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THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL'S STRATEGIC AGENDA 2019-2024

POLICY BRIEF

Being in a phase of poly-crisis, the European Union (EU) and its member-states face several internal and external challenges that provoke limitations on the work of political institutions at all levels on how to make the EU more efficient and strategic for the future. By reflecting on the New Strategic Agenda for 2019-2014, experts participating at the High-Level Policy Dialogue which took place at the School of Transnational Governance at European University Institute on 27 September 2019 in Florence, asked for the necessary EU capacity to supply governance to all policy fields. Given the long list of ambitious topics and vague formulation, the New Strategic Agenda provides much flexibility for the political leadership at both the European and national level to implement the political priorities. However, the New Strategic Agenda lacks clear political direction as to where the EU would like to go, rendering the work of the European and national institutions very hard to implement it. Moreover, the expert group stressed that the New Strategic Agenda will neither have a long-term impact on the political landscape of the EU nor on the political agendas of national parliaments as it lacks a robust timeline for action. Therefore, the New Strategic Agenda does not manifest a crucial turning point for the future development of the EU.

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BACKGROUND: INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL CHALLENGES FOR THE EU IN A GLOBALISED WORLD

Being in a phase of poly-crisis, the European Union (EU) and its member-states face several internal and external challenges, which increase pressure on the work of political institutions at all levels on how to make the EU more efficient and strategic for the future. External relations of the EU experience hard times.

Acting in an increasingly globalised world, the EU has come across numerous challenges that affect its strategy of effective multilateralism and 'soft power' diffusion. The relations of the EU with the United States and China have become more complex and threatened the internal cohesion among the EU member-states. In geopolitical terms, new phenomena like disinformation, cybercrime as well as hybrid threats pose a risk on the democratic systems of the EU member-states. On top of that, the changing security landscape in the EU's neighbourhood and the Middle East raises questions on how far the EU common foreign and security policy can go and what is the state of the EU's relation to NATO.

Turning our radar to the intra-EU level, the EU faces a series of internal challenges such as: the recent withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the EU and the subsequent long and ambiguous

process of the determination of the relation between the two entities; increasing EU-sceptic and populist forces at the national and the European level; the disrespect of the rule of law and European values in several EU member-states, to name but a few. Coupled with that, the internal dimensions of the external challenges such as the management of migration and internal security still asks for deeper cooperation and reforming of the EU's migration and asylum policy.

Without a doubt, this sort of problematic agenda increases the demand for EU governance and, more importantly, asks for the necessary EU capacity to supply governance to all policy fields. On 20 June 2019, national and European leaders agreed on a New Strategic Agenda for the period ranging from 2019 to 2024.¹ The content of the agenda raises high expectations for the future development of the Union in the next five years of the institutional cycle after the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty and the role of the EU at the global stage. It remains to be seen whether this will be the case since the European political space is currently characterised by a growing competition between liberal and authoritarian political logic.

REFLECTIONS ON THE NEW STRATEGIC AGENDA FOR 2019 – 2024: AN APOLITICAL BUT STILL 'SMART' DOCUMENT?

Four key priorities

In the New Strategic Agenda, the political leaders of the EU formulate four, rather broad, priorities for the next five years:

1. protecting citizens and freedoms,
2. a strong economic base,
3. a climate-neutral, green, fair and social Europe, and

4. promotion of Europe's interests and values in the World.

When someone reads the New Strategic Agenda, several messages and 'truths' become visible:

¹ For the full list of participants at the European Council in Brussels, in June 20-21, see: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/39846/20190620-21-trombinoscope.pdf>.

The European Council is the key institution

The European Council can be considered as the key institution of the EU which seeks to frame the future path of Europe by formulating a strategic agenda. As so-called “masters of the treaties”², the Heads of State or Government promote the interests of their respective member-states and aim to turn national preferences into common European policies. The formulations of the New Strategic Agenda document a fundamental ‘master-narrative’ of European and national political leaders, which is mirroring an essential set of common perceptions and attitudes towards the EU. Thus, the agenda can be considered as a typical symbol of a vital consensus on the lowest common denominator in the European Council, irrespective of controversies between the Heads of State or Government on major issues and ongoing internal and external challenges.

