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Contribution - Towards an EU global strategy – Consulting the experts

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At the turn of the millennium, the European Union deluded itself with a false sense of security. It had sought to build a ring of friends that were supposed to become prosperous and more democratic, and to filter migrants coming to Europe. By doing so, Europeans made a twin mistake: they believed that their neighbours would emulate their example, and they outsourced their migration and border policies. This, in turn, had two consequences.

First, Europeans played into the hands of authoritarian and murderous leaders who exacted concessions in return for keeping migrants at bay. In the 2000s, for instance, Colonel Qaddafi obtained financial rewards, as well as international recognition. And the agreement that the EU struck with Ankara on 18 March 2016 to dry up the Aegean and Balkan routes for smugglers and refugees depends on Turkey's willingness to comply. Second, Europeans ignored power politics. In designing the so-called 'ring of friends', the EU stumbled over what the Kremlin considered to be its sphere of influence. The Commission and the Council produced technical solutions, Association Agreements and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTA), for what actually was a political issue: competition over eastern Europe.

A global strategy worthy of its name should start with promoting security on the European continent and in its surroundings. The European Union established itself as a small community which forged a new way of conducting international relations in Europe. It gradually – and sometimes haphazardly and reluctantly – expanded its model and eventually began to dominate the continent and influence its periphery. This has now changed. The current challenges – Russia's invasion of Ukraine, forays in NATO members' airspace, the war in Syria, inroads into the EU through Gazprom, corruption and disinformation, the refugee crisis, the spread of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) to Libya, Mali and Europe – are the result of some of the failings of the EU.

PREDICT AND PREPARE

First of all, the European Union, as a collective, has repeatedly proven to be unable to think ahead. The latest wave of refugees started to build up in 2011, when uprisings in the Arab world were crushed. Although EU agencies and institutions published figures, and NGOs offered solutions (such as the resettlement of refugees to undermine people trafficking and allow for vetting), little was done. National administrative budgets – of the German Federal Office for Migrants and Refugees, for instance – were cut, and capacities to register migrants did not expand, be it in Greece or Italy. And, since the European Court of Human Rights ruled in 2011 that Athens disregarded the rights of refugees, the latter could not be deported back to Greece if they had crossed that country to move illegally to another EU member state. All of these were indicators that the so-called refugee crisis was in the making, and yet the EU still did not anticipate the massive influx of migrants.

The crisis over Ukraine offers a similar account. Though the Kremlin imposed a massive embargo on Ukrainian goods as of the summer of 2013, and President Putin met four times with his Ukrainian counterpart in November, Europeans deluded themselves by firmly believing that Kiev would sign the DCFTA. No proposal was made to mitigate the consequences of the embargo – despite the fact that Brussels later increased the quota of Moldovan wine, which was also subjected to a Russian embargo for the same reasons.

THINK AND ACT EUROPEAN

Second, the decision-making process of the EU is becoming increasingly dysfunctional. The heads of state and government have abandoned the Monnet method for numerous reasons, primarily to protect their so-called sovereignty, and also, as German Chancellor Angela Merkel put it, to promote the speed and efficiency of decision-making by centralising decisions within the European Council. Whether this is successful is far from obvious. When asked why the EU could not foresee the refugee crisis, a minister and confidante of Chancellor Merkel retorted that he could not multitask. Overwhelmed by the series of crises, the European Council has become overstretched, and the specific issues it does not deal with, such as the Normandy negotiations, fall onto the shoulders of the German Chancellor – who is even more overburdened herself. Instead of being facilitated, the decision-making process in the EU is blocked: European and national civil servants cannot take political decisions and rely upon technocratic approaches. The DCFTA with Ukraine is a very good example of this lack of political thinking.

Last, because of prevailing of national sovereignties, the EU is incapable of controlling its own borders. Frontex was created to mount limited operations in order to repel illegal migrants. The external borders of the EU were, and still are, controlled by the peripheral member states. This system is dysfunctional, too.

The EU and its eastern neighbours share 4,000 miles of land borders, of which 1,400 are with Russia. 23 out of 28 member states have a coastline adding up to a little over 40,000 miles of indentations, caps, bays, and islands, some of which are very close to the borders of Asia and Africa, where problems abound. Only a *European* border guard would have a chance to work properly, patrolling coasts and inspecting harbours where, according to intelligence sources, surveillance is far too limited.