

Rebuilding the Neighbourhood: Introduction to the Web Dossier

Mar 08, 2016 by Ilana Bet-El

Europe is unique amongst continents in that it has an outlying neighbourhood – indeed that it has divergent neighbourhoods in close proximity. This is a consequence of it being physically tied to Asia and tangentially tied to Africa: it is a continent in concept as much as pure geography. And the very ambiguity of the geographical dimensions of Europe is a defining characteristic of its history and its political trajectory. It is not possible to understand the current complex relationships between Europe and Russia and Turkey – or indeed the Middle East and the Maghreb – without incorporating geography and history, as well as politics.

Europe is no less unique in that it is considered to a large extent a single entity, with many identities. No other continent has fought within itself as a whole over centuries, nor has any other eventually arrived at a framework that contains large swathes of land, people and states in a combination of sovereignty and collectivity. In our times, it is this combination that defines Europe as a political concept as well as a geographic entity: the European Union is not Europe, nor is Europe the European Union, but there is a large measure of overlap between the two – with those European states that are not part of the EU either aspiring to membership or else concluding formal arrangements with it.

This combination, as well as the complexities underpinning it, was well on display in February 2016, when the Foreign Ministers of the six founding nations of the European Union met in Rome to discuss the State of the Union in its sixty ninth year. The statement issued after the talks sought to reassert the values of the Union in a time of multiple crises, and significantly, it did so in a very European manner, with a mix of geography, politics and history:

We will not forget that Europe had to go through violent conflicts and a painful history before it pursued the path of integration. For many generations, Europe was merely a dream of peace and understanding, accompanied by the hope for human dignity, freedom, democracy, the rule of law and solidarity on the continent. The European project has enabled us to make these very principles the foundation of our coexistence in Europe. They have been the basis for our security, stability and prosperity.

Notably, the ministerial statement then went on to note:

A democratic, stable and prosperous neighbourhood is a strategic priority and in the fundamental interest of the EU.¹

Many statements have been issued by politicians about the EU neighbourhood over the years, but few have probably been so sincere – which is a sign of the times: the neighbourhood is in complete turmoil, and as a consequence both the EU and Europe are suffering. This is hardly surprising; for while external forces could not necessarily have ensured a different outcome, European politicians and EU institutions alike have consistently ignored the tensions, dissensions and corruption in the surrounding regions over many years, other than paying money and lip service to democratic values and the need for reforms. And now, as in a very bad dream, all these regions have erupted, nearly simultaneously, impacting the EU, its states and values in the most physical and violent of manners. From human waves of refugees and migrants to terrorist attacks, the neighbourhood has arrived in Europe, demanding it live up to its values and promise.

But the EU is failing.

The long durée

Europe has always interacted with its neighbours. Like all continents, it has traded with states and entities both near and far; but possibly more uniquely, it has also impacted all other continents – for better and for ill. While it is commonplace now to speak of the US as the sole superpower, its global presence is largely cultural and political. Europe, on the other hand, has physically impinged upon all other continents. Over centuries Europeans settled in every corner of the globe, having invaded and colonised large swathes of lands and peoples. Significantly for current circumstances, maps were drawn in the interests of the colonisers, dividing off spoils and peoples without regard for their histories, traditions, ethnic and tribal affiliations – or enmities.

While the process of decolonisation commenced in earnest after the Second World War, with the European colonisers largely disengaging from their colonial past and possessions, the divisions of peoples and lands remained in place: the maps and their dislocations did not change. This background is imperative to understanding the deep roots of much that afflicts Europe's troubled relationship with the neighbourhood today, definitely in the south and the Middle East (much as it goes some way to explaining the origins of wars and unrest in various parts of Africa). The states of the Maghreb and Sub-Saharan Africa as well as those of the Middle East were all created and defined by colonial powers – be it the scramble for Africa in the 19th century or the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1917. Lines were drawn, states created, sheiks and tribal leaders bought off and masses of people shoved about – all with scant respect for the realities of their lives, and in some cases also for geography. Maps were largely made in European ministries and conferences, not on the ground. The only logic was the interests of the colonial powers.

