The three major challenges in Europe’s neighbourhood – my proposals how best to meet them

In this essay, I explain what - in my opinion - are the three major challenges in Europe’s neighbourhood, and why. Also, I will explain what my proposals are to meet these challenges. I have chosen two obvious challenges in Europe’s neighbourhood: first, the civil war in Syria and the resulting migration crisis, and secondly the tensions between the situation in Ukraine and the tensions between the European Union (EU) and Russia as a result of this. The third challenge I would like to highlight is less obvious: I focus on the opportunity for Europe to draw strength from increased cooperation with neighbouring Arab countries which are relatively stable, as Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, and Jordan. The challenge here is that strengthening relations with these countries is forgotten due to the overwhelming political attention for the countries in crisis.

As indicated, the first major challenge I would like to touch on is the civil war in Syria, which has led to the massive refugee flows that started in 2015. The Arab Spring of 2011, which was a hopeful movement for more democracy in the Arab region bordering Europe, turned into social unrest in many countries. The wars in Syria and Libya are the most extreme example. Since 2011, in Syria a civil war has developed between dictator Assad, who gets support from Russia and Iran, the Syrian opposition and together with the Kurds (supported by the United States), and Islamic State. As a result, millions of Syrians fled across the Syrian border into neighbouring Arab countries and to Europe. Most of them are given shelter in the region, but many fled to Europe via the illegal sea route from Turkey to Greece. In 2015 this led to social unrest in the EU member states which accepted many of the refugees. Citizens of European member states are worried that the influx of refugees affects the welfare state and that refugees do not integrate well and do not adapt to the standards and values of the European society. There is also a fear that there are terrorists among these refugees, fuelled by the Paris attacks of November 13, 2015 and the attacks in Brussels on March 22, 2016.

Since early 2016, the EU has tried with all its might to limit the influx of refugees from the illegal route from Turkey to Greece. When the Netherlands took over the EU presidency in January, she promised that a solution would be found in 8 weeks’ time. On March 18, 2016, Donald Tusk, the chair of the European Council, announced that the EU and Turkey reached an agreement on the return of refugees from Greece to Turkey. This is a very important step, but in the end this agreement is just a medicine to treat only the symptoms of a deeper lying illness which affects Europe’s neighbourhood: the civil war in Syria. It is key that Europe sets a clear and dedicated policy that contributes to peace, security and stability in Syria. Europe should play a clear role in the peace talks between Assad and the opposition in Geneva, under the supervision of UN special envoy Staffan de Mistura. The announcement by the Russian president Vladimir Putin on 14 March that Russia will withdraw some of its military forces out of Syria is an opportunity for the European Union to use its diplomatic power for a long-term solution to Syria. On moments such as these, Europe can show to the world and its citizens that it is in fact able to design and pursue a vigorous foreign policy, not only when there is an acute emergency with domestic implications such as the illegal refugee route across the Aegean see, but also proactively to promote stability across its borders. Of all the big regional players outside the Arab region, the European Union has the most to lose from a
continuous crisis in Syria in terms of its effects on the European society. Therefore, Europe also has the most to gain from peace in Syria. On 23 March, the High Commissioner of the EU for Foreign policy, Federica Mogherini, visited the Syrian peace negotiation round in Geneva, and issued a joint statement with UN Special Convoy De Mistura. Mogherini and De Mistura together stressed that a political transition in Syria is a prerequisite to win the war on terrorism. I appreciate that Mogherini’s visibility at these peace talks. I also appreciate that the European Union is the biggest donor of humanitarian aid after the cease-fire in Syria. But now the next step should be that the EU takes initiatives which help these peace talks forward. Of course, the peace talks should be Syria-led and Syria-owned, but Europe could use the momentum of the migration accord with Turkey as a legitimization for a larger role. Since there is a great risk that Turkey can frustrate the cease-fire and peace talks with military interventions against the Curds, the EU should focus on preventing the Turkish government from doing this. Turkey has had a great success in the migration accord by achieving a continuation of the accession negotiations. The benefit of this for the EU is that it is in a position to claim alignment of the Turkish government with the European Syria policy. This is my proposal for the challenge in Syria.

