In search of Dissent

Dutch Engagement with the civil society in the Warsaw Pact, 1985–1989

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Introduction

The advantage of being a small country is that most of the world is foreign.

- *Joseph Luns, former Dutch Minister for Foreign Affairs.* [1]

On September 19, 1989, Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands delivered her annual royal address before a joint session of the Dutch States General. Here, she reflected on the events of the past year and outlined her government's policy agenda for the coming term. Among her remarks were the following words:

> In several parts of the world, there is a push towards greater freedom and a democratic rule of law. It is increasingly widely recognised that this development provides the best basis for a just and prosperous society. Encouraging changes, for example, are taking place in a number of Eastern European countries. These deserve our support and sympathy, in word and deed, so that the chilly separation by the Iron Curtain increasingly gives way to cooperation and good neighbourliness.[2]

Events in Eastern Europe had taken centre stage for the Dutch government. A wave of reform and revolution was sweeping through the Warsaw Pact, and the Dutch government had every intention to build a new and better relationship with the emerging political forces on the other side of the Iron Curtain. This thesis seeks to examine the perspective of Dutch government officials who were the closest to these unfolding events, those working at Dutch embassies in Eastern European capitals. By tracking and analysing Dutch diplomats' observations of, and interactions with, this ostensibly anti-communist, pro-democracy bloc during its efforts to reform or overthrow communist rule, this thesis sheds light on how the Dutch diplomats engaged with the emerging civil society during this period.[3]

Until the revolutions of 1989 swept away the old regimes, much of Central Europe remained under the control of communist one-party states. In 1985, the Soviet Union, under

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[1] Translated by the author. In: 'Wat vindt NRC | Het turbulente buitenland is voor de Nederlandse politiek te groot geworden', *NRC*, 16 November 2019.

[2] As early elections had taken place just two weeks earlier, and no new cabinet had been formed, this statement was only to include the most essential vision of the Dutch government. In: Queen Beatrix, *Speech from the Throne*, delivered in The Hague on September 19, 1989, accessed May 1, 2025, https://www.parlement.com/id/vjvzk78aebvt/troonrede_1989_volledige_tekst.

[3] The term *civil society* was first used by the polish writer and political activist Aleksander Smolar, referring to a movement that stood opposed to the authority of the state, while also being an alternative way of seeing society from "the nation," understood in hereditary, ethnic terms: Aleksander Smolar, 'Civil Society After Communism: From Opposition to Atomization', *Journal of Democracy* 7, no. 1 (1996): 24.

the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev, started the process of initiating policies of openness (*glasnost*) and reform (*perestroika*).[4] With these reforms, the Soviet Union's relationship with the Central European regimes shifted dramatically. Under Gorbachev, the USSR was no longer willing or able to act as the guarantor of one-party rule due to its massive domestic economic problems.[5] It had effectively signalled to its allies that they now would have to sustain their regimes without external support.[6] Unable to do so, Gorbachev's policy would eventually lead to the collapse of the Soviet sphere of influence.[7] Left to fend for themselves, the communist regimes became increasingly overwhelmed by their own lack of legitimacy, economic crises and mounting internal and external pressure to reform.[8] By early 1990, communist rule in every single Warsaw Pact member state, apart from the USSR itself, had disintegrated or had been overthrown.

This thesis analyses these last four years of the Warsaw Pact member states from a Dutch perspective. Starting in 1985, it seeks to find out how the diplomatic relationship between the Netherlands and People's Republic of Bulgaria, the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, the German Democratic Republic, the Hungarian People's Republic, the Polish People's Republic, and the Socialist Republic of Romania navigated the events of the final years of communist rule in Central and Eastern Europe. It does not go into the Dutch Soviet relationship, as the focus remains on Dutch diplomatic efforts with the other members of the Eastern Bloc. This relationship began to transform in 1985, as Gorbachev began the process of granting greater freedoms to these states in their internal and external policies, encouraging the countries to introduce their own reforms.[9] Economic malaise, political stagnation and pressure from the West, Moscow and their own population to reform, forced these regimes to implement their own reforms.[10] As these reformist policies proved inadequate to the challenges faced by the regimes of Eastern Europe, public opinion increasingly turned towards more radical reforms, and away from the communist ideology that had governed them for the last four decades.[11]

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[4] Jacques Lévesque, *The Enigma of 1989: The USSR and the Liberation of Eastern Europe* (University of California Press, 1997), 10.
[5] Mary Elise Sarotte, *1989: The Struggle to Create Post-Cold War Europe - Updated Edition* (Princeton University Press, 2014), 15.
[6] Victor Sebestyen, *Revolution 1989: The Fall of the Soviet Empire*, (Phoenix, 2010), 198.
[7] Sebestyen, 196.
[8] Philipp Ther, *Europe since 1989: A History* (Princeton University Press, 2016), 66.
[9] Ther, 45.
[10] Mark Kramer, 'The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union (Part I)', *Journal of Cold War Studies* 5, no. 4 (2003): 180.
[11] Elen Braat and Pepijn Corduwener, *1989 and the West*, (Routledge, 2019), 97.

The push for reforms, and the subsequent failures of these reforms to address the population's economic, political and social demands, saw the rise of a growing group of citizens demanding radical change.[12] This group, ranging from poets and clergymen to dockworkers and disgruntled party members, became collectively referred to as the "civil society", a term used at the time to refer to all those who stood opposed to communist rule.[13] Civil society was seen "as the ideal of a voluntary community opposing the coercion of the state, as the arena of the democratic formation of collective will, and as a space for freedom, dialogue, and communication."[14] In other words, civil society was a broad term used to refer to anyone who was opposed to Eastern European socialist governance as it stood in the late 80s, and who demanded more liberalisation and democracy.[15] In many of these countries, large parts of the civil society had been repressed during the four decades of communist rule, either by internal repression or Soviet intervention.[16] By the end of the decade, members of these organisations began peacefully replacing the collapsing communist parties as the rulers of their countries.[17] The primary focus of this thesis is on efforts made by Dutch diplomats stationed in embassies to engage with the rise of civil society from 1985 to 1989.

Certainly, the shifting role of civil society from politically irrelevant to governing their countries within five years is a fascinating subject. Many scholarly works have been written about their role in the events of 1989. Significant attention has been given to the relationship between these movements and the Western governments, even before the final collapse of communism in Europe. This thesis examines how Dutch embassies and their diplomatic personal perceived and interacted with civil society in Eastern Europe during the late Cold War. While there is existing scholarship on the Dutch engagements with dissident movements in Eastern Europe, the focus has been unevenly spread, with a particular focus on East Germany and Poland.[18] The relationship between the Dutch state and non-state actors in Eastern Europe has received comparatively little attention, especially compared to inter-state

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[12] Braat and Corduwener, 238.
[13] Smolar, 'Civil Society After Communism', 25.
[14] Aleksander Smolar and Magdalena Potocka, 'History and Memory: The Revolutions of 1989-91', *Journal of Democracy* 12, no. 3 (1 July 2001): 9.
[15] Smolar and Potocka, 9.
[16] Stephen Kotkin and Jan Tomasz Gross, *Uncivil Society: 1989 and the Implosion of the Communist Establishment*, (Modern Library, 2009), 16.
[17] Kramer, 'The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union (Part I)', 190.
[18] For Dutch relations with opposition in Poland, see: Christie Miedema, 'The Transnationality of Dutch Solidarity with the Polish Opposition 1980-1989', *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire* 89, No. 3 (2011): 1307-30; On the relation with dissidents in East Germany, See: Beatrice de Graaf, *Over de muur: de DDR, de Nederlandse kerken en de vredesbeweging* (Boom, 2004).

diplomatic relations or transnational relationships between non-state organisations and actors. By analysing the evolving relationship between the Netherlands and civil society actors across all six Eastern Bloc states, this study aims to offer new insights into the dynamics of democratic opposition and Dutch foreign policy during this transformative period.

Research Question

The central question of this thesis is: *How did Dutch embassy personnel engage diplomatically with non-Soviet Warsaw Pact member states and their civil societies between 1985 and 1989?* This thesis employs of Bent Boel's layers of engagement to trace Dutch diplomacy between Dutch embassies and oppositional forces in Eastern Europe during the final years of communist rule.[19] In doing so, I will argue that Dutch diplomats consistently underestimated the weakness of communist rule in Eastern Europe and the strength and support for the opposition, leading to them being caught off guard during the revolutions in late 1989. To create a comprehensive answer to the research question, it has been divided into sub-sections.

To begin, this thesis examines the relationship between Dutch embassies, the governments of Warsaw Pact member states, and their respective civil societies before, during, and after 1985. It explores how the Netherlands conducted its diplomacy with Eastern European governments prior to this turning point, and how Dutch officials engaged with dissident movements in non-Soviet Warsaw Pact countries during the late Cold War. Particular attention is given to the extent to which these contacts were visible or prioritized within the broader Dutch diplomatic agenda, and what relevance officials attributed to dissident groups within the political systems of these states. The analysis also considers how the arrival of Mikhail Gorbachev and the introduction of his reformist policies altered the prospects for civil society and opposition movements across the Eastern Bloc. The hypothesis of this thesis is that, prior to Gorbachev's rise, the Dutch embassies had little incentive to engage with dissident movements in Eastern Europe. Internal repression kept opposition groups weak, and in cases where dissident elements emerged, Soviet intervention swiftly crushed them. This dynamic created little incentive for Dutch diplomacy to actively seek out oppositional forces in the east.

Furthermore, the term engagement requires clarification within the context of this

[19] Boel's layers of engagement can be found in: Bent Boel, 'Avoiding (Unwanted) Departures: British Diplomacy and Soviet Bloc Dissidents during the Cold War', in *Contemporary British History* Vol. 37, No. 4 (2 October 2023): 573-604.

thesis. It refers broadly to the range of diplomatic and political actions undertaken by Dutch embassies in relation to civil society actors in Eastern Europe. These included discreetly or openly maintaining contact with dissidents, issuing statements through multilateral channels like the CSCE, and relaying support through indirect means.[20] Importantly, this thesis also considers the absence of engagement as a significant factor. Instances where the Netherlands chose not to engage with civil society are equally revealing and are examined in comparison to cases of active engagement, both within the Eastern Bloc and in other regions or historical contexts.

Finally, this thesis considers whether and how Dutch engagement varied across the six non-Soviet Warsaw Pact states. It examines how the Netherlands balanced a broader regional strategy with country-specific approaches in its diplomacy toward the Eastern Bloc during the late Cold War. Particular attention is given to differences in its interactions with civil society in East Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria, and to the extent to which these approaches converged or diverged over time. Understanding these distinctions helps to clarify how the Netherlands adapted its foreign policy in response to the shifting political landscape of the late 1980s.

Structure

Chapter I. This chapter includes the literature review, methodology, and theoretical concepts. It introduces and explains the main concept of 'civil society' and what is meant by the term 'engagement.' This section also clarifies Bent Boel's layers of engagement.[21] The literature review touches upon the different historical debates this thesis makes use of, on the history of 1989 and on Dutch Foreign policy. Chapter I will not make use of primary sources but will entirely consist of secondary sources.

Chapter II. This chapter addresses how Dutch diplomacy engaged with non-Soviet Warsaw Pact states and their civil societies before and during 1985. It argues that Dutch contact with opposition groups was minimal and mostly limited to informal or humanitarian channels, except in Poland. This restraint was shaped by the legacy of the Brezhnev Doctrine and the absence of politically legitimate dissident movements. Drawing on Bent Boel's analysis, the thesis shows that Dutch engagement was primarily driven by humanitarian rather than

[20] Floribert Baudet, '"Ik hoop maar dat ze hun hand niet overspelen.": De Fluwelen Revolutie door de ogen van de Nederlandse ambassade in Praag', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 135, no. 4 (1 December 2022): 383–401.
[21] Boel, 'Avoiding (Unwanted) Departures'.

political concerns and constrained by state repression and mistrust. It shows how Gorbachev's rise in 1985 did not immediately alter Dutch diplomatic behaviour.

Chapter III. This chapter explores the early effects of Gorbachev's glasnost and perestroika policies on the political climate in the non-Soviet Warsaw Pact states from 1986 to the summer of 1988. It investigates the first signs of a growing group of dissenters, and the increasing awareness this rise by Dutch diplomats. Particular attention is given to Poland and Hungary, were reforms advanced earliest. The chapter maps the slow shift from mere recognition to initial para- and political contacts between the embassies and civil society.

Chapter IV. This chapter focusses on the period from the summer of 1988 to the summer of 1989, analysing the acceleration of political reforms and civic mobilization across the Warsaw Pact. It examines the strengthening of opposition movements, particularly with the resurgence of Polish Solidarity's and the introduction of political pluralism in Hungary. It also shows the definite signs of a split, with the regimes in Berlin, Bucharest, Prague and Sofia resisting any attempts made at political reform. Dutch diplomatic engagement intensified throughout this period, but it differed vastly between countries. Diplomatic engagement with civil society ranged from fully established contacts in the reform-oriented states of Hungary and Poland to continued struggles to establish any meaningful connections in Bulgaria and Romania. It concludes in the summer of 1989, when the communist parties in Poland and Hungary relinquished their exclusive hold on power.

Chapter V. This chapter covering period from the summer of 1989 until the end of the year. It covers the rapid collapse of communist rule across Eastern Europe starting with the election victory for Solidarity in Poland until the fall of the Ceaușescu. It highlights how Dutch embassies responded to the growing strength of civil society within this shifting political order. Dutch diplomatic strategies evolve quickly but remain reactive. During this period, ties with civil society gradually strengthened, so that by the end of the year, the Dutch had established full diplomatic contact in all six countries. This chapter demonstrates that, despite having established serious contacts in most countries, the Dutch consistently underestimated the strength and agency of civil society, and the vulnerability of the ruling regimes. As such, the Dutch diplomats present in these countries were caught of guard by the speed of events, as communist rule disintegrated around them.

Conclusion. Four main conclusions are put forth on how Dutch embassies responded to the rapid transformations in Eastern Europe. First, Dutch diplomacy remained closely aligned

with Western allies, both ideologically and out of necessity, often relying on friendly nations for information and access to civil society. Second, Dutch diplomats made little distinction in their approach to Warsaw Pact states until 1988. It is argued that internal reform by communist elites, and not the rise of civil society, was the main driver of change. Third, while diplomatic engagement with civil society deepened over time, this did not correlate with the pace of political reforms implemented and differed strongly between countries until the end. Last, despite growing contacts, Dutch embassies underestimated civil society's influence and were ultimately surprised by the revolutions. The conclusion also reflects on the study's limitations, including its narrow national focus, archival-based methodology, and lack of civil society voices, pointing to the need for further research on this fascinating subject.

Chapter I: Theory and Method

Main Theoretical Concepts

Civil Society is the main concept at the centre of this thesis. This term is contested and has changed significantly over the centuries. In this thesis, the definition given by David Armstrong, Professor of International Relations at the University of Exeter is used, from his book *Civil Society and International Governance*.[22] He argues that although the term could be dated back to the 17th century, by the late 20th century, civil society had become a distinct term to refer to those who struggled against the repressive governments, especially those of communist Europe.[23] In these societies, the state was the only institution that possessed legal authority.[24] 'Civil society', by its very existence, challenged the state for its claim to sole legitimacy. The term was to be defined for what it was against, as much as what it stood for on its own. Against the communist states of Eastern Europe, this meant that it was private and voluntary, non-hierarchical, and dispersed instead of centralised.[25] This was how civil society was understood during the 1970s and 1980s, and this is the definition used in the thesis as well. It refers to all those individuals, groups, organisations, and networks, from dissident activists and independent trade unions to environmentalists and religious institutions. As summed up by the former Polish dissident and writer Aleksander Smolar:

> As used in Central and Eastern Europe, the notion of *civil society* never had much to do with the grand theoretical debates that one may trace across two centuries in the works of Locke, Adam Ferguson, Adam Smith, Hegel, Tocqueville, Marx, and Gramsci, among others. To speak of civil society was instead to express a twofold opposition. The first dimension was opposition to authority. Civil society was "us"; the authorities were "them." The second dimension was one in which civil society was held up in contradistinction to "the nation," understood in hereditary, ethnic terms.[26]

For similar reasons, the focus of the thesis is not just on dissidents, but civil society at large. To quote Adam Michnik, another Polish dissident: "The opposition is not the same as the

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[22] David Armstrong, *Civil Society and International Governance: The Role of Non-State Actors in Global and Regional Regulatory Frameworks*, (Routledge, 2011), 4.
[23] Armstrong, 4.
[24] Armstrong.
[25] Armstrong, 5.
[26] Smolar, 'Civil Society After Communism', 24.

nation. We are a part of society, not its representatives."[27] Dissidents, then, were those individuals or groups who openly challenged the legitimacy of their governments. In contrast, civil society encompassed a broader network of autonomous institutions and practices existing outside state control, including churches, clubs, and grassroots organisations.

Diplomatic engagement is the other concept in this thesis that requires careful attention to explain. At first glance, terms like *diplomatic outreach*, *interaction*, or *relationship* might seem more appropriate to describe the engagement between Dutch diplomats and members of civil society. However, these terms imply a reciprocal exchange, something that was often limited or one-sided due to state repression and the restricted capacity of civil society actors to respond. In some instances, and especially during the first years analysed in this thesis, there was simply little to no interaction between Dutch diplomatic personnel and those who were associated with civil society. This lack of interaction did not mean that the Dutch were unaware of the opposition to the regime's growing power: they did not have the will, means, connections or opportunity to reach out to these groups. Still, they were acknowledged by the Dutch and written about in their reports and memos. Therefore, this thesis uses the term 'engage' to also include this process of acknowledging the existence of these groups, prior to any contact being established.

To measure the level of engagement between the Dutch and the civil society active in Eastern Europe, the thesis utilises the concept 'layers of relationship' introduced by Bent Boel, Historian at the Department of History and International Studies at Aalborg University. In *Avoiding (Unwanted) Departures: British Diplomacy and Soviet Bloc Dissidents During the Cold War,* Boel identifies three layers of engagement: para-contacts, political contacts, and direct diplomatic encounters with dissidents, focusing on the British approach to dissident diplomacy during the final decades of the Cold War.[28] Although Boel is focused on dissidents specifically, this theoretical concept can be applied to diplomacy with civil society more broadly as well.

Boel defines these three layers as stages of interaction between the British government and dissident groups. Para-contacts is used by Boel to refer to the different ways in which diplomats reached out to dissidents, without having actual face-to-face contact with them.[29]

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[27] Found in the essay "Letters from Gdansk Prison, 1985, in: Adam Michnik *Letters From Prison and Other Essays*, ed. Maya Latynski et al., Studies in Society and Culture in East-Central Europe (University of California Press, 1987), 76.
[28] Bent Boel, 'Avoiding (Unwanted) Departures: British Diplomacy and Soviet Bloc Dissidents during the Cold War', *Contemporary British History* 37, no. 4 (2023): 573.
[29] Boel, 575.

This can refer to political statements, quiet diplomacy and encounters with exiles.[30] The next step, 'Political contacts' refers to symbolic contact between high-profile politicians and dissident groups, to signal the support for these groups.[31] The final step, direct diplomatic encounters, refers to contact between dissident groups and embassy staff.[32] These three layers can be directly applied to the analysis of Dutch diplomatic engagement with the Warsaw Pact member states and their dissident groups. This approach may offer a clearer understanding of the depth of Dutch engagement with civil society across the Warsaw Pact. To refine this model for the case study of communist Europe in the 1980s, this thesis introduces an additional, preliminary layer: recognition without outreach. This stage captures instances in which diplomats acknowledge the existence or relevance of a group without initiating any form of contact. Including this step allows for a more nuanced understanding of how relationships with civil society groups evolved, or failed to evolve, over time. Such a step is needed in highly repressive societies, whereby any contact between foreign governments and dissidents are hindered by the state.