In an age of Twitter, Facebook and SMS, in which the overriding imperative is immediacy, it seems difficult to correlate events of past centuries and decades with those unfolding today. Yet that is the case: events have effects, and effects take time. Our communications may be instant but they do not void the core historical reality of the longer process: decolonisation may have become a fact some 50-70 years ago, depending on the state, but the relatively technical and administrative acts of the colonisers retreating only started the long process of decolonisation; of peoples and states coming to their own terms with their pasts and presents in order to build futures. In the European neighbourhood this has always been complicated by European former colonisers maintaining strong ties with the states and rulers they left behind, and the EU institutions reinforcing these relationships, even though the corresponding regimes were largely authoritarian, corrupt and often downright oppressive. This was the lip service to democracy and institution building, while the many millions of European tax payer money rarely reached the populations they were intended for, much of it often badly dispersed through non-functioning state institutions or else disappearing into the personal accounts of the regimes.

The peoples in these states eventually rose up: the Arab revolutions that started in late 2010 – once optimistically known as the Arab Spring – disrupted most of the Middle East, as far as Yemen, and some of the Maghreb. This was the political process of decolonisation evolving, nearly three generations on, ironically aided by Twitter, Facebook and SMS. But it was not a resounding success – which is not entirely incredible, given the circumstances. In most cases the colonisers left behind states with few or no institutions, other than the military and religion, which were quickly seized by dictators. To keep in power they built massive security machines – often financed and armed by European companies and states – repressing most freedoms, banning civil society, but allowing a modicum of religion to remain. It is therefore hardly surprising that the Arab revolutions have been a drama enacted between the military and the religious establishments: in the absence of civil society, they were and remain the only two functioning institutions in most neighbourhood states in the south and the Middle East.

To date only Tunisia has emerged as a renewed democratic state, albeit with many problems. Libya is in total collapse with complex patterns of sectarian fighting and no proper government to speak of, while Egypt only flirted with regime change – into the hands of the Muslim Brotherhood – then reverted to authoritarian military dictatorship. Syria is in the fifth year of a full-blown horrific civil war, which has not only imposed death, destruction and disorder upon the state, but has also allowed for the emergence of ISIS, a mutation of Al-Qaeda, as a Sunni power seeking to finally demolish the Shia within the Islamic world, and as a Muslim enemy of the west. With its barbaric forms of war and oppression, and its claims to establishing a new Caliphate, it has expanded the war in Syria by conquering parts of Iraq, murdering thousands, enslaving women, deleting ancient sects, and chasing out Christians and all others. In so doing, ISIS has complicated further the notions of decolonisation: it is an enterprise that seeks to unwind not only the states created by the colonists but effectively any state within a modern political definition.

The murderous war in Syria has created the biggest refugee crisis since World War II. After flooding neighbouring states, notably Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey with millions of refugees over four years, the stream of humanity has now turned towards Europe, with one million people arriving in 2015 and at least as many expected in 2016, if not more.ⁱⁱ To be clear, this stream of humanity is not only from Syria, though it is that state that has caused the flood, not least by disintegrating and allowing new routes and passages to form from further afield, notably Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan. These regions too have been afflicted not only by past colonisation but also by more recent wars brought about by the west as well as their own corrupt and dictatorial regimes. And this human wave has also been augmented by many people from sub Saharan Africa, often dismissed as economic migrants, but nonetheless representing the dire face of humanity under stress, be it from oppressive regimes, corruption and poverty – many of which are legacies from colonisation – or the effects of climate change.

This is history unfolding: the same routes that made Africa and the Middle East relatively accessible to the Europeans are now being used in the reverse direction, as both a part and a consequence of the Arab revolutions – which in themselves must be understood as part of the long process of decolonisation. The old order, which divided people and terrain into states, has collapsed – bringing chaos. Equilibrium will only be found when the processes of revolution and decolonisation deliver economic benefits and political freedoms to all people in the European neighbourhood, and beyond.

