The new year is unlikely to bring calm to the European Union’s neighbourhood. From Ukraine to the Levant and North Africa, the strategic implications of the events that dominated 2016 will begin to play themselves out – foremost among them the election of Donald Trump as US President, the UK referendum to leave the EU and the fall of Aleppo.

**Russia**

Russia’s all-out entry into the Syrian war, which decisively contributed to the Assad regime retaking control of the country’s biggest city, marks the expansion of deep Russian influence beyond its traditional ‘near abroad’ to a new theatre. With the fall of Aleppo, Russia’s decades-old presence in Syria has taken on a different character. What was once a foothold, a sort of forward base, now serves as a basecamp for Russia’s strategy of thwarting western policy goals. Russia’s annexation of Crimea, its continued military backing of separatists in Donbas and ongoing deployments in frozen conflicts in Georgia and Moldova now appear as elements – by design or chance – of a broader strategic positioning in a new cold war with the west.

**A test of unity and resolve**

Russia’s bid to frustrate western policy goals wherever it can is made considerably easier by having a man in the White House who seems to trust Vladimir Putin more than his own intelligence officials. The inauguration of Donald Trump as the 45th President of the United States on January 20th might herald an all-out realignment between US
and Russian interests. Regardless of whether this manifests itself first, and most dramatically, in the Middle East or in Ukraine, it is likely to have repercussions throughout the neighbourhood, and indeed in the heart of the EU as well. The question of continued sanctions against Russia over its invasion of Ukraine will be an early test of transatlantic unity when it comes up late in the spring. Will the US stay the current course? Will the EU split on Russia? Will they both continue to support Ukraine’s government as it seeks to preserve the country’s territorial integrity following the loss of Crimea?

A changing international environment

Just as the international strategic environment is turning more hostile to the values, goals and approaches of the EU (as muddled as some of these may be), the EU itself is increasingly absorbed by the business of negotiating the exit of its second-largest economy. This may well reinforce the Union’s inward-looking tendencies, although it might also unblock initiatives that had been dormant due to UK opposition, for example in security and defence. Elections in France (April and June) and Germany (September) will further distract policymakers from international issues. A Union busy with itself is less likely to deal effectively with the security and policy challenges emerging from the neighbourhood, whether Russian expansionism, refugee movements or localised crises. It is also less likely to be able to manage relations with Turkey, a crucial neighbour that has grown increasingly antagonistic. A constitutional referendum on sweeping powers for President Erdogan expected to take place this spring provides a focal point for the frustrations on both sides.

All is not doom and gloom, however. It is possible that the Greek and Turkish communities on Cyprus strike a deal to reunify the island as early as this week. A deal, if endorsed in referenda by both communities, would have wide-ranging implications for deeper cooperation between the EU and NATO; it would also ease some of the pain in EU-Turkish relations. The fall of Aleppo, and the prospect of a defeat of the main armed opposition against the Assad regime, might ease the pressure on Syria’s neighbours by encouraging refugees to return. Leaving Assad in power would be a terrible outcome of almost six years of war – but in purely humanitarian terms it might bring some immediate relief.

Paying attention to the neighbourhood
It is critical that European policymakers pay attention to events in the neighbourhood, and not only when a crisis erupts. That is why CEPS will continue its 360° monitoring and analysis of developments from Eastern Europe to the Caucasus, from the Balkans to Cyprus and Turkey, from the Levant to North Africa, from the isles in the northern Atlantic to the neighbours in the high North. These are the true testing grounds of the EU’s foreign and security policy. As a sign of our continued commitment to these regions, CEPS is relaunching its European Neighbourhood Watch newsletter. As in the previous 132 monthly issues, our newsletter will continue to provide editorial opinion as well as a listing of the previous month’s main developments in the neighbourhood (resuming in the February newsletter), with references and links to official documents. We hope this formula remains as relevant to your work as it has been in the past.

In this space, you will find a round-up of the previous month’s major developments with links to the full text of each corresponding news item, analysis or official document. This service will resume with the February 2017 edition of ENW.

Back issues

For our backlist of 132 editions of European Neighbourhood Watch, please see our archive page by clicking the button below.

Read more »

The EU’s Enlargement Strategy - is it working?

In the December 2016 European Neighbourhood Watch editorial, Associate Senior Research Fellow Erwan Fouéré argues that the European Commission needs a more creative and determined approach to make the enlargement process more meaningful and tangible. To read a PDF of the editorial, please click the button below.

Read more »