Brussels Forum

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A Conversation with Baroness Catherine Ashton

Mr. Craig Kennedy: Grab a seat. Okay, welcome back, everybody. Shhh. Great. And don't worry, we're going to get the air-conditioning going full blast and bring out the fans and everything.

Welcome back. Now, it is a very great pleasure for me to introduce to the Brussels Forum, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the Vice President of the European Commission, Catherine Ashton.

Please allow me to first thank her for all of the things that she's done for GMF. She's been to every one of the forums since she had this post. She's always been an extremely active participant. And we've really--you've really improved the quality of this event because of your participation. Thank you.

So the conversation with her will be moderated by GMF Senior Vice President Ivan Vejvoda. Ivan, please.

Mr. Ivan Vejvoda: Thank you, Craig. And welcome, Lady Ashton, Cathy, if I may. As Craig said, you've been an avid and stalwart participant of all of our meetings. And I think that makes this conversation easier for me, because I think I take this as a bit of a fireside chat, as you're in your fifth year in this role. In European parlance, you're the Minister of

Foreign Affairs of Europe; or in American parlance, you're the Czar of Foreign Policy, or Czarina, to be more precise. And apparently you do have a telephone number where viewers can reach you. But we'll get to that later on.

Let's start with the obvious place, which is unavoidable, and that's Ukraine. The EU has had a crucial role, not only in the crisis, but just to remind everyone, there's been a process that's been ongoing for seven years. So can you give us a sense of the depth of that process and the lead up to the crisis and how the EU, from your vantage point intends to address, actually, the way forward?

Baroness Catherine Ashton: Well, it's great to be here, first of all. And, as you say, the issue that will dominate all our lives for the next period will be Ukraine. We were negotiating with Ukraine over many years, the association agreement, which would give access to our markets, help support the development of the Ukrainian economy, and develop a strengthened political set of links, which would especially try and tackle some of the underlying issues, structurally and otherwise, that dominate Ukraine's life: corruption, the justice system, the kind of reforms that we believe make it better for people in that country.

We got to the point where we had initialed this agreement. And when it came to signature, President

Yanukovych decided he would not sign. I went to see him, and spent many hours with him trying to work out what the problem was. And the problem was his fear of pressure from Russia, but also his fear that somehow the economy of Ukraine would not be able to develop fast enough to compensate for what he saw as an imbalance that could result. And we talked this through.

One of the most important messages that I want to say again was at all points we made it clear, this was not about a competition between Russia and the European Union. Ukraine needed strong relationships with both, if it was going to become the country that people aspire to: strong economy, good democratic institutions, freedom for people. They needed to have strong economic links with Russia, strong economic links with the European Union. And if you look at everything I've said in all my visits to Ukraine, I've made that point.

The crisis developed because people were very angry that a commitment that had been made by a president from the very day that he took office and during his campaign had been broken. I went to Maidan to see for myself who the people were in the freezing night who stood all night. And they were people like us. They were not people of extreme views. They were people who were just cross and angry at what he had done.

There were politicians, there were people from business, there were people from different parts of Ukraine who came together in Maidan. And they said, we want an answer to the question; why has this been done? And we want to know that we will indeed move forward as agreed.

And just to complete that picture, in all of the meetings I had with Yanukovych, the first thing he would say was, I do intend to sign this agreement. And I would say at the end of it, well, okay, but frankly I don't quite believe that anymore. I don't think that this is what you're going to do. What then occurred is terrible. To see a situation evolve where, by using the means that we used and have been well discussed here, there was effectively a land grab.

And I think the two things I would say that are most important and uppermost in my mind are, first of all, that we have to make sure that Ukraine economically does not fall over. Because my biggest fear right now is the state of the economy and the need for us all to offer the support that they need.

Mr. Ivan Vejvoda: And do you think that the EU can muster up the means that are quite substantive, when people make the calculations?

Baroness Catherine Ashton: When you look at, there are three elements to the Ukrainian economic problems as I identified them, indeed with my conversations with

Yanukovych. The first is a short-term deficit problem, which needs to be resolved. And various figures get thrown around. But it's in the order of a few billion that needs to happen relatively quickly.