To the end of the east

Turning east, to Turkey and to Russia, Europe is faced with ancient dilemmas which the EU has inherited. The search for the eastern border of Europe is centuries old. While the EU has created a coherent entity that can speak to economic, social and political affairs, it does not, as noted above, encapsulate the continent – which is a land mass that may stop at the Ural Mountains, or possibly before or beyond. In the case of Turkey, Istanbul is famous for being a city on two continents, half in Europe and half in Asia. Does that make it European? Or Asian? It is definitely a stepping stone to the Middle East, and potentially also a buffer from it, but it is not Middle Eastern in itself.

Historical memory serves to note that the Ottoman Empire, the predecessor of Turkey, was the last to seriously invade Europe, reaching as far in as the gates of Vienna in the 16th century. From that point on not only did the Ottomans start a long process of decline, but Europe began its global ascent: the long *durée* again. Turkey today is not deemed to pose any invasionary threat to Europe, but the unease in the relationship remains: in whatever way the EU encapsulates modern Europe, Turkey is not European. The EU seeks to have an enhanced relationship with Turkey, especially with regard to trade and transit routes for energy, but it does not wish to have it as a full member of the club. On the other hand, Turkey is a member of NATO, in which most of the EU states are members too; and let it be recalled that a major reason for having Turkey join the alliance was to have it alongside the western allies during the Cold War. Thus an open dispute with it is a complex notion indeed – and in any case,

the EU now desperately needs Turkey to stem the flow of refugees from Syria and beyond, to the extent that it is seemingly willing to pay any price for the service, from money to values.

The Turkish government immediately sided with the civilians rising up against the Assad regime in Syria, and threw open the border to those fleeing from the resulting war. It is fair to say it had little inkling that some three million people would eventually seek refuge within its borders, or that the war would be so drawn out. To complicate matters further, the regime of Raci Tayep Erdogan has slowly moved Turkey closer to Islam – despite strong opposition from many secular people and political parties in the state – and has latently identified it as Sunni. The perception is thus that Turkey is apparently supporting some of the religious elements of the Syrian uprising, but not ISIS, and thus also enhancing its distance from the Shia Alawite Assad government. At the same time, it has maintained its long running military conflict with the Kurds both within Turkey and in Syria and Iraq, so adding ever more layers to the complexity of warring parties in the area. It has also brought dual meaning to its open borders, especially with regard to the flow of fighters to ISIS and terrorists to Europe, and of course to the flow of refugees out of Syria.

Taken together therefore, Turkey can be considered the ultimate Janus, looking back and forth, to past and future, with two faces. It is one of the warring parties in Syria yet also a significant element of the allied coalition against ISIS, both participating in air attacks and providing airbases from which to launch sorties; it is both part of the refugee problem, and potentially a major part of its solution. It is thus a cornerstone of the European neighbourhood, and its feeble point too – a duality made worse by its recent dispute with Russia.

Russia is the eternal other on the borders of wherever Europe is: seeking to be like it, yet resenting it, and forever separate from it. Russia under Vladimir Putin has also become revanchist, seeking to restore itself as a major power through some mythical combination of the Tsarist and Soviet empires, and thus in contrast to the west. There are two major stumbling blocks to such aspirations. First, Russia is no longer a world-class economy or military power: it is a serious multiregional player with a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. This allows it to block western and other initiatives, not least against its own activities, but it cannot garner a caucus to support its own actions. Second, the lands it seeks to recover are now independent states with no desire to relinquish this status. Alongside such obstacles, Russia has a fundamental dispute with the west over the meaning of international law, a position in which it is joined by China and many in the developing world: Russia believes that international law concerns only the interaction between states, and does not relate to the people within the states, and that the borders of states are inviolable. The west, on the other hand, whilst largely agreeing on the matter of borders, holds that individuals can be protected by international law, hence its emphasis upon human rights – an emphasis becoming visibly weaker in the face of events in Syria, and the growing refugee crisis in Europe.

