

Re-orienting priorities: Back to basics to value fundamental rights

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The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) has been designed and launched in 2004 in order to extend the opportunities for stability, security and prosperity to the European neighbouring countries, both in the South and the East. Furthermore, as an alternative to the enlargement policy that was previously applied to specific countries on their EU's admission path, the ENP was expected to achieve much with fewer resources among a wider group of countries (Frappi, 2017). In this regard, evaluating the effectiveness of the ENP has always been a difficult task, especially in changing circumstances. Despite its revision several times in 2011, 2015, and 2021 to better target the priorities of cooperation between the EU and its Southern partners, the effectiveness of the ENP remains widely questionable.

Perceived Low Impact

Based on the figures of the EuroMeSCo Euromed Survey in 2023, the majority of respondents coming from both official and independent northern and Southern Mediterranean entities think the effectiveness of the ENP is low in several areas of action. Conflict resolution comes on the top of these areas as 85% of the respondents view the ENP's impact in the region as either 'low' or 'very low'. It is quite reasonable to receive such results given the ongoing war claiming thousands of civilian lives in Gaza and the incapacity of all actors, especially the EU, to propose and enforce suitable plans for a ceasefire. When first launched in Barcelona in 1995, the cooperation across the Mediterranean was born in a context of optimism for peace and prosperity for the whole region. Therefore, assessing the effectiveness of the EU's main instrument of this cooperation in the middle of a devastating war on the Southern shore would not help but questioning its *raison d'être*. Additionally, the EU, along with its partners, has been incapable of solving many extended conflicts in the South, be it in Syria or Libya, rather merely suggesting tools for conflict containment to stop its proliferation.

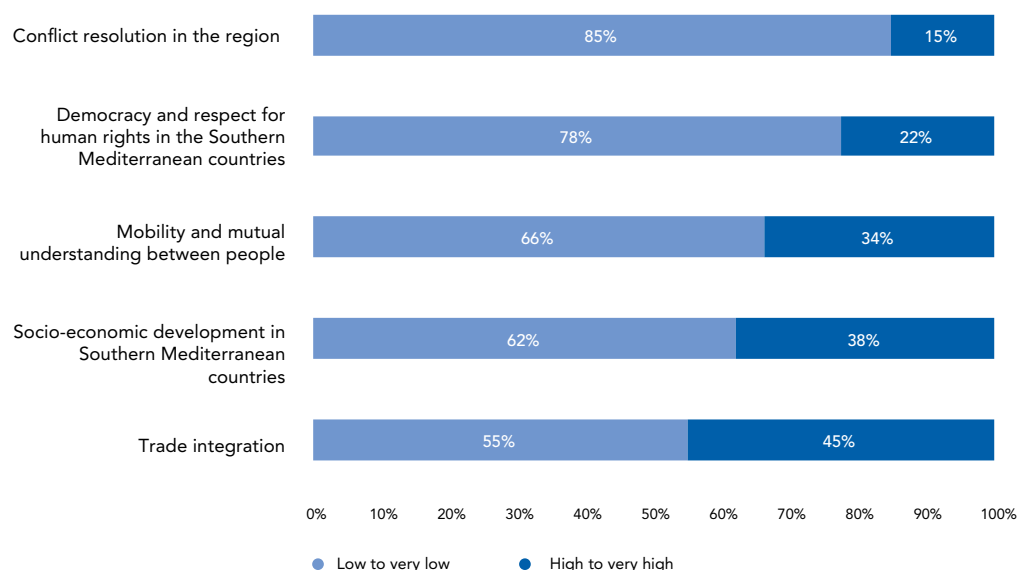
The ENP's low impact on the Southern neighbourhood was also perceived in the field of democracy and human rights promotion with a percentage of 78%, mobility

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and mutual understanding with 66%, socio-economic development with 62%, and trade integration with the EU with 55%. Traditionally, there was a common conviction that a pragmatic trade-off should take place in the Euro-Mediterranean relations; to enhance stability and economic advantages, the political pillar consisting of democracy promotion should be left behind. However, the survey results challenge this conviction by showing that neither stability nor democracy promotion were among the biggest successes of the ENP Southern cooperation as perceived by the respondents. On the contrary, maintaining stability via resolving conflicts and promoting democracy seems to be more intertwined than traditionally expected; whereas less dissatisfaction with the impact of ENP was perceived in the economic field especially in trade integration and socio-economic development. Hence, the pragmatic technical cooperation on the economic level has to some extent paid off in connecting both shores through trade and developmental projects.

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?

