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Summary

The narratives associated with constructing what were at the time the European Communities identified themselves as peace projects meant to pacify the European continent as well as to prevent a new conflict – as large as that of World War II – from emerging. However, competing narratives regarding the communities' – nowadays the European Union (EU) – construction and consolidation have hindered the path toward greater integration, including capacity-building in sectors like security and defence. This policy brief seeks to understand better the peace narratives which pervade in the EU and how they shape distinct narratives under discussion.

Peace Narratives and the European Union Project

This policy brief stems from a round-table discussion regarding the distinct narratives that have accompanied the European Union's (EU) development. The debate focused particularly on the way in which these evolved, as well as their contribution to creating contestation and cooperation spaces.

The initial narrative, underlining how these actors were constructed, showcased itself as a peace project which sought to pacify the European continent and to prevent a new conflict – as large as World War II – from emerging. However, competing narratives about how those communities – nowadays the European Union (EU) – were constructed and consolidated have hindered the path toward greater integration, as well as capacity-building in sectors like security and defence. This discussion aimed at understanding which peace narratives exist in the EU and how they bring distinct agendas to the table. The participants discussed initially the challenges currently being faced by the EU, agreeing with the fact that they are multiple and differentiated, namely those resulting from Brexit, populist movements, political polarization, terrorism or management migration, refugees, among others. Three issues ought to be underscored, that is, the way in which the peace narrative adapts itself to different contexts and time-periods, the perception of legitimacy connected to a certain narrative (with implications within and outside the EU) and, related to this last point, how they connected to one another within the internal-external nexus. Some issues among these three issues are important for a deeper reflection on the opportunities and difficulties that the EU nowadays faces.

First, the peace narrative associated with the European project's construction and consolidation within a post-World War II context, which was initially tied to a war/peace dichotomy, gradually adapted itself to the internal and international arena's transformation, gaining additional values, such as prosperity, social welfare and well-being, sustainable development and security. These values were also added by way of agreeing with the dominant neo-liberal project that has come to characterise the European project. In fact, liberal peace became the dominant narrative: a security community – the idea that member-states do not conflict with one another – became internalised. This contributed, in turn, to proliferating an ever-expansive view of peace, and understanding was, in effect, visible in the way the Noble Committee substantiated the EU's Noble Peace Prize in 2012. This broader peace narrative that essentially keeps the assumptions that for constructing the European project, such as a fundamental rights Europe, a Europe of values, or even a green Europe, represents a type of reconfiguration that seeks to ensure the institution's main goals and their continuity.

However, some critics view the aforementioned reconfiguration as a path that may well contribute to the EU's militarisation. They underscore recent advances in defence issues, which may, at the limit, symbolize a breaking point from the core peace narrative which has characterised the EU. It is worth bearing in mind, however, that this process is far from conceptual, nor is it clear that this process is actually being taken, despite the new policies and for European defence and security. The main question related to this new-old peace narrative is, indeed, to know whether it is still all-encompassing. In a time when the so-called "permissive consensus" in relation to the European project gave way to "dissensus", as citizens plea to be listened to as well as to participate more actively in the decisions that impact their lives, and as younger generations consider war in the European continent to be just one more episode in a history book, the question is whether the peace narrative is still capable of gaining citizens' support and of uniting them around the European project?

Second, and following from the previous point, the idea of the European project's legitimacy stems mainly from the debate around the peace narrative. The goal is for the narrative to bring political legitimacy back in periods of greater contestation, since it essentially responds to citizens' expectations and their ambitions. From this reflection's point of view, the consensus is that alternative (or complementing) narratives need to be also included within European institutions. The so-called *new* narratives for Europe place the citizen within the centre of its project. They also base themselves on recognising the need of including a clearer means by which to bring the sub-national to European governance, especially by privileging proximity to citizens (in initiatives such as active subsidiarity, dialogue with citizens or a conference about the future of Europe) as a way of reinforcing the European project's legitimacy. In this way the suitability of this project suggests that it cannot avoid the legitimacy that comes from a UE that effectively responds to its citizens' daily issues, or that shows results with a positive impact on their lives ("*a Europe that delivers*").

