



Summary of the seventh high-level *EU Diplomacy Lecture*

EU International Relations and Diplomacy Studies

College of Europe, Bruges

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ANNUAL HIGH-LEVEL EU DIPLOMACY LECTURE



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EU INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
AND DIPLOMACY STUDIES

What is the real role of the European Union in peace processes?

**Ambassador Roland KOBIA, EU Special Envoy to Afghanistan,
European External Action Service**

The Rector of the College of Europe, Federica MOGHERINI, welcomed the audience and expressed her gratitude to Ambassador Roland KOBIA, EU Special Envoy for Afghanistan, for accepting the invitation to come to Bruges and address the students of the College of Europe. As former High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy she outlined the growing importance of the EU's role in peace processes.

Professor Sieglinde GSTÖHL, Director of the Department of EU International Relations and Diplomacy Studies, then introduced the speaker.

Ambassador KOBIA introduced the topic in highlighting the key role of peace processes in today's world. He started with four 'inconvenient truths' about peace processes. First, the increasing interest in peace processes does not always arise purely for humanist considerations, but as a means to forward an agenda and reduce threats. Second, peace has almost become an industry,



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where competition is as present as the quest for cooperation. Third, peace processes often imply the necessity to sit at the table with individuals who have committed atrocities. Fourth, Ambassador KOBIA highlighted that the will to mediate should not lead to compromise on the end state and on fundamental values.



In this context, the European Union advocates a long-term and inclusive approach to peace. The EU must accompany its role as a 'convening power' by a political ambition to be a 'convincing power', shaping narratives at the negotiation table. Ambassador KOBIA underlined that the EU is not like a normal state or organisation, but a *sui generis* entity founded on peace as an existential factor. This special nature can be convenient in peace processes, as it stands both inside and outside the classic definitions and boxes. Its complexity can be puzzling, yet it can also be more acceptable for third parties as some member states have a colonial history whereas the EU is a new constituency.

In addition, the EU is perceived as a predictable party, focused on values and embodying consistency and reliability. However, the EU at times suffers from an expectation gap. Moreover, Ambassador KOBIA stressed the difference between impartiality and neutrality: the EU as a political organisation can be independent and impartial but it cannot be neutral on political issues and values. Finally, the EU works with an integrated approach and a long-term horizon and focuses on preventive diplomacy, looking at less visible micro-processes as much as macro-processes hitting the headlines.

The speaker referred throughout to the case of Afghanistan as a challenging example of a peace process, because the region has been the centre of geopolitical rivalry between great powers since the 19th century and it represents the microcosm of all conflicts.

To conclude, Ambassador KOBIA highlighted three dilemmas the EU is facing in peace processes today. The first dilemma lies in the relationship between interests and values: according to him, they can be complementary and respond to a logic of principled pragmatism. Second, he mentioned the dilemma between peace and democracy: peace represents a universal



aspiration, while democracy has a 'Western colour'. Third, Ambassador KOBIA reiterated the relationship between principles and pragmatism, in a transactional world where both values and interests have to be upheld. The EU should strike a balance between 'realpolitik' and 'idealpolitik', where noble objectives matter but so do political means. In a nutshell, the EU should strive not only to be a convening power but also a convincing one.

The lecture was followed by a stimulating question and answer session with the audience on topics ranging from the peace process in Afghanistan, to the effectiveness of EU in peace negotiations, and the role of religion in conflict mediation.



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Roland KOBIA is since 2017 the European Union's Special Envoy for Afghanistan. He has for 30 years been specialising in foreign policy through different geographical and thematic angles: conflict and transition countries, peace processes, formal and informal negotiations, development and humanitarian aid, political and economic transitions, political dialogues and mediation, state-building and regional security.

Prior to his current appointment, Roland KOBIA Ambassador of the European Union to Myanmar/Burma (2013-17) where he acted as the EU negotiator and signatory of the 2015 Nation-Wide Ceasefire Agreement. Before that, he served as EU Ambassador to Azerbaijan (2009-13) with a focus on political and security issues, regional affairs and energy politics. He negotiated the Presidential EU-Azerbaijan Agreement on the 'Southern Corridor'. Between postings abroad, he was Diplomatic Advisor in the Private Office of the EU Commissioner for Energy. Earlier on, he was the Deputy Head of Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo, covering the regional politics and the Great Lakes conflict. He also served in Kenya as the Head of Regional Political Affairs, covering politics, conflicts and peace processes in 12 countries of the Horn of Africa and of the Great Lakes, negotiating and mediating peace agreements. He was posted in South Africa in the late 1980s/early 1990s during the transition out of Apartheid. Earlier in his career, Roland KOBIA was a European Commission negotiator for the accession process of 7 countries to the EU as well as for international legislation at the World Intellectual Property Organisation in Geneva.

Roland KOBIA holds a Master's degree in European Politics from the College of Europe in Bruges, a Master's degree in International Nuclear Law from the University of Montpellier 1, as well as a Law degree from the UCL. He has been a visiting professor at the University of Montpellier, a regular lecturer at various universities and a frequent guest speaker at international conferences.



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