

# Europe's Progress and the Road Ahead at R2P's 15th Anniversary

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## Abstract

This contribution examines the European Union's engagement with the R2P framework and showcases various examples of progress in support of R2P from the past 15 years. It also illustrates some lingering ambivalence within the EU towards the principle and the divisions which exist across the EU membership regarding some aspects of the R2P agenda, and in particular the role of military force in pursuit of human protection. With the EU currently facing a range of internal and global challenges, its ability to improve policy coherence across the broad range of programmes and activities in support of the R2P agenda, and its ability to shape norms internationally, remain uncertain.

## Keywords

Responsibility to Protect – European Union – human protection – atrocity prevention

The European Union (EU) has been a key – although sometimes overlooked – actor in the political, normative, and operational evolution of R2P. The principle's future prospects will be linked to the EU's leadership in the next phase of R2P promotion and implementation, although this will take place in the

context of a multiplying set of challenges confronting the EU and a difficult international political environment. The question of whether the EU can help to keep R2P alive as a meaningful norm and a policy framework – something that cannot be taken for granted – is therefore very much debatable.

Much has been achieved in the last 15 years of European investment in advancing the R2P agenda in diplomatic circles and in strengthening its normative traction.<sup>1</sup> The EU – as the body speaking with one voice on behalf of its 27 Member States – has actively contributed to each of the twelve UN General Assembly Interactive Dialogues to date. Each year since 2009, EU members have been part of an active group of national R2P Focal Points, and have provided input into the Annual Reports of the UN Secretary-General on the topic. The EU delegation to the UN has participated in the activities and meetings of the ‘Group of Friends of R2P’ in New York, a group of state supporters of R2P, whose co-chair has always been a European country. The European Parliament launched a major initiative in 2013 to consolidate the EU’s support for R2P and to formulate a ‘European consensus’ on the issue. Also significant in terms of visible leadership, the EU appointed an R2P Focal Point in 2016 to coordinate its activities in this area, becoming the first regional organisation in the world to do so.

In academic circles, the European Centre for the R2P was launched at the end of 2016 to bring together European scholars working on R2P-related topics and to encourage and support academic research on R2P and atrocity prevention. The European External Action Service officially launched its ‘Toolkit for Atrocity Prevention’ in January 2019, designed to coordinate European responses to atrocities in a proactive and coherent manner. Albeit without always using the ‘R2P’ label, the EU has also developed considerable expertise in conflict prevention and resolution which underscores its capacity to champion the R2P principle. The past 15 years thus showcase various examples of R2P progress, alongside some lingering ambivalence within the EU towards R2P and divisions across the EU membership regarding the role of military force within the operationalisation of the R2P framework.<sup>2</sup>

15 years after the World Summit R2P agreement the traction of the principle, both in operational and normative terms, is acutely threatened in a transitional international order defined by a resurgence of nationalism and geopolitical

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1 Edward Newman and Cristina G. Stefan, ‘Normative Power Europe? The EU’s Embrace of the Responsibility to Protect in a Transitional International Order’, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, first published online 25 July 2019, 58(2): 472–490 (2020).

2 Edward Newman and Cristina G. Stefan, ‘Europe’s Contested Engagement with R2P in a Transitional International Order’ in Cecilia Jacob and Martin Mennecke (eds.), *Implementing the Responsibility to Protect: A Future Agenda* (London: Routledge, 2019).

rivalry, and the retreat of liberal internationalism.<sup>3</sup> In 2020 Europe is now facing a significant and multiplying set of internal and external challenges which could bring further R2P promotion and advocacy within the EU to an abrupt halt. In defining cases, the EU offered only a faltering response to mass atrocities in Myanmar and Syria in recent years, which opened up a panoply of criticisms. So, with the EU now fighting on several fronts at the same time and preoccupied with political challenges that take precedence over liberal ideas such as R2P, it is questionable whether R2P is going to remain a priority for the EU in the future.

The EU's global solidarity was expressed in its assistance to vulnerable communities in developing countries and conflict zones once the COVID-19 challenge surfaced. The EU launched 'Team Europe', a 20-billion-euro package, to support states around the world fight the coronavirus pandemic. This clear focus on a pragmatic and urgent EU priority agenda shows how much the EU can achieve, in a short period of time, with dedicated resources. What will it take for the EU to invest similar resources behind implementing the R2P framework as a priority worldwide, when the normative European agenda is now challenged by a new fragility of solidarity for liberal goals? The EU has an enormous capacity to work on the 'prevention' dimension of the R2P framework, which it could maximise by aligning its existing Atrocity Prevention policy programmes and instruments. Further progress depends upon R2P being embraced not only by EU officials, but also by political leaders in member states, and the ability of the EU to bring better policy coherence across the broad range of programmes and activities that could better serve the R2P agenda.

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3 Cristina G. Badescu, *Humanitarian Intervention and the Responsibility to Protect: Security and Human Rights* (London: Routledge, 2011).