

Seminar: Finland and the Netherlands – a hundred years of cooperation

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Finland in the EU and cooperation with the Netherlands

First, let me thank Ambassador Viinikka for hosting this seminar to mark the hundred years of cooperation between Finland and the Netherlands. Throughout the history, the Netherlands has always been a very close and like-minded partner for Finland, easy to cooperate with. Being part of the EU means that we work together on a daily basis at all levels and in different fields. We have also learnt a lot from your country as a more senior member in the EU.

When Finland joined the EU more than 20 years ago, in 1995, we regarded the Benelux countries as a model. They were, and still are, member states who have fully integrated the idea of Europe, and what European integration really means. One has to admit that there is a difference between the founding members and those who have joined the process later.

Looking around the EU table, we realize that most of the time our two countries have similar views, like now on the EMU but also in other policy fields: we both are net contributors underlining the importance of better spending; for us implementation of already agreed decisions is more relevant than setting new targets, better regulation is key to cutting the administrative burden. Our priority is an effective internal market with services as well as a digital dimension.

The euro crisis put our EU policy under strain and contributed to growing scepticism. Several explanations can be offered: 1) the Finnish society is profoundly rules-based, and we expect from our partners in the EU the same behaviour – jointly taken decisions should be implemented; 2) In the beginning of the 1990s, Finland went through a very severe economic recession, – commonly called “the Great Depression”, – and had to carry out very harsh reforms with no help from the outside. Our people were critical accusing the government for paying those who were not following the rules.

Also the crisis in the Eurozone hit Finland later than the others. In 2015, our GDP was still about 7 % below the high it had reached at the end of 2007, just before the global financial crisis. Today, the economy is growing by 2.4 % and the upswing is expected to continue in the coming years. It is really important to underline that the crisis in the Eurozone is overcome. The measures taken – solidarity extended – have been worthwhile.

Finland, the Netherlands and perhaps some other member states have felt that they have been quite safe with Germany defending the same principles. At the same time, we need to acknowledge that things may change with a new Franco-German initiative. We need to be prepared for some movement. However, there are hardly any fundamental changes to be foreseen, since the EU Treaty

sets limits to how far it is possible to go in the deepening of the EMU. Now Finland and the Netherlands together with some other northern smaller and mid-sized like-minded member states have presented their joint views and values in the discussion on the architecture of the EMU.

Finland and the Netherlands have close cooperation also in other fields. Both are export-led economies and committed to free trade and the rules-based multilateral system. The only way to defend our interests is through the EU, negotiating trade agreements and taking action against unfair trade practices and even trade wars.

It is clear that migration will stay on the agenda and we should have a common asylum policy, including returns. In 2015, Finland became one of the main destinations of asylum seekers: 32,500 new applicants during that year only. We are among the very rare countries who have fully implemented the council decisions on relocation and resettlement. The frontline countries should not be left alone to carry the burden. All member states should do their share.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We are concerned about the weakened international role of the EU. If the US continues to walk away from multilateral arrangements and also leave a vacuum in different parts of the world, the EU should step up its efforts. The EU can't replace the American influence but we should try to build alliances also with other countries to defend the international order. The leadership of Berlin and Paris would be of utmost importance.

Finland and the Netherlands share the same views regarding global responsibility, development cooperation, and human rights, including the rights of girls and women. Of equal importance is the direction in which the UN System – broadly understood – will evolve in the next few years. We see growing pressure to change the substance of its work in practically all fields. China's rise is taking a concrete form in the alternative vision of the world that it has begun to promote throughout the UN System. It is also taking shape through China capturing key positions of influence related to economic and administrative decision-making inside UN structures – some of which the West has voluntarily vacated.

This is a challenge that we have not faced since the 1980s. The tools that were available to us then are no longer sufficient. We need to find new ways to convince the majority of the governments in the world that our vision is superior. We need to find common ground, platforms for joint action, new avenues for communication and collaboration. We also need to stay committed to international institutions and uphold the positive legacies we have felt build in them over the decades. I believe countries like the Netherlands and Finland are well placed to play a key role in this. Our visions of the world are very similar.

