



European Economic and Social Committee

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Review of the European
Neighbourhood Policy

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OPINION

of the
European Economic and Social Committee
on the

**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
JOIN(2015) 50-final

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On 18 November 2015 the European Commission decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 304 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, on the

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
JOIN(2015)50-final.

The Section for External Relations, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 19 April 2016.

At its 517th plenary session, held on 25 and 26 May 2016 (meeting of 25 May), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 162 votes to 15 with 21 abstentions.

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1. **Conclusions and recommendations**

- 1.1 The EESC welcomes the adoption by the High Representative and the European Commission of the Joint Communication on the Review of the European Neighbourhood Policy, and acknowledges that many of the proposals made by the EESC in the Opinion on the Joint Consultation Paper *Towards a new European neighbourhood policy*¹ are included in the review, which is an attempt to redefine the ENP in order to make it more effective.
- 1.2 The need to revise the ENP is, on the one hand, a result of the failure of the uniform "one size fits all" approach and, on the other, a consequence of ongoing fragmentation and decomposition of the relative uniformity of both the Southern and Eastern Neighbourhood.
- 1.3 The new ENP should acknowledge that the roots of the dramatic developments in those regions lie in both external pressure and internal instability, linked to poverty, inequality, lack of opportunities, corruption political and religious radicalisation as well as violent extremism.
- 1.4 The intention in revising the ENP is to make it flexible enough to keep on board those countries which are not able or not willing to meet all the requirements related to economic integration or alignment with the *acquis communautaire*. In this sense the new ENP is designed in a spirit of inclusiveness.

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EESC Opinion on the Joint Consultation Paper Towards a new European neighbourhood policy, EESC-2015-02442-00-03, 1 July 2015, rapporteur: Gintaras Morkis.

- 1.5 In order to limit the damage resulting from dramatic developments in the neighbourhood, the Communication sets a new priority of **stabilisation** and a new approach of **differentiation**.
- 1.6 The emphasis placed on stabilisation explains why the issue of internal and external security has such a prominent place in the communication. Nevertheless, although instruments at the disposal of the EU are limited, the present reactive attitude should be replaced by a proactive policy of dynamic diplomatic efforts aiming at conflict prevention and peaceful solution of frozen conflicts.
- 1.7 The EESC would like to stress the importance of economic development as the main precondition for a stable and safe environment in the EU's neighbourhood. The EU should be very consistent in providing economic support for the ENP partners and enhancing long-term conditions and motivation to pursue economic reforms, increase competitiveness and modernise business regulations.
- 1.8 It is also very clear that the economic development must be accompanied by its social and environmental dimensions, only these factors going together may effectively contribute to real progress, stability and social peace.
- 1.9 The EESC understands that the new working method of differentiation reflects the sense of political realism, growing gaps between partner countries and their different aspirations. However, even if not all the economic criteria can be met, the EU must not compromise on the matter of fundamental European values, including social dimension, respect for universal human rights, democracy and rule of law. It is regrettable that the principle of respect for the ILO labour standards is not mentioned in the communication as a cornerstone of sound industrial relations.
- 1.10 There is not enough emphasis on the role of organised civil society and autonomous social and civil dialogue. The objectives of the ENP, including stabilisation, will never be met without substantial involvement of independent organisations of civil society. We must never forget that the European integration is, above all, a peace project, and civil society is vitally interested in its success.
- 1.11 The Communication is silent on the existing deficit of social and civil dialogue as well as violation of right to association and freely organise in the ENP area.
- 1.12 The communication appears to be proposing a rather defensive approach of limiting the ENP's ambitions because of its shrinking potential. It is true that the EU has been confronted with disruptive, sometimes dramatic developments in both the Southern and Eastern Neighbourhood. However, lack of vision will not help overcome the deadlock. The EESC suggests defining a new, bold, dynamic ENP agenda, including the prospect of accession to the EU for some partner countries, especially in the East, which have such aspirations and are able and willing to meet the requirements.

