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Conversations on the future of Europe in the world

The EU and its Eastern Neighbourhood

Session 1: The EU and the process of reform and renewal in the Eastern Neighbourhood: six countries, six nuances and a giant elephant in the room

The Hague, 23 November 2021

Summary of Proceedings

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Conference
on the **Future**
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The Hague has a long-standing history and strong connection with Europe. Over 7000 inhabitants in our International City of Peace and Justice work at more than 30 European organisations established in the city. As the International City, we believe in the strength of co-operation, both in the city as well as on the European level, to shape the future of Europe. Therefore, The Hague creates inspiring meeting places in co-operation with our local, national and international partners to involve local citizens in the work of our International City of Peace & Justice.

Only together are we able to realise a shared European future!

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Summary of proceedings

The conference, “The EU and its Eastern Neighbourhood”, was held over three sessions at The Hague Humanity Hub (city centre) in The Hague on Tuesday 23 November 2021. Close to a hundred people participated in all or some of the three sessions, including Ambassadors accredited to the Netherlands, representatives of international organisations, journalists, academics, civil society representatives, students and concerned citizens.

The first session addressed the topic, the EU and the process of reform and renewal in the Eastern Neighbourhood: six countries, six nuances and a giant elephant in the room.

After welcoming remarks by **Wim Jansen, Director of International Affairs at The City of The Hague**, and **Dennis Sammut, Director, LINKS Europe**, the conference heard opening comments by **Mr Didier Herbert, Head of the Representation of the European Commission in the Netherlands**, and **Ambassador Jaap Fredricks, Special Representative for Europe and the Eastern Partnership at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of The Netherlands**.

The conference was then addressed by **Ambassador Vsevolod Chentsov**, Head of the Mission of Ukraine to the European Union.

Ambassador Chentsov and Dennis Sammut were then joined by **Dr Antoaneta Dimitrova, Professor of Comparative Governance at Leiden University**, and **Harry Hummel, Senior Policy Advisor at the Netherlands Helsinki Committee**, in a panel discussion on the theme “The EU and the process of reform and renewal in the Eastern Neighbourhood: six countries, six nuances and a giant elephant in the room”.

Didier Herbert, Head of the Representation of the European Commission in the Netherlands

The Head of the Representation of the European Commission in the Netherlands, Mr Didier Herbert, said in his opening remarks that the work that the European Union does with its neighbours is something that needs constant maintenance, that can always benefit from improvements and that needs to be constantly checked for its pertinence and relevance.

Internally, the European Union has identified two immediate challenges – the reforms needed for a double transition in the fields of sustainability and renewal. The process has to be implemented whilst still taking into account Europe's values, and it is important that as part of the process the EU emerges more resilient.

Very similar challenges face the Eastern Partnership EaP countries, with whom the EU has a joint ambition for closer co-operation. The approach is one based on differentiation, ownership and flexibility and the objective is post-covid recovery, resilience, and reform.

The work of the Eastern Partnership has two pillars: Investment and governance.

The Investment plan is an ambitious strategy with dedicated country flagships and with numerical targets: improving the air quality in 300 cities across the Eastern Partnership region; providing high speed internet for 80% of households; and investing in 20% of small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the regions. The second pillar is governance and this also requires all sides to act responsibly, identify shared values and show commitment to them.

Covid has tested our collective resilience, but we are emerging out of it stronger. EU solidarity with the Eastern Neighbourhood countries has been tangible. Team Europe (the EU institutions and the member states) have provided 10 million vaccines to the EaP countries – this is one third of all vaccines that have been administered so far. The EaP countries are also in the process of joining the EU digital vaccine certificate.

Didier Herbert concluded his remarks with two observations. He said that in Belarus we are seeing an orchestrated migration crisis. However, we continue to stand by the people of Belarus.

More generally, as regards the Eastern Partnership, “we know our objectives, our priorities and we have an agenda. However, we also need to ask where do we go from here? What do the citizens want”. The speaker said that the discussion in this conference fits very well into answering this question and contributes to the Conference on the Future of Europe process, and he wished the conference success in its deliberations.

