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 its 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 ENP 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 its neighbours. Keeping the ENP intact is a necessary condition for maintaining solidarity among EU member states, some of which prioritise the
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.

* Review of the European Neighbourhood Policy, Brussels,

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General

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*Remarks by the High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini ahead of the 2015 Valletta Summit on Migration*
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*European Union and League of Arab States representatives met on 24-25 November 2015 in Brussels*
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*Remarks by High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini at the press conference of the Union for the Mediterranean Conference “Towards a common development agenda for the Mediterranean”, Barcelona, 26 November 2015.*
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The European Union provides €78 million support to Jordan for its Resilience and Youth Skills development
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EU provides €25 million to support private sector development, governance and civil society in Lebanon
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