

THE ROLE OF THE EUROPEAN UNION FOR THE SETTLEMENT OF THE CONFLICT IN SYRIA

Vasil Stankov

Ph.D., National Defense College, Sofia, Bulgaria, vassilst@abv.bg

Abstract

The article „The Role of the European Union for the settlement of the conflict in Syria” features the efforts made by the EU and the Member States to contribute to the settlement of the Syrian conflict, arguing that the political and diplomatic potential of the EU allows it to engage on a larger scale with the peace process, since the conflict’s implications have a significant impact on the European countries. A description is made of the EU-Syria relations prior to and immediately after the beginning of the conflict, including the framework of the Euro Mediterranean Partnership (Euromed), the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) and the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) as important platforms for political dialogue and economic and social cooperation. The article also outlines the restrictions EU introduced in 2011 upon certain companies and infrastructure projects in Syria, as well as the ban on exports of dual use goods, equipment and technologies for the oil and gas industries and some communication systems. An overview is made of the individual efforts of the lead Member States and the absence of a coherent allied strategy, which is partly due to the fact that the EU institutions proved unprepared for a scenario in which Bashar al-Assad remained in power. Further an argument is made that the Union could have acted jointly with other countries and regional powers involved in the conflict and could have taken non-military measures, for example to establish a Crisis Management Centre to coordinate the diplomatic efforts and humanitarian operations of both Member States and regional countries. Then, the article points to the financial contribution of the EU and Member States aimed to relieve the humanitarian situation on the ground and highlights the key aspects of the strategy “Towards a comprehensive EU approach to the Syrian crisis”, adopted by the Union in June 2013. Finally, the article concludes that it all depends on political will and particularly on the ability of the European leaders to find the synergy in their joint effort and prove that the EU is capable of playing a decisive role in the settlement of global and vitally important security issues.

Keywords: European Union, conflict, Syria, contribution.

1. INTRODUCTION

The sizeable political and diplomatic potential of the EU enables it to play a significant role in the settlement of the conflict in Syria. This is more than natural as the implications of the conflict affect significantly the European countries, which are exposed to the ongoing risk of terrorist attacks and increasing refugee flows from the conflict zone to Central Europe. At present the attitude of the lead Member States to the processes in the East Mediterranean region is prompted not so much by their strategic and economic interests but rather by the fact that because of their relative proximity to the European continent the conflicts in this region generate specific threats to EU security. Furthermore, the level and scope of the joint actions of the Member States in response to the conflict depend on the likelihood for agreeing upon a single migration policy and

common rules for granting humanitarian status and political asylum. This would allow the European institutions to develop and apply a set of coordinated measures to address the common risks and challenges.

2. EU APPROACH AND RESPONSE TO THE SYRIAN CRISIS

In the beginning of the conflict the EU terminated its contacts with Syria in the framework of the Euro Mediterranean Partnership (Euromed), which had served as a platform for dialogue and deliberation of the prospects for economic and political reforms in partner countries. In May 2011 the Union adopted a series of restrictive measures affecting the trade with Syria – a ban on imports of crude oil and petroleum products, a ban on exports of dual use goods, equipment and technologies for the oil and gas industries and some communication systems. Restrictions were set on the financing of certain companies and infrastructure projects in Syria and the economic assets and financial resources of natural and legal persons supporting and benefiting from the Syrian regime were frozen. Euromed and the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) are important formats that ensure the EU direct commitment in key regions in the world and enable it to promote the geopolitical vision of the Union. In regard to the Arab countries in the Mediterranean, the focus is placed on creating conditions for economic cooperation in order to gain mutual trade and economic benefits. In addition, Euromed includes projects for cooperation in the fields of culture, social activities and security. In 2008, at the Paris Summit, a Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) was set up as part of the Neighborhood Policy and as an extension of Euromed. It is intended to serve as a multilateral framework for political, economic and social connections between the EU and 15 Mediterranean countries, including Syria. Syria's membership in this Union was suspended because of the civil war.

Individual actions of lead Member States are primarily based on their national objectives and priorities. Great Britain appears to be unwilling to contribute to the resolution of the issue with the refugees as it is focused rather on the Brexit procedures. Germany reluctantly participates in military operations outside its national territory but it plays an active role in the settlement of the refugee problem. France is ready to engage with military actions but by acting alone it cannot achieve a lasting effect on the security environment in Syria. To a certain extent, this inconsistency is due to the fact that the main institutions in the EU did not have the full set of tools to effectively influence the military and political processes in Syria and proved unprepared for a scenario in which Bashar al-Assad remained in power.

