

Netherlands

Tim Wagemakers interviewed **Neelie Kroes**.

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Wagemakers: My name is Tim Wagemakers, I am a programme editor at De Balie, and today I am talking to Neelie Kroes, whom many [in the Netherlands] will know as a former cabinet minister and state secretary. Others, especially the younger generation, probably recognise her as having served as a commissioner on the European Commission and in many other official positions. Welcome.

Kroes: Thank you.

Wagemakers: It's great to have you here. How are you doing?

Kroes: Very well. I'm still spry, I'm still all there, I think—the people around me haven't warned me or anything—so things couldn't be better.

Wagemakers: That's great. You're still working hard.

Kroes: Yes.

Wagemakers: You are no longer active in politics, but you do still work in other areas. What are you doing right now?

Kroes: I am on the board of an American multinational business with headquarters in San Francisco. And I am a member of an advisory board for Bank of America, Merrill Lynch. I am active in the area of culture, am involved with the Rijksmuseum and with various social projects, including a project to raise funds for refugee shelters. I am also working with a project to raise awareness for women's heart health. I just joined a project developing a device that would make it easier to identify and operate on cancer cells—tumours, in other words. And I am working with various start-ups. In short, I keep busy.

Wagemakers: I can imagine that now, especially, you are thinking a lot about the things you still want to do. What do you really feel is important when it comes to that?

Kroes: That I can contribute. To something. That may sound quite pompous, but if you're going to do something that doesn't actually have any purpose, it's not for me. I can always do things like that in my leisure time. I think it is important to pass on one's knowledge. I myself was given many chances, many opportunities to take advantage of.

Wagemakers: Which is itself a great opportunity to turn our attention to the past. Let's talk about Europe, about your origins. You were born when Europe was in ruins. 1941, Rotterdam. I myself don't remember much from when I was three, four years old—is that something you have clear memories of?

Kroes: Yes, in as much as my father was involved with the resistance. So it was dangerous in the sense that things were happening around me that I, as a small child, was not allowed to talk about. And that does affect you. One thing I do have very clear memories of is when the war ended and people celebrated in the streets.

There were two things in particular, one very depressing, one really positive. I was chosen to be an angel in the peace parade, wearing old lace curtains and such. That was an experience. But the other thing is that at the same time, women who had been friendly with Germans, who had sided with them, were put on a cart—

Wagemakers: The *moffenmeiden*.

Kroes: Yes, and their heads were shaved bald, while I was very eager to have long hair. I even ate brown beans, which I hated, but my mother told me that they helped grow your hair long. What I saw then was the biggest humiliation I could imagine. So as a child, of course I asked, "What's going on here?" I was four years old, so the explanations were all about war and different sides fighting each other. Later I went to school in the centre of Rotterdam, which had been completely flattened by bombs. I would walk across that empty expanse to get to my school, one of the few buildings in the city centre that had almost miraculously survived.

So that also gave rise to questions, like: why do people fight? Why do things like this happen? That was when I began to realise that things can't be taken for granted and that sometimes things happen that you have to do something about. That's why to me—and now I'm fast-forwarding a bit—the year 1957 [Treaty of Rome] was so important. That you could see former enemies sit down to work together, and to agree to never have war again, and that we needed to work on prosperity for all the people. There was a lot of poverty at the time, and scarcity—not enough homes, and so on. That in itself made me think that the people needed to sit down at the table to talk to each other. Even if they had fought each other before and made each other's lives miserable or even killed each other, it was still necessary. So for me, that initiative for the first version of Europe, or my experience of it, was very defining.

Wagemakers: Were your parents still alive then?

Kroes: Yes, sure.

Wagemakers: So what was it like for them? I can imagine that as a four-year-old, what you saw more than anything else was individuals: one got to be an angel, the other was shaved bald. Your parents had also experienced those years and now saw countries sitting down together.

Kroes: After World War II, my father started his own business, a freight company. Using the lorries that the Americans had left behind—he bought them and used them to start the company. His company hauled goods across borders as well, so for him, having no borders and fewer rules was very important for business. My mother was more focused on keeping the family on its feet, trying to figure out in those lean times how to make ends meet.

