

CDE4Peace

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Strategic Autonomy for the Masses

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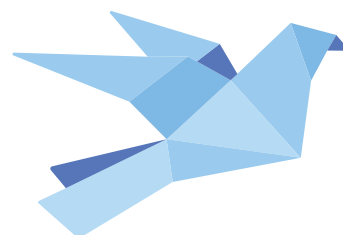
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After a controversial diplomatic visit to Moscow on February, 5-th 2021 the High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission (HR/VP) Josep Borrell faced sharp criticism. Over 70 Members of the European Parliament (out of 705) said the EU foreign policy chief must resign – or be sacked – over what they called a ‘humiliating’ performance by Borrell. The EU foreign policy chief defended his trip to Moscow as ‘important’ and said he would propose sanctions in response to Russia’s refusal to engage on human rights. This incident could be interpreted in different ways. First, it shows that in institutional terms the HR/VP position is truly a ‘mission impossible’ given the complexities of forging a common foreign and security policy at the EU level.¹ In geopolitical terms it reveals widely diverging perceptions and views on the EU’s posture towards major powers, such as Russia and the U.S. Geopolitical preferences differ not only among Member States but also within European societies. It could be argued that this is actually a healthy state of affairs for a democratic union like the EU, that does not seek total control over the Member States’ foreign and security policies. Of course, the negative interpretation would be that the EU is to great extent an astrategic actor which is not able to display ‘power’ on the international arena.²

Against Elitism in EU peace-building and the CSDP

The example which comes from EU foreign policy is suggestive for the state of play in the related policy fields of EU conflict prevention, peace-building and the wider EU Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). All these closely interconnected policy areas fall within the remit of the European External Action Service (EEAS) headed by the HR/VP. They are generally considered to be part of EU ‘high politics’ and reserved for the political class at the EU and Member States’ level, for selected experts and academics. The complex problems of EU conflict prevention, peace-building and the CSDP are usually discussed behind closed doors by a cabal of politicians and experts in high-level bodies shrouded in mystery and inexplicable abbreviations. Parts of the mainstream academia have also played a role in developing this preposterous ‘elitist’ image of EU conflict prevention, peace-building and the wider CSDP with the specific ‘highbrow’ methodological tools of the academic trade. The predominance of the ‘elitist’, top-down approach in this policy area has been one of the major setbacks for its development in the two decades of its existence.

Little wonder that this ‘high-level’ policy area has actually very low public appeal all over Europe and most Europeans cannot grasp its relevance for their lives. Neither EU common security and defence, nor EU conflict prevention and peace-building are ever possible without the active involvement of European citizens and societies. Hence, this Policy Brief seeks to find ways for involving the common people of Europe in forging the EU’s common policies for peace and security. An ideal opportunity in this respect is the new concept of strategic autonomy which has been gaining traction in Europe over the last years.



Strategic autonomies in a Strategic compass

Strategic autonomy was first introduced in the EU Global Strategy (adopted in 2016) but was not clearly defined in the document.³ As argued by Fiott, there are three different conceptual visions of strategic autonomy in the EU.⁴ The first vision of strategic autonomy is that of responsibility. This vision links directly to the notion that European states should take up a greater share of the burden inside NATO and, when appropriate, through the EU. Under this vision, autonomy is defined as the freedom to conduct missions and operations autonomously rather than the freedom from dependencies on the U.S. The second vision interprets strategic autonomy as hedging. Strategic hedging can be seen as a way to ensure that EU defence structures and policies are autonomous and effective enough to take on a range of military tasks should the U.S. gradually withdraw from Europe over time. The third and most radical vision is strategic autonomy as strategic emancipation. Obviously, the three conceptual visions have very different geopolitical implications for Europe. These widely diverging visions reflect the diverging geopolitical inclinations on the Continent and the different foreign policy priorities of the major European political parties. Hence, it is more precise to speak of 'EU strategic autonomies' in plural.

