

# Failed? Reformable? What is needed? – What future for the European Neighbourhood Policy in the Mediterranean?

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On 1 May 2004 ten new member states completed their accession to the European Union, enlarging the Union from 15 to 25 members, with two more countries – Romania and Bulgaria – still waiting on the sidelines to be admitted to the Union only three years later, in 2007. Already almost two years earlier, the EU's first High Representative on Foreign and Security Policy Javier Solana and his colleague in the Commission, external relations Commissioner Chris Patten, in their joint "Wider Europe" letter of 7 August 2002 had sketched out a new policy framework for the enlarged Union's future relations with its immediate neighbours (Tocci, 2004). This was further refined in 2003 and 2004 on the basis of proposal made in two Commission Communications, to become known as the "European Neighbourhood Policy" (ENP) (Commission 2003 and 2004).

While initially focusing on establishing a partnership with European countries outside the enlarged European Union located east of Poland and the Baltic Republics, which would share a border with the Union following its 2004 enlargement, the ENP concept was soon extended to include also EU's neighbours both in the South-East – in the Southern Caucasus – following the 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia and in the South, i.e. the EU's Mediterranean partners. They were already linked to the European Union through a series of Association Agreements concluded in the five to ten years before and in particular through the Barcelona Process that since 27/28 November 1995 had become the setting for a Euro-Mediterranean Partnership.

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establish a 'ring of [EU] friends', not the least from the South, that would share everything with the Union except its institutions (Prodi, 2002).

From the outset, the new approach was met with considerable questions in the Mediterranean region, such as: What would be the relationship between the new policy and its governance architecture on the one hand and the – partnership-driven – structure of the Barcelona Process with its strong regional focus that the EU-15 and their 13 Mediterranean neighbours had formed not even nine years earlier? Would it be appropriate, and was there enough in common, to deal with the Southern and the Eastern Neighbourhood together under one common European Neighbourhood umbrella? If enlargement policy was bound to prepare the way to EU accession, what would be the final objective of cooperation under the European Neighbourhood Policy? Was the new policy approach too euro-centric and inspired by the proven EU method of pre-accession partnership to be adapted to the complex and diverging realities and perspectives of the countries involved? Was the geographic scope of the emerging ENP appropriate rather than simple and – for the European Union – conveniently based on tradition instead of geopolitical realities (Assessing 2017, Lannon, 2012)?

Undeniably, the launching of the ENP was in itself not only triggered by the massive enlargement of the Union to the East and, with Malta and Cyprus joining the EU and Türkiye starting accession negotiations in 2005, to a lesser also to the South. It was also a reaction to two new game-changing factors that very much distinguished the Euro-Mediterranean environment of 2004 from the one of the Barcelona Foreign Ministers Conference of 1995: (1) the stalemate in the Middle East Peace Process since the return to power of the Likud in Israel and in particular the second Palestinian Intifadha (2000-2005), and (2) the echoes of the 9/11 terror attacks in New York and Washington, including the Iraq war, that introduced a new focus on security aspects into the cooperation with the MENA region and contributed further to the region's fragmentation.

Clearly, in particular for the ENP's Southern dimension the policy's EU enlargement policy heritage proved to be challenging from the start. This does not only relate to the benchmarking methodology, according to which the EU was assessed on an annual basis development and reform progress in the partner countries – as if they were supposed to advance on a mutually agreed EU-integration track – but also to the strict bilateralism of the initial ENP that had very largely renounced any major regional or subregional cooperation ambition and put on the back burner the admittedly complex regional dimension of the Barcelona Process co-decision architecture.

