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Nobel Peace Prize for the European Union

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In October 2012, the Norwegian Nobel Committee announced that this year's Nobel Peace Prize would be awarded to the European Union (EU). In its official press release, the Committee lauded the EU and its predecessor institutions for their contribution to “the advancement of peace and reconciliation, democracy and human rights in Europe” and for their role in helping “to transform most of Europe from a continent of war to a continent of peace”.² In particular, the Committee emphasized two main achievements:

- The reconciliation of France and Germany, two countries that fought three wars between 1870 and 1945, but have since become close allies and are often seen as the “twin engine” of European integration, and
- The enlargements of the EU towards Southern and Central/Eastern Europe, as well as future enlargement in the Balkans and possibly Turkey, which have contributed not only to the unification of the European continent, but also to democracy and human rights in the accession states.

The decision to award the 2012 Nobel Peace Prize to the EU was seen as surprising by many observers, especially in the light of the Eurozone financial crisis, which has resulted in an overwhelmingly negative media discourse about the EU in recent years. In announcing the prize, the Nobel Committee explicitly acknowledged that the EU is currently going through a period of “grave economic difficulties and considerable social unrest”. It stressed, however, that the Peace

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² Norwegian Nobel Committee, “The Nobel Peace Prize 2012”, Press Release, 12 Oct 2012, http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2012/press.html (3 Dec 2012).

Prize was to be seen as an explicit counterpoint to the resulting crisis discourse, intended to “focus on what [the Nobel Committee] sees as the EU’s most important result: the successful struggle for peace and reconciliation and for democracy and human rights”.³

According to the will of its founder Alfred Nobel, the Nobel Peace Prize is to be awarded for contributions to “fraternity between nations, the abolition or reduction of standing armies and [...] the holding and promotion of peace congresses”.⁴ The Peace Prize has always been the most politicized of the Nobel Prizes. This is unavoidable given the subject matter; it is further exacerbated by the fact that the Nobel Committee tends to base its decisions on a relatively broad interpretation of Nobel’s instructions. Nobel Peace Prizes in the past decades have been awarded not only for the resolution of inter-state or intra-state conflict, but also for contributions to other valued purposes such as democracy, humanitarianism, or sustainable development (see Appendix). Against this background, it is unsurprising, and by no means unprecedented, that the decision to award the Nobel Peace Prize to the EU has caused considerable controversy. Two main lines of criticism can be distinguished:

- The first, popular especially among conservative commentators, disputes that the EU is primarily responsible for the achievements highlighted by the Nobel Committee. A particularly prominent argument in this context claims that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), rather than the EU, should be credited with the stabilization of peace in Europe after World War II. Wasn’t it the 1949 NATO Treaty, these critics ask, that obliged member states to settle their disputes “by peaceful means” – two years before the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), the first of the organizations that would later become the EU, was even created? Wasn’t it NATO that brought down the Soviet Bloc in the Cold War, thus allowing for democratization in Central and Eastern Europe? Wasn’t it NATO’s intervention that ended the Yugoslav Wars in the 1990s, after EU foreign policy had failed? Disregarding these achievements and attributing peace in Europe to the EU, argued a characteristic editorial in the *Globe and Mail*, is “an insult to the role of Canadians and Americans in ending centuries of European bloodshed”, and reveals the Nobel Committee’s “leftist”, “ideological agenda”.⁵
- The second line of criticism acknowledges that the EU has indeed made a major contribution to reconciliation and democratization in Europe, but points to the fact that EU institutions and policies have also had significant negative effects, so that on balance the EU should not be considered worthy of the prize. The negatives cited in such arguments vary depending on the political leanings of the commentators; they include most prominently the social and economic hardship that the financial crisis and the resulting, EU-imposed austerity measures have brought for Southern Europe,⁶ but also the fact that European integration has implied the transfer of power away from democratically elected national parliaments;⁷ the

³ Ibid.

⁴ Norwegian Nobel Committee, “Full text of Alfred Nobel’s Will”, http://www.nobelprize.org/alfred_nobel/will/will-full.html (3 Dec 2012).

⁵ “NATO and not EU deserves the Nobel Peace Prize”, *Globe and Mail*, 12 Oct 2012. For similar arguments, see James Goldgeier, “Don’t forget NATO”, *New York Times*, 16 Oct 2012; Iain Martin, “EU winning Nobel Peace Prize is beyond parody”, *Daily Telegraph*, 12 Oct 2012.