While Boel's framework offers a structured way to assess varying degrees of engagement, it is not without its limitations. The model was developed in the context of British diplomacy toward explicitly dissident actors, which may not fully capture the diversity and complexity of civil society engagement across different national and political contexts. Moreover, applying a staged model risks oversimplifying fluid and overlapping diplomatic behaviours, or missing forms of engagement that do not fit neatly into any one category. Nevertheless, this approach remains valuable for this thesis, because it provides a clear analytical structure that enables comparison and pattern recognition. By adapting the framework and adding an additional layer, it becomes flexible enough to accommodate the nuances of Dutch diplomacy in Eastern Europe, while still offering a coherent basis for systematic analysis.

Literature Review

This thesis engages with two distinct historiographical debates and seeks to interweave them into a coherent analytical framework. First, it examines the historiography of 1989, exploring the significance, causes, and unfolding of the events that marked the end of the Cold War. Second, it engages with scholarship on Dutch foreign policy, with particular focus on its

[30] Boel, 575.
[31] Boel, 577.
[32] Boel, 578.

orientation toward Eastern Europe during the final decade of the Cold War. Combining these threads, the thesis is placed into these larger academic debates.

Historiography of 1989

Historians remain divided over the causes and character of the 1989 revolutions. Among the many debates surrounding the collapse of communist rule in Eastern Europe, four are particularly relevant to this thesis.

First is the question of historical *continuity* versus *rupture*: were the events of 1989 a sudden break, or the culmination of a more prolonged decline of the communist grip on power? In his book on the revolutions of 1989, journalist and historian Victor Sebestyen argues that the beginning of the end for communist rule in Eastern Europe starts ten years earlier, with the visit of Polish-born Pope John Paul II.[33] Millions of Poles turned out to greet him, despite living in an officially atheist state. Their turnout demonstrated to each other and the world just how much appeal an alternative to communism still held in Poland.[34] Sebesteyn argues that Papel's visit fatally undermined the Polish government's claim to legitimacy, showing the world just how little support it had from its citizens.[35] This crisis of *political* legitimacy affected every communist regime, and consequently, the events of 1989 were the result of unpopular regimes collapsing due to their inability to deal with this crisis. Professor of History and International Relations Padraic Kenney offers a contrasting perspective, arguing that the growing political legitimacy of the opposition enabled it to successfully challenge communist regimes.[36] What had changed in 1989 was not changes at the top, but the opposition.[37] Thus Kenney argues that the fall of communism was due to the enduring rise of a pluralistic, creative, decentralised, and often joyful carnival of revolutions lasting from 1986 to late 1989.[38]

Professor Cornel Ban argues that it was the lack of *economic* legitimacy, caused by debt crises, which fatally undermined Communism in Easter Europe.[39] It explains how even under the rule of Nicolea Ceaușescu, who successfully repressed any hint civil society right up to his overthrow, can still collapse. Ban shows that when a regime "defaults on its

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[33] Sebestyen, *Revolution 1989*, 22.
[34] Sebestyen, 27.
[35] Sebestyen, 27.
[36] Padraic Kenney, *A Carnival of Revolution: Central Europe 1989* (Princeton University Press, 2020).
[37] Kenney, 247.
[38] Kenney, 3.
[39] Cornel Ban, 'Sovereign Debt, Austerity, and Regime Change: The Case of Nicolae Ceaușescu's Romania', *East European Politics and Societies* 26, no. 4 (2012): 743.

socioeconomic promises to broad strata of society, regime change can happen through mass mobilisation," even without an active opposition present to lead it forward.[40] Although Ban acknowledges that Romania stood out in its response to the debt crisis, by repaying all its loans through severe austerity, the result was similar to the other communist states. These regimes failed to prevent a decline in living standards, fuelling public discontent and the emergence of widespread opposition, leading to their demise in 1989.[41]

A contrasting perspective to these long-term explanations is put forward by Emeritus Professor of International Relations Adam Roberts. He accepts that long-standing structural weaknesses and societal dissent laid the foundation for change.[42] However, the collapse of communist regimes in 1989 was "an incredibly swift transition" made possible by Gorbachev's abandonment of the Brezhnev Doctrine and the Soviet Union's retreat from coercive enforcement.[43] Roberts accepts that evidence suggests a multi-faceted explanation of these revolutions and the end of the Cold War.[44] Yet he emphasises that the rupture in Soviet policy which occurred in 1985 was a turning point that cannot be discarded.[45] This thesis adopts Roberts' interpretive framework, which identifies the rupture not in 1989 itself, but in 1985 with the rise of Gorbachev.

A second debate is on *agency*: was the collapse of communism driven primarily by top-down actors, such as political leaders in Moscow and Washington, or by bottom-up forces of the opposition within the Warsaw Pact? Archie Brown, Emeritus Professor of Politics at the University of Oxford, emphasizes the importance of the *human factor*, arguing that the events of 1989 were shaped above all by the decisions of individual leaders.[46] Brown strongly rejects structuralist or deterministic explanations of the Cold War's end; it was leadership based on ideological conviction and moral reasoning which ended it.[47] Without Gorbachev's "new thinking" and the reforms he introduced by 1988, expectations would not have risen, and 1989 may have looked very different.[48] Brwon consequently argues that Communist

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[40] Ban, 747.
[41] Ban, 747.
[42] Adam Roberts, 'An "Incredibly Swift Transition": Reflections on the End of the Cold War', in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War: Volume 3: Endings*, ed. Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad, vol. 3, The Cambridge History of the Cold War (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 533.
[43] Roberts, 513.
[44] Roberts, 533.
[45] Roberts, 521.
[46] Archie Brown, *The Human Factor: Gorbachev, Reagan, and Thatcher, and the End of the Cold War* (Oxford University Press, 2020).
[47] Brown, 25.
[48] Brown, 396.

regimes endured for decades because people believed there was no viable alternative, and without a change at top, this would have endured.[49] The American political scientist William Taubman echoes these claims in his book *Gorbachev: His Life and Times.*[50] He argues that Gorbachev, motivated by economic pressures, personal beliefs, ideological convictions, and political considerations, pursued a policy of non-intervention in Eastern Europe.[51] Gorbachev's decision to end Soviet intervention in its satellite states undermined local regimes and ultimately pavved the way for their collapse.[52] In his widely acclaimed book *Postwar*, the historian Tony Judt also sees the 1989 revolution as a direct result of Gorbachev's renunciation of the Soviet Empire.

> The satellite states of Eastern Europe were all colonies of the Communist empire based in Moscow. Accordingly, there is only so much about the changes of 1989 that can be attributed to Indigenous social or political forces—whether they were underground Catholic organisations in Slovakia, rock-music groups in Poland, or free-thinking intellectuals everywhere. In the last analysis, Moscow always counted.[53]

Although Moscow's role is sometimes downplayed by national narratives, particularly by those who partook in the protests of 1989, Judt argues that the communist regimes could only be toppled because of Gorbachev's decision not to intervene.[54] Judt, Taubman and to an extend Brown fall within the tradition of Sovietology, with their focus on Moscow and the Kremlin.[55]

Others dispute this focus on top-down actors. German historian Philipp Ther describes the revolutions of 1989 as "negotiated revolution," neither driven by both public pressure and elite concessions.[56] Ther speaks of mass mobilization, both in the capital and the provinces, as evidence of a genuine popular push for change.[57] U.S historian John Connelly too rejects the elite-centred framework proposed by Judt, Taubman and Brown. The course of events was the decision of thousands of individual choices, and without these choices "… the outcome would

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[49] Brown, 396.
[50] William Taubman, *Gorbatsjov: zijn leven en tijdperk* (Hollands Diep, 2017).
[51] Taubman, 452.
[52] Taubman, 566.
[53] Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (Vintage Books, 2010), 630.
[54] Judt, 631.
[55] Ther, *Europe since 1989*, 56.
[56] Ther, 74.
[57] Ther, 66.

have been very different, perhaps violent."[58] Connelly argues that although the challenge to communist rule stemmed from decades of social and economic crisis, a peaceful transfer of power was made possible only through the choices of both leaders and citizens.[59] Rejecting both the top-down approach and the middle way, German historian Ilko-Sascha Kowalczuk understands the events of 1989 primarily as a citizens movement.[60] It was the people, claiming and exercising their civil rights, that was the driving factor in the transformation from communist rule towards the pluralist, democratic system that emerged in the 1990s.[61] Kowalczuk view that the revolutions of 1989 were primarily driven by civil society was widely shared at the time.[62] *The Magic Lantern,* a book written by British historian Timothy Garton Ash to recount the sequence of revolutions in Poland, Hungary, East Germany and Czechoslovakia, has been especially popular in spreading the perspective of a bottom-up led change.[63] He tells the story how dissidents organized and overcame their government, and winning freedom for themselves.

The analysis of this thesis is primarily based on the framework provided by Taubman, Brown and Judt for the period leading up to 1989, while recognising the critical role played by dissident groups in the revolution's final year. It argues that opposition movements became decisive only after Soviet control began to recede. Thus, the top-down decision not to intervene, by both Moscow and the West, created momentum for bottom-up forces to mobilise and push for reform.

A third debate concerns the *role* of *civil society*. How broad was its support, who actively participated in it, and how was its visibility and legitimacy viewed abroad and at home? In *Uncivil Society: 1989 and the Implosion of the Communist Establishment*, American historian Stephen Kotkin and Polish historian Jan Tomasz Gross make the argument that, except for Poland, civil society did not exist.[64] Kotkin and Gross make the argument that it can be questioned to even speak of an opposition.[65] Instead, it makes more sense to speak of

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[58] John Connelly, *From Peoples into Nations: A History of Eastern Europe* (Princeton University Press, 2020), 687.
[59] Connelly, 686.
[60] Ilko-Sascha Kowalczuk, *End Game: The 1989 Revolution in East Germany*, (Berghahn Books, 2022).
[61] Kowalczuk, 6.
[62] Examples of this can be found in the excellent bundle of Dutch articles published by De Volkskrant in: Rob Vreeken, *Het jaar van het volk: revolutie in Oost-Europa* (De Volkskrant, 1990).
[63] Timothy Garton Ash, *The Magic Lantern: The Revolution of '89 Witnessed in Warsaw, Budapest, Berlin, and Prague* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2010).
[64] Kotkin and Gross, *Uncivil Society*.
[65] Kotkin and Gross.

isolated dissidents.[66] They argue instead that "the regimes of the Soviet Bloc collapsed not because of vibrant civil societies, but because of the rot and dysfunction within the ruling elites, 'the uncivil society.'"[67] Communism collapsed because its leadership lost the support of the political, security, and military cadre.[68] Other scholars, while not questioning the existence of civil society, dispute its support during the final years of communism. Katya Hoyer a German British historian writing on East Germany, has controversially argued that most East Germans were not consciously opposed to the regime they lived under.[69] She cautions against the narrative that most people opposed how things were. People might have called for modernisation, but most East Germans neither wanted the state abolished nor dreamt of immediate reunification with the West.[70] Hoyer's argument is echoed by Mary Elise Sarotte, an American post-Cold War historian. She writes:

> Relevant here is the point that many East German dissidents believed socialism—and not just the watered-down variant of Western-style social democracy— still had a chance, if the corrupt leadership of the Warsaw Pact could be removed.[71]

Sarotte does concede that in the very last months, the size of the opposition soared.[72] Both she and Hoyer both point out that the pro-democracy, pro-Western, neoliberal governments that replaced the old forms of government were almost never envisioned as the end goal for those who participated in the civil society.[73] Most agreed that there should be some political and economic reforms, and many were well disposed towards the West, but it was not what drove them to openly challenge the regimes.

In his book *Worlds of Dissent: Charter 77, The Plastic People of the Universe, and Czech Culture under Communism* professor Jonathon Bolton adds that, although Czechoslovakia is often viewed as a hotbed of dissent, the dissident movement there was in fact quite small.[74] He points out that the group of individuals who had signed Charta-77 number not even 2000.[75] Even in 1989, the Czechoslovak secret police only had 500 people

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[66] Kotkin and Gross.
[67] Kotkin and Gross, 4.
[68] Kotkin and Gross, *Uncivil Society*.
[69] Katja Hoyer, *Beyond the Wall: East Germany, 1949-1990* (Penguin Books, 2024), 370.
[70] Hoyer, 370.
[71] Sarotte, *1989*, 14.
[72] Sarotte, 35.
[73] Sarotte, 14.
[74] Jonathan Bolton, *Worlds of Dissent: Charter 77, The Plastic People of the Universe, and Czech Culture under Communism*, (Harvard University Press, 2012).
[75] Bolton, 24.

listed as active opponents.[76] But Bolton makes the argument, that the number of dissenters did not properly represent those who sought out civic alternatives to communist rule.[77] Kenney too makes the point that the opposition to communism could be explained by only those active dissenters.[78] Environmental groups, church communities, trade unions, student organizations, and other non-party-affiliated groups began to emerge in the final years of communism; they would eventually form the backbone of the opposition.[79] U.S. historian James Krapfl extends this argument further, seeing the spread of civic society throughout the country as prove that the revolutionaries had deep domestic roots.[80] His argument is that this very spread of civil society was a large-scale mobilisation in small towns as well as the cities, uniting the citizens and laying the groundwork for the revolution.[81]

This thesis acknowledges that dissident groups across the Warsaw Pact were often small in scale. However, it rejects the notion, advanced by scholars such as Kotkin and Gross, that this renders the concept of civil society inapplicable. The rise of civic organisations, non-political in nature but unaffiliated with the communist regime, show a rise of citizens seeking alternatives to the communist rule. As such, it comes less of a surprise when the revolutions in 1989 manage to mobiles hundreds of thousands, despite the lack of any opposition in most countries. There might have not been a dissident movement, but there was an active civil society that rose up in 1989.

A final historiographical debate concerns the *role of the West* in the collapse of communism, and how Western governments responded to Eastern European dissidence. During the Cold War, the United States and its allies had been critical of how the dissidents were treated by Moscow and its satellite regimes. After the 1974 Helsinki Final Act, which emphasised the respect for human rights amongst other issues, Western governments were more than happy to point out any violation committed by the communist bloc.[82] And with the Cold War heating up again in the early 1980s, there was little incentive not to critique the repression of the Civil Society. Yet during the period from 1985 until the revolutions of 1989, Western governments often stayed remarkably silent on the plight of anti-communist

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[76] Bolton, 261.
[77] Bolton, 266.
[78] Kenney, *A Carnival of Revolution*, 257.
[79] Kenney, 257.
[80] James Krapfl, *Revolution with a Human Face: Politics, Culture, and Community in Czechoslovakia, 1989–1992* (Cornell University Press, 2013).
[81] Krapfl.
[82] Richard Crockatt, *The Fifty Years War: The United States and the Soviet Union in World Politics, 1941-1991* (Routledge, 1995), 352.

dissidents. Sarotte argues that the West became increasingly committed to the status quo as relations improved with the USSR under Gorbachev.[83]

> Even as East Europeans ceased to be willing to tolerate the status quo, the renewed U.S. preference for components of that status quo became plain. Leading NATO countries were aware of how hard-fought the compromises involved in coalition diplomacy and action had been, and did not want to alter them lightly. Reagan's initiatives had had a number of detractors in NATO and his own vice president's office, and now Bush was in charge. This interest in slowing down the pace of change and sticking to what had been decided, most notably the maintenance of short-range nuclear weapons, clashed with the desires of European protesters both in the East and the West.[84]

Apart from the improving relations between the capitalist and communist blocs, Richard Crockett, Emeritus Professor of American History at the University of East Anglia, provides an additional reason. The Soviet Union and its empire seemed stable and were not going anywhere.[85] Even in 1989, a prominent Western Soviet expert declared that the glasnost era had reached its climax.[86] Revolution in the Soviet Union seemed not to be, at this time, part of the historical agenda.[87] Professor of International History John W. Young slightly disagrees with this assessment. He notes that even when popularity of Gorbachev peaked in the Western world, the government of western Europe remained cautious.[88] The government of Western Europe and the US embraced the new rhetoric coming out of Moscow, but made little changes to their own approach towards the East.[89] The warming of relations had eased tensions, but it had not yet bridged the divide between the capitalist and communist worlds. Instead, the West created the space for Gorbachev and other reformers to pursue their agenda for change.

Professors Eleni Braat and Pepijn Corduwener posit that the West was an influential but indirect factor; "more a model and a mirror than a maker."[90] She argues that the importance of the West did not lay in its direct involvement in the process of reform, but as a

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[83] See for example: Mary Elise Sarotte, 1989: The Struggle to Create Post-Cold War Europe - Updated Edition (Princeton University Press, 2014); Sarotte, *1989*; Crockatt, *The Fifty Years War*.
[84] Sarotte, *1989*, 46.
[85] Crockatt, *The Fifty Years War*, 339.
[86] Crockatt, 338.
[87] Crockatt, 338.
[88] John Young, 'Western Europe and the End of the Cold War, 1979–1989', in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War: Volume 3: Endings*, ed. Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad, vol. 3, The Cambridge History of the Cold War (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 289.
[89] Young, 'Western Europe and the End of the Cold War, 1979–1989'.
[90] Braat and Corduwener, *1989 and the West*, 10.

symbol of what could be achieved.[91] Boel, in *Who Helped the Soviet Bloc Dissidents? Western Subversive Encounters Beyond the Iron Curtain During the Cold War: Narratives, Approaches, Puzzles* looks at how western organisations supported and makes the argument that dissidents in the East did get crucial support from the West.[92] This support emerged from grassroots movements, was often personal and done by small groups or even individuals.[93] There was much less contact directly between Western government officials and diplomats, and dissidents active in the Warsaw Pact.[94] Most contact came from non-governmental organisations, independent from the Western governments. Boel does note, that the Western governments became more active as reform was implemented in the final years of communist rule.[95]

This thesis makes the argument, insofar as it concerns contacts between Dutch diplomats and Eastern European dissidents, that Western involvement became stronger involved with civil society during the final years of communism. The improvement of relations between East and West did not lessen this involvement.