The issue of international law is crucial to understanding Russia's moves over the last years – inasmuch as they are comprehensible – and thus the difficulties in finding any form of accommodation with it. And that is due to Kosovo. Russia, which ultimately helped the NATO alliance defeat Milosevic and so allow the province to become de-facto detached from Serbia, felt immensely cheated when the west subsequently helped Kosovo to become a de jure independent state in 2008. It never agreed to the move, nor did five members of the EU that joined it in appealing to the International Court of Justice. Since 2008, and despite losing the case in 2010, Russia has claimed all its actions were modelled on western moves in Kosovo – thus the war with Georgia in 2008 and the annexation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia; and thus the invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and the annexation of Crimea. More recently, it has justified its active military support of the Assad regime in Syria, in which its aircraft have repeatedly bombed civilians, not only as part of the fight against ISIS but also as aiding a 'legitimate' government fight rebels within its own borders.

As a result of these actions, Europe as a whole is in open dispute with Russia. For the first time since the end of the Cold War twenty-five years ago, NATO is focusing upon Russia as a threat and reorganising itself anew with this in mind. And while the alliance is not involved in Syria, a number of its member states – that are also EU Member States – are part of the US led coalition against ISIS, while Russian planes are also flying anti-ISIS sorties, which many in the west claim are actually anti-rebel attacks, in support of the Assad regime. At the same time, the EU has levied economic sanctions upon it in response to its annexation of Crimea from Ukraine in 2014, and then for its active incitement and backing of the Ukrainian rebels holding large areas of the state in the south. This has blatantly weakened the Russian economy, while apparently strengthening the Putin regime, which has become ever more nationalist and authoritarian. The annexation of Crimea and the ongoing conflict in the Donbas are depicted by state media as the restoration of Russian lands and pride – with no notion of Ukraine being an independent state – while the fighting in Syria is explained as a strong Russia exerting power in support of a friendly state. The complexities of law and international treaties either do not figure in these narratives or else are shown within an interpretation in which the west, especially Europe, is in violation – not Russia.

Upon this complex and multi-layered background, the dispute between Russia and Turkey over a downed Russian plane has exacerbated tensions not only between the two states, but between each of them and the EU too. Turkey claimed the aircraft, which was presumed to be flying sorties over Syria, violated its airspace and so brought it down; Russia denied the charge, claiming Turkey had shot down the plane over Syrian airspace, and consequently imposed harsh economic sanctions on Turkey. NATO stood by Turkey as did the EU – though in a more neutral tone, trying to keep Turkey on side in attempts to alleviate the refugee crisis while not further stoking its bad relationship with Russia.

The very need to pursue such a fine line, involving the two strongest and richest states bordering Europe, reflects both the extreme circumstances of the times – and the need for creative thinking with regard to both, and the neighbourhood at large. So far, Europe has been remarkably short on that.

Divided we stand

This complex external chronology in all parts of the neighbourhood has been unfolding upon a background of increasing crises within the EU – from the euro and its intertwined demands of austerity, to deepening questions about the meaning of the Union itself as exemplified by the Brexit debate and the rise of Eurosceptic parties across the continent. The influx of people and in some cases terrorism from the surrounding regions has not only exacerbated these internal tensions, but also produced others – most notably disputes over core European values such as freedom of movement, human rights, humanitarian solidarity and asylum. As a result there is a growing perception of divide between the various parts of the EU: north and south, east and west.

The states that border Russia and Ukraine, and that were once controlled by the Soviet Union, are entirely focused upon the real and potential threats emerging from these states, largely rejecting any attempt to collectivise the refugee problem from the south and the Middle East. However, in so doing, the leaders of some states have voiced opinions verging on the racist, while denying any common responsibility for the refugees. In turn, this has led the western and more established Member States that are taking most of the refugees, and that fund the bulk of the EU budget, to suggest there might need to be a re-examination of such monies, from which the eastern and newer Member States greatly benefit. On the other hand, the states that border the south and Turkey have little interest in the Russia/Ukraine problem on a daily basis, and are focused almost entirely upon the mass of humanity heading their way, and in saving lives when possible. And moving further west, the terrorist attacks that have afflicted France and Belgium, and the large numbers of young people heading to fight with ISIS, notably men from mostly western states, further serves to exacerbate this east-west divide between EU Member States. Cutting across this divide is the euro crisis and its resulting austerity policies, largely initiated by Germany, which have been implemented in many of the same states that

are on the front line of the refugee crisis. These have wrought many tensions between north and south within the union, without necessarily healing the euro.