The second issue is to do with the economic viability of industry, many parts of which needs to be modernized, an issue that most countries, certainly in the European Union, have had to deal with at some time or another and which needs a sort of slightly longer-term plan.

And then there are the underlying structural problems and how to make sure that they're able to generate the resources that they need to be able to pay their bills and to be able to develop that economy without running into the buffers of not having enough money day to day.

Mr. Ivan Vejvoda: So a continuing soft-power approach.

Baroness Catherine Ashton: I think I'm not ruling out anything. What I'm saying is that for the work that I believe I need to focus on--the European Council is busy looking at the issues, and rightly so, about what needs to be sent, not just by way of message, but by a determined approach. But for me, when I think about the role I play, in all my visits with--into Ukraine and all of the discussions I've had with the finance minister, the foreign minister, the prime minister

there now, the most important thing is how do we make sure this economy holds together, because for people's lives, for ordinary people, that's the most fundamental thing.

Final comment on this part of what I would say about Ukraine: One of the things that has been really, really important in all of this is that the Parliament, the Rada, have worked. And in my conversations with my counterpart, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, I don't think he would mind me saying this anyway, I've made the point to Russia that actually, if they're worried about extremism or worried about who the hell these people are, remember, that the Parliament is functioning.

There are people from all over Ukraine going to the Rada every day and doing their work. Elmar Brok is here from the European Parliament. Elmar's been in the Rada for days on end. You will know, as I know, you go in there, there are legislators. There are Parliamentarians. The Party of the Regions, which was the party of Yanukovych, exists. They told me they want to be in opposition, not in government now. But they will not be difficult. They will not try and ruin things as we build towards the presidential elections.

So surely what we should all be doing, if we believe in these institutions, is backing the very democratic institutions we say we really care about.

Therefore, I don't understand why, for Russia, they were not prepared to work with me, and hope they will be in the future, to support the democracy in Ukraine that is still functioning and which needs to be supported, along with the economy, for that country to develop in the way that I believe it should.

Mr. Ivan Vejvoda: Very briefly, before we go on to the next big subject is, does that mean that there will be a more proactive approach on your process with Moldova, say, and Georgia?

Baroness Catherine Ashton: I think you've already seen that we're being extremely active with Moldova and with Georgia. We're concerned about things that can suddenly happen, how their wine is suddenly not accepted, what can happen in terms of pressure. And we're ready for that, by the way.

But what we also really, genuinely believe is that, if you set up a climate where people are scared and worried, then you create the circumstances which can lead to instability or worse. And what really matters for the countries in our neighborhood is that we help to support them to stability and democracy and freedom, with strong economies where they make their own sovereign choices.

Mr. Ivan Vejvoda: Going on to the next subject. The night that the three Foreign Ministers, Sikorski, Fabius, and Steinmeier, were in Kiev, you weren't

there--a noticeable absence. But, as you told me, there was a good reason for that. And that is our next topic; namely, Iran.

You have been dealing with this issue for close to four years, if not more. And you were just recently in Vienna, a few days ago. You were the first notable western leader to go to Tehran, about 10 days or two weeks ago. Tell us about how you got to Geneva in November, and what you're feeling from this very important visit to Tehran and of course from the Vienna talks. Is there a way forward to the agreement and compromise?

Baroness Catherine Ashton: You're right, I was in Vienna, and in fact it was up to me to ask the foreign ministers of the three countries, on behalf of myself and the EU, to go to Ukraine. Something I've developed over these years is actually recognizing the value of using our foreign ministers as teams, as groups to represent the union. It doesn't always have to be me.

They did a fantastic job, and I am hugely grateful to them. How we got to Geneva was I think a combination of things: the determination of what I call the E3+3 and U.S. calls P5+1, six plus me and us, to really develop an approach that said we will use the pressure, but we really will look for a united team solution to this problem.

And I think we were supported in that, to that extent, because of the changing government in Iran where meetings that had been very difficult suddenly became not less difficult, but easier to have the conversation about the relations.

And a whole combination of factors, some of which I'm not going to talk about now because we're in the beginnings of the process of trying to find a comprehensive agreement, but this was a real team effort, and I just want to pay tribute to everyone. The U.S. role has been notably talked about. You know, you can't say enough praise for some of the work that was done. But I would also praise in equal measure all the others who have put the effort in and to the EU team, too, because it is genuinely a team effort.