Dutch Foreign Policy

The most well-known framework for explaining the Dutch vision of international relations was published by Professor Joris Voorhoeve in *Peace*, *Profits and Principles.*[96] Voorhoeve sees Dutch politics as being guided by three competing ideas.[97] Peace, the supreme goal of Dutch foreign policy, reflects the desire to seek stability and security through a commitment to international alliances.[98] As the Netherlands is a small country and vulnerable to larger states, Voorhoeve argues that it committed itself to an alliance like NATO for its defence. Profit stands for the Dutch seeking to promote their economic interests abroad.[99] Principles refer to the Dutch willingness to promote certain values, such as human rights, democracy and the rule of law worldwide.[100] This model was a widely recognised shorthand in political

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[91] Braat and Corduwener.
[92] Bent Boel, 'Who Helped the Soviet Bloc Dissidents? Western Subversive Encounters Beyond the Iron Curtain During the Cold War: Narratives, Approaches, Puzzles.', *Cold War History*, (2024), 1–34.
[93] Boel, 5.
[94] Boel, 1.
[95] Boel, 'Avoiding (Unwanted) Departures'.
[96] Voorhoeve left his post as professor of international relations to join the conservative-liberal party (VVD), becoming a member of parliament in 1982. In: J.J.C. Voorhoeve, *Peace, Profits and Principles: A Study of Dutch Foreign Policy* (Martinus Nijhoff, 1979).
[97] Voorhoeve, 296.
[98] Voorhoeve, 103.
[99] Voorhoeve, 154.
[100] Voorhoeve, 198.

circles on understanding Dutch foreign policy.[101] Crucially, the Foreign Minister Hans van den Broek eagerly subscribed to this tripartite theory of Dutch diplomacy.[102] Within the scope of this thesis, Voorhoeve's principles intersect with three key debates about the conduct of Dutch foreign policy. The principle of *peace* holds that Dutch foreign policy is often pursued in close cooperation with the Western alliance. Professor Alfred Pijpers identified three approaches the Netherlands took when conducting foreign policy during the Cold War: cooperation with its European neighbours, alignment with the United States through an Atlanticist orientation, or to break with both and pursue an independent global policy.[103] Pijpers argues that under the leadership of Van den Broek, the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs aimed less at asserting independence and more at strengthening cooperation with its European and American partners.[104] Dutch foreign policy had "assumed a more or less 'European' profile as the 1980s went by," while remaining closely committed to the trans-Atlantic relationship.[105] Professor of International Relations Alfred van Staden argues that the Dutch Atlantic and European dual-track approach did not fundamentally conflict.[106] Dutch policymakers relied on Atlantic cooperation, particularly NATO, for security and defence, while turning to the European Community for economic and trade policy.[107]

More recent works seem to conform to this framework. Professor Thomas Gijswijt argues that the leading Dutch politicians and diplomats developed an instinctive 'Atlanticist reflex,' through intense personal contacts and exchanges with the American system and society.[108] However, public opinion swung during the Cold War, and the establishment of Dutch foreign policy remained guided by an 'Atlanticist primacy.'[109] Professor of international relations Niels van Willigen and professor of Political Science Hans Vollaard add

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[101] Hellema notes that Voorhoeve's model was influential in shaping public and governmental discourse for decades, even if he found it too simplistic and descriptive, not explaining how one motive can win out in practice. In: Duco Andele Hellema, *Nederland in de Wereld: De Buitenlandse Politiek van Nederland* (Uitgeverij Unieboek: 2014), 323.
[102] Floribert Baudet, *'Het heeft onze aandacht': Nederland en de rechten van de mens in Oost-Europa en Joegoslavië, 1972-1989* (Drukkerij Haasbeek, 2001), 21.
[103] Alfred Pijpers, 'The Netherlands: The Weakening Pull of Atlanticism', in *The Actors in Europe's Foreign Policy* (Routledge, 1997), 248.
[104] Voorhoeve, *Peace, Profits and Principles*, 250.
[105] Pijpers, 'The Netherlands', 252.
[106] Alfred van Staden, *De herontdekking van de wereld : Nederlands buitenlands beleid in revisie*, Clingendael-notitie 22 (Nederlands Instituut voor Internationale Betrekkingen 'Clingendael', 2004).
[107] van Staden.
[108] Thomas Gijswijt, 'De trans-Atlantische elite en de Nederlandse buitenlandse politiek sinds 1945', in *Bezinning op het buitenland: het Nederlands buitenlands beleid in een onzekere wereld*, ed. Duco Hellema and Mathieu Segers (Nederlands Instituut voor Internationale Betrekkingen 'Clingendael', 2011), 32.
[109] Gijswijt, 33.

that by the late 1980s, public interest had waned in foreign policy questions.[110] After the protest against the placement of American ballistic missile subsided, a new pragmatic and conservative consensus once again guides Dutch foreign policy.[111] Historian of international relations Duco Hellema argues that the more conservative approach towards international relations affected the Dutch willingness to promote their values abroad.[112] Promoting human rights could not harm economic or security interests with few exceptions.[113] In Voorhoeve's terms, principle took a backseat to peace and prosperity.

This conclusion has not gone unchallenged. In his book *Kruistocht in de derde Wereld* (*Crusade in the Third World*), Professor Peter Malcontent argues that the Netherlands had a reputation for highlighting and fighting against human rights violations since the late 1970s.[114] Regarding human rights, the Dutch often displayed what could be described as a "crusading mentality."[115] The discrepancy might be explained by looking at a regional approach: The Dutch had always been critical of human rights violations in the communist world, but gained its reputation by focusing on violations in the 'third world.'[116] The focus on human rights receded to regimes with friendly relations with the Netherlands and the West.[117] Professor of International Human Rights Peter Baehr argues that during the 1980s, the Netherlands became more critical in its position towards the Soviet bloc.[118] Especially after introducing perestroika, did the Dutch adopt a more activist policy towards the East.[119] In *Het heeft onze Aandacht* (*We pay attention to these Matters*), professor Floribert Baudet argued that the Netherlands used its diplomatic freedom to take a more assertive and idealistic stance toward Eastern Europe.[120] Dutch rhetoric on human rights was often stronger than its allies, though

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[110] Hans Vollaard and Niels van Willigen, 'Binnenlandse steun voor Buitenlands', in *Bezinning op het buitenland: het Nederlands buitenlands beleid in een onzekere wereld*, ed. Duco Hellema and Mathieu Segers (Nederlands Instituut voor Internationale Betrekkingen 'Clingendael', 2011), 207.
[111] The Labour Party (PvdA) also came back to this consensus, having been more critical of the Atlanticist policy in the decades before. In: Vollaard and van Willigen, 'Binnenlandse steun voor Buitenlands'; Rob Hartmans, *Rode kameraden : de Nederlandse communisten, 1909-1991* (Uitgeverij Omniboek, 2024).
[112] Hellema, *Nederland in de Wereld*, 324.
[113] Hellema, 324.
[114] Peter Malcontent, 'Op kruistocht in de derde wereld: de reacties van de Nederlandse regering op ernstige en stelselmatige schendingen van fundamentele mensenrechten in ontwikkelingslanden 1973-1981' (Verloren, 1998), 237.
[115] Malcontent, 237.
[116] Malcontent, 240.
[117] Hellema points at pro-Western regimes in Pakistan, Iran and Argentina where Dutch criticism seemed to have lessened in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In: Hellema, *Nederland in de Wereld*, 325.
[118] Peter R. Baehr, Monique Castermans-Holleman, and Fred Grünfeld, *Human Rights in the Foreign Policy of The Netherlands* (Intersentia, 2002), 146.
[119] Baehr, Castermans-Holleman, and Grünfeld, 147.
[120] Baudet, *'Het heeft onze aandacht'*.

tempered to avoid harming opposition groups.[121] Dutch diplomacy had to balance idealism with pragmatism, often leading to diplomats voicing sharp criticism when they had little influence and showing restraint where they had real leverage.[122] Baudet has further noted that, since all European states had signed the Helsinki Accords and participated in the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE), the Netherlands had an additional multilateral channel to address human rights issues specifically within Europe.[123]

Relatively little attention has been given to the individual diplomatic relationship between the Dutch government and the non-Soviet members of the Warsaw Pact. This can partly be explained by the relative unimportance both sides attributed to the relationship. Pijpers reflected a few years after the end of the Cold War that "The Netherlands had hardly any substantial diplomatic expertise vis-à-vis Eastern Europe… embassies in these countries were small, lacking in funds and staff."[124] The historian Mathieu Segers emphasises that since 1945, Dutch politics have primarily focused on Western Europe and the United States.[125] Segers makes the point that because the interest of the Dutch government in Eastern Europe was limited, its diplomats' room to manoeuvre was limited as well, as their actions had to remain anchored in a broader strategy of alignment with its western partners, instead of a more individual Dutch approach.[126] Eastern Europe did not figure prominently in the Netherlands' economic and security interests, except insofar as it was a threat. Furthermore, the Soviet Union was the leading state in the Warsaw Pact, making the relationship with the other states even less of a priority. Hans van den Broek appears to confirm this when he remarked that the embassies in these states were less sought after and felt like an exile.[127]

Baudet notes that the Dutch embassy in Czechoslovakia was modestly staffed, which reflects its modest strategic importance.[128] The role of the embassy was to be both representative and observational, especially in monitoring human rights issues.[129]Much of the

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[121] Baudet, 262.
[122] Baudet, 260.
[123] Floribert Baudet, 'Soevereiniteit en Humanitaire Interventie', in *Humanitaire interventie en soevereiniteit: de geschiedenis van een tegenstelling*, ed. Duco Hellema and Hilde Reiding (Boom, 2004), 121.
[124] Pijpers, 'The Netherlands', 266.
[125] Mathieu Segers, *The Netherlands and European Integration, 1950 to Present*, trans. Andrew George Brown (Amsterdam University Press B.V, 2020).
[126] Segers, 28.
[127] Twan Huys, *In opdracht van Hare Majesteit : diplomaat in crisistijd*, Derde druk (Uitgeverij Unieboek, 2013), 179.
[128] Floribert Baudet, '"Ik hoop maar dat ze hun hand niet overspelen.": De Fluwelen Revolutie door de ogen van de Nederlandse ambassade in Praag', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 135, no. 4 (2022): 391.
[129] Baudet, 385.

work was shaped by this interest in human rights, as economic relations had been minimal.[130] The relationship with East Germany was similar. Historian Beatrice de Graaf highlights in her book *Over de muur* (*Over the wall*) that the Netherlands maintained relatively few political, commercial, or strategic ties with Eastern European states such as East Germany outside official state channels.[131] While De Graaf primarily focuses on the ties between Dutch churches and religious groups in East Germany, she notes that the Dutch embassy facilitated and monitored these contacts. In turn, the embassy relied on these church networks to gather information, as diplomats faced greater restrictions on movement and access within the GDR. A similar story was true for the role of the Dutch embassy in Poland. It strongly supported the opposition and condemned the repression in both bilateral and multilateral channels.[132] Throughout the Warsaw Pact, the role of embassies was largely guided by the principle of upholding human rights, as neither economic nor security interests were at stake in doing so.

Based on the works outlined above, the following framework is adopted in this thesis. During 1985 to 1989, Dutch foreign policy prioritised cooperation with its Western allies over pursuing an independent course. It was shaped by a small, Atlanticist-leaning elite, with limited input from the broader public. While principles such as human rights played a role, the Dutch approach remained pragmatic and careful not to compromise its security or economic interests. However, these ideas did not come into conflict when it came to policy toward the Warsaw Pact, where there were neither significant economic interests nor friendly regimes to accommodate.

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[130] Baudet, 391.
[131] Graaf, *Over de muur*, 13.
[132] Floribert Baudet, '"That Poland Be Polish Again"? Dutch Policy on Poland, 1975-1989', in *Poland and The Netherlands: A Case Study of European Relations*, ed. Duco Hellema and Ryszard Żelichowski, (RoL, 2011), 209.

Innovative Aspects

This thesis seeks to integrate the various strands explored in the literature review and, in doing so, contribute to each of these themes. It examines the perspective of the Dutch diplomats stationed in foreign embassies during the final years of communism in Eastern Europe, shedding light on how they dealt with civil society emerging as a political force during the period from Gorbachev's rise until the wave of revolutions in 1989. By analysing official reports, diplomatic communications, and policy discussions, this study explores how the Dutch diplomats on the ground perceived and responded to these organisations and their members. The perspective from the embassy is often overlooked in favour of the political leadership back home but provides a crucial link between how the Dutch engaged with the events leading up to the revolutionary year of 1989. The archival evidence used in this thesis also contributes to a larger historiographical debate on Dutch foreign policy.

Furthermore, it situates the Dutch approach within the broader historiography of Dutch foreign policy, offering insights into the country's diplomatic traditions and strategic considerations in moments of political transformation. The example of the Netherlands offers a small-state diplomatic perspective within a historiography largely dominated by the actions of major Western powers. In doing so, it also seeks to raise a larger question: How can the governments of liberal democracies, like the Netherlands, engage with individuals and groups opposed to their government in authoritarian states? With democratic backsliding occurring across the globe, this issue remains complex, unresolved and more relevant than ever.[133] The dynamic of large segments within a country opposing their authoritarian government and demanding greater freedom and democracy, much like the revolutions of 1989, is something that has been repeated throughout the years, from the Arab spring to the fall of the South American Juntas. This reality requires the diplomatic services of democratic nations, such as the Netherlands, to navigate a delicate balance between upholding the principles of freedom and democracy and maintaining pragmatic relations with governments around the world, regardless of their ideological orientation or human rights record.

[133] In just the last five years in Europe, there have been wave of protests in Georgia, Serbia, Turkey and Belarus, of groups demanding more democracy, less repression and closer ties to the West and the European Union.

Sources and Methods

This thesis employs a qualitative hermeneutic analysis to examine interaction by Dutch diplomatic personal with Civil Society in Eastern Europe. The research began at the National Archives in The Hague, focusing on four primary source collections. These included the code-archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the years 1985 to 1990, and the files of Dutch diplomatic representations in Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia, when gaps had been identified in the main collection on the subject of internal political developments. The analysis is grounded in primary sources from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of General Affairs; documents from other ministries, such as Defence or Finance, have not been consulted to maintain a manageable scope and a clear focus. Sources were selected by systematically reviewing the coded diplomatic correspondence from the six selected embassies, as well as by looking at materials addressing internal political affairs, dissident activity, and human rights. In total, 2400 potentially interesting sources where found, scanned, and saved to analyse further. Supported by secondary literature, the archival material has been interpreted within its broader socio-historical context. Due to word constraints, only a small selection of sources is analysed in detail in this thesis, though these have been selected to represent the wider collection. This approach reveals how Dutch embassies, in their own words, perceived and engaged with civil society during these five pivotal years.

The author acknowledges that archives are not neutral. Archival practices reflect power structures; decisions about preservation or destruction influence historical narratives.[134] The consulted sources, especially from the National Archive of the Netherlands, will thus inherently reflect the official narrative of the Dutch foreign ministry and its embassies. While this aligns with the thesis's interest in governmental perspectives, it is essential to remain critically aware of how archival logic and access policies shape research. Since only documents up to 1990 are publicly available, this imposes a temporal limitation on the analysis. While the timeframe aligns with the broader historical context, the research is shaped as much by how the archives are structured and what is accessible as by the sources themselves.[135]

This thesis acknowledges several methodological limitations. First, there is the risk of cherry-picking sources to confirm preconceived hypotheses. To mitigate this, a

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[134] Simon Gunn and Lucy Faire, *Research Methods for History*, (Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 20.
[135] Gunn and Faire, 25.

comprehensive and contextualised reading strategy has been applied, with close attention to source bias and interpretative frameworks. Secondary literature has been used extensively to incorporate alternative perspectives and to avoid over-reliance on the archival narrative. Furthermore, the curated nature of internal memos, reports, and press releases, often edited to reflect official positions, underscores the importance of this approach. What is written in these sources have been compared extensively with other scholarly works. This is also true for when there is silence in the sources used; when certain subjects are not mentioned by the embassies but have been written about in other works. It is also acknowledged that these sources provide a state-centric perspective, with the perspective only given by those working for the state in these embassies. Although this is intended, it may give a warped view of those who did not work at the embassies. Ultimately, this thesis aims to move beyond a narrow state-to-state analysis, as often seen in traditional International Relations scholarship. The chosen methodology should reflect this broader perspective, ensuring that the study is not constrained by conventional diplomatic history but instead incorporates the complex interactions between the State on one side and civil society on the other. A final shortcoming is that all sources have been written in Dutch, and this thesis has been written in English. The author is responsible for the translation, including when the meaning can be up for interpretation.

Chapter II: The Spark of Reform

The rise of Gorbachev, 1985:

We cannot go on living like this.

- *Mikhail Gorbachev to his wife, March 1985.*[136]

For three and a half decades, the eastern half of Europe had been divided from the West by an Iron Curtain, and Mikhail Gorbachev became General Secretary of the Soviet Union on March 11, 1985. The country he now led was not only the largest on earth but also counted a significant part of Central and Eastern Europe as its informal empire. Six Warsaw Pact member states had been forced into this Soviet sphere in the aftermath of the Second World War. In the capitals of the People's Republic of Poland, the German Democratic Republic, the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, the Hungarian People's Republic, the People's Republic of Bulgaria, and the Socialist Republic of Romania, Moscow's will was ever present in their decision-making process. This is not to say that these countries were mere puppets controlled by their puppet master in Moscow. Within the Warsaw Pact's "multilateral context," the alliance leaders were compelled to take the interests of all its members into account in order to safeguard group cohesion."[137] These 'satellite states' could, in theory, conduct their own foreign policy, make their own laws, enact their own economic policies, and maintain their own independent security forces.

There were, however, strict limits to how far this independence could go. This was demonstrated to the world with the crushing of the Prague Spring in 1968 by Soviet tanks, when one-party rule was threatened by internal reforms. If a member strayed too far from the communist way of rule as desired by Moscow, it faced the threat of military intervention by Soviet armies. This 'Brezhnev Doctrine', named after the General Secretary of the Soviet Union Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev, saw any challenge to socialist rule, in any member of the Warsaw Pact, as existential. As such, the other countries would be forced to intervene.

> Without question, the people of the socialist countries and the Communist parties must have the freedom to determine their own path of development. Any decision they make, however, must not be inimical either to socialism in their own country or to the fundamental interests of the

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[136] Taubman, *Gorbatsjov*, 261.
[137] Laurien Crump and Susanna Erlandsson, *Margins for Manoeuvre in Cold War Europe: The Influence of Smaller Powers*, Routledge Studies in Modern European History (Routledge, 2020), 17.

> other socialist countries. … A socialist state that is in a system of different states composing the socialist commonwealth cannot be free of the common interests of that commonwealth. The sovereignty of individual socialist countries cannot be set against the interests of world socialism and the world revolutionary movement. … Each Communist party is free to apply the principles of Marxism-Leninism and socialism in its own country, but it is not free to deviate from these principles if it is to remain a Communist party.[138]

Under Gorbachev's leadership, the Soviet Union began moving away from Brezhnev's vision. He believed that the USSR had to reform, if it were to overcome its economic and social crises.[139] Part of this reform was a drastic change in the Soviets foreign policy. First secretly, and eventually publicly, he began distancing himself from this doctrine in favour of non-intervention.[140] From 1985 onwards, the threat of Soviet intervention began to wane. Reformists, inspired by Gorbachev's example in the USSR, began pushing for reforms in their own country.

This chapter aims to describe the political situation in the Warsaw Pact member states as it stood in 1985, based on reports from the Dutch embassies located in their capitals. The goal is to outline the most essential elements found in various reports, memos, and coded messages sent back to the Ministry in The Hague, and to analyse what Dutch foreign policy toward communist Europe focused on. How were the political, social, economic, and humanitarian conditions perceived at the time? How was this situation expected to develop in the years that followed? What impact did the change in leadership in the USSR have on those in power in other Warsaw Pact states? How did the Dutch view the role of political outsiders in both the present and the future? Were there dissidents and opposition groups active, and if so, were they acknowledged by the Dutch? Was there any indication of the Civil Society at this point, which would play such a key role only a few years later in the events of 1989?

2.1 Economic Crisis

The primary challenge to the communist regimes, as seen by the Dutch diplomatic corps, was not political in nature. Instead, it was an ever-worsening economic situation affecting the Soviet Union and its satellite states alike. By 1985, the economic situation of these countries was showing signs of a severe crisis. None of the Soviet satellites seemed to be faring much

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[138] Kramer, 'The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union (Part I)', 180.
[139] Judt, *Postwar*, 599.
[140] Kramer, 'The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union (Part I)', 185.

better than the Soviet Union itself, where Gorbachev and his predecessors were facing similar economic stagnation. What Gorbachev came to recognise in the coming months and years was that economic revitalisation, for both the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, would be impossible in the absence of sweeping political reform.[141] These problems were vast; an enormous level of debt, reliance on Western loans, a slowdown in economic growth and the stagnation, and even decline of living standards.[142] The economic problems, which were clearly seen by the Dutch, were therefore also the beginning of a yet unseen process of political reform throughout the communist bloc.