1.13 The EESC welcomes the declaration that better communication and promoting EU policies will be at the heart of the new ENP in order to better explain the rationale of EU policies and the positive impact of concrete EU actions. However, it is equally important to limit the danger resulting from misinformation, disinformation and propaganda which are in conflict with the reality, EU values and ENP objectives.

1.14 It has to be stressed that the ENP in both the South and the East is undermined by external factors. Da'esh is trying to destabilise, among others, the Southern Neighbourhood through terror and war. Russia's diplomatic efforts and military action target the ENP directly, especially Eastern Partnership. Moreover, its military intervention in the South strengthens the authoritarian regime in Syria.

2. **The need for a new, revised ENP**

2.1 The EESC welcomes the Commission's review of the European Neighbourhood Policy, which aims to redefine its goals and general approach following dramatic developments in the EU's neighbourhood.

2.2 The EU's relations with its neighbourhood are based on Article 8(1) of the TEU, which states that the Union shall develop a special relationship with neighbouring countries, aiming to establish an area of prosperity and good neighbourliness, founded on the values of the Union and characterised by close and peaceful relations based on cooperation.

2.3 Originally, the goals of the ENP were quite ambitious and the general objective was to achieve the closest possible political association and the greatest possible degree of economic integration with the EU's southern and eastern neighbours.

2.4 One of the consequences of economic integration is potentially greater access to the EU's single market, which must go hand in hand with difficult political, economic and institutional reforms, as well as commitment to democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights.

2.5 However, since 2003–2004, when the ENP was designed, the neighbourhood has undergone dramatic changes and the original "one size fits all" principle has proved to be completely ineffective.

2.6 Since 2014, the Eastern Neighbourhood has been severely affected by the aggressive policy of the current Russian presidential administration and government, especially the war in Ukraine and (partly successful) manoeuvres to attract the EU's eastern neighbours to the Eurasian Economic Union dominated by Russia.

2.7 Acknowledging that each country has the right to its own political perspective, it should be noted that Russia's present administration wishes to develop its own neighbourhood policy, which is incompatible with the ENP, and wants to be considered as a global player and an entity of similar importance to the EU.

- 2.8 Although the EU's constructive cooperation with Russia could potentially be beneficial for both sides, it seems unlikely that in the foreseeable future it is possible to avoid the conflict of interest in the Eastern Neighbourhood, unless Russia changes its aggressive and subversive attitude. Recent developments in Syria are the evidence that this may apply also to Southern Neighbourhood.
- 2.9 In the Southern Neighbourhood, the war in Syria, conflicts in Libya, the emergence of Da'esh, controversial political developments in some countries of the region and other armed conflicts in the Middle East mean that the high hopes for peace and democratic transformation associated with the Arab Spring have been fading, at least with regard to the near future.
- 2.10 All these negative developments and growing gaps in many areas between different countries in both the Southern and Eastern Neighbourhood call for reprioritisation, a new approach, new working methods and more proactive and effective EU diplomacy. The communication is a response to these challenges.

3. **Stabilisation – a new priority**

- 3.1 The Commission accepted the EESC's views on the need to make stability, increased security, flexibility and differentiation, as well as greater mutual ownership, priorities of the revised ENP. The review identifies stabilisation as the most urgent challenge in many parts of the neighbourhood and therefore recommends that it be made the main political priority of the new ENP.
- 3.2 The EESC believes that this recommendation is well-founded, as recent developments provide evidence that the EU has only partially been able to foster stability, prosperity and security in the neighbourhood.
- 3.3 It is also very clear that threats to the neighbourhood's stability may not only represent major obstacles to the democratic transition and reform process called for by the EU, but also have a negative impact on countries which are successful in their ENP-driven transformation and on the EU itself.
- 3.4 Conflict prevention and conflict management should be substantially strengthened, especially as many frozen conflicts remain a serious threat to stability in both the Southern and Eastern Neighbourhood. In order to play a positive role in finding peaceful solutions, Europe should, on the one hand, remain impartial, and on the other hand, assist victims, the most vulnerable and threatened.
- 3.5 It is also quite evident that the instability is not only a result of external pressure, and the joint communication is right to identify a link between instability and poverty, inequality, lack of opportunities and corruption, which may all increase vulnerability to radicalisation. However,

the document is lacking a balance between the economic and social dimensions, underestimating the important role of welfare and social protection for stability.