Where we are now, well we have to try and make the comprehensive deal a reality. My trip to Tehran was interesting. It was a day of intense meetings with a number of people. I went to see my old counterpart, Dr. Chilelli, in his new surroundings, which was very interesting. He advises the supreme leader, and it was good to see him.

But I had a series of meetings with the Foreign Ministry and the president, with the head of the parliament, with the advisors and so on, through the day. And I was struck by the pretty consistent message that I was getting that at least people were going to

give this set of talks a fair hearing or a fair wind at this point, and that was important.

And then I spent a day in Isfahan, which was my opportunity to see some of the incredible historical and cultural sites in Iran. And I know a number of my colleagues who are here who have also been said to me before whatever you do you should see Isfahan.

Mr. Ivan Vejvoda: But you're being a bit modest because some newspaper reports said that you were surrounded by crowds in Isfahan of young people, older people who came to see you, congratulate you, and hope for the best that their country would actually reach an agreement. And you made the headlines in practically every daily newspaper in Tehran.

Baroness Catherine Ashton: My head of office said it was like, for the first time ever with me, being with a rock star. It's probably never going to happen again. What was especially nice was how many women in Iran, because of course one of the photographs that over the four years has always been on the front pages of every Iranian newspaper has been the press conference at the end of the talks, and that's always been me and either Chilelli or Javad Zarif now.

And therefore I am a quite well-known. I'm more well-known than I expected. I'm certainly more well-known than I am at home, so--

Mr. Ivan Vejvoda: And again testimony to your abilities as a negotiator, for those of us who watched the Geneva moment of the announcement of the deal that was struck, everyone of course was congratulating each other, but it seemed that most of them were congratulating you. But we'll get to that.

Just one final question on Iran, and that's, and we heard that in our panels here, the role in Syria. How do you see, and is there a way for you and other diplomats to actually talk as you talk on the nuclear issue about Iran's responsibility for what's going on in Syria?

Baroness Catherine Ashton: One of the consistent themes of the discussions in Tehran, remember in Tehran I went as a EU high representative, not to do with the talks, we very specifically focused on other issues, inevitably Syria was raised in all meetings.

And I take a very strong view that Lakhdar Brahimi has taken on an extraordinarily difficult role and that we have to back and support him until he decides that he needs other people to do other things in the processes that he had set up.

I was at Geneva One and Geneva Two, and the efforts made to try and bring together people to talk with each other, knowing that the initial rhetoric was always going to be pretty brutal, and it was, in the room, it's really important. There is no other way, it seems

to me now, than to try and get this political solution, and that means really the support that's been given for that process. And it's really important that the role of Russia in polishing that support remains, too.

Mr. Ivan Vejvoda: Let's stay in the area, and all of this sounds like a serious laundry list because you are juggling so many issues. You were if not the only one then one of the rarest people who saw Morsi in Egypt, and Egypt has involved in ways, dramatic ways, and unwarranted for dramatic ways over these months since June of last year, when Tahrir exploded again with dissatisfaction with the Morsi government. How did that whole event go, and what was your sense? Did Morsi understand that he did something wrong by not being more inclusive in his government?

Baroness Catherine Ashton: I was asked to go back to Egypt, both in conversations with colleagues in Europe and the U.S. and by the Egyptians, at the end of July. And I made it a condition of my return that I had to see what had happened to Mohammed Morsi.

Remember, at this point, he had been incommunicado for over three weeks. People didn't know where he was. And although there had been massive concern for what had gone on before, I think for the international community there was a concern about what was happening to him and to the people around him.

The Egyptians readily agreed, and I found myself, because I know you want me to tell the story of the trip.

Mr. Ivan Vejvoda: Yes.

Baroness Catherine Ashton: I found myself carted away in the evening heading for a helicopter with one of my colleagues, being told I could take nothing with me, and I didn't, no phones, bags, money, nothing. I'm being flown for over an hour through Egypt and then getting into quite an old car with the windows covered with cardboard, apart from the windscreen thank goodness, with two guys in jeans, T-shirts, and guns.

