

Differentiation, incentive-based approach and joint ownership – Two decades of ENP's expectations – Real-politique gap

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Three decades have passed since Christopher Hill wrote about the gap between expectations and capabilities that the European Union's (EU) Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) created since its inception (Hill, 1993). The start of ENP caused similar gaps. The President of the European Commission, Romano Prodi's 2003 promise to ENP countries of "everything but institutions" created unrealistic expectations to the extent it was described as "the original sin" (Blockmans, 2017). As promise and deed were apart, the ENP gap was titled as that between conception and performance (Koenig, 2016). EuroMeSCo's Euromed Survey shows this gap still very much exists. However, it also shows that the principles on which ENP was based are held worthy on both sides of the Mediterranean.

On the eve of a new European Commission, set to enter by the end of the year, yet another review of ENP awaits. Expectations regarding the South are not high while challenges are. The EU is known for its cumbersome and usually slow pace of change, which is especially felt in intergovernmental consensus-based CFSP. As a club of 27 member states with diverging views and interests, the EU usually fails to do a re-start: to erase an unsuccessful policy and start over a new page. When it announces a reform, it ends up with a quilt of many old and some new principles and tools (Cardwell, 2012).

Yet what is most needed in ENP is less a reform of principles and more their realisation. To narrow the conception – performance gap the emphasis needs to be on the output legitimacy, meaning the performance side, though ENP can also benefit from increasing input legitimacy by not only conducting more roundtables with Southern Mediterranean countries (SMCs) policy-makers, experts, and civil society

Survey results show that the gap between conception and performance still very much exists. However, they also show that the principles on which ENP was based are held worthy on both sides of the Mediterranean.

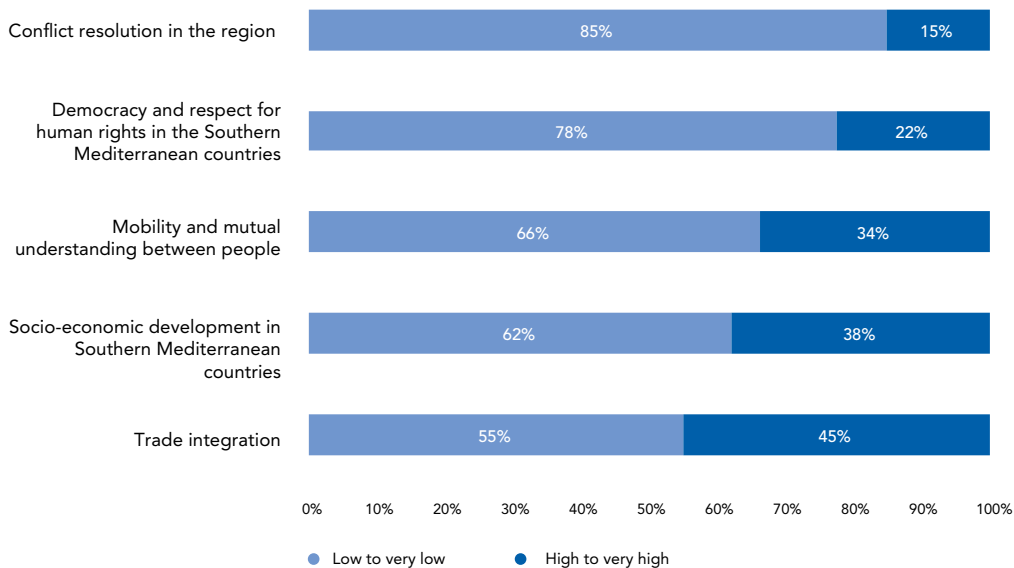
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organisations (CSOs) but also by letting them comment on the initial drafts of the revised ENP.

ENP was criticised as institutionally weak, lacking meaningful funding, and too soft to coerce political change (Blockmans, 2017). It has been lacking the EU's political willingness to act upon its conditionality mechanism according to its core values (Kostanyan, 2017). Yet, when examined in retrospect, after two decades, one can observe some progress in implementing a few of the principles it was founded upon, such as differentiation which was given new tools (see below). And so, ENP should turn to be less of a one-size "cookie cutter", as one survey respondent described it. On joint ownership, some progress was made, but criticism is still very high. One respondent called it a "smoke screen" to impose EU priorities. What is most lacking is the political will to apply conditionality according to the incentive-based approach, which is still a far cry from the EU's declaratory statements.

