Building
Stronger Neighbors

EU policies must be consistent, coherent

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The European Union has always approached challenges from neighboring countries by externalizing and spreading its core values, norms and principles. Enlargement has been the EU's finest tool. Because the EU could not expand indefinitely, it crafted the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) in 2004 with the goal of fostering stability, security and prosperity in countries beyond the EU's frontiers. Nevertheless, the EU has been unable to substantially alleviate the problems faced by countries close to its borders. On the contrary, countries in the EU's vicinity have become less stable and less secure. To the south, along the Mediterranean basin, the 2011 Arab Spring triggered an unprecedented wave of political, economic and societal upheaval, culminated by Syria's civil war, the rise of ISIL, also known as Daesh, and complete disarray in Libya after the central state's collapse. To the east, in the aftermath of the Eastern Partnership Vilnius Summit in November 2013, the crisis in Ukraine sparked regional turmoil in post-Soviet Eastern Europe with menacing effects on European security. Since then, numerous voices have raised misgivings about the ENP and called for a reshuffling of the political framework. "Miscalculation," "lack of preassessment," "incomplete understanding of the region(s)" and "need for better tailored policies toward partner countries," are among the phrases used in political discourses and policy recommendations.* Critics questioned Europe's "transformative power" in the neighborhood and, ultimately, the European Commission was asked to shape a response. To this aim, the publication of an ENP review in November 2015 reiterated "the need for a new approach, a re-prioritization and an introduction of new ways of working."

ENP 2.0: What is actually new?

But the revised ENP, just as the previous version, is unable to live up to these challenges and, in particular, is not capable of building resilience against hybrid threats. The new neighborhood policy is insufficiently equipped to deploy efficient answers to the regional turmoil. This is linked to the conceptualization phase of the ENP, from 2003 to 2004. The ENP was largely modeled on the EU's own enlargement blueprint (minus the accession "carrot") which ultimately appeared to be inadequate, given the complexities and uncertainties of the neighborhood. The central assumption was that stronger economic

engagement and integration of the ENP countries into the EU economy, together with a diffusion of European normative ideas (such as democracy, human rights, economic growth and social welfare) would foster a "community identity" and, in turn, regional stability and security. Thus, by creating solid ties with ENP states, the EU has sought to embrace the neighborhood within a broader security community. However, the initial positive assessment of the ENP appeared to be overrated since the limited appeal of the ENP could not sufficiently motivate neighboring states to take on approximation costs and in-depth reforms. For the past couple of years, the EU has also been confronted with a radically different context marked by a revival of security concerns and geopolitical rivalries, which ran counter to the EU's efforts to stabilize the region. Convulsions from its perilous vicinity have strained the EU's actions since the ENP was molded according to a soft, normative logic unlikely to succeed in a volatile environment lacking the necessary prerequisites for the "community approach" to function.

Hence, it appears from the ENP Review 2015 and the European Union Global Strategy (EUGS) 2016 that the EU must forge a new approach aimed at including more realist considerations in its traditional community mechanisms. Nevertheless, the simultaneous employment of two logics — "interest-based" and "value-based" — at the heart of the ENP could only diminish its credentials and deem it ineffective. So far, the difficulty in reconciling these two contrary approaches (interests vs. values) has been evident since 2004. The lack of conceptual clarity translated, in turn, into a neighborhood policy marked by intrinsic incoherence and inconsistency. Moreover, the projection of an image combining normative and geopolitical dimensions has resulted in failure by the EU to portray itself either as a value-based transformation project or as an interest-laden geopolitical strategist. The constructive ambiguity displayed by the EU has been particularly puzzling to neighboring nations trying to understand the EU's actions. Even today, the EU has yet to clearly explain the *finalité politique* of its engagement in the neighborhood, instead vacillating in its discourse between exclusion and inclusion, between limited and full integration. Additionally, the pressing security concerns of the region remain unanswered since an actual European road map to tackle the ongoing conflicts remains elusive.

What the EU has recently provided, instead, is the new concept of "resilience," the hallmark of both the 2015 ENP review and the EUGS. The resilience of neighboring states appears to be not only the bedrock of long-term

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✱ For a more detailed analysis, see Moga in *Theorizing the European Neighbourhood Policy*, Gstöhl, S. and Schunz, S. (eds.), Abingdon: Routledge, 2016.

engagement with the EU's neighbors, but also the leitmotif in both documents since it was used — together with the adjectival form "resilient" — no less than 50 times (nine entries in the ENP review and 41 entries in the EUGS). If we add the number of entries (29) from another important document published by the European Commission, the 2016 "Joint framework on countering hybrid threats – a European Union response," the salience of the resilience concept for the EU policymakers becomes even more evident.

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Whereas the ENP review was one of the first documents to include resilience-building as a foreign policy goal, resilience was later defined in the EUGS as "the ability of states and societies to reform, thus withstanding and recovering from internal and external crises." More specifically, building "state and societal resilience to our East and South" is identified as one of five priorities for the EU's external action (alongside building the EU's own security; crafting an integrated approach to conflicts and crises; fostering cooperative regional orders; and redefining and adapting the EU's global governance in line with the 21st century). Thus, resilience-building marks a clear move in the conceptualization of the EU's foreign affairs, one that is underpinned by "principled pragmatism" as the new operating instrument at the EU's disposal.