⁶ David Cottle, “The EU: Peaceful but hardly at peace”, *Wall Street Journal*, 12 Oct 2012; Helena Smith, “Greece shocked at EU peace prize amid economic ‘war’”, *The Guardian*, 12 Oct 2012.

⁷ John Bolton, “The theory behind the EU is simply wrong”, *Ottawa Citizen*, 15 Oct 2012.

militarization of EU foreign policy,⁸ or the role of EU agencies in policing the borders of “Fortress Europe” without much regard for the rights of migrants.⁹ All of these arguments have in common that the achievements of the EU are seen as outweighed by other, more problematic aspects of European integration.

Academic scholarship on the EU supports these critiques to varying degrees. While NATO has clearly left its imprint on the post-war European construction, the claim that the transatlantic alliance, and not the EU, has been the main peacemaker in Europe is ultimately not convincing. Both processes highlighted by the Nobel Committee – Franco-German reconciliation and democratization in Southern, Central/Eastern and Southeastern Europe – have been advanced primarily by the EU and its predecessor institutions, rather than NATO. In the development of the Franco-German partnership, NATO did not play a major role, not least because France was initially opposed to (West) Germany’s rearmament and NATO membership (which came in 1955). For both countries, the most important step to reconciliation was the establishment of the ECSC in 1951, which placed mining and steel production – the backbone of the economy at the time and also the crucial industrial sector for arms production – under supranational control.¹⁰ Ever since the 1950s, the Franco-German partnership has been rooted in European integration, rather than transatlantic security cooperation.

With respect to democratization in Southern, Central/Eastern and Southeastern Europe, the role of NATO is likewise overshadowed by that of the EU. NATO’s primary concern has always been external security, not the internal politics of its member states. During the Cold War, Greece and Portugal could remain NATO members even under authoritarian governments. While the alliance clearly played a key role in the collapse of Soviet rule in Central and Eastern Europe, it was the EU that exercised a stronger influence on the emergence of democracy and human rights in the post-Soviet states, through more demanding and more vigorously enforced membership conditions.¹¹ More recently, the promise of EU membership – and the conditions tied to it – have had similarly beneficial consequences in the Balkans, where they have helped motivate the countries of former Yugoslavia to engage in post-conflict reconciliation (which includes cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal in The Hague, the settling of border disputes, the guarantee of minority rights, etc.).

The Norwegian Noble Committee is hence correct in its assertion that the EU and its predecessor institutions have had undeniable positive effects for peace and democracy in Europe. At the same time, it is also clear that not everything that the European institutions have done since the 1950s has served prize-worthy goals. The EU is a complex organization that produces binding laws and executive decisions in a large number of policy fields on a day-to-day basis. While the Nobel Peace Prize has been awarded to international organizations before – past recipients include the International Labour Organization (1969) and the United Nations (2001) – none of these

⁸ Mairead Corrigan Maguire, “EU doesn’t deserve Nobel Prize, says past prize-winner”; *The Progressive*, 16 Oct 2012.

⁹ Judith Sunderland and Alice Farmer, “EU, as peacemaker, should welcome those fleeing war”, *European Voice*, 17 Oct 2012.

¹⁰ Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (New York: Penguin 2005), pp. 149-159.

¹¹ Milena Anna Vachudova, *Europe Undivided: Democracy, Leverage, and Integration after Communism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 134-37; Frank Schimmelfennig and Hanno Scholtz, “EU Democracy Promotion in the European Neighbourhood: Political Conditionality, Economic Development, and Transnational Exchange”, *European Union Politics* 9:2 (2008), 187-215.

organizations had the EU's almost state-like breadth of policy responsibilities. It is questionable whether an organization of this kind can be an unambiguous force for the good in world politics. The Nobel Committee's justification for the 2012 prize indicates that it primarily wanted to honour the EU's existence and continuous growth as a *polity*, to which the highlighted achievements can be attributed, but whether this is appropriate without a comprehensive analysis of the democratic quality of EU *politics* and the concrete effects of various EU *policies* is a matter for legitimate debate.¹²