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A rhetoric exercise

The New Strategic Agenda can be also characterised as a pure rhetoric exercise as its formulations seem to be rather vague given the complexity of internal and external challenges. In this sense, the agenda might merely be another document for historical research in a long line of similar and non-binding European Council conclusions. Thus, the formulations of the new agenda rather

document a ‘Zeitgeist’ in light of the start of the next legislative period without meeting the demand for EU governance.

Creating a sense of unity within the Union

When taking a closer look at the text of the New Strategic Agenda, one major characteristic is the attempt to create a sense of unity vis-à-vis ‘the others’ by frequently using the term ‘we’, e.g. “we will”, “we must”.³ In several formulations, the Heads of State or Government also address ‘all Member States and the EU’ (e.g. stressing that “the rule of law must be fully respected by all Member states and the EU”)⁴. Such formulations indicate that the EU will work collectively at both the European and the national level for refining a norm of unity in the future despite ongoing internal controversies over some issues, such as migration policy or the EU budget. This sense of unity might be important for strengthening the necessary EU capacity to supply governance to all policy fields.

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More than that, the EU’s political leaders often document a “certain idea of the Union”⁵ which shall manifest cohesion among the EU-27 as well. For instance, the document stresses “our values” and “the strength of our model”, and claims that “the EU will promote its own unique model of cooperation as inspiration for others”.⁶ The recent agenda thus confirms a long-term trend that the Union is not only a single purpose construc-

² Bundesverfassungsgericht. 2009. Urteil zum Vertrag von Lissabon, 2 BvE 2/08 vom 30.6.2009, Absatz-Nr. (1–421), Rn. 150.

³ European Council (2019): A New Strategic Agenda 2019 – 2024, 20 June 2019, online available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/39914/a-new-strategic-agenda-2019-2024-en.pdf>.

⁴ European Council (2019): A New Strategic Agenda 2019 – 2024, 20 June 2019, online available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/39914/a-new-strategic-agenda-2019-2024-en.pdf>.

⁵ Related to de Gaulle, Charles (1954): Mémoires de guerre – L’Appel: 1940-1942 (tome I). Paris: Plon.

⁶ European Council (2019): A New Strategic Agenda 2019 – 2024, 20 June 2019, online available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/39914/a-new-strategic-agenda-2019-2024-en.pdf>.

tion for economic integration, but also a political union with shared values seeking to create a common European identity among its citizens.

An ambiguous and ambitious set of policy priorities

Like other historical documents, the New Strategic Agenda covers nearly all areas of public policy. Indeed, it is difficult for someone to find a policy field that is not mentioned by the Heads of State or Government. The New Strategic Agenda covers policy areas such as: the rule of law, the integrity of the territory, migration policy, protection against cyber activities, cohesion, demographic challenges, banking and capital market union, deepening the internal market and industrial policy, digital transformation, artificial intelligence, entrepreneurship, small and medium-sized enterprises, European competition framework, climate neutrality, the Paris climate agreement, energy market, biodiversity, costs of a greener future, social issues, equality between women and men, social protection, cultural heritage and European identity, multilateralism and global rules based on international order, support of the UN, European perspective for European states able and willing to join, European economic, political and security interests, security and defence, and relations with strategic partners.

Taking a closer look, one can also identify some typical patterns of rather vague and diplomatic formulations with ambitious goals, creating the impression of ambiguity and co-existence of competing concepts. Not only in the final chapter on “Promoting Europe’s interests and values in the world”, one can find traces of different concepts such as the EU as “normative power”⁷, the EU as “market power”⁸ as well as the EU as a security and defence actor at the global stage.