After years of financial stability, Bulgaria's economic prospects rapidly disintegrated by late 1985.[143] Declining exports and rising imports, in no small part due to a change in Soviet oil exports, had wiped out its trade surplus, forcing the government to borrow more and raise prices.[144] In the ambassador words, Bulgaria was entering a critical phase, with its economy descending into a vicious circle.[145] In Romania, too, the situation was dire. Housing and living conditions remained "challenging", with the economy lacking needed Western imports and investments.[146] However, as the situation remained similarly bad to the last few years preceding it, it was not necessarily "more disastrous".[147] In Poland, the dour economic and financial developments of 1984 were to continue into 1985 with no prospect of ending anytime soon.[148] In other telegrams and memos coming from Budapest, Berlin and Prague, similar signals were sent about the lacklustre economic performance of their host countries. Even these seem to have underestimated the true magnitude of the economic and financial crisis that the regimes were facing. Already in 1983, the GDR, ostensibly the richest of all Warsaw Pact member states, was on the verge of total bankruptcy.[149] The GDR had fallen into a "fatal circle of indebtedness, renewed indebtedness, new credits and the growing burden of

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[141] Kramer, 183.
[142] Jacques Lévesque, 'The East European Revolutions of 1989', in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War: Volume 3: Endings*, ed. Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad, vol. 3, The Cambridge History of the Cold War (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 314.
[143] "*Bulgarian Economy – Vicious Circle*," National Archives, The Hague, Inventory of the code-archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, (1961) 1985–1990 (1998), access number 2.05.392, inventory number 798, Sofia to The Hague, 30 September 1985.
[144] *Ibid*.
[145] *Ibid*.
[146] "*Situation in Romania*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 93, Bucharest to The Hague, 13 Januari 1986.
[147] *Ibid*.
[148] "*Poland: economic-political developments 1st semester 1985*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no 4039, Warsaw to The Hague, 13 January 1986.
[149] Gabriel Partos, *The World That Came in from the Cold: Perspectives from East and West on the Cold War* (Royal Institute of International Affairs: BBC World Service, 1993), 126.

interest payments."[150]

Other states, except for Romania, were buckling under their debt as well. Under the Neo-Stalinist leadership of Nicolae Ceaușescu, Romania had embarked on a project to repay all its sovereign debt in just a few years.[151] This policy, as seen above, had caused plummeting living standards for the population and a shock to the economy.[152] Even in Hungary, often seen as the most prosperous and liberalised of all the member states, signs of trouble were seen. In a confidential report made by the Dutch embassy in Budapest on the state of its economy in 1985, the country's economic problems were laid bare. To the casual observer, the report observed that results from the macroeconomic policies might seem to be relatively successful.[153] However, closer examination of critical economic indicators reveals that this view is highly misleading.[154] Industrial production, internal investments and income levels were well short of the expected targets set in 1980. Domestic consumption and construction even decreased during this period.[155] The report rebuked the official reasons given by the government, such as blaming Western obstruction or the unusually cold winter.[156] Instead, the primary reason was "a lack of interest, from all parties involved, in the outcome of the economic process."[157] What this report alludes to is the lack of willingness from anyone with the political capacity to implement the needed economic reforms to actually have the desire to do so. There were simply no incentives to start the process of reforms that were needed to tackle the fundamental economic and financial issues Hungary and the other states faced. Instead, the report argues that Budapest, like the different countries that were part of the socialist systems, simply preferred to wait for better times and "keep the courage."[158]

Hungary's troubles in particular were a significant warning to its neighbours. It had already reformed some parts of its economy but had little to show for it by the mid-eighties. Since 1968, it had followed a reformist model, initiated through the New Economic Mechanism (NEM).[159] This policy allowed more market access, more freedom to the

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[150] Partos, 126.
[151] Ban, 'Sovereign Debt, Austerity, and Regime Change', 744.
[152] Ban, 744.
[153] "*Periodic report internal and external Political Developments*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no 3979, Budapest to The Hague, 2 April 1986, 2.
[154] *Ibid*.
[155] *Ibid*, 2.
[156] *Ibid*.
[157] *Ibid*, 3.
[158] *Ibid*.
[159] Connelly, *From Peoples into Nations*, 709.

consumer, and less state intervention.[160] Although initially successful, this 'Goulash Communism' began to run out of steam during the late 1970s. By 1980, the NEM had transformed into "a set of improvised bailing-out measures to keep Hungary from capsizing under the combined burdens of the state's external indebtedness and the party's failure to deliver on the terms of its social contract with the people."[161] Reflecting back after 1989, Rezső Nyers, the architect of the NEM, explained its failure in the following words:

> (The party was) powerless to explain to people that necessary changes were not always going to be pleasant in the short term... we weren't able to be a political and social driving force, and so the reform came to a dead end.[162]

The failure of the NEM in Hungary indicated that only economic reforms were not enough; it had to be accompanied by a change in the political system. The Hungarian communist party was not prepared to take this step and risk losing its political power.[163] The leadership of communist parties throughout Europe agreed with this assessment agreed and held firm. It was in this context that the rise of Gorbachev and his cautious embrace of reform proved to be such a shock to the system. In the years following 1985, he became a symbol for anyone with dreams of reform, while slowly chipping away at the foundations of communist rule in much of Eastern Europe.

2.2 The Political Situation

Where the economic situation was slowly worsening, the political situation seemed to be simply stuck. The communists were firmly in charge, with one-party rule, and with old men at the helm. In the GDR, Erich Honecker had led the ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED) since 1971.[164] At 73 years old, he had been leading his country for 14 years. Gustáv Husák, General Secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSČ), was one year his junior and had been in charge since the end of the Prague Spring in 1969.[165] János Kádár led the communist regime since the failed 1956 Hungarian revolution.[166] By 1985, he was closing in on three

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[160] Lévesque, 'The East European Revolutions of 1989', 314.
[161] Connelly, *From Peoples into Nations*, 707.
[162] Connelly, 688.
[163] Sebestyen, *Revolution 1989*, 146.
[164] "*Erich Honecker*," Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed April 26, 2025, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Erich-Honecker.
[165] "*Gustav Husak*," Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed April 26, 2025, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gustav-Husak.
[166] "*Janos Kadar*," Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed April 26, 2025, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Janos-Kadar.

decades as general secretary of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (HSWP). Todor Zhizkov became the first secretary of the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP) in 1954, the prime minister in 1962 until 1971, and the chairman of the State Council from 1971 to 1989.[167] Nicolea Ceaușescu, the Neo-Stalinist leader of Romania, had been in charge for two full decades.[168] Poland's Wojciech Jaruzelski had been a relative newcomer, only serving four years as premier since 1981, when he oversaw the crackdown on Solidarity.[169] The difference between these sixty- and seventy-year-old men and Gorbachev, who was only 54, was stark.[170] In 1985, this gerontocratic clique planned to stay in power for as long as they could. Various embassies signalled that, despite the worsening economic outlook and evident dissatisfaction of the population, the communist leadership was not planning to concede a smidge of their political responsibilities to those calling for reforms. In Poland, the strength of the opposition seemed to be steadily diminishing by the middle of the decade. In the late 1970s, the trade union Solidarity had managed to unite intellectuals and workers throughout the country.[171] The success of Solidarity created a surge of patriotism within Polish society, clamouring for democracy and liberation from the grasp of the Soviets.[172] By 1980, most Poles identified with the movement, attracting millions of members.[173] Their success came to a sudden end in December 1981, when the government declared martial law.[174] The poles feared a Soviet intervention to restore order. The leadership of Solidarity was arrested, the union was outlawed, and martial law was enforced until 1983. Two years later, the repression of Solidarity continued.

On Christmas Eve 1985, the Dutch embassy in Warsaw sent out a dispatch on the likelihood that future repression was to be expected.[175] Recent "Humanitarian Gestures" were done to create a positive impression for the visiting French president and German

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[167] "*Todor Zhivkov*," Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed April 26, 2025, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Todor-Zhivkov.
[168] "*Nicolae Ceaușescu*," Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed April 26, 2025, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Nicolae-Ceausescu.
[169] "*Wojciech Jaruzelski*," Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed April 26, 2025, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Wojciech-Jaruzelski.
[170] Sebestyen, *Revolution 1989*, 109.
[171] Beata Krzywosz-Rynkiewicz and Kerry J. Kennedy, *Reconstructing Democracy and Citizenship Education: Lessons from Central and Eastern Europe*, Asia-Europe Education Dialogue (Routledge, 2022), 57.
[172] Krzywosz-Rynkiewicz and Kennedy, 57.
[173] Krzywosz-Rynkiewicz and Kennedy, 58.
[174] Sebestyen, *Revolution 1989*, 50.
[175] "*Poland – Domestic Policy*," National Archives, The Hague, Dutch diplomatic representation in Poland (Warsaw), access number 2.05.387, inventory number 610, Warsaw to The Hague, 24 December 1985.

chancellor.[176] The dispatch warned, however, that "People should not be blinded by these incidental humanitarian gestures, which have a sombre downside due to the continuing repressive policy."[177] It continued by speculating that political prisoners would only be temporarily freed, further purges of higher education were to be expected, and the campaign against the Catholic Church would intensify. In a dispatch from February 1986, the ambassador reinforces these observations when discussing the fate of those groups who stood opposed to the Polish regime.[178] The language of the party had hardened against its opponents. Where Solidarity had previously been referred to as misguided "romantics" or "daydreamers", they were now referred to as traitors, terrorists and conspirators against the Polish nation.[179] He concludes: "There is no dialogue, and there will be none."[180] The opposition had once again become irrelevant, a far cry from its heydays in 1980 and 1981. As seen by the Dutch diplomatic corps, there was not much active opposition left in Poland by the end of 1985.

Other countries in the Warsaw Pact had even fewer signs of an active and independent opposition. There seemed to be almost no organisations in these countries that could act independently. A dispatch from Bucharest in October cited a visiting member of the Federation of Dutch Trade Unions, complaining that their Romanian counterparts were wholly controlled by their government.[181] Members of the clergy who dared to criticise the regime were intimidated.[182] In Czechoslovakia, the Dutch received signals that members of the dissident group Charta 77 were banned from travelling abroad, and were being intimidated at home.[183] In contrast, East Germany often would force its dissidents to move to the West, giving them the choice of emigration or imprisonment if arrested.[184] In Bulgaria, multiple reports were sent on the repression of its Turkish minority.[185] Throughout the Communist bloc, dissidents were actively repressed. Despite the clear crisis that communist regimes

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[176] *Ibid*.
[177] *Ibid*.
[178] "*Position Opposition*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Embassy Warsaw, 2.05.387, inv.no. 621, 10 February 1986.
[179] *Ibid*.
[180] *Ibid*.
[181] "*Visit FNV-Delegation to Romania 15-17 October 1985*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no 92, Bucharest to The Hague, 17 October 1985.
[182] "*Priest Calciu*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no 92, Bucharest to The Hague, 12 February 1985.
[183] "*Charta '77/VS-National Celebration*," National Archives, The Hague, Dutch diplomatic representation in Czechoslovakia/Czech Republic, access number 2.05.382, inventory number 297, Prague to The Hague, 7 July 1986.
[184] Connelly, *From Peoples into Nations*, 671.
[185] "*Turkish Minority*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no 798, Sofia to The Hague, 30 April 1985.

found themselves in by 1985, there were few indications that any opposition was likely to emerge.[186] At the start of 1986, the Dutch embassies reported few signs of any serious political force operating in these countries that wielded any serious political force.

2.3 Human Rights and Dissidents

Although the Dutch embassies saw few signs of an organised political opposition, and even fewer signs of political reforms, they did follow the plight of dissidents closely. Only Poland had a 'dissident movement' to speak of, due to the continued existence of Solidarity, albeit pushed underground.[187] In the other countries, dissidents ranged from non-existent to extremely marginal. Václav Havel, perhaps the best-known dissident in all of Eastern Europe, would recall in late 1989 that only a few months earlier, no one had even recognised him when he was walking around Prague.[188] This unfamiliarity was widespread throughout the Warsaw Pact; people did not know, or did not care, about these troublemakers.

This lack of recognition and support made it difficult for the Dutch to seek out dissidents on their own. Following Boel's layer of engagement, the Dutch were stuck in most countries at para-contacts, with no face-to-face contacts.[189] In some countries, these dissidents were barely acknowledged, even in internal communications. Neither the embassy in Bulgaria nor the embassy in Romania wrote any memo, dispatch or report during the entirety of 1985 on dissident movements active in their country.[190] The only document from Bucharest was on the sudden disappearance of the dissident priest Gheorghe Calciu-Dumitreasa, which notes that British, Norwegian, German and American diplomats were requesting information on his well-being.[191] In Bulgaria, extensive reports were made on the assimilation campaign of its Turkish minority, but no contact was made with any member of this community.[192] A report from October explains that because foreigners are not permitted to visit the regions where the

[186] With the possible exception of Poland, although messages from Warsaw make it clear that the solidarity movement was thoroughly repressed in 1985.
[187] Kramer, 'The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union (Part I)', 190.
[188] Mark Kramer, 'The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union (Part 2)', *Journal of Cold War Studies* 6, no. 4 (2004): 50.
[189] See the section in theoretical concepts, or: Boel, 'Avoiding (Unwanted) Departures'.
[190] A small note on this claim: the Dutch did write about individuals who might be considered dissidents but never referred to any group or organisation as consisting of dissidents. These were simply seen as individual human right cases.
[191] "Visit Minister Ruding," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 94, Bucharest to The Hague, 12 November 1985.
[192] These reports can be found in: NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 798, 4551 and 5520.

Turkish minority lives, they are only reliant on rumours.[193] Even in Czechoslovakia, where the well-known dissident group Charta-77 was active, Dutch diplomats were largely reliant on reporting meetings others had with these dissidents. The embassy in Prague got news about the internal divisions within the movement and how they were persecuted by their government from outside sources. For example, they were informed twice a year by the international secretary of the Dutch Labour Party, when he made his biannual visits to Czechoslovakia.[194] The embassy was still reliant on these intermediaries to establish contacts between itself and the dissidents.

If Dutch diplomats could not directly contact dissidents, they could support them by advocating and promoting human rights throughout the Warsaw Pact. The Labour Party secretary, who was in contact with Charter 77 members, informed the Dutch ambassador that these members were aware of the actions of Dutch politicians in pleading the case for the rights of dissidents to the Czechoslovak government, and were grateful.[195] The issue of human rights was a serious concern for Dutch diplomats and politicians. The Dutch used their diplomatic apparatus to fight against these human rights violations. In a coded message dated the 12th of November, the ambassador in Warsaw requested permission to congratulate Jaruzelski for becoming the chairman of the Council of State, seeing as other states had done so already.[196] On the side of the document, a small note was scribbled, "Amnesty first?"[197] Evidently, the foreign minister was unwilling to proceed with diplomatic formalities if no serious commitment was made to reducing the prosecution of the opponents of the regime. From internal documents, it becomes clear that the Dutch saw the issue of human rights violations as an indication of the political situation at large. When the amnesty failed to materialise, a dispatch from Warsaw saw it as an indication that there would be no dialogue with the opposition in the near future.[198] A few days later, a dispatch noted the Polish displeasure at interest from foreign media and governments reporting on the repression of its

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[193] "*Turkish minority/Relations with Turkey*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 798, Sofia to The Hague, 8 October 1985.
[194] "*Visit Labour party Secretary Dissidents*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Embassy Prague, 2.05.382, inv.no. 299, Prague to The Hague, 21 November 1985.
[195] *Ibid*.
[196] "Response to New Leadership," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 870, Warsaw to The Hague, 12 November 1985.
[197] *Ibid*.
[198] "*Poland, Amnesty*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 4760, Warsaw to The Hague, 12 November 1985.

opposition.[199] For the Polish government, the issue of human rights violations was a pressing issue as well, and they were eager to cover it up. This approach differed per country: in more liberal Hungary, the Dutch were happy to report that the rights of its citizens, as agreed to in Helsinki in 1974, were upheld to a large extent.[200] In contrast, the Romanian government accused the Dutch of meddling in internal affairs when it raised human rights violations in their country.[201] The Romanians questioned the future bilateral relationship between the countries after this "unfriendly act" by the Dutch.[202]

The Dutch foreign ministry did not see the issue of raising concerns on human rights violations as only a matter of bilateral relations, but preferred to raise it under the auspices of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE).[203] Embassies were expected to regularly report on the state of human rights and the position of dissidents in the country in which they were located. In turn, any violations could be raised in CSCE meetings. There, the Dutch would not raise concerns about human rights and political freedoms on their own, but would cooperate strongly with their European and American partners. A coded message from the Duch embassy in London from May 1985 showed this cooperation.[204] Sent after the British foreign secretary had come back from a trip to Berlin, Warsaw and Prague, it discussed how the British and the West at large should deal with dissident groups on the other side of the Iron Curtain. Both sides agreed that "only with compassion and support from our side (the West), can the dissident movement continue to function."[205] However, the document also reveals that neither the British nor the Dutch truly knew what their policy should be towards the issue of what is referred to in the document as the "question of human rights violations in Eastern Europe."[206] The West wanted to support dissidents and aid them if they

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[199] "*Political Prisoners – Human Rights*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 4760, Warsaw to The Hague, 18 November 1985.
[200] "*Periodic report internal and external Political Developments*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 3979, Budapest to The Hague, 2 April 1986, 8.
[201] "Human Rights in Romania," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 94, Bucharest to The Hague, 9 December 1985.
[202] *Ibid*.
[203] Oliver Bange and Poul Villaume, *The Long Détente: Changing Concepts of Security and Cooperation in Europe, 1950s-1980s* (Central European University Press, 2017), 216.
[204] "*Visit Foreign Minister to Eastern Europe*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 6592, London to The Hague, 5 Mei 1985.
[205] *Ibid*.
[206] *Ibid, 2.*

were persecuted, but acknowledged that there was a limit to this support.[207] What the limit was, neither side knew.[208]

2.4 Dutch Diplomacy in 1985

The Dutch approach to diplomacy in the Warsaw Pact in 1985 was defined by a cautious and pragmatic balancing act. While firmly committed to the principles of human rights and democracy, the Netherlands recognised the geopolitical constraints of engaging with authoritarian regimes within the Soviet sphere of influence. Dutch diplomats closely monitored political, economic, and social developments across the Warsaw Pact, but their ability to engage directly with dissidents or opposition movements was severely limited. In most cases, Dutch embassies operated at a distance, relying on intermediaries such as foreign politicians, visiting delegations, or reports from other Western allies to stay informed about internal dissent. Direct contact with dissidents was rare and often impossible due to surveillance, travel restrictions, or the repressive environments in which these individuals operated. Despite these limitations, the Netherlands sought to uphold human rights through multilateral cooperation, especially via the CSCE, rather than through unilateral confrontation. Human rights were treated not only as a moral imperative, but also as a barometer of political change. However, it was the view of the Dutch that this political change was a way off. The main issue facing the communist regimes was the economic malaise, not an organised opposition. The Dutch diplomatic service saw little engagement with dissident groups outside of Poland, and did not move much further than para-contacts with dissident movements. Partly, this can be explained through the repression of dissidents by the state, discouraging contact with outside officials working for an unfriendly state. But some of it should be seen as the Dutch simply not recognizing any signs of civil society; lack of engagement can be explained because the embassy had no clear individual or group to engage with.

The descriptions of the embassies during 1985 in this chapter lend some weight to the argument that the major problem for communist rule in eastern Europe can be attributed especially to long term decline.[209] The embassies saw especially the economic crisis as *the* major challenge to the communist regimes. On the question of agency, this chapter cannot tell

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[207] *Ibid*.
[208] *Ibid*.
[209] See the argument made by Cornel Ban in the historiography section, in: ‘Sovereign Debt, Austerity, and Regime Change’.

much, as Gorbachev only was elected in early 1985. However, in line with the work of Kotkin and Gross, Dutch diplomats did note the absence of a vibrant civil society beyond Poland.[210] In 1985, the Dutch did certainly not consider civil society as a major force in the Warsaw Pact during this period. The chapter also shows how the role of the Dutch, like other western states was still very marginal, with little interaction with dissidents. It also shows how Dutch policy was focussed on the issue of human rights, even when there was not an active dissident movement to support. Finally, the way in how the embassies operated, showed reliance and cooperation with western partners, and not an independent approach to diplomacy.

[210] Kotkin and Gross, *Uncivil Society*.

Chapter III: Stirrings Beneath the Surface

The first years of Glasnost and Perestroika, 1986 to Summer 1988

What separated perestroika and glasnost from the Prague Spring? "Nineteen Years."

