

Research impact: making a difference

Strengthening policies to protect human rights and prevent genocide

LSE research influenced European Union policies intended to protect human rights and to prevent genocide and other mass atrocities

What was the problem?

In the past century over 100 million people have been killed in mass atrocities, including genocide and crimes against humanity.

Recent history demonstrates that early diplomatic or military intervention can help prevent such atrocities. European Union foreign policy, however, has often focused on crisis management rather than prevention.

The challenge is to strengthen the EU's capacity to act decisively and effectively in international affairs, especially in circumstances involving violations of human rights and possible genocide, and to work together with the wider international community (including the United Nations) to do so.

What did we do?

Professor Karen E. Smith, Professor of International Relations and Director of LSE's European Foreign Policy Unit, has explored issues of consistency and effectiveness in European Union foreign policy for over a decade. In 2007 she received the Anna Lindh award for outstanding research on European foreign policy.

Smith's research on the EU's pursuit of an 'ethical' foreign policy has highlighted member states' disagreements over priorities and the difficulties they have maintaining common positions on human rights in relation to non-EU countries. Some violations are overlooked while others are punished, and this has laid the EU open to accusations of hypocrisy and undermined its influence on international institutions charged with improving human rights.

Smith's interest in ethical foreign policy led to research more specifically focused on European policymaking in the area of genocide prevention and response. In 2010, in her book *Genocide and the Europeans*, Smith argued that, despite Europe's experience of genocide during the Second World War, some European governments were hostile to the 1948 Genocide Convention. She analysed the causes of subsequent reluctance to use the term 'genocide' and why European responses have often been limited to humanitarian aid and prosecution of perpetrators in international tribunals. She concluded that governments fear becoming subject to external pressures to respond in ways contrary to their own national interests if they use the term 'genocide' to describe atrocities.

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What happened?

In 2010, Smith was commissioned by the European Parliament's Sub-Committee on Human Rights to conduct a study on the role of the European Union in the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC). She found that EU member states spend so much time resolving internal disputes that they have little opportunity to lobby for EU positions at the United Nations. Her report argued that the EU needed to improve coordination of its human rights position with other aspects of its foreign policy in order to become more ambitious in its approach within UNHRC.

Smith's report and oral evidence to the European Parliament's Sub-Committee on Human Rights was instrumental in its evaluation of the EU's record at the United Nations. The report was used extensively by the Sub-Committee's political advisors in their preparation of the European Parliament's recommendations regarding the EU's positions on UN Human Rights Council reform. Its subsequent resolution reflected Smith's recommendations and endorsed her proposals for the use of 'independent triggers' (initiating automatic consideration of special sessions when required) and for improvements in transparency and oversight of Special Procedures (mechanisms agreed by UNHRC to address country-specific situations or thematic issues).

In 2011, the Foundation for the International Prevention of Genocide and Mass Atrocities launched a Task Force to assess the EU's capabilities for the prevention of mass atrocities. On the basis of her research, the Foundation asked Smith to act as Co-Chair, and in this capacity she co-authored its official report, which has influenced policy at both EU and member state levels as well as in the UN.

Drafting of this report involved meetings with national and EU officials in Berlin, Paris and Brussels as well as months of negotiations with officials and the wider policy community to build support for the Task Force's recommendations. In 2012 a draft was circulated throughout the European External Action Service and EU foreign ministries. Feedback on the report's conclusions led to a final report that made specific recommendations for strengthening the EU's capacity to prevent mass atrocities.

Following the report's launch in Brussels, the Task Force's conclusions and recommendations were disseminated through newspaper editorials, interviews and presentations to UNHRC and policymakers in London, Geneva, Rome, Berlin and Budapest (at some of which Smith was a panel member), with future events scheduled for 2015.

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The Rapporteur of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the European Parliament was one of the key parties who had commented on the draft of the Task Force Report. The official version of the report was subsequently used by that Committee in the drafting of a European Parliament resolution, which was adopted in April 2013.

The UN Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on the Prevention of Genocide publicly endorsed the Task Force. The UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office welcomed the recommendations and raised the Report at EU level. The report has also been extensively used by civil society groups to lobby at member state level, which has generated wider public consciousness of issues involving human rights and mass atrocities.

Karen E Smith is Professor of International Relations and Director of the European Foreign Policy Unit at the London School of Economics and Political Science. She has written extensively on European Union foreign policy, the EU's promotion of human rights, EU-UN relations and European policies regarding genocide and other mass atrocities. In 2007 she received the Anna Lindh award for excellence in research on European foreign and security policy. In 2012-13, she co-chaired the Task Force on EU Prevention of Mass Atrocities.

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