Successive reforms of the ENP endeavoured to address the founding flaws and adjust the ENP's priorities and policy toolbox in order to equip it realistically and therefore better to deal with the challenges in the region and with partner interests – in 2007/8 phasing out some pre-accession elements and launching a new framework for regional cooperation with the Union for Mediterranean, in 2011 reacting to the Arab Spring, and in 2015 taking into account the need to provide for stabilisation given the crises both in the East and the South, growing fragmentation and a differentiation of realities, interests and needs in both sub-regions and the emergence

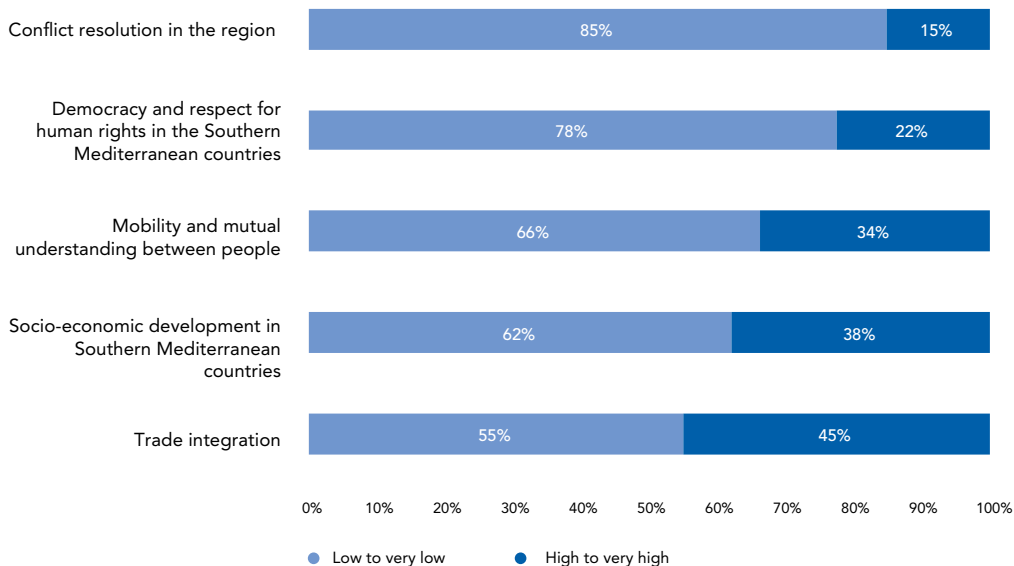
of massive migration flows to Europe from and through the Mediterranean region. In particular, the 2015 reform is noteworthy in this context, not only because of its extent and ambition, but even more so since it was based, for the first time ever, on a four-month long public consultation of ENP stakeholders, including partner countries and regional organisations (European Commission, 2015).

Against the background of this long track record of European Neighbourhood Policy reform and adjustment, the general assessment provided by a rather diverse and heterogenous group of 445 experts consulted in the EuroMeSCo IEMed Survey of the ENP's Southern dimension coming from a vast majority of countries that form part of the policy – regardless of the whether they share a Mediterranean coast or not – offers a rather sobering picture of the policy's effectiveness 20 years into the process:

**- Policy impact is considered generally low to very low:**

In none of the five key areas (conflict resolution; democracy and human rights promotion; mobility and mutual understanding of people; socio-economic development; trade integration) a majority of experts participating in the survey observes a positive balance of ENP action.

**Graph 1: Q.1 The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) was designed 20 years ago. It became the structuring framework of Euro-Mediterranean relations. Since then, to what extent do you consider that it has effectively impacted the following areas?**



