

## **RENEWED EU NEIGHBOURHOOD POLICY: OLD METHODS FOR STABILITY**

**Dzianis Melyantsou**

On November 18, the European Commission together with High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy issued a joint communication about a renewed European Neighbourhood Policy<sup>1</sup> (ENP), the framework programme of cooperation with the European Union's neighbouring countries. Some observers have already claimed that the EU moved away from its previous principles and emphasized the economic development of its periphery and tackling security issues. This blitz provides a brief analysis of the document about the renewed ENP, an overview of its changes, as compared with the earlier versions of the neighbourhood policy, and an evaluation of the potential for further cooperation between Belarus and the EU within the framework of this policy.

### **Why is Brussels renewing the ENP?**

The foundation of the European Neighbourhood policy was laid out in the communication of the European Commission known under the short title of "Wider Europe"<sup>2</sup>, which outlined major aims and principles of the policy towards the EU's eastern and southern neighbours. At that time, Brussels was planning to create around its borders "a ring of friends" – with whom the EU enjoys close, peaceful and co-operative relations". The documents establishing the ENP were then infused with optimism and the mood for rapid transformation of the region, since the majority of the neighbouring countries were expressing eagerness to integrate with the European Union, relations with Russia were developing at a fast pace, there were no serious conflicts on the periphery, and the European Union itself was experiencing the most massive expansion in its history.

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<sup>1</sup> JOINT COMMUNICATION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS. Review of the European Neighbourhood Policy, Brussels, 18.11.2015 - [http://eeas.europa.eu/enp/documents/2015/151118\\_joint-communication\\_review-of-the-enp\\_en.pdf](http://eeas.europa.eu/enp/documents/2015/151118_joint-communication_review-of-the-enp_en.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Wider Europe — Neighbourhood: A New Framework for Relations with our Eastern and Southern Neighbours - [http://eeas.europa.eu/enp/pdf/pdf/com03\\_104\\_en.pdf](http://eeas.europa.eu/enp/pdf/pdf/com03_104_en.pdf)

The first revision of the ENP happened in 2011 as a reaction to substantial changes near the EU's borders (a series of state coups in North Africa and the Middle East, the Russo-Georgian conflict, protracted transformations in Ukraine and Moldova, tense relations with Belarus). All those challenges required reactions. Moreover, at that time, regional initiatives within the framework of the ENP had been already launched: the Eastern Partnership and the Union for the Mediterranean, implying separate institutional grounds for cooperation. The European Union itself had also changed. The Treaty of Lisbon had provided more opportunities for bolstering the foreign policy of the Union. In order to strengthen the incentives for cooperation, the EU introduced the more precise principle of "more for more" (more aid for more profound reforms), established the European Endowment for Democracy, and threatened to impose sanctions on governments violating human rights and democratic standards. In addition, the decision was made to provide more assistance to and engage with non-governmental organisations in countries whose governments are inactive in building democracy and adapting to EU standards<sup>3</sup>.

A new wave of consultations with the partner countries and all stakeholders on reforming the ENP was launched in spring 2015, and on November 18, the European Union issued the communication on the revision of its neighbourhood policy. External threats to the EU once again have become major stimuli for reforming the ENP: by the beginning of 2015, it was clear that instead of democratisation, the Arab Spring, which had been met with such enthusiasm in the previous communication of 2011, generated more instability, armed conflicts, and an uncontrolled flow of migrants into the European countries; Russia began counteracting the integration of the post-Soviet states with the EU in an increasingly aggressive manner and turned into a source of threats (including a military one) instead of being a strategic partner.

In a consultation document<sup>4</sup> issued in March 2015 and authored by High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, it is said – as a prologue to debates about the future of the ENP – that today, the neighbourhood region is less stable than 10 years ago. This is so despite the initial goal of stabilizing the region and turning it into a prosperity area. Nevertheless, for the first time since the launch of the ENP, this document openly points out drawbacks of this policy and poses a number of harsh questions about its future development. The following problematic areas are considered as the most pressing ones:

- The partners are demonstrating a growing number of discrepancies when cooperating with the EU. In some areas, reforms have appeared to be blocked, partly because of contradicting interests, partly because not all partners can be viewed as equally interested in having privileged relations with the EU.
- The feeling of mutual involvement is not experienced by the partners, which hampers the full realisation of the neighbourhood policy's potential. The principle of "more for more" underscores the EU's adherence to its core