Security as the main EU concern, social policy left behind

It is striking that the protection of EU citizens is mentioned first, indicating a fundamental interest of the EU political leaders to highlight internal security largely. There seems to be a trend towards increasing security within the EU for the next five years, e.g. by restricting immigration, fighting against terrorism and crime. Social policy is also mentioned in the agenda but it looks like it has been side-lined as a less important priority for the members of the European Council. Surprisingly, social policy has been merged with climate policy in one chapter; two policy areas that obviously has no much to share. This gives the impression of social policy being either less important for the Heads of States or Government or a rather controversial topic discussed in the European Council.⁹

No references to institutional aspects

In contrast to earlier documents, like the Laeken declaration or the strategic agenda of 2014¹⁰, the Heads of State or Government do not plan any additional institutional change for the next five years ahead. No reference has been made to ‘deepen’ the Union in the traditional sense via treaty changes.

In contrast to earlier documents, the Heads of State or Government do not plan any additional institutional change for the next five years ahead.

Moreover, in line with the so-called ‘enlargement fatigue’, the document does not envisage to ‘widen’ the Union neither. The members of the European Council do not provide recent accession

⁷ Manners, Ian (2002): Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?, in: Journal of Common Market Studies 40 (2): 235-258.

⁸ Damro, Chad (2012): Market power Europe, in: Journal of European Public Policy 19 (5): 682-699.

⁹ European Council (2019): A New Strategic Agenda 2019 – 2024, 20 June 2019, online available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/39914/a-new-strategic-agenda-2019-2024-en.pdf>

¹⁰ Schäfer, David and Wolfgang Wessels (2014): Europäischer Rat, in: Werner Weidenfeld and Wolfgang Wessels (ed.), Jahrbuch der Europäischen Integration 2014. Baden-Baden: Nomos, p. 95.

countries, such as the ones in the Western Balkans, with any concrete perspective for joining the EU in the next five years. Both, treaty revision and enlargement would have been key policy areas where the Member States would have played a major role. In light of increasing fragmentation in the EU and increasing cleavages within the European Council, concrete and far-reaching decisions in the framework of ‘deepening’ and ‘widening’ the EU will remain unlikely in the next institutional cycle.

A typical ‘package deal’

Following the liberal intergovernmentalist approach, the explanation for this long list of manifold policy priorities is rather simple: The New Strategic Agenda is a typical ‘package deal’. It is the product of long bargaining where each member-state had the chance to insert national preferences and priorities, while at the same time finding compromises and accepting the inputs of other members for reaching “substantive agreements.”¹¹

Thus, the compromise indicates that each of the four key priorities shall satisfy one political party group: (1) “protecting citizens and freedoms” refers to the interests of the right-wings, (2) “a strong economic base” reflects the interests of the Liberals, (3) “a climate-neutral, green, fair and social Europe” includes the interests of the Greens and the Socialists, while (4) the “promotion of Europe’s interests and values in the World” addresses all political party groups.

Following a ‘problem-solving-instinct’, but keeping a ‘sovereignty reflex’

Apparently, the members of the European Council enumerated all policy fields and challenges in which they seek to find a common European solu-

tion. Despite of all references to the subsidiarity principle made in the agenda, the Heads of State or Government, who all act in both a national and a European arena, follow a strategy that can be called ‘problem-solving instinct’. In light of external challenges which affect domestic interests, political leaders recognise that they cannot deal with such issues merely at the national level. Therefore, they address the EU to deal with these challenges in order to find common European solutions. At the same time, however, the Heads of State or Government keep a ‘sovereignty reflex’ protecting them to transfer too much sovereignty to the European level.¹²

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No timeline for action

Furthermore, the agenda lacks proposing a timeline for action, although the Heads of State or Government stress that “[t]he European Council will follow the implementation of these priorities closely and will define further political and priorities as necessary”¹³.

The rather conventional formulations do not indicate any concrete steps for implementing the broad set of priorities. In line with the Lisbon Treaty, the agenda seems to “provide the Union

¹¹ Moravcsik, Andrew (1998): *The Choice for Europe: Social Purpose and State Power from Messina to Maastricht*. New York: Cornell University Press, p. 20. See also Wessels, Wolfgang (2016): *The European Council*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, p. 139f.

¹² Wessels, Wolfgang (2016): *The European Council*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, p. 19.