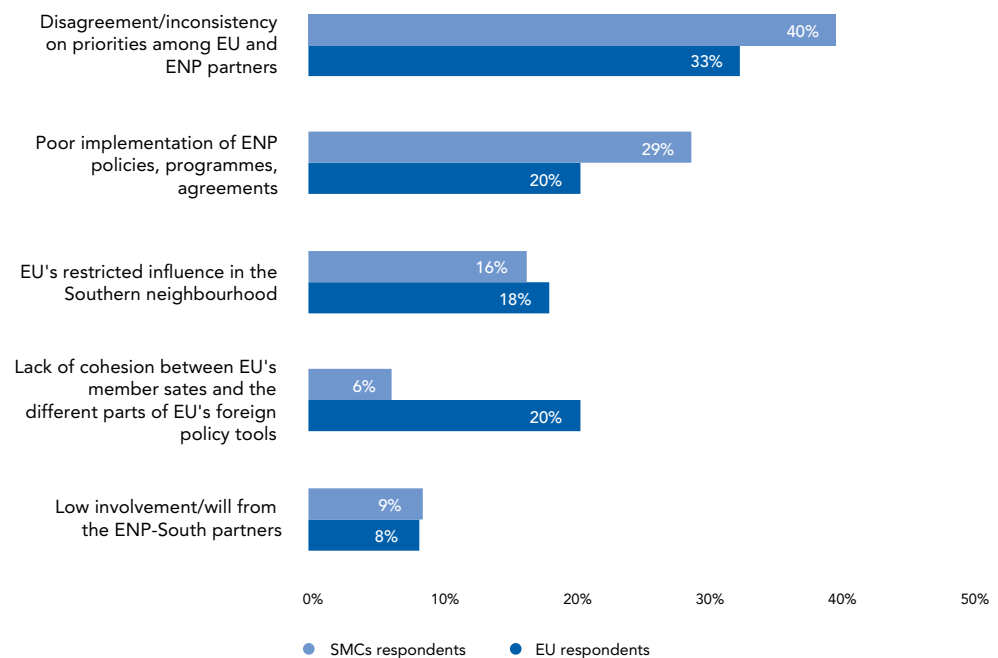
Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 14<sup>th</sup> Euromed Survey

Two features are striking in this regard: Firstly, while respondents’ damning assessments of low-level effectiveness of ENP in conflict resolution (85%) and mobility and mutual understanding (66%) can hardly surprise, the policy scores also low in areas where undoubtedly major efforts have been undertaken, such as democracy and human rights (78%) – not only but in particular after 2011 – and both socio-economic development (62%) or trade integration (55%). Secondly, there is no stark difference in the views of either EU- or Southern Neighbourhood-based respondents. EU-based observers tend to be slightly more critical of the policy impact on conflict resolution and democracy/human rights, and slightly more positive on trade integration than experts from the South, but these are nuances that do not change the general impression.

- Disagreement and inconsistency on priorities among EU and ENP partners is seen as the main source of the ENP’s insufficient effectiveness:

Again, correspondents from both the South (40%) and the North (33%) seem largely to agree on this finding. The second most common reason for the perceived lack of ENP effectiveness quoted is a perception of poor implementation of ENP policies, programmes, and agreements (29% Southern and 20% Northern respondents).

**Graph 2:** Q.1b In general terms or in relation to the specific areas mentioned above, why do you think the impact has been limited? (categories developed from open-ended answers)



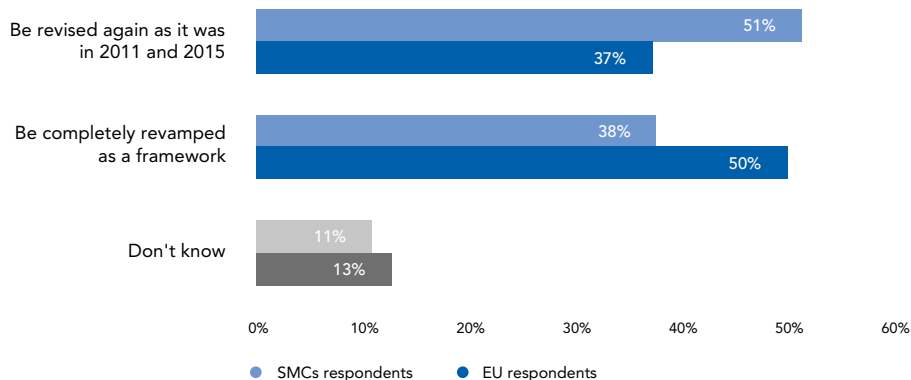
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If we do not want to explain this observation exclusively by assuming a lack of professional capacity on the side of implementing partners, poor implementation has probably to be understood as a function of the first and most prominent reason identified: If ENP partners do not fully agree on priorities and do not ensure their consistency, it is hardly astounding that the implementation of policies, programmes, and agreements will leave something to be desired. Open comments proved by respondents hardly ever refer to technical deficiencies in programme implementation. Moreover, there is also hardly any difference between comments from countries where the EU has applied budget support programmes conditioned on reform progress (such as Tunisia, Morocco, Jordan or Egypt) and those where it has not. Rather than that, respondents repeatedly refer to problems such as differences in policy priorities and interest, a too euro-centric and narrowly EU interest-based approach in the ENP, or even a perception of a neo-colonial attitude, policy inconsistency, and a lack of cohesion between EU and EU member states' policies (observed more by EU experts than those from the South: 20.5% to 6.3%) (see graph 2), as well as an insufficient commitment and a lack of political will on the EU side: in short, a lack of common interest paired with a too imposing and badly communicated EU approach, and a degree of hypocrisy on all sides when referring to common priorities and shared values.