Ambassador Jaap Frederiks, The Netherlands Special Representative for Europe and the Eastern Partnership

The conference was addressed online by Ambassador Jaap Frederiks, the Netherlands special representative to Europe and the Eastern Partnership. He said that the forthcoming Eastern Partnership Summit's main message should be political. "It should underline first and foremost the closeness of our mutual ties, and the EU's solidarity and support to our Eastern Partners in the face of the many domestic and external challenges that they are experiencing". Ambassador Frederiks emphasised that the partnership is built on common values. "Respecting these values is a pre-condition for EU support, and trampling on these values will inevitably have consequences for receiving EU financial assistance, or even for the relationship in a wider sense, as is currently the case with Belarus."

Ambassador Frederiks said that the EU recognises that the Eastern Partnership is an area of sources of instability, which are often exacerbated or made worse by Russia. "It is in our interest as an EU to invest in stability on our eastern borders. Investing in strengthening democratic institutions, the rule of law, and media freedom will make our Eastern partners more resilient, also in the face of external threats", he said. On the other hand, the Eastern neighbours need themselves to continue to invest in their reform agenda, although we recognise that this takes time and that powerful vested interests remain major obstacles, he added.

Ambassador Frederiks positively assessed the work of the Eastern Partnership to date, saying that it had achieved much, and that the current architecture providing for a multilateral as well as tailor-made bilateral tracks has served us well, but he acknowledged that there was an ongoing debate centring around differentiation versus inclusiveness that was also likely to be part of the Summit's discussion. Ambassador Frederiks said that a discussion on possible membership, particularly as regards the Associated trio countries was untimely and unhelpful. "None of the three countries will in the foreseeable future qualify for EU membership and focusing on the distant future may result in us taking our eye off the ball in terms of what needs to be done in the immediate future regarding the implementation of each partner's reform agenda. It will also downplay the significance of our current agreements and the scope they offer for closer political association and further integration in the European single market." Jaap Frederiks, however, said that that does not mean that there could not be further sectoral co-operation, as long as the principle that this would also be open to all the other EaP countries was recognised. "We look forward to a successful summit that will reflect the geopolitical significance of our partnership and will inspire us to continue our co-operation", Ambassador Frederiks concluded.

Ambassador Vsevolod Chentsov, Head of the Ukrainian Mission to the European Union

Ambassador Vsevolod Chentsov, The Head of the Mission of Ukraine to the European Union, was the keynote speaker at the session. He outlined some of the history of the establishment of the Eastern Partnership, and said that the process was flawed from the start because it considered countries like Ukraine as neighbours rather than potential members of the family. “Historically, culturally and economically, we considered ourselves part of the European family. There was also an approach of ‘a common neighbourhood’, which was not always understandable.”

“At the time this was a ‘take it or leave it’ situation, since all the funding was linked to this new neighbourhood framework, and so there was no choice. And so we started to work on a new ‘enhanced agreement’, which initially had a very low ambition. But we managed to push to change this into an Association Agreement, with a strong trade part which later became DCFTA.” Chentsov said that the enhanced Association Agreement that came out “was the result of our struggle”, and afterwards it became a blueprint that could be offered to others. The same situation happened with the visa dialogue, which led to a visa liberalisation agreement. “Back in 2008 and 2009 visa free dialogue was an expression that was forbidden in discussions with the EU – we could not even talk about or mention the term.”

These two instruments are now functioning and are working. “We had to fight for every idea”, the Ambassador said, adding that what has been achieved so far is still not enough.

“Russia’s war against Ukraine’s is a direct consequence of Ukraine’s European choice. Therefore, I agree we need to consider the relationship in geopolitical terms. It is not about reforms, or building institutional capacity or funding for these issues, but it is about geopolitical considerations”.

Ambassador Chentsov said that Russia considers the EU’s relations with the Eastern Neighbourhood from a geopolitical perspective, even if the EU doesn’t. He said that he agreed that every discussion should be timely and well prepared. He added that the current question to be considered was whether to focus just on the implementation of the Association Agreements, or whether to fix if not the final goal, something in between. The Ambassador added that the intermediate goal for Ukraine and the other trio countries, which would be digestible for the EU in the current conditions, it is to join the EU internal market. “There is a mutual interest now that this happens. Our countries in terms of energy, agriculture and digital transformation are not a liability, but an asset for the EU. This is a gamechanger which should lead to the EU to consider us as part of the family rather than simply neighbours, even for economic reasons. I wish that a political decision in Brussels to open up the prospect for membership, but if it is not possible, let’s go step by step

**Professor Dr Antoaneta
Dimitrova, Professor
of Comparative
Governance, Leiden
University**

with a serious, mutually beneficial, upgrade in economic relations. We see progress in this in the draft declaration.”

