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The Neighbourhood Policy is Dead. What's Next for European Foreign Policy Along its Arc of Instability?

by Nathalie Tocci

ABSTRACT

The Arab uprisings alongside the Ukrainian crisis have triggered the perfect storm. The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), developed at the height of enlargement EU-phoria, is in tatters. To be fair, its failure is only partly endogenous, and largely due to the dramatic transformation of the neighbourhood – east and south – which no one could have foreseen at the turn of the century. Be that as it may, the EU will have to fundamentally rethink its approach towards its turbulent backyard. To move forward, the EU needs to devise conceptually different approaches to the east and south. In both cases, instability and crises abound. In both, the magnitude of the challenges that the EU faces is so great that down-to-earth realism must be its guiding light. Formulating and pursuing down-to-earth objectives for the neighbourhood that reflect current realities is not cynical. It is responsible.

European Union | European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) | Mediterranean | Eastern Europe | Eastern Partnership (EaP)



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Introduction

The Arab uprisings alongside the Ukrainian crisis have triggered the perfect storm. The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), developed at the height of enlargement EU-phoria, is in tatters. To be fair, its failure is only partly endogenous, and largely due to the dramatic transformation of the neighbourhood – east and south – which no one could have foreseen at the turn of the century. Be that as it may, the EU will have to fundamentally rethink its approach towards its turbulent backyard.

1. The ENP's false dawn

Both the Arab uprisings in 2011 and the Ukrainian crisis in 2014 have led to a redoubling of EU efforts to boost the ENP. In the early days of the uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), a revamped ENP appeared to many to be the most appropriate answer. Based on bilateral relations with neighbours, through “more money, more markets and more mobility,” the EU would conditionally support democratic change in MENA countries. Likewise, the EU was steadfast when Viktor Yanukovich refused to sign the EU Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) in November 2013 (he had been preceded by his Armenian counterpart Serzh Sargsyan two months earlier, as both Ukraine and Armenia were presented with a Russian “offer they could not refuse”). Rather than abandoning the ENP, the EU kept the DCFTA offer on the table. The Maidan uprising and the completion of the DCFTAs with Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova in June 2014 (despite Ukraine's decision to postpone its application for two years) appeared to vindicate the EU's approach.

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Yet the truth of the matter is that, both in the south and east, the ENP has dismally failed, for different and largely exogenous reasons. To the south, with the lone exceptions of Tunisia and Morocco, the region is marked by authoritarian retrenchment, spiraling violence and the risk of state collapse. The Pollyanna-ish European dream of propping up democratization with money, market access and mobility is far removed from realities on the ground. To the east, by expecting the eastern neighbours to comply with the minutiae of the *acquis* in the DCFTAs without front-loading the benefits, the ENP provided ample space for Russia to veer economically-troubled Armenia and Ukraine towards its Eurasian embrace. Arguably, had the EU been more forthcoming towards its eastern neighbours, developments in Ukraine could have taken a very different turn.

However, the cause cannot simply be attributed to a design fault in the ENP. The Policy was developed in a fundamentally different geopolitical context. In the Mediterranean, the ENP was premised on a relatively predictable if not benign geopolitical environment, in which the United States was the global hegemon. The EU thus carved itself a role in the political and socio-economic spheres that benefitted from and was premised on the US's dominant security presence. Now, that paradigm is fading. The US remains the most relevant security actor in the Middle East, but its "leadership from behind" in Libya, its second thoughts on Syria, and its determination to keep "boots off the ground" in its fight against the Islamic State (IS) point to a fundamental, albeit gradual, transformation of US foreign policy. In eastern Europe, gone is the optimism of the EU-Russia Strategic Partnership based on the Western belief that Moscow was coming to terms with its Cold War defeat. The crisis in Ukraine and Russia's brazen attempt to recapture what it considers to be its rightful sphere of influence expose the inadequacy of Western policy that seeks to expand its role in the eastern neighbourhood on the cheap.

2. What next for the EU's arc of instability?

The European Neighbourhood Policy, in its current form, is dead.¹ The dramatic developments to the east and south present the EU with a stark political choice: either it musters the necessary will and capabilities to do what it takes to remain the most influential power in its neighbourhood, or it factors in the polycentric nature of its neighbourhood.

¹ Daniel Keohane et al., "A New Ambition for Europe. A Memo to the European Union Foreign Policy Chief", in *Carnegie Europe Publications*, 29 October 2014, <http://carnegieendowment.org/publications/?fa=57044>; Michael Leigh, "A New Strategy for the European Neighborhood", in *GMF Europe Program Policy Briefs*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (September 2014), <http://www.gmfus.org/archives/a-new-strategy-for-europes-neighborhood>.