Those are not the only values the EU is insufficiently promoting. Conflict resolution, democracy and respect for human rights, mobility/ migration, and socio-economic development are all challenging areas the ENP is supposed to tackle. These challenges are especially high regarding the Southern neighbourhood (EIU Democracy Index, 2024; UN 2023). This is recognised by the respondents to Euromed Survey, who most found the EU's effective impact on these four areas to be either 'low' or 'very low': 85% regarding conflict resolution, 78% regarding democracy and respect for human rights, 66% on mobility/ migration and 62% on socio-economic development (Q.1). The low-performance rates are considerable. Two decades after the initiation of the ENP, these are grim results.

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 14th Euromed Survey

The principles of differentiation, defined as the ability to have a tailor-made framework of cooperation between the SMCs and the EU was a novelty of the ENP. It stood in contrast to the Barcelona Process, which tended to progress at the pace of the Southern low, sometimes lowest, denominator (Pace, 2004), and therefore had no reference to an individual incentive-based approach (“more for more”). Joint ownership was introduced by the European Commission to the ENP to enable “the EU and third countries to define cooperation objectives through mutual consent and ‘give added weight to the agreed priorities for action’” (Zardo, 2022).

Following three ENP re-evaluations and reforms (in 2011, 2015, 2021) these three principles demonstrate the gap between the high expectations and quite a disappointing reality. 49% of all respondents do not think the EU applied the principle of differentiation effectively. Only 25% think it did (Q.4a). 56% do not think the application of the incentive-based approach led to more political and economic reforms in the SMCs. Only 27% think it did (Q.5a). 64% do not think SMCs feel they co-own ENP, while a mere 15% think they do. Yet in some SMCs percentages are a bit higher on joint ownership. In Egypt a third of the respondents do think co-ownership was employed, among the Palestinians surveyed 37% think so, and in Jordan, this percentage rises to 40%. The question begs – was it something the EU did better, and if so, can it be replicated in the Maghreb, or were the Mashreq expectations more

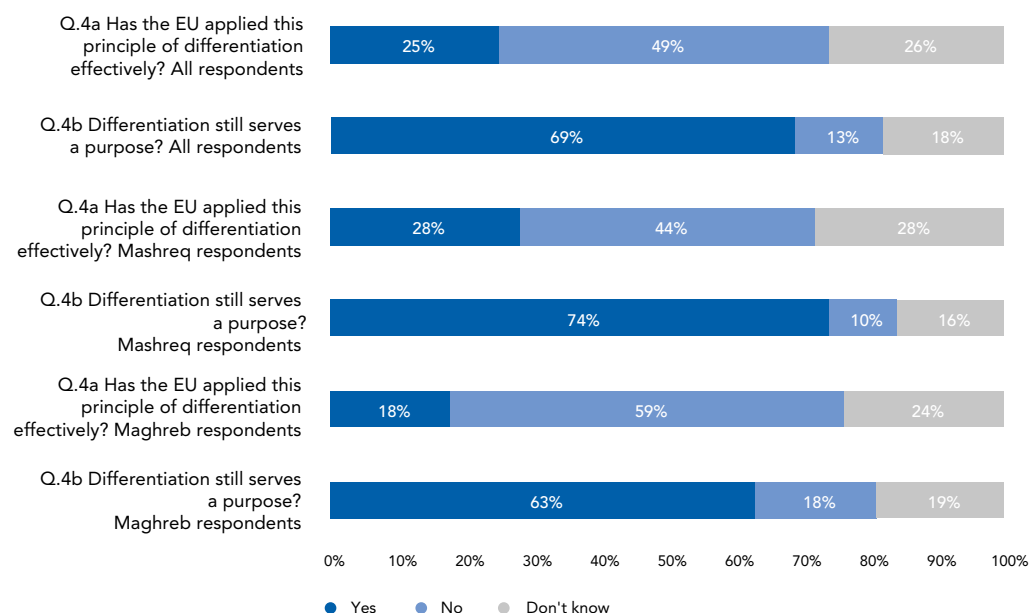
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modest to begin with? The EU should learn from them what it did that increased their sense of joint ownership and examine if it would work with other SMCs too.