- *Gennady Gerasimov, March 1987.* [211]

Initially, there was uncertainty about what policies the new Soviet leadership would pursue.[212] By 1986, it became increasingly clear that the Soviet Union had taken the path of reform. The twin policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika* signalled a departure from the rigid orthodoxy of previous decades.[213] The failing war in Afghanistan and the USSR's general economic malaise forced Gorbachev to confront the system's shortcomings.[214] The conviction that reform should be implemented was strengthened by the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, which exposed the rot in the Soviet system for the world to see.[215] While these reforms were primarily aimed at revitalising the USSR, they had significant effects across Eastern Europe.[216] Dutch diplomatic personnel noted growing tensions between stagnating regimes and increasingly restive societies, which demanded reforms akin to those being implemented in the USSR. Reports from embassies indicated that while most Eastern Bloc governments resisted political change, internal debates were beginning to stir, with the old guard being challenged internally by party members welcoming of efforts to reform, and externally by a growing group of dissidents.[217] Throughout these years, Dutch embassies increased their contact with this growing group of dissidents while cautiously awaiting the outcome of the political shifts that transformed the Warsaw Pact.

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[211] Gerasimov was Mikhail Gorbachev's foreign affairs spokesman when he made this comment during a trip to Czechoslovakia. In: Connelly, *From Peoples into Nations*, 731.
[212] Archie Brown, 'The Gorbachev Revolution and the End of the Cold War', in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War: Volume 3: Endings*, ed. Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad, vol. 3, The Cambridge History of the Cold War (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 246.
[213] Roberts, 'An "Incredibly Swift Transition": Reflections on the End of the Cold War', 515.
[214] Sebestyen, *Revolution 1989*, 58.
[215] Taubman, *Gorbatsjov*, 296.
[216] Lévesque, 'The East European Revolutions of 1989', 314.
[217] Lévesque, 212.

3.1 The Gorbachev Effect

Mikhail Gorbachev's election to the role of general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union was not an immediate turning point in the relationship between the East and West.[218] Although Margret Thatcher famously described Gorbachev as "a man with whom we can do business," there was some scepticism in the West.[219] Other British ministers pointed out that while his rhetoric was agreeable, they did not observe any policy change.[220] The Western response was a shift in their rhetoric, with hardliners such as President Reagan seeking dialogue.[221] Gorbachev accepted, East and West reached a new security understanding, and the Cold War began to subside. By 1987, the cooperation on various issues, especially arms control, had advanced so far that talk of a 'Cold War' seemed increasingly outdated.[222] Despite the threat of conflict receding, the West remained unified in its engagement with the Warsaw Pact. While the Soviet bloc disintegrated, the Western alliance stayed strongly aligned.[223] Even when it became clear that change was truly afoot on the other side of the Iron Curtain, the West was cautious in its reaction, seeking to avoid direct interference in the internal politics of the Warsaw Pact.

The Netherlands mirrored this cautious Western stance, embracing talk of reform but not responding with changes in its foreign policy. Dutch politicians emphasised their commitment to supporting democracy and human rights abroad. The governing coalition of Christian democrats (CDA) and conservative liberals (VVD), facing an election in early 1986, reaffirmed this stance in their election manifesto. The CDA pledged that "The Netherlands will (continue to) provide active political and humanitarian support to democratic forces resisting repressive structures and human rights violations."[224] It further promised:

> Together with its European partners, the Netherlands is committed to the implementation of all the principles of the Helsinki Accords in Eastern Europe. The Netherlands promotes

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[218] Young, 'Western Europe and the End of the Cold War, 1979–1989', 303.
[219] Young, 304.
[220] Archie Brown, 'The Gorbachev Revolution and the End of the Cold War', in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War: Volume 3: Endings*, ed. Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad, vol. 3, The Cambridge History of the Cold War (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 246.
[221] It is highly contentious to call Reagan a hardline, but he was widely perceived as such in the early 1980s. In: Sebestyen, *Revolution 1989*, 91.
[222] Roberts, 'An "Incredibly Swift Transition": Reflections on the End of the Cold War', 515.
[223] Young, 'Western Europe and the End of the Cold War, 1979–1989', 289.
[224] Translated: Bob van den Bos, *Partijleiders En Buitenlandse Politiek*, *Serie Clingendael Voorlichting.*, Serie Clingendael Voorlichting (Den Haag, 1986), 33.

> intensification of religious, cultural, social, economic, and personal contacts with relevant groups, to promote the implementation of human rights.[225]

Prime Minister Lubbers saw the relationship between the Soviet and Western blocs as becoming less ideological and expressed his hope and expectation that this development would continue.[226] The VVD, junior party in the coalition, was more sceptical. Party leader Ed Nijpels expressed his disappointment in the new Soviet leadership, which had shown no signs of liberalisation and had shown no progress in upholding human rights.[227] The VVD took a harder line towards the USSR, being especially critical of the invasion of Afghanistan.[228] Still, Nijpels called for an even-handed approach in dealing with the Soviet bloc, even if he and his party were not convinced by Gorbachev's rhetoric.[229] The internal debate within the government at the time centred on whether Moscow was truly willing to enact reform, and how far these reforms would go. There was no debate on whether the Dutch themselves should adjust their foreign policy to accommodate this shift.

The debate on Gorbachev's policies and their impact was heavily discussed in all the palaces, parliaments, and embassies in the Warsaw Pact. This became especially pressing when Gorbachev started to enact political reforms in 1987.[230] The embassies started to report on how this shift in the Soviet Union was seen by the leadership of the other Warsaw Pact member states. The leaders of the socialist states did not at first seem to understand the implications of what Gorbachev was already privately discussing with them. [231]When they met in Moscow at Konstantin Chernenko's funeral, Gorbachev's direct predecessor as general secretary, they were effectively told that the Brezhnev Doctrine would end.[232] Gorbachev later reflected that the other leaders "did not understand this very well and did not even believe it."[233]

An early sign that Gorbachev meant to rebuild the communist system significantly came from the Dutch ambassador to Hungary.[234] Hungary had been heavily criticised by

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[225] Translated, see: Bos, 33.
[226] Bos, 22.
[227] Bos, 56.
[228] Bos, 52.
[229] Bos, 51.
[230] Jacco Pekelder, 'Nederland en de DDR: beeldvorming en betrekkingen 1949-1989' (Boom, 1998), 363.
[231] Brown, 'The Gorbachev Revolution and the End of the Cold War', 253.
[232] Taubman, *Gorbatsjov*, 328.
[233] Brown, 'The Gorbachev Revolution and the End of the Cold War', 253.
[234] "*Hungary and Soviet Alliance Policy*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 87, Budapest to The Hague, 6 February 1986.

Soviet officials for its dependence on the West, its liberal economic policies, and its plan to democratise its political system.[235] Now, when Gorbachev had asked János Kádár about his country's policies, he "did not mean to criticise, but was merely interested, and was satisfied with Kádár's explanation."[236] It reaffirmed the views shared in an earlier message, wherein a Hungarian member of the politburo expressed his relief with the change in leadership. The arrival of Gorbachev was a "relief", as Hungarian efforts to reform would no longer be hindered at every step by Soviet officials.[237] For others, it was a heavy disappointment. The East German regime was unwilling to implement similar reforms to those Gorbachev was proposing. When the GDR and USSR started to drift politically apart, the Dutch noted that the relationship between Moscow and Berlin cooled down significantly as well.[238] The relationship with Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria and Romania also began to worsen, as these regimes tried to stave of the wave of reforms which had been started by the Kremlin.[239]

3.2 Signs of Change

Hungary

In Hungary, political liberalisation would come from pressure within the party.[240] Ostensibly, the Hungarian Communists were well placed to embrace the shift in priorities coming from Moscow. Under its efforts to reform the country, it had already implemented a 'liberal' economic system under the NEM, granted more political liberties, and kept good relations with the West.[241] One issue: it was all built on lies. The NEM was failing, and the Hungarians resorted to borrowing staggering amounts to stay afloat.[242] A parallel economy emerged, with long working hours, high rates of alcoholism and suicide, and significant inequality in health and income as a result.[243] And although there was no official censorship, criticism of the Soviet Union, the legitimacy of Communist party rule, and Marxist-Leninist 'socialism' was

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[235] *Ibid*.
[236] *Ibid*.
[237] "*Hungary as Satellite, or Hungary Alone*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 87, Budapest to The Hague, 23 January 1986.
[238] "GDR – Evaluation at the start of a new Winter," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 3959, East Berlin to The Hague, 17 November 1987.
[239] Taubman also writes that there was a deep personal animosity between Gorbachev and the conservative leadership of these countries, which cannot have helped in the relationship. In: Taubman, *Gorbatsjov*, 453.
[240] Archie Brown, *The Rise and Fall of Communism* (HarperCollins Publishers, 2011), 666.
[241] The NEM refers to the New Economic Mechanism, see page 9. In: Judt, *Postwar*, 608.
[242] Sebestyen, *Revolution 1989*, 146.
[243] Judt, *Postwar*, 609.

taboo.[244]

In dispatches back to the Hague, Dutch diplomats could clearly describe to the economic troubles. Unsustainable levels of debt forced the party to take action.[245] In late 1986, they reported that Hungary was facing an economic downturn, which would inevitably lower living standards.[246] They reported that the Hungarian leadership blamed the reforms to the economic system for not having gone far enough.[247] Overproduction of goods with little demand, unaffordable pay raises for workers, and rising government expenses; all were threatening the Hungarian economy.[248] Exogenous factors, such as bad harvests and unfavourable oil prices, further exacerbated the situation.[249] The embassy warned that the government had to respond with unpopular measures, creating unemployment, stifling pay raises and lowering consumption.[250] These measures were further tightened in the years that followed, as the state failed to close the growing deficit. The impact of these measures was clearly outlined in a dispatch on Hungary's domestic situation, sent just days before Christmas 1987. Large contingents of the population lacked optimism and were fearful, cynical, or disillusioned about the future.[251] The party warned of hostile elements within society seeking to exploit the situation and rejected any attempt to resolve Hungary's predicament outside of the socialist system.[252]

The embassy in Budapest estimated the size of the opposition to be tiny, to the point of insignificance. In the autumn of 1986, the ambassador estimated that there were, at most, just a few hundred active dissidents.[253] The size of the opposition was kept small by the carrot of political liberties and consumption goods granted by the NEM, as well as the stick of intimidation and repression. [254] In early 1988, the embassy in Hungary reported on the

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[244] Timothy Garton Ash, 'A Hungarian Lesson', in *The Uses of Adversity: Essays on the Fate of Central Europe* (Random House, 1989), 144.
[245] Brown, 'The Gorbachev Revolution and the End of the Cold War', 532.
[246] "*Hungary in Economic Decline*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 87, Budapest to The Hague, 16 October 1986.
[247] *Ibid*.
[248] *Ibid*.
[249] "*Hungary and the low Oil Price*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 87, Budapest to The Hague, 6 August 1986.
[250] "*Hungary – Economic Stagnation*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 87, Budapest to The Hague, 28 November 1986.
[251] "Domestic Situation," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 88, Budapest to The Hague, 21 December 1987.
[252] *Ibid.*
[253] "*Commemoration October rising 1956*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 87, Budapest to The Hague, 5 September 1986.
[254] Judt, *Postwar*, 608.

persecution of known dissidents who stood accused of calling for demonstrations during the commemoration of the failed 1848-49 revolution.[255] One of the arrested had organised a gathering the week before under the auspices of the 'Democratic forum', where more than 700 people had attended.[256] This event alone had more attendees than the entire active opposition just a few years earlier. The opposition, still small, was rapidly making inroads in the angry population.[257] Nonetheless, the embassy reported that the biggest challenge to the political system came from within the party itself.[258] The embassy did not know what would happen to the communist system should the ailing Kádár and other members of the politburo be replaced by younger party members committed to reform.[259]

Poland

The focus of the Dutch embassy in Warsaw was not on party intrigues within the communist authorities, but on the plight of civil society. In the first years of the decade, the Solidarity movement had grown into a substantial political force, until it was crushed when martial law was imposed on September 12, 1981.[260] The West joined together to impose a diplomatic boycott on the Poles, demanding that the state of martial law be lifted, political prisoners be freed, and the communist authorities start a serious political dialogue with the Church and Solidarity.[261] Poland lifted martial law in 1983 and announced partial amnesty in 1984.[262] It would take the Dutch another two years to normalise their relations with Poland, remaining highly critical of the regime.[263] Even with the last political prisoners being freed in September 1986, the Dutch diplomatic attaché remained critical, as the government refused to hold a dialogue with Solidarity, nor with the Church.[264]

The Dutch believed that the authorities had released the remaining political prisoners

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[255] "*Measures against members of the 'Democratic forum*,'" NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 89, Budapest to The Hague, 11 March 1988.
[256] *Ibid*.
[257] "*The Party and the Democratic Opposition*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 89, Budapest to The Hague, 17 March 1988.
[258] "*Party conference*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 89, Budapest to The Hague, 29 April 1988.
[259] *Ibid*.
[260] Jack M. Bloom, *Seeing through the Eyes of the Polish Revolution: Solidarity and the Struggle against Communism in Poland*, Historical Materialism Book Series; v. 50; Volume 50 (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 378.
[261] Baudet, '"That Poland Be Polish Again"? Dutch Policy on Poland, 1975-1989', 204.
[262] Baudet, 201.
[263] Baudet, 203.
[264] Baudet, 204.

to get into the good graces of the West and regain access to Western credit.[265] The opposition, although now free again, was in disarray.[266] The ambassador warned that if the opposition was able to reorganise, a new confrontation between the government, backed by the Soviets, and Solidarity might emerge.[267] In the months that followed, it was unclear if the opposition could rebuild. A year after the amnesty granted by the authorities, the ambassador reflected that there had not been any significant political events since.[268] The economy was still stagnating.[269] A Papal visit had shown the widespread popularity of the Church, which continued to act independently from the state[270]. What was clear was that the population had lost faith in the authorities.[271] It was the implementation of perestroika in the Soviet Union, which the government sought to cautiously imitate, although "they lacked the courage to push for substantial change."[272] By early 1988, the authorities had become nervous that Solidarity had regained its footing and would push for mass demonstrations.[273] They were right to worry. Significant strikes broke out in industrial areas and universities in late April and early May, putting further pressure on the already sluggish economy.[274] The response from the authorities drew criticism from the West, damaging the image of Poland further. By the summer of 1988, the communist authorities were in a serious bind.

Czechoslovakia

Unlike their Hungarian neighbour, the Czechoslovak leadership was not open to embracing any reform which would truly change the balance of power within the country.[275] The ambassador saw the initial mimicking of Gorbachev's rhetoric as "purely cosmetic," and not

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[265] "*Poland/Tacking Stock*,'" NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 4761, Warsaw to The Hague, 10 October 1986.
[266] *Ibid*.
[267] *Ibid*.
[268] "Political Snapshot Poland," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv. no. 4762, Warsaw to The Hague, 25 August 1987.
[269] *Ibid*.
[270] *Ibid*.
[271] "Poland/ Internal Politics," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv. no. 4762, Warsaw to The Hague, 2 October 1987.
[272] "Political Snapshot Poland," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv. no. 4762, Warsaw to The Hague, 25 August 1987.
[273] "Opposition movement in Poland," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv. no. 4763, Warsaw to The Hague, 2 October 1987.
[274] "Situation Poland," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv. no. 4763, Warsaw to The Hague, 16 May 1988.
[275] Lévesque, 'The East European Revolutions of 1989', 324.

indicative of future reform.[276] The legacy of 1968 still tarnished the image of reformers in the eyes of the communist hardliners, and they were quick to stress that the difference; "The difference from 1968 is that the current reforms are intended to strengthen the socialist system, rather than dismantle it"[277] Even the change in leadership from Gustáv Husák to Miloš Jakeš meant little, with Jakeš keeping firmly to the conservative approach.[278] By March 1988, the embassy was forced to conclude that the harsh repression of the previous decades had not disappeared, but transformed to become more subtle.[279] The tactics changed from political trails and long jail sentences, to unannounced searches, house arrests, denying request to protest and keeping protesters away from foreign media.[280] The point was to show a more human face to the outside world, while still intimidating dissidents.

This tactic might have helped in keeping the population in line but failed to prevent Western officials from meeting with dissidents.[281] Czechoslovakia did have a well-known opposition like in Poland, even if it was nowhere similar in size nor strength. Western diplomats, including the Dutch, eagerly sought them out. The question by the summer of 1988 was if this group of dissidents push the regime towards serious reforms, or if the Communist Party could remain in power without granting serious concessions.

East Germany

At the start of 1986, the embassy in Berlin saw little signs of change. In a discussion with the ambassadors of NATO countries, the Dutch ambassador concluded that there would not be any changes in the East German leadership any time soon.[282] As the leadership stayed the same, so did its policies. While perestroika began to be implemented in the Soviet Union, an East German official explained why they resisted similar efforts: "You wouldn't feel the need

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[276] "*New Department for Humanitarian Affairs*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv. no. 4285, Prague to The Hague, 21 August 1986.
[277] "*Husak's speech in Ceske Budějovice*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv. no. 4173, Prague to The Hague, 3 March 1987.
[278] "*75th birthday of President Husák,*" NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv. no. 4173, Prague to The Hague, 11 January 1988.
[279] "*75th birthday of President Husák,*" NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv. no. 4173, Prague to The Hague, 11 January 1988.
[280] *Ibid*.
[281] An example can be seen in a dispatch on dissidents visiting the embassy of the United Kingdom. The police tried to stop these dissidents from leaving their houses, but some managed to evade the police and arrive at the embassy for the meeting. In: "Dissidents / UK," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Embassy Prague, 2.05.382, inv.no. 297, Prague to The Hague, 8 March 1988.
[282] "*Political Report second half 1987*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 4059, Prague to The Hague, 29 March 1988.

to get new wallpaper just because your neighbour happened to be renovating his house?"[283] The embassy believed that this anti-reformist stance by the leadership was intended to mask the underlying tensions within the country.[284] The portrayal of economic success contradicted citizens' daily realities.[285] Ideas of reform were ignored, despite citizens' hopes inspired by changes in other socialist states.[286]By the spring of 1988, the consequences of Honecker's unwillingness to implement even minor reforms had become clear.[287] The situation was one of "Stagnation, demotivation and repression. Stagnation in all areas."[288] Unwilling to change, the regime had become isolated from Moscow, the West, and even its own population.[289]

Despite this, signs of a growing opposition were mostly absent. When there were signs of discontent, such as in the churches, repression soon followed.[290]If anything, the Dutch saw the repression of civil society growing, with protesters being expelled to West Germany.[291] The general malaise mainly seemed to result in an increase of emigrants heading West, following those who had been forcibly expelled.[292] This *ausreiseprobleem* (emigration problem), seemed to be the main problem facing the state.[293] If it worsened, it could further deteriorate an already fragile economic situation, further delegitimizing the regime.

Bulgaria

The authorities in Sofia were slow to join its fellow socialist states in reforming its system. Todor Zhivkov was initially perplexed by the rhetoric of change coming out of the USSR, but he and his party would eventually seek to adopt it themselves.[294] This did not come as a surprise to the Dutch, who noted that all domestic and foreign policy in Bulgaria remained

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[283] Pekelder, 'Nederland en de DDR', 362.
[284] "*The GDR and its Leadership, Dichtung und Wahrheit*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 4599, East Berlin to The Hague, 19 May 1987.
[285] *Ibid*.
[286] *Ibid.*
[287] "*GDR: Worsening internal situation*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 4599, East Berlin to The Hague, 19 April 1988.
[288] *Ibid*.
[289] "*GDR – Evaluation at the start of a new Winter*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 3959, East Berlin to The Hague, 17 November 1987.
[290] *Ibid*.
[291] "*GDR: a fair exterior hides a rotten core,"* NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 3959, East Berlin to The Hague, 17 November 1987.
[292] "*GDR: Worsening internal situation*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 4599, East Berlin to The Hague, 19 April 1988.
[293] *Ibid*.
[294] Lévesque, *The Enigma of 1989*, 166.

firmly aligned with the will of the Kremlin.[295] When the Soviets began implementing perestroika, Bulgaria would be not far behind.[296] Yet over time, it became clear that Bulgarian perestroika was limited and would not undermine the power of Zhivkov and his party. When the communist party announced economic and political reforms in the summer of 1987, the Dutch embassy commented that these reforms might come to a halt if they threatened to undermine the party's hold on absolute power.[297] By 1988, there had been significant efforts to liberalise the economy, and even a "remarkable level of openness" in allowing criticism on the state of the economy or levels of corruption.[298] But this openness did not extend to criticism of the leadership.[299] Nor did the population appear particularly moved by the reforms. The main response observed by the Dutch was one of apathy.[300]

The lack of any significant opposition to speak of comes through clearly in the sources. A memo, written in December 1986 by the temporary chargé d'affaires, simply stated there was "dissatisfaction, but no dissent."[301] If there was criticism to be heard, it would not ideological, but about people's dissatisfaction with their material reality.[302] The embassy in Sofia concluded that Bulgaria lacked an underground press, an independent church, free trade unions, and a coherent dissident movement.[303] Even within the communist party, they could not detect a faction pushing for more political reforms.[304] The Dutch had to wait a little while longer before civil society would emerge in Bulgaria.

