Editorial

The European Neighbourhood Policy reviewed: Will pragmatism trump normative values?

The reviewed European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) is more pragmatic, differentiated and focused than its predecessors. The Joint Communication presented by High Representative Federica Mogherini and Commissioner Johannes Hahn on 18 November 2015 is a masterful analysis of the complex realities in the EU’s neighbourhood and pushes the policy forward in a more pragmatic direction. But the Review falls short of offering innovative solutions to ‘how’ the new approach will be implemented.

Injecting pragmatism into the ENP

For over a decade, the ENP has been unable to create a Treaty-prescribed “area of prosperity and good neighbourliness, founded on the values of the Union and characterised by close and peaceful relations based on cooperation” (Article 8 TEU). The aftermath of the Arab revolt; Russia’s aggression towards common neighbours; (protracted) conflicts; the refugee/migration crisis and the political and economic elites’ resistance to reform in many of the partner countries are just some of outstanding challenges in the EU’s neighbourhood.

In truth, the EU has only had a modest influence on the affairs of its neighbours. The Review candidly admits that the EU will not be able to resolve these challenges alone and that the ENP is merely a part of the solution. Indeed, the automatic norm transfer from the EU to it neighbours – as was the case in 90s with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe – is no longer in evidence. Not only is what the EU has to offer less attractive, it is also not the only game in town. The EU model is contested by alternative ‘models’ without normative conditionality, such as China or Qatar and integration formats such as the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union. In the face of new challenges, the long-term goals of the ENP have been complemented by a short-term objective: the stabilisation of the neighbourhood in security and economic terms through incorporating differentiation is key to the ‘new’ ENP.

Differentiation for laggards, nothing for leaders

Although the Southern and Eastern neighbours have more differences than commonalities, the ENP (with its geographic components of the Eastern Partnership and the Union for Mediterranean) will continue to be the single framework for defining the EU’s relations with the whole neighbourhood. Keeping the ENP intact is a necessary condition for maintaining solidarity among EU member states, some of which prioritise the
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East over the South and vice versa. Incorporating strong differentiation in the policy addresses the diverse needs and desires of a variety of neighbours.

Indeed, doing away with a one-size-fits-all approach and stressing differentiation is a pragmatic acceptance of the realities on the ground. This effort to work flexibly with the partners is a considerable departure from the EU’s previous method. In particular, it is a welcome move for the neighbours that are unable or unwilling to accept the EU’s prime offers of the Association Agreement and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTA).

Yet differentiation has its limits and should be applied with care if it is to avoid undermining the common policy. In its rhetoric, the Review pledges to promote human rights, democracy, rule of law and good governance. However, the EU’s differentiated approach might be misused by some of the neighbouring governments that resist any human rights agenda. Furthermore, the differentiation logic in the ENP Review offers little extra to the ‘leaders’ of the ENP. Morocco and Tunisia in the Southern neighbourhood are in talks about the DCFTA with the EU. And unless there is a profound change in the domestic politics of Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia, their relationship with the EU will continue to be governed by the Association Agreement and the DCFTA for many years to come.

The old ENP, with its regional components, was modelled on enlargement policy. The reviewed ENP, however, abandons regular ‘progress’ reports in favour of more flexible and political reporting. The ENP also eases the application of its ‘more for more’ principle, stating that the effects of ‘more for more’ to promote fundamental values and principles were limited, especially in difficult countries. This is not surprising, given that the principle was upheld only at the EU level and member states did not align their bilateral policies with those of the EU. The Review therefore pledges to explore a more effective approach to achieving fundamental reforms than the previous ‘more for more’ approach. But it remains vague on the detail.

More focused policy: economy, migration and security

The EU’s short list of priorities includes economic development, migration and security. Elaborating on the issue of economic cooperation, the Review presents a list of items such as micro-financial assistance, modernisation, youth, transport, energy security and climate. Differentiation in the trade policy vis-à-vis the neighbours is an innovative element. For the countries that are not interested in DCFTA, the EU will offer lighter trade agreements, including the Agreements on Conformity Assessment and Acceptance (ACAA).

In the areas of migration and mobility the Review remains general; it does not offer anything new in structural terms and mentions already existing initiatives that are inspired first and foremost by the EU’s security and welfare concerns. The EU commits to increase support for those countries that provide shelter to refugees and IDPs, to intensify cooperation on return, readmission and reintegration policies, as well as to encourage legal migration.

Although the security dimension is prioritised by the Review, it only scratches the surface of this issue. In an institutional sense, the Review does not create closer links between the EU’s Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and the ENP’s geographical divisions that are reflected in the structure of the EEAS. The ‘new’ ENP will be a crucial testing ground for the EU’s relatively new ‘comprehensive approach’, which aims to bring together all available tools and policies — security, diplomacy, technical support and financial instruments.

Issues left unaddressed

As the EU’s Eastern and Southern neighbourhood has been profoundly transformed, so should the EU’s policy. Yet, despite the expectations raised through a lengthy consultation process, the new ENP did not manage to break through its structural limitations.

It is unclear how the EU will address the challenge posed by Russia, other than the woolly commitment “to offer ways to strengthen the resilience of the EU’s partners in the face of external pressures and their ability to make their own sovereign choices”. Will member states align their bilateral policies with the EU towards the neighbourhood countries? Removing the ‘more for more’ policy principle risks weakening the ENP’s merit-based approach even further. Differentiation does little for the EU’s most committed neighbours. The Review represents an important step forward to a more pragmatic approach to the neighbourhood. But the EU’s experiment with pragmatic ‘semi-realpolitik’ should not come at the expense of its normative agenda.


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