Wagemakers: You studied economics. In the end, you travelled around the whole world. Do you still remember the first time you left the Netherlands?

Kroes: I was very young then—it was with my father. My father went to visit a business connection in Antwerp and he took me along. And for me the biggest surprise of that trip was that you crossed the border and there was a barrier and you had to show your passport. But what surprised me most was that the grass was just as green on the other side, and the cows looked exactly the same. So why was there a border there? It wasn't as if there was a river, a natural border. People had made it, and I thought that was strange. That was the first time I went abroad that I'm aware of.

Wagemakers: You studied economics at Erasmus University in Rotterdam. The difficulty with interviews of course is that you try to bring everything together into a coherent story in which everything makes sense . . .

Kroes: It makes sense enough as far as that goes. I represented the first generation of my family to go to university, and my father was fine with that. He didn't want me to pay for my studies with a grant, because he didn't want to have anything to do with the government. He felt that that was something you ought to do yourself. We had limited means, because what we had went into the business. He said: you may study, but if you're going to you should study economics, because that way you can continue living at home. And then, even if you quit your studies halfway through after getting your candidate's degree, you can still get a job because you have a candidate's degree in economics. While if you study medicine, you will have nothing and will not be able to get a job.

So it was based on very rational arguments, and once I started studying economics I actually did find it interesting. And the further I progressed in my studies, the more interesting it became. After getting my candidate's degree, I had some income of my own. That's when I became a student assistant, because that way I could rent a room.

Wagemakers: In Rotterdam?

Kroes: Yes, in Rotterdam. I became student assistant to a professor, and people did sometimes mock him a bit. He taught transport and port economics, was a professor and held a top position at Statistics Netherlands. And he had such a passion for Europe, he was already looking far ahead. Which I think was insufficiently appreciated at the time.

Wagemakers: But it did impress you? Or did you also not see it until later?

Kroes: In retrospect, I would say that he was trying to flesh out that vision of Europe. He referred to this “Golden Triangle”: the Ruhr area, the Netherlands, and then on to Belgium and northern France, which would form an economic venture without gaps or obstacles. It was ground-breaking at the time, but he was still something of a voice in the wilderness.

Wagemakers: So what was the dominant view?

Kroes: Well, each country had its own philosophy and its own approach to transport and regulations. It was almost impossible to compare. Germany was extremely strict, and politics there were primarily centred around Deutsche Bahn. There was a lot of direction from the centres of political power, in the area of port policy too—a lot of subsidies were being put into Northern German ports, even though it was much more natural for Germany’s hinterland to use the port of Rotterdam. He was already working on that. And of course there was no PowerPoint back then, we still did presentations with real slides, so the professor and I would travel for government projects, and it was my job to make sure everything was organised. We travelled for instance to northern France and to Germany, like a pair of preachers calling for the creation of a single Europe. So I did have opportunities there as well, yes.

Wagemakers: And when you were travelling like that, did you feel that those other countries, other than Germany, were also open to that? That things were more or less progressing in step?

Kroes: No, no—and the Netherlands was not open to the idea at all either. But of course it was also beneficial to the Netherlands. We had no natural resources, so we barely had any industry based on our own resources. Everything was imported, processed, and then shipped along—we were basically sitting on a hub, where the opportunities granted by our geographic location were fully exploited. A very large sales market, good waterway connections. Pretty good rail connections, too. So that was taken advantage of. But in the German economy, they had much more of their own resources, their own materials.

Wagemakers: So what did they say to you when you'd come along like preachers saying, *Let's work together?*

Kroes: They didn't listen to us straight away. So we were constantly trying to break through those blinkered ways of thinking, in France, in Belgium . . . It was very slow going, it took forever.

Wagemakers: And did that professor—what was his name? Do you remember?

Kroes: Kuiler.

Wagemakers: And did he, how should I put it, did he later feel like he was proven right?

Kroes: I don't know. I lost contact with him.

Wagemakers: Have you ever spoken to him since?