The debate on strategic autonomy is currently being channelled through the so-called strategic compass. The strategic compass is a 'flagship' initiative at the EU level which seeks to strengthen a common European security

and defence culture and help define the right objectives and concrete goals of EU policies. In practice the strategic compass will be another high-level EU document with compromise texts on global and regional threats, conflicts in the Neighbourhood, challenges by state and non-state actors. As argued by Nováky, a compass is only useful if it can tell the navigator where north is.⁵ Likewise, for the strategic compass to be successful, the EU needs to set a clearly defined strategic north. Another great challenge is the democratic legitimacy of the strategic compass. Once again, the policy process is designed as a high-level initiative to be conducted without the involvement of common EU citizens. Therefore, it is not difficult to predict the actual level of grassroots support for strategic autonomy and the strategic compass all over Europe. So, the question is how to break the cycle of low-impact 'high-level' initiatives in this very important, yet almost unknown EU policy area and to get real popular support for it?



The 'spirit' of Concept development and experimentation

Sometimes hope can come from unexpected places. In this case this could be a syncretic NATO policy process and scientific methodology named Concept development and experimentation (CD&E). CD&E is defined as one of the tools that drive NATO's transformation by enabling the structured development of creative and innovative ideas into viable solutions for capability development.⁶ It is a broad framework which includes multiple methods, such as modelling and simulation (M&S), operational analysis, scenario development, exercise-based experiments, alternative analysis etc. The most important thing in CD&E is that every concept has to be tested through experimentation in order to be validated. In the case of strategic autonomy, the most relevant experimentation method is a participatory experiment in which European citizens participate directly in the political decision on the actual substance, meaning and implications of strategic autonomy. Although not a CD&E method in the strict sense of the word, such a participatory experiment is fully in line with the experimental 'spirit' of CD&E.

A participatory experiment on the concept of strategic autonomy is needed

Overall, EU conflict prevention, peace-building and the CSDP do not have a wide appeal in European societies. Mainstream references to Eurobarometer surveys are not convincing as the formulation of the survey questions, the lack of more diversified alternative choices and contextualization strongly affect the survey results.⁷ The strategic compass and debates on strategic autonomy give the opportunity for

more active involvement of European citizens in the decision-making process in this policy area. If appropriately streamlined, the principle of European sovereignty could facilitate the attainment of EU strategic autonomy instead of hampering the process.



An EU-wide referendum on EU strategic autonomy

A possible solution for overcoming the credibility deficit in the policy area would be to institute an EU-wide referendum on EU strategic autonomy. A similar proposal has already been made with regard to EU defence⁸ but has not come to fruition. Direct democratic participation of European citizens in the decision-making process can give legitimacy and public support to strategic autonomy, regardless of which of the three different conceptual visions would be chosen:

- *Strategic autonomy as responsibility;*
- *Strategic autonomy as hedging; or*
- *Strategic autonomy as emancipation.*

The three conceptual visions on strategic autonomy should be subject to an EU-wide referendum held simultaneously in all EU Member States to determine in the most democratic way the course of action to be pursued by the competent EU institutions, and especially by the EEAS. As noted in a recent study commissioned by the European Parliament, referendums on EU matters are here to stay and will continue to be central to the EU's future.⁹

Under the current EU law, the most suitable participatory democracy instrument for this participatory experiment is the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) which has the main features of a referendum at the EU level.¹⁰ The ECI is considered a seminal achievement in terms of providing for channels for direct citizen participation on the equivalent of federal level issues.¹¹ Despite its limitations the ECI is the EU's fledgling instrument of supranational direct democracy. The European Citizens' Initiative enables citizens from EU Member States to come together around an issue they consider important with a view to influencing EU policy-making. Once an initiative gathers 1 million signatures with minimum thresholds achieved in at least 7 EU countries, the European

Commission must decide whether or not to take action. As a result, the Commission may propose a legislative proposal in the respective policy area, the area of EU conflict prevention, peace-building and the CSDP in this case. Carrying out European Citizens' Initiative on the alternative visions of strategic autonomy would be a clear expression of European sovereignty. Thus, strategic autonomy could offer an ideal opportunity for exercising the nascent European sovereignty as the supreme source of legitimate power in the Union.

The proposed EU-wide referendum on strategic autonomy will help define the substance of this strategic concept. Critics speak of EU 'dreams of strategic autonomy', highlighting confusion on what strategic autonomy actually means in practice.¹² Dreams are indispensable to human life, yet strategic autonomy should indeed overcome the surrealist realm in which it presently exists. Giving more substance to the term would be very useful in terms of enhancing this EU policy area. And it is up to the EU citizens to shape the meaning of strategic autonomy.