2.1 To the south...

To the south, the choice is relatively simple. EU enlargement is simply not an option. Far more complicated instead is devising a regional policy that genuinely accounts for the fundamental transformation that is ongoing in the region. The Mediterranean is in deep flux. This used to be a region of relative stability, in which even "old conflicts" like the Arab-Israeli conflict or the Western Sahara conflict manifested a degree of predictability. It used to be a largely insular region, seemingly detached from broader global trends, be they the successive "waves of democratization" in southern Europe, Latin America and eastern Europe, or the broader trends of globalization. For good and for bad, that Mediterranean is gone.

In today's Mediterranean, borders have become more porous or have functionally disappeared altogether. The explosive mix of unsustainable livelihoods, environmental degradation, state fragility and conflict has led to an acceleration of the movement of people across state borders. Migration flows from the Horn of Africa, through the Maghreb, and through Libya in particular on to Europe, have become incommensurably less regulated. Environmental challenges and global epidemics are undermining state borders, tying together the fates of North African and Sub-Saharan African societies. Furthermore, the Internet has fundamentally transformed Mediterranean borders; one needs only to think about the role of social media in the mass mobilizations of the Arab awakening in 2011 or the nefarious use made of the Internet by terrorist networks. Finally, the global threat of IS highlights most dramatically the trans-boundary nature of the region's security challenges. Unlike other terrorist organizations before it, IS is a fundamentally territorial organization that does not respect existing state boundaries and is designed to undermine them, beginning with Syria and Iraq – but with ambitions that stretch much further into the Levant and the Gulf.

Today's Mediterranean is also marked by variable geometries of regional and global actors. In the crises in Gaza, Libya or Syria there have been different configurations of regional actors with a stake in and influence on the unfolding situations. In each crisis, the relevant state and non-state actors that the EU must factor in, address, work with or fight, changes. There is no neat, "one-size-fits-all" "Mediterranean region". Today's Mediterranean is also one in which global actors beyond the EU and the US are making their presence felt. Russia's role in Syria and Iran, China's economic interests in North and Sub-Saharan Africa, and Brazil's budding diplomacy in the region are clear cases in point.

So what to do about this "new Mediterranean"? While the old ENP ought to be shelved, replacing it by a new grand strategic paradigm would be premature. The region is undergoing profound change. Designing or redesigning rigid institutional frameworks – à la Union for the Mediterranean – is not a wise way forward. By contrast, drawing and building upon the regional formats emerging bottom-up – the extended 5+5 dialogue, for instance – as practical ways to find regional solutions to regional problems could offer a more fruitful way forward.

Convening a conference on peace, security and development in the region may be a first step towards identifying the appropriate bottom-up mechanisms to build on and foster.²

Alongside this, EU policies towards the south should focus on the realm of the possible. Amidst violence and turmoil, the EU should not forget the few rays of light shining in the region. Tunisia stands out as the only Arab Spring country with credible prospects for democracy. The recent elections in the country that have led to a peaceful and democratic transfer of power are testimony of this.³ Supporting Tunisia's democratization and economic revival is within the EU's reach, and it is a responsibility the Union cannot shy away from, both for the sake of Tunisians and for the positive spillover that Tunisia's successful transition would have on the region. It would only take small steps on the EU's side in the domains of tourism, agriculture and people-to-people contact to make a huge difference. If the EU abandons Tunisia, no one is going to come to the rescue.

Beyond Tunisia, as well as Morocco to a degree, there is not much good news to report across the region. What this suggests is that the EU may need to recalibrate its goals for the time being, setting objectives within its reach. Focusing on reducing ungoverned spaces, reducing polarization within and between states, reducing human suffering, and reducing extremism may appear unambitious when compared to the classic "promotion of democracy, human rights and good governance" agenda. But it is probably a more realistic, and therefore more effective, route to reverse current trends and allow for the possibility of reverting to the classic "transformation agenda" in the future. Tailoring the EU's policy instruments – development, humanitarianism, migration, trade, diplomacy, military – to realistic objectives that reflect existing realities is the only responsible way ahead.

2.2 Turning east

When it comes to the east, the hardest part in the formulation of a revamped EU policy regards the perennial question of EU membership. Burying heads in the sand and hoping that a relentless implementation of the ENP, as a half-way compromise, will magically restore peace and stability on the eastern border is irresponsible at best, dangerous at worst. Either the EU gathers the consensus to pursue the European integration of the eastern neighbours, or it proactively seeks an accommodation with Russia devising a shared compromise for the torn neighbourhood. Both options have their pros and cons, weighed differently by different EU member states. And yet the crossroads that the EU is at cannot be wished away. The least EU member states and the renewed leadership at the helm of the Union can do is

² Nick Witney et al., "Rebooting EU Foreign Policy", in *ECFR Publications*, No. 114 (September 2014), http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/rebooting_eu_foreign_policy319.