This novel principle, in fact, does not depart much from the previous EU foreign policy outlook. According to the EUGS, it intertwines in a pragmatic way "a realistic assessment of the current strategic environment" with "an idealistic aspiration to advance a better world." Such a dual approach might again raise more theoretical and practical challenges than it solves since it retains that contradiction in terms. From a conceptual point of view, an idealistic international player can only perform actions that strongly abide by moral, universally accepted values. Undertaking actions selectively,

An Iraqi oil well burns after being set aflame by ISIL, which has triggered instability across the Middle East.
AFP/GETTY IMAGES

on a case-by-case basis, guided by pragmatic cost-benefit assessments, could only risk damaging the EU's idealistic mantra. The EU cannot act in an idealistic and realistic fashion at the same time. It is a matter of "either/or." Otherwise, the EU's external actions are doomed to be castigated as incoherent and inconsistent, with potentially negative effects. "Idealistic ambitions also have a price for political actors when they fail to live up to their ideals, or deliberately violate them through action or inaction; such actors lose credibility/ legitimacy at best and can be accused of hypocrisy at worst," notes Michael E. Smith in the journal *Contemporary Security Policy*. For instance, a discordant mixture of intentions can be observed when assessing the EU's approach to Russia. While

threats." The concept of hybrid threats refers to "the mixture of coercive and subversive activity, conventional and unconventional methods (i.e., diplomatic, military, economic, technological), which can be used in a coordinated manner by state or nonstate actors to achieve specific objectives while remaining below the threshold of formally declared warfare," according to a European Commission assessment. The concept is most recently associated with Russia's covert military actions in Ukraine and with the aggressive tactics of ISIL in the Middle East and North Africa. For instance, apart from the heavy confrontation in the Donbas region, the conflict in Ukraine appears to have all the ingredients of a cyber war since high levels of disinformation and propaganda (especially via social networks) are being employed. To achieve strategic gains, ISIL often makes use of massive information campaigns to recruit radicals or to appeal to proxy actors to conduct certain terrorist acts.

Civil defense members look for survivors under rubble after airstrikes in Idlib, Syria, in December 2016.

In spite of its increasing salience, hybrid threats were not directly addressed by the ENP review. The review insists on the stabilization of the neighborhood and on the need "to work on conflict prevention through early warning," yet there was no mention of the word "hybrid." Nevertheless, the document identifies some of the hybrid threat characteristics (terrorism, propaganda and information warfare, cyber crime, etc.) and provides ways of countering them. Only later, in April 2016, after a year of intense consultation, did the European Commission produce the document "Joint framework on countering hybrid threats —

acknowledging the deterioration of relations as a result of the illegal annexation of Crimea and the destabilization of eastern Ukraine, the EU also admits that constructive cooperation with the Russian Federation would be helpful in addressing common challenges, according to both the ENP review and the EUGS. Similarly, in the South, the EU is further committed to the democratic transformation of the countries in the region and in this regard appears adamant about strengthening cooperation and partnerships, despite the fact that authoritarian tendencies are increasingly regaining ground (for instance, in Egypt).

'Resilience' as a counterweight

A pressing issue the EU appears compelled to act upon is the menacing effect on European security posed by "hybrid

a European Union response." It acknowledged the need for the EU to adapt and enhance its capacities as a security provider. Likewise, it identified that many of the current challenges to the EU's stability and security stem from the neighborhood of nations close to the EU. Considering the multilayered and multifaceted nature of the concept, the document sought also to clarify for the EU's defense lexicon the meaning of hybrid threats and to distinguish them from conventional ones. It further aimed to provide a set of guidelines on how to deter the potential use of hybrid tactics. These guidelines recommended improved awareness, building resilience, a stronger response to crisis by EU member states, as well as by ENP partners, an increased role for the Common Security and Defense Policy and solid EU-NATO ties. This comprehensive approach was

subsequently introduced in the EUGS 2016 because the EU's internal security is seen as inextricably linked to its external action and to the security of its neighbors. It remains to be seen if the implementation of the recommendations from the "Joint framework" document can generate stronger synergies among EU/ ENP countries in tackling hybrid threats.

Conclusion

Whereas it appears that for the near future resilience will be the strategic priority across the EU's East and South, it is still not clear how resilience building will actually succeed in the neighborhood, especially when faced with an increase in hybrid threats. In general, the EU's revised external policy toolkit maintains a level of abstraction, to the potential disillusionment of those expecting more concrete action and much more hawkish behavior. Likewise, those hoping to see a morally liberal agenda might be equally dissatisfied with the EU's new pragmatic approach to world affairs. Against this backdrop, the confusion purposely created by hybrid tactics is likely to further complicate the EU's ability to craft a truly coherent response, which would give preference to individual member state actions. To respond effectively, the EU needs to coalesce all member states' interests into a single comprehensive approach, potentially doubled by a "rapid reaction force" to include military staff and intelligence from neighboring countries.

This short analysis appeals to moderate expectations with regard to the ENP 2.0, which should not be surprising considering the usually slow, consensus-building reaction of the EU in the realm of foreign policy. Although the EU aims for a much more ambitious stance, both in the neighborhood and in the wider international arena, it is still tributary to its inherent soft power nature, which causes the EU to refrain from undertaking bolder actions. As such, soft power remains the EU's biggest strength — and greatest weakness. □