Romania

Of all the Warsaw Pact states, Romania was the least receptive to the reforms associated with perestroika and glasnost. The economic situation had been dramatic in 1985 and would barely

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[295] "*Annual Report on Bulgaria's Domestic Policy in 1986*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 3933, Sofia to The Hague, March 1987, 2.
[296] Lévesque, *The Enigma of 1989*, 166.
[297] "*Bulgaria – Internal Politics*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 799, Sofia to The Hague, 28 August 1986.
[298] "*Perestroika and Glasnost in Bulgaria*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 801, Sofia to The Hague, 20 January 1988.
[299] *"Internal Politics Bulgaria - Glasnost,"* NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 801, Sofia to The Hague, 2 May 1988.
[300] *"Perestroika and Glasnost in Bulgaria,"* NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 801, Sofia to The Hague, 20 January 1988.
[301] "*Bulgaria, Autumn 1986,"* NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 3933, Sofia to The Hague,15 December 1986, 8.
[302] *Ibid, 9.*
[303] "*Internal Politics Bulgaria*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 801, Sofia to The Hague, 26 May 1988.
[304] *Ibid*.

improve in the years that followed.[305] When the ambassador was told in the summer of 1986, that in two to three years the economic situation would improve and Romania would start implementing political reforms, he simply did not believe it.[306] He was right to be sceptical. Describing the situation in the following winter, a dispatch told that the people suffered from a lack of food and fuel, with public transport falling apart, and private cars were banned; the people were cold and hungry, and were reaching their limit.[307] Their resilience was pushed to the limit.[308] The ambassador notes that many members of the security forces felt the squeeze, who all started to blame the man at the top.[309] Even so, the embassy expected no change as long as increasingly unpopular Ceaușescu remained, and there was no prospect of that happening anytime soon.[310]

There were no public figures who could rally this anger against the regime. During Ceaușescu two decades of rule, only a handful of dissidents were courageous enough to openly and publicly defy the communist authorities.[311] Still, the signs of discontent were seen. As the economic situation had worsened again by the fall of 1987, and people in the streets were openly complaining.[312] A large demonstration broke out spontaneously in the city of Brasov, led by angry factory-workers.[313] Although it was quickly repressed, small-scale protests continued to erupt across the country in the months that followed.[314] During the period, the regime had become increasingly isolated form the Soviet Union, the Western Alliance, and now its own citizens.[315]

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[305] "*Winter in Romania,"* NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 95, Bucharest to The Hague, 13 February 1987.
[306] "*CSCE - Vienna*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 94, Bucharest to The Hague, 25 Juli 1987.
[307] "*Winter in Romania,"* NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 95, Bucharest to The Hague, 13 February 1987.
[308] *Ibid*.
[309] *Ibid*.
[310] *Ibid*.
[311] Lavinia Stan, 'Gheorghe Calciu-Dumitreasa, the Forgotten Anticommunist Dissident', in *On Christian Churches of Eastern Europe since 1980. A Festschrift for Sabrina P. Ramet*, ed. Frank Cibulka and Zachary T. Irwin (Central European University Press, 2024), 203.
[312] "*Recent Developments in Romania,"* NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 95, Bucharest to The Hague, 27 November 1987.
[313] *Ibid*.
[314] "*Political developments in Romania*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 95, Bucharest to The Hague, 13 December 1987.
[315] "*Evaluation Romanian Politics*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 96, Bucharest to The Hague, 20 January 1988.

3.3 Diplomatic Engagement Intensifies

As the political situation slowly began to shift in Eastern Europe, the Dutch embassies began conducting different levels of relations with civil society. By the spring of 1988, the levels of relations ranged from barely recognizing dissident activity in Bulgaria and Romania, to full on diplomatic contacts with civil society in Poland and Hungary. Hungary, despite being the most liberal and open of all the Warsaw Pact states, did not have a considerable active opposition before the latter part of the decade.[316] Changes in the leadership of the Soviet Union did not change this fact. A coded message sent from the embassy in early 1987 gives some indications why this was. It concludes that the Hungarian government eagerly embraced Gorbachev's reforms, seeing it as a confirmation of support for their own reformist policies.[317] Yet its citizens reacted with a deep suspicion. "Too good to be true", was their initial reaction, as they remembered the aftermath of 1956 and feared future backlash.[318] It took time for Hungarian civil society to emerge, and consequently, the Dutch diplomatic personnel present did not significantly strengthen the relationship with civil society. Up to May 1988, the party sought to curb the rising number of opposition parties.[319] The Dutch began establishing more political contacts with the opposition and started treating them as legitimate actors in the country's emerging political system.[320] Still, the real attention in Budapest was on the internal party politics of the ruling party.

In Warsaw, the Dutch sought to re-establish political contacts with the Solidarity movement. When political relations were mended between The Hague and Warsaw, and politicians were once again able to make visits, the Dutch decided to make a clear statement: Foreign Minister Van den Broek would only visit if he were able to meet the opposition.[321] Van den Broek succeeded, meeting Lech Wałęsa, the most prominent member of Solidarity, in September 1987.[322] Staff at the embassy also met with opposition figures more regularly as

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[316] Judt, *Postwar*, 608.
[317] "*Gorbachev's Echo in Hungary*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 88, Budapest to The Hague, 30 January 1987.
[318] *Ibid*.
[319] "*Annual report on Hungary's domestic and foreign developments in 1988*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 3979, Budapest to The Hague, March 1989, 4.
[320] For example, the foreign minister Van den Broek met with three members of the 'Democratic Opposition' in Budapest on September 3, 1987. In: "*Political consultations between the Netherlands and Hungary in Budapest, 23–24 June 1988 (Part 3),*" National Archives, The Hague, Dutch diplomatic representation in Hungary, access number 2.05.386, inventory number 404, 28 June 1988
[321] Baudet, '"That Poland Be Polish Again"? Dutch Policy on Poland, 1975-1989', 204.
[322] Baudet, 207.

talk of more substantial reform grew.[323] A question remained: Would it be Solidarity or another, more youthful movement that would lead the charge for democracy and liberalisation?[324] By the summer of 1988, the Dutch had regular meetings with the opposition, the church, and dissidents of all kinds, establishing solid diplomatic relations. In Poland, civil society had returned, with the Dutch diplomats being in regular contact.

Dutch engagement was also strong with civil society in Czechoslovakia, despite its government resisting the implementation of political change. In May 1987, the Dutch received signals from the authorities that visiting Western politicians could start contacting members of Charta-77 again.[325] Dutch diplomats began openly supporting persecuted dissidents, despite protests from the authorities.[326] They did so in cooperation with their allies, who had also increased their engagement with civil society over the years.[327] Still, to speak of full diplomatic engagement might overstate it, as the local authorities still tried to discourage these contacts by going after its citizens, even if they did not hinder Western officials.[328] The engagement with civil society did not progress much during this period in East Germany. Only in the early months of 1988 did public criticism rise, led primarily by the churches.[329] The response of the authorities was always to supress it, and deport the troublemakers to the West. Most contact instead seemed to have been indirect, making use of the strong connection between Dutch and East German churches.[330] As such, the relationship seemed to have stranded between para-contacts and diplomatic contacts, with the embassy struggling to reach out on its own to parts of civil society.

Neither the embassy in Bucharest nor Sofia saw many signs dissident-activity in either country. When Foreign Minister Van den Broek came to visit the country in 1988, the embassy reported that there were so few known dissidents, it would be impossible to arrange

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[323] "Poland, Dissident movement." NL-HaNA, BuZa / Embassy Warsaw, 2.05.387, inv.no. 621, 8 December 1987.
[324] The Dutch and British ambassador agreed with each other that Solidary might have lost its energy and was no longer able to lead the youth. In: "*British vision on Solidarity and Internal Developments Poland*." NL-HaNA, BuZa / Embassy Warsaw, 2.05.387, inv.no. 621, 1 July 1988.
[325] "*Visit Western Foreign Minister to CSSR / Human Rights*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Embassy Prague, 2.05.382, inv.no. 297, Prague to The Hague, 21 November 1985.
[326] "*Process Jazz-section,"* NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 4817, Prague to The Hague, 9 March 1987.
[327] "*Process Jazz-section,"* NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 4817, The Hague to Prague, 6 March 1987.
[328] Boel, 'Avoiding (Unwanted) Departures'.
[329] "*GDR: (Staats)sicherheit and Uncertainty*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 4599, East Berlin to The Hague, 8 March 1988.
[330] For a closer look at this relationship, see: Graaf, *Over de muur*.

a meeting between them and Van den Broek.[331] Dissidents were few, and "very difficult to reach."[332] Throughout this period, the relationship between Dutch diplomats and Bulgarian civil society scarcely progressed beyond mere acknowledgment. The Dutch found no independent groups of meaningful size nor significance. A similar story held true for the embassy in Bucharest. The Romanian churches remained uncritical of the regime.[333] There were no independent trade unions, a free press, and freedom of speech was severely limited.[334] The Dutch maintained minimal political dialogue and almost no contact with civil society, unable to get into contact with dissident groups. The Dutch instead sought to make use of Romania's isolation by raising its criticism, together with other Western states, and force the regime to start making concessions.[335] So far, this tactic had not worked.

3.4 Dutch Diplomacy from 1986 to the summer of 1988

Dutch diplomatic engagement with civil society deepened across the region but did so unevenly. In Poland and Hungary, continuously grew, even if the Dutch did not attribute significance much relevance to civil society in Hungary. In Czechoslovakia, contact increased but remained cautious. In East Germany, the Dutch did not observe a comparable rise in opposition forces, while in Bulgaria and Romania, they struggled to identify anyone who could be meaningfully described as part of civil society.

The developments analysed in this chapter lend greater credence to the argument made by Roberts, Judt and Taubman that the rupture in the communist bloc began not in 1989, but with Gorbachev's rise in 1985.[336] Dutch diplomatic reporting shows how the effects of Soviet reform were beginning to ripple across the Warsaw Pact, with regimes seeking to accommodate this shift as best as they could. It also shows that the embassies noted that political change, when it occurred, was largely driven by party insiders or Soviet influence instead of domestic grassroots pressure. The notion advanced by Kotkin and Gross, which states that civil society was marginal, holds true for Bulgaria, Romania, and

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[331] "*Your visit to Bulgaria (8-9 March) - dissidents*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 801, Sofia to The Hague, 26 May 1988.
[332] *Ibid*.
[333] "*Process Jazz-section,"* NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 4817, The Hague to Prague, 6 March 1987.
[334] "*Evaluation Romanian Politics*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 96, Bucharest to The Hague, 20 Jnauray 1988.
[335] *Ibid*.
[336] See the first two sections of the literature review, page 14 to 17.

the GDR during this period.[337] The role of the civil society and the West, during these years, was mostly reactive. In terms of Dutch foreign policy, this chapter continues to support the argument that the Netherlands increasingly engaged with civil society if possible and continued to operate within an Atlanticist framework.

[337] Gross does note that civil society was a significant factor in Poland, which is evident in this chapter as well. Kotkin and Gross, *Uncivil Society*.

Chapter IV: Cracks in the Bloc

The emergence of civil society, Summer 1988 – Summer 1989

Historical experience shows that communists were sometimes forced by circumstances to behave rationally and agree to compromises.

- *Adam Michnik. Polish historian and dissident.*[338]

By the summer of 1988, the Communist parties' hold on political power began to loosen across Eastern Europe. The USSR had by then seriously begun implementing Gorbachev's internal reforms, while making it clear to its fellow socialist states that it could no longer guarantee their economic stability or enforce one-party rule. His policy became that every country was entitled to its own path of socialism and should not expect Soviet interference.[339] Economic and social crises persisted, as internal and international criticism and calls for reform grew louder. Dutch diplomatic personnel, both on the ground and in the Netherlands, began shifting their focus toward engaging with the newly emerging civil society. Unlike the dissidents who had been active in previous decades, these groups appeared, at least to Dutch diplomats, to have the potential to play an active role in the political process.

At the same time, the Warsaw Pact itself began to fracture over the issue of political reforms. Two groups emerged. In Hungary and Poland, progress was made in implementing far-reaching reform, while civil society began to emerge as a political force capable of challenging the Communist Party's monopoly on power. The roundtable discussions, held first in Poland and then Hungary, showed that communist rules could start the process of transition into a multi-party democratic system.[340] In Czechoslovakia, the German Democratic Republic, Romania, and Bulgaria, the leadership held firm, blocking any discussion of relinquishing political control. Their leaders, referred to collectively as "the gang of four," tried desperately to save the communist system as it had been for the four decades.[341] In all these countries, the Dutch continued to develop their contacts and relationships with individuals and groups who

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[338] Judt, *Postwar*, 585.
[339] As quoted in: 'Opinie | Elk Oostblokland gaat zijn eigen weg naar het socialisme Gorbatsjov en het rode schisma', *NRC*, 13 March 1989.
[340] Roberts, 'An "Incredibly Swift Transition": Reflections on the End of the Cold War', 530.
[341] Connelly, *From Peoples into Nations*, 722.

had broken with the orthodox leadership, whether they were advocating gradual reform or radical societal transformation.

4.1 The Gang of Four

While the communist leadership in Moscow, Warsaw and Budapest continued with the implementation of broader reforms, those in the remaining Warsaw Pact member states tried desperately to stem the tide.[342] The "Gang of Four", consisting of Romania's Nicolae Ceaușescu, Bulgaria's Todor Zhivkov, East Germany's Erich Honecker and Czechoslovakia Miloš Jakeš remained unwilling to undertake meaningful reforms of their political system.[343] They had no legitimacy of their own without the backing of Soviet arms, and feared what might follow now that Soviet support was no longer guaranteed.[344] Consequently, political repression remained, and even increased during the final years of communist rule, as the rules of these countries sought to fight of the challenge raised by an emergent civil society.

For the Dutch diplomats present in the summer of 1988, it was uncertain in which direction the political winds would blow in the future. As of late December 1988, the East Berlin embassy thought that Honecker and his politburo would try to stay the course until at least the year 2000.[345] The embassy in Prague even warned The Hague that it might be prudent to start creating a contingency plan, should "perestroika suddenly come to an end."[346] There was a fear that the government would strike against dissidents, especially those connected with the West.[347] It would set an example in case the people grew restless due to the chaotic economic situation. In Bulgaria, the hope for further political and social reforms were seen as wishful thinking, as the embassy concluded that it would be more likely for the situation to remain stagnant.[348] The description sketched of Romania was downright dystopian, as the ambassador wrote about a society, completely controlled by the Ceaușescu clan who ruled with bribery, intimidation and brutal violence.[349] The economic situation of

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[342] Connelly, 722.
[343] Sebestyen, *Revolution 1989*, 194.
[344] Sebestyen, 194.
[345] "*Honecker Central Committee and 40 years of their GDR, 'the Vault in Europe's House'*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 4599, East Berlin to The Hague, 13 December 1988.
[346] "*Perestroika and West-Europe*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Embassy Prague, 2.05.382, inv.no. 227, Prague to The Hague, 6 December 1988.
[347] "*Domestic situation*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Embassy Prague, 2.05.382, inv.no. 227, Prague to The Hague, 29 November 1988.
[348] "*Bulgaria Internal Politics*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 4552, Sofia to The Hague, 17 January 1989.
[349] "*Eastern Europe notes for Parliament, part I*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 96, Bucharest to The Hague, 15 November 1988.

Romania had been steadily worsening since the early 1980s, which seemed to have demotivated the population.[350] Diplomats in Czechoslovakia reported something similar, as they had noticed the people having become inert, which halted the growth of popular opposition in the country.[351]

While civil society fully emerged in Poland and Hungary, the opposition remained curiously irrelevant as a political force in the other states of the Warsaw Pact. Still, the embassies saw small signs that not all was well. The local elections in East Germany were as always won by the ruling Socialist Unity Party.[352] Yet a not insignificant number of Germans, numbering about 150,000, had voted against the party.[353] It had not been the upset some hoped for, but a future sign of trouble.[354] When the communist share of the vote was announced to be 98.89 per cent rather than the usual 99.9 per cent, admitted that things were not as before.[355] The ambassador in Czechoslovakia warned that the authorities simply kept pushing off the reforms, demanded by its population.[356] He warned that this "immobilism" risked the loss of legitimacy for the ruling party, and would undermine its standing in the future.[357] And what would happen if no-one had any faith left in the leadership? Perhaps, he reasoned, change might come, and sooner than could reasonably be expected.[358]

4.2 Around the Round Table

Throughout the summer of 1988, strikes were continuously held throughout Poland.[359] Although the embassy had heard rumours that the authorities sought to buy off the leadership, it noted that most strikers were "quite young, with little to lose."[360] The government was unable to get a grip on the strikes and was forced to start a dialogue with Solidarity.[361] It was a breakthrough, which the embassy speculated would have major consequences for the balance

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[350] "*Eastern Europe notes for Parliament, part II,"* NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 96, Bucharest to The Hague, 14 November 1988.
[351] "*Internal Politics CSSR*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Embassy Prague, 2.05.382, inv.no. 227, Prague to The Hague, 21 September 1988.
[352] "*Kommunalwahlen 1989: Farce or Forgery*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 4874, East Berlin to The Hague, 12 May 1989.
[353] *Ibid.*
[354] *Ibid.*
[355] Hoyer, *Beyond the Wall*, 393.
[356] "*Internal Politics*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 4818, Prague to The Hague, 5 April 1989.
[357] *Ibid*.
[358] *Ibid*.
[359] "Workers unrest in Poland," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Embassy Warsaw, 2.05.387, inv.no. 611, 24 August 1988.
[360] *Ibid*.
[361] "*Workers unrest in Poland*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Embassy Warsaw, 2.05.387, inv.no. 611, 31 August 1988.

of power between reformist and conservative tendencies within the communist party.[362] The first of these so-called roundtables resulted in failure.[363] The embassy believed that the failure was due to the authorities demanding too much, and Wałęsa being unwilling and unable to settle.[364] But neither side could walk away. By late 1988, Jaruzelski and his advisers concluded that the regime could no longer govern without Solidarity.[365] The very same Jaruzelski, who had been responsible for crushing Solidarity in 1981, was prepared to engage in negotiations with its representatives to prepare Poland for regime change.[366]

Almost all the attention of the Dutch embassy was on these negotiations. In March, the embassy reported a breakthrough after Wałęsa had met, once again, with high-ranking officials.[367] In meetings with the opposition, the Dutch were already made aware that they were "cautiously optimistic."[368] When the negotiations finished in April, the results were, in the words of the ambassador, "limited but encouraging."[369]He saw the opposition gaining concessions from the party, which would enhance their status and influence as a political force.[370] Crucially, the participants agreed to an election for the Polish parliament and Senate.[371] The members of civil society could now finally compete democratically with the communist authority.

