

The Regional Security situation in advance of Latvia's EU Presidency

INTRODUCTION

Pleasure to be invited to speak at the CEU Centre for EU Enlargement Studies.

Latvia's 1st Presidency of the Council of the EU begins in just over 3 months. Every presidency deals with a combination of the planned and the unpredictable. Nobody at the beginning of this year was predicting that Russia was going to invade the territory of Hungary's neighbour, Ukraine. This presented the Greek presidency with the organisational task of arranging emergency meetings to ensure a speedy reaction by EU member states. Italy has continued to handle this particular foreign policy crisis in an efficient manner by ensuring a common approach at a time of crucial EU institutional changes.

On the predictable side, there are two major Common Foreign and Security Policy events that have already been earmarked during Latvia's Presidency. The first is the Eastern Partnership Summit in May, to be followed in June by a European Council that will address strategic issues relating to the Common Security and Defence Policy.

I want to use this opportunity today to address EU Foreign and Security Policy issues and so leave aside some of the other important priorities that we will address during our presidency. They relate to growth and competitiveness as well as the digital potential of the economy.

Just as our EU Presidency will face the planned and the unpredictable, we will also be guided by other factors. For example, we will be guided by the progress and success of the current Italy. This in turn will become more apparent once we know the outcome of the October and December European Councils. Our presidency will have to take on board the mandates given by these European Councils. Another factor which will influence our presidency is the work programme of the New Commission. We can already see from the nominated Commissioners that the make up of the Commission has changed. New personalities will no doubt leave their mark on policy. Here I would like to mention in particular that the appointment of Prime Minister Tusk of Poland as the new President of the Council was a noticeable success for the region and in particular the work of the Visegrad Four.

In addressing the regional security situation, I will focus on 3 issues. They all have implications for security:

- The European Neighbourhood policy, in particular the Eastern Partnership;
- The importance of the Central Asian region to the EU;
- Relations with Russia;

So let's take them one by one.

European Neighbourhood Policy / Eastern Partnership

Perhaps we should begin by noting that the newly nominated President of the Commission has decided to amalgamate the Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement issues into one Commission portfolio, with Austrian Johannes Hahn being offered the responsibility to take charge for the next years. Juncker wrote in his letter to Hahn as follows:

„The focus of your work should be on strengthening the EU's political and economic ties with its Southern and Eastern neighbourhood. This will require working in close cooperation with many

other Commissioners and with authorities and stakeholders at national, European and international level”.

Latvia's view is that both regional dimensions of the European Neighbourhood policy are equally important and should be developed in a balanced way. We consider it desirable that countries in Europe's neighbourhood should embrace Europe's values and be stable, secure and economically developed.

Migration policy has been very much in the focus of the Italian Presidency in view of the tragedies with loss of life that regularly occur in the Mediterranean Sea as refugees from Europe's Southern neighbourhood try to reach the security of our shores. Given that my own parents were refugees from Latvia during the war, I can personally understand the plight of those seeking a more secure and stable life in Europe.

Instability rages to the south, with anarchy of crises spreading from North Africa to the Middle East. Events surrounding the Arab Spring during recent years have had a big impact on EU policy. Likewise developments in Syria and now once again Iraq are high on the foreign policy agenda of EU Governments, with close attention also being paid to Egypt and Libya. This list shows how important countries on Europe's Southern rim are to our security and stability.

In view of the fact that at the Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius last November the decision was taken to hold the 4th Eastern Partnership Summit meeting during Latvia's Presidency in Riga, the focus on the Eastern Partnership was a fait accompli for our Presidency. The Eastern Partnership agenda for our Presidency is already being actively discussed with our EU partners. It relates to both the ratification of Association Agreements as well as specific questions covering visa liberalisation.

Latvia considers that our ongoing support for the European aspirations of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia is essential. Ratification and entry into force of the Association agreements with these 3 countries is a way in which the EU can reinforce the reforms that these neighbours are carrying out. We consider that by implementing some of the provisions of the Association Agreements prior to their full entry into force, an important opportunity for reviewing progress at May's Summit would arise.

There are also opportunities for reviewing the EU relations with those Eastern Partners that have decided not to pursue closer relations with us. We should look at ways in which the EU's relations with Armenia can proceed given Armenia's decision to join the Eurasian Union. We could also take another look at the possibility of returning to the talks on an Association agreement with Azerbaijan. The re-admission agreements and the easing of visa requirements with both Armenia and Azerbaijan could be reviewed next May. There is a chance to finish the talks with Belarus on re-admission agreements and the easing of visa requirements by the Riga Summit in May.

