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# The EU and its Eastern Neighbourhood

## Session 2: The EU and conflicts in the Eastern Neighbourhood

The Hague, 23 November 2021

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Summary of Proceedings

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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 in The Hague on Tuesday 23 November 2021. Nearly one 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 second session addressed the topic, ‘The EU and conflicts in the Eastern Neighbourhood’.**

The Chair of the session, **Alexander Hug**, Head of Mission, Iraq, International Commission on Missing Persons; Former Principal Deputy Chief Monitor of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine, welcomed participants and introduced the topic of the session and the speakers: **Ambassador Mika-Markus Leinonen**, EU Liaison Officer to The Hague, The European External Action Service, who was invited to make opening remarks; followed by the keynote speaker **Tony van der Togt**, Senior Associate Fellow, Russia and Eastern Europe Centre, Clingendael Institute. The Chair also introduced the speakers on the panel: **HE David Solomonias**, Ambassador of Georgia to the Netherlands; **Dr Anar Ahmadov**, Associate Professor, Leiden University; and **Alexander Petrosyan**, a Brussels-based independent analyst, focusing on the South Caucasus region and Eastern Europe.

**Ambassador Mika-Markus Leinonen, EU Liaison Officer to The Hague, European External Action Service**

The European Union is not only a massive peace project; it is also an important mediation project and it has a specialised mediation unit within the European External Action Service (EEAS) which can be deployed when necessary and when possible. This does not mean that in every situation the EU needs to play a leading role – there are plenty of examples where it plays a supportive role.

A case in point is the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh where the EU supports the work of the OSCE Minsk Group. This does not mean that the EU is disengaged from the conflict resolution process on this issue. On the contrary, the EU is talking directly to both Armenia and Azerbaijan; it is sending clear messages as to what it sees that needs to be done, including through high-level meetings. This is because the European Union is committed to a peaceful and prosperous South Caucasus and wants to contribute towards this objective through a comprehensive and holistic approach.

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**Tony van der Togt, Senior Associate Fellow, Clingendael Institute**

When initially designing its neighbourhood policy, particularly the Eastern Partnership, the European Union aspired to create around it a ring of friends. This has unfortunately now turned into a ring of fire. It is primarily the result of Russian claims to create a sphere of special interest in the former Soviet space, and this has now become a major point of contention between the EU and Moscow.

When the Association Agreements were first being discussed Russia appeared at first not interested, but once the scope of the agreement with Ukraine became clearer, Russia wanted it rewritten. In Brussels there was some effort to try to accommodate Russian interests in the economic sphere, and EU-Russia-Ukraine trilateral talks were held, but in the end Moscow refused to stomach the geopolitical aspects of the agreement.

Russian action and intransigence on this and other geopolitical issues in the region has contributed to instability and the EU is increasingly being called upon to get involved in security aspects of the relationship. It is clear the EU needs to put more attention on “sharp security” – hybrid, cyber, disinformation, etc. The Eastern Partnership is not the only tool at the EU’s disposal – the Association Agreements with

Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia are also important. The EU can do more with its civilian missions, assistance with security sector reform, and so on, and its potential to do so is not exhausted.

The EU is involved in the process of resolving the conflicts in the Eastern neighbourhood from a distance. Nonetheless it is developing new tools which it may be able to deploy in the future. The EU's potential to engage with the unresolved conflicts in the EaP area is hindered by Moscow's lack of co-operation. Sensitivities to Moscow's sensibilities for a while were reflected in the reluctance of some of the member states, especially France and Germany, to move forward with further engagement. This is changing, because there is an increasing realisation that playing to Moscow's sensibilities has not helped to resolve anything.

Concluding his keynote remarks, Tony van der Togt said it was important that all the instruments in the EU foreign and security policy toolbox come together. The solution is not an EU army, but there must be a better division of labour between NATO and the EU, and a stronger European pillar in NATO. The EU should continue developing its capacity to act in an autonomous way, especially for those circumstances where the US will not be able to assist in the way it has done before. All this indicates there will be an increased role for the EU in the Eastern neighbourhood, also in the security sector.

The Eastern Partnership has proved a success story. The approach of the EU has been "my neighbours' and my partners' weaknesses are my weaknesses" and it has been working with EaP partners to increase resilience. The unresolved conflicts in the EaP area are a major hinderance to prosperity and development. However, it is obvious that Russia has been trying to preserve these conflicts as it sees them as instruments in influencing the foreign policy orientation of neighbouring states. Russia has deployed hybrid tools to achieve this aim, including annexation, occupation, imitation of peace keeping and peace making, and the creation of black holes where human rights violations occur with impunity.

Georgia highly values the EU's support in countering these Russian threats; its vocal statements of support for Georgia's

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## **HE David Solomonias, The Ambassador of Georgia to the Kingdom of the Netherlands**

territorial integrity and peaceful conflict resolution through instruments like the EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM), the Office of the EU Special Representative (EUSR), the Geneva International Discussions (GID), and the Investigative Prevention Mechanism (IPM). The logical next step is the opening of prospects for membership accession by the Associated states, since this would also be an important contribution to their resilience.

