

# THE EUROPEAN NEIGHBOURHOOD POLICY'S IDENTITY CRISIS

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## **The ENP is Dead... Long Live the ENP!**

The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) has long been under the magnifying glass of analysts and the catalyst of much critique. After two modest appraisals in 2006 and 2011, in 2014 the Commission decided to launch a broader and deeper review which included, for the first time, a consultation process with governmental and non-governmental actors and analysts across the two shores of the Mediterranean and in Eastern Europe. The turmoil of the past few years seemed to warrant finding new ways to deal with the troubled neighbourhoods. The Commission and the European External Action Service running this exercise asked searching questions which, potentially, could have led to a radical overhaul of the policy.

The consultation asked whether the ENP should be maintained and, if so, what geographical scope it should have, not just in terms of differences between East and South but also with respect to other neighbouring countries. It questioned the relationship between the “partnership” approach, based on seeking joint objectives together with governments of the ENP countries, and the desire for a stronger political approach stemming from a clearer understanding of the priorities of the EU and its Member States towards each of the 16 neighbouring countries.

The consultation also encouraged questioning the validity of ENP tools and of the institutional framework based on Association and Trade Agreements, asking whether existing tools were appropriate to the objectives set out, whether and how a stronger security focus could and should be included in the policy, and how to balance differentiation between countries with sectoral cooperation, conditionality, reflecting EU interests and those of partner countries.

Yet the ENP review proposed in November 2015 did not overhaul the policy – rightly so if one looks at the results of the 6th Euromed Survey to be examined in this short contribution. Rather, the ENP review focused on identifying a more limited and, arguably, less ambitious but perhaps achievable set of priorities, on strengthening the “partnership” approach with the aim of setting more realistic and shared goals, and on improving the flexibility and visibility of the tools.

From the point of view of the institutions involved in the review, this risk-averse approach reflects the uncertainty about EU policy in general. The High Representative's exercise to devise an “EU Global Strategy for Foreign and Security Policy”, to be concluded in June 2016, belittled the ENP review and, if endorsed, may provide the blueprint for the neighbouring regions. The fact that the two review processes were not fine-tuned was a missed opportunity to make so-called “strategy” and tools work together. Given that of all the EU's foreign policy toolboxes the ENP has the most comprehensive, there could have been much of the ENP of relevance to more global approaches than might be superficially assumed.

Even if the two processes had been dove-tailed, the Euromed Survey asking about the future direction of the ENP reveals that the respondents struggle with the same dilemmas policy-makers have when it comes to dealing with the southern Mediterranean: a number of open answers as well as the responses to question 3 (see graph 1) indicate that the respondents

