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The new European Commission

How to strengthen the EU as a force for global peace

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How to strengthen the EU as a force for global peace

Bonn, 28 October 2019. The new European Commission is still taking shape. Commission President Ursula von der Leyen's team will formally start work on 1 December at the earliest. Four members of the Commission will be responsible for the EU's external cooperation, which includes its EUR 16 billion annual aid budget. These are Spain's Josep Borrell, the EU's High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy; Finn Jutta Urpilainen, Commissioner for International Partnerships; a (still to be confirmed) Commissioner for the European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement, and Slovenia's Janez Lenarčič, who takes over crisis management, including humanitarian aid.

Von der Leyen has announced that her team will be a "geopolitical" commission, with a more strategic approach to external policy. In principle, this is a welcome approach from an international actor with a reputation for glacial decision-making. However, early indications are that the new Commission's approach to international cooperation will be strongly driven by security concerns. This risks not only undermining international aid effectiveness principles that the EU and its member states have signed up to. It also risks compromising the core ideal of the European project, namely that the EU should be a force for sustainable peace in a troubled world, and that it should pursue this objective via civilian, rather than military, means.

Securitization – which on one hand means treating policy issues that are not ostensibly security-related as threats, and on the other using resources that have been allocated for non-security purposes for alleviating perceived threats – has been growing in importance in EU external relations for several years. Migration is the most obvious policy area where this has been happening. Persistent narratives portray migrants and refugees as threats to European security, economic wellbeing and culture. Development aid has been diverted into financing migration management initiatives where access to EU funds has been made conditional on border controls and readmitting migrants.

The *mission letters* in which von der Leyen outlined the Commissioners' responsibilities indicate that this trend is likely to persist in the next five years. The letter to Borrell prioritises the formation of a European Defence Union, but does not mention the EU's role as a civilian peacebuilder, where the High Representative's influence is potentially much greater. The letter to Urpilainen asks her to be ready to adapt bilateral funding to achieve the EU's objectives in migration management. This would imply cutting aid to countries that do not cooperate, something the EU has not done to date. Lenarčič's letter stresses the need to react to

new and emerging threats, but does not prioritise international humanitarian aid principles.

Two key proposals for the EU's next multiannual budget underpin the sense that balance is shifting away from civilian engagement for global peace, towards a more heavily securitised approach. The first is the proposal to create the European Peace Facility, an off-budget instrument for funding security cooperation with partner governments and regional organisations. Should this EUR 10.5 billion instrument go forward as proposed, it will be able to finance lethal equipment including weapons and ammunition. This would represent a major departure from the core ideal of the EU as a civilian power. Secondly, the proposals for the next EU budget envisage the integration of the EU's EUR 2.3 billion Instrument contributing to Security and Peace into the new Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument. This has the potential to reduce the visibility of the EU's civilian peacebuilding dimension.

In spite of these trends, supporters of the EU's potential as a global, civilian peace actor can try to keep some key issues on the agenda. Most urgent is the need for strong safeguards on the European Peace Facility, prohibiting the financing of arms for the security services of partner countries. The European Parliament has a key oversight role to play in this regard. More generally, the civilian dimension of EU peace support and crisis response policy needs strengthening against the trend towards military cooperation. The process of negotiating and drafting an EU strategy for conflict prevention and peacebuilding, emphasising mediation and civilian cooperation with partners, would make the EU and its member states discuss these issues openly. A related measure could be the creation of a dedicated Council working group on conflict prevention and peacebuilding. The fact that a resolution calling for this went through the European Parliament in March indicates that there is demand, if the political will can be found. Finally, the drift towards securitised aid will not be halted easily. EU and member state decision-makers must respect international aid effectiveness principles, especially partner ownership, mutual accountability and transparency, when financing migration management initiatives or capacity building with partner country security services.