

RESEARCH FORUM Column

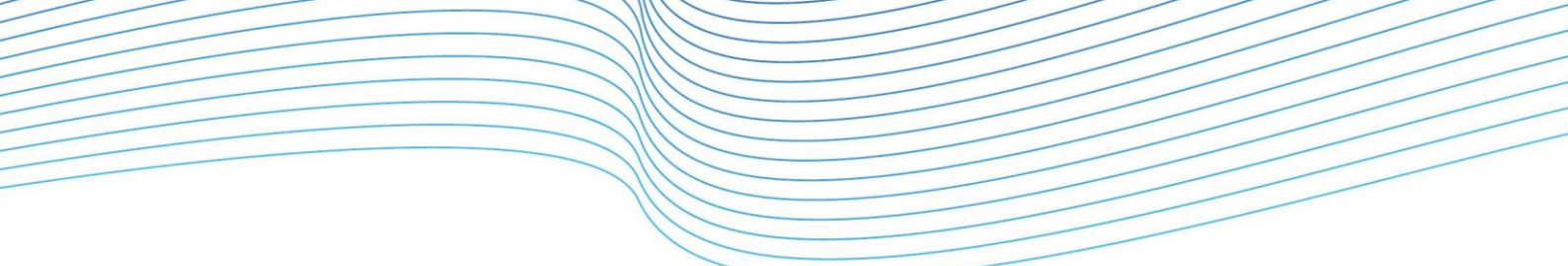
The EU is failing in its mission of Peace and Reconciliation

Uroš Popadić, Research forum Coordinator

In times of crisis such as the one Europe is in right now, it is worth remembering that the EU was founded primarily as an organisation that is meant to create perpetual peace in Europe. Ever since Immanuel Kant has there been in the public imagination an idea of a just and lasting peace in Europe under an overarching legal and ethical framework. The EU is the consummation of this idea, and it has led the continent to a period of unprecedented peace after centuries of conflict. In recent years we have however witnessed a deterioration of this role due to various emergent conflicts, especially the one in Ukraine.

The war in Ukraine is not the product of impulsiveness, it is the consequence of a failure of a peace process that was being conducted in Minsk. Russian aggression notwithstanding, the EU, which has a primary priority to maintain peace and security in Europe, especially at its own borders, seems to have forgotten the wise words of its founders who believed any and all effort was necessary in order to maintain peace. When the conflict started the EU rightfully focused on supporting Ukraine's defense, as aggression and violence is never the answer to dispute, nor can a just outcome ever be reached by force of arms. However the diplomatic effort to stop the conflict, to make the peace, keep the peace, and then build the peace, was lacking. Instead all effort was made to provide weapons and money for weapons to Ukraine, and to conduct a complete isolation of Russia. Dialogue was effectively stopped, efforts to stop bloodshed was likewise stopped, and the EU was accused even by its own members, Hungary and Slovakia, of taking a warlike stance rather than a peaceful one, both before the Russian aggression and during it.

In relation to the conflict the EU has reoriented its budget towards the military, it has directed its vast economies towards a militarised role. Most EU states are members of NATO which now demands five percent of the budgets of its members to go towards defense. This is almost at the level of the US budgetary distribution for the military during the most heated periods of the Cold War, and this money has come at the expense of other European needs, especially those that would support peacebuilding. At the same time the EU has been completely unable to mediate in the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the peace being made almost without its involvement, even though the region is of high importance to it. It has allowed Georgia to lose enthusiasm in EU integration, further putting the future of EU enlargement in question. In the middle east, the EU has



very little influence on the situation in Syria, and more worryingly it is completely sidelined in relation to the Israel-Gaza conflict. It does not have a clear vision of how peace could be created, nor is it involved in the peace process, limiting its influence and lessening its role in its wider neighbourhood. The lack of a clear direction towards peace and a clear condemnation of war and violence, also harms the EU's normative role in relation to peace, which is a long term problem that can lead to serious negative outcomes for its strategic position and enlargement.

The recent turn of the EU towards stabilisation and geopolitics, and away from Civilian power and norms of peace, has changed the identity of the EU in the eyes of other powers. It is no longer seen as a peaceful organisation concerned only with peace, but an organisation oriented towards military and security, towards stability at the expense of its liberal and democratic norms. It has been accused of supporting stabilocracies, of tolerating democratic backsliding, of relaxing its own standards and ignoring its own values, for the sake of temporary and direct gain in security. This has severely harmed its reputation which was built on peace and peacefulness, which has created internal contradictions as well as external problems. This turn is most obvious in the western Balkans, where support for EU integration in Serbia is at a record low after more than two decades of enthusiasm, at first high and then muted. The collapse of Yugoslavia was the the first war in Europe since 1945, and during that war the EU failed its first test of preventing war and creating peace. It has since spend another three decades failing to foster a sustainable and positive peace in the region, which is still marked by tension and distress.

The EU's move towards militarisation, geopolitics and security above all else, has further lowered the reputation and normative power of the EU in the region, which together with the slowness of enlargement and confusion over its normative demands, has created a crisis in the region. Its states, especially Serbia, are confused over their accession processes, the reforms they have to carry out and the norms they have to follow. Simply put, it is not the same EU they signed up for, and they are not fulfilling the same conditions that they were expected to. The initial idea that when the entire region enters the EU regional peace would be achieved more easily, now seems more like a dream than a reality. Unless the EU remembers that its greatest value is that of a peace organisation, not an economic agreement or a political union or a military alliance, but an organisation meant to keep peace in Europe, its normative and ethical power will continue to decline. Its global role as a peacebuilder will also be challenged, its model of peace and cooperation will become hollow, states will be less motivated to remain in it, future states will lose the motivation to join. As such its role in peacebuilding both in the western Balkans, and more urgently in eastern Europe, will be repeatedly challenged and questioned.