

THE END OF “STABILITY” IN THE EU’S NEIGHBORHOOD

The period of “stability” in the neighborhood (that started with the development of the European Neighborhood Policy in 2004 and ended at the end of 2010 with the crackdown in Belarus and the Arab Spring in early 2011), which was characterized by the reliance of the European Union on authoritarian and dictatorial rulers in its neighboring countries, is over. The EU has to revisit the paradigms defining how it relates to its neighborhood and quickly make strategic decisions based on new realities. One of these realities is the war in Europe unleashed by the Russian leadership with the goal of preventing Ukraine’s closer integration with Europe, and the broader information war Russia is waging against the West. Russia’s new assertiveness in the region blatantly undermines the EU. Another new reality is the wish of people in the EU’s neighboring countries to live in freedom and dignity. The people, not the dictators, have to be the principle partners of the EU.

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prolonged period of rather smooth development in Europe, which started with the fall of the Berlin Wall, ended with a major crisis in its neighborhood that threatens Europe's own existence.

In the 1990s, after the collapse of the USSR, the concept of “Europe Whole and Free” was not only attractive but also quite realistic and encouraging. Elites and the general public alike in all Eastern European countries quickly reached the consensus that the future of their countries lay within the European Union (EU). There was also another kind of consensus reached: they did not want to go back to life under Russian domination.

Eastern Europe broke free from the “socialist camp” and was re-claiming its European identity. The extraordinary challenges of reforms were met successfully, and in an amazingly short time many East European states became full-fledged members of the EU and NATO. Membership in the latter facilitated, among other things, the newcomers’ accession to the EU.

The “big bang” enlargement of the EU in 2004, the single largest expansion of its membership, brought in 10 new member states. This enlargement was the peak of a period marked by the successful political and economic development of Europe, which managed to take a gigantic step towards its unification based on values – in general terms, the respect for human rights and basic freedoms and in practice, the establishment and development of democratic institutions.

2004 also marked the beginning of a new strategy of the EU – the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP). It was developed as a foreign policy instrument of the EU, designed to prevent the emergence of new dividing lines between the enlarged EU and its neighbors.



The attempt to more precisely define the ENP, which reflected the division within the EU as to its priorities in the neighborhood, led to the creation of two distinct frameworks: the Union for the Mediterranean and the Eastern Partnership. During this process of bifurcation, the Southern Caucasus was added to the eastern dimension, and Turkey and Western Balkans were formally excluded from the ENP on the premise that they were “candidate or potential candidate” countries.

This geographic redistribution of priorities seemed to strengthen the undeclared strategy of the EU. This implicit strategy seemed to rest on stability in the neighborhood in many cases, while disregarding the very values on which the EU was built and developed.

In other words, the EU, while being very effective and constructive with those countries that have made a clear choice in favor of its European future could not find a tangible strategy for the countries that either could not or did not have integration plans among their policy priorities. Most of those countries suffer under authoritarian rulers and are deprived of the right to elect their governments. Besides, Russia, which is the dominant factor in the politics of the countries within the Eastern Partnership from the very beginning, demonstrated a hostile attitude towards this initiative.

The EU apparently placed its stakes on authoritarian and dictatorial regimes in its neighborhood in the bizarre hope of achieving democratic improvements “from above.” The Association Agreements, which stressed the shared values of democracy in most cases, were signed with the autocratic rulers in EU’s southern and eastern neighborhoods.

The goal of the Union for the Mediterranean, “to transform the Mediterranean into an area of peace, democracy, cooperation, and prosperity,” relied on the complete transformation of non-democratic regimes, and was absolutely unrealistic. It served a contrary purpose: the dictators were enjoying high-level recognition in Europe, were supported financially, and were even offered the “know-how” of security forces of major European states that helped them to control their population with repressive methods.

Through the Eastern Partnership, the EU unfortunately fell into the same trap. It relied on authoritarian regimes while hoping to achieve progress in the areas of economic and political reforms that could make the six partners compatible with the EU.

This reliance was either *naïve* or a wrongly calculated plan to achieve predictability and stability in the EU neighborhood. Instead, the misplaced emphasis on stability led to growing tensions and strengthened autocratic regimes.

The relationship with the 16 neighbors of the EU both in the Mediterranean and Eastern neighborhoods were to be “based on the values of democracy, the rule of law, and respect for human rights” as suggested in EU papers.¹ To contribute to this end, the EU must identify partners committed to these principles and values no matter whether they are part of political opposition parties or in civil society – and make them real counterparts of the EU efforts, not the dictators that prevent people from making their own choices. Europe’s money must be invested into forming decent democratic societies in its neighborhood.