Kroes: He passed away a long time ago. We didn't talk about it, although of course we saw things happening while I was still working with him, but . . .

Wagemakers: But you'd still like to be able to tell him.

Kroes: Yes, and give credit where credit is due. He was ahead of his time.

Wagemakers: And then you went to work at the Chamber of Commerce? That was—

Kroes: I didn't actually work there. I represented road transportation. So, the Chamber of Commerce is an organisation with a board whose members are drawn from all sectors in that region. So I represented [road transportation], but did not work there.

Wagemakers: What was your ambition at the time? Was there something particular that you wanted to be? Because your choice to study economics was partly the result of your father's wishes and partly your own. But did you have any ambitions, any ideas of "this is what I want to become"?

Kroes: I was always involved in the area of logistics, so transport and port economy. Having that at a European scale was kind of a dream to me. Without all those regulations, without needing permits for everything—which had all been set up based on a very narrow perspective. So I wanted to do something about that. And to oversimplify a bit: in science, you could write a paper and you might get complimented, or not, but it would just be left on the shelf. In the business world—I was also involved in my father's company, and I saw that you just ran into these barriers, it was all compartmentalised. So then I thought, I need to go into politics, because that's where the rules are made. That's where the strategy is determined. That's how I ended up in politics. I never thought, as a child, "Politics is where I need to go." No way. But as I started working, I came to the conclusion that if I wanted to change things, or help change things, I had to go into politics.

Wagemakers: So in that sense your political awareness was not exactly instilled at home.

Kroes: Oh no, no. I was raised in a liberal family, with an entrepreneur father. “The government should have as little role as possible.” Which was also why he felt that if I wanted to study, he would pay for it, but I had better do my very best, because if you laze about at my expense you can just go find a job somewhere.

Wagemakers: That’s when you ended up in the Municipal Council of Rotterdam. That was basically the first step.

Kroes: The first step, yes.

Wagemakers: And then you became a state secretary.

Kroes: No, first the Lower House.

Wagemakers: First the Lower House. Then you became a state secretary.

Kroes: Yes.

Wagemakers: That’s when you were given the Transport, Public Works, and Water Management portfolio.

Kroes: Yes.

Wagemakers: Would you have preferred a different portfolio at the time? Because it was so directly in line with—

Kroes: No, not at all. It’s really as if, in that respect, my working life was cut out to be that way.

Wagemakers: Yes, indeed.

Kroes: I was fascinated by logistics and the connections between people and between communities and so on. So I couldn’t have dreamed a better choice than Transport, Public Works, and Water Management. On top of that, I had a fantastic minister, because ministers and state secretaries must work together. This minister’s background was in agriculture, and he said to me: I don’t know anything about this, I need you. So I was given complete freedom—I couldn’t have asked for more.

Wagemakers: Later, you became Minister of Transport, Public Works, and Water Management. You were part of the national government for twelve years. Now, the eighties were the years of free trade and liberalism—so in those years, was there a moment when you saw that breakthrough, from the point in time when you first went abroad to Antwerp and were confronted with those barriers and thought, “Why does it have to be like this,” to a point where you felt like, “Hey, there is some real movement gaining traction on Europe”?

Kroes: Well, of course it's a bit like the Echternach dancing procession. A few steps forward, then a few steps back again, because in the end it was the big partners who set the tempo. So as a small country, it was a constant fight to keep things moving along. My portfolio included air traffic, an industry that was more far-reaching than just Europe, and airlines were very cartelised back then. The big companies were in control, which included KLM as the oldest airline business. You could really tell, looking at the prices; it was obvious that the big companies were monopolising everything. This was just around the time that prosperity was increasing, so people were beginning to want to see more, to travel. I'll never forget how we had these transport councils with members from different countries, and I remember this moment when the English representative and I, we were sitting on the windowsill talking about how we'd have to push through at some point, somehow. Those big companies were still dictating everything, and we said to each other: we need to liberalise air transport, and then see what happens. That way, you'd no longer be restricted to big airports, you'd be able to have more than just one important airport per country.