It is true that the EU institutions could not foresee the strong resilience of the Syrian regime, due mainly to the scale of support received from Iran and Russia. Incidentally the Union was in a situation in which its position that Bashar al-Assad should step down and leave power for the greater interests of Syria and the unity of his people and in the name of democratic values and human rights turned out to be unrealistic and difficult to render. The EU was not able to impose this position or to persuade the US and the international coalition to carry out a large-scale military operation to change the regime.

The Union could have acted jointly with other countries and regional forces involved in the conflict and could have taken non-military measures aimed at tension de-escalation. Using the strengths of its foreign policy, the EU could have launched an initiative for establishing a Crisis Management Centre which could have coordinated the diplomatic efforts and humanitarian operations of both Member States and other countries in the region.

However, the EU institutions and Member States are doing their best in the circumstances and are seeking ways to deliver the European contribution to the settlement of the Syrian conflict. The European Commission, acting as the EU executive, has channelled almost 800 million euros (\$909.44 million) on food, medicine and shelter for Syrians inside the country, following more than seven years of a devastating war.

In June 2013 the Union adopted a strategy entitled „Towards a comprehensive EU approach to the Syrian crisis”, setting the following key tasks to the Union: support a political settlement through a robust EU position at the international fora; engage with the opposition so as to ensure the participation of its legitimate interlocutors that can make commitments; further work to ensure the access of humanitarian assistance to all conflict affected areas in Syria; develop further exemptions to the sanctions regime to provide support to the Syrian population; increase EU budget financial assistance by EUR 400 million in 2013 to cover priority needs of affected population in Syria and the region; increase support for hosting communities in the countries neighbouring Syria, in order to support and enhance their capacity to deal with the refugees; continue urging the United Nations to deal with claims of violations of human rights, international humanitarian law and fundamental freedoms; prevent the radicalisation of EU citizens and deal with EU „foreign fighters” that have travelled to the conflict zone; prepare for the post-conflict reconstruction and rehabilitation phase.

The measures for the political settlement were not fulfilled as the negotiations were terminated for reasons

beyond EU's control but the other aspects of the strategy relating to humanitarian aid and support for the opposition in exile were more or less implemented.

The EU institutions are experienced in dealing with complex, multi-faceted and volatile conflicts, in which many players and diverging interests are involved. For example, the Union contributed positively to the ongoing international efforts to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, supporting the the Minsk Group and the implementation of the confidence-building measures agreed in 2016 in the course of the peace process.

The Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy published in June 2016 highlighted the major principles, practices and rules for the development of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), particularly in the realms of the fight against terrorism, cyber security, energy security and strategic communications. Special attention is placed on the so-called integrated approach to conflicts and crises, envisaging comprehensive and multilateral measures at local, national, regional and global levels, aimed to secure participation of all actors and stakeholders. The efforts are focused on crisis and conflict prevention, which requires a well structured and operating early warning system. It expressly states that the EU should be able to rapidly respond and with the required responsibility to different types of crises and particularly to crises caused by terrorist actions (Bekiarova, Armencheva, 2019; 2019a-c; 2016; Terziev, Petkov, Krastev, 2018a-j; Terziev, Bankov, Georgiev, 2018l-m).

3. CONCLUSION

Probably we are not far from the moment when an opportunity would arise for the EU to play a more active role in the settlement of the Syrian conflict. The Union cannot only suffer the humanitarian and economic implications from the conflict, without actively participating in the joint efforts for its settlement. After the end of the active phase of the war the traditional political and socio-economic tools of the EU crisis management policy will come to the fore, providing prospects for large-scale involvement and contribution. The importance of the humanitarian aid, the assistance for restoration of different kinds of infrastructure, the need of support the internal political reforms and the efforts for creation of civic society, including through establishment and financing of non-governmental organisations, will be increasing across different regions of Syria. Though it is hardly possible to introduce the EU's social and political standards in Syria, the Union could promote its underlying principles, such as the rule of law, tolerance and equal rights in the formation of the main elements of the democratic state, as well as in the framework of the future projects for reforming the public administration, the judiciary and in establishing independent mass media.

Ultimately it all depends on the presence or absence of political will and particularly on the ability of the European leaders to find the synergy in their joint actions in pursuit of the common goal - proving the status of the EU as a global factor with a decisive role in the settlement of vitally important security issues.

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