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Democracy and security in the EU's neighbourhood

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has exposed the instability of the EU's neighbourhood policy. It is time to reconceptualise it

As United States intelligence predicted, Russia last week invaded Ukraine with a full-scale military intervention which wiped out any European illusions of diplomatic dialogue. The war is knocking at the doors of Europe and the union and its member states are called upon to respond — over and above the initial statements and sanctions announced.

Beyond the empty rhetoric of the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, about an aggressive stance on the part of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the increasing closeness between Kyiv and Brussels, represented by the 2014 Association Agreement, is in fact the greatest challenge to Russia's influence in Europe's eastern neighbourhood. It is the dynamic to which Moscow is least equipped to react and perhaps a better explanation for Putin's decision to wage war.

European instability

After the fall of the Soviet Union, most former Warsaw Pact countries considered Europe a model of freedom, democracy and prosperity and asked for solidarity and openness. The European Union responded with enlargement to those countries in central-eastern Europe and in the western Balkans which could aspire to it, with 'everything but institutions' for the rest. Enlargement and neighbourhood policies represented an adequate response to the aspirations of the nations involved and acted as a stabilising factor.

The quest for a closer bond with the EU is still there for countries in the neighbourhood. The enlargement process has however caused an integration fatigue: the union has not been able to deepen its competences and institutions, and its governance is suffering from the vagaries of non-compliant member states, among those which acceded

from 2004, especially in terms of solidarity on refugees and the rule of law. The enlargement process is stalled for Turkey and for Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia, while Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo remain potential candidates in limbo.

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The lack of credible perspectives for accession in the foreseeable future has triggered a negative spiral of regional instability, cross-border claims and democratic involution in the western Balkans, while competing actors such as Russia, China, Turkey, and in the Arab world are extending their influence on governments and among populations. In the eastern neighbourhood, the economic gains linked to access to the single market and EU investment packages have not compensated for the limited progress made in other arenas, such as security and migration.

At the same time, Russia has worked to restore its grip in the area by launching annexationist and predatory wars, such as in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014. It has meanwhile supported secessionist claims and placed puppet governments in Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Donetsk and Luhansk.

The crisis of its enlargement and neighbourhood policies has left the EU unable to respond to its partners' expectations, thus turning its attractiveness into a factor for instability. With the latest military confrontation in Ukraine, this dynamic has gone even further, representing not only an existential threat to Ukraine but also a menace to the European security architecture and a direct attack on the principles of the union's legal order. How can the EU turn the page, capitalise on its appeal to guarantee its own security and fulfil the promises made to its neighbouring partners?

Clear stance for democracy

It must first abandon the technocratic approach which has characterised the management of enlargement and neighbourhood policies. The EU must become a fully-fledged political actor, able to think and act strategically at regional and global levels. Two priorities should stand out as the core of its political vision for, and action in, the region: democracy and security.

The possibility to live in a democratic environment in which individual

liberties and social rights are guaranteed is a precondition of the long-term stability of societies. It is crucial for the EU to continue its political and financial efforts in support of civil society, which has proved the most effective agent of scrutiny and change in situations of democratic deterioration and authoritarian escalation.

The EU should avoid any ambiguity when these values are at stake and take strong action against governments in the neighbourhood which do not respect them, first and foremost by implementing conditionality measures in the enlargement and association agreements. It should also fully exploit the other instruments at its disposal to contest not only the violation of human rights but also corruption, for example by expanding the application of the EU Magnitsky act adopted in December 2020.

Sorting out security and defence

The Ukraine crisis has shown once more that the EU needs to increase its security and military engagement in the neighbourhood and at the same time develop its own defence capabilities. EU civilian missions are deployed at the border between Moldova and Ukraine (since 2005), in Georgia (since 2008) and Ukraine (since 2014), as well as in Kosovo (since 2008). A military mission in Bosnia-Herzegovina launched jointly with NATO in 2004 is being phased out. Such missions ensure a European presence on the ground and have been instrumental in monitoring post-conflict reconstruction and supporting institution-building.

Their action needs to be reinforced through a military presence in the framework of the Common Security and Defence Policy, which could provide domestic security and military forces with the training and advice required to react to possible menaces coming from the east. The European Peace Facility, originally focused on the African continent, should be used more extensively to finance military operations and equipment in the EU's neighbourhood. Greater integration of western-Balkan and eastern neighbouring countries in the EU's security and defence, notably through participation in CSDP missions or common projects in the framework of Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), could help them reform their security and defence apparatuses and reinforce their security bond with the union.

Developing a Strategic Compass should primarily equip the union with the rapid-reaction forces

Yet the EU lacks a deterrence capacity which could be mobilised to respond to threats of aggression in its back yard. Developing a Strategic Compass should primarily equip the union with the rapid-reaction forces necessary

necessary for it to intervene in high-intensity conflicts.

for it to intervene in high-intensity conflicts. Such forces should be credible in terms of military personnel — so not limited to 5,000 — and supporting capabilities: strategic transport, communication technologies and so on.

This would imply member states spending more on defence, as a share of their gross domestic product, and at EU level increasing the allocation to the European Defence Fund (currently about €8 bn) and the common costs of military missions financed jointly through the Athena mechanism. This might be a challenge when most capitals are struggling to recover from the economic and social consequences of the pandemic, but we have to take advantage of the funds available under the Next Generation EU package to restructure our budgets in a way that makes more defence spending sustainable.

Only by engaging seriously in the promotion of democracy and the provision of security will the EU be able to transform itself from an attractive model to a credible actor — for its partners and its competitors.

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