The event was organised by the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies to launch Visiting Fellow, Ambassador Salome Samadashvili’s policy paper on the European Union’s Eastern Partnership Initiative: “Building a Lifeline for Freedom: Eastern Partnership 2.0”. The panel welcomed Tunne Kelam, Estonian Member of the European Parliament’s Committee on Foreign Affairs and Subcommittee on Security and Defence, Jerzy Pomianowski, Executive Director of the European Endowment for Democracy and Gunnar Wiegand, European External Action Service Director for Russia, Eastern Partnership, Central Asia, Regional Cooperation and OSCE. Roland Freudenstein, Deputy Director and Head of Research at the Martens Centre moderated the discussion.

The event was opened by Wilfried Martens Centre Director Tomi Huhtanen who noted that the Eastern Partnership Initiative has been a source of much debate and controversy that the Martens Centre has been closely following for some time. While recent developments have been less than positive in the region, Samadashvili’s book suggests a path to get the Eastern Partnership back on track as a significant tool in promoting democratic values and the rule of law in Europe’s eastern neighbourhood.
Vice President of the European Peoples Party, Jacek Saryusz-Wolski MEP, delivered the keynote address where he stressed the need to view the Eastern Partnership Initiative as part of a geopolitical confrontation with Russia. He argued that though the “war” was not lost, Europe is losing the current “battle”. Saryusz-Wolski passionately declared that the Eastern Partnership’s main obstacle is not its design but the context: Russian opposition and even disruption. He said it was time for the EU to move from “appeasement” to “containment”.

Ambassador Salome Samadashvili then spoke on how the Eastern Partnership was modelled on the European Union’s enlargement process but was implemented in a much more complicated and adverse geopolitical environment. She criticised the European reaction to the Russian-Georgian War of 2008 which should have identified Russia’s aggressive determination to maintain control of its neighbours. Nonetheless, Samadashvili characterises the progress of the Partnership so far as the beginnings of success. A key point she discussed from her book was the need to engage civil society, not just government, through the Eastern Partnership. Citizens in Europe’s Eastern neighbourhood consistently call for further engagement with Europe irrespective of their government’s policy and could make valuable partners for the European Union.

Tunne Kelam was adamant that the European Union had no choice but engagement with its eastern neighbours and that it had many means, though not military, at its disposal to confront Russia. Kelam was positive about the future prospects of the Eastern Partnership and said it was crucial that the European Union works to bring its Eastern neighbours closer without necessarily working towards full accession.

Jerzy Pomianowski took up the topic of refocusing on civil society with great enthusiasm. He believes that there is already a shift towards greater civil society engagement from the European Union but that it is simply not happening quickly enough. He argues that Putin’s strong opposition to European engagement with civil society in its Eastern neighbourhood is proof that this engagement is needed. While Russian arm-twisting and security necessity have moved two of the six Eastern partners, Belarus and Armenia, closer to Russia through membership and likely membership...
respectively of the Eurasian Economic Union, Pomianowski believes that their citizens still want to enjoy closer ties to Europe and the embrace of democratic values and the rule of law that that entails. Therefore, they need Europe’s support.

Gunnar Wiegand spoke of the necessity of the European Union still talking to Russia if the Eastern Partnership is to work. He defended European Union policy saying that it does work at engaging civil society but cannot neglect state to state relations and that a common economic area encompassing the entire European continent remains a major goal. Wiegand also remarked that the European Union has proved itself not entirely toothless against Russia noting that the current sanctions against Russia are having notable effects on Russian GDP, employment, inflation and crucially access to capital.

The event was followed by a question and answers session that covered a wide range of topics such as the effects of discontentment within the EU on foreign policy, how Europe can work to get Russia to adopt a more cooperative attitude and on the effects of the diversity of Europe’s eastern neighbours on the Eastern Partnership.