

EIAS Book Launch
“Mongolia: Cracks in the Eternal Blue Sky”
EIAS Brussels, 13 April 2022

REPORT

On 13 April 2022, the European Institute for Asian Studies (EIAS) hosted a book launch for Mr Erik Versavel’s recently published book ‘Mongolia: Cracks in the Eternal Blue Sky.’ The book provides an insight into the politics of Mongolia, taking a specific look into the current issues Mongolia faces with regard to their socio-economic development, as well as issues surrounding corruption as a fact of daily life. Opening remarks were addressed by CEO of EIAS, Mr Axel Goethals, and the event was moderated by Mr Erik Famaey, an EIAS Senior Associate. Further remarks were made by Mr Eduard Van Kleunen, Deputy European Correspondent for the Belgian Federal Public Service for Foreign Affairs, and H.E. Mr Bold Luvsanvandan, the Ambassador of Mongolia to the Kingdom of Belgium, Kingdom of the Netherlands, Grand Duchy of Luxembourg and Head of the Mission of Mongolia to the EU.

In his opening remarks, Mr Axel Goethals welcomed Mr Versavel, underlining in his remarks the domestic and international issues which present challenges to Mongolia’s development. He proceeded to detail how the EU should look to further assist Mongolia’s transition in becoming economically independent, how they should aid their development and work with the state’s government in moving towards a more sustainable future and ensuring greater political stability. Whilst stressing the need for the EU to conduct more trade and investment with Mongolia, he highlighted a number of current issues associated with the GSP+ Scheme in Mongolia, in particular the scheme’s (in)ability to deliver on its key intentions, and raising burden on the beneficiaries’ administrations.

Subsequently, Mr Famaey introduced the author, describing his career as an international banker, and how he has lived in Antwerp, London, Jakarta, Seoul, Shanghai, Brussels, Kiev, and Mongolia. He also went on to underline how Mr Versavel will move to Colombo within the weeks following the event. In introducing the book, he described it as ‘out of the ordinary,’ and that what you never thought you should know about Mongolia is in the book, stressing that the book should be read by everyone wanting to know more about Mongolia.

In his presentation, Erik Versavel underlined how he had been welcomed by the Mongolian people. He detailed how it is difficult for any country to realise their potential if it lies in natural resources, given the difficulty in distributing wealth based on natural resources. He underlined that as Mongolia has to cooperate with foreign companies, there are difficulties in their development, making the situation not easy for the state.

In describing the contents of the book, he underlined how the first part looks into how he moved to Mongolia, before it goes on to discussing the matters which he had found very challenging. He articulated how for nearly five years he had worked in finance, working with many companies and institutions – both domestic and abroad. A key issue which hinders Mongolia’s development lies in the balancing of cooperation and the sentiment towards foreign investment. This with particular regard to finding a way for the population to benefit without having to give up too many minerals, especially given the cost of its extraction.

He argued that since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, another significant challenge for Mongolia is in the mixing of government and business. The high amount of government interference in enterprises hinders the country’s healthy economic development, leading to poor economic decision-making. Such limits the country’s ability to lift people out of poverty, and thus fully exploit their natural resources and talent. He underlined the lively democratic field Mongolia had between 2016 and 2020, the uniqueness of the presidential election, as well as pertaining issues in balancing relations between Russia, China and other countries. He argued that the government could do more to highlight such challenges in further promoting the country. He went on to discuss the issues of corruption and the SME (small and medium sized enterprises) scandal.

Following Mr Versavel's presentation of the book, Mr Famaey further underlined the issues of corruption, matters surrounding the EU GSP+ scheme, and the tight balance that Mongolia has to play in their foreign policy.

Mr Eduard Van Kleunen then discussed the complex nature of Mongolia's geopolitics, and the fact that the book gave a high level of insight into such complexities. From there, he went on to detail how following the pandemic and their covid recovery plans, as well as the recent issues in Ukraine, Mongolia will have a role to play in the future, of which the EU must take note. With regard to Belgium's presence in Mongolia, he underlined how whilst Belgium does not have an embassy there, the government currently funds a regional hospital in the east of the country. Through EU cooperation with Mongolia and upcoming EU grand strategies, such as the Global Gateway, Belgium and the EU will see more opportunities for cooperation with the state. Despite the issues, the GSP+ scheme brings a framework and material incentives to Mongolia's relationship with the EU. A deep understanding of Mongolia is needed when engaging with the state, for which the book can serve as a guide, providing a great level of insight into the complexities of the country.

H.E. Mr Bold Luvsanvandan, Mongolia's Ambassador to Belgium, made some closing remarks. He presented his credentials to the King of Belgium on the day of the Russian invasion into Ukraine, discussing pressing political and security affairs in addition to Belgium's cooperation with Mongolia on an educational front. Many Mongolians study abroad in different countries, a few of which in Belgium, many of which return to Mongolia and contribute to the state's development. Such exchanges with other countries aid to build bridges between Mongolia and other parts of the world. He underlined his experience of being one of the 10,000 students during the 1980s studying in East Germany, and how after coming back he too wanted to change the country for the better. Hence, in 1990, he and others understood the nature of what was occurring in East Germany, and pushed to establish democratic governance in Mongolia. Recognising that there are still issues to be addressed in Mongolia's governance, the state has the flexibility to overcome and tackle such issues, while young Mongolians have a high level of engagement with politics in the state and triggering change. Mongolia has never had limited resources, and the aim of the 'Third Neighbour' policy was to attract different partnerships and diversify the economy. With regard to the book, he underlined it gives a good insight into Mongolia, demonstrating both the state's strengths and weaknesses.

During the Q&A session, the need for Mongolia to gain access to foreign markets in order to diversify their economy was highlighted, as well as matters surrounding ecological issues associated with mining and growing trends in green investment. This was with particular regard to whether mining can still be financed in Mongolia. Whilst underlining support for economic diversification in the state, the challenges in financing the shift towards green/renewable energy for the country were underlined. Other questions included Mongolia's political and parliamentary system, parallels between Mongolia and Ukraine, the role of women in Mongolia, and land-use clashes.

For more information on the book and the author, Mr Erik Versavel, please refer to his [website](#). His book, 'Mongolia: Cracks in the Eternal Blue Sky,' can be purchased on [Amazon](#), [Barnes and Noble](#), and [Book Baby](#). For more information on our upcoming events, please visit the [EIAS website](#), and feel free to read our [publications](#), such as the recently published EIAS Op-ed on '[Mongolia's 'New Revival Policy'](#)' which takes a look into Mongolia's post-pandemic recovery plans.

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