³ Anthony Dworkin, "Tunisia's Elections and the Consolidation of Democracy", in *ECFR Publications*, No. 116 (October 2014), http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/tunesias_elections_and_the_consolidation_of_democracy321.

launch a frank intra-EU debate on the options and possible consequences ahead.

But in the meantime, the EU cannot stand still. The crisis in Ukraine is unlikely to disappear any time soon. Beyond the short-term priority of securing the ceasefire, the bulk of the EU's efforts in the years ahead should be devoted towards transforming Ukraine into a functioning state, one that will no longer be vulnerable to the instability, violence and external interference that we have seen in the last year.

More broadly, the time has come to recognize explicitly the internal differentiation within the Eastern Partnership. While on one level we can distinguish between the three Eastern Partnership (EaP) front-runners that have concluded Association Agreements (Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia) and the remaining three (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus), on closer inspection EU policies must factor in the key differences within these two sets. For instance, within the three front-runner states, Moldova is furthest ahead both in terms of EU integration – having concluded both the Association Agreement and visa liberalization – and in terms of domestic reforms, Georgia is next in line, and Ukraine is a country at war. In the laggard set of EaP countries, Armenia's turn away from the Association Agreement should not be considered irreversible, while the EU's relationship with Azerbaijan looks bound to be premised upon energy, and Belarus is marked by a frozen domestic situation but a more constructive regional role as of late.

These observations lead to a possible way forward. The crises, fragilities and instabilities of the eastern neighbourhood will require constant and upgraded EU attention. But the support these countries need today – foremost Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia – is less in the direction of European integration, and more on the basics of state building. Having concluded Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements, and having either achieved or being on track towards visa liberalization, the EU must take a step back and work towards ensuring that its eastern neighbours are functioning states capable of Europeanizing in the first place. This does not mean halting or reversing the path towards integration – quite the contrary. The EU's efforts in the years ahead should be devoted towards consolidating the eastern neighbours' prerogatives of statehood, in the basic Weberian sense of the term. Concretely what this means is greater EU attention to security sector and judicial reform, policing, infrastructure, energy, customs and border control, and the fight against corruption, as well as conflict mediation, democratization and reviving the economy. When the eastern partners secure the basic elements of functioning statehood, the EU can resume its integration agenda, provided that in the meantime it will have resolved its internal debate over the European future of the region. In the meantime, the EU should avoid symbolic promises and concentrate on concrete delivery.

The EU's strategy towards the eastern neighbourhood cannot be detached from its approach towards Russia. Once a solution to Ukraine is found, the EU's priority must be that of managing its relationship with Russia so as to minimize new dividing lines in Europe. As Nicu Popescu convincingly argues, the geopolitical

concept of a Eurasian Union premised on confrontation/division with the West is destined to fail.⁴ As the Ukraine crisis itself demonstrates, Russia has not and will not succeed in making all of its neighbours succumb to a geopolitical Eurasian Union opposed to the West. At the same time, the time has come to recognize that the EU's own geopolitical vision of a homogenous ring of friendly Europeanizing neighbours to the east is not in the offing. While some neighbours have amply demonstrated their European orientation, others have either voluntarily or been forcibly turned away. The EU must acknowledge these choices, while keeping its doors open to all. Hence, there is a need for the EU to seek a *modus vivendi* with the Eurasian Economic Union – itself a far more geographically limited and politically unambitious project – by listening to one another's concerns and finding concrete solutions to prevent trade disruptions. Beyond Europe, it is equally crucial that the EU sustains and fosters cooperation with Russia on all those regional and global dossiers in which interests converge and/or where Russia has a stake. The fight against extremism/terrorism, maritime security, the Iranian nuclear file, and also Syria are key cases in point.

Conclusion

The challenges stemming from the EU's neighbourhood, both east and south, have never been so great. The post-Cold War European security architecture is unravelling. Many talk about the end of Sykes-Picot in the Middle East. In such times, the EU must pursue a *responsible* foreign policy: a foreign policy grounded on a level-headed assessment of the challenges and opportunities the EU faces; a foreign policy based on realistic goals and a pragmatic but sophisticated deployment of all the instruments at the EU's disposal; a foreign policy that is able to prioritize, choosing strategically where it can and is expected to be in the driver's seat while building and oiling multilateral machines to confront other pressing challenges.

To move forward, the EU needs to devise conceptually different approaches to the east and south. In both cases, instability and crises abound. In both, the magnitude of the challenges that the EU faces is so great that down-to-earth realism must be its guiding light. Formulating and pursuing down-to-earth objectives for the neighbourhood that reflect current realities is not cynical. It is responsible.

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⁴ Nicu Popescu, "Eurasian Union: the real, the imaginary and the likely", in *Chaillot Papers*, No. 132 (September 2014), <http://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/detail/article/eurasian-union-the-real-the-imaginary-and-the-likely>.

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