East and west, north and south, rich and poor, old and new Member States – the vicissitudes within the EU are now very striking. And sitting at the nexus of them all is Greece, neighbouring Turkey and the main gateway to Europe for Middle Eastern refugees; a major beneficiary of the open border Schengen Agreement while at the same time a strong violator of the common refugee policy and thus of Schengen; an historic ally of Russia yet also a member of NATO; an older Member State yet one often at odds with the north and most other older Member States; and seemingly forever, the weakest link in the euro. If Brexit looms specifically as an event to be decided by referendum, Brexit has hovered over both the EU and the eurozone since 2010.

And unless the EU starts to evolve more coherent policies, more exits may become appealing.

Security, stability and prosperity

From a political perspective, it is the refugee crisis that currently seems to threaten both the EU as a union and the future of Europe. And it is this threat that has finally led to the understanding, made amply clear in the ministerial statement noted above, that the fortunes of Europe, and especially the EU, as both concept and geography are absolutely intertwined with those of the neighbourhood. Consequently, stabilising the neighbourhood in all its parts – to the east, to the south, and in between, in the Middle East – is now viewed as a real strategic priority and a fundamental interest of the EU. However, the union may not be dealing from a strong position. The notion of collectivity is constantly being undermined within the union, while outside Europe there is little understanding of the EU or the difference between the union and the continent. Indeed, as noted above, there is a strong inclination to see them as synonymous, and as such weak and failing in the face of the current mesh of internal and external problems.

That said, some form of long-term equilibrium is also in the strategic interest of the states in the neighbourhood: they too need ‘security, stability and prosperity’, not least because many of them – such as Ukraine, Lebanon or Tunisia, to name but one from each part of the neighbourhood – have severe deficits on all three counts. Until these states, and others alongside them, attain a measure of each, especially security, there is little chance of the overall neighbourhood being stabilised: the EU is now part of a vicious circle of instability and insecurity, constantly afflicted and worsened by poverty and misery in most of the neighbourhood states and those beyond them, in Sub-Saharan Africa, the wider Middle East, the Caucasus, Afghanistan and Central Asia.

This vicious circle must be broken – which is a complex matter in the extreme circumstances of our times. Each region of the neighbourhood is focused upon its own issues within a singular dynamic, with only some problems that overlap; while the EU, in dealing with them, has a single aim of reasserting control over its territories and borders in order to maintain (or re-attain where necessary) its ‘security, stability and prosperity’. This mismatch of contexts and interests must be carefully noted and explored. A core characteristic of EU dealings with the neighbourhood over years, and part of its repertoire of neglect, was a ‘one size fits all’ approach – as if solutions and models that suited Morocco and possibly Algeria would also work in Egypt, Lebanon, Georgia or Moldova. If there is anything at all to conclude from this approach it is that one size does not fit all; if it did, the EU may not be grappling with the neighbourhood in some desperation.

Another so called solution that has become evident since late 2015 – new fences and patrols that have appeared on the external borders of the EU, as well as within it – is threatening to undermine the Union in the most fundamental way, while not necessarily delivering security or stability. Physical

borders can always be infiltrated and torn down, putting ever more pressure upon those who sit within them without resolving the problems that lie outside them; they are, at best, a tactical measure. A ‘democratic, stable and prosperous neighbourhood’ is therefore a strategically sensible means of attaining security and stability, but laborious. The EU must separately reach accommodation with the states and actors of each part of the neighbourhood, and it must do so in a manner coherent with its own interests and strategies – as well as with all the other negotiations. For much as the EU must live with each region, so must they all live with each other.

Put another way, the vicious cycle must be made virtuous, by offering gains to each state in the neighbourhood, as well as the EU.

A union of values?