“What the trio countries want is more serious – mutually economically beneficial steps”, the Ambassador added.

Ambassador Chentsov said that the current draft text of the Summit declaration recognises the specific agenda of the Trio countries, and puts emphasis on the green transition and the digital transition. He said that on both close co-operation will be mutually beneficial.

“We need a smart approach, not a free lunch! We need to be treated as a partner with a strong potential to be part of the family”, the Ambassador concluded.

Professor Dimitrova said that whilst the expert community had become very familiar with terms like ‘resilience’, ‘coherence’, ‘differentiation’, ‘pillars’, and so on, these terms have few meanings for citizens in the Eastern Partnership countries or in the EU countries themselves. The 2016 Consultative Referendum in the Netherlands on the new Association Agreement with Ukraine came as a surprise to everyone except the ones that had initiated it. The Agreement was one of the most complex the EU had ever negotiated. But what Dutch citizens were interested in was more basic – ‘will there be one army? How about corruption in Ukraine? And what will be the impact on Dutch produce if they have to compete with Ukrainian goods?’

Five years later we can see that the Association Agreement, together with the political and the geopolitical upheaval that it triggered, has had a substantial impact. It was only on the streets of Kiev that thousands of people demonstrated for an Association Agreement.

Dr Dimitrova said that the agreement really changed the trade orientation of Ukraine, including with the Netherlands. Traditionally Ukraine has been a large exporter of grain with the involvement of large companies. However, in 2013-18 new sectors, such as organics products, are now increasingly important because certification has allowed Ukrainian organic goods to be sold in the EU. The EU has pushed with its support of SMEs which has opened many opportunities for them across the Ukrainian agricultural sector. Of course, some oligarchs also benefit from the new trade opportunities, and this cannot be helped.

The Association Agreement has provided a stimulus for reforms. Of course, administrative reforms may be boring, and may not sound particularly urgent, especially if you have a Russian army amassed on

your border. However, it is good to note that the European Union has been quite innovative in the way that it has been pushing for administrative reforms by creating a new architecture to enable improvement in administrative reform capacity, including by creating possibilities for highly qualified young people to join reform teams attached to key administrative sectors. There has also been an increase in the process of hiring and firing of key personnel – to the point that you can sometimes even see the job interviews on YouTube.

The governance pillar therefore remains just as important today, even in the context of relations with Russia – because reform success in Ukraine can resonate across the region and even in Russia itself.

Dr Dimitrova said that a number of specific targets in the reform process need to be highlighted and sustained: the process of reduction in energy inefficiency is something that resonates with citizens and many thousands have already benefitted from it. The EU needs to communicate better its support for Ukraine's energy sector, and particularly household needs.

The process of strengthening the rule of law needs to be maintained, and this requires transparency. The 'declaration of assets' by officials may seem a mundane and boring task, but it increases trust in government, and that is hugely important. That cannot be achieved without real reforms. Recent research has shown that people are supporting the reforms – from the registration of bases to the declaration of assets – so there is popular support for the reform process.

In conclusion, Dr Dimitrova said that the European Union must be well prepared for changing dynamics in the region.

**Harry Hummel,
Senior Policy Advisor,
Netherlands Helsinki
Committee**

Harry Hummel, Senior Policy Advisor at the Netherlands Helsinki Committee, said that Ukraine and other Eastern Partnership countries were already a part of the family – in the context of the Council of Europe and the OSCE. He argued that the standards set by these organisations should be used in defining the relationship between the EaP countries and the EU, and these standards needed to be applied comprehensively within the EU also.

The speaker explained that the main concept of the OSCE revolves around three dimensions: the military and security dimension; the environment and economic dimension; and the human dimension, which covers human rights and good governance. On all three sectors there were agreements in place on the way forward. It was unfortunate that governments were picking and choosing what to accept and implement.

Harry Hummel said that relations between the EU and Eastern Partnership countries were often described as being unequal – and this was across the board, from state level to civil society level. However, the OSCE norms and standards were the same for all, and they therefore could form the basis for solid partnerships going forward.