Unsurprisingly, the reaction of EU leaders to the Nobel Peace Prize has been enthusiastic. The President of the European Commission, José Manuel Barroso, called the award “a very important message to Europe that the European Union is something very precious” and should be cherished “for the good of Europeans and for the good of the entire world”.¹³ Faced with a significant decline in popular support for European integration in the wake of the financial crisis – in public opinion polls, the share of Europeans who stated that they “trust” the EU has declined from a high of 57% in 2007 to 31% in 2012¹⁴ – EU leaders are understandably grateful for a major piece of good news. It is doubtful, however, that the Nobel Peace Prize will have an immediate impact on the EU's legitimacy in the population.¹⁵ While the preservation of peace was indeed one of the original goals of European integration, the possibility of war between EU member states has become so remote for most Europeans that the EU's character as a “peace project” no longer suffices for its legitimation. In this respect, the EU can be considered a victim of its own success in making war in Europe unthinkable. At the same time, the financial crisis has undermined another traditional justification for European integration, namely its positive economic consequences. The EU is hence in urgent need for a new legitimating discourse to justify its existence. The Nobel Prize alone is unlikely to form a sufficient basis for such a discourse. It might, however, serve as a reminder to European elites that European integration merits an active and spirited defence.

¹² I owe this argument to Ralf Bendrath.

¹³ José Manuel Barroso, “Statement by President Barroso following the award of the 2012 Nobel Peace Prize”, 12 Oct 2012, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-12-724_en.htm.

¹⁴ Eurobarometer 77 (Spring 2012).

¹⁵ Virginie Van Ingelgom, “Le Prix Nobel de la paix de l'UE : entre quête de légitimité et tentative de légitimation”, *rtbf.de info*, 24 Oct 2012.

Appendix: Nobel Peace Prize Recipients in the Past Two Decades¹⁶

Year	Recipient	Rationale
2012	<i>European Union (EU)</i>	“For over six decades contributed to the advancement of peace and reconciliation, democracy and human rights in Europe”
2011	Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Leymah Gbowee and Tawakkul Karman	“For their non-violent struggle for the safety of women and for women’s rights to full participation in peace-building work”
2010	Liu Xiaobo	“For his long and non-violent struggle for fundamental human rights in China”
2009	Barack H. Obama	“For his extraordinary efforts to strengthen international diplomacy and cooperation between peoples”
2008	Martti Ahtisaari	“For his important efforts, on several continents and over more than three decades, to resolve international conflicts”
2007	<i>Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)</i> and Albert A. Gore Jr.	“For their efforts to build up and disseminate greater knowledge about man-made climate change, and to lay the foundations for the measures that are needed to counteract such change”
2006	Muhammad Yunus and Grameen Bank	“For their efforts to create economic and social development from below”
2005	<i>International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)</i> and Mohamed ElBaradei	“For their efforts to prevent nuclear energy from being used for military purposes and to ensure that nuclear energy for peaceful purposes is used in the safest possible way”
2004	Wangari Maathai	“For her contribution to sustainable development, democracy and peace”
2003	Shirin Ebadi	“For her efforts for democracy and human rights. She has focused especially on the struggle for the rights of women and children”
2002	Jimmy Carter	“For his decades of untiring effort to find peaceful solutions to international conflicts, to advance democracy and human rights, and to promote economic and social development”
2001	<i>United Nations (UN)</i> and Kofi Annan	“For their work for a better organized and more peaceful world”
2000	Kim Dae-jung	“For his work for democracy and human rights in South Korea and in East Asia in general, and for peace and reconciliation with North Korea in particular”
1999	<i>Médecins Sans Frontières</i>	“In recognition of the organization’s pioneering humanitarian work on several continents”
1998	John Hume and David Trimble	“For their efforts to find a peaceful solution to the conflict in Northern Ireland”
1997	<i>International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL)</i> and Jody Williams	“For their work for the banning and clearing of anti-personnel mines”
1996	Carlos Filipe Ximenes Belo and José Ramos-Horta	“For their work towards a just and peaceful solution to the conflict in East Timor”
1995	Joseph Rotblat and <i>Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs</i>	“For their efforts to diminish the part played by nuclear arms in international politics and, in the longer run, to eliminate such arms”
1994	Yasser Arafat, Shimon Peres and Yitzhak Rabin	“For their efforts to create peace in the Middle East”
1993	Nelson Mandela and Frederik Willem de Klerk	“For their work for the peaceful termination of the apartheid regime, and for laying the foundations for a new democratic South Africa”

¹⁶ Source: http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/ (3 Dec 2012).