Once my colleague and I had got in, the doors, we discovered, didn't open again. So it had that sense of, well, this could be okay. But I have to tell you that at no point were we frightened. The Egyptian army, who were looking after us, we knew we were in good hands. It was just a very, very weird experience.

We drove for a long, long time. If we left at quarter to 8, I got to see Mohammed Morsi at half past 10. So you can imagine how far away we were. And he was told 15 minutes before I arrived that I was coming, and had the choice whether to see me or not.

I would have been disappointed after all that had he not. And the circumstances of where he was were difficult in many ways. He was obviously being kept away from people. He didn't know where he was. But what

was interesting, apart from the fact that he did see me, was that we talked about the last thing I'd said to him when he was president and I'd seen him, which was only a couple of weeks before.

And I'd been going back to Egypt many times to try and persuade him that he needed to do something. And the last thing I said to him was Mr. President, it's not enough to be elected. Democracy is not just about being elected. It's about what you do with it. And you have the prospect of millions of people coming out on the streets in a few days time because they are unhappy. This is not about a division in society. It's about a people feeling let down, and you have got to do something.

So when he asked me where he was, what was happening in Cairo, I said to him you will be disappointed because actually Cairo was functioning. There are not millions of people on the street demanding your return. There are some, but you have to understand that this situation is not going to reverse.

We talked for two hours, and I promised him I would never reveal the contents of that because he has no way of correcting what I've said. So I'll stick with what that particular part of the conversation was. But I was there to tell him how we saw events and what we felt about it and to give him a sense of what was actually happening, not just in Cairo, but beyond that in Egypt.

Mr. Ivan Vejvoda: Okay, there would be much more to drill down on, but we have barely 10 minutes left and quite some road to travel. And all of these seem sorts of missions impossible. And a fourth one that I'd like to address with you has come out at the brighter end. As one of our friends said, you pulled the rabbit out of the hat. And that, of course, takes us to my neck of the woods, the Balkans and the agreement that you reached, together with the prime ministers of Serbia and Kosovo, Dačić and Thaçi. A long road again, another one of these complicated historical, ethnic, cultural divides between groups, issues of self-determination, a NATO intervention, 22 meetings, I believe, that you had and more than 220 hours of negotiations, as with you are doing with these other subjects.

This is an unsung success story because good news doesn't make news, unfortunately. But for those of us who live in that region and in the broader Europe, I think this is very significant because it proves that compromise can be reached, very tough ones. And that means people really accepting that the other side has its own views, that there are realities that need to be borne out.

And I say this because at the same time in Northern Ireland, someone like Richard Haass and Meghan O'Sullivan didn't reach an agreement with their

Northern Irish counterparts more or less at the same time in June. So how did you do it?

Baroness Catherine Ashton: Well, they did it. That's the first thing. I didn't do it. There's no Ashton agreement. And I said to them very early on there will never be an Ashton agreement. It's your agreement.

I think the combination of people willing to recognize that the situation remaining as it was was just not helping anyone, that the criteria we set for the agreement was to improve the lives of the people of the north of Kosovo, that we were not asking Serbia to recognize Kosovo, we've never asked that, and we were not asking Kosovo to see itself other than a sovereign state.

But within rubbing up against those two red lines, there was an awful lot you could do. And I spoke with Prime Minister Thaçi and actually President Nikolić in Serbia to ask them if they were willing to try, and both agreed. So two very nervous prime ministers arrived in my office to have the very first occasion when they'd ever seen each other in any setting where they would speak to each other. And as they've said at the--when I brought them together at the Munich Security Conference, you know, one of the big things they had to decide at home was whether they would shake hands or not.

And we kept no record of that handshake, but it did happen. And we did everything to make them feel comfortable, and I think one of the big lessons from this is that the meetings are always in my office. They come with who they want, but they're often alone with me. And the purpose is very clear, it's for them to try and find a way through on different elements, different issues at a political level.

I should just say that, you know, every week for months and months, 50 people have been in our building from Serbia and Kosovo on working groups, doing all sorts of detailed work: border management; you know, sorting out the police systems; working out judiciary. All of that goes on all the time. So the headline meetings are really the icing on the cake nowadays.

