

Summary

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Panel Discussion

Europe's Exit from its Neighbourhood?

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Summary by: Larissa Wehrle

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Liberal World Order

Panelists:

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Introduction:

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Executive Summary

The European Neighbourhood Policy, launched in 2004, was developed as a political tool to promote the EU's transformational power in the immediate neighbourhood. In return for approximation to EU norms, partner countries were offered a stake in the EU market. 15 years later, the Union as well as its neighbourhood have undergone significant changes. The rise of populist, illiberal and nationalist movements, growing tensions among member states and Brexit have challenged the EU's transformative and normative power. At the same time, tectonic shifts as the Arab uprisings or the Ukrainian crisis have narrowed the Union's scope of manoeuvre in the region.



Has a common Neighbourhood Policy become obsolete? What can be the EU's future role in the neighbourhood?

Nathalie Tocci criticized the concept of the European Neighbourhood as it puts the European Union at the core and reasserts a eurocentric view on the world. She highlighted that the European Neighbourhood Policy was developed in the context of the post-Cold War in a time when the EU saw itself and was at the same time perceived by others as a benign force that can transform its surroundings by the expansion of its own model. However, against the backdrop of a changing international context with the liberal world order more generally in question, the ENP has become a debatable tool. The challenge the EU is facing is to develop a common foreign policy that brings together Realpolitik with the values the EU stands for.

However, it is not easy to replace or reform a policy instrument such as the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). Tocci emphasized that the conservative instinct of institutions and political actors should not be underestimated. While people working in the EU, institutions have been aware of the ongoing tremendous changes for quite some time, a policy framework does not get replaced until a realistic alternative has been developed. In the case of the ENP, there is currently no alternative. Thus, it is reformed and revised within its original set-up.

Declining US hegemony

With decreasing US hegemony in the post-Cold War era, Europe is slowly waking up to the fact that the United States is no longer Europe's "caretaker". The world is in a "post-imperial phase" where the US no longer has the capability nor the willingness to sustain a world system larger than itself. Europe must therefore avoid letting foreign players step into the vacuum that the withdrawal of the US has left. Unlike the US, the EU cannot exit Europe geographically and is bound to its neighbours. The EU was able to increase its power in a US-led liberal world order. Tocci also highlighted that it is not that Europe has become weaker, but its weakness has rather become visible with the US withdrawing. What can be observed over the last years, is a clear shift towards security and defence. In reaction to the decline of US hegemony, security and defence spending has become a bigger priority. In 2018, the European Commission (EC) announced to allocate nearly 30 billion Euros to security and defence. This is remarkable as until recently the word "defence" itself had been considered as a "dirty word".

"Europe" and its "neighbourhood"

Tobias Schumacher drew attention to the fact that "Europe" as well as "neighbourhood" are both artificially constructed regions and concepts. The existence of a "Europe" and a "neighbourhood" seems to create two different entities and suggests that Europe is superior to the surrounding regions.

This goes along the lines of “self vs. other” and “in vs. out” narratives. He highlighted that the definition of who is a member of “Europe” is an artificial one. Some countries that are de-facto on the European continent are members of the EU, some are candidates for membership, others are partners of the ENP and others considered to be non-European. These distinctions only underline the socially and historically constructed nature of “Europe” itself.

The title of the event and the question of “exit” suggest that “Europe” can disentangle itself from its neighbourhood. It actually cannot, but should rather be seen as part of a larger region that includes the neighbourhood and beyond. Depending on the neighbouring region, Europe has very actively played a role or hardly been present at all.

Objectives and achievements of the ENP

Schumacher stresses that perspectives, conclusions and interpretations diverge and that the evaluation of the ENP changes with them. The ENP can be seen as (1) a policy framework externalising internal practices and values or (2) as a pragmatic foreign policy tool for member states where they can upload their individual interest or (3) as a practice for a kind of imperialistic external governance which aims at creating a “buffer zone” between the “civilised self” vs. the “uncivilised other”. Whether the ENP is regarded as a failure or success fully depends on the perspective and the interpretation of its goals. However, at the time being, EU member states hardly agree on the objectives of the ENP. Is it about peace and stability, the creation of a ring of friends, expanding the EU's sphere of influence or creating transnational assimilation between societies?



Despite just criticism, Schumacher underlined that the EU has also achieved much. Relations between the EU and the surrounding regions have overall improved through the ENP as a framework for regular dialogue. It has not only allowed for a mere exchange of views but provided an institutionalized framework for socialisation and networking. Schumacher highlights that there have also been quite successful examples for the EU's positive role in neighbouring countries. The EU has made a difference in Ukraine and Georgia and thereby demonstrated its transformative power in influencing local decision makers. Similar findings apply for the South such as Libya where the EU engages with civil

society, health care and social security in unprecedented ways. At the same time, the EU merely became active in Belarus for example.

Internal fragmentation

Since the Maastricht treaty 1993, there has always been intra-EU fragmentation but within the ENP this has only become a major problem within the past two years. Member states are less and less reluctant to play the veto card. This has the effect that fast decisions cannot be taken (e.g. Hungary preventing the EU from meaningful policies). Against this backdrop, it is concerning that László Trócsányi of Hungary is nominated to lead the Neighbourhood and Enlargement portfolio in the new European Commission.

The normative power of the ENP

With its very strong normative underpinning, the ENP was intended to be transformative in nature and spreading democracy, human rights and the rule of law. As the EU has recognised that it does not have a “magic hand” that can transform the neighbourhood, it is now important to develop a credible alternative policy. This is particularly challenging considering the fact that the ENP has a quite large agenda.

There has been a crucial shift in means and ends of the ENP. In its early stages the goals of the ENP were normative (democracy, human rights, rule of law) and its means were relationships with neighbouring countries. Meanwhile, having good relationships with neighbours has become the new goal in itself. This is a significant “flip-around” to the



situation before and a new understanding of these relationships as tools. The EU now capitalises on these relationships that were built in the past. Tocci therefore identifies a “lazy debate in academia” on the subject, treating the normative commitments in the neighbourhood still as the end goal. She argued that norms and interests are now ultimately competing.

Tocci argued that all the instruments are already present and don't need to be invented in new documents. She stressed the urgency for the EU to take action and the importance to “get it right” -

especially in relation to the Western Balkans. Personally, I cannot think of one good argument why not to open up talks with Albania and Macedonia". She admitted that the EU membership process is a delicate issue but in this region the EU is currently not only not supporting positive developments but possibly even actively supporting negative ones.

Migration, Brexit and geopolitics

The EU has lost credibility in the world due to its handling of the migration crisis. Referring to an anecdote of High Representative Federica Mogherini Tocci said that many leaders in the world were astonished by Europeans' "pathetic" reactions to migration.

Regarding Brexit, she asserted that while the EU has already "digested" Brexit, for the UK the process only begins.

Schumacher further highlighted that the EU has failed to implement a fully coherent Russia policy and should now communicate red lines more clearly. Overall, he called for a clear definition of objectives, incentives and benchmarks. He further noticed a general fatigue in the EU's engagement towards its Eastern neighbours. In this context he argued that the "bread crumbs" strategy of the EU towards its Eastern and Southern neighbours is likely to backfire. Therefore, the EU needs to develop a strategy that keeps these countries engaged without offering a membership perspective which then never gains momentum. He also argued however that EU bashing is not helpful and that it must be kept in mind that given its institutional set-up, the EU cannot be measured by nation state criteria.