Discussion

After the presentations there were questions and comments from the floor, to which members of the panel responded. The following were amongst the points made:

- (1) The trio countries (Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) are Europe, they are not just neighbours; and they contribute to European security and European energy security.
- (2) The issue of degradation of norms needs to be recognised; there is still no clear agreement as to what instruments are best used to hold countries to account against their commitments.
- (3) It needs to be recognised that reforms absorb a lot of political and societal energy. They can only be sustained and succeed if they have widespread popular support.
- (4) The importance of young people in driving the reform agenda was strongly highlighted.
- (5) It was recognised that the Eastern Partnership persisted despite Russia's attempts to undermine it.
- (6) The fast intervention of the EU in support of Moldova during the recent standoff with Gazprom was highlighted as a good example of effective practice.
- (7) It is important to remember the very tangible benefits for the people in the Eastern neighbourhood from the agreements signed with the EU.
- (8) EU member states should be more active in EaP meetings and not leave it only to representatives of the institutions.

About the Conference on the Future of Europe

The Conference on the Future of Europe is a citizen-led series of debates and discussions that will enable people from across Europe to share their ideas and help shape our common future.

The Conference is the first of its kind: as a major pan-European democratic exercise, it offers a new public forum for an open, inclusive, and transparent debate with citizens around a number of key priorities and challenges.

It is part of President von der Leyen's pledge to give Europeans a greater say on what the EU does and how it works for them. All Europeans - whoever they are and wherever they are - can take part.

The Conference aims to reflect our diversity, and to bring Europe beyond its capital cities, reaching every corner of the EU, strengthening the link between Europeans and the institutions that serve them. It does so through a multitude of Conference-events and debates organised across the EU, as well as through an interactive multilingual digital platform. Young people in particular are encouraged to take part and share their ideas. European, national, regional and local authorities, as well as civil society and other organisations can also organise events to involve as many people as possible. #TheFuturesYours

For more information: www.futureu.europa.eu

About LINKS Europe

LINKS Europe is a foundation based in The Hague promoting the peaceful resolution of conflicts and a secure and prosperous Europe, in friendship and solidarity with its neighbourhood. Our work is organised around five thematic areas:

1. **Peace through dialogue and confidence-building**

LINKS Europe is a peace-building organisation. We support the quest for peace through track 2 and track 1.5 initiatives, including through dialogue and confidence-building. Our work is currently focused primarily on areas in the EU's neighbourhood, with particular emphasis on the South Caucasus.

2. **A European Union in friendship and in solidarity with its neighbourhood**

LINKS Europe firmly believes that peace and prosperity in Europe are strongly dependant on peace and prosperity in Europe's neighbourhood. It supports an extensive EU commitment to the future of neighbouring regions, including through political and economic co-operation, support for peace initiatives, and extensive people-to-people contacts. We group the EU's neighbourhood in six clusters: North Africa and the Sahel; Turkey, the Balkans and the Levant; Russia and Eastern Europe; The South Caucasus; The Gulf and Red Sea Regions; and Central Asia. Whilst each cluster has its own specificity, there are also a number of common features resulting from geographic proximity and common historical experiences and connections.

3. **A Global Europe that provides safety, security and prosperity for its people and is a force for good**

Europe's increasing ambition to become a global geopolitical player is a result of necessity. We believe this will happen despite the reluctance of some and the shortcomings of others. It is therefore important to engage with this debate and help forge the new global Europe that can provide safety, security and prosperity for its citizens and be a force for good in the world. The process of 'The Conference on the Future of Europe' provides us with an excellent focus and platform to do this in a structured way.

4. **Connectivity as a tool for peace and prosperity**

In an increasingly interdependent world, isolation is not the solution. Developing proper connectivity that works well for all concerned is one of the biggest challenges of the time. Connectivity, in areas such as transport and communications, is also a potential tool for peace, improving trade and business, facilitating people-to-people contacts, and enabling countries and communities to develop shared interests. LINKS Europe is contributing towards the debate on how connectivity can contribute to peace and prosperity.

5. **Understanding radicalisation, and developing responses to it**

Globalisation and connectivity have their negative side too. Radicalisation has shown a capacity to spread quickly, often leading to violence. Vulnerable groups – be they whole communities and tribes in the Sahel, or disenfranchised sons of migrants in the slums of Paris – are prone to fall victim of radicalisation. No religious or ethnic group is immune. White communities impacted by economic downturns are equally likely to succumb to extreme ideas, leading some to see violence as a solution. LINKS Europe works to understand the phenomena, including the connection between radicalisation and violent conflicts, and on ways of fighting back against this dangerous trend.



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