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The ENP: A policy without a strategy…

Anne-Marie Le Gloannec

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The European Neighborhood Policy was supposed to be one of the flagship policies of the European Union, designed after the last big wave of enlargement (2004-2007) which brought the European Union (EU) to the shores of the Black Sea, to embrace poor and hardly democratic neighbors, which urgently needed Europe's help without being able to absorb it quickly, let alone to introduce rapid and thorough reforms. Contrarily to enlargement policy, the ENP was essentially a pro-active policy. Enlargements were more or less thrust upon the European Communities (EC) and later the EU in a fit of absent-mindedness, since the EC and later the European Union (EU) never looked for new members. The ENP, on the contrary, was addressed to new or old neighbors, in eastern Europe and on the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean, to tie them in and at the same time contain possible instabilities and spill-overs which might have weakened the EU.

From the beginning an inherent contradiction haunted the ENP though. Was it to help the neighbors develop and democratize or was it, first and foremost, to protect the Union from the outer world by a ring of "well-governed" states, a grey zone of graded marches between the inner core of continental peace and prosperity and the outer world?

Unfortunately, the Europeans erred on the side of conservatism and procrastination. The Arab Spring caught the EU off guard and revealed how much European governments, the French and the Italian ones in particular, had connived with authoritarian regimes for the sake of stability, instead of talking democracy with the peoples of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya or Syria. Even the so-called "Tunisian economic miracle", hailed by the EU and by the international organizations as well, on the eve of the revolution, was a total sham: liberalization and privatization mostly benefitted a few, clan and cronies of the Ben Ali. To that extent, the ENP towards the South morphed into a policy of stability, i.e. of containment of migrants and of counter-terrorism, short of any strategic thinking about what long-term stability in the South required – what Lady Ashton called sustainable stability, too late though as the bush fire had become inextinguishable. No thoughts were devoted either as to what might happen to Libya after the fall of Gaddafi. Aside from an EU-mission to guard the indefensible borders in the desert, those who had wanted – rightly so – to protect the population from their dictator and tormentor, turned their attention to other countries, letting Libya slide into disintegration.

East of Europe has hardly fared better. The ENP was conceived, first and foremost, for Ukraine, the biggest country on the European marches, the closest to Polish hearts and minds in particular, because of historical ties and minorities, Polish ones in Ukraine, Ukrainian ones in Poland, and because Poland's 'other neighbor', Belarus, seemed hopelessly in the grip of Lukashenka, the "latest dictator" on the continent, as he was called a decade ago. Yet in spite of the Orange revolution in 2004, few hopes lingered on as the tandem that the two heroes of the Revolution, Yulia Tymoshenko and Viktor Yushchenko, constituted, began to quarrel and squabble and to mimic democracy rather than to emulate it. As a result, little was done and, aside for German or Italian businessmen who rushed to Kyiv or Lviv, hardly any effort was spent to encourage civil society: for instance, visa liberalization was more talk than deed.

The ENP towards the Eastern Europe suffered from two major flaws. First, extended also to Moldova and to the three Caucasian republics of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, the ENP boiled down to little more than "we pretend to help you and you pretend to reform". It took a few years and the determination of the Polish and Swedish governments, backed by Berlin,

to ratchet up the offer with more palatable rewards. The so-called Eastern Partnership (EaP) involved the inclusion of the recipients into a free-trade area and visa liberalization, two of the mostly coveted prizes, in return for gradual improvements in their make-up, institutions and markets. In other words, a policy of "positive tit-for-tat", "you do this and I'll do that", was devised.

However, and this was the biggest flaw which confronts us to-day, aside from trying to stabilize the marches without much success, strategic thinking was cruelly missing. While the European Commission was engrossed in the nuts and bolts of technicalities, the member states were torn between ignoring Eastern Europe and its overbearing eastern neighbor, from which they had just wrenched themselves, Russia, fearing it, or doing business with it. Aside from the Poles, the Balts or Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt, the EU member states preferred to ignore the link between the ENP and a policy, by the way absent, towards Russia. The EU turned more or less a blind eye to the so-called frozen conflicts, from Transnistria to South Ossetia, though they were never frozen on the ground. It did not dare to send EU observers to Georgia before the war that Russia waged against it in 2008 (with a little help from Mikheïl Saakashvili, though), deploying an EU mission after the Russian troops had sealed off the enclaves, preventing the mission to enter them.

Though it was not a "little war that shook the world", as Ronald Asmus contended, the war in Georgia clearly indicated what the master in the Kremlin intended: to draw a line in the sand, to create on the ground and foster the emergence of "entities". The latest is Crimea, now returned to Mother Russia by stealth, infiltration, disinformation and manipulation, in short by 19th centuries raw force and 21st century viruses. This was clearly in the making for some years – and clearly announced by Vladimir Putin when he lamented the fall of the Soviet Union. The question which remains open is how many hypotheses are on Vladimir Putin's agenda: probably several, from the minimal one, surrounding himself with confetti of empire, to the grand coup of overtaking Eastern Ukraine and recreating a contiguous empire from Transnistria to South Ossetia … – and more?

Finally, the EU has woken up to geopolitics. Most crucially, the government in Berlin shed the last glimmer of hope it entertained when it was dreaming that the man in the Kremlin might be amenable to dialogue and win-win reasoning. Vladimir Putin, in turn, has shed all pretenses of speaking the West's language, breaking his word, and showing contempt for our values. To Chancellor Merkel, this is unforgiveable, and her minister of Foreign Affairs, who as Foreign Minister in Angela Merkel's first grand coalition, sought to devise an "Ostpolitik Two", is as determined as she is, in having the EU get its act together. Germany is the pivot. The question is whether France, Italy, or the UK will be as ready as the German government to pay an economic price, if need be, and whether what Winston Churchill called the soft belly of Europe, from Serbia, an EU-candidate, to Greece, Cyprus and Bulgaria will follow suit.

Before revamping any European Neighborhood Policy, it is a strategy vis-à-vis Russia that is in dire need.The European Neighborhood Policy was supposed to be one of the flagship policies of the European Union, designed after the last big wave of enlargement (2004-2007) which brought the European Union (EU) to the shores of the Black Sea, to embrace poor and hardly democratic neighbors, which urgently needed Europe's help without being able to absorb it quickly, let alone to introduce rapid and thorough reforms. Contrarily to enlargement policy, the ENP was essentially a pro-active policy. Enlargements were more or less thrust upon the European Communities (EC) and later the EU in a fit of absent-mindedness, since the EC and later the European Union (EU) never looked for new members. The ENP, on the contrary, was addressed to new or old neighbors, in Eastern Europe and on the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean, to tie them in and at the same time contain possible instabilities and spill-overs which might have weakened the EU.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anne-Marie Le Gloannec

Anne-Marie Le Gloannec is a Research Director at the Centre d'Études et Recherches Internationales (CERI), Sciences Po, Paris.

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