#### - Consequently, experts demand a new deal:

The verdict is overwhelming: 88% of experts consulted want to see a radical change in the approach, with comparable numbers among them recommending either another revision of the ENP or, more radically, a complete revamp (44% each). While EU-based experts in their majority wish to see a total revamp (50%), Southern Neighbourhood analyst would mainly prefer to see a new policy revision (51%).

**Graph 3: Q.2** Since its inception in 2004, the ENP has been reviewed several times. The 2011, 2015 reviews, 2021 New Agenda for the Mediterranean. The ENP should:



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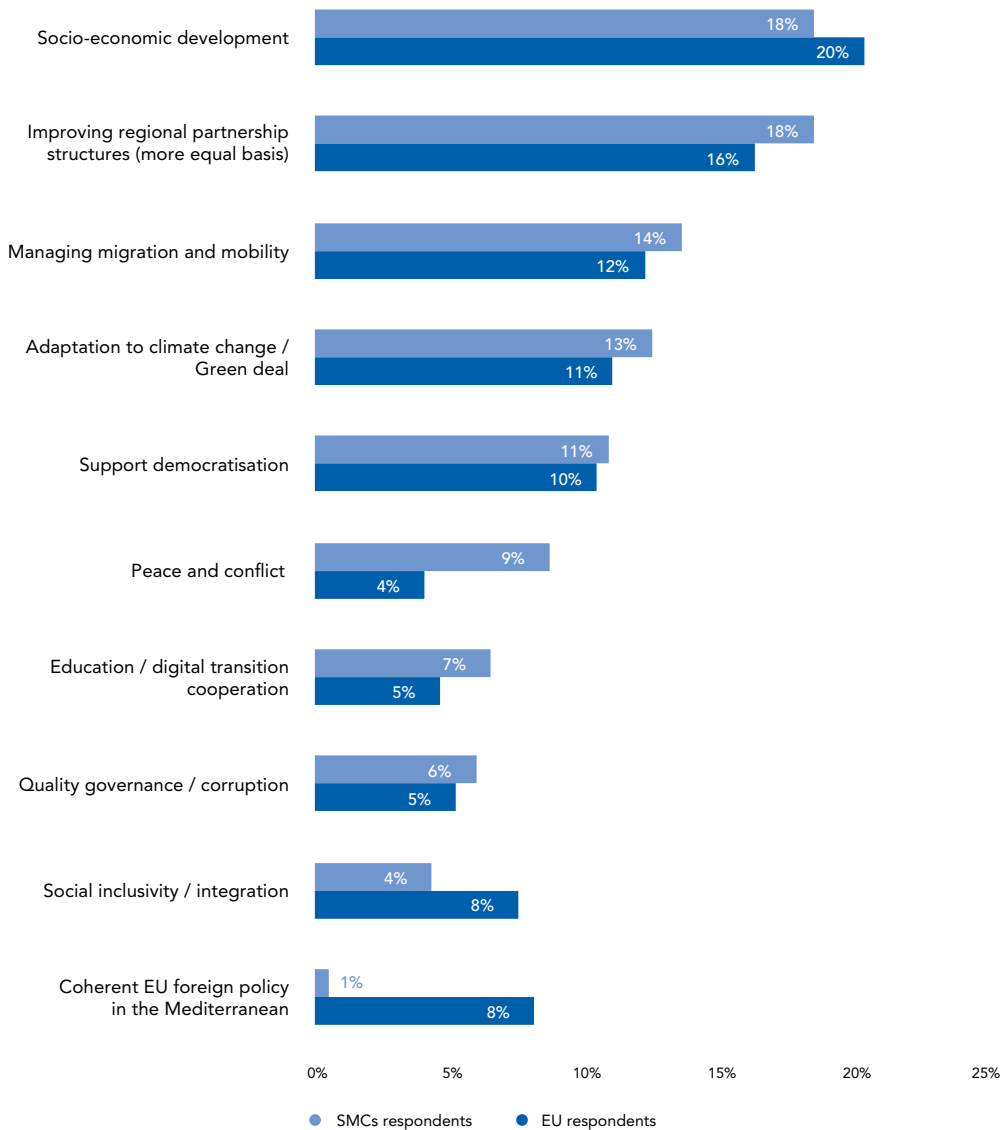
Arguments advanced in favour of a radical policy overhaul are invariably references to new geo-political realities, a definite split between the East and the South since the Russian aggression against Ukraine that would make a common ENP policy look out of phase, the need to give higher priority to the South, develop common ground and identify shared interest, including on conflict resolution and new challenges such as climate change adaptation and mitigation.

