should buy more Russian gas.



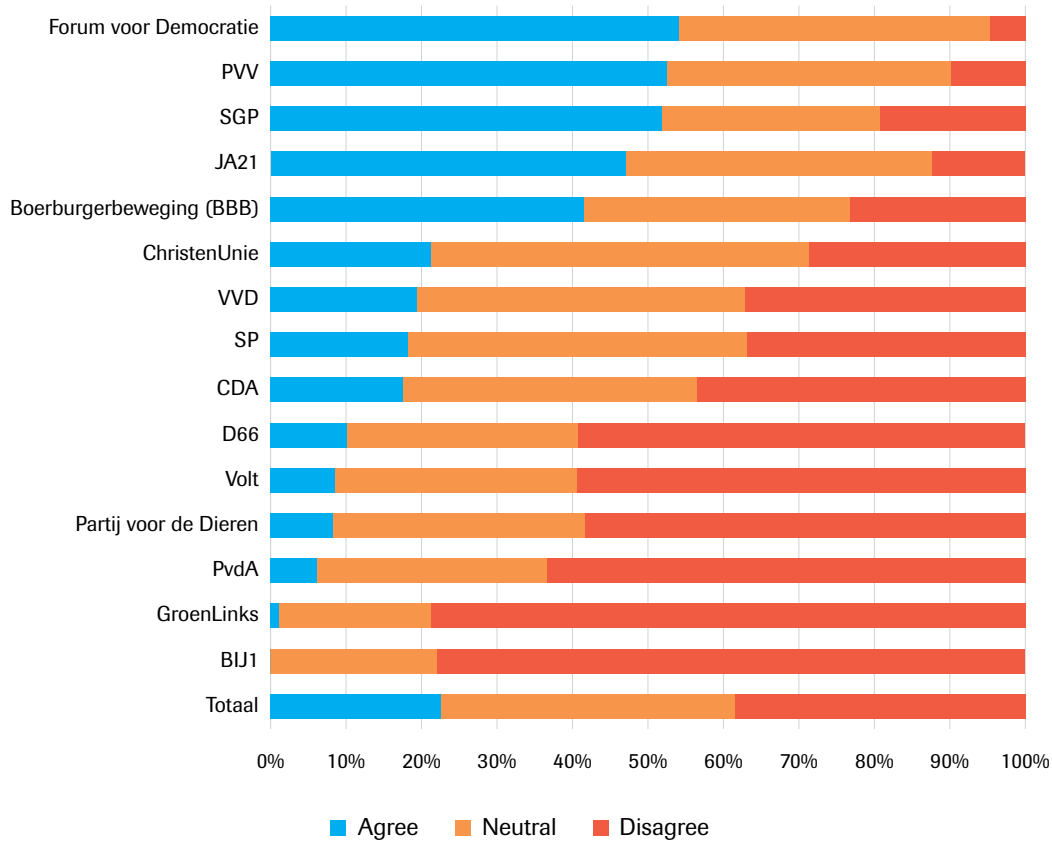
We should stop cooperating with the Russian government, because critics of government policy in Russia are increasingly being repressed.



Russia should be able to choose its own values. The Netherlands should not interfere.



I think it is good that traditional conservative values and national pride are promoted in Russia.



Appreciation or rejection of Russia’s domestic policy

Dutch people’s positions on a Russian sphere of influence and cooperation with Russia can be linked to an appreciation for the promotion of traditional conservative values and national pride in Russia. These attitudes are clearly closely related. Of those who think it is bad that traditional conservative values and national pride are promoted in Russia, 89% reject Russia’s desire to maintain a sphere of influence. Of those who endorse these conservative-nationalist ideas, 59% understand Russia’s demand to have its own sphere of influence.³

3 In crossbtabs 1 and 2 the ‘neutral’ categories have been removed from the analysis, because only respondents with strong views on both relevant questions are included.

Crosstab 1: Russian values X understanding for Russian sphere of influence

		The Netherlands should understand Russia's desire to maintain a sphere of influence in countries such as Ukraine and Belarus		Total
		Disagree	Agree	
I think it is good that traditional conservative values and national pride are promoted in Russia.	Disagree	88,6%	11,4%	100,0%
	Agree	41,3%	58,7%	100,0%
Total		72,0%	28,0%	100,0%

We see the same relationship in the positioning on whether we should continue to cooperate with Russia given the Russian government's increasing repression of critics of its policy. Of those who are unenthusiastic about the Russian government's conservative nationalism, 80% believe we should halt international cooperation because of these human rights violations. Of those who think the promotion of traditional conservative values and national pride in Russia is a good thing, only 37% believe we should halt cooperation with Russia.

