

Is Europe Ready to Be Geopolitical?

Summary and Reflections from “Mapping National and Regional Approaches to a More Coherent European Common Foreign and Security Policy: A Workshop” event

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We are celebrating the 10th anniversary since the establishment of the European External Action Service (EEAS) and a year ago the then new European Commission (EC) President Ursula von der Leyen boldly announced that her Commission will be a one with a geopolitical mandate. With such a strong statement come certain expectations and among these are for the European Union (EU) to act more coherently in the international environment, to act quicker, and to acquire a more significant role.

Yet, today, if all else equal, the global shifts have exposed a trajectory of declining influence of the Union in the international stage, according to Stefan Lehne. The multilateralism, as we knew it before, has become blurred. Some global powers, like the U.S. under the Trump administration, were seeking to protect and expand their own interests by unilateral actions, avoiding the multilateral institutions and thus weakening them. And, others, like China, attempt to create new spheres of influence.

In the mist of the changing global environment, divisions within Europe, which are being driven, among others, by political ideologies, identity politics, national agendas and priorities, regional peculiarities, differences of threat perceptions, sometimes even lack of trust, present one of the main obstacles to a more coherent EU common foreign and security policy (CFSP). Doubled with the current lack of decision-making flexibility, complex web of institutional involvement, and limited financial resources on the European level, if well-designed changes and compromise among member-states are not introduced, it is doubtful that the EU will be able to gain much influence in the global environment.

A better equipped and unified EU can be a global power, according to Stefan Lehne, but it needs a more resilient foreign and security policy in many areas, needs to take the lead in re-launching multilateralism (reformed), and needs to initiate Transatlantic relations 2.0.

During the first event of our GEOPE Project “Geopolitical Europe: Are the Member States Ready for It,” a group of esteemed European experts began to tackle the question if there are opportunities to find areas in foreign and security policy where member states can build compromise and the EU can act as a unified unit, quicker and acquire global influence.

We began with mapping out the national approaches to foreign and security policy in Germany, Slovakia and Italy. Later, the experts looked into two specific areas: European strategic autonomy and Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policies.

While there is a certain excitement about the ambition for having a Geopolitical Europe, in Germany, Slovakia and Italy, sobering concerns appear. For example, according to Roderick Parkes, the German response to EC’s Geopolitical Europe and France’s strategic autonomy is



“Europe’s capacity to act” necessity. The focus is on strengthening processes and institutions, based on future-oriented scenarios and specific aims. At the same time, the German foreign policy is adapting to the global changes. Importance is placed on key relationships, e.g. France, thus some German priorities reflect the priorities of those strategic partners. In the meantime, global actors like China are treated with more caution—trying to find a balance between trade relations and moral expectations. Today, Germany is prepared to take a stand on some moral issues, trying to overcome the accusations of double standard. Such shift can play a role in EU’s CFSP related to sanctions, relations with third countries, democracy and rule of law promotion, and multilateralism.

In Slovakia, where the CFSP is seen as an amplifier to the voice of the small country, the promise of Geopolitical Europe fits well. Yet, there is an apprehension for this initiative, according to Tomas Valasek, not to become “non-American” or an alternative to NATO, in the defence and security realm. Europe being a stronger, faster and more coherent global actor is not objected and of philosophical grounds the ability to have some independence from the global supply chains is accepted in Slovakia. However, the country and the region have an unwavering commitment to NATO and the U.S. and have the practical guarantees that they are protected. In Slovakia, for example, Russia is perceived as a threat. The worry is two-folded. On the one hand, not all member states (MS) share the same threat perceptions. Where is the guarantee that an action will be taken by Europe to defend the region? On the other hand, in practicality it would be even more dangerous if Europe would receive the responsibility but will not have the means to defend.

With Slovakia and Germany trying to balance between their own national interests, shifting global trends and the promise of a Geopolitical Europe, an unwavering supporter of European integration and Transatlantic relations in the past, Italy has changed its foreign policy narrative. Today only 28% of the Italians trust the EU, according to Matteo Bonomi. This massive shift of public opinion in the last 10 years has been prompted by the asymmetry of impact from the financial and migration crises and the following response from the EU (and other MSs). Today, for Italy some of the main foreign policy priorities are migration (looking for common EU long-term solution), Russia, enlargement (especially accession of Albania) strategic autonomy, but with a caveat to go parallel to Transatlantic relations, viewed as key. As U.K. has been seen in Italy as the one to balance the Franco-German leadership within the EU, with Brexit, there is a certain re-shuffle of players. The process will most likely affect negatively Italy’s position and therefore its ability to influence in deliberations on various foreign and security policy issues.

Can strategic autonomy be a compromise-building policy?

While strategic autonomy makes sense in regard to the external environment, according to Elena Lazarou, only after the interlinks between the different types of such autonomy and the reinforcement of internal solidarity are clarified and strengthened, the initiative can converge the strategic interests of all MSs. After all, not all MSs define strategic autonomy within the realm of defence and security.

The lack of EU-wise accepted concept definition and the lack of clear answers on questions like what we want from strategic autonomy, what kind of autonomy has to be achieved, and when this should be completed, according to Monika Sus and reaffirmed by Gregoire Roos, brings cacophony of voices and not much progress. In her example of Germany there is lack of internal coherence and some discomfort to step up.