To cut a long story short: together—and England is no small country, of course— together we took the initiative for that liberalisation, in order to make it possible to, for example, have flights from Amsterdam not just to Heathrow, but also to Birmingham, Manchester, and so on. My English colleague's idea was that this would open up a big piece of his country, because by establishing a connection with Amsterdam, you had a connection to the world, you know, since Amsterdam was a global hub.

So those kinds of developments, where we managed to break open a previously locked-down market, yes, that would be an example of what you were asking about.

Wagemakers: So what does Europe mean for you, then? First there was the war, then the peace that followed, and then we get the increasingly unified economic Europe. So: when do you feel like a European?

Kroes: Day and night.

I stood in front of the wall with my German colleague, not in Berlin but farther to the south. I saw that border, with barbed wire and armed people, saw how it cut a village in two—my colleague told me that families had been torn apart. That really brought home to me that Communism was something we couldn't allow, that we had to resist. And you knew that those people were still receiving messages from the West, so they dreamed of maybe being part of Europe one day. That is part of the explanation why so many countries joined Europe later on, perhaps too many in too short a time, but bear in mind that the arguments behind that were in large part military and geopolitical arguments: these countries have been liberated from Communism, and now they want to join us,

and although they may not quite satisfy the rules of the game, we have to take them now or they might end up joining the other side.

Wagemakers: It was a question of values, of “what do you want to be a part of.”

Kroes: Yes, and that involved taking risks. Greece became a member even though they were far from ready, but if we hadn’t brought them into the fold back then, they would have fallen into the hands of the Soviet Union. So there are a lot of geopolitical aspects to the game, even though originally it was definitely an economic collaboration.

Wagemakers: Yes. But sometimes people talk about the economy as if it were value-neutral, as if it were just a technique.

Kroes: The economy does represent a value. The economy is prosperity for people, and that means education, public health, taking care of nature, and so on. The prosperity attached to the economy—having a job—is so important, and it’s easy to talk big when you yourself have already got all of that.

Wagemakers: Where were you when the Wall came down?

Kroes: The Hague.

Wagemakers: And I guess you stayed up all night and watched it?

Kroes: Yes, and I regretted not being there in person. [*laughs*]

Wagemakers: So what were your thoughts when it happened? Was that the symbolic moment when . . . ?

Kroes: Well, yes, it was definitely a very important moment.

Wagemakers: I assume you were watching together with the other ministers and state secretaries? I think it was right before you resigned from national politics?

Kroes: No, it was right after—it was late November, and I think our cabinet had ended in early November. I believe I had just become a free agent.

Wagemakers: What’s also interesting is that these days, we increasingly see that when talking about Europe, there are two kinds of people: those who see it as something with value in and of itself, and those who talk about it either in negative terms, as a “bureaucracy,” or in positive terms, as “a way to get things done together.” Those two types seem to have difficulty finding common ground, as if these views were mutually exclusive. Have you experienced this as well? Europe—it remains a difficult concept to explain.

Kroes: Yes, and there is also a contradiction in that, isn’t there? Lots of people travel, make phone calls, and do all sorts of things that, in essence, cover a larger area—that is, Europe. They see that as normal. They also consider it normal that when they go to the supermarket, they can find everything they need, and so on. But then, when it

comes to the discussion about whether you are pro-Europe or against it . . . Look, in every organisation where agreements are made, there are people who tend to over-regulate things. But the way I see it, if you feel that things are over-regulated, then try to do something about that. But don't throw out the baby with the bathwater.

Wagemakers: Now there are people who are saying that the European project is failing.

Kroes: No!

Wagemakers: Absolutely not?