It was not the rising civil society that forced the Hungarian party to the negotiation table, but the members of the party itself.[372] In the spring of 1988, the new generation of party members succeeded in removing János Kádár and many other members of the ageing leadership during an extraordinary party conference.[373] The embassy would look back on it as

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[362] *Ibid*.
[363] "*Poland – Internal Political Developments*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Embassy Warsaw, 2.05.387, inv.no. 611, 10 November 1988.
[364] Ibid.
[365] Jacques Lévesque, 'The East European Revolutions of 1989', in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War: Volume 3: Endings*, ed. Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad, vol. 3, The Cambridge History of the Cold War (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 312.
[366] James Mark et al., *1989: A Global History of Eastern Europe*, New Approaches to European History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 76.
[367] "*The state of Negotiations*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 4763, Warsaw to The Hague, 17 March 1989.
[368] "*Interim Report on Round Table Conference*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Embassy Warsaw, 2.05.387, inv.no. 611, 1 March 1989.
[369] "*Afterthought on the Round Table Conference,"* NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 4763, Warsaw to The Hague, 19 April 1989.
[370] *Ibid*.
[371] Connelly, *From Peoples into Nations*, 721.
[372] Sebestyen, *Revolution 1989*, 212.
[373] Judt, *Postwar*, 609.

the most important political event of 1988.[374] He was replaced by Prime Minister Károly Grósz. The Dutch embassy reported that he was in favour of modernising and democratising the communist party.[375] He did not favour pluralism outside the framework of the party itself, in which he differed from many colleagues, such as the liberal politburo member Imre Pozsgay and former finance minister Rezső Nyers.[376] Although a multi-party system seemed the inevitable outcome, Grósz was not willing to cede the leading role of the Communist Party in such a system.[377]

While the Dutch eagerly awaited what course of action the new leadership would take, they began taking notes on the growing strength of civil society. The Church managed to reduce the state's interference in its own business and was able to fill in all vacant dioceses without meddling from the state.[378] Political parties unaffiliated with the communist party began propping up. Trade unions began acting autonomously, demanding better wages.[379]These organisation were not always willing to follow the path of reform laid out by the Communist Party; when Grósz called for restraint, warning against those who sought to implementing too much political and economic reform within too little time, the newly created *Fidesz*-party called his statement "an incitement against the political minority, and an open threat."[380] The ambassador feared that this would be the start of a harsher political climate after a "summer of tolerance.[381]

By 1989, civil society had entered the political arena in full force. In March, 70,000 Hungarians attended a manifestation organised by various organisations independent of the ruling party.[382] In April, the first attempt at a roundtable between the government and the opposition was held.[383] When these talks collapsed, the liberal wing of the Communists

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[374] "*Annual report on Hungary's domestic and foreign developments in 1988*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 3979, Budapest to The Hague, March 1989, 1.
[375] "*The new Politburo and its new Course*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 3979, Budapest to The Hague, 30 May 1988.
[376] *Ibid*.
[377] "*Internal Political Developments*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Embassy Hungary, 2.05.386, inv.no. 264, 12 December 1988.
[378] "Annual report on Hungary's domestic and foreign developments in 1988," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 3979, Budapest to The Hague, March 1989, 5.
[379] "*Internal Developments*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Embassy Hungary, 2.05.386, inv.no. 264, 24 April 1989.
[380] "*Internal Political Developments*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Embassy Hungary, 2.05.386, inv.no. 264, 12 December 1988, 3.
[381] *Ibid*.
[382] "*15th of March Celebrations*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 90, Budapest to The Hague, 17 March 1989.
[383] "*Internal Developments*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 90, Budapest to The Hague, 13 April 1989.

sought to kick out the conservative holdouts.[384] By the middle of April, Grósz and the entire politburo resigned. [385]In June, the reformers managed to renew talks with the opposition.[386] When this roundtable was opened, it was already clear that the party leadership agreed to free and fair elections.[387] In both Poland and Hungary, the rise of civil society resulted in the end of one-party rule.[388] The fate of Communist rule would now be decided democratically by its citizens.

4.3 Diplomatic engagement with Civil Society

By the time of the roundtable discussion, the Dutch diplomats had already created solid diplomatic contacts in both Poland and Hungary. Contacts with members of the ascendant civil society were no longer made solely for humanitarian or ideological reasons but were necessary to engage with the full political spectrum. In both cases, internal political shifts had forced their regimes to recognise, if not de jure, at least de facto, the existence of the opposition.

In Bulgaria, the Dutch noticed the emergence of a dissident movement. On the first of august, Dutch diplomats met with the founders of the 'Independent Human Rights Organisation' active in the country.[389] Another meeting took place, whereby the Dutch were asked to share a document on the state of human rights in Bulgaria with newspapers and Amnesty International.[390] In early 1989, the embassy had identified three dissident groups, the Independent Human Rights Group, the 'Glasnost and Perestroika'-club and the 'League for the Rights of Men', consisting of mostly ethnic Turks.[391] Semi-regular contact was created between these groups and Dutch diplomats, but contact remained difficult due to the authorities continuously curtailing the movements of its critics.[392] Greater openness enabled foreign journalists to seek out Bulgarian dissidents when they emerged in 1988, while also

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[384] *Ibid*.
[385] "*Mutations in the Hungarian Politburo*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 4221, Budapest to The Hague, 13 April 1989.
[386] "*Internal Political Developments*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 90, Budapest to The Hague, 6 June 1989.
[387] Lévesque, 'The East European Revolutions of 1989', 321.
[388] Connelly, *From Peoples into Nations*, 721.
[389] "*Dissidents in Bulgaria*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 801, Sofia to The Hague, 1 August 1988.
[390] "*Dissidents in Bulgaria*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 801, Sofia to The Hague, 5 September 1988.
[391] "*Dissidents in Bulgaria*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 802, Sofia to The Hague, 24 January 1989.
[392] *Ibid.*

allowing Bulgarians to access foreign radio broadcasts and hear about these opposition figures.[393] The authorities in Sofia were powerless to stop it; instead they accused Dutch journalist Dick Verkijk of participating in a smear campaign when he attempted to contact the Independent Human Rights Group, but did halt his activities.[394] Despite no significant political reforms having been implemented, civil society steadily grew throughout the early months of 1989. Dutch contact with civil society can be said to have reached the level of political contacts in this period, holding semi-regular meetings with dissident groups. The ambassador noted that without legal recognition, these groups could not realistically advance political reform.[395]

In East Germany and Czechoslovakia, Dutch engagement did not necessarily deepen during this period. Dutch diplomats continuously sought contact with members of civil society but were often hindered by the authorities seeking to hinder these meetings. In both countries, engagement seemed to have stranded at a political level, but did grow until the very end of the summer in 1989. The change in these countries was in the size of civil society. Czechoslovakia saw its first major protest on the 27th of October 1988 and would see more over the months that followed.[396] In May, Vaclav Havel was released from jail, thanks to pressure from the West, including from the Netherlands.[397] Leading dissidents began to meet up, while more and more people and organisations turned out to challenge the regime. In East Germany too, did the Dutch notice more resistance to the authorities.[398] In both countries, this growth was not driven by reforms granting greater freedom, but rather by anger at their absence.[399] As neighbouring states embraced reform, the lack of change at home spurred people to demand similar freedoms.[400] By this point, Romania had become a true exception, as the Dutch still struggled to identify any significant number of active dissidents. When the ambassador made attempt to contact dissidents, he was called in by the Romanians, who

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[393] "*Dissidents in Bulgaria*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 802, Sofia to The Hague, 10 February 1989.
[394] *Ibid*.
[395] "*Dissidents in Bulgaria*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 802, Sofia to The Hague, 7 April 1989.
[396] "*Jan Palach demonstration*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Embassy Prague, 2.05.382, inv.no. 298, Prague to The Hague, 16 January 1989.
[397] "*Vaclav Havel*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Embassy Prague, 2.05.382, inv.no. 298, Prague to The Hague, 22 May 1989.
[398] "*Forced Emigration due to filling Complaint about Election Result*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 4600, East Berlin to The Hague, 2 June 1989.
[399] Kramer, 'The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union (Part 2)', 10.
[400] Kramer, 11.

strongly complained about his actions.[401] A similar sounding complaint was filed just a few months later, as these contacts "should not be one of an ambassadors' activities."[402] The new ambassador who had arrived in 1988 sought to make stronger contacts with Romanian civil society, but was hindered at every step.[403] He would struggle to make any serious political contacts throughout his time in Bucharest.

4.4 Dutch Diplomacy between the summer of 1988 and the summer of 1989

By the summer of 1989, the Dutch had already established strong political contacts with civil society in both Poland and Hungary. The ability of civil society actors in these countries to legitimize themselves as equal partners to the communist authorities enabled them to emerge as recognized political players. Throughout this process, Dutch diplomats maintained stable and consistent diplomatic engagement. In Czechoslovakia, the Dutch maintained a diplomatic relationship with members of the opposition but were often hindered in their contacts by the authorities. In East Germany and Bulgaria too, political contacts had been established when civil society started to emerge in the final months of 1988. Only in Romania did the Dutch struggle to create strong engagement with civil society, as the state continued with its thorough repression. The expansion of engagement between Dutch diplomats and civil society often followed, rather than preceded, the growth of these movements; in many cases, the Dutch simply had to reach out to what was already there.

This chapter supports the argument made by Kenney, Krapfl, and Bolton that civil society, though limited in previous years, emerged as a decisive political force in late 1988 to early 1989 and began driving events on their own, instead of reacting to it. The top-down perspective should however not be discarded, as it remains in particularly relevant in explaining Hungary's path of reform, or Romania's stubborn resistance to change. Although those who can be counted as active members of civil society still remained relatively few, the elections in Poland, and protest in Hungary showed they had significant support with the wider society, slightly undermining the argument that civil society was limited to a few intellectuals and priests.[404] The dispatches from the embassies also show that Dutch

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[401] "*Contacts with Romanian Dissidents*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 96, Bucharest to The Hague, 27 September 1989.
[402] "*Romanian wishes and Sermon*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 97, Bucharest to The Hague, 3 February 1989.
[403] Huys, *In opdracht van Hare Majesteit: diplomaat in crisistijd*, 89.
[404] Although this thesis primarily focuses on the level of support civil society received in terms of its political influence, important questions have been raised about the identity and nature of the leading dissidents. Barbara

engagement with civil society increased only after it begun to emerge as a significant political force. The Netherlands and he West once again reacted to events, rather than leading it

Falk, in particular, explores the extent to which civil society itself was driven by elites, questioning how representative these dissident movements truly were. In: Barbara J. Falk, *The Dilemmas of Dissidence in East-Central Europe: Citizen Intellectuals and Philosopher Kings* (Central European University Press, 2003).

Chapter V: Revolution

The collapse of communist rule across Eastern Europe, Fall 1989

People! Your government has returned to you!

- *Vaclav Havel, Czech poet and dissident.*[405]

By the summer of 1989, the Communist governments in Warsaw and Budapest had abolished their monopoly on power and begun enacting genuine multiparty democratic reforms. The 'refolutions' of Poland and Hungary demonstrated that complete systemic transformation was possible.[406] Unlike the Hungarian revolution of 1956, the Prague Spring, or the troubles in Poland during the early 80s, there was no threat of Soviet intervention.[407] Gorbachev had made clear that he would not seek to stop these developments.[408] Neither did the regimes seek to use force of their own.[409] The quiet renunciation of the Brezhnev doctrine became ever more apparent as time went on.[410] By the autumn of 1989, Soviet spokesman Gennady Gerasimov made this explicit, stating to the press; "We now follow the Sinatra doctrine. Sinatra has a song, 'I had it my way.' Now these countries can all do it their way."[411] In both Poland and Hungary, the emergence of a robust civil society played a key role in compelling the communist party to abandon one-party rule.[412] Just as the wave of reforms and protests seemed to sweep across the rest of the Warsaw Pact, a chilling reminder came from China. The brutal crackdown on Tiananmen Square on June 4th reminded the world that liberal reforms in communist states remained vulnerable to repression from above.[413] The decision to crush the protests showed the world that democratisation was not inevitable, and could be rolled back.[414] Hardliners such as Ceaușescu and Honecker applauded these actions, while the

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[405] Judt, 585.
[406] The term 'refolution' is explained on the next page, and originates from: Timothy Garton Ash, 'Refolution', in *The Uses of Adversity: Essays on the Fate of Central Europe* (Random House, 1989).
[407] Connelly, *From Peoples into Nations*, 714.
[408] Connelly, 714.
[409] Mark et al., *1989*, 104.
[410] Sebestyen, *Revolution 1989*, 198.
[411] 'Moskou lanceert Sinatra-doctrine', *NRC*, 26 October 1989.
[412] Mark et al., *1989*, 103.
[413] Mark James et al., *1989: A Global History of Eastern Europe*, New Approaches to European History 59 (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 73.
[414] James et al., 105.

Polish and Hungarian governments joined the West in their condemnation.[415]

In the end, authorities in Berlin, Prague, Sofia and Bucharest did not relinquish power through gradual reform, but lost it either to sudden mass protests or internal coups. In East Germany, mass protests erupted, culminating in the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9.[416] In Czechoslovakia, the Velvet Revolution brought Václav Havel and the Civic Forum to power without a shot fired.[417] Even in Bulgaria, the Communist Party leadership was forced to step down amid internal and external pressure.[418] Only in Romania did the regime fall violently, with the execution of Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu marking a bloody end to decades of dictatorship.[419]

5.1 Refolution in Warsaw and Budapest

The historian Timothy Garton Ash, visiting both countries in the early summer of 1989, was astounded by scale of change brought about due to deliberate reform.[420] The undertaking to share power, even give it up if it was lost democratically, was nothing less than revolutionary.[421]Indeed, it was nothing short of a 'refolution', reform implemented at a revolutionary level.[422] In Poland, the confirmation of this revolution came on June 4th, when Solidarity won in a landslide in the election agreed to during the round table conference.[423] Solidarity had only reluctantly agreed to holding elections, as its leadership feared the public reacting with apathy, and not showing up.[424] When Foreign Minister Van den Broek met with his Polish counterpart two weeks before the election, he was informed that these elections would be of limited in scale, as election campaigns were a new element in polish society, and the poles needed time to familiarize with the process.[425] Having spoken with high-ranking members of the opposition, the ambassador reported that they expected to win 60, maybe 70 seats out of the 100 up for elections.[426] In the end, they won every single seat up for election

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[415] James et al., 73.
[416] Pekelder, 'Nederland en de DDR', 395.
[417] Lévesque, 'The East European Revolutions of 1989', 324.
[418] Sebestyen, *Revolution 1989*, 363.
[419] Sebestyen, 381.
[420] Ash, 'Refolution', 309.
[421] Ash, 310.
[422] Ash does not explain why he favoured the term refolution over revorm. In: Ash, 310.
[423] Judt, *Postwar*, 606.
[424] Sebestyen, *Revolution 1989*.
[425] "*Visit Polish Foreign Minister Olechowski/Internal Developments in Poland*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 4764, The Hague to Warsaw, 19 May 1989.
[426] "*Intermediate Report on the Elections to be held on June 4th,"* NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 4926, Warsaw to The Hague, 22 May 1989.

in a landslide.[427] The embassy reported a "total victory" for the Solidarity, which surely would have far reaching consequences.[428] Months of difficult debates and negotiations would follow, but the opposition, now officially had risen to a position of power. Civil society had triumphed. In the year that followed, the Communist party would rapidly lose its remaining grip of power, ending communist rule after more than four decades.

It was not an electoral defeat which ended communist rule in Hungary, but a burial. the one-party rule ended with the burial of Imre Nagy.[429] Nagy had been the leader of Hungary when its revolution was crushed in 1956 by Soviet tanks. In the aftermath of this failed uprising, he had been secretly executed and buried in an unmarked grave.[430] Now, as his vision of an independent pluralist Hungary was being realised, his body was dug up and given a proper state funeral. The ambassador did not miss the significance of this moment.[431] He quickly asked for and got permission from the foreign minister to attend the funeral and lay a wreath on behalf of the Netherlands. If it were needed, he would undertake this action alone if other Western countries hesitated in taking similar symbolic action.[432] Reporting a few days later, the ambassador was surprised by the turnout of what he estimated to be more than 100,000 attendees.[433] He also noted that all speakers had the same message: that Hungary would become free and democratic once again.[434] The head of the Fidesz party, a certain Viktor Orbán, strongly objected to the Communist Party attending the proceedings, as they "had stolen the future of the country, and hypocritically honoured Nagy's, after they had betrayed his legacy."[435] He reported that Orban's speech resonated most with the crowd, as the people no longer seemed to accept the empty promises of the regime.[436] The democratic multiparty system, agreed to during the roundtable discussions, dealt the final blow to the remaining vestiges of the Communist era. [437] Referenda held in November abolished the

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[427] "Situation after the First Round of Elections," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 4764, Warsaw to The Hague, 13 June 1989.
[428] *Ibid*.
[429] Sebestyen, *Revolution 1989*, 293.
[430] Judt, *Postwar*.
[431] "Presence of EC-ambassadors at reburial of Imre Nagy," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 5125, Budapest to The Hague, 7 June 1989.
[432] "Presence of EC-ambassadors at reburial of Imre Nagy," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 4889, Budapest to the Hague, 13 June 1989.
[433] "Commemoration Ceremony," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 5125, Budapest to The Hague, 16 June 1989.
[434] Ibid.
[435] Ibid.
[436] Ibid.
[437] Kramer, 'The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union (Part 2)', 49.

Communist militias, ended their involvement in companies, and forced them to let go of their properties.[438] In the spring of 1990, the communist were swept out of power, ending their five decades of rule for good.[439]

5.2 The final holdouts fall

The end of communist rule in Germany started with an emigration crisis.[440] With a stagnating economy, no signs of reform, and a leadership unwilling to change direction, people began to leave.[441] When the Hungarians opened their border with Austria, there was no obstacle left for those wanting to leave.[442] The tens, if not hundreds of thousands of people choosing to leave finally revealed to the embassy in Berlin just how far the discontentment with the regime had spread.[443] It was an "overwhelming vote of no confidence" in the leadership of Erich Honecker and his politburo.[444] Instead of tackling this crisis, Honecker's first appearance when he had returned from his vacation was to praise a locally produced, 32-megabyte computer chip. The ambassador described him as looking like an "old men living, out his dream," unable to cope with the reality his country faced.[445]

Many citizens chose to stay, demanding real change from their leadership.[446] Opposition groups began to emerge. The ambassador, having met with his West-German colleague, sent a few descriptions of these groups back to The Hague. The *Neues Forum* (New Forum) did not impress him much; they struck him as "a collection intellectual amateurs, resembling an action group in its infancy."[447] The groups formed around the evangelical churches had a much concreter set of demands, but were nonetheless overwhelmed by a feeling of total hopelessness.[448] Criticism from reformers within the leading party was also nipped in the bud.[449] Reporting on the creation of an opposition group

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[438] "*Hungarian Domestic Politics: The Referendum on November 26 1989*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Embassy Hungary, 2.05.386, inv.no. 264, 30 November 1989
[439] Kramer, 'The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union (Part 2)', 49.
[440] Judt, *Postwar*, 611.
[441] Pekelder, 'Nederland en de DDR', 389.
[442] Judt, *Postwar*, 611.
[443] "*Does Honecker Survive his GDR*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 4600, East Berlin to The Hague, 18 August 1989.
[444] *Ibid*.
[445] *Ibid.*
[446] Hoyer, *Beyond the Wall*, 393.
[447] "*Is there a future in Alternative Groups in the GDR*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 4600, East Berlin to The Hague, 22 September 1989.
[448] *Ibid*.
[449] *Ibid*.

in late September, the ambassador raised the question of what the emergence of such groups signified. They were symptoms of discontent, but that there was widespread discontent had already been obvious since the start of the migration crisis.[450] The importance of these groups is that they signalled that there were still many who demanded reforms and had not yet given up hope.[451] The fear of repression was waning, but there was still a "significant chance" that momentum would be lost.[452] In his dairy, the ambassador wrote down that for the time being, the German Democratic Republic was not yet ready to blow up.[453]

Moment would however only grow in the weeks that followed. Protests were attended by tens, then hundreds of thousands of people.[454] When 70,000 people protested in Leipzig on October 9 without the police cracking down, it signalled a breakdown in state control.[455] Honecker was forced to resign by the other party leaders, once again to the surprise of the embassy, who had not anticipated the speed of change that was occurring at the top of the Communist Party.[456] From here on out, the embassy saw the communist leadership lose control.[457] Egon Krenz, the new General Secretary, did not have the people's trust.[458] When the Berlin Wall fell, the communist party was simply dragged along by events, unable to turn it around or change its direction.[459] It would take a few more weeks to discover that the communist party indeed had no future left, but after November 9th, it had become clear that civil society now were setting the terms for the future.