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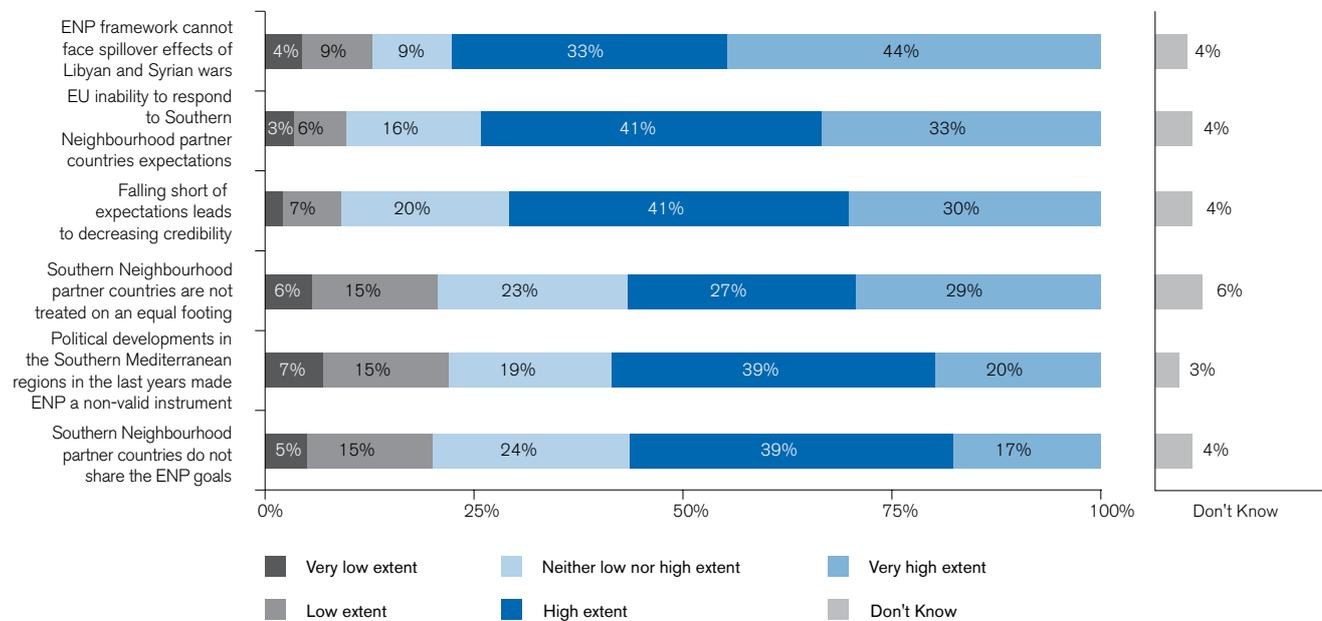
are well aware of the limitations and failures of the ENP. However, 79% also think it should be maintained.

For instance, two thirds of respondents believe that the ENP has overwhelmingly fallen short of expectations, with a low credibility in the Maghreb, where 76% believe that “falling short of expectations leads to decreased credibility.” This suggests that the “capabilities-expectations gap” is a relevant explanation for the ENP’s travails.

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At the same time, however, when questioned about the reasons for the ENP’s failures, growing conflict and its spillover in North Africa and the Middle East rank as strong motivations – issues which the ENP was never designed to address, even if there may have been expectations about the ENP supporting stability.

**Graph 1: To what extent the following elements explain why the European Neighbourhood Policy has not always been able to offer adequate responses?**



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 6th Euromed Survey/Question 3

Both findings thus have paradoxical elements. A number of qualitative and open-ended answers provide no reason for maintaining the ENP in its current geographical set up. One quarter of the interviewees argued in favour of greater differentiation between individual countries, but also between East and South; some of the suggestions favour breaking down the ENP into sectoral or geographical components to better reflect regional patterns of interdependence and multipolar scenarios; few, if any, pointed out the advantages of a broad multilateral framework covering 16 countries; yet a clear majority believe the ENP should not be wound up.

**The ENP is in Crisis but Continues to Survive**

Another dilemma the EU consultation raised is the degree to which the ENP ought to be devised as a policy addressing EU collective interests and priorities or as a tool for improved cooperation. Here too the experts provide no clear-cut answer: 33% believe the ENP should evolve to become a “more equitable partnership” and 24% see it as a cooperation instrument; conversely, 19% advocate that the ENP should become a “political instrument”. 25% advise

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greater differentiation, which can be applicable to both approaches. The more qualitative findings of the Survey show how respondents acknowledge the need for a comprehensive and multi-layered tool but offer no clear strategic trajectory for the policy.

It therefore comes as no surprise that the ENP review did not produce a “new” policy: it reflects widespread uncertainty in the expert community too. Differentiation, a greater focus on needs and expectations of partners, and more flexibility of engagement are to be expected for the near future.

### **An ENP Identity?**

Why “identity” crisis? Firstly, two disclaimers are called for. Discussing “identity” issues would require theoretical tools which go beyond the scope of this article. My less ambitious aim is to offer some interpretations to understand the ENP’s simultaneous crisis and resilience, on the basis of the Survey results and of over ten years of engagement with the policy, the policy-makers, and the thinking and civil society community around it. Secondly, the obvious needs to be stated: the ENP is stuck in an inability to address the challenges in North Africa and the Middle East because most of those challenges are extremely hard to address.