Dutch people's views on international relations therefore appear to be driven strongly by communitarian thinking. We have already seen that Forum voor Democratie, PVV and SGP supporters see Russia as less of a threat⁴, and now we also see that views on international cooperation with Russia are determined by a values perspective. For a substantial part of the Dutch population, communitarian thinking thus appears to trump not only socioeconomic thinking⁵, but also the *realpolitik* approach to international threats and cooperation.

Crosstab 2: Russian values X cooperation with Russia and repression of critics

		We should stop cooperating with the Russian government, because critics of government policy in Russia are increasingly being repressed		Total
		Disagree	Agree	
I think it is good that traditional conservative values and national pride are promoted in Russia.	Disagree	20,4%	79,6%	100,0%
	Agree	63,2%	36,8%	100,0%
Total		34,7%	65,3%	100,0%

4 [Barometer_Alert_Rusland_def_0.pdf \(clingendael.org\)](#)

5 [Barometer_Alert_Rusland_def_0.pdf \(clingendael.org\)](#)

Attitudes towards Russia as a portent of the future political landscape?

After years of silence on international relations in the Dutch political debate, we note that attitudes towards Russia are now mainly divided along lines of communitarian thinking. Views on the definition, identity and values of the community are a major influencing factor. Attitudes are formed not only by the international threat perception or the assumed need for international cooperation, but particularly by value judgements on human rights violations and the Russian government's traditional conservative nationalism.

Moreover, in attitudes towards Russia a new group is emerging among supporters who were previously designated as 'right-wing'. The views of Forum, PVV, Ja21 and BBB supporters contrast sharply with those of VVD supporters, particularly on the issue of respect for a Russian sphere of influence. This contrast in the Dutch population resonates with what we are seeing in the French election campaign, where the new candidate Eric Zemmour is standing up for Russia (in a far more radical way than Marine le Pen did): "Russia is under siege from NATO, but they present it as if Russia were the aggressor. The Anglo-Saxons have always done that, even with Louis XIV and Bonaparte."⁶

The major importance attached to human rights at the other end of the continuum is echoed in other countries, with Josep Borrell, the European Union's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, saying last year that foreign policy was essentially about changing the *domestic* politics of other countries.⁷

At the same time we see a substantial part of the Dutch population (still) giving neutral answers to the questions and a majority of Dutch people saying they need more information on Russia. The combination of polarisation and a lack of information also makes Dutch society susceptible to external influence. That should provide impetus for an in-depth Dutch debate on foreign policy in general and on Russia in particular.

6 Eric Zemmour on Dailymotion CNews, 21 May 2021.

7 Josep Borrell, seminar *European Foreign policy in times of Covid-19, a conversation with High Representative Josep Borrell*, Groupe d'Etudes Géopolitiques, 29.04.21.

Annex 1: List of variables

Conservative values in Russia⁸

- I think it is good that traditional conservative values and national pride are promoted in Russia.
- Russia should be able to choose its own values. The Netherlands should not interfere.

Sphere of influence

- The Netherlands should understand Russia's desire to maintain a sphere of influence in countries such as Ukraine and Belarus.

Cooperation with Russia and human rights

- We should stop cooperating with the Russian government, because critics of government policy in Russia are increasingly being repressed.

Russian gas

- It is not a problem if the Netherlands imports Russian gas, even if it makes our country more dependent on Russia.
- If imports of Russian gas lead to lower energy costs, the Netherlands should buy more Russian gas.

Knowledge of Russia

- I feel well informed about Russia's role on the world stage and its consequences for the Netherlands.

Political preference

Which political party would you vote for if elections to the Dutch House of Representatives were held today?



- VVD
- D66
- PVV
- CDA
- SP
- PvdA
- GroenLinks
- Forum voor Democratie
- Partij voor de Dieren
- ChristenUnie
- JA21
- 50Plus
- SGP
- Volt
- DENK
- 50Plus
- Boerburgerbeweging (BBB)
- BIJ1
- Another party, namely...
- Blank vote
- I can't vote
- I'm not sure yet
- I wouldn't vote

⁸ For all questions, except 'political preference', the respondents could enter one of the following five answer categories: 'totally disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, totally agree'.

About the Clingendael Institute

Clingendael – the Netherlands Institute of International Relations – is a leading think tank and academy on international affairs. Through our analyses, training and public debate we aim to inspire and equip governments, businesses, and civil society in order to contribute to a secure, sustainable and just world.

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