So we can see that the Summit will provide the opportunity to evaluate the progress achieved in relations between the EU and Partners since the last Summit in Vilnius and identify a new strategic guidance on further steps to be taken. Our aim will be to reform and give new impetus to the Eastern Partnership. The date for the Riga Eastern Partnership Summit has been fixed for 21st and 22nd May next year. Riga will also host a number of important side events including a Business Forum, Media Freedoms Conference and Civil Society Conference. We hope for some active participation by our Hungarian partners, including the CEU.

Central Asia

Given the region's geostrategic importance, Latvia has defined Central Asia as a priority for its Presidency. We see EU interests as relating to regional security in the post 2014 scenario given the potential risk of problems in Afghanistan spilling over to the rest of the region. At the same time it has to be acknowledged that Central Asia offers a huge economic potential, including as an energy rich region that can help to diversify energy supplies.

The increasing importance of the region is also reflected by the fact that the EU is currently addressing the following questions:

Has the Ukraine crisis led to significant shifts in the Central Asian countries' policies and attitudes towards Russia? If so, what are the consequences for the EU?

What further steps should the EU undertake for defusing tensions and promoting cooperation in the energy/water field in Central Asia

What should the EU pursue as priorities for the next high level meetings with the Central Asian region?

The EU has consolidated its presence in the region through the EU-Central Asia Strategy, the EU development assistance programmes for CA and diplomatic representations. These efforts have been appreciated by the CA countries. However, the CA partners wish to receive more attention and engagement from the EU side. Latvia is willing to devote its effort to address their expectations.

Latvia already has a well-established contact network in CA countries with expertise gained through bilateral Embassies in Astana and Tashkent, and from representing the EU Presidency in Uzbekistan. Our CA partners have acknowledged the positive cooperation with Latvia in the sharing of our reform and transition experience.

The framework for our Presidency's activities will be the EU-CA Strategy and the EU development assistance programs for CA. We will focus on the following issues:

1. stepping up EU visibility in the CA region;
2. implementing the current EU-CA Strategy;
3. reviewing the EU-CA Strategy in 2015.

Let me say a few words on each of these.

1. Stepping up EU visibility in Central Asia

The EU has raised its profile substantially in CA with high-level events, four EU Delegations being set up in the region and a fully-fledged Delegation to be opened in Turkmenistan. The EU Special Envoy for CA, a good Hungarian colleague Janos Herman, has played a crucial role in assuring high-level contacts and maintaining regional dialogue with the CA countries. His current mandate expires next month and should be renewed as soon as possible. Diplomatic representations of the EU Member States and the EU delegations should pool resources and better coordinate their activities to reinforce the EU policy in CA.

The Latvian Presidency will seek to facilitate and support efforts in strengthening EU contacts and visibility in the region. Latvia will continue to organise bilateral high-level

visits to the region, framed in the context of the EU-CA Strategy, EU-CA cooperation platforms and assistance programmes covering education, rule of law, energy and water.

2. Implementing the current EU-CA Strategy

There is a need for the EU's engagement in the larger CA region, looking beyond the current borders. We need a comprehensive approach, enhancing cross-border ties in border management, education exchanges, and the strengthening of economic and commercial ties. In promoting the EU-CA agenda, our Presidency will focus on three key areas:

- 1) Security;
- 2) Education;
- 3) Sustainable development

3. Reviewing the EU-CA Strategy in 2015

The EU has regularly reviewed the EU-CA Strategy through its implementation reports, which reflect the changed realities, such as the shifting stability of Afghanistan and the need to focus on security issues. This forward-looking and flexible approach should be maintained.

The Trio Presidency Programme (July 2014 - December 2015) schedules a review of Strategy in early 2015. The regular updating of the Strategy is one of the preconditions for our cooperation agenda remaining dynamic. It will be an important signal to the CA countries and will reinforce the EU aim of remaining engaged in the region.

The review of Strategy will provide the impetus for Member States' to hold an in-depth discussion on the CA. There are significant cross-regional processes to be taken into account. We shall evaluate the EU-CA relations in the context of cross-regional developments, developments within-the-region, and in the context of EU current policies and activities.

Relations with Russia

I know that you will be holding a conference on the role of Central Europe in EU- Russia relations later this week and I am pleased that the Director of Latvia's Institute of Foreign Affairs, Andris Sprūds, will be participating. The title of the conference refers to "turbulent times".

I think it is almost an understatement to say that we are in "turbulent times" in our relations with Russia. The relations have hit an all time low following Russia's invasion, occupation and annexation of Crimea earlier this year, the subsequent attack on Eastern Ukraine and the shooting down of the Malaysian Airline MH17 by Russian controlled terrorists.

