

The United Nations and the European Union: An Ever Stronger Partnership

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SESSION 4: The UN, the EU and the role of civil society

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Thank you very much, Ms Chairman for your kind introduction. It is indeed a pleasure and a privilege to be part of such a prestigious gathering on Europe and the UN and the civil society, especially because it is organised by an organisation that is so close to us and so UNO-phile as the UNA for Flanders and Belgium and of course the Institute for International Law of the Leuven University and the IRRI or KIIB, it eludes me what the abbreviation actually stands for, but as I will be spending more time in Brussels, I will learn that too. I regret not having been with you before and not having been able to benefit from the presentations right from the beginning of this meeting, but as you said, until a few hours ago I was in Prague as a UNIC Director, an endangered species in these days of UN reform. My presence here today, in another function than I had up until a few hours ago, is in a manner of speaking UN reform in action. So, I am slightly out of breath, out of focus and disoriented, but in any case determined to make this organisation of ours more effective and to work a little bit better.

I am meeting with you today as part of RUNIC, which represents a bridgehead in uncharted territory, that is to say something that was never tried before. RUNIC is the implementation of a new UN information and representation concept, which aims to bundle resources and personnel around regional hubs. It replaces the country offices in many European capitals, 9 offices, all of which were closed at the end of this year. Now the ideal is to rationalize, to streamline, to make ourselves more effective, and in the end, of course, to save resources and money, which could be moved to areas of greater need or programs of higher priority. This is, of course, not as easy as it sounds. UN reform in particular is not taking place in a vacuum, but is heavily intertwined with competing political interests and what may seem logical, and common sense on paper, may prove to be quite difficult to translate into reality. Let me very briefly give you the background of what is officially called 'rationalization of UN Information Centres around regional hubs'. The original proposal was made by the Secretary General in a report to the General Assembly some 2 years ago. His concept was essentially based on two points: first, the avalanche of competing messages caused by the Information Technology Revolution, and the challenge of unilateral policies pursued by some member states, which have made it imperative to create a better understanding of the UN and to build public support for its work, particularly in an important donor community like Europe. Retrenchments exercised since the early 1990s have left a crippling mark: a significant number of posts in the field of public information were abolished and through zero-growth budgeting resources for carrying out the work, they were eroded by inflation. In other words, given the increased UN need to make the UN voice heard and the lack of sufficient resources for that purpose, the Secretary General felt that there was no option for the organization, but to rationalize the network of information centres around regional hubs. The intention was certainly not to reduce the information capacity, but rather to reduce the administrative costs required to operate the network by pooling scarce resources and to

assemble a strong team, a critical mass of staff and resources to enable the new RUNIC to be proactive in its work. After consultations with the affected member states, there was consequently decided, as a first step, to close the existing nine centres and to create a Western European hub in Brussels. Now, as it is UN established procedure, reform and structural changes, as deep as those described can only be realised in close consultations with affected member countries. The reaction of these member countries in the European region was generally supportive, but not overly enthusiastic. It is of course not uncommon in the UN concept that member countries are very much in favour of streamlining and of cost-cutting principles, but when it comes to their particular priorities and projects, their respective weight within the organisation, they are more reluctant to accept these cuts. But in this case, the affected European countries had accepted, although with varying degrees of scepticism to the closure of country centres in their region and the creation of RUNIC as a regional hub on the condition, with the understanding that, though, this exercise be regarded as a pilot project, to be expanded to other regions in the near future. The choice of Brussels as site of the Western European hub was of course helped by the generous offer of the Belgian government of providing rent-free premises in the centre of town and a 50.000 € annual grant towards its operations. Of course, we also hope to profit from the particular position of Brussels, because of the extraordinary transportation links with the rest of the region, the modern communication systems, the large international press core and, of course, the very active civil society institutions. Here, in fact, we counted over 2000 international NGOs headquartered in Brussels. The intention was also to benefit from the synergies within the EU and to take advantage of the higher level of computer connectivity in the region. This allows us to rely more than elsewhere on electronic dissemination of information material and a high penetration of our website, which will eventually contain information in most of the 13 languages of our mandate area. Much of that linguistic capacity is our own, as we have tried to absorb as many professionals from the closed information centres as possible. Thereby we hope to inherit, not only their language capacity, but also their institutional memory and the still existing contact with our local counterparts. By this we may be able to ensure some measure of continuity. At this moment, however, we are not fully operational, not fully staffed, not yet fully equipped and we reside in provisional premises. Most of our library materials are still in boxes and storage, and the development of our database must wait for the installation of the new electronic equipment. We have, however, reason to hope, and for that we have to thank the support of the Belgian Prime Minister, that our permanent premises will be ready in a few months and that we will be able to move during June and July, and the RUNIC will be able to offer a reference centre containing relevant documentation on the organisation's work. It will provide public access to the internet and all electronic databases and other resources of the UN. This RUNIC library should develop into an international, intercultural contact point, which will give a local face to a global organisation and which would make relevant and concrete, what otherwise would remain distant and abstract, at least for those people who have access to it and who live in the region of Brussels. We will use all our instruments in the efforts to mobilize the media, like press conferences, briefings, backgrounds, newsletters, websites but also more innovative approaches as training seminars for journalists, advanced target group oriented electronic databases for dissemination, placing public service announcements in the electronic media or offering information on topical issues to the press. It must be clear, however, that the nine country offices who now handle the countries or country groups of the former UNICs on their own, cannot offer the same intensity and complexity of service as those former UNICs, however weakly they may have been staffed. It is therefore necessary to found new cooperation systems with our traditional civil society partners. There are limited travel funds available for the country offices to maintain vital contact with traditional civil society partners, and to participate in major events and to service the travel of the Secretary General, but some of the functions will clearly have to be distributed on more shoulders. In particular, well-established UNAs, it is