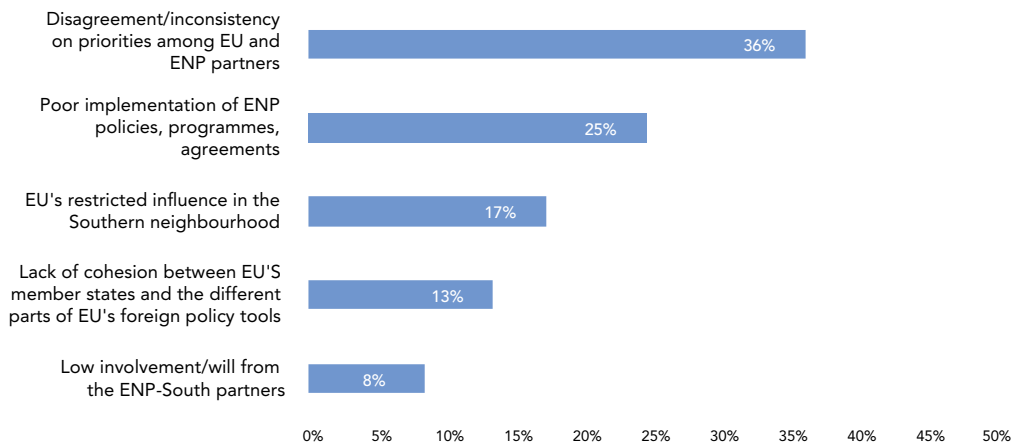


Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 14th Euromed Survey

Some would see the main obstacle impeding an effective ENP in the disagreement over identifying priorities of cooperation between the EU and the Southern partners (almost 36.2% of the respondents). The first explanation to that figure could be the Southern governments’ consistent rejection of any dictation regarding their internal governance when it comes to human rights and democratic process. However, the

disagreements might also emanate from the emphasize put by the EU on the irregular migration problem opposed to the developmental dimension that the Southern partners are more interested in.

Graph 2: 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?



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Meanwhile, almost 25% perceive the obstacle in the poor implementation of the ENP programs that prevent them from generating the expected success. Frequently, the implementation of the EU programs requires a rigid and sophisticated level of institutionalisation that might not be common to the Southern partners whether for the governmental or the non-governmental entities. This fact usually requires longer processes of adaptation and coordination that might be time-consuming, reducing thus the expected benefits of the cooperation. Nevertheless, another segment of the respondents sees the obstacles lying in the weak influence of the EU in the Southern neighbourhood, the low involvement of the Southern partners in the ENP's process, and the lack of consistency and cohesion between the ENP and other parts of the EU's foreign policy tools, with a percentage of 17.3%, 8.5%, and 13.5% respectively. These last three factors could be grouped to understand the dynamic of competition that the EU's role might face in the region when compared to other actors such as the USA, Russia, or China. Understandably, a national policy is by definition much easier to formulate and implement than a collective policy of a union of states. Therefore, the different policy tools applied by these competitors might seem more consistent and harmonised with their foreign policy, which naturally generates strong influence and engagement from the Southern countries.

The EU's role might face a dynamic of competition in the region. Compared to a collective policy of a union of states, USA, Russia or China can easily formulate and implement policy tools consistent and harmonised with their foreign policy.

The EU's Diminishing Credibility in the South

Apart from the strict figures introduced by the survey, there is a real crisis of credibility facing the EU's role in the Southern neighbourhood regarding adopting different stances toward similar issues (Venturi & Vallianatou, 2022). The different reactions coming from Brussels and other European capitals regarding the war in Gaza have greatly harmed the EU's image, especially when compared to previous reactions to the Ukraine war. The President of the European Commission Von der Leyen highlighting Israel's right of self-defense without equally urging it to respect the international law, has given the impression that the EU's foreign policy is subject to personal views, rather than institutionalised decisions. Likewise, the ad-hoc decision to suspend the European humanitarian aid to Gaza during the first week of war was widely received in the Arab Southern countries as a biased position automatically backing Israel in its collective punishment against Gaza (Wax & Barigazzi, 2023). Hence, the following decisions of increasing the EU's aid to the Palestinians have gone unnoticed and the effect of the first reactions has remained longer (Lynch, 2023).

Traditionally, the EU was seen as a neutral mediator and a reliable guarantor to the peace process in the Middle East. However, recently the American and the European stances are grouped to be judged as western partial positions backing Israel and turning a blind eye to the tremendously huge amount of civilian casualties in Gaza.

