



## COMMENTARY


Four years later, time to revise the EU's Global Strategy?

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## 1. Background: the EU's Global Strategy

In light of rapid global changes regarding the security environment and the deviations within the EU, The Global Strategy for the EU's Foreign and Security Policy (EUGS) was drawn up on 28 June 2016. Under the title 'Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe', the document gave the EU a broad strategic framework that was needed to face today's international challenges in a strong and coherent manner. In order to turn this vision into action, the EUGS called for collective investment in the EU's credibility, notable but not exclusively, through enhanced security and defence capabilities.<sup>1</sup> Yet, as diverging interests of Member States and the issue of resources come to the fore, translating this Strategy into action seems to be easier said than done.

Although the EUGS has in the four years after implementation demonstrated its value in providing a strategic vision and a shared agenda for Member States, the EU is still struggling to live up to the principles and goals it has set.<sup>2</sup> Especially today, in times of a world-wide pandemic that risks deepening existing conflicts and crises, there is even a greater need to be truly strategic and to become a credible global actor.

Yet, the reality remains that the Union needs to take care of its neighbourhood first, which is clearly not yet the case and is increasingly undermining its reputation. Following this rationale, if we want to continue on the course set by the Strategy, the challenges in its neighbouring countries should be at the heart of a much needed review. The purpose of this paper will therefore be to find out what weaknesses the EUGS of 2016 contains that are exposed by how the EU is tackling today's geopolitical challenges in its eastern and southern neighbourhood.

## 2. Current State of Play

### *Geopolitical Challenges vs. A Strategic Vision*

With its 2019 implementation report on the EUGS, the European External Action Service (EEAS) emphasised the continued relevance of the five priorities as mentioned in the Strategy: the security of the Union, state and societal resilience in its east and south, an integrated approach to conflicts and crises, cooperative regional orders and global governance for the 21st century.<sup>3</sup> While in the area of security and defence the EU has made great achievements<sup>4</sup> in the last years, international complexity has however not led to more cooperation. Instead, growing uncertainty and rivalry are characteristics of this world that is more "connected, contested and complex" than ever.<sup>5</sup>

In this context, the EUGS did not succeed to achieve all the objectives to which it has set itself to. This is especially the case when you look at the EU's neighbourhood. Although the Strategy

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<sup>1</sup> 'Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe – A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign And Security Policy', *European External Action Service (EEAS)*, June 2016 ([https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top\\_stories/pdf/eugs\\_review\\_web.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf)). Consulted on October 23, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> 'The European Union's Global Strategy: three years on, looking forward', *EEAS*, June 2019 ([https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/eu\\_global\\_strategy\\_2019.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/eu_global_strategy_2019.pdf)). Consulted on October 8, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> 'The European Union's Global Strategy: three years on, looking forward', *EEAS*, 9-12.

<sup>4</sup> Such as the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence, the Military Planning and Conduct Capability, Permanent Structured Cooperation, the European Defence Fund, a proposed European Peace Facility, and a Civilian Compact.

<sup>5</sup> L. REIS FERREIRA, 'Implementing the Global Strategy for the EU's Foreign and Security Policy', *TEPSA Briefs*, February 2020, 2-3.

introduced 'resilience' as an objective with regard to the neighbouring countries, it is not quite clear whether the EU deals with them in a different way.<sup>6</sup>

### *The EU's eastern neighbourhood*

While the Eastern Partnership has helped to maintain the presence of the EU in its direct neighbourhood, the ambition in the EUGS demands that the Union demonstrates its influence and capacity to act. An example of such a partner country where the EU failed to bring stability and resilience is Belarus, a centralised and authoritarian state. Although the EU supported the country with regular funding and political attention, it failed to lay down the fundamentals for reform, which is the rule of law.<sup>7</sup>

This is evident from recent events, whereby Belarusian authorities used violence against peaceful protestors, as well as intimidation, arbitrary arrests and detentions following unfair presidential elections. Even though these elections took place on 9 August 2020, the EU only succeeded to impose sanctions for repression and election falsification on 2 October 2020, almost two months later.<sup>8</sup> Josep Borrell, High Representative of the EU, attributed this slow response to the ministers that "didn't even attempt to reach unanimity at their meeting, knowing that Cyprus would block the decision". Because of the failure not to impose sanctions more quickly, he acknowledged rightly that the EU's credibility on foreign policy is at stake.<sup>9</sup> If the EU is not able to forge a common foreign affairs policy in a rapid way, it will be hard to become a credible global actor as envisioned in the EUGS.