The Dutch membership in the UN Security Council, and especially the periods when you hold the Presidency of the Council, offer opportunities to take important themes forward. We very much appreciate the fact that you have chosen peacekeeping as the subject for the open discussion on March 28th. The needs for peacekeeping are greater than ever – especially when it comes to finding new solutions to the protection of civilians, and the protection of the peace-keepers themselves.

Another topical issue in this context, and also more broadly, is eliminating sexual exploitation and abuse.

This shows that today, the commitment of our two countries to upholding and improving the rules-based international order remains as strong as ever. We both have been supporting the Commission taking action to protect the rule of law in Europe. One needs to acknowledge that it was not foreseen that the rule of law would be an issue within the EU. Is there perhaps something missing in screening of the candidates? Respecting the principles of the rule of law is a fundamental question also in the eyes of the citizens. No weakening of the European values should be tolerated; otherwise we lose credibility on the international scene and in relations with third countries.

I'd like to stress that Finland has always been promoting EU enlargement while underlining the need to fulfil the criteria. We have our commitment to the Western Balkans. Keeping Turkey also on the path of enlargement would, in our view, serve the EU's interests. However, Turkey seems to be taking steps back from European norms. We don't want to mix up enlargement and neighbourhood policies. We have other means to support our Eastern Partners and to enhance stability in our direct vicinity. Right now, there is no real debate about the EU's enlargement in Finland. However, according to a survey by Eurobarometer, only 27 % of Finns are now in favour of future enlargement. The result can partly be explained by the earlier difficulties in the Eurozone.

Security was one of the key motives for the Finnish people to join the EU, perhaps the main reason. Finland has taken seriously the EU as a security provider and regards the EU as a security community. We have been pushing for the implementation of the defence provisions in the Lisbon Treaty, also the mutual security guarantee. And now the changed security situation in Europe, Brexit and the election of Donald Trump have served as a wakeup call in many other member states: the EU should do more for its own security. We are happy that EU is moving forward and engaging in Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO). In particular, we welcome the Dutch initiative on military mobility.

Unlike the Netherlands, Finland is not a member of NATO – but we uphold the possibility of joining the Alliance. According to recent surveys, only about 20 % of Finns are in favour of NATO membership. However, the public opinion is more supportive of the close cooperation between NATO, Finland and Sweden (29+2). This also goes for deepening EU-NATO cooperation.

In EU-Russia relations we don't expect any, at least positive, changes in the years to come. The sanctions could be rolled back only when the Minsk agreement is fully implemented. The presidential elections in Russia were not surprising. The murder attempt in Salisbury, in which a nerve agent was applied, is a very serious matter. We agree with the UK's assessment that Russia is highly likely responsible for the attack, and support fully the measures taken by the UK.

We have experienced growing tension in the Baltic Sea region. The Dutch military contribution to the security of the Baltic States is enhancing the overall security in the region.

Finland presently holds the presidency of the Arctic Council. Here again, we try to strengthen the EU's role and involvement in the Arctic where we can already witness Russia and also China increasing their influence.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The international role and influence are the key questions when discussing the future. The EU should speak with one voice. We regret that it has become more difficult to reach a common view among member states, e.g. in addressing human rights situations. We need to introduce more flexibility in our decision making if we want to be able to react and take more often the lead in the world. Different speeds may be required if all member states are not willing to move forward at the same time. Cooperation should always be open for others to join. It is important that all forms of cooperation, multi-speed or not, should take place within the institutional framework, not outside.

I believe that Finland and the Netherlands can cooperate even more closely in the EU in the coming years. There is a clear demand for member states which are actively committed to the future of the EU and can mobilize other partners. Finland will hold the EU Presidency during the latter part of 2019. It will be the third time for us. We remember and try to follow the example of the very successful Dutch presidency in 2016: ambition, courage, leadership and results.

It is evident that no member state would have a say in the world without the EU. We need to keep the EU strong. Even if some see room for criticism, Finns, like the Dutch, are pragmatic and sensible. 53 % of Finns trust the EU, more than those who say that they tend not to trust (38 %). I think this is good enough.

Thank you for your attention.