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EFPU roundtable: 'The EU's Influence in its Eastern Neighbourhood'

Blog editor



On 2 February 2012 the LSE's European Foreign Policy Unit hosted the fourth of ten roundtables on 'EU Foreign Policy after Lisbon' addressing the highly topical issue of "**The EU's Influence in its Eastern Neighbourhood**". **The panellists were** Professor Hiski Haukkala (University of Tampere, Finland), Dr Nicu Popescu (European Council on Foreign Relations) and Professor Stefan Wolff (University of Birmingham). The event was chaired by Dr Ulrich Sedelmeier of the LSE.

The roundtable set off to investigate what, if any, has been the EU's influence in the Eastern Neighbourhood. In depicting the EU's impact in the region the panellists converged on two essential points. Firstly, the speakers unanimously praised the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), launched ten years ago, for its visionary aspiration. Aiming to respond to the opportunities and challenges posed by its immediate neighbourhood in the aftermath of successive rounds of enlargement, the ENP was based on a sound conception and a correct analysis of the necessity to engage these countries. As the EU expanded its area of stability and prosperity in Central and Eastern Europe, the need to develop a strategic approach towards its new borders to the East and around the Mediterranean's shores became imperative. Secondly, and regrettably, the implementation of the ENP can hardly be considered a success story. The high expectations of receiving countries contrasted with the EU's limited rewards. This skewed incentive structure was reinforced by the EU's request for long term reforms which extracted great political costs from local elites who found it unappealing to abide by EU rules in the absence of significant carrots. Moreover, as the question of membership constantly gravitated around this newly institutionalised relationship, none of the parties seemed content with the ENP dynamics: lest they should be suspected to offer an unsustainable membership perspective, member states were slow to come up with a robust policy, while the neighbours found the EU's self-imposed limited engagement disappointing and disheartening.



L to R: Dr Ulrich Sedelmeier, Dr Nicu Popescu, Professor Stefan Wolff and Professor Hiski Haukkala

A reason for concern unanimously voiced by the members of the panel was the potential impact of the financial crisis on the EU's foreign policy in general and its Eastern dimension in particular. Currently, the effects of the financial crisis pose an acute threat to the EU's power of attraction and credibility. Professor Haukkala appropriately raised the question: how can the EU ask others to embrace the same norms that seem to have tragically failed internally? Arguing that the neighbours' appetite for membership is waning in the face of the EU's financial debacle, he emphasised that the EU's once powerful attractiveness instilled by its image as a successful economic project is now more endangered than ever. Apart from contributing to the EU's declining power of attraction and credibility, the Eurozone crisis affects the EU's foreign policy in two other respects: on one

hand, the EU cannot devote as much time as it should to its external relations dimension and secondly, it has less resources for this particular policy area, both in absolute and relative terms. As Dr Popescu put it, the EU has less time, less shine and less dime for foreign policy.

Finally, the task of presenting an unambiguous picture of the EU's post-Lisbon performance in its Eastern Neighbourhood proved to be an ambitious endeavour and called for a number of qualifications. The general view was that, while the changes introduced by the Lisbon Treaty have the potential of mitigating some of the EU's shortcomings in the area, major challenges still remain. Dr Popescu expressed his opinion that the effects of the Lisbon Treaty are inconclusive since some of the developments on the ground, such as the European Union Special Representative for Moldova being scrapped, diminish the effectiveness of more inspired institutional arrangements, such as the abolishment of the pillar structure. Reflecting on the broader context of the ENP, Professor Wolff pointed out that the Lisbon Treaty failed to address some of the fundamental problems that limit the EU's influence, which are often external to the EU as the notable example of Russia indicates.

While addressing internal and external challenges to its policy approach in the Eastern Neighbourhood is crucial if the EU is to become an influential actor in the region, a more elementary undertaking lies ahead. The EU must learn the difficult but essential skill of prioritising and redirecting its resources and attention towards countries and policy areas in which it can have a significant impact.

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