

## The EU and its Neighbours: Predictions for 2015

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**T**his may prove to be a rather a reckless attempt to forecast the events of 2015; nevertheless let us hazard an overview of what the next 12 months might bring for the EU in terms of relations with its neighbours. Conscious of the events that defined the *annus horribilis* 100 years before 2014, who could have predicted that last year would see the anachronistic behaviour of Putin's Russia infiltrating Ukraine and grabbing the Crimean peninsula? Who would have betted on an al-Qaeda offshoot in Iraq carving out its own quasi-state the size of Belgium in the heart of the Middle East? There will be events in the EU's neighbourhood this year that none of us can or would wish to imagine.

What we can predict, however, is that the troubles of 2014 will cast a long, dark shadow over this New Year. Putin's Russia will endure as a revisionist power, posing a threat to its 'near abroad'. But faced with an economic crisis at home, sanctions overseas and expectations that the oil price will drop below \$50 per barrel in 2015, Moscow will suppress dissent at home and 'freeze' its gains in Eastern Europe rather than annex new territory.

Turkey will continue its clampdown on freedom of speech and an independent judiciary and slide into authoritarianism. As a result, the stalemate over Cyprus is bound to continue.

Chaos will prevail in the Middle East, with the war in Syria bleeding out across its borders and the Islamic State posing a strategic threat to the region, albeit a lesser threat due to the sustained Iraqi and Kurdish ground offensives backed up by the air power of a US-led coalition.

Libya will continue its descent into violence and chaos, allowing thousands of migrants to slip through its porous borders and risk the perilous journey across the Mediterranean. It is against the backdrop of these and other trends that the following predictions are made.

### January

With the Treaty establishing the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) having entered into force on January 1<sup>st</sup>, pressure will mount for the EU to reassess its position on relations with the customs union of Russia, Kazakhstan and Eastern Partnership countries Belarus (one of the three original members) and Armenia (which acceded on January 2<sup>nd</sup>). The EU's refusal to deal with an organisation comprising states that are not yet members of the WTO and/or have been coerced to join the EEU will gradually become counterproductive as Kazakhstan

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and Belarus progress towards WTO accession and as the EEU's emphasis on economic integration extends to the political and security realms. This will further undermine the EU's Eastern Partnership policy. The latter will become especially pertinent if and when the EEU entertains the desire expressed by leaders of the breakaway regions of Moldova (Transnistria and autonomous Gagauzia), Ukraine (Donetsk and Luhansk) and Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia) to join the EEU.

## February

On February 8<sup>th</sup> Federica Mogherini will mark her first 100 days in office as High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the European Commission. She will no doubt reach the conclusion that the 2003 European Security Strategy (ESS) is hopelessly outdated and that the organisation and functioning of the European External Action Service (EEAS) need further improvement. She will therefore decide to review the ESS and the 2010 Council Decision setting up the EEAS.

## March

A political framework agreement that restricts Iran's ability to militarise its nuclear programme will be agreed to with the EU3+3 by the March 1<sup>st</sup> deadline. This truly 'historic' agreement is within reach. The cost of failure – domestically, regionally, internationally – is too great for the negotiating parties to stick to their guns. A final agreement is expected to follow four months later.

Early elections to the Knesset will be held in Israel on March 17<sup>th</sup>. Whoever occupies the Prime Minister's seat in 2015 "will swear allegiance to Israel's ever-growing defence establishment", according to the leading *Haaretz* newspaper. It is unlikely that the new government will abandon the current coalition's policy of settlement-by-stealth. Similarly, the Palestinian leadership will not summon the courage to make the difficult internal choices necessary for a two-state solution. Spurred on by parliamentary calls on EU member state governments to recognise Palestine, it will persist in its attempts to have the excesses of the Israeli military prosecuted at the international level. The 'dialogue of the deaf' will therefore continue, at best under the patronage of the Quartet, otherwise played out in the media.

Towards the end of March, the European Commission and the High Representative will publish their annual European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) package, consisting of a joint communication, 12 country-specific progress reports and two regional reports. This package will provide the springboard for a public consultation process leading to the publication of a communication in the autumn that presents a thoroughly reviewed ENP. The revised ENP Strategy will be characterised by the abandonment of 'more for more/less for less' conditionality and the further differentiation of relations with each of the neighbouring countries, taking their own and their neighbours' interests more into account. As such, the ENP will be detached from the EU's enlargement philosophy and thus come to resemble a more classic foreign policy.