There is, however, wide agreement these principles are relevant and should be kept and implemented. While only 25% of the respondents think the EU applied differentiation effectively (Q.4a) 69% think differentiation still serves its purpose and wish the EU offer SMCs tailor-made partnership (Q.4b). In retrospect of two decades, one can see more differentiation, especially in the move from the first round of the general all-encompassing 'Action Plans' (AP), to the second more advanced round of APs, and when APs were replaced with short-list individual 'Partnership Priorities' in 2015 and the EU added different kinds of tailor-made partnership agreements, e.g., on mobility and migration (Andrade, 2020), on climate change, energy and green transformation, or strategic/ privileged partnership. Again, overall, the answers of the Mashreq countries are slightly more positive than the Maghreb: 28% versus 18% respectively. However, there are mixed results inside these groups: 35% of the respondents in Egypt found differentiation was applied effectively, 33% in Lebanon, 31% in Israel, yet only 10% in Jordan. 29% in Morocco, compared to only 10% in Tunisia. This does not correlate to the different tools the EU used with each SMC.

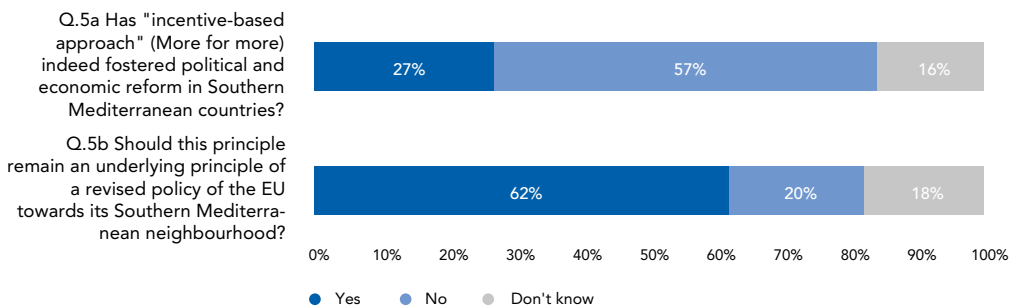
Graph 2: Q.4 One of the most distinctive principles of the ENP is differentiation, under which the EU recognizes the different aspirations of partner countries in their relations with the EU and offers them tailor made partnerships accordingly.



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 14th Euromed Survey

The same twist can be seen regarding the “incentive-based approach”, introduced to ENP in 2011: 57% think it did not foster political or economic reform in the SMCs (only 27% think it did, Q.5a), yet 62% think it should remain an underlying principle of a revised ENP (Q.5b). Whether it reflects the path-dependency of EU and SMCs participants or principled views, it is for the next European Commission to strive to advance its achievement.

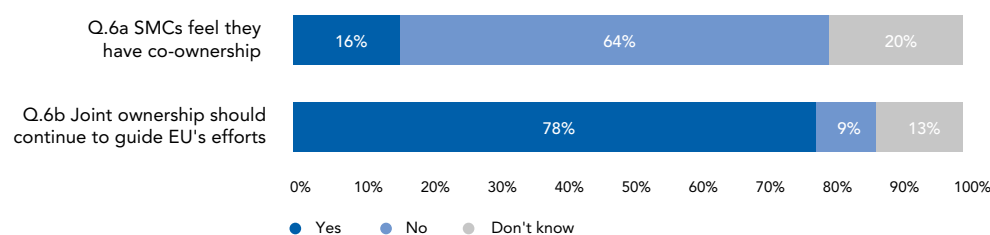
Graph 3: Q.5 Since the inception of the ENP, the EU has strived to make some modalities of its financial assistance conditional, with the objective to provide “an additional incentive to pursue political and economic reform”.



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 14th Euromed Survey

On joint ownership, the gap is even wider: 64% of the respondents do not think SMCs feel co-ownership over ENP (Q.6a). Yet 78% of the survey respondents think the principle of joint ownership should continue to guide the EU’s efforts in redefining its approach to SMCs (Q.6b). Input legitimacy has been enhanced in the last few years by consultations and roundtables with SMCs. These efforts begin to be reflected in the answers given by CSOs, which are the highest, but still very poor (23%). Experts’ answers reflected the lowest level of input legitimacy (10%).

