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Study | 02.09.2021

A fresh breeze for nuclear disarmament in Europe?

A study from the International Affairs cluster

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The entry into force of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) on 22 January 2021 provides the European Union (EU), the European Parliament (EP) and EU Member States with an opportunity to advance nuclear disarmament. Europe should seize the momentum created by the new accord, even if this entails controversial and sustained discussions on the role of nuclear weapons in European security.

The TPNW is contentious because it takes a radically different approach to nuclear disarmament when compared to previous treaties. It focuses on the humanitarian dimension of nuclear weapons and their use, rather than on their benefits for national security and strategic stability.

The EU and the EP have consistently advocated reductions of the role and numbers of nuclear weapons and supported the goal of a world free of nuclear weapons. EU Member States, however, remain split on the right approach to nuclear arms control and disarmament. Membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is the main dividing line.

Only four EU Member States (Austria, Cyprus, Ireland, and Malta) support the TPNW but there is much sympathy for the humanitarian approach in other European nations. The EP has already engaged in the debate on the TPNW. The 10th Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and the first meeting of TPNW States Parties (1MSP), 12-14 January 2022 in Vienna, provide crucial opportunities for Europe to engage constructively with the new disarmament accord.

This report describes the global nuclear landscape; analyses political divides within and among EU Member States on the TPNW; and suggests actions the EU, the EP and governments can take to engage constructively with the TPNW. These actions can increase the credibility of the EU as a supporter of multilateral disarmament and, more importantly, can help to make progress towards a world free of nuclear weapons.

A strategy of “constructive engagement” that takes advantage of the TPNW while addressing concerns about the treaty should focus on three elements:

Debate and inform. The EP can be a catalyst and a forum for an open and inclusive debate on the specific merits and shortcomings of the TPNW. The goal of such a discussion, which should take place at the intergovernmental level but also between parliamentarians, would be the development of a more nuanced position on the TPNW and, by consequence, a more coherent EU approach towards nuclear disarmament.

Engage and participate. The TPNW provides the EU with opportunities to broaden its remit on nuclear arms control and disarmament. Thus, the EU could propose nuclear risk reduction measures and steps toward more transparency on nuclear weapons. Interparliamentary diplomacy is one way for the EP to engage with other legislative bodies, such as the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, on nuclear disarmament. The EU and its Member States can also participate in the 1MSP as observers to make their views heard.

Collaborate and support. The EU could provide practical and financial support for efforts under the TPNW to assist victims of nuclear weapons and remediate the environmental damage caused by nuclear weapons-related activities.

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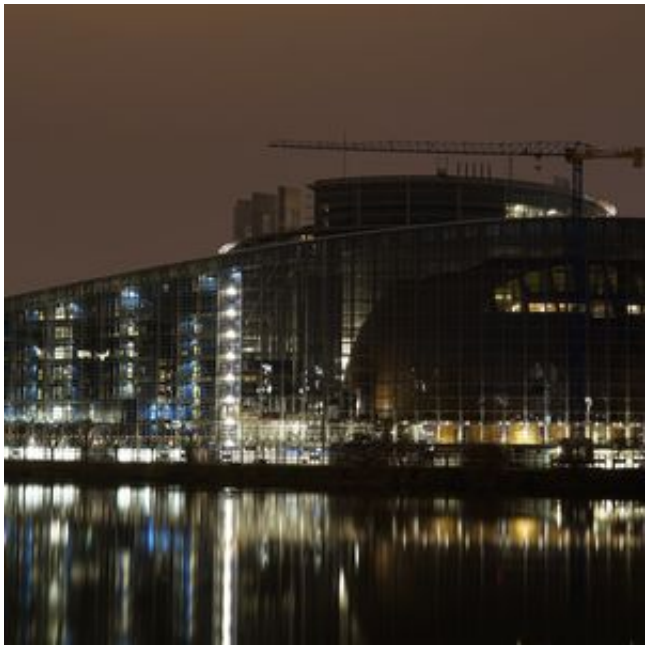

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