The EU’s Peacebuilding: Past, Present, Future

By Münevver Cebeci (Marmara University)

Policy Recommendations

- Consider the everyday needs of the locals more
- Engage the locals in a more equal dialogue
- Better assess the socio-economic, cultural and political dynamics of recipient societies
- Avoid “one-size-fits-all” approach and imposing European best practices which do not match the reality on the ground
- Avoid offering technical and economic solutions to political problems

The EU is defined as a peace project/process as it was founded on the idea of making the recurrence of war unthinkable in Europe. Maintaining peaceful integration between European powers was the major motivation behind the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951. The EU’s success has formed the basis/pretext for the projection of its model, as well as its norms and values, to the other parts of the world. In other words, the EU’s definition of itself as successfully pacifying disputes in Europe leads to the perception that the EU represents peace, gives it the legitimacy to pursue peacebuilding in the world today.\(^1\) Nevertheless, a closer look at the EU’s peacebuilding efforts reveals that the Union has not been very effective in promoting and building peace so far. This is mainly because its policies have remained confined to a liberal peace logic, which is top-down, based on offering technical and economic solutions to political problems, and paying little attention to the everyday needs of the locals. However, many analysts and policymakers view that due to its normative stance, the EU has the potential and the aspirations to create an ideal form of peace (hybrid peace) especially if it takes into consideration the needs of the non-co-opted locals (grassroots) and couples its top-down approach with a bottom-up dimension.\(^2\)

- Peacebuilding: Liberal and Hybrid Peace

Peacebuilding can be defined as processes, procedures, and activities undertaken to prevent lapse/relapse into conflict and to achieve sustainable/durable peace. Initially understood as and employed to refer to post-conflict rehabilitation and reconstruction, peacebuilding has evolved into a comprehensive concept covering attempts to achieve peace at all stages of conflict from humanitarian responses to crises and conflict prevention to post-conflict statebuilding. Analysts refer to several ways of building peace, but two of them are especially significant as they are frequently employed to describe how international organisations/actors undertake this venture: liberal and hybrid peace. Liberal peace is a specific type of peacebuilding that is practiced through foreign intervention, based on
the assumption that only such intervention can bring peace to and promote political reforms in recipient societies, helping socio-economic development. It is marked by a top-down approach within which foreign interveners set the conditions for building peace and give little say to the locals, especially grassroots. In this regard, it pursues technical and economic solutions to political problems, and, aims to consolidate neoliberalism in the target country, with an emphasis on statebuilding. Hybrid peace, on the other hand, merges the effective aspects of top-down and bottom-up approaches to peace. While leaving room for foreign interveners to support statebuilding in post-conflict societies, hybrid peace makes the voice of the grassroots heard at the same time, and, paves the way for policies that are more sensitive to the locals’ everyday needs. Hybrid peace is usually regarded as an ideal form of peacebuilding which is hard to achieve and which thus mainly remains an “aspiration”.

The EU is regarded as an actor that promotes liberal peace. Its peacebuilding approach is thus usually viewed as problematic. The EU is criticized for its prioritization of stability and statebuilding, which rests mainly on a neoliberal idea of socio-economic development, technical and economic solutions for political problems, and, which, thus, overlooks the needs of the locals in recipient societies. Nevertheless, the aspirations of the EU about peacebuilding, especially the expectation that it might pursue hybrid peace, contribute to its construction almost as an “ideal” peacebuilder even when its practices on the ground do not match its aspirations.

● Existing Problems with the EU’s Peacemaking Efforts and Recommendations for Change

The EU aspires to achieve durable peace based on democracy, human rights and the rule of law as well as social justice. These aspirations of the EU make many believe that it can pursue hybrid peace in the future. However, in many cases, the EU’s liberal peace efforts do not produce the desired result. In such cases, usually the EU’s non-unitary nature, its member states’ unwillingness and diverging interests, and its “young” foreign policy are listed as factors that hinder success. More importantly, the underdeveloped, conflict-prone, and corrupt nature of the recipient countries/societies and their reluctance for reform are put forward as reasons for ineffectiveness/failure. In other words, the EU as an international actor is dissociated from the ineffectiveness in its peacebuilding. Nevertheless, certain EU-related factors also diminish the Union’s effectiveness in this regard.