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<sup>3</sup> A New Response to a Changing Neighbourhood. A review of European Neighbourhood Policy, Brussels, 25 May 2011 - [http://eeas.europa.eu/enp/pdf/pdf/com\\_11\\_303\\_en.pdf](http://eeas.europa.eu/enp/pdf/pdf/com_11_303_en.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Joint consultation paper "Towards a new European Neighbourhood Policy, Brussels, 4.3.2015 - <http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/neighbourhood/consultation/consultation.pdf>

- values; however, it has not always facilitated the creation of an equal partnership atmosphere or fostered further reforms in the partner countries.
- Many issues that are to be dealt together by the European Union and its neighbours cannot be tackled without cooperation with the neighbours of the EU's neighbours.
  - Association Agreements and DCFTA (deep free trade areas) are not priority goals for everyone. Perhaps it is necessary to develop more individualised alternatives reflecting diverging interests and aspirations of some partners.
  - ENP Action Plans and reports are probably too excessive and complicated for some partners. It is necessary to find an easier reporting mechanism meeting the interests of the EU and its partners.

These problematic realms highlighted in the EU document partly reflect the criticism of the ENP that has been voiced for many years by researchers, some neighbouring countries, and representatives of interested groups. To summarise, it is possible to talk about three key fundamental problems of the European Neighborhood Policy.

**First**, the attempt to apply common principles to cooperation with all neighbouring countries without taking into consideration the variety in their political regimes and the degrees of willingness (or unwillingness) to integrate with the EU, which is causing the dysfunction of “conditionality approach”.

**Second**, the absence of an understanding and clear definitions of what the EU is trying to promote in its neighbourhood policy as “mutually shared” values and “joint ownership”. (At a recent briefing on the new neighbourhood policy, which was attended by the EU diplomats, I could not receive an explanation what is meant by these terms.)

**Third**, in building relations with third countries, the EU is practicing a vertical approach based on imposing standards and rules, as well as setting conditions, which contradicts the very idea of partnership. The contribution of neighbouring countries in the development of principles and rules of cooperation is minimal, while it is underscored in any ENP document that the entire “partnership” must be based exclusively on the values of the EU.

The previous adaptation of the ENP in 2011 could not solve these fundamental problems, even though the European Union once again declared its intention of achieving differentiation, flexibility in approaches, more involvement for the partner countries, and mutual responsibility, whatever it may mean.

So, in what ways does the renewed ENP propose solving these problems?

### **What is new about the new ENP?**

According to the communication, the renewed ENP aims to build a more effective cooperation; for achieving this, “the EU will pursue its interests which will include the promotion of universal values”. In the text, it is said that the EU's own stability is based on democracy, human rights, rule of law, and economic openness; therefore, the new ENP will consider stability through the lenses of the same categories. Consequently, it is erroneous to claim that the EU is moving away from democracy promotion in its neighbourhood policy.

At the same time, it is claimed that differentiation, more pronounced "mutual ownership" or mutual involvement will be a differentiating characteristic of the new ENP "recognizing that not all partners aspire to EU rules and standards", and therefore, "reflecting the wishes of each country concerning the nature and focus of its partnership with the EU"; however, what follows these quotes allows to gain some understanding of what they actually mean.

For instance, in the third part entitled "Stronger Neighbourhood, Stronger Partnership", it is declared that the EU's partners have various aspirations; therefore, the ENP should reflect the interests of the neighbouring countries in a better way and be more focused on a lesser number of priorities. The very such claim sounds innovative on behalf of the European Union. In the 2003-2004 documents, their authors did not presuppose that someone may not aspire to the integration with the EU and will not conduct "homework" reforms. Today, when Belarus and Armenia have joined the Eurasian Economic Union, and Azerbaijan is demanding a separate treaty on strategic partnership, the new reality is requiring the European Union to devise new approaches, going beyond the framework of traditional conditionality and orientation towards the promotion of values.

The communication proposes a rather modest response to this challenge: it says about new formats of relations in 2016, and that "the EU is ready to discuss the possibility to jointly set new partnership priorities, which would focus each relationship more clearly on commonly identified shared interests". This quote is extremely important for understanding the European Neighborhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership in particular. In other words, the European Union is not ready to take into account national interests of the neighbouring countries, it is not ready to define mutual interests; what it is actually ready to do is "to discuss the possibility to jointly set new partnership priorities". That is, judging by this phrase, "partnership", still frequently mentioned in the EU documents, does not assume such opportunity.

The proposal to sign more simplified and flexible trading agreements with those countries who are not ready for DCFTA (agreements on deep and comprehensive free trade areas) can also be viewed as part of differentiation, just like widening and deepening the spheres of cooperation with "champions" of European integration.

