

Commentary

EUROPEAN POLICY IN SHAMBLES

By Andreas Andrianopoulos

Misunderstanding is the mother of all lies. Likewise, intention kills the best dispositions. You can discern this in most major international events as well as in efforts of nations to overcome difficulties and dead end situations. Europe has already started losing its grip searching for complex solutions to relatively straightforward pending issues.

Talking to serious and moderate people in Russian cities that I found myself during the last two weeks I started realizing why the European experiment is in danger of perishing. While the USA utilize all means available to promote aims and achieve end results, Europeans get entangled in conceptual ambiguities and fruitless choices. In the case of Iran, it is obvious that Americans and Russians worked in cohort to open ways of communication aiming far beyond Tehran's nuclear efforts. Notwithstanding the cool façade in relations between Washington and Moscow, the two great powers comprehend global geopolitical realities and the need for understanding to be in charge of unfolding events and consequences.

The agreement with Iran paves the way for a head on confrontation with the murdering jihadists of the Islamic caliphate of Iraq and Syria. Having achieved the support of Iran in this struggle, obviously with the tacit agreement of Russia, Assad's regime in Syria would inevitably read the writing in the wall and thus either will agree to a compromise or face its demise. Likewise, other peripheral powers will acknowledge the fact that the period of pretention is over. The Turkish Prime Minister Tayip Erdogan has already faced reality and turned his guns against ISIS while simultaneously desperately attempting to avert the establishment of a Kurdish state in the region.

For Saudi Arabia also the signs are clear that an epoch is coming to an end. Playing friendly games with the West while protecting and encouraging jihadist radicalism cannot go any further. The dilemma is profound. Either a lid is enforced upon the fanatical Wahhabis who play a pivotal role in the governance of the Kingdom or phenomena like the Shia revolt in Yemen will spread to the oil rich districts of the eastern Saudi peninsula itself. With a menacing and powerful Shia Iran on the opposite shore. A similar message is obviously forwarded to neighboring Qatar. Where a nominally pro-western regime blinks the eye to the Sunni extremists of the Caliphate, by means of generous financial handouts. In return, the hegemony of the ruling family in Doha is excluded from possible jihadist assaults.

What Russia gains from these developments is not difficult to discern. While receding somehow in Iran, Lebanon and Syria its interests are served with the termination of the war that Saudi Arabia had declared on the price of oil aiming to reduce its

revenues and undermine its global market share. In this Moscow has the United States as its ally, since the collapse of the oil price created difficulties to the extraction of shale oil since the various operations had been rendered unprofitable. At the same time, Russia sees eye to eye with the West as far as the curtailing of the jihadi activity is concerned and the restriction of their means of finance.

Talking with people in Kazan, in the Muslim dominated Russian Republic of Tatarstan, and in Astrahan, near the Caspian Sea, but also with pundits in Moscow, it became clear to me that there is a lot of concern and that the need for common action is desirable. The thorn of the Ukraine I judge that it won't be long before it becomes an issue of the past. There are many more pressing things ahead that require common action. Many people in the West have started to recognize that an act of favoritism of the Soviet regime in the past, to offer as a prize the Russian speaking territories of Crimea and Donetsk to the Ukraine for the purpose of regional enlargement and to serve the caprice of powerful at the time leaders of the USSR whose origins were in the Ukraine (Khrushchev, Podgorny), is unnatural to burden today's developments and endanger the world's political architecture. A timely decision to reverse the previous ruling of the Soviet government would have solved the problem. Andropov had contemplated it, and Gorbachev – although he had it scheduled – failed to enact it on time. When Yeltsin came to power it was already too late to proceed on it.

As for the Europeans, they are always out of focus. They handle issues in an amateurish fashion lacking depth and vision. They are involved halfheartedly in the course of events failing to show initiatives and rational planning. They were pathetically absent with Iran and are now rallying to do business with Tehran, indifferent to the perils of Islamic radicalism, they have allowed their societies to be corroded with an influx of alien populations and are now wondering thoughtlessly for the emerging hate and for the cost of curtailing the waves of incoming refugees. Wherever they took the initiative they ended up in a mess. The case of Libya is paramount among their blunders. In the case of the Ukraine they were responsible for outcomes without having first studied special national circumstances and institutional set ups. Former President Yanukovych was overthrown by a decision of Parliament. This however was not legitimate under Ukraine's constitution. Institutionally democratic Europe is a wonder how it came to accept such a turn of events? Europe even proceeded with sanctions against Russia, disregarding plebiscites and popular feeling in the Crimea. Moscow's decision to annex Crimea is closely tied to European apathy and wrongly judged initiatives. French MPs are now touring the area talking about genuine popular disposition that led to the annexation. They obviously see damaged French economic interests and the need to do something about it. The government in Kiev protests about violation of sanctions, but it is obvious that the overall political climate is changing. The French are the first Europeans who try to catch up with events.

The way Brussels dealt with the Greek debt crisis is a typical token of European shortsightedness and operational imbecility. Struggling with countless regulations and bureaucratic entanglements Europe assumes that for every problem there is a technical solution. It constantly bypasses issues of national characteristics as well as local habits and traditions. It assumes that if 50 gets in, by necessity 50 will get out. In Greece, for example, instead of insisting on structural changes to the political system which would have abolished clientelism and made deficit spending obsolete, they adamantly persisted in imposing heavier taxes and lukewarm cuts in spending. All these proved ineffective since society overruled them and political authorities very

randomly attempted to enforce them. Tax evasion in Greece is not a matter of legislation and institutional framework. It is rather the result of a genuine social contract ever since the Greek state was founded. It was based on the understanding that taxes would be imposed without people having to pay them. Elections signaled the plundering of state coffers by supporters of the victorious party. Since major parties were succeeding each other in office the whole society was partaking in the spoils of office. Whatever laws are to change this populist logic remains intact. Failure to comprehend this results in disastrous outcomes. Lending is destined never to solve Greece's financial problems. Radical changes to the political system, and especially to the electoral procedure, may produce a situation resembling modernization and an approach to a contemporary democratic polity. As the Greek author and journalist Th. Papandropoulos has written, populism in Greece has produced not only economic but brain damage as well. Europe has to understand that unless bridges that connect state handouts, electoral process and the institutional build up of the country are demolished nothing is ever going to change in the country.

Europeans are stuck in a series of self-perpetuating concepts of their own. They adore heavy taxation which, they believe, will accumulate revenue for an efficiently functioning public sector. For Greeks there is an opposite trend of events: funds are distributed – by and large borrowed – so that political authorities would secure the necessary votes for their re-election and impose taxes to cover handout for which the loans are not adequate. Two elements can break this self-perpetuating process. The abolition of the personal cross of preference during parliamentary elections, which would render obsolete the anxiety of a politician's personal re-election. And the reduction of the need for public sector borrowing to enable the country become self-sufficient and autonomous. Europe failed in both counts. Its authorities continue to insist in new taxes to rationalize (!) the public sector while turning a blind eye to the country's obvious deficient political procedures. Other European member-states are now loaded with the burden of the Greek debt (see excellent analysis by Benn Steil και Dinah Walker, *Greece Fallout: Italy and Spain Have Funded a Massive Backdoor Bailout of French Banks*, 2 Ιουλίου 2015), while Greece continues to pursue policies even its government does not believe they may succeed.

There is no doubt therefore that misconceptions lead to falsehood. And thus to tragic no results. Would someone in Europe finally wake up to reality?