On the very same day the wall fell in Berlin, a coup took place within the Bulgarian politburo.[460] Todor Zhivkov, having led his country since 1954, was suddenly out. The reason for his sudden removal lay in the so-called "Revival Process," a campaign aimed at forcibly assimilating Bulgaria's ethnic Turkish population.[461] Already in 1986 did the embassy warn

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[450] "*Recent Developments in the GDR*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 4600, East Berlin to The Hague, 26 September 1989.
[451] *Ibid*.
[452] *Ibid*.
[453] Egbert Jacobs, *Oost-Berlijns dagboek: de laatste maanden van de DDR* (Gibbon Uitgeefagentschap, 2011), 40.
[454] Pekelder, 'Nederland en de DDR', 391.
[455] Jacobs, *Oost-Berlijns dagboek : de laatste maanden van de DDR*, 392.
[456] "Recent Developments in the GDR," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 4600, East Berlin to The Hague, 26 September 1989.
[457] "Egon Krenz, chance of Survival," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 4206, East Berlin to The Hague, 1 November 1989.
[458] "GDR - Internal," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 4600, East Berlin to The Hague, 8 November 1989.
[459] "Berlin after 9 November – the Wall loses its relevance," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 4600, East Berlin to The Hague, 14 November 1989.
[460] Sebestyen, *Revolution 1989*, 361.
[461] Judt, *Postwar*, 627.

that ethnic Turks were forced to change their name and forbidden to practice their faith.[462]This process escalated in the summer of 1989, when 300,000 ethnic Turks were expelled from Bulgaria.[463] Dutch diplomats heard the news of this escalation in early May, when they received reports of disturbances.[464] This action of ethnic cleansing drove Bulgaria towards isolation. Not just the west was unanimous in its denouncement, but Hungarian and Soviet officials also seemed to regard the situation as "highly unfortunate."[465] Foreign outrage intensified as the crisis prolonged, with the Dutch parliament demanding stronger language form their diplomats in Bulgaria.[466] The Dutch also began to observe the economic consequences; by July, they reported a labour shortage which was shutting down factories and damaging that year's harvest.[467] Throughout the crisis Dutch cooperated with their European and American partners to keep the rest of the world informed, organizing trips to Turkish areas and seeking out Turkish dissidents.[468] As the economic crisis worsened and Bulgaria got ever more isolated from the East and the West, party-members began fermenting a coup.

In October 1989, a Conference of Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) summit was to be held in Sofia.[469] The dissident group 'Ecoglasnost' saw this as an excellent opportunity to strengthen its relationship with western delegations and requested to attend. The Dutch did not initially believe that they would be able to attend, as the group was "…if not illegal, it was juridical non-existent."[470] Despite this scepticism, individual members of Ecoglasnost were granted permission to join the conference.[471] Dutch diplomats immediately made use of this possibility to create contacts with the group.[472] Yet it turned out to be a trap.

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[462] "*Turkish Minority in Bulgaria*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 800, Sofia to The Hague, 12 December 1986.
[463] Judt, *Postwar*, 627.
[464] "*Turkish Minority*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 802, Sofia to The Hague, 29 May 1988.
[465] *"Question Turkish Minority," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 802, Sofia to The Hague, 19 June 1989.*
[466] *"Question from members of the Parliament, with responses provided by the Government," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 4330, Sofia to The Hague, 19 July 1989.*
[467] "*Bulgaria*, *Taking Stock*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 802, Sofia to The Hague, 31 July 1989.
[468] "*Turkish Minority Bulgaria*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 802, Sofia to The Hague, 23 August 1989.
[469] Sebestyen, *Revolution 1989*, 361.
[470] "*Dissidents* in *Bulgaria / CSCE Environmental Conference*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 802, Sofia to The Hague, 6 October 1989.
[471] "*Bulgarian statement on Turkish Question in light of CVSE Environmental Conference Sofia*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 802, Sofia to The Hague, 16 October 1989.
[472] "*CVSE Environmental Conference Sofia Ecoglasnost*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 802, Sofia to The Hague, 18 October 1989.

The embassy wrote in outrage that on the morning of October 25, secret police units descended on the members of Ecoglasnost, right in front of hundreds of attending delegates.[473] The Dutch joined their American and European partners in demanding an explanation for the treatment of these dissidents.[474] When the Soviets voiced their disapproval, Bulgaria seemed more isolated than ever before.[475] Party members used this as a pretext to remove Zhivkov.[476] The Dutch were astounded by his sudden removal.[477] The new leadership promised a wide range of social, economic and political reforms. This in turn paved the way for roundtable talks in early January 1990 that forged agreement on a multiparty system and free elections.[478]

The same scenario that had played out in East Germany seemed to repeat itself in Czechoslovakia. Here too did the Dutch describe the citizens being stuck in a hopeless situation, with a government not responding to the demands of reform, an economic downturn lowering the living standards, and no perspective of change to come.[479] Dissidents were continuously harassed, and prevented from meeting western diplomats.[480] In response to a newspaper article in NRC stating that "the citizens of Czechoslovakia were dissatisfied," the ambassador remarked that this had long been the case, and that it remained uncertain whether the population would take any action.[481] This feeling of wanting to be left alone also seemed to hinder the people from joining dissident groups in demanding change.[482] In the middle of October, the embassy was still sending dispatches that the authorities remained committed to an orthodox approach, no matter what was happening in other countries.[483] On 28 October 10,000 persons gather in Prague to protest against the regime.[484] It had been the fifth mass

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[473] "*Bulgarian Dissidents / CVSE Environmental Conference Sofia*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 802, Sofia to The Hague, 25 October 1989.
[474] "*CVSE Environmental Conference Sofia / Dissidents*," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 802, Sofia to The Hague, 31 October 1989.
[475] Sebestyen, *Revolution 1989*, 362.
[476] Sebestyen, 362.
[477] "End of the Zhivkov Era," NL-HaNA, BuZa / Code 1985-1990, 2.05.392, inv.no. 802, Sofia to The Hague, 13 November 1989.
[478] *Kramer, 'The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union (Part 2)', 50.*
[479] "*Internal Politics CSSR,"* NL-HaNA, BuZa / Embassy Prague, 2.05.382, inv.no. 227, Prague to The Hague, 21 September 1989.
[480] "*Conscientious Objectors CSSR / Vaclav Havel,"* NL-HaNA, BuZa / Embassy Prague, 2.05.382, inv.no. 298, Prague to The Hague, 18 August 1989.
[481] "*Internal Politics CSSR,"* NL-HaNA, BuZa / Embassy Prague, 2.05.382, inv.no. 228, Prague to The Hague, 21 September 1989.
[482] *Ibid*.
[483] "*Domestic Politics,"* NL-HaNA, BuZa / Embassy Prague, 2.05.382, inv.no. 228, Prague to The Hague, 13 October 1989.
[484] "*28 October Demonstrations,"* NL-HaNA, BuZa / Embassy Prague, 2.05.382, inv.no. 228, Prague to The Hague, 30 October 1989.

demonstration in a year. The embassy noted that the response of the authorities increasingly leaned toward repression rather than tolerance.[485] The regime's only apparent response was to intensify repression. The embassy referred to it as a "bunker mentality", whereby the authorities had dug themselves in. The situation was at an impasse.[486]

The breakthrough came on the 17th of November, with the start of what quickly would come to be referred to as the "Velvet Revolution."[487] A Student protest was violently supressed by riot police, and there were rumours that someone had been killed.[488] The event sparked a series of popular demonstrations from 19 November to late December. By 20 November, the number of peaceful protesters assembled in Prague had swelled from 200,000 the previous day to an estimated 500,000.[489] The embassy staff was present at this protest, and impressed by their size, but still feared that the authorities might want to crack down on the protest.[490] Yet the authorities did not act and the size of the protest only grew. On the 24th, the embassy reported that the leadership was splitting up along those who wanted to negotiate, and those who refused to do so.[491] While the authorities began to splinter, the opposition had united under the leadership of Vaclav Havel in his Civic Forum.[492] The demanded more individual liberties, elections and the freedom of the press.[493] The curtains finally fell for the authorities on the 28th of November, when the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia announced on 28 November 1989 that it would relinquish power and dismantle the single-party state.[494] On 10 December, President Gustáv Husák appointed the first largely non-communist government in Czechoslovakia since 1948 and resigned.[495] In Czechoslovakia too, civil society had triumphed.

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[485] *Ibid*.
[486] "*Internal Politics CSSR,"* NL-HaNA, BuZa / Embassy Prague, 2.05.382, inv.no. 228, Prague to The Hague, 13 November 1989.
[487] Baudet, '"Ik hoop maar dat ze hun hand niet overspelen."', 383.
[488] "*Statement from Students of the Universities in Prague,"* NL-HaNA, BuZa / Embassy Prague, 2.05.382, inv.no. 228, Prague to The Hague, 20 November 1989.
[489] Baudet, '"Ik hoop maar dat ze hun hand niet overspelen."', 396.
[490] "*Eyewitness account Demonstrations 20-11-89,"* NL-HaNA, BuZa / Embassy Prague, 2.05.382, inv.no. 228, Prague to The Hague, 21 November 1989.
[491] "*Internal Situation,"* NL-HaNA, BuZa / Embassy Prague, 2.05.382, inv.no. 228, Prague to The Hague, 23 November 1989.
[492] "*Internal Situation,"* NL-HaNA, BuZa / Embassy Prague, 2.05.382, inv.no. 228, Prague to The Hague, 24 November 1989.
[493] *Ibid*.
[494] "*Internal Situation,"* NL-HaNA, BuZa / Embassy Prague, 2.05.382, inv.no. 228, Prague to The Hague, 29 November 1989.
[495] Baudet, '"Ik hoop maar dat ze hun hand niet overspelen."', 391.

5.3 Diplomatic engagement with civil society ascendant

By the summer of 1989, the split between conservative and reformist regimes had become apparent in how the Dutch diplomats engaged with civil society. Whereas the Warsaw and Budapest embassies were mostly unhindered in strengthening its relationship with civil society, those located in Berlin, Sofia, Prague and Bucharest were continuously hindered by the local authorities. Local dissidents, critical clergymen, journalists, trade unions, and others were all obstructed by their governments when they attempted to establish contact with members of the Dutch embassies. Only at the very end of 1989, did the Dutch manage to create diplomatic contacts with civil society in all six countries.

Full diplomatic contacts were established at different stages along each country's path away from communism. As shown in the previous chapter, in Poland and Hungary this engagement preceded the political transformation, with Dutch diplomats already operating with relatively few restrictions even before it was certain that the regimes would pursue reform. In East Germany and Czechoslovakia, this moment had to wait until civil society had fully mobilized, and where marching in the streets demanding change. As the ambassador in East Berlin saw it: "engagement with civil society took place in a stage of transition, in which repression persisted, yet the fear of its consequences had begun to diminish."[496] A similar situation was present in Czechoslovakia before the Velvet Revolution. Dutch diplomats were not hindered in seeking out dissidents, but these dissidents were actively harassed if they met with foreign officials.[497]

In Bulgaria and Romania, diplomatic contacts could only fully form after their regimes had been replaced by a more reformist leadership. The political change had begun than in much later, in November and December of 1989, long after elites in Budapest or Warsaw had already begun to dismantle their regimes.[498] The transition had not come from popular mobilization, but from an internal party coup in late 1989.[499] Only after this coup, did civil society find the room to emerge openly in these countries.

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[496] Huys, *In opdracht van Hare Majesteit : diplomaat in crisistijd*, 64.
[497] "*Vaclav Havel,"* NL-HaNA, BuZa / Embassy Prague, 2.05.382, inv.no. 298, Prague to The Hague, 22 July 1989.
[498] *James et al., 1989, 108.*
[499] Mark et al., *1989,* 90.

5.4 Dutch Diplomacy between the summer of 1989 and 1990

The embassies of the Netherlands had to rapidly adapt to seismic shifts in late 1989. While in the previous years, there been sings of the fundamental weakness of these regimes, their rapid collapse still came as a surprise. The collapse of these regimes gave the embassies the space they needed to finally create full diplomatic connections with civil society in these countries. The approach throughout this period was one of caution, as the Dutch feared that civil society still could be violently suppressed, as had happened in China on Tiananmen Square. This caution did mean that the embassies were caught off guard by the speed of events in East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria and Romania. By the summer of 1989, the question began to arise whether communism had any future left in Eastern Europe. The answer became clear at the end of 1989 and was resounding; it did not.

This chapter reinforces the argument made by Kenney, Garton Ash, and Krapfl that civil society became the decisive force behind the collapse of communism in 1989, at least in the case of Poland, Hungary, East Germany, and Czechoslovakia. It also affirms Roberts' and Judt's view that Gorbachev's renunciation of the Brezhnev Doctrine, removed the threat of intervention, which created the space for revolution to unfold peacefully. The chapter further supports the view that Dutch human rights diplomacy intensified as opportunities opened up, though it remained cautious, shaped by fears of repression. In Romania, the argument of Kotkin and Gross remains relevant: civil society was nearly absent, and change came not from below but from above. Overall, the chapter highlights how Dutch diplomacy adapted rapidly to regime collapse, and how civil society moved from the margins to the centre of political life across the Warsaw Pact.

Conclusion

The historian Timothy Garton Ash was in Prague when the Velvet Revolution broke out.[500] Astounded by the speed of events, he said, “In Poland it took ten years, in Hungary ten months, in East Germany 10 weeks: perhaps in Czechoslovakia it will take 10 days!”[501] When the Federal Assembly deleted the provision in the constitution referring to the "leading role" of the Communist Party, officially ending Communist rule in Czechoslovakia, it had only been twelve days since the first outbreak of protest.[502] Before the end of the year, the final domino fell with the overthrow and execution of Nicolae Ceaușescu.[503] By 1990, the political landscape in Eastern Europe had totally transformed, with civil society now in the driving seat. Former dissident now led their countries into a new age.[504] Four key conclusions follow on how the Dutch embassies in these countries responded to these rapid political transformations.

The Dutch embassies did not act independently of their allies when engaging with civil society. Instead, the Netherlands remained firmly anchored in the Western camp, both in its diplomatic outlook and in its conduct. In doing so, the embassies aligned with the broader foreign policy direction set by Foreign Minister Hans van den Broek, marked by Atlanticist primacy and a commitment to European cooperation. This alignment was often driven as much by necessity as by ideology. Many Dutch embassies were simply too small, and lacked the local networks required to engage civil society actors on their own. As a result, much of the information relayed back to The Hague was sourced not by its own personal, but via allied embassies, such as those of the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and other Western partners. As events grew more uncertain in the final year, the Dutch became increasingly reliant on their partners to understand developments on the ground and to maintain contact with civil society. The sources further suggest that the role of the West was relatively limited, in shaping these events. Dutch diplomacy, like that of its Western allies, mainly reacted to internal developments rather than directing them.

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[500] Ash wrote about his experiences in *The Magic Lantern* immediately after the events of 1989. He had also been present in Poland, Hungary and East Germany.
[501] Ash, *The Magic Lantern*, 78.
[502] Sebestyen, *Revolution 1989*, 379.
[503] Sebestyen, 398.
[504] A number of prominent dissidents went on to assume significant political roles after 1989. Notable examples include: Václav Havel, president of Czechoslovakia, Ján Čarnogurský, prime minister of Slovakia, Zhelyu Zhelev, president of Bulgaria, Viktor Orbán, prime minister of Hungary, Lech Wałęsa, president of Poland, József Antall, prime minster of Hungary, and so on.

Not only did Dutch diplomacy align with broader Western policy, but Dutch diplomats also made little distinction in how they conducted relations with individual Warsaw Pact states, at least up until 1985. In all six countries, Dutch embassies portrayed the situation in similar terms: economic stagnation, ageing leadership, suppressed opposition, and Soviet dominance over key decisions. This unified outlook only began to break down around the summer of 1988, when serious political reforms were introduced in Poland and Hungary, while other regimes remained resistant to change. This may also suggest that Dutch diplomats did not see opposition movements or civil society as the primary drivers of change in Eastern Europe, since it was not a shift in their position that prompted a change in diplomatic attitude. Instead, they saw change as dependent on the choices of the communist leadership, whether to reform or resist. Accordingly, this thesis strengthens the academic view that the revolutions in Eastern Europe were primarily outcomes of decisions made by ruling elites. At least, this is what can be gaged from looking at the source from the Dutch embassy.

Throughout the period examined in this thesis, a clear trend emerges: Dutch diplomats stationed in Warsaw Pact countries increasingly engaged with civil society as time went by. However, this trend was neither linear, nor did it necessarily correspond with the implementation of reform in the regions. Both Poland and Hungary charged ahead of the other Warsaw Pact states in their implementation of reform, but Dutch diplomats engaged more with Polish civil society than its Hungarian counterparts. One reason for this might be that in Poland, civil society had already firmly established itself with the rise of Solidarity in the early 1980s. In Hungary, most of the political momentum was driven by reformers within the ruling party, which as well might explain why less attention was paid to Hungarian civil society. The Dutch kept strong contacts with civil society in Czechoslovakia, even when the regime resisted implementing reforms of their own, while it held fewer contacts in East Germany, ruled by another conservative regime. In Bulgaria, the Dutch only properly engaged with civil society in the final year of communist rule, while in Romania, this engagement only reached the level of diplomatic connections after the revolution in December 1989. Only in early 1990, had the Dutch been able to establish proper diplomatic connections with civil society in all countries, as communist rule had already mostly collapsed.

Despite growing contacts with dissidents, Dutch embassies remained notably pessimistic in their evaluation of civil society's political potential. Even as these relationships deepened and moved up Boel's "layers" of engagement, ambassadors continued to send back sceptical reports to The Hague. Right up to the fall of 1989, diplomatic dispatches expressed consistent doubt about the influence and effectiveness of opposition movements. It suggests

that embassy staff, despite having solid contacts with civil society and being present in the countries themselves, were still caught off guard by the rapid political changes. One possible explanation lies in historical precedent: everyone was aware of the suppressed Prague Spring in 1968, the crushed Hungarian Revolution of 1956, and, more recently, the violent repression of protesters in Tiananmen Square in 1989. These events likely shaped expectations. For the Dutch, the revolutions of 1989 still came as a shock.

This thesis has explored how Dutch embassies in the Warsaw Pact engaged with emerging civil society during the final years of the Cold War. It has shown that, while Dutch diplomats increasingly deepened their contacts with dissident groups, their perception of civil society's political potential remained limited. Dutch foreign policy closely aligned with broader Western strategies, and change was largely interpreted as being guided by top-down decision-making rather than the mobilization of civil society. This research comes with several important limitations. The timeframe could have been extended, either to include earlier developments or the aftermath of the 1989 revolutions. Geographically, the focus was confined to six Warsaw Pact states; future research might include comparisons with countries like Yugoslavia, Albania, or the Soviet Union. The thesis has also focused solely on the Netherlands; a comparative study with other smaller states like Belgium or Denmark could grant valuable insights. Methodologically, the research has relied almost entirely on textual sources, primarily embassy reports and dispatches preserved in the Dutch National Archives. These documents offer only one side of the story and carry institutional biases. A more biographical approach, centred on the ambassadors themselves, might have produced different conclusions. A more obvious gap is that this thesis does not incorporate the perspectives of members of civil society. Future research should seek to include their voices to present a fuller picture of the complex dynamics that shaped East-West diplomacy in the Cold War.

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