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**Dr Anar Ahmadov,  
Associate Professor,  
Leiden University**

Up to now, the EU has not been so visible in its efforts to achieve peace in the South Caucasus, especially compared to the decisive way in which Russia and Turkey acted in the immediate aftermath of the 44-day Karabakh War. The EU's involvement, especially after the 2008 Georgia-Russia War, increased, but results have been mixed

From both the perspective of the EU as well as from Armenia and Azerbaijan, more EU interaction is necessary and desirable but there remain several obstacles – foremost of which, the Russian military, political and economic interests in the region, which still see further EU involvement in the Caucasus as a threat. However, some of the obstacles are also internal – between the EU member states themselves, which often have different readings of the state of relations with Russia; and within EU member states, where, for example, in France, a pro-Armenian stance due to internal political dynamics, negatively impacts that country's ability to project itself as an honest broker.

There are, however, things the EU could be doing. It needs first to learn lessons from what has impeded it in achieving better results in this area in the past. It needs to better leverage its influence with both Russia and the countries of the region, and it needs to appreciate that the new, post-2nd Karabakh war situation has created more interphases where it could engage.

In particular, the EU can use its extensive knowledge and experience in developing regional co-operation to support soft regionalism in the South Caucasus, especially by creating multiple and multi-tiered networking opportunities. One idea that may also find favour is the creation of a regional development bank to assist in some of the economic challenges and opportunities ahead.

In all this the EU must keep in mind that it has two key assets: it offers an important alternative to the hegemonic agendas of other players; and it itself is not interested in a monopoly of engagement with the South Caucasus. However, the best approach will also need to be based on realistic assessments of the ongoing reality.

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**Alexander Petrosyan,  
Brussels-based  
independent analyst**

The South Caucasus region is still far from stability and peace. The process of EU engagement with the region will continue to encounter resistance, even in Armenia, where a pro-Russian media is constantly sowing doubts. If anything, after the 44-day war the elephant in the room has only grown in size, and another elephant, Turkey, has now appeared. Nonetheless the EU's new ambitions in the region can be achieved. Russia appears increasingly ill at ease carrying the whole burden of peacekeeping in Nagorno-Karabakh, and there are indications it may welcome some limited burden sharing in the conflict zone.

There are a number of things the EU can do, including helping to expand the capacity of the Minsk group through the creation of working groups within its framework, and through direct engagement with Nagorno-Karabakh. The upcoming EU-Armenia-Azerbaijan meeting on the margins of the forthcoming EaP summit should lead to the development of a new trilateral platform. The EU's support for Armenia, including support for the economic resilience of its southern region has been widely welcome and reduces the danger of increased dependence on Russia. The EU needs to ensure reasonable balance between the competing East-West, North-South transport and connectivity projects. Finally, by supporting civil society in both Armenia and Azerbaijan, the EU can help apply the democratic peace theory to the South Caucasus region.

It is, however, essential to keep in mind that without focusing on the major issues, the achievements of minor milestones will be fragile, and not sustainable.

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## Discussion

There followed a discussion during which members of the audience engaged with the panellists on a number of topics, ranging from the human rights situation in some of the Eastern Partnership countries, and how to respond to human rights abuses whilst remaining engaged, to issues related to differentiation in the EU's approach to the Eastern Partnership countries.

Speakers were in favour of more EU engagement in resolving conflicts in the Eastern neighbourhood, whilst cautioning about the need for the approaches to be long term and realistic. The EU needs to use better its soft power, including in supporting regional co-operation and regional networking. Participants acknowledged the limitations of EU leverage in the region, and there were concerns that things were getting even worse. There was recognition that a lot of work and resources had been invested by the EU in the past but also concerns about their effectiveness, as well as the need for the EU to learn from its own experiences – and those of others – in the region.

Several participants raised concerns about the deteriorating situation in Bosnia Herzegovina where they felt the EU's credibility was currently on the line. Any major failure there, where the EU is seen to have invested much more than in regions such as the South Caucasus, will have very serious consequences for the EU's credibility in Eastern Partnership region. There were also concerns that in terms of the present situation in Belarus, the EU was looking increasingly impotent as a player. As one speaker put it, "If you want to talk like a geopolitical actor, you have to walk like one".

### **Panellists and participants also made a number of important suggestions and recommendations**

(a) EU's engagement with the conflicts in the South Caucasus and other parts of the EaP has been very often episodic, reacting to events and providing short-term responses to them. This way of doing things is unlikely to change in the short term which is why it is necessary that the EU develops in parallel to this approach, a longer-term approach where a wide angle view is adopted, and conflicts which have many commonalities are approached more holistically. This could be part of a wider process of reviving the OSCE, which several speakers felt was becoming an increasingly moribund organisation.



(b) The EU needed to draw lessons from the work of the Monitoring Mission in Ukraine, and from the EU's own engagement on the economic level in the process of conflict resolution in the Moldova-Transnistria conflict.

(c) Several participants saw a need for the Russian presence in Karabakh, subsequent to the 10 November ceasefire declaration, to transform quickly into an international presence and saw the EU as the best possible actor to lead this process. An opportunity may arise as the provisions of the declaration give the Russian deployment a term of five years.

(d) Most participants were of the view that the EU needed to remain engaged even where partners fell short of desired norms and standards. It was mentioned repeatedly that any vacuum that the EU left was likely to be filled by others including Russia, but also increasingly China and Turkey.

(e) Participants broadly saw track 1.5 and track 2 activities in support of peace processes as being important, although some disappointment was expressed at the role of participants from previous such actions during the second Karabakh War. It was also noted that people from Abkhazia and South Ossetia were benefitting from many of the provisions of the EU-Georgia association agreement despite obstacles by the de facto authorities and their Russian protectors and this was important for future peace and reconciliation.

# 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. #TheFutureIsYours

For more information: [www.futureu.europa.eu](http://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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