Not only in Belarus, but also elsewhere in its neighbourhood, the EU has a hard time being strategic. As the latest Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan flared up again, many eyes have turned to the EU and its Member States. Nevertheless, fifteen years ago, the EU already made an attempt to mediate this dispute and, because of its failure to do so, gave up trying to influence the course of the conflict.<sup>10</sup> Yet, now that it is guided by the EUGS, the question that hence arises is whether the EU is able to come up with a solution. This time too, however, there seems to be no alternative other than negotiations: "the only solution is to go back to the negotiating table".<sup>11</sup> Thereby, since the EU can only act with the consent of Armenia, Azerbaijan, the OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs, and now also Ankara, the conditions to have a substantive impact on the conflict are not much better than they were before.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> S. BISCOP, 'The EU Global Strategy 2020', *Egmont Institute*, nr 108, March 2019, 3.

<sup>7</sup> D. MINZARARI and V. PISTRINCIUC, 'A problem shared: Russia and the transformation of Europe's Eastern Neighbourhood', *ECFR*, April 2020 ([https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/a\\_problem\\_shared\\_russia\\_and\\_transformation\\_of\\_europe\\_eastern\\_neighbourhood](https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/a_problem_shared_russia_and_transformation_of_europe_eastern_neighbourhood)). Consulted on October 21, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> 'Restrictive measures in respect of Belarus', *Official Journal of the European Union*, L319 I (63), 2 October 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Doorstep statement by Josep Borrell, *Foreign Affairs Council*, 21 September 2020 (<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/media-galleries/fac/2020-09-21-fac/?slide=6>). Consulted on October 22, 2020; D.M. HERSZENHORN and J. BARIGAZZI, 'Borrell admits EU's credibility 'at stake' over failure to sanction Belarus', *Politico*, September 2020 (<https://www.politico.eu/article/borrell-admits-eu-credibility-is-at-stake-in-failure-to-sanction-belarus/>).

<sup>10</sup> N. POPESCU, 'How the EU became marginalised in Nagorno-Karabakh', *ECFR*, October 2020 ([https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_how\\_europe\\_became\\_marginalised\\_in\\_nagorno\\_karabakh](https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_how_europe_became_marginalised_in_nagorno_karabakh)). Consulted on October 23, 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Nagorno Karabakh: Remarks by the High Representative/ Vice-President Josep Borrell at the EP Plenary debate on the resumption of hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan, *EEAS*, October 2020 ([https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/86498/nagorno-karabakh-remarks-high-representative-vice-president-josep-borrell-ep-plenary-debate\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/86498/nagorno-karabakh-remarks-high-representative-vice-president-josep-borrell-ep-plenary-debate_en)). Consulted on October 23, 2020.

<sup>12</sup> N. POPESCU, *Idem*.

By again failing to act on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the EU likewise fails to live up to its ambition of strategic autonomy as envisioned in the EUGS. The EU's permanent statements on the conflict do not seem to be enough. Therefore, in order to promote peace and security beyond the Union's borders, more should be done to apply an appropriate level of strategic autonomy.

### *The EU's southern neighbourhood*

Furthermore, with the goal to become an effective geopolitical Union, the EU also makes its voice heard on conflicts in its southern neighbourhood. With regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, for example, the EU has however been totally excluded from a possible solution since the election of President Trump. Despite the long historical relationship and the substantial economic involvement, the EU plays a very limited role in the process of conflict resolution.<sup>13</sup> This is the case as current developments are unfolding not only with regard to relations between the EU and Israel, Palestine and the US, but also because of internal divisions. Particularly Hungary repeatedly vetoed EU policy suggestions and statements, which makes it very hard to contribute to change on the ground.<sup>14</sup> These internal divisions are very crucial, since the EU's foreign policy is still largely consensus-driven.

As a result of that disagreement, the EU's foreign policy chief Borrell made a statement that represented only his office and not the EU as a whole, which consequently undermined the EU as a credible and influential actor. With this speech, that was firmly in line with the classic EU consensus position, he thereby declared the EU's support for a negotiated two-state solution as proposed by the United States of America.<sup>15</sup> This is problematic, as the 'peace plan' presented by the US President contravenes international law.<sup>16</sup>

The question hence arises whether the EU, after introducing its ambitious principled pragmatism concept in the EUGS, is not obliged to respond to repeated violations of international law.<sup>17</sup> Although Mr. Borrell stated that "steps towards annexation, if implemented, could not pass unchallenged", he did not make any concrete suggestions as to what this means.

In all probability, the EU will however maintain bilateral relations with Israel despite the continued Israeli occupation, and will continue to fund the Palestinian Authority despite its gross undemocratic records.<sup>18</sup>

### *A Vision but no Action?*

When we look at how the EU is tackling today's geopolitical challenges in its neighbourhood, we can conclude that the EUGS of 2016 is not quite a success and the Union did not yet become a credible

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<sup>13</sup> P. MIREL and X. MIREL, 'The Challenges and Constraints facing a 'Geopolitical Commission' in the achievement of European sovereignty', *Robert Schuman Foundation*, May 2020 ([https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/86498/nagorno-karabakh-remarks-high-representative-vice-president-josep-borrell-ep-plenary-debate\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/86498/nagorno-karabakh-remarks-high-representative-vice-president-josep-borrell-ep-plenary-debate_en)). Consulted on October 21, 2020.