The second challenge for Europe is the situation in the Ukraine. In recent months Russia has mainly focused its foreign and military policy efforts on Syria. Now Putin has announced that Russia withdraws from Syria, the chances increase that Russia points its arrows back to the Ukraine. This is a serious challenge for Europe, because for the first time since the Cold War we see that both NATO and Russia step up military forces along the border of the European Union with Russia. At the beginning of February 2016 a NATO summit took place, where it was decided that NATO will strengthen its ‘forward presence’ in NATO member countries bordering Russia. This means that there will always be a military force of 3,000-5,000 soldiers in Eastern Europe. America recently decided to increase its defence spending in Europe from 789 million dollars to 3.4 billion dollars. This demonstration of military hardening is a necessary signal to Russia that European NATO members and the United States stand together, but it is in the public interest if Europe also shows its soft power. With this definition of soft power, I mean the attractiveness of the EU as a region in which democracy and respect for human rights are accompanied by economic growth. The idea is that neighbouring countries want to make part of this European value system because they see that this brings prosperity and respect from the international community. It is this soft power which Europe can be proud of since the start of the European Community in 1967, and it should be properly utilized in these times.

The challenge for Europe as a soft power is to support Ukraine to grow as a liberal democracy, and to not let this nation sink into increasing corruption. In this political transition, the position of Russian minorities must be respected, and it should give way to a vital democracy with space for all population groups. This is important because Russia is keen to use a deteriorating government system and rule of law in the former Soviet countries as a legitimization to boost its troops along their borders and invade these countries. Therefore, it is key that the European Union concludes an association agreement with Ukraine: if the EU shows its commitment to this country, this will represent a major incentive for democratic forces in the country to push through democratic reforms. On April 7 2016, the Netherlands will hold a referendum on the Association Agreement of the EU with Ukraine. A no vote will put the European Union in a very difficult position. Waning support for Ukraine will strengthen Russia’s belief that there are opportunities to increase its
influence in that country, but also in EU member states such as Bulgaria, Poland and the Baltic states. The strength of the European project is founded precisely in the combination of a strong economy, a social welfare state and a liberal democracy based on the rule of law. This is what binds European countries. If the European Union does not give the right support to neighbouring countries to also realize these values, a frustrated, authoritarian Russia with a worsening economy will take every opportunity to stir up conflicts along the European border and puncture the "European dream".

The third major challenge for Europe is in fact an opportunity: investing in the improvement of stability of countries along the southern and south-eastern borders which are not in a civil war or deep political crisis. I mean countries such as Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia, and Egypt. Since the start of the EU’s neighbourhood policy, this was already an opportunity and I thought I should end this essay with a story about opportunities rather than a third deep crisis. However, I see a risk that the EU and its member states forget about investing in relations with these countries, in times when all political leverage is spent on the ‘crisis countries’ like Ukraine, Syria and Libya. This is a risk, because the recipe for structural security and stability on and around the European continent lies with improving relations with these countries both now and in the future. Now, because it is important to make these neighbours Europe’s allies in combating the crises in Syria and Libya. And in the future, because a lack of attention to the promotion of democracy and economic growth in these countries right now, may result in the crisis of tomorrow. As a professional in the energy sector, I would like to focus on the opportunity of increased energy cooperation between the EU and its neighbouring countries. In November 2015, the European Commission issued a review of the European Neighbourhood Policy which stressed that ‘the EU is committed to strengthen its energy dialogue with neighbourhood countries in energy security, energy market reforms and the promotion of sustainable energy.’¹ Indeed I believe that increased energy cooperation between the EU and the neighbourhood countries will contribute to enhanced stability of these countries. There can be a role for European energy companies to invest in sustainable energy production in neighbourhood countries. A possibility could be to open up the subsidy regimes of EU member states for renewable projects in neighbourhood countries. These projects could then contribute to the national renewable energy target of the EU member state which grants the subsidy. This would stimulate investments by European private sector parties, contributing to sustainable economic growth in the neighbourhood countries and increased economic interdependency between Europe and its neighbourhood. An inspirational project is the Desertec project, an industry initiative launched in 2003 to produce renewable (solar) electricity in the Sahara desert and export the produced electricity to Europe.

To conclude, I would like to reflect on how the focus of the European Union’s external priorities have shifted over the last decade. When I finished my Master International Relations in 2007 and wrote a dissertation on the European foreign policy, I focussed on how the EU could support African developing countries. It was before the financial crisis, the euro crisis, and the Arab Spring and the EU could afford to direct its foreign policy to regions outside its direct neighbourhood. Almost 10 years later, everything has changed. The way in

which Europe deals with its direct neighbourhood, is decisive for the stability and security of the European continent itself. Great challenges lie ahead, but I hope that in this essay I have also succeeded in drawing attention to the opportunities.