Russia is at this moment conducting a war on three fronts. Military actions are taking place on the sovereign territory of Ukraine, Hungary's neighbour. A trade war is taking place with economic repercussions from sanctions hitting the Russian economy where it hurts and counter sanctions by Russia affecting many EU countries. Finally there is the continuation of a massive war of propaganda. I say "continuation", because Latvia and the other Baltic countries have been familiar with the propaganda war conducted against us by Russia during the last twenty years or so. The information war against Latvia has been well documented in books by the Finnish journalist Juka Rislaki.

An example of the propaganda campaign was the recent speech in Riga by Konstantin Dolgov, Special Representative of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs for Human Rights. The speech was made at the Regional Conference of Russian Compatriots of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia. He accused the Baltic states of fostering neo-Nazism, discriminating against ethnic Russians and the Russian language, and gross violations of human rights. The West, he said, had instigated these abuses. These allegations are of course both unfounded and wildly exaggerated. And he went on to say the following:

The defense of the rights and lawful interests of our compatriots abroad is one of the priority fields of activity of the Foreign Ministry of the Russian Federation — on which we work actively and proactively.

The proactive work was clear for all to see when, by means of a hybrid war, Russia took over Crimea using the false pretext of protecting compatriots.

For the record, let me also give a brief quote from Latvia's response.

„Latvia's a part of the free, democratic world, and it is proud that its residents, just like residents of all other EU member states enjoy all fundamental rights and freedoms. We are confident that the overwhelming majority of people in Latvia are well aware of this and are therefore not yielding to these manipulations.”

There are other actions by Russia that are of concern. For example, the abduction of an Estonian border guard from Estonia's territory 2 days after the visit of President Obama to Tallinn at the start of the month. Russia asked Lithuania to extradite an estimated 1,500 citizens who allegedly failed to complete their military service in the final years of the Soviet Union. We have witnessed increasing incursions into the air and sea space of neighbouring Baltic and other countries by Russia's air and naval forces, as well as offensive military exercises close to the EU and NATO's border which in recent years have included a scenario using nuclear weapons.

Russia's actions in Georgia and Ukraine have shown that Russia is an aggressive revisionist power bent on overturning the post Cold War order and with the means to pursue its objectives. Russia now has the capability to field not just elite “little green men” that seized Crimea, but also large regular units that are both well organized and equipped.

So regrettably this year we are facing a completely new and dangerous security situation which has profound implications for stability in Europe. The recent NATO Summit in Cardiff made substantial decisions to address the challenges, which involve fundamental steps to be taken by all Allies in the months and years ahead.

Although Russia may view developments in regions covered by the Eastern Partnership and Central Asia in terms of geopolitics, our policy must remain one of allowing countries in these regions to determine their own fate without the risk of their sovereignty and territorial integrity being challenged.

In light of the changed situation it will be important for the EU to maintain a common approach towards Russia in spite of the refined attempts at divide and rule. The policy on sanctions is working and the coordination and tailoring of the policy with the USA shows how effective EU-US relations can be in practice. Given Russia's actions this year it is doubtful that there will be

a return to “business as usual” in the near future. But at the same time, every effort should be maintained to continue with dialogue and endeavours to seek diplomatic solutions to the current crisis caused by Russia.

Concluding remarks

Colleagues, ladies and gentlemen!

Given that we are meeting here in the Centre for EU Enlargement, let me make a few remarks about the enlargement policy, which of course also affects security and stability in the region. Even though Commission President Juncker has stated that no enlargement is likely during the next 5 year term of the Commission, even though there will not be a Commissioner to deal solely with enlargement, progress towards further enlargement must proceed. Completing Europe’s unfinished business in the Western Balkans region will take precedence over the symptom known as “enlargement fatigue”.

Latvia’s Presidency is determined to advance the enlargement agenda building on the work done during the Italian Presidency. We will pursue the enlargement policy based on principles of conditionality and the individual approach, with each country being assessed on its own merits. We will strive to advance the European perspective of Western Balkan countries. We also consider that efforts are necessary to regain the momentum in the accession negotiations with Turkey.

The European Neighbourhood Policy, Central Asia, relations with Russia and the EU enlargement policy all have implications for regional security.

Latvia has described one of the strategic priorities for its EU Presidency as reinforcing the role of the European Union in the global arena. In addressing questions the above issues, I think the scope for increasing the EU role as a global actor is apparent. Latvia’s Presidency from 1st January 2015 will endeavour to contribute to this aim.

Thanks – questions.