Kroes: No, no. In fact, I think it's incredible what we have now. Best not to get too deep into whether I have any pet wishes about how we could have got here faster or how things could develop faster now or how much there still is left to do, but if you think about it, it really is fascinating: there has been no war in this region we all share since 1945. That alone is historically unique. High levels of overall prosperity. Education. Public health. Now, compare that to other parts of the world. I say we have Europe to thank for that, among other things. And we may be down to twenty-seven members now—well, almost—and things are not the same anymore, but it remains a fact that several of those countries have really been able to pick themselves up because of Europe. That's fantastic. So to look at that and still say, "I don't like it" . . . In many cases, I think it's a case of a nostalgic longing for the past. With regard to Brexit, I tell my English friends: you are busy projecting your colonial past onto the present. But that will never work. It's the past—even disregarding the ethical aspects, it's the past. You can't go back to that.

Wagemakers: On the one hand we have the promise of Europe, but now with Brexit, we have the promise of "take back Britain," which apparently appeals to some.

Kroes: Yes, because lies are being propagated. I think it's a disgrace what some politicians are doing. You can have a discussion and have different opinions, but don't lie. That's appalling to me. And when people choose to start lying, then they can justify just about anything.

Wagemakers: You witnessed the birth of that awareness of "Europe," but now with Brexit, and in the Netherlands as well, we are seeing that awareness change, dwindle. Do you feel that that project, those values, are under pressure? Or is it a matter of two steps forward, one step back?

Kroes: The latter, yes—Echternach. Though we shouldn't underestimate the fact that some people really are very serious about it, so we need to debate, communicate, explain the benefits of Europe and admit that perhaps some things have been over-regulated. And some things are just not true. When people say that there are so many

bureaucrats—all the civil servants involved in the European project together add up to less than the number of civil servants in this city [Amsterdam]. And when you tell people that, they say, “No way.” Yes way—it’s the truth.

Wagemakers: Sometimes I feel—I’m a bit younger than you, of course—

Kroes: A lot younger! [*laughs*]

Wagemakers: —that many people, even politicians, refuse to say anything positive about Europe that is not followed by “but.” It’s like, “Okay, we’ll talk about Europe’s achievements, but not everything works.”

Kroes: There are certain issues that you can’t tackle on your own. Climate. The issue of migration. Safety in general, security, with digital technology. All the possibilities we have today are no longer bound by borders. That’s why I made such an effort with regard to roaming charges, because it was ridiculous that telephone providers used methods of calculations that factored in borders. I mean, come on, there are no borders anymore! Borders are often used to such ends, but when you try to do something about it, people resist. To that I say: Why don’t we talk about what’s really bothering you? But free travel, the fact that you only need to bring one wallet because you don’t have to exchange currency everywhere you go, those are good things.

Wagemakers: So what do you think it is that really bothers people?

Kroes: The misapprehension—in my view, but that doesn’t change the fact that people feel that way—that we are losing our culture. It’s not true—of course we’re not losing our culture. We are still celebrating Saint Nicholas, and so on. Nevertheless, some people are claiming that a unified Europe will result in a bland uniformity. But the Frisians haven’t had to give up their culture because they are part of the Netherlands. And Limburg’s culture is still there. So conclusions are being drawn, sometimes on purpose, sometimes unconsciously, that are in fact untrue, that are based on nothing—or an attempt to influence the discussion through dishonest means.

Wagemakers: Is there anyone you looked up to, as a politician, with regard to the story of Europe?

Kroes: Well, yes, those men—they were all men—who sat around that table in 1957. They showed guts. The German chancellor and the French president sitting at the table and signing that treaty even though they had been fighting each other on the battlefield not long before. They really had to shrug off their own past.

Wagemakers: You sat at those tables yourself, later on.

Kroes: Yes.

Wagemakers: So what kind of agreement do you need to have before starting such a meeting? Because you have to make it work, somehow.

Kroes: Yes. Compromises. Compromises. And it's easy to say that there are much faster and better ways of doing it, but you have to bear in mind that—it's a bit like a family. You can't just dictate how things should be done—everyone has to feel the same way.

Wagemakers: And that takes time.

Kroes: That takes time. And arguments.

Wagemakers: Was there any point along your career path—which looks so logical in retrospect—where you feel now that perhaps you should have taken a different path in order to achieve even more? I mean, you made the choice to go into politics because you felt that was where you could achieve something, then you stepped away from politics, then you stepped back in.

