

Steffen Erdle: European Neighbourhood Policy: Will It Become the Driving Force for Reforms in the Mediterranean Region?

To rearrange its relations with its southern and eastern neighbours, the EU established the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) in 2003, thus creating a new policy field which is part of the follow-up of the most recent enlargement round of the EU. After all, it had become clear at that time that a fundamental reorganisation of European structures would be necessary for the enlarged EU to preserve its capabilities and to shape its relations with its new surroundings constructively.

One part of the response to the enlargement of the EU was the decision to tighten and simplify its set of financial tools which, from then on, was to comprise several macro-instruments, such as an 'instrument for pre-accession assistance', a 'neighbourhood and partnership instrument', an 'instrument for development cooperation and economic cooperation', a 'stability instrument', an 'instrument for common foreign and security policy', for 'macro-economic assistance' and for 'humanitarian aid'.

Just one glance at the basic documents of the ENP and the key terms they contain reveals what the policy is aiming at. These terms include, for example, concretisation and intensification of cooperation and integration processes across the EU's external border, acceleration and deepening of reform and modernisation processes in partner countries, as well as politicisation and conditionalisation of relations with them. These key words give rise to some questions: What does implementing the ENP mean for the political systems of Europe's neighbouring states, particularly in the southern Mediterranean region? Do these instruments really serve to achieve the policy's goals? How do the southern Mediterranean power elites position themselves vis-à-vis the ENP? And in what way will all this influence the already difficult work of external democracy promoters?

The ENP particularly aims at those new neighbours of the enlarged Union that will have hardly any membership perspectives in the foreseeable future. Next to its three eastern neighbouring countries, Russia, Ukraine, and Moldavia, these include the southern Mediterranean littoral states, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Israel, Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, and the Palestinian Territories as well as the three southern Caucasian republics, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. Through the ENP, the EU offers a special partnership to those of its new neighbours that are ready to enact more substantial reforms both in the political and the economic fields and that are thus willing to go beyond the current state of association and cooperation agreements. What is to be created is a 'ring of friends' who share basic European political and societal values and with whom it should be possible to establish 'peaceful and cooperative relations'.

The concrete political content of the ENP is based on neighbourhood action plans (ENAPs) that function as a kind of road map, naming the most important problem areas of each partner and providing concrete policy proposals that serve as a framework of action for both sides. The ENAPs will run for three to five years but are renewable by common accord. Even though the European Commission has suggested that they could serve as the starting point for future neighbourhood agreements, it must be pointed out that the EU constitutional treaty offers no legal basis for such neighbourhood agreements – a fact which gives rise to the question whether the ENP itself constitutes an interim solution on the path towards Europe or rather an alternative to enlargement.

The twelve ENAP texts that are currently available, however, considerably differ from the original EU suggestions in that they constitute not a brief compendium but rather a whole catalogue of tasks which contains up to 400 individual objectives per country. A closer look at these documents also reveals that they are much more detailed and ambitious in the economy-related chapters than they are in the genuinely political ones. Thus, the "irony of history" is that, contrary to what was

originally intended, the ENAPs again neglect security- and domestic-policy aspects but overemphasise economic and trade-policy questions. This way, some major shortcomings of the Barcelona Process are being revived, although the ENAPs were supposed to correct them.

The financial tool for realising the neighbourhood policy is the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI). Together with the new Euro-Mediterranean Facility of the European Investment Bank plus some smaller sectoral programmes financed under the Community budget, it is to provide the funds for supporting reform processes in the EU's neighbouring countries. In this, the appropriation of funds from the EU budget will be based on four criteria – the concrete needs and characteristics of the latter, their specific management and absorption capacities, the level of ambition of the partnership, and neighbours' progress in implementing agreed goals.

The ENPI programmes are divided into three groups – national programmes, regional programmes, and cross-border cooperation (CBC), which takes up essential features of the EU's regional policy and its structural funds. A common administrative body set up by adjacent countries and acting by a standardised set of rules will be responsible for implementing these CBC programmes. For the first time since the foundation of the Union, both internal and external funds may thus be employed for carrying out common projects on either side of the EU border.

In fact, the actual added value of the ENP is the nexus of internal and external political instruments, and the fact that it links foreign- and security-policy with cohesion- and development-policy objectives, thus providing an opportunity to overcome some of the classical deficits in European foreign policy. An additional significant benefit is offered by the essentially bilateral nature of the ENP: Anyone can actually interpret it whichever way they like. Pioneering countries which feel inadequately challenged may now hope for privileged relations, while the laggards will be glad of the break.

However – the results achieved so far are sub-optimal as all ENAPs adopted up to this day show similar weak points: They include a great number of unconnected components, overemphasise technical questions, blank out systemic aspects, rely on official players, concentrate on economic goals, and ignore transnational issues. What is also worth criticising is the lack of real incentives for 'hard' reforms, the lack of clear links between the objectives and promises of the EU on the one hand and the self-commitments and achievements of the neighbouring countries on the other and, particularly, the near-complete loss of the regional dimension which was a central *acquis* of the Barcelona Process.

Many explanations have been given to account for these outcomes: It is said, for example, that the ENP pursues the internals of European policy rather than a sound evaluation of its external relations, that it focuses on securing the EU's external borders rather than on promoting the development of its neighbouring states. Even more serious, however, is another factor particularly determining the EU's relations with the Southern Mediterranean the countries: Although all parties concerned are agreed that any changes would have to address existing structural problems first – good governance being the key term – they focus on vertical structures and neglect horizontal reforms. At the end of the day, this policy aims less at democratising and overcoming the authoritarian systems of the Arab world and more at modernising and thus stabilising them.

In fact, evidence suggests that the interests and agendas of key players on both sides converge around a number of issues. Their aim is to strengthen and widen the socio-political and economic-financial bases of Mediterranean partner countries, in order to improve the framework of development in the region and reduce the likelihood of conflict. Absolute priority is awarded to the maintenance of stability and the prevention of crises, while the transformation of existing structures

and the promotion of democracy is relegated. What is not addressed, however, is the implicit incompatibility between stabilisation on the one hand (which ultimately implies the maintenance of existing regimes) and democratisation on the other (which ultimately implies their transformation).

Tackling this question would imply the confession that democracy is simply not on the agenda, at least not for now. Thus, attempting to address concrete problems, support social modernisation and gradually enhance political participation appears more appropriate than trying to enact sweeping structural change or implement a whole-sale system reform. Rather than requesting from partners to pay lip-service to an ever-growing number of well-meaning objectives, the EU would be well-advised to make sure that partners respect a certain number of key issues in daily practice – such as respect for the freedom of information, opinion, and assembly, the 'regularity' of legislative and legal procedures, or the independence of judicial and administrative bodies, for example.

And instead of giving direct support to political opposition forces and sounding the attack on the political bastions of the ruling regimes, the EU should rather seek cooperation with two groups in particular – the reform-oriented forces within state institutions that endeavour, if not to democratise, then at least to modernise their societies, and who often see their efforts thwarted by outdated structures; and even more importantly, truly independent and socially representative forces within civil society that have met with much rhetorical approval but mostly had to go without concrete support to this day.