Apart from the substance issue an EU-wide referendum could give a clearer picture on the foreign policy and geopolitical preferences of Europeans. Each of the three conceptual visions on strategic autonomy has different geopolitical implications, hence popular support for one of them would indicate the geopolitical inclinations of the majority of Europeans. It is also likely that two or even the three alternative visions would have similar results in an EU-wide referendum. This would be a clear sign for deep divisions within European societies on strategic-related issues which should be taken into account by EU policy-makers. For sure, enforcing one vision of strategic autonomy on all Europeans despite their unwillingness to support it in a people's vote would not be democratic. In this case, future EU policies in the area of conflict prevention, peace-building and the CSDP should be even more cautious, balanced and limited than today. A reassessment of the need to invest considerable political and financial capital in this policy area would be possible and desirable.

Conclusions

Inclusivity has been one of the 'buzzwords' in the EU jargon over the last years, closely related with the so-called 'local turn' in peace-building declared by some academics. Inclusivity, though, cannot only be preached outside the EU; it should also be practiced within the EU. An EU-wide referendum on strategic autonomy would be a concrete example of the EU's ability to implement inclusivity in its own realm. Such a referendum will give substance and democratic legitimacy to the concept of strategic autonomy, and help define EU conflict prevention, peace-

building and the CSDP in a way that is appealing to the common people of Europe. Debates over the referendum and the results thereof will also show whether EU conflict prevention, peace-building and the wider CSDP are at all compatible with the 'European way of life' as perceived by the common people of Europe. Thus, a bottom-up experiment inspired by the scientific methodology of Concept development and experimentation could help bridge the gap between the citizens and the Union in this strategic EU policy area.

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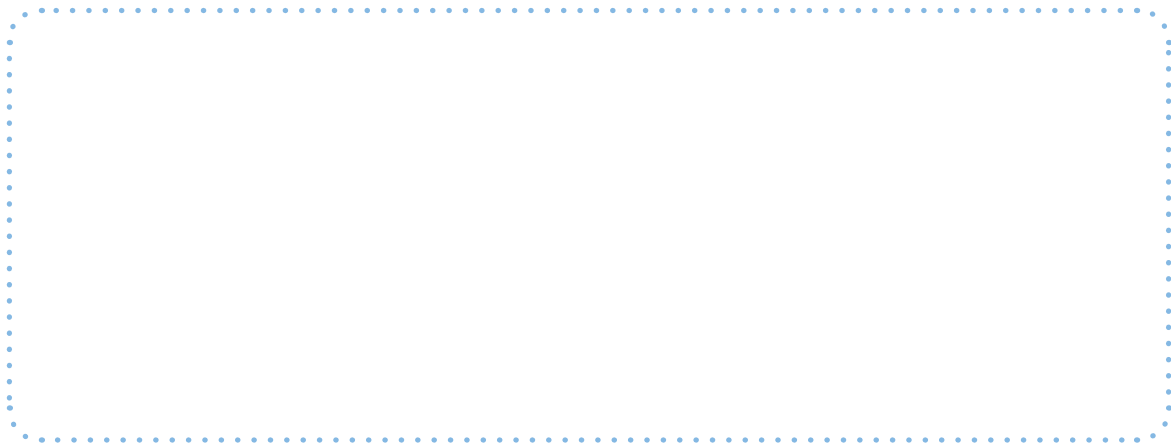
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About CDE4Peace

CDE4Peace is a Marie Curie project funded under the EU's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation programme (GA no. 882055). The project's principal research objective is to explore the potential of Concept Development and Experimentation for enhancing the EU's conflict prevention and peace-building policy. The project's hypothesis is that Concept Development and Experimentation could serve as a tool for politically independent, unbiased

and safe experimentation of novel concepts and approaches in the field of EU conflict prevention and peace-building. The project's research and innovation objectives are closely related to the current developments in the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) which forms the political framework of EU conflict prevention and peace-building. The project is hosted by the Vienna-based research and innovation company SYNYO GmbH.



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