Kroes: Yes. Well, at most—and hindsight is always easier, of course—I suppose it could all have gone a bit faster. But some things simply need time. Age helps with that, with realising that you can't force everything, even while knowing that we won't live forever.

Wagemakers: So how far into your life have we got at this point?

Kroes: That's another thing, isn't it? The realisation of how much has been achieved in the span of one human life. It's incredible.

Wagemakers: Do you feel that your children realise that, too?

Kroes: My son went to America, became an American. My grandchildren are Americans. To my grandchildren, Europe is the mythical land of Far Away. They do visit, of course, but . . .

Wagemakers: But they don't see themselves as Europeans.

Kroes: No, they wouldn't.

Wagemakers: And how does your son view Europe? The American perspective is interesting, of course.

Kroes: Well, he really is an immigrant, so he's stuck between places. He will always be Dutch—he's got the Dutch straightforward attitude, and so on. That's something he runs up against in American society, where this attitude is not always appreciated. He is interested in American politics, but is exasperated by the current goings-on there. Back when I was politically active, he wasn't very interested in politics, didn't like it. Rebelling a bit against his mother, perhaps.

Wagemakers: When you look at the political debate about Europe now, would you say that it's a different kind of debate than when you were in politics?

Kroes: Yes—there are more parties. A lot more parties. And there is that confrontation with those who are “against.” Things are often very black-and-white now, very us-versus-them. So that's different, yes.

Wagemakers: And the promise of Europe, is that still the same? That safety?

Kroes: Yes, and I think—but this is something you are probably better able to answer than myself—that your generation has come to view the “no more wars” argument as worn-out. “What are you talking about, there is no more war.” But me, I still have a clear image of war in my mind. I think that your generation is saying: quit obsessing about that.

Wagemakers: Because of my work, I do see that, but looking at my daily life, Europe primarily is convenience and enrichment. The Erasmus programme, for example.

Kroes: But I imagine that your friends have probably grown somewhat tired of the pro-Europeans' argument of “no war”.

Wagemakers: Yes, but that might also be because people no longer fear war as in country-versus-country, but rather in the form of terrorism.

Kroes: Yes, that's a good point.

Wagemakers: Do you feel that Europe has an answer to that?

Kroes: No, not yet, but it urgently needs to. You raise a very good point, because it is of course much more about the infiltration of ideologies that we want to stay far away from. And that is something you can only address at a European or global level. So the scope has become a lot bigger because of that. And on top of that there is the rise of China and the US turning its back on the world. We'll end up sandwiched between those two sides if we don't come up with an alternative of our own.

Wagemakers: What kind of alternative?

Kroes: Our own policies, our own strategies. As far as that goes, I find the new European Commission . . . There are early signs of a desire to act rather than play the waiting game, and that's hopeful. It's a new kind of war, and it's a global playing field.

Wagemakers: Do we still have the reins in hand? Or is Europe really being sandwiched?

Kroes: It's not too late yet, but we do need to act. Urgently.

Wagemakers: And what are the biggest challenges?

Kroes: Climate, immigration, security.

Wagemakers: You have not mentioned the word “Russia.”

Kroes: Yes—it’s not part of Europe.

Wagemakers: No, that’s true, but you mentioned China and the US.

Kroes: Yes. China is bigger.

Wagemakers: Some are saying that this is the beginning of a new Cold War. What do you think of that? What did the Cold War mean for you? I find it difficult to imagine, since it’s such an abstract concept.

Kroes: Well, we were confronted with it even as children. And whether it was a cold war or not, when the Korean War happened my mother began stockpiling food. As a child, I saw the cupboards fill up with bags of rice and so on, because my parents never wanted to experience hunger again like during the [Second World] War. That was really one of the things that started the Cold War, and then later there was Czechoslovakia, Hungary, et cetera. Those were certainly things that had an impact and were discussed around me. So is that happening again now? To me, the point you raised earlier is much more important—that infiltration in society. That infiltration has a source somewhere, of course, and the sources vary widely: sometimes it’s religion or semi-religion, sometimes it’s politics.