Tania Latici, noted that in Romania the culture of strategic thinking is not that refined as in other countries that have a longer tradition of strategy-making. This leads the government to try and



be friendly with various actors, without expressing strong opinions. More recently the country is experiencing a more visible Chinese influence, remains pro-European and it continues to prioritise its relationship with the U.S. As regards the debate at the European level, there are already definitions and a relative common understanding. Now it is time to focus on concrete implementation and deliverables behind the scenes.

How can you build Europe-wide solidarity when it comes to defence, security and the strategic autonomy concept if even within regions, countries perceive threats differently and seek different strategic partnerships, asks Kinga Brudzinska. For example, Poland does not want to give additional power to Brussels, has a long history of close relations with the U.S. and perceives Russia as its main threat. While Hungary is also not willing to surrender any more sovereignty to the European project, it has been keeping very cordial relations with Russia and even breaking EU ranks and testing the Russian COVID vaccine. Slovakia and the Czech Republic, meanwhile, has not placed a great importance to strategic autonomy, with growing concern when it comes to European defence vs NATO defence.

For Austria as a neutral state, Europe is in the heart of its defence and security and it wishes for the EU, as a whole, to have a stronger geopolitical role. This is a different view expressed from other Central European MSs. According to Velina Tchakarova, by starting with a large EU-led geopolitical project, the Union can increase its global role. It can be a connectivity project, for example. The time for such project is now, while the space is not taken but others. Importantly, the EU should involve the U.S. and should be able to provide security for the infrastructure. But, to have an effective CFSP there will need to be a clear split of responsibilities and roles between the EC and different MSs.

The experts see some potential in pursuing strategic autonomy as a channel for more coherent CFSP, but only if the concept is crystalized, MSs' national interests are taken into account, and there are clear roles distributed to all actors involved.

What to do with the enlargement and the neighbourhood policies?

For 16 years the European Neighborhood Policy has been in place but, according to Eleonora Tafuro Ambrosetti, when it comes to the Eastern Partnership (EaP) there have been lost opportunities and it is time for a change in the strategy. MSs have different interests and expectations in the region and so the EU strategy has been suffering from this lack of harmonization. Currently, with an attempt to switch into “less for less” and “more for more” approach, the EU hopes to become a more influential partner in the region. However, at times bilateral agreements between MSs and EaP countries can hinder the relations between the EU and the six EaP states. Thus, the project cannot succeed without making sure that all MSs and their interests are aligned.

Pavel Havlicek stressed that the EaP policy has reached some successes, including the association agreements, promotion of trade and free visa regimes with 3 countries. Especially, where there was interest from the EaP countries to do more the EU has responded. The EaP is a learning process and already there is a new dimension—security resilience and hybrid threats, where Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova are active. More importantly, however, what the enlargement and the neighbourhood policies bring for EU's CFSP is an opportunity to become a Geo-economic actor, by really investing in the regions and focus more on the societies and people's opinions.



While, trying to apply geoeconomics to the Western Balkans and the EaP region is a noble idea, according to Jan Cingel, it would most likely lead to “pouring money to a problem.” Previous experiences show that financial motivations have only solidified the current structures and there is an observation of sliding back from democracy and less eagerness to join the EU or engage closely. Especially de-motivating for Western Balkan countries is to see first-hand the lack of convergence among the MSs on enlargement. Case in point: North Macedonia, being blocked by Greece, France, The Netherlands, and Bulgaria. In addition, taking a stock of 10 years EaP, some achievements have been made but certainly there is no at large transformation.

The Western Balkans have in some sense joined the European market and there is a high convergence in trade, noted Matteo Bonomi. But what is missing is the political will to turn promises into facts. The enlargement process has been dragging for a long time, without producing benefits for the EU, nor the Western Balkans. What is important now is to have constructive relations with the Western Balkans without ambiguities.

There is a mismatch between EU’s and EaP countries’ expectations, according to Peter Balazs. Initially, riding on the high wave of the CEE enlargement, the EU took upon another near-by region to transform into the values and way of life in Europe. On the other side, the EaP countries were expecting solid financial support and perhaps a tangible progress towards closer relations with EU. Today with powerful neighbours like Russia and Turkey in the region the EU has to introduce new bold initiatives for the EaP countries, to address the West Balkans with a regional and not so much bilateral approach and try to re-engage with Russia and Turkey—which at some point in time did opt for closer relations with the EU. Re-engagement will be tricky, and it can involve sectoral approach, e.g. connectivity, energy, already existing networks in education, etc.

Sebastian Schaffer is stressing that there is a claim that the enlargement and EaP neighbourhood policies are successful examples of EU CFSP. But he warns that it depends on what one is considering a success. Intentions are good, but when ambition is lacking and the policies take too long or are reduced to few areas of engagement, then this is not a success story. Investing heavily in the regions or suggesting a feasible alternative to full membership were some possibilities, but today it is too late for them to have an effect. The MSs, placing different importance on the enlargement and neighbourhood policies are hindering the cohesive and fast action of the EU. Without foresight, especially in the context of the other global actors around, these policies cannot be effective.

Our discussion exposed that member states indeed put a great attention to their national priorities and are only slowly starting to adjust them based on global shifts and keeping in mind the EU’s role. Considering mega trends and thinking about strategic foresight can bring the MSs closer to a more coherent CFSP. However, without proper ambition from the MSs and clarity of purpose, scope, deliverables, and responsibilities from all actors involved—national and supranational, it would be challenging to enact successful policies and keep up with the global environment shifts.

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