Mr. Ivan Vejvoda: Okay, well, and during all this time and on all these other issues, obviously you've worked very closely with the United States, which brings us to the transatlantic relationship, which in this world in transition and transformation, which is the theme of our Brussels Forum, brings us to this issue: Do you see a strengthening of this relationship?

Obviously you are on the phone, I presume very often, and we come to this famous phone number. You do have a phone and a phone number, and the secretaries of state can call you. So there's a bit of an answer to the famous Kissinger question is there a phone number.

Tell us about the state of the relationship as you see it now.

Baroness Catherine Ashton: I think it's a fantastic relationship, and it's a vital relationship. More than anything, you know, the constant traffic between Brussels and Washington and with the people that we work with on all kinds of issues shows you the depth and breadth of the relationship as it is now and as it will be.

I think the decision taken to develop TTIP, as it's called, this trade investment agreement, is really significant. And I think the combination of the way we work bilaterally, but also how we work together in different formats, shows just how important the EU-U.S. relationship is. And I've been very fortunate to have had such fantastic people to work with at the Secretary of State level with Hillary Clinton and now John Kerry, and then with lots of others, some of whom--like Wendy Sherman is sitting here now. You can't ask for better.

Mr. Ivan Vejvoda: Terrific. We're nearing the end. And so the final question will be about your whole experience. You're coming into this position of high rep and vice president of the commission has been described as being thrown into the lion's den and then surviving in that den. Just yesterday, one of the foreign ministers of the union said something that I've heard many times, both in private and public

conversation, that, thank God for Cathy because she brings us to a consensus in these meetings.

And I think many people have recognized the important role that you have played, both because you have the tenure of now it's your fifth year and you're--as you mentioned to me, you're sort of older in tenure than most of the 28 ministers that you're dealing with. So how did you survive? What are some of your successes that you deem successes, and maybe some failures? And what would be your message to the successor that follows you?

Baroness Catherine Ashton: I have survived because I had around me some fantastic people to work with. That's usually what people say, but it's true. And--

Mr. Ivan Vejvoda: May I just--

Baroness Catherine Ashton: Yeah.

Mr. Ivan Vejvoda: Before I forget this part of the conversation--and I asked you if I could mention it in a conversation. You did mention to me once people were saying you were a bit soft and, you know, not strong enough. You said, I'm a girl from the North.

Baroness Catherine Ashton: Yeah. Yeah.

Mr. Ivan Vejvoda: Tell us about that.

Baroness Catherine Ashton: Well, I think the--you know, the assumption that--I once said that when you take on the role for the first time, you are bound to disappoint a huge audience who have, in their own mind,

got the interpretation of what this person and this job will be. It's like a novel translated to a film. If the key actor doesn't look like you thought, then you don't like the film. So I already knew that the way I was going to succeed was by people gradually realizing that we could do the things that we'd set out to do.

And if you like, success for me is about making sure there's a second high representative, which there will be. And I said that for my time in office, there were three things that mattered. One, I had to build a service because when I started, we had lots of fabulous people, but they were scattered in eight buildings in Brussels and across the world doing things that were not what we do now. We now have 140 delegations that are EU operating across the world who are a real network of impressive people who can deliver the range of what the EU does.

The second, I said, was that we would be judged by everyone, all of you, by how effective we were in our own neighborhood. And we've talked about some of the things we've been able to do, much more to do. A lot of things have happened in these three years, four years, that I could not have predicted--nobody predicted--at the beginning that we've had to deal with, dramatic changes that are not yet over and the outcome of which we're not certain of, that we've had to be critically

engaged in financially, in terms of policy, in political commitment and so on.

And then the third was the building of our strategic partners. The relationship had to get stronger and better, not least this one, the transatlantic one. If we were going to demonstrate that the European Union, when it works together, had more to offer than it does individually, and that's really the important part of what I hope I've started on.

This is the very beginning. You know, first institution set up for 50 years, we're just at the very beginning. It will be easier to judge whether I got any of it right in the years to come.

And to my successor, I say two things. One is good luck. And the other is you will never, ever, ever hear me ever complain about you.

Mr. Ivan Vejvoda: Lady Ashton, Cathy, thank you so much. I introduce Sylke Tempel, our next moderator. Thank you.

Dr. Sylke Tempel: Thank you so much, Ivan. I just have to move around here. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.