

Despite its costs and limited effectiveness, the European Neighbourhood Policy's symbolic commitment to engage beyond the EU may mean that it is doomed to survive.

Set up to promote security and prosperity in the EU's neighbors, the European Neighbourhood Policy has struggled in recent years to cope with the pace of change in the region. Giulia Pastorella argues that recent events such as the Arab Spring illustrate the ineffectiveness of the policy, with many countries making little progress. While reform is badly needed, budget squeezes, more assertive Middle Eastern regimes and a lack of political will within the EU all mean that it is likely that the policy will continue relatively unchanged for the time being.



Of the many sticks and carrots which make up Europe's soft power, the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) has arguably been the least effective. Established in 2004 and funded from the EU budget, the ENP was set up to help build an arc of security and prosperity to the EU's east and south, and to prevent new divisions between the haves and have-nots which could destabilise the regions on the EU's borders. Who could object to a 'structured dialogue' in the service of stability and security for all, and a better life quality for the peoples of the former Soviet Union, the Levant and North Africa?

The logic was irresistible – or so it seemed. And the case for bringing sixteen countries closer to the EU (but not too close) seemed impeccable. But, measured against the ENP's ambition to be an enabler of real change, it is clear that its record to date has, at best, been one of trying to keep pace with the spontaneous changes which are sweeping the region to the EU's south, and the forces of inertia which are still weighing down on the former communist countries to its east. At worst, the EU's actions have been a case of too little, too late. To illustrate: recipient countries like Moldova and Belarus have made little or no progress in eight years, whilst others such as Ukraine have actually seen their democratic momentum go into reverse.

Setting aside such ongoing stalemates, the latest, most graphic example of ineffectiveness has been the Arab Spring. While the civil society networks and exposure to European values stimulated by ENP initiatives may have contributed to the spread of democratic ideas, it is clear that these have been of marginal importance. The problem is not only, as former Commission president Romano Prodi has said optimistically, that the EU is offering 'everything but institutions': it is also offering very little practical support, not least in the form of *money*.

The ENP's effectiveness is further hampered by political arguments between the member states, and by the intrinsic shortcomings of conditionality (offering rewards for domestic reforms) as a tool for real change. Those shortcomings were cruelly exposed in the case of the Middle East's autocracies, such regimes being particularly resistant to conditionality – not least when it has been 'business as usual' until the day before. The EU commissioner for Enlargement and ENP Štefan Füle has been honest enough to recognise that Europe has been sending out conflicting messages about its priorities, and insisted that "we have changed our approach and there is today much less tension between our interests and our values." Without doubt the beginning of wisdom, but time is not on the EU's side if it is to build its regional standing and engage effectively with Arab societies.

But surely the ENP can be improved and take its rightful place in the EU's foreign policy toolkit? Can member states not harness their political will, and put money where the mouth is? The omens are not good: the EU's budget for 2014-2020, currently under negotiation, is unlikely to see a useful increase the resources available for the ENP. But political will and financial resources are just one

part of the equation. We have to remember that ENP is a “joint ownership” policy, in which the EU and its partner countries participate on an equal footing. And the fact is that the new regimes of the Middle East are likely to become increasingly assertive in their foreign policies and geopolitical orientations. This represents an opportunity for the EU, but also a challenge, for the old certainties – such as a ‘ default’ alignment with western interests – can no longer be taken for granted. Whilst Tunisia has joined the International Criminal Court, Egypt has restored its relationship with Iran.

Against this sobering background, we are entitled to ask some searching questions. If both sides – donors and recipients – have little incentive to continue, and if the policy is costing money *and* achieving little, what prevents us all from admitting that we were wrong, and that the ENP should now be quietly binned? Would it not make more sense to leave European action to member states; to encourage the private sector to seek out investment opportunities; and to concentrate on other EU instruments, such as intensified diplomacy and security and defence (ESDP) missions? The most useful elements of ENP have been borrowed from the EU’s enlargement policies, from its development aid strategy, and from its defence and security activity. So it should be relatively easy to break it up again and to return each chapter to its appropriate policy area.

The main explanation for the current inertia is to be found in the EU’s self-image, and in the need to not betray that image in the courtroom of world opinion. *Reputation* is the key word, and Ian Manner’s much quoted expression “normative power Europe” is another. Having consolidated peace and prosperity within its own borders, the EU has always seen itself as engaged in a universal mission to export its own success by supporting democracy, the rule of law, honest and efficient institutions and human rights, along with policies that boost human welfare and prosperity. The new, treaty-based ([Article 8](#)) obligation to export the Union’s values to its borderlands has, indirectly, given a constitutional justification to ENP that will reinforce the EU Commission in the ‘path-dependency’ of its policy. The pressure is now on to deliver some tangible successes through the ENP, and to be *seen* to be doing so, for the sake of the EU’s credibility.

But there is another reason why the ENP may yet be doomed to survive. It is that the symbolic commitment to engage beyond the EU’s actual frontiers sends a signal of good will and solidarity whose value easily surpasses the concrete achievements of the policy. That commitment has built a political capital that would be difficult to rebuild if the ENP were to be scrapped. It would be as if the EU were telling the benighted peoples of its ‘ near abroad ‘ that it had stopped caring about them – and they – and, crucially, their governments – would draw the obvious conclusion, and orientate their policies in ways which could prove more costly to Europe.

There are costs attached to dismantling any policy or institution, even if these are not altogether evident at the time – and these are costs to all the parties involved. Sometimes the price is worth paying. But it seems we are not there yet with the ENP. Neither side can bring itself to walk away, even if (maybe *because*) they know that most of real life will take place elsewhere. Which is not necessarily the best endorsement of a policy.

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