As a result of a misplacement of emphases, the efforts of the EU in its neighborhood ended in what can be called a period of “squares,” or people’s uprisings on the EU’s borders. Some of the largest protest demonstrations include that of Minsk’s Independence Square against the rigged Belarusian election of 2010, Egypt’s Tahrir Square in 2011 against the despotic rule of Hosni Mubarak, Turkey’s Taksim Square (*Gezi Park*) protests in 2013, and most recently, the Independence Square (*Maidan Nezalezhnosti*) protests in Kiev in 2013-14. These all were manifestations of the peoples’ utter dissatisfaction with the infringements on their liberties.

The Ukrainian Euromaidan Protests, which led to the “revolution of dignity,” were without any doubt a historic event. The unexpected Russian aggressive reaction to the events in Ukraine and the demise of the Russian-backed President Viktor Yanukovych not only changed the dynamics in the region but had a tremendous impact on world politics.

The fierceness with which Russia interfered in Ukrainian affairs and the continuation of its undeclared war is a major threat to international security. This threat is recognized by the international community, as proven by regular UN Security Council meetings on the issue. However, the response to this crisis has not always been adequate or fast enough. Partly, this inadequacy of response is due to differing views in different centers in the West on the nature and the goals of Kremlin’s aggressiveness. Russia’s belligerent behavior toward Ukraine is still perceived as a geopolitical conflict even as a rivalry between the US and Russia fighting for influence over this important country. This line of thinking is quite visible today in Russian propaganda.

¹ See for example: “The Factsheet on the European Neighborhood Policy,” *European Parliament*, http://www.europarl.europa.eu/aboutparliament/en/displayFtu.html?ftuId=FTU_6.5.4.html

Indeed, geopolitical interests of different countries are certainly involved, but it would be wrong to see the whole situation through this prism. People in Ukraine have spoken in favor of European integration, but it was not a geopolitical choice. It was a choice of values, and a clear move to break away from the totalitarian environment that still dominates the post-Soviet area. Ukrainians protested against Yanukovych’s U-turn on the Association Agreement, ousted him when he tried to make a deal with Russia behind their back and did remarkably well in electing their new executive and legislative powers in a democratic way despite the ongoing war on their territory.

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The decision to support European integration has to be seen as a choice of values and supported as such. Then values will introduce logics in geopolitics, not *vice versa*. That was the case with the enlargement of the EU when new members made their choice of values and that choice changed the geopolitics in the region.

The EU is now responsible for the adequate support of this choice and for strengthening its own values since it is under attack, along with Ukraine.

There is no place for realpolitik in dealing with this crisis, no place for futile attempts to use other dictatorial post-Soviet regimes to oppose the Kremlin. In this case, Belarus is the most illustrative example.

Belarus, under the 20-year rule of Aleksandr Lukashenko, is a critical test for the EU’s abilities. Today, some observers try to consider Lukashenko as a potential counterweight to Russian aggression in the region, somehow fooling themselves into believing that he can truly reform or be trusted to put the public interest above his own. This is especially true in Europe where economic interests and business are involved. But the Lukashenko regime actually created the model of neo-totalitarianism – that was closely watched, used as a test ground, and copied by Moscow – which has now reached new heights with Kremlin’s war in Ukraine. This model is dangerous not only for the people of post-Soviet countries, but also for the entire international system. Such autocrats and dictators are not genuine partners and the realpolitik of the last century only fails those brave people who continue to struggle for freedom and dignity under dictatorial regimes.

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It looks like the period of “stability,” which was characterized by the reliance of the EU on authoritarian and dictatorial rulers in the neighboring countries, such as Gaddafi, Mubarak, Ben Ali, Lukashenko, and Aliyev is over. The EU has to revisit its own concepts of relationships with its neighborhood and quickly make strategic decisions based on new realities.

These realities include the war in Europe unleashed by Russian leadership with the goal of preventing closer integration of Ukraine with Europe and undermining the EU. They also include Russia’s

information war against the West and the new assertiveness of Russia in the region. At the same time, they include the wish of people in post-Soviet countries to live in freedom. They have to be the principle partners of the EU, not the dictators.

“Europe Whole and Free” is still a worthy goal but it requires sacrifices from the EU, ones that are nothing compared to the huge sacrifices people in Ukraine, Belarus, and other neighboring countries make by risking their lives for the values Europe has to support by definition. Europe’s sacrifices mostly lie in the difficulties and constraints faced by its businesses, but that are necessary for the effectiveness of sanctions. Taking a firm moral position on dictators and exhibiting strong reactions to any violation of human rights and basic freedoms are still the most effective instruments for defending values and preventing an erosion of the EU’s foundations.

Getting back to values is the only solution to the present-day crisis. The EU is best equipped to make and implement such decisions. There has to be no efforts spared towards helping Ukraine preserve its independence, territorial integrity, and to stay on the path of democracy. There has to be no “engagement” with autocrats in the European neighborhood who will always serve as a source of potential crises in Europe. The best strategy is engaging the people and disengaging the dictators. The present-day crisis has to be turned into an opportunity for “Europe Whole and Free.”