It is, therefore, desirable to compromise, to have a peace narrative that anchors itself in its citizens' general impulse. This dynamic is, at any rate, visible in the way in which the European narrative transformed itself from an elite-level project (based on the vision of a limited number of political leaders who otherwise justified their goal to found the project) to a citizen-based project; on the grounds that a the broader involvement and a capacity to listen, to adjust and to change, becomes part of the whole continuously (re-)legitimating process. This allows us to think of the institutional narrative construction from below to above (instead of the traditional top-down dynamics) from the point of view of a positive relationship between the EU as an institution and the EU as an expression of its citizens, potentially fostering a European-wide identity. This initiative must, however, overcome the perception which has been growing: one that connects diversity, itself a key feature of the European project, to fragmentation and to excluding the *other*. Instead, inclusive narratives of true "unity in diversity" are necessary. The Erasmus programme appears in this way as a very practical example of this institutional-collective-individual appropriation: it is based on an inclusive, diverse and cosmopolitan narrative. Diluting the prevailing liberal peace into a more cosmopolitan peace would potentially achieve the idea of legitimacy that the narrative tries to propound, sometimes without success.

The third issue relates to the internal-external nexus and to external perceptions of European peace narratives. This dimension is crucial to validating the narrative and to having external actors influence and shape the way in which European citizens - including those who are influenced by the EU's enlargement, development and neighbourhood policies - view this reality. Disillusioned by the Western model, by the difficulty of reconciling the European social model with the neoliberal models and their policies, and by the liberal peace's growing contestation, the EU currently shows internal gaps and dilemmas in its external relations that threaten the actual liberal order.

As it became evident both in the way the relationship with Russia and in the way migration from unstable contexts were managed, internal fragility is frequently exacerbated by external challenges. It seems clear the EU cannot think first of internal peace without also paying attention to what happens around it. In the case of Russia, the post-Crimean narrative exacerbated readings of "another" and an "enemy", justifying militarization logics in both Russia and NATO, leading to an increasingly tense neighbourhood. The "militarization" narrative followed by growing friction in other domains, such as energy, often emphasize how the EU is vulnerable to its giant neighbour. Differences among member-states were also visible, for example, in the difficulties that they faced in agreeing with a sanctions package with Russia and with how the Eastern Partnership was to be managed within this context. Moreover, despite the better instruments with which to struggle against disinformation and propaganda, the European narrative has been challenged by new technologies and their uses, that is, the

attempts to control and model competing narratives. This was especially the case in Russian disinformation campaigns.

In the case of growing migration flows toward Europe, lack of solidarity between member-states, as they attempted to manage the issue, contributed to narratives of intolerance and isolation, as well as to openness, leading to several different spaces of contestation. The European narrative regarding these movements of people has, therefore, evolved within the paradox of security and humanitarianism. The policy has actually materialized itself, though subject to criticism, by way of externalizing migration control. This in turn has led to delegating control outside European territory, which contradicts the principles of good governance and fundamental rights which has tended to characterise the Union.

Building on its specificities and the internal and external challenges, the EU must be capable of casting a peace narrative that drives wills and expectations, that reflects its cosmopolitan project and that also propounds a sophisticated and embracing version of peace.

To that effect, adjusting narratives at all levels of EU acting is essential, thereby mitigating the distances between discourses and action. Without coherence between discourse and action, the narrative loses credibility. Constructing a different narrative from the institution to the people who follow it, contributes to the repetition of slogans whose content is interpreted in manifold manners. External coherency can only be built according to a project that consolidates itself internally. Its internal strength is the basis from which to build external credibility. In the same way, greater internal coherency will be the grounds from which to project external legitimacy and to reinforce the Union's role in international affairs. The peace narrative might be an element that, subject to contextual diversity and sophistication, may affirm itself as a way of combining differences, especially in periods and spaces of greater contestation. Ultimately, it is up to the main actors – the European institutions, states, civil society organisations and citizens – to legitimate the narrative by words and deeds, instead of destabilizing it through logics of fragmentation and even extremism.