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Peace in the world: what can the EU really achieve?

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Peace in the world: what can the EU really achieve?

Bonn, Berlin 10 December 2012. In 2012 the Norwegian Nobel Committee has defied the doom-and-gloom scenarios hanging over the European integration project in the current financial and debt crisis like a sword of Damocles. Instead, it has recalled that Europe's transformation from a continent of war to one of peace has been the greatest accomplishment of the European Union (EU). This is especially true at a time of crisis. In its explanation, the Committee turns its eyes to the European interior: such former arch-enemies as France and Germany have become permanent friends and close partners, and the division into East and West has been overcome. It also sees the EU's foreign policy as having an important role to play: the EU enlargement policy is, according to the Committee, contributing to reconciliation in the Balkans; it is also having an impact beyond its borders in Europe and so helping to spread democracy and human rights. It therefore seems no accident that the award of the Nobel Peace Prize today, 10 December, coincides with the United Nations' Human Rights Day.

Indeed, the EU has never been more outspoken in its support for the promotion of democracy and human rights in the world than in the last two years: in June 2012, for example, the European Council adopted a strategy paper declaring democracy and human rights to be the overriding goal of European foreign policy. Quite a few cooperation agreements, like those with the sub-Saharan African, Pacific and Caribbean nations, are based on compliance with democratic and human rights standards. At programme level, then, the EU really seems to be serious about supporting human rights and democracy. But what is actually happening?

Great ambitions, poor implementation

Three factors point to there being a wide gap between ambition and reality in the EU's foreign policy.

Firstly, this policy has been characterised in the past by dual standards: the EU's promotion of

democracy and human rights has been particularly robust when and where it has no major geopolitical or economic interests. As soon as such natural resources as oil or security interests are at stake, the EU has been ready to cooperate with dictators and regimes that violate human rights. It has, for example, refrained from reducing its support for Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan despite their obvious and serious abuses of human rights. In Egypt's case, too, the EU appears to be more interested in the infant government's stability than in its adoption of certain standards and values. The EU's position on the attacks on NGOs, political foundations and Coptic Christians shows that human rights are of secondary importance. Although the EU has repeatedly appealed for respect for the rule of law and emphasised the importance of civil society, it has not, in the end, threatened to impose any credible sanctions. This, again, is inconsistent with the goals of the neighbourhood policy pursued by an EU which, in the euphoria of last year's Arab Spring, committed itself to promoting democracy in the region.

Secondly, the financial crisis in the EU is now clearly reflected in its foreign policy: when times are hard, Member States are less prepared to invest in foreign and development policy projects. The EU budget most recently proposed by the Commission for the next seven years, for instance, provides for a 13 percent reduction in expenditure on development cooperation – one of the most important areas of policy for the EU's promotion of democracy and human rights. The European Fund for Democracy established in June 2012 is also having difficulty obtaining financial support from the Member States. Although the external support of democratisation and the protection of human rights costs less than, say, infrastructure measures, the EU will not be able to achieve its ambitious normative goals without sustained financing.

Thirdly, the EU's foreign policy machinery is still far from making a common policy endorsed by all

the Member States possible – especially one aimed at autocracies and transition countries. Most of the day-to-day business between the newly established European External Action Service and the EU Commission, which manages all EU projects, continues to be determined by competition rather than cooperation. Far too often the EU Member States pursue their own interests bilaterally and fail to speak with one voice. Germany, too, is an example of this: only a few days after the announcement of the Nobel Committee's decision, Bundestag President Norbert Lammert called publicly for a halt to EU enlargement, particularly in the direction of south-eastern Europe, on the ground that consolidation should be the Community's first task. In so doing, he is not only opposing all EU Council decisions: he is also further eroding the credibility of the prospect of accession, which for the EU is the most important instrument for stabilising the fragile countries of south-eastern Europe.

The EU must remain credible

These gaps between wishful thinking and reality leave little room for the hope that the EU will be able to follow up its own words with deeds and

promote human rights and democracy effectively in the future. If the EU is serious, it must maintain the coherence and credibility of its own foreign policy. For that it is vital that the EU ensure sustained financing. Cuts in resources for development cooperation, for example, will not only send out the wrong signal to partners throughout the world it will also be a step backwards for the EU's democracy and human rights agenda. One key is also held by the Member States: they should do more to subordinate their own short-term interests to the long-term objective of peace, democracy and human rights. They should recognise that investment in standards and values is worthwhile – even from an economic and security policy perspective. After all, democratic nations do not wage war among themselves, and they cooperate more closely than other countries.

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