The EU’s claim to be representing peace and universal values legitimizes the imposition of its model and best practices on recipient. In its peacebuilding, it sets what is “normal” for the recipient societies and decides about their future on several issues. This pertains to a top-down approach. Nevertheless, the EU’s best practices do not usually match the reality on the ground. Furthermore, in imposing its best practices, the EU pursues a “one-size-fits-all” approach without a thorough analysis of the specific dynamics (socio-economic, political, cultural) of the recipient countries. Even in cases where the EU claims that it applies the principle of “local ownership” (that priorities and the necessary measures/reforms are determined and/or owned by the recipient governments and societies as much as by foreign interveners); it draws the boundaries of that ownership through an asymmetrical, top-down approach, which considerably overlooks the everyday needs of the grassroots peoples. EU policy-makers and peacebuilders deployed on the ground mostly hold the view that the recipient societies are not capable of overcoming their problems by themselves and thus need external mitigation. For example in the case of Macedonia, the principle of “local ownership” in police reform could not be applied in practice, because of the lack of a thorough analysis of the situation. Furthermore, the European peacebuilders believed that they were appointed to “teach” their Macedonian counterparts their best practices and did not involve them in an interactive process where the latter could also provide their expertise and engage in equal dialogue through which co-tailored recipes for addressing local needs could be created.
Another crucial problem concerning local ownership is that even when the EU attempts to pursue such ownership, it does so mainly through the governments of the recipient countries and this has the potential to limit its access to grassroots society. This also reduces the chances of involvement for those locals who are not close to the government or who are in opposition. It further carries the risk of confining the EU’s engagement to technical areas such as police training. The EU should help the development of civil society in target countries, however not only by supporting professionalized civil society groups, but also grassroots actors. This is necessary because civil society organisations, which are either established with EU initiative or supported with the expectation that they will establish the link between the EU and grassroots actors, might pursue their own interests and become insensitive to the needs of the grassroots peoples. 7

The EU’s emphasis on security, stability, development and economic liberalisation in its peacebuilding efforts is another factor that leads to ineffective policies. The security and stability-first approach towards these societies, which prioritizes the EU’s and its member states’ interests (such as liaising with corrupt regimes for the sake of stability and security or prioritizing war crimes over corruption – as in the case of Kosovo), inevitably curtails the voice and involvement of the locals, depriving them of participatory rights in major decisions that directly affect their lives.

The problems listed here demonstrate that the EU is far from effectively engaging the recipient societies in its peacebuilding efforts today and there is room for improvement by considering the needs of the local populations and the needs of third states on a “case-by-case” basis.

Conclusion

The EU’s definition of itself as a model with best practices empower it to determine the rules of regional integration/cooperation, democratization, peacebuilding, etc. This also legitimizes its asymmetrical approach towards some third countries and regions, where it sets the rules and the others are expected to fulfil them. When the EU imposes its best practices on others through such logic, it overlooks the specific cultural, economic and social characteristics of those countries and regions and the everyday needs of local peoples. Thus, if the EU aims at achieving an ideal type of peace (hybrid peace) it needs to gear its policies towards a bottom-up approach which takes into consideration the needs of the grassroots peoples of recipient countries more; it needs to better assess the socio-economic, cultural, and political dynamics of those societies; it needs to reduce its reliance on technical and economic solutions to political problems; and, it needs to avoid the imposition of a one-size-fits-all remedies and its best practices which do not match the reality on the ground in recipient societies.

References


About the Author

Münevver Cebeci, Prof. Dr., is a Professor at the Institute of European Studies, Marmara University, Istanbul. She was also a visiting professor (2017-2019) and senior researcher (2016-2017) at the College of Europe-Natolin. Her teaching and research concentrates on European Foreign Policy, (especially the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership/UfM and European Neighbourhood Policy), Common Security and Defence Policy, European Security, and Security Studies.

Acknowledgement

This publication is based upon work from COST Action CA17119 ENTER, supported by COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology).

www.cost.eu