hoped, could play a more prominent part in, for instance, the commemoration of international days, hosting special events, public debates, seminars as this one, educational outreach activities, like the organisation of model UN, support for major UN promotional campaigns and, of course, sharing more heavily in speaking engagements on UN issues. Here it must be clear, however, that UNAs may have similar, but certainly not an identical mission to that of RUNIC, and they would not speak on behalf of the UN, nor would they represent the organisation in any official capacity. We also have to recognize that civil society organisations and UNAs are not a homogeneous group, but act with different degrees of dependence from sponsors, and possess varying professional capacities. So the envisioned outsourcing of some of the traditional UNIC functions, can only work where local UNA structures are strong and have an energetic leadership. It will also require that the respective governments provide additional financial support to them. I think it is foreseen that once we are established in our new premises, we will intensify the dialogue with our civil society partners, in particular with our local UNAs, and work out modalities of concrete cooperation. We will in any case aim for a meaningful interaction and dialogue, which should go beyond mere exercises of PR. Our staff resources will probably not allow dedicating a person specifically for this purpose, but it is our intention to develop an attitude of openness within RUNIC to be able to take full advantage of the support and energy offered by the civil society organisations. This would, of course, be in line with the ever closer ties between the growing network of civil society organisation and the UN as a whole, through the accreditation process. More than 3000 NGOs have established formal links with the UN Secretariat, 1400 of these are accredited with DPI, the Department of Information, which is our current department within the UN. These numbers reflect the deepening involvement of civil society in the full range of UN activities, and if you have ever been in one of the major world conferences, you may know that even the intergovernmental decision-making process is slowly, but surely, and with all the problems involved, opening its doors to NGO participation. In that context, it is only natural that RUNIC will facilitate the process of integration, through providing timely information and stimulating direct involvement and cooperation in information and outreach activities. By being able to reach UNAs and other selected NGOs at the country level, RUNIC's major focus would lie in generating and managing region-wide information campaigns, on the many UN priority issues like conflict prevention, the Millennium Development Goals, aids prevention and human rights protection, to mention just a few.

Apart from our traditional partners, or clients in new UN speak, the civil society, the media and educational institutions, RUNIC will engage in an increasing number of common projects with the European institutions located in Brussels. We know that the member states of the EU are amongst the staunchest supporters of the UN and the multilateral approach to international problem-solving. The EU is the largest donor of humanitarian aid in the world, between them I think, the EU and its member states provide more than half, that is about 55% of all official development assistance. This high level of cooperation and the policy and operational sectors, offer a firm basis for developing positive working relations and a multitude of common projects in the public information domain. We are already working with the Commission on common publications on subjects such as the benefits of multilateralism, 'Multilateralism matters' is the working title, I think, on RUNIC's cooperation with the EU institutions, the contributions of the EU and its members states to UN peace-keeping and development work, as well as a special publication on EU and UN efforts in Central Africa. RUNIC will also have to rely on the input of our sixteen UN agencies and offices in Brussels, they cover the wide field of UN activities, from all aspects of development, to refugees, population affairs, children's welfare, labour rights, food security and agriculture, health and environment and intellectual property. This provides a rich reservoir of knowledge and experience on which to build success stories about not only the UN, but also the benefits of interactions with the institutions of the EU. We certainly intend to use this reservoir because it is of particular importance that the public of the most important donor region of the

international community is aware of the degree of cooperation between the most prominent multilateral actors. It is equally important that the public develops a broader understanding of the multitude, the complexity and relevance of the tasks of the only, truly global organisation. In that sense, public information is not a luxury, but an integral part of the substantive work of the organisation, in fact, it is an in-expendable pillar of the entire UN structure. With the support of our partners in the European institutions and the flourishing civil society network, RUNIC will strive to become a major building block in that pillar. Thank you and I hope I haven't been too long.