- **Soft security policies should be at the heart of the new approach:**

While crisis, conflict, and new geopolitical realities are seen as areas where the existing ENP has fallen particularly short of expectations, analysts participating in the survey in their vast majority (around 70%) and with little distinction between experts from the South or the North identify five pillars on which the hoped-for new partnership should be built: 1) socio-economic development (19.4%), 2) improving regional partnership structures (17.4%), 3) managing migration and mobility (12.9%), 4) adaptation to climate change (11.8%), and 5) support to democratisation (10.7%).

Interestingly, peace and stability with 6.5%, and governance and fight against corruption with 5.6% score rather low on the priority list. One may wonder if this is based on a low assessment of needs or if it rather expresses an expression of a lack of trust in the probability of serious improvements and the ability of even a re-vamped ENP to help in these fields. Whatever it may be, Southern observers expect more peace and conflict engagement from the policy than Northern (8.7% against 4.1%). Northern analysts, however, seem much more concerned with social inclusivity (7.6% to 4.3%) and furthering EU foreign policy coherence than their Southern colleagues (8.1% to 0.5%).

**Graph 4: Q.2a** What should be the new paradigm or the main focus of a revised or revamped ENP? (categories developed from open-ended answers)



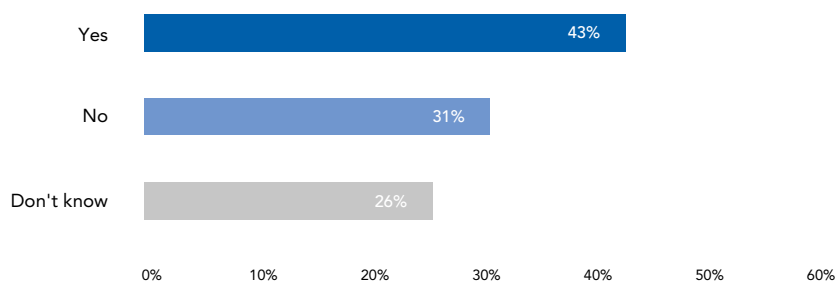
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- Establish a new policy framework for partnership with the South, while taking inspiration from elements in the European Union's Partnership with the East:

Respondents – strikingly in the EU even more than in the Southern Neighbourhood (51% vs. 47%) – are clearly in favour of splitting up the traditional ENP geography that unites the East and the South under one common umbrella (with 49% in favour of a split, 35% against and 16% undecided). They are pointing repeatedly to the growing differentiation between the two sub-regions and the game-changing nature of dynamics in the East, where the ENP approach is increasingly being overshadowed by a concrete EU accession perspective notably for Ukraine and Moldova, and in a more conditioned way for Georgia.