## April

The Arctic Council ministerial meeting in April will be the moment that Russia decides to block the full implementation of the EU's observer status. Such obstruction is quite likely, unless the Kremlin decides that this is a fight it does not need to pick with Brussels, as an illustration of its claim that it is pursuing business as usual with the EU. The latter would be in line with the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs' review of 'Key Foreign Policy Events of 2014', which stresses a new generation of Russia-EU cross-border cooperation (CBC) programmes. Similar tactics will be on display in 2015 within the framework of the Barents

Euro-Arctic Council, of which the EU is a member; the Northern Dimension, which is a common policy of the EU, Iceland, Norway and Russia; and the EU's transnational cooperation programmes for the Black Sea region for which Russia is eligible.

## May

The Eastern Partnership (EaP) summit in Riga on 21-22 May will see the EU and its six partners agreeing to the main drivers to revise the ENP Strategy while deciding to reinforce the multilateral elements of the EaP, in order to bridge the widening gap between the two groups of partner countries. This will be done by beefing up Euronest, holding meetings of officials at different levels, and promoting the exploitation of benefits of sub-regional cooperation through multilateral treaty frameworks and CBC programmes. An EU membership perspective for the EaP countries will remain off the table.

## June

As a result of Russia's aggression against its western neighbours and the lamentable state of the military across the 28 member states, the European Council summit will give a further boost to the development of the Common Security and Defence Policy, with a specific focus on operationalising the 'Comprehensive Approach' in the EU's strategic neighbourhood. The EU will break new ground by militarising its border assistance mission to Libya and by sending personnel to Syria to help with the implementation of UN Syria envoy Staffan de Mistura's plan to freeze hostilities in and around Aleppo by providing food, medicine and other humanitarian assistance.

## July

The 'Helsinki+40' project, an initiative that brings together security and human rights experts to evaluate the OSCE's past and chart concrete lines of action for the future, will culminate in a final colloquium organised by the Finnish Institute of International Affairs on the site of the signing of the Helsinki Final Act of 1975. In an attempt by the Finnish government not to sully Helsinki's good name with a potential ministerial spat over Russia's shock to the system, this rather subdued commemoration will be held in parallel with the 24<sup>th</sup> Annual Session of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly. No major new initiatives should be expected. The OSCE ministerial meeting will take place in December in Belgrade.

## August

Given that the situation on the ground in Eastern Ukraine is unlikely to have changed significantly by mid-2015, the 28 member states, some of which will have suffered a year of economic pain or negative growth, will not reach the unanimity necessary to maintain the 'level 3' sanctions threshold reached after the downing of flight MH17. On August 1<sup>st</sup>, EU sanctions against Russia will therefore be eased substantially.

The summer is likely to see at least one of the other inaptly named 'frozen' conflicts flaring up again. Nagorno Karabakh is a case in point.

## September

The fragile success of the plan to implement a ceasefire in and around Aleppo will open the way to negotiate a political settlement in Syria, with the backing of Russia and Iran.

## October

Due to the ongoing failure of respective governments to address the EU's growing concerns about the politicisation of state institutions, the independence of the judiciary and freedom of expression, the Commission will follow up on its warning one year earlier and withdraw its recommendation to open accession negotiations with Macedonia. In the same vein, the Council will request that the Commission halt accession negotiations with Turkey.

## November

Twenty years on from the Dayton Agreement, it will be clear to all that its executive structures and quasi-colonial powers are spent and that the EU's enlargement conditionality has failed, in spite of the recent initiative of the German and British foreign ministers to encourage the political leadership of Bosnia and Herzegovina to adopt a major reform programme. Seizing the momentum generated by a 'Bosnian Spring', the Council of the EU will decide to support a national dialogue process, engaging civil society and bypassing the corrupt elites to work towards the reorganisation and better functioning of the country.

## December

The Commission and the High Representative will present proposals for the further development of an integrated and coherent Arctic Policy. The Council will endorse Mogherini's recommendations to amend the organisation and functioning of the EEAS. And the European Council will adopt a new European Global Strategy to replace the ESS.

All in all, the EU's foreign policy will mature throughout 2015 - not overnight, but step by step, *à la méthode* Monnet.