Perhaps it is more appropriate to speak of a policy which is undergoing a phase of crisis and lack of direction but has resilience thanks to its “identity”; and “identity” should perhaps be more appropriately described as a loose network of interests, institutions, non-governmental organisations, and experts which gravitate around the policy. Indeed, the Survey results reveal a degree of osmosis of ideas between the communities working on and around the ENP. As was to be expected, think tank experts and NGO activists are more critical of the ENP than EU and national policy-makers, but the differences of opinion are not so great. Interviewees from Israel and Turkey were amongst the most critical (respectively, 43% and 40% do believe the ENP should be wound up) and, on the whole, southern Mediterranean experts are somewhat more sceptical and disappointed than their European counterparts. But divergence from the mean percentage of 79% favouring continuation of the ENP is not so significant.

These findings suggest that around the ENP there is a community of diverse experts which, formally and informally, provides for the exchange of ideas and debates about the policy itself. Alongside formal consultations introduced by the ENP with civil society networks, policy-makers participate in the expert and academic debates through workshops, conferences, and other occasions that the networks around the ENP organise. It is likely that these exchanges, however informal, have informed the discussions held during the review process, more deeply than the consultation process itself.

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The ENP’s institutional and bureaucratic set-up provides another clue to explain its resilience. As “a whole of government” policy, its management straddles the Commission and the European External Action Service creating clusters of interests in the ENP’s survival. Secondly, embracing both the southern Mediterranean and Eastern Europe brings together communities of interest and analysis which rarely interact with each other (indeed, much advocacy has focused on splitting the ENP in two regional policies, a line which was not pursued in the Communication of November 2015). More importantly, they reflect the compromise between internal EU political constituencies more interested in the southern Mediterranean, on the one hand, and in Eastern Europe, on the other, which largely reflects geographical proximity.

Tied to this is the distribution of resources, with both constituencies eager to ensure that these limited resources are not concentrated in one region to the expense of the other. Breaking down the ENP into different components would upset the delicate balance achieved between these constituencies.

The institutional and bureaucratic path dependencies, in other words, reflect a deeper political issue which the EU is unlikely to resolve: for reasons of geography, both neighbourhoods require vital attention and the ENP set up has so far provided that balance. The severe crises hitting Eastern Europe with Russia's annexation of Crimea and destabilisation of Ukraine, and the Middle East descending into chaos with the dangerous ramifications of the civil war in Syria, makes the salience of the two dimensions more acute. Russia's military intervention in Syria today justifies, *ex post*, the relevance of establishing linkages between Eastern Europe and the Middle East.

Finally, the ENP's survival is likely to be due to the pivotal role it plays between the EU as an internally-focused European organisation and as a global actor. There have been debates over whether the EU should focus more exclusively on its neighbourhood rather than on global engagement, the argument being that if the EU is incapable of developing effective policies in its neighbourhood, how can it aim to play a global role?

Indeed, the EU's neighbourhood attracts much of the Union's political and financial resources: 28% of the EU's budget for external action (under the heading of Global Europe) is earmarked for the European Neighbourhood Policy Instrument, second only to the Development Cooperation Instrument which takes up 35% of the Global Europe budget; the countries involved in the ENP have seen a number of missions deployed under the Common Security and Defence Policy; many of the EU's most important internal policies (agriculture, the Energy Union, infrastructure, migration) have important ramifications in its neighbourhood. This also explains why the expectations from the ENP have been so high: proximity and interdependence make the EU's neighbourhood of vital importance to the EU.

The identity-forming networks built around the practice and analysis of the Neighbourhood Policy, the institutional and political path dependency due to the internal political compromise between South and East, made more salient in light of the dual crises in Ukraine and in the Middle East, and the demonstrating role the ENP plays for broader EU global ambitions all made the ENP a policy which is impossible to kill, despite the critiques it has provoked, and very difficult to change. The next steps to await, therefore, are how relations between the EU and individual countries will evolve and the guidelines that the forthcoming EU Global Strategy are likely to produce.

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