However, the proposed split is not radical: A relative majority of experts from the North and the South alike are of the view that a Southern Neighbourhood Policy should nevertheless take some inspiration from the Eastern Partnership: 43% in favour, with 31% against and 26% undecided. Votes in favour seem to be based on the view that in a variety of areas from economic and trade integration/DCFTAs to governance reform, mobility, and Erasmus scholarships the ENP has proven more effective in the East than in the South, not the least due to a – perceived – higher level of policy commitment by the European Union, and the will to establish a partnership between equals and to make available significantly more abundant resources.

**Graph 5:** Q.3a Do you think the Southern Neighbourhood Policy should get some inspiration from the Eastern Partnership?



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 14<sup>th</sup> Euromed Survey



In sum, experts both in the North and the South assess the European Neighbourhood Policy, as we know it, as little effective in the South over the past 20 years, since based on wrong assumptions and wrongly construed. They recommend replacing it with a new and specific EU policy approach to the South that should deal with socio-economic, climate, and democracy challenges, drawing strength from the EU's soft power competencies and its experience in the Eastern Neighbourhood but being distinct from it, and being based on true partnership, realistic assessments, and understanding of the complexities of the South, a considerably higher level of engagement and a commensurate allocation of political energy and financial resources.

## How is this to be assessed?

The message included in the votes and comments of a considerably numerous and diverse community of specialist respondents from more than 20 countries – 445 persons – is downright unequivocal, as impressions converge in many regards even if written comments reveal a large diversity of perspectives often influenced by national points of view and mostly generalist positions. This is significant, as it can be assumed that the understanding of what the European Neighbourhood Policy *is* and *who its actors are* could vary quite a lot from one respondent to the other – e.g. whether the term ENP would be considered to refer only to the action of EU institutions in the neighbourhood region or also the one of EU member states, or if EU humanitarian engagement in Gaza and Syria or migration or trade policy initiatives in the Mediterranean form part of the ENP or are to be considered distinct EU policies that are only playing out in the same geographical area. Despite this, the level of convergence of views and recommendations of experts consulted is strikingly high.

However, it would not be obvious to construct a new policy approach that would promise higher effectiveness and more tangible results only based on these findings. Further thought must be given to several paradoxes and open questions that result from analysing the results of the survey, such as the following:

## Which region and which form of regional partnership?

While recommending a new approach to the region, experts in their written comments make virtually no reference to a need for regional cooperation, or partnership, and to format where it best could take place. Neither the Union for the Mediterranean nor the Anna Lindh Foundation are mentioned, addressed, or assessed in any noteworthy way, nor at least criticised, recommended to be reformed or perhaps replaced by new successor bodies. Their action, mandates and potential do not seem to be considered overly relevant in the context of the survey. It should be asked: How could they be empowered to provide more stimulus and co-ownership to the partnership's regional dimension? Or do they need to be replaced?

Similarly, the geography of the desired new policy approach is not being defined in any sizeable detail. This element, however, would merit further reflection: If ge-

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opolitical realities in the Mediterranean have changed, as most of the respondents hold, should any new EU to the region approach not constitute a MENA partnership, including the Gulf countries and Iraq, rather than simply continuing with the present EU-Southern neighbourhood geography? Is the geography of the European Neighbourhood Policy still the appropriate one in order to ensure policy effectiveness and equal partnership?

## How to better understand the South and construe a more credible partnership among equals?

Respondents do not reflect on the ongoing trend of fragmentation of country realities and interests in the South itself that makes it ever more complex to come up with a common policy framework for the region.

Experts – not only from the South – see the present ENP still as too euro-centric and imbalanced, and despite the 2015 reform, which endeavoured to phase out much of the previous pre-accession style methodology by introducing a more differentiating, pragmatic, and mutual interest/mutual accountability-based approach. However, experts provide only little insight into what it would take for the EU to better listen and understand the South and adapt the policy better to its needs. Which mechanisms and practices would it take to overcome this problem?

They also do not reflect on the ongoing trend of fragmentation of country realities and interests in the South itself that makes it ever more complex to come up with a common policy framework for the region, in whatever way it is geographically defined. Has this fragmentation reached a point where it makes only little sense to still assume that there is a joint “Southern Neighbourhood” rather than just a geography of individual countries with very distinct realities, interest and needs? In other words, what justifies a regional approach today, and if it is maintained, how to structure it and make it a basis for a credible partnership of equals?