Acknowledging that the conditionality policy ("more for more") did not bring about reforms to those countries where there was no political will for conducting them, the European Union proposes "to explore more effective ways to make its case for fundamental reforms" through civil society organisations, economic and social actors. Independent mass media are supposed to be used as catalysts of changes in partner countries. This approach, however, contradicts the idea of developing mutual priorities for partnership together with the governments of the neighbouring countries and is unlikely to be met with enthusiasm in some capitals.

Moreover, the European Union is planning to repudiate the common set of country reports on progress within the ENP framework and prepare a new evaluation method based on how each neighbouring country is reaching its declared aims.

Regarding “mutual ownership”, it is not possible to understand what this term denotes in the text of the communication, although the latter points out that many of the surveyed interest groups have mentioned this priority and that the EU should pay more attention to this issue. As a conjecture, it is possible to assume the feeling of “mutual ownership” stemming from mutual development of priorities grounded on the overlapping interests of the neighbouring countries and the European Union. In this case, however, this term intersects with term of differentiation and does not bring more clarity.

The bulk of those measures presented as innovative in the document, including more profound cooperation with the neighbours of the neighbours (Russia and Turkey among them)<sup>5</sup>, assistance in economic reforms and modernization, aid for small and medium-sized enterprises, involvement of the EU member states, stabilisation of the neighbourhood, cooperation in the field of security, etc. had been already mentioned as priorities in the earlier ENP documents (in 2004 and 2011). Since they had not been realised in full, they were included in the updated version of the neighbourhood policy.

In general, the communication is a very general, framework document describing the directions and priority areas of the EU policy. It does not contain specific mechanisms and deadlines for the realisation of the set aims. As noted in the conclusion, in 2016, basing on this communication, the European Union is going to hold consultations with the partner countries regarding the further formats of relations. Therefore, we will learn more specific details about the contents of the new European Neighbourhood Policy only by the end of the next year. Meanwhile, the relations with the EU will be developing within the framework of the priorities that had been arranged earlier and according to the international and domestic political conditions of each neighbouring country.

### **The place of Belarus in the new neighbourhood policy**

I would like to remind that Belarus is not a fully-fledged member of the ENP and has not signed a Partnership Action Plan. This state of affairs resulted from the fact that the launch and development of the ENP coincided with the period of the worst relations between Minsk and Brussels. While the 2004 communication on the ENP had a separate section on Belarus, the 2011 document on adaptation mentions Belarus several times in various contexts, but the new edition of the neighbourhood policy does not mention our country at all, just like Armenia and Azerbaijan. It has been decided to keep silence about these examples of unsuccessful integration.

A reference to regional cooperation in the sixth part of the document allows to make judgments about the attitudes towards these countries: it says that the Eastern Partnership will be developing in the light of the priorities of the Riga Summit 2015, namely strengthening institutions and proper governance, mobility and humanitarian contacts, market opportunities and communication.

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<sup>5</sup> Russia and Turkey are geographic neighbours of the EU; nevertheless, they are not included in the European Neighbourhood Policy due to the different statuses of their relations with the EU. Thus, in the document, they are considered as the “neighbours of the neighbours”.

## Conclusions

- Despite the aims set in the communication document, the European Union could not overcome the fundamental controversies in its neighbourhood policy, specifically, to repudiate directive approaches and begin instead building true partnership based on mutual interests with the neighbouring countries, but not on the promotion of its own standards and norms.
- Democracy promotion remains to be the main priority of the ENP, even though some emphasis was put on the need to stabilise the neighbourhood region, which had resulted from the escalating conflicts and deteriorating economic situation along the EU's perimeter. However, Brussels considers democracy and human rights as the foundation for such stabilisation.
- The European Union declares the willingness to take into account the neighbour's interests and foster "mutual ownership", however, the realisation of these intentions are questionable since such claims were also mentioned in the 2011 documents on the adaptation of the ENP. Furthermore, the EU is ready to employ civil society, non-state mass media, and other actors for promoting democracy in the neighbouring countries disregarding the positions of their governments. Such an approach may cause even further alienation in the bilateral relations with the countries not aiming to close integration with the EU.
- Compared with the previous editions of the ENP, the current document is more realistic; it acknowledges several misfortunes in the neighbourhood policy and declares the willingness to more flexible approaches. In case of fruitful consultations with the neighbouring countries and bringing more specific contents to the neighbourhood policy, the regional cooperation may receive a new impulse.
- So far, Belarus has remained an outsider of the European Neighbourhood Policy. It is participating in this policy vicariously, through the Eastern Partnership. Belarus will be able to join the projects and tools of the ENP when its political relations with the European Union normalise.