Despite the pressures of refugees and terrorism, it is the divide over values that poses the biggest threat to the EU: at its most fundamental, this is a union based on values as a means to avoiding war; if this core agreement is no more, the union is no more. The current emphasis upon the refugee crisis, through which core values have become deeply undermined, is a sign of the weak political leadership in the EU. This is exemplified first and foremost by the blatant drive to close the borders of Europe to those in need, other than a very narrow definition of “refugee” from Syria. The death, destruction, suffering and fear of millions is simply to be ignored. The continent that drove the creation of the office of the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the legal definitions of the terms ‘refugee’ and ‘asylum’ in the modern world, is basically junking it, together with a swathe of other values such as human rights, freedom of speech, the supremacy of the law. The deal between Turkey and the EU over refugees envisaged in early March is a further example of this fact. Upon a very clear backdrop of the Turkish government closing down opposition papers and diminishing free speech the day before a major meeting with the EU, the Union agreed to accelerate visa free travel and accession talks for Turkey, as against Turkey taking back migrants and refugees from the EU – in what the UNHCR considers to be a violation of refugee law.ⁱⁱⁱ To be clear: the need to include Turkey in the solution to the refugee crisis is irrefutable, but both the manner of the doing and the terms of the agreement reflect a basic disregard for values, and the victory of cheap politics.

Refugees and relations with Turkey are not the only examples of the complex nexus of failing values, weak political leadership and the neighbourhood. Indeed, in many ways the forerunner was the Ukraine crisis: having been overtaken by the confrontation with Russia, it is often forgotten that the origin of the crisis was the negotiation over an Association Agreement between the EU and Ukraine, and the last minute decision of the then president, Viktor Yanukovich, to not sign it. This led to mass protests against the government and the corruption of the state, and more significantly, in favour of the EU. Hundreds of thousands of people went out into the snow and risked their lives because they wanted their country to be part of the EU: they believed that the values the bloc represented as well as its wealth were the correct and best avenue for Ukraine.

Even at the time much of the EU leadership, in the states as in the institutions, seemed nonplussed by this turn of events: it had been a very long time since anyone actively sought to align with the EU for its values. In any case, many chose to ignore this crucial fact in favour of focusing upon the problem of its implications: would supporting the protesters mean the EU had any commitment towards Ukraine? Herein lay the EU’s eternal neighbourhood problem: how to be positive towards neighbouring states, move them towards standards of behaviour and values the union upholds, but without even hinting at potential membership of the bloc or expending any political capital.

Ultimately, this original crisis was overtaken by Russia’s invasion and annexation of Ukraine, which threw the EU entirely off balance. A union based on values and soft power suddenly had to deal not only with hard power but also the dawning reality that for Russia the EU was an opponent, close to becoming an enemy. Moreover, while lacking international support for leading a counter force to the

US and the west on the international stage, Russia then managed to insert itself as the lynchpin in Syria – thereby also becoming a central component of the mass refugee problem.

Russia is not all of the neighbourhood, but it has become a crucial element within it – because of values, but also due to history and geography, Europe's eternal contours. The conflict in Ukraine has become a clash of histories and narratives, which Russia has been far more adept at handling than either the EU or the individual components of Europe; while the disputes with it over gas and energy, which extend far into Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan, are derivatives of geography. Turkey is integral to the geographical debate, but underpinning the tensions with the west are not only conflicting values but also differing historical narratives, in this case also intertwined with religion. The necessities of striking a deal over refugees has seemingly resolved such tensions, but probably not for long: they are too deep. Much the same is true of North Africa and the Middle East, where Europe as a trading continent must preserve open seas and access to the Suez Canal. However, this geostrategic reality is undoubtedly complicated by the complex historical interaction of Europe with the people and states of these regions.

Ultimately, these are all neighbours and in one way or another some form of equilibrium with them must be sought – the questions are how, and at what price? If the answers are respectively through money, borders and values, the price may be too high, at least for the EU. The structures of the Union have been clearly overwhelmed by the recent onslaught, since it was conceived as an internally focused mechanism for economic and social affairs. There is a slow shift towards external engagement, but it must be accelerated with new policies and possibly structures. If not, the mentality of 'Fortress Europe' will overwhelm both the Union and its Member States.

ⁱ Joint Communiqué - Charting the way ahead. An EU Founding Members' initiative on strengthening Cohesion in the European Union
http://www.esteri.it/mae/it/sala_stampa/archivionotizie/comunicati/2016/02/joint-communication-charting-the-way.html

ⁱⁱ At the time of writing this piece, in March 2016, 100,000 refugees.

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://unhcr.org/56dee1546.html>