In this context, it should also be further elucidated what Southern neighbour countries’ interest is in the ENP. If they confirm their interest, as they did in the 2015 ENP public consultation exercise, what would be their suggestions to make the partnership at the same time more functional, co-owned, and better balanced?

This is not only a question of balance and fair partnership. If, as many respondents noted, higher levels and a clearer focus on EU political and financial commitment would be required to make the policy more effective, the question has to be addressed what Southern partners themselves bring to the process to make it more attractive and relevant and therefore justify such higher level of EU engagement? Not a somewhat ailing process is what is needed but a partnership that is a conduit to solutions in the joint neighbourhood. In partnership, as in tango, it takes more than just one partner to make it happen...

## Who should be the partners and how to take into account their interests?

Respondents generally refer to the “Southern Mediterranean” in a rather generic way. This leaves open the question to which extent the EU should focus its policy on intergovernmental cooperation – only or at least mainly – based on mutual interest and in a transactional way, and whether or how far the EU policy should also seek a dialogue and interaction with civil society and other non-state actors, as it was tried not only but in particular between 2011 and 2019. This question is of particular relevance if one considers the tremendous size and speed of change in societies in the region, not the least due to the demographic dynamics and the huge percentage of youth in Southern Mediterranean societies but also to the impact of modern media, communication technology and the emergence of Artificial Intelligence options. Both trends will not fail to leave their deep mark on governance systems and public opinion alike in the region. How must a partnership approach be construed that takes into account factors in the reality of societal change in the region?

Size and speed of change in societies in the region (demographic dynamics, impact of modern medias) is of key relevance when thinking about whether or how far the EU policy should also seek a dialogue and interaction with civil society and other non-state actors.

## How can the new policy become relevant in a crisis- and conflict-stricken region?

The Mediterranean and Middle East region is, or many of its countries are, marred by crisis and conflict. Little speaks for the view that this could change any time soon, on the contrary. As was discussed above, however, respondents gave particularly low scores to the ENP on conflict resolution (85%). In the EU itself the debate on how to make Europe more resilient against crisis, how to boost European armament and defence, and ultimately whether to set up a European army or build a stronger European security identity is in full swing. The majority of participants in the survey still recommend soft security and human development topics as the priorities of a new policy approach for the region. While they may have a point, the question must be discussed if a revamped ENP for the South, or any other form of new policy partnership, could really be imagined without a much stronger crisis management competence that would possibly even include credible hard security elements.

Coming up with credible solutions in this regard is all but simple but it can be assumed that the war between Israel and the Hamas following the 7 October 2023 attack against Israel will further accentuate the question.

The critical assessment of the ENP should be heard as a call for a new and more effective partnership that must be comprehensive, inclusive and differentiated, and as much as possible in every partner’s interest.

The European Neighbourhood Policy in the South needs new momentum, effectiveness, and better balance. May ENP effectiveness presently fall short of expectations, dropping it altogether in favour of pragmatic bilateralism is not an option to be recommended. There is hardly any credible alternative to some form of a specific Euro-Mediterranean or Euro-MENA Partnership. You cannot ignore geography, neither is it wise to ignore history. A short-term, day-to-day transactional policy approach may produce partial successes, but it will fail to build solid partnerships, address long-term structural problems, and enable partners in the South and the North of our common Mediterranean Sea to exploit politically, economically, and socially the potential of their common neighbourhood. Mere transactionalism can, in the long run, not replace partnership.

Therefore, the critical assessment of the European Neighbourhood Policy in the South expressed by the 445 respondents from inside and outside the Mediterranean region must not be understood as a justification for giving up the policy. It should be heard as a call for a new and more effective partnership that must be comprehensive, inclusive and differentiated, and as much as possible in every partner's interest. What at first sight looks like a squaring of the circle, can perhaps nevertheless succeed if it is approached with honesty, dialogue, the will for understanding, and a sense of commitment.

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