<sup>14</sup> J. JENSEHAUGE, J. PALIK and others, 'A House Divided: EU Policy on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict', *PRIO Middle East Centre*, MidEast Policy Brief 2, 2020, 2-3.

<sup>15</sup> MEPP: Statement by the High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell on the US initiative, *EEAS*, February 2020 ([https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/73960/mepp-statement-high-representative-vice-president-josep-borrell-us-initiative\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/73960/mepp-statement-high-representative-vice-president-josep-borrell-us-initiative_en)). Consulted on October 22, 2020.

<sup>16</sup> 'Peace to Prosperity: A Vision to Improve the Lives of the Palestinian and Israeli People', *White House*, January 2020 (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Peace-to-Prosperity-0120.pdf>). Consulted on October 23, 2020.

<sup>17</sup> P. MIREL and X. MIREL, 'The Challenges and Constraints facing a 'Geopolitical Commission' in the achievement of European sovereignty'.

<sup>18</sup> J. JENSEHAUGE, J. PALIK and others, 'A House Divided: EU Policy on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict', 3-4.



global actor. Although it provided a strategic vision and historic breakthroughs were made in the field of security and defence, these have not yet been completely translated into concrete actions. From the foreign policy issues described above, three EUGS elements can be extracted with which the EU has difficulty putting them into practice: state and societal resilience, strategic autonomy and principled pragmatism. The main reason for this is the EEAS' weakness of describing its concepts very vaguely. As these are at the same time very important objectives of the Strategy, it can however not afford to do this. As a result, confusion is created and the chance of a focused and effective Strategy is disregarded.

### 3. Policy Recommendations

As for the first element, state and societal resilience, it is very clear that the EU's response needs to be quicker, more flexible and more strategic. If it wants its neighbourhood to be more stable, it has to be more visible politically and take more responsibility for the region's security. The objective of 'resilience' in its EUGS should therefore be more than just a buzzword by making it more concrete. A first step could be to base it on a preliminary 'resilience audit' in order to better understand current strengths and weaknesses in each region, state and policy area. Only if it possesses such focused knowledge, the EEAS could fine-tune its objectives and instruments, and develop a targeted strategy.<sup>19</sup>

Besides a thorough assessment of implementation, a revised resource allocation could guide the finetuning of the concept of 'resilience' in a new Strategy. As a result, the Union will be able to strengthen its reputation and its capacity to act to a great extent.

With regard to principled pragmatism, then, the EU seems to prioritise stability in its neighbourhood over controversial measures that would nevertheless make its position towards conflict fall in line with its proclaimed values.<sup>20</sup> Whether the EU has made progress with this element is however difficult to say, as there have so far been no explanations in the EUGS on the practical application of it. To make this concept stronger and hence strengthen its global role, the Union should begin with shedding more light in its Global Strategy on the interaction between its interests, its proclaimed identity of a normative global actor and the role of values in pursuing its interests.

To come to a clear strategy it would be appropriate to increasingly bring values back to play, linking it to a more legalistic approach, so the Union could adhere to them in a consistent manner. The EUGS should however also better define the Member States' common interests, in order to regain the EU's full credibility in its ability to solve complex dilemmas.

Finally, a similar problem can be observed with regard to strategic autonomy. This concept as well remains rather unclear as to what it means exactly. To avoid misunderstandings, the EU should define in its Strategy more clearly which (realistic) responsibilities it is willing to assume as a security and defence actor, and which scope these initiatives would contain. This is of great importance for the Union's relations with other actors. Once they take this into account in their decision-making, the EU will have a real chance of becoming a true strategic actor.

However, due to the reduced European Defence Fund because of COVID-19, it will be more difficult to improve its strategic autonomy as part of a broader effort to mitigate new internal and external

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<sup>19</sup> A. MISSIROLI, 'After the EU Global Strategy: Building resilience', *European Union Institute for Security Studies*, 2017, 7.

<sup>20</sup> J. JENSEHAUGE, J. PALIK and others, 'A House Divided: EU Policy on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict', 4.

# FOUR YEARS LATER, TIME TO REVISE THE EU'S GLOBAL STRATEGY?

security threats.<sup>21</sup> Yet, rather than focusing on levels of defence spending, it is maybe the ideal time to place more emphasis on the actual output of European efforts.

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<sup>21</sup> R. CSERNATONI, 'EU Security and Defense challenges: Toward a European Defense Winter?', *Carnegie Europe*, June 2020 (<https://carnegieeurope.eu/2020/06/11/eu-security-and-defense-challenges-toward-european-defense-winter-pub-82032>). Consulted on October 8, 2020.