¹³ European Council (2019): *A New Strategic Agenda 2019 – 2024*, 20 June 2019, online available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/39914/a-new-strategic-agenda-2019-2024-en.pdf>

with the necessary impetus for its development” and to “define the general political directions” (Art. 15 (1) TEU), but the Heads of State or Government do not offer a precise temporal framework to structure the future work of other institutions at the European or national level. As is the case with the previous strategic agenda of 2014,

one might wonder whether the new one should require a longer time frame than five years as it might help “Member States to envision where they want[ed] to go in the long term”.¹⁴

NEXT STEPS AND FOLLOW-UP IN THE LONG RUN: IMPLICATIONS FOR EU INSTITUTIONS AND NATIONAL PARLIAMENTS

The New Strategic Agenda is a typical product of a rhetoric exercise and a symbol of a fundamental consensus in the European Council, which can be understood in a historical context.

Like the declarations of Bratislava, Rome and Sibiu, the new agenda intends to demonstrate the unity of the EU-27 who aim to look ahead even if one important member has already left the common endeavour. Like the strategic agenda in 2014 and in light of the ‘Spitzenkandidaten’ procedure, this document seeks to show the European Parliament and the new President of the European Commission that the members of the European Council are the ‘principals’ who set the agenda for the next legislative cycle. This, apparently, will create pressures to the EU institutions and National Parliaments to follow the political guidelines of the European Council for every step they would like to follow regarding the formulation and implementation of any political priority.

Given the long list of rather ambitious topics as well as the vague formulation of the text, the implementation of the political priorities that the New Strategic Agenda sets up is leaving much freedom and flexibility for the political leadership of the EU institutions or the National Parliaments. On the one hand, this is good news for the EU institutions and the National Parliaments because they obtain numerous degrees of freedom

to formulate their policies in accordance to their priorities and needs. On the other hand, though, the New Strategic Agenda does not have a clear political direction where the Union would like to go rendering the work of the EU institutions and the National Parliaments very hard to implement it.

Only if the members of the European Council engage themselves with the European Parliament and the National Parliaments, the political priorities can be addressed appropriately and implemented in concrete working steps at all levels

The absence of a robust ‘timeline for action’ comprises a fundamental drawback of the New Strategic Agenda since it does not essentially prioritise actions to be done in a specific time. This has a direct implication on how the EU institutions and the National Parliaments will sketch their political footing in the next years given that there is no critical impact of the New Strategic Agenda on their working priorities.

In more general respects, one would say that the New Strategic Agenda does not have a long-term impact on the political landscape of the EU as

¹⁴ Cuperus, René and Cathelijn Padberg (2019): An Inter-institutional battle: who decides upon the EU's future?, in: René Cuperus et al. (ed.), The European Council's Strategic Agenda. Setting the EU's political priorities. Clingendael Institute, 23 January 2019

well as on the political agendas of National Parliaments and, therefore, does not manifest a crucial turning point for the future development of the EU.

Only if the members of the European Council engage themselves with the European Parliament and the National Parliaments, the political priorities can be addressed appropriately and imple-

mented in concrete working steps at all levels. It remains to be seen how this interaction between institutions at the EU level and the national level can work in the future without strengthening the role of the National Parliaments through treaty revisions.

The School of Transnational Governance (STG) delivers teaching and high-level training in the methods, knowledge, skills and practice of governance beyond the State. Based within the European University Institute (EUI) in Florence, the School brings the worlds of academia and policy-making together in an effort to navigate a context, both inside and outside Europe, where policy-making increasingly transcends national borders.

The School offers Executive Training Seminars for experienced professionals and a Policy Leaders Fellowship for early- and mid-career innovators. The School also hosts expert Policy Dialogues and distinguished lectures from transnational leaders (to include the STG's Leaders Beyond the State series which recorded the experiences of former European Institution presidents, and the Giorgio La Pira Lecture series which focuses on building bridges between Africa and Europe). In September 2020, the School will launch its Master-of-Arts in Transnational Governance (MTnG), which will educate and train a new breed of policy leader able to navigate the unprecedented issues our world will face during the next decade and beyond.

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