Graph 4: Q.6 Since the inception of the ENP, the EU regularly reiterated that it “does not seek to impose priorities” on its partners, and the principle of joint ownership has featured indeed consistently in EU strategic documents related to the ENP. Q.6a Do you think EU Southern Mediterranean countries feel they co-own the ENP? Q.6b Do you think the principle of joint ownership should continue guiding the EU’s efforts in redefining its approach vis a vis its Southern Mediterranean neighbours?



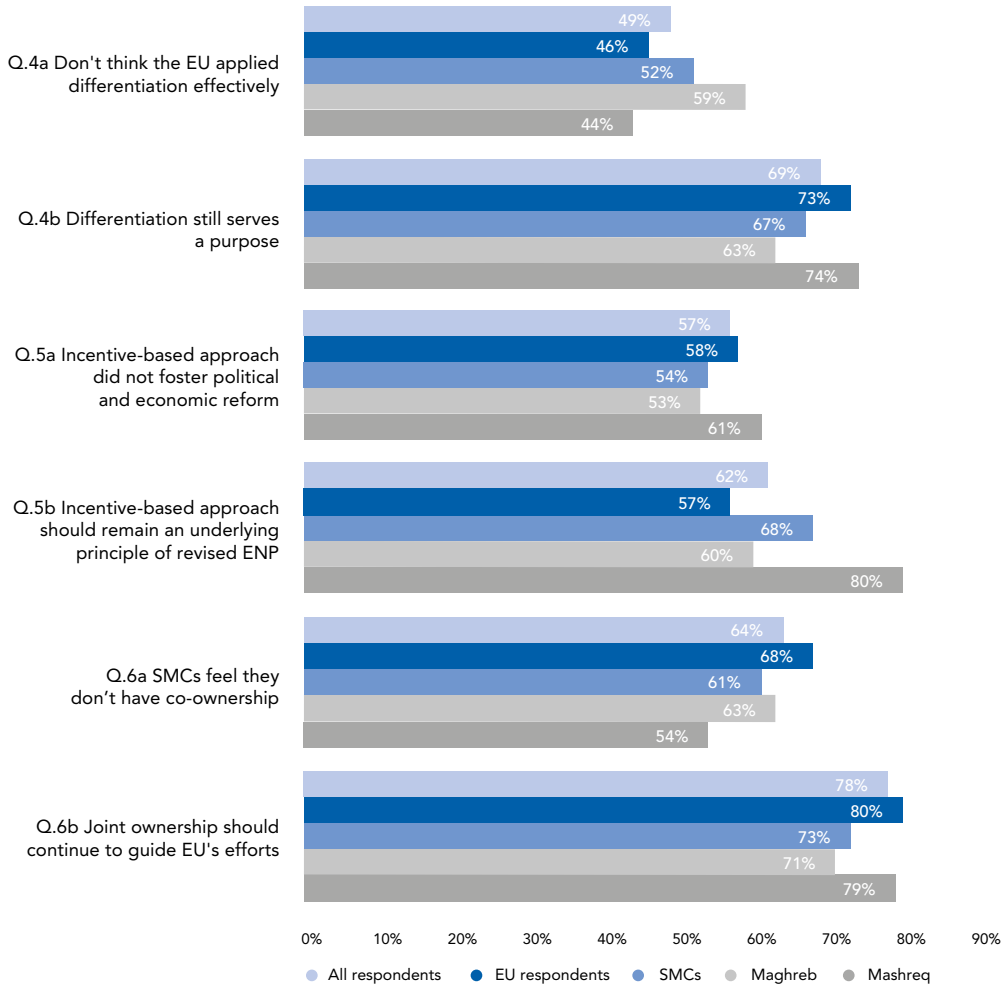
Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 14th Euromed Survey

ENP principles themselves still enjoy strong support on both sides of the Mediterranean. The challenge, therefore, is for both sides to improve its implementation and work on ENP deliverables according to them, not to replace them.

The gap between expectations and performance (real or perceived) is sobering. Disappointment comes both from the respondents in the SMCs and the EU. Yet, as mentioned, the principles themselves still enjoy strong support on both sides of the Mediterranean. The challenge, therefore, is for both sides to improve the implementation of these principles and work on ENP deliverables according to them, not to replace them.

