



Everyday Cohesion 4

EU foreign policy embedded in a successful cohesion policy

Our point of departure

Since – at least for the time being – the member states have delegated only part of their sovereign rights to the Union, there is no united, combined joint or amalgamated position among them concerning foreign policy, not to mention different projects and urgent policy decisions that require imminent steps by the Union as a whole.

Since Cohesion Policy means that the EU's strategy is to promote and support the "overall harmonious development" of its Member States and regions and aims to strengthen economic and social cohesion by reducing disparities in the level of development between regions, it would be advisable also to contemplate reducing disparities and differences in the field of foreign and security policies, public attitudes and actual steps taken by different governments.

According to the official definition, the EU Cohesion Policy contributes to strengthening economic, social and territorial cohesion in the European Union. It aims to correct imbalances between countries and regions. It delivers on the Union's political priorities, especially the green and digital transition.

Why not including foreign policy? What is the reason why “to correct imbalances between countries” in the rocky terrain of joint foreign and security policy is omitted from the list?

In both official and scholarly texts, you can find as definitions two kinds of cohesion: *structural cohesion*, which measures ties between member states such as trade flows, participation in common policies, and geographical proximity to other EU states; and *individual cohesion*, which measures citizens' engagement and experiences with, and views of, the EU policies in these fields.

Cohesion Policy must be on the frontline of the challenges European citizens face today, from climate to environment, from social inclusion and skills to connectivity, to crisis management, from responses to outside threats to strengthening joint responses to the war being waged in our neighbourhood. Therefore, it is important for European citizens to have a bigger say in the way these policies deliver. Both public authorities and civil society organisations will reap the benefits of more authentic citizens' participation.

Europe faces major regional and global – economic, social, environmental and security – challenges. In many regards Europe also faces increasing imbalances and inequalities which drive people, territories and sometimes countries (governments) apart and risk undermining future development and integration perspectives. This is despite (economic, social and territorial) cohesion and solidarity being an aim of the Treaty on the European Union.

The EU Cohesion Monitor analyses ten broad factors that improve cohesion between individuals and countries – or “indicators” of cohesion – for each of the 27 member states. The Cohesion Monitor classifies six of these indicators as “structural” because they concern large-scale relationships between EU states and institutions. They are: Resilience, Economic Ties, Funding, Neighbourhood, Policy Integration, and Security. All six indicators have to do with coordination between the Union and individual member states.

Political division between East and West, and also both inside the West and inside the East continues to shape, complicate and hinder delivering EU policy. Due to diverging trends in cohesion across the EU, cohesion-building strategies are increasingly being tailored to individual countries.

Neighbourhood, Policy Integration, and Security measure factors including proximity to non-EU neighbours, opt-outs from EU policy, and military deployments in EU multinational missions and most recently the military support programmes to Ukraine and handling the consequences of the energy crisis and rising inflation efforts are being managed by individual countries. Questions arise: Will the

integration process in itself, without effective intervention and cooperation hold up against these growing nationalist and populist forces? Do Europeans still value the EU's achievements enough to maintain their countries' interdependence? Are there indications of a rebalancing between divisive and cohesive forces in the EU? Is it possible to counter deteriorating conditions without effective educational and communication efforts, using common union-wide instruments?

All these topics have to do with foreign relations and boosting cohesion among member states to effectively handle them.

The nationalist and populist challenge to EU cohesion is difficult to counter. The principal problem arises from pooling national sovereignty because this sovereignty prevents "them" from making decisions about "us". Identity politics seems largely immune to other arguments. Warnings of economic risk cannot deter nationalists and populists from turning their backs on the European project: they believe that the advantages of national autonomy over EU coherence, togetherness, international rules, resource sharing, and trade will eventually make up for any short-term losses their country incurs.

Between the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its ramifications, climate change, debates over transatlantic relations and policy towards China and Russia in general, controversies over the future of the European Union and its place in a globalized world, and the rising cost of living attributed to international developments, etc. we are facing multiple once-in-a-generation crises at the same time. But while politicians may be tempted to be cautious, a new poll commissioned by the Open Society Foundations finds that people are still inclined toward solidarity and looking for bolder action.

What we are suggesting in the first place:

- To mobilize civil society organizations connected to EU topics to promote understanding and inclusiveness, and strengthen awareness that a common European approach to foreign policy is part of achieving basic objectives and cohesion among both member states and EU citizens; use the various related EU events to present and advocate this idea;
- To further develop the activities of the European Council of Foreign Relations resulting in a Europe-level network with national chapters;
- To establish a joint single EU authority with offices in each and every state with the task of issuing Schengen visas to applicants in order to avoid unnecessary multiplication of this operation in national embassies – this also promotes the feeling of union and togetherness!;
- To strengthen the role of the European Parliament – as the paramount body of citizen legitimacy – in the field of foreign policy to make people feel that they are a constituent part of the decision-making process.

But first and foremost, we need to accept that in order to avoid major divergence or temporary falling out from a cooperative and jointly accepted EU foreign policy, "to correct imbalances between countries and regions", there is a need to introduce foreign policy into the EU's cohesion policy framework.

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