Wagemakers: The role of religion has changed as well.

Kroes: Yes.

Wagemakers: Do you come from a religious family?

Kroes: Yes, Dutch Reformed, originally. I went to Dutch Reformed schools.

Wagemakers: My grandparents were Reformed too. But you personally are not religious?

Kroes: No.

Wagemakers: But you did have to go to church—rather austere, weren’t they, the Dutch Reformed churches.

Kroes: Yes.

Wagemakers: How did the church portray things? Was the world an actual subject that was addressed?

Kroes: Politics gradually became more of a theme, at least among some of the pastors. But I didn’t stay around for very long.

Wagemakers: Did the Cold War scare you?

Kroes: Well . . . I've been part of cabinets that had to deal with cruise missiles. And you don't have cruise missiles because they look pretty.

Wagemakers: Did it ever keep you awake at night? I mean, war is such an abstract concept, especially for my generation, and the Cold War during the eighties was certainly an abstract thing as well. We see crises happen on TV all the time, but they don't actually affect us personally. Did you, as a member of the cabinet, ever experience it as having a real impact?

Kroes: While I was still in Parliament, I travelled to South Vietnam, where I witnessed warfare at the border. That was the first time that I actually had to be protected because there was shooting going on. You could hear it. And that changes things of course, it made the war into something I could visualise.

Wagemakers: I imagine that was a very visceral experience.

Kroes: Yes. You see the consequences, the victims. And then you realise that you talk about war, but a lot of the time you don't see it.

Wagemakers: How did this affect you personally?

Kroes: I felt that it was always the wrong people who became victims. That it's the poor who foot the bill, who go hungry.

Wagemakers: Like now—they say that IS has been defeated, but it feels like something very distant.

Kroes: Yes, but they're not. And it isn't.

Wagemakers: How do you see the conflict in Ukraine? Essentially there is a war going on in European territory.

Kroes: Ukraine isn't part of the European Union, it's a neighbouring country. So there is in fact nothing going on in European territory—which is a real achievement. Otherwise we wouldn't be surprised that one of our neighbouring territories is in such a situation. There definitely is war, yes, but not in European territory.

Wagemakers: Europe is something that happens gradually—we can see things moving along, but we don't quite know in what direction. How do you picture Europe thirty years from now?

Kroes: It depends on so many things. It of course gives me hope that your generation can't really conceive of a world without Europe anymore. It's as if I were to think that we could let go of Limburg—it's just not possible. So Europe will remain, and hopefully even stronger and playing an even larger innovative role.

Wagemakers: When it comes to your area of expertise, technology, Europe is not all that relevant. The apps on my phone are American, and my surfing behaviour is tracked in America, China, and other countries.

Kroes: Yes, we have been much too modest in that regard, because there are of course a number of areas in which we are very good, such as quantum computing and nanotechnology.

Wagemakers: You have been active throughout your life. I saw you at De Balie when Hedy D'Ancona asked you whether you were a feminist. You also were awarded the Aletta Jacobs Prize [in recognition of contributions made to the cause of women's emancipation]. Europe was very much a male affair—you mentioned all the men around the table in 1957.

Kroes: Men dominated not just governance, but everything, yes. At best, one could hope that their wives gave them advice at home.

Wagemakers: When you were young, did you feel like you had to fight for your seat at the table?

Kroes: I felt very strongly at a very young age that I did not want to be financially dependent on anyone. And even as a child I dreamt of not having to ask my parents' permission to do or buy something. So I thought: I have to try my hardest. I remember the first time I had my own money, that I had personally earned—money I could spend as I saw fit.

Wagemakers: What did you spend it on?

Kroes: I bought a present for my mother, though I don't remember the reason. But in any case, I wanted to be independent. I feel that's the way it should be in marriage as well. You should stay with someone because you love them, not because you're financially dependent on them. That's why I always encourage young women to finish their studies, get work experience, so they'll never be dependent on someone. Did I have to fight for my place? Back then, when I studied economics, there were very few female students. In my work and in my political work, it was all men. And you shouldn't think that you can go ahead and change the rules all on your own. But I did strive to bring in more women, because that way you get a varied society, more variation in meetings. But I also realised that as long as I was on my own or with one or two others, there was no way I would manage to change things.