Along the quite similar negative evaluation results are coming both from the EU and SMCs, there are some differences between the two sides of the Mediterranean. EU respondents wish to preserve the principles of differentiation and joint ownership slightly more than their SMCs counterparts: 73% in the EU and 67% in SMCs regarding differentiation (Q.4b), and 80% by EU respondents in comparison to 73% by SMCs regarding joint ownership (Q.6b). On the inclusive-based approach 68% of the SMC wish to preserve it, in comparison to only 57% of the EU (Q.5b). Oddly, it seems the respondents in SMCs (policy-makers, experts, and civil society organisations) believe a bit more in the effectiveness of the EU’s conditionality – if implemented properly – than the ones in the EU. This is quite unexpected, taking into consideration the criticism prevalent in these countries over the EU as post-colonialist. Among SMCs, on all three principles, the Mashreq countries wanted these principles to be applied more than the Maghreb. Further research is needed to explain this slight but consistent difference (see graph 5 below).

Graph 5: Reviewing some of the constitutive principles of the ENP.



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 14th Euromed Survey

Triangular or quadruple groupings on an ad-hoc basis is also a way to create more dynamism when implementing differentiation and joint ownership, as well as to advance cross-border cooperation across the Mediterranean.

Both wars (Russia against Ukraine and in Gaza between Israel and Hamas) have far-reaching regional implications and internal domestic ones. More emphasis on conflict resolution is needed.

Today the ENP does no longer reflect the original rationale. Perhaps a return to solely focus on the Southern neighbourhood is needed.

As differentiation and especially joint ownership are elusive, it would be beneficial if an independent research institute would develop an index to measure such principles based on joint and separate declarations, conduct of political dialogue, negotiations, content of agreements, partnerships and other forms of cooperation and their realisation on the ground, using this survey, interviews and focus groups methodology. Another form of measurement could be how far is an SMC from reaching the ENP goals (like OCED measurement regarding SDGs).

Mini-lateralism (Kibrik, 2024) is another way forward. Forming triangular or quadruple groupings on an ad-hoc basis is also a way to create more dynamism when implementing differentiation and joint ownership, as well as to advance cross-border cooperation across the Mediterranean. The EU-Morocco-Israel cooperation is an example, though it needs further development. Perhaps through an emphasis on cross-border cooperation, ENP can create more value both to the EU and among SMCs.

As mentioned, another round of ENP re-evaluation is expected upon the entry of a new European Commission in 2024. It comes at a time when the old “ring of friends”, declared in the 2003 European Security Strategy, which turned in its 2016 European Global Strategy into a “ring of fire”, has turned into a real security danger to the EU since 2022 due to the war of Russia against Ukraine. The neighbourhood security was further destabilised in 2023 by the Gaza war between Israel and Hamas. Both wars have far-reaching regional implications and internal domestic ones. More emphasis on conflict resolution is needed.

Russia’s attack on Ukraine was also done from the territory of Belarus, an ENP country. This war caused the Eastern Partnership to split up the countries upon which the EU suspends relations and inflicts sanctions, as with Belarus, and to countries that became either fast-track EU accession countries, as Ukraine and Moldova, to Georgia to which the EU granted candidate country status. The ENP, which in 2002 was set as an alternative to EU membership, as a policy tool to foster good neighbourly relations with the new neighbours to the east following the 2004-07 enlargement, has split in 2022 to EU candidates, which are future club partners (much more than friends), and foe & sanctioned. It no longer reflects the original rationale. Perhaps a return to solely focus on the Southern neighbourhood is needed.

To conclude, despite the considerable progress CFSP has made, Hill expectation – capabilities gap and Koenig ENP conception – performance gap arguments still hold, and perhaps even more so, as the foreign and security challenges of the 2020s are far greater than those of the 1990s. The principles on which ENP was based: differentiation, incentive-based approach, and joint ownership receive very low markings both in the EU and SMCs, but they are also held worthy on both sides of the Mediterranean. What is most needed in ENP is less a reform of principles and more their realisation. To narrow the conception–performance gap, the emphasis needs to be especially on the output legitimacy (the performance side), but it would be useful and reinforcing to also increase input legitimacy. It is for both sides to improve the implementation of these principles and work on ENP deliverables according to them, not to replace them. Both the EU and SMCs should work jointly to narrow the gap between expectations and conceived realisation and realize more the promise of ENP differentiation and joint ownership and work on ENP deliverables.

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