These mixed messages coming from the EU added to the popularity of anti-colonial arguments introduced previously to criticise the ENP in the South. All colonial explanations were given to justify the different stances that the EU has shown to the wars in Ukraine and in Gaza (Gray, 2023). Traditionally, the EU was seen as a neutral mediator and a reliable guarantor to the peace process in the Middle East. However, recently the American and the European stances are grouped to be judged as Western partial positions backing Israel and turning a blind eye to the tremendously huge amount of civilian casualties in Gaza. The Western media are seen completely biased when adopting the Israeli narrative of the war and almost entirely excluding the Palestinian narrative (Shehata, 2023). The fundamental rights of humans are not valued equally but according to their nationality and skin colour (Jones, 2023). Double standards, media bias and colonialism were frequently used to describe the position of western governments with little differentiation among them.

Meanwhile, the stances of Spain, Ireland, Portugal, and Belgium insisting on maintaining humanitarian aid to the Palestinians were received as individual positions, not representing the whole European bloc. Nonetheless, these positions are much more loyal to the traditional stance of the EU in previous episodes of the Middle East conflict and should not be regarded as an exception (Kassam, 2024).

In an open letter, a group of Arab intellectuals called upon Western intellectuals to show their real adherence to the universal values of freedom, justice, human dignity and human rights by announcing their solidarity with the Palestinian cause. The letter addressed by a group of writers, researchers, artists and poets, emphasised a huge gap between the rhetoric of the Western culture and the actual positions of Western intellectuals, let alone Western governments (Ourouba22, 2023). Others have questioned the degree of inclusiveness of Western democracy, usually set as an example to follow, if the media was biased and the views of peace movements calling for a ceasefire are not taken into consideration when deciding on national or European foreign policy.

Consequently, the repercussions of this continuing war in Gaza have not only harmed the EU's legitimacy as a normative power, but also questioned it as a credible partner if compared to other actors. For instance, Russia and China were perceived in the Southern neighbourhood as less biased towards the Palestine/Israel conflict and for sure less demanding in terms of democracy promotion. And in a context of accelerated animosity towards the West, both countries appear as perfect partners to the region to substitute the Northern neighbours, especially in trade ties and developmental projects.

Additionally, the continuing war in the neighbourhood does not serve by any means the main purpose of ENP in terms of extending peace and prosperity in the Southern neighbourhood. On the contrary, the continuous bloodshed in Gaza accentuates the appeal of the use of violence both regionally and domestically. On one hand, the non-state actors involved in the conflict are getting more and more popular in the eyes of the public, since no other mechanism of justice for Palestine is in action. On the other hand, Iran as the main backer of these non-state actors is seen as the sole regional power capable of supporting the Palestinians militarily, when other channels of support are blocked. Furthermore, the continuous bloodshed constitutes an ideal argument for grievances to be easily misused by violent extremist groups to recruit youth for attacking whether the local governments or the western interests in the region. Apart from the organised attacks directly planned and supported by violent extremist groups, lone wolves' attacks are very likely to occur both in the Southern and the Northern Mediterranean countries.

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Conclusion: Ways out of the Polarisation

Crises could be an ideal moment to introduce alternatives and opportunities. The Covid-19 crisis was an opportunity to realise that the concept of shorter and nearer supply chains could bring the Northern and Southern Mediterranean closer to enhanced trade partnerships. The Ukraine war was an occasion for the EU to look for better energy deals on the Southern shores of the Mediterranean. Following the same rationale, the war in Gaza should be seen as an opportunity for the EU to emphasize its normative power and to help enforce justice, and freedom and restore the respect of human and fundamental rights.

A basic needs approach should be put forward in the current situation to reinitiate the diminishing credibility of the EU. A strong political leverage should lead the rationale of the ENP to ensure that extremely disproportionate violence is not tolerated in this space if we are to think of the best mechanisms and tools for long-term cooperation and interdependency. The different components of the ENP were usually seen as working in parallel, not in a hierarchal pattern of progress. However, this devastating war in Gaza should act as a locomotive to advance the importance of the political component as a prerequisite to ensure the ability of other components to advance.

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the value of human life. Protecting civilians, preventing their forced displacement, and guaranteeing their safe access to human assistance should come on top of all priorities. Humanitarian organisations should be preserved and spared from politicisation or polarisation; their funding should not be used as a bargaining card in collective punishment, their resources should be augmented rather than decreased (Ebeid, 2024).

In such a serious context of polarisation and militarisation in the Southern neighbourhood, the last thing the region needs is a biased EU which takes sides. On the contrary, the best option for the EU is to regain its role as a fair mediator credibly willing to use its leverage to stop war and encourage peace. A balanced position of the EU will help pave the way to create suitable circumstances leading to a detailed plan for a ceasefire, constant and safe access to humanitarian assistance to Gaza and a comprehensive scheme linking these steps to the two states final solution. Other partial solutions would not help anymore in containing the conflict; rather it would create consecutive and wider episodes of confrontations and would likely empower the extremists on each side to lead ahead.

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