I was against a quota, I believed we could do it under our own steam, until I saw the figures—this was still in the previous century—and I thought: I'm going to need a hundred lifetimes to get somewhere with this, it's not going to happen. So a quota is necessary to create that shift, not forever, but to bring about the change.

Wagemakers: You also need role models.

Kroes: I was never that big on role models.

Wagemakers: How come?

Kroes: I never collected the bubble gum movie star cards or anything. Later, much later, there was one role model for me, and that was mostly because of the focus of her work. It was an Italian lady, eighty-eight years old when I met her, and she was involved in a scientific project that was funded by Europe. It was about robotisation for the elderly, allowing older people to continue living at home for longer, with a robot that reminded you when to take your medication and so on.

I told my secretary that I wanted to meet her next time I was in Rome. So the next time I was there I went and visited her and I saw how she was telling these professors what to do, communicating online, at eighty-eight years old. Afterwards, I asked her what her life had been like.

Long story short, she said: I was sixteen when I married, and my husband did not want me to get an education or to travel. Two things that were very important to me, that I enjoyed. When I was seventy-two, my D-Day happened. What do you mean? I asked. She said: he died. That made it possible for me to go to school, to university. I travelled, wrote books, and now I'm involved in a scientific project. That was the ultimate proof for me that you're never too old to realise your dreams, so we should remember that! How often do we say: if I were younger, I would...

Wagemakers: My mother was not allowed to study, only work, because it brought in money.

Kroes: Really you could still say: go study now! Dream! Dream that you're never too old to do anything.

Wagemakers: Is there anything you'd still like to learn?

Kroes: I'm sure there is! I have always said, and I should start living up to it, that I would love to spend a few months living in one city, then a few months in another. But I keep telling myself that my busy schedule won't allow it—which is nonsense, of course.

Wagemakers: In which city would you start?

Kroes: Rome. Like [Dutch non-fiction writer] Geert Mak did. Not as a tourist, but as a researcher.

Wagemakers: What's stopping you? Yourself?

Kroes: Yes. And my recent discovery of Amsterdam.

Wagemakers: Finally: do you ever have time to take stock? To review your life? Or is that something you don't do?

Kroes: I suppose that depends on what you mean by "review." I certainly think about life sometimes.

Wagemakers: But are you proud?

Kroes: That brings me back to my Calvinist background. I learned that pride is improper. I have been privileged to get all the opportunities that I did, but I also worked hard for it. Blood, sweat, and no tears. Satisfied, yes—some days more than others, but that goes for everyone.

Wagemakers: What is the most important thing you would say to a younger person who wants to keep Europe alive?

Kroes: Never take arguments for granted and don't just go with the flow; stick to your own position. Develop yourself, on the basis of the facts but also your dreams.

Wagemakers: You had a dream. What was that?

Kroes: No more war. Most wars are caused by differences in prosperity. When one group thinks that their lives would improve by fighting another group. If you can extend the reach of the economy a bit further, so that others have opportunities as well . . .

Wagemakers: But people are very critical; even the VVD is saying that market ideology is more problematic than we thought.

Kroes: Yes, but I'm not going to bad-mouth my own party.

Wagemakers: It's not about the party, I mean that the attitudes have changed.

Kroes: But it is about the party—and a very important party in terms of power. People have been cynical about Europe, and not always justifiably so, to put it mildly. Prejudiced. About all those officials and rules—well, do something about it then! The ministers were personally there, at the table in Brussels, when the decisions were being made. Then they came back saying, "You won't believe what they've decided this time." Come on, you were a part of it too!

But also with regard to the possibilities for the Netherlands, to the young generation, I say: take part in that debate. Don't think that it doesn't affect you.

Wagemakers: The question politicians are always trying to answer is, "What can Europe do for me?", but it should go the other way as well: "What can I do for Europe?"

Kroes: Exactly.