4. **Differentiation**

- 4.1 The new ENP has been designed to reflect different aspirations, ambitions and interests of partner countries and the situation resulting from differing developments in particular countries of the EU's neighbourhood.
- 4.2 The joint communication declares that "the EU will continue to work with partner governments, civil society and citizens on human rights and democracy related issues". This statement is far from categorical, reflecting the new sense of political realism and readiness to water down the firm promotion of European values enshrined in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.
- 4.3 There is no mention, in the communication, of the ILO Conventions and Recommendations. However, respect for the ILO core labour standards is a bottom line which must not be crossed; this principle must not be weakened by the differentiation.
- 4.4 The communication states that "that different patterns of relations will emerge, allowing a greater sense of ownership by both sides. 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 signifies not only a change in the language but also abandoning a rather "normative approach" focusing on the transposition of European values in partner countries.
- 4.5 The change of strategy may be partly due to a desire to dispel the illusion that all peoples want to adopt EU democratic standards and only oppressive regimes prevent them from doing so. Nevertheless, the EESC represents the position that no compromise on universal human rights or democratic values may be envisaged.
- 4.6 It is also true that some partner countries expressed the opinion that the ENP was too prescriptive and did not sufficiently reflect partner countries' specificities and aspirations.
- 4.7 The incentive-based "more for more" approach has proved to be only partly efficient. It has not worked in countries where local elites resisted EU-driven transformation. Moreover, the "more for more" principle sometimes gave the impression of paying for respecting EU values. However, the only way to ensure that EU values are respected is to make people and communities believe in their universal significance and adopt them as theirs. It is not effective to buy values for projects. In this respect, the EESC appreciates the declaration that "the EU will explore more effective ways to make its case for fundamental reforms with partners, including through engagement with civil, economic and social actors".

- 4.8 Nevertheless, even taking into account the new differentiated approach, we must not let the "more for more" principle become "more for less" for the sake of the new paramount objective of stabilisation in the neighbourhood. The principle of conditionality in implementing the "tailor-made" policy within the ENP needs to be further developed.
- 4.9 It remains to be seen whether the new differentiation approach does not in practice mean a gradual dismantling of the ENP and smooth transition towards a purely bilateral approach.
- 4.10 It should be also stressed that the new "joint ownership", meaning less patronising and more genuine partnership, combined with the differentiation, must not lead to a pick and choose policy where partner countries can pick only such parts of the partnership which are convenient to their governments.
- 4.11 The differentiation will also affect the way in reporting about the progress made by partner countries. A new style of assessment will be developed focusing on specific goals agreed with partners. It is to be regretted that the present transparent way of preparing progress reports in similar format for all countries simultaneously will be replaced by a series of reports of different nature for different countries, in formats which still have to be determined.

5. **Role of organised civil society**

- 5.1 The communication does not pay enough attention to the role of organised civil society or to either social or civil dialogue. There is only a vague reference to the need for deeper engagement with civil society, including social partners, and to "expand outreach to relevant members of civil society in its broadest sense as well as social partners".
- 5.2 There is a clear deficit of civil and social dialogue in almost all countries, both in the Southern and Eastern Neighbourhood, although there are also countries such as Tunisia or Georgia where substantial progress in this respect has been made.
- 5.3 The communication is silent on violation of the right to association and to freely organise employers, workers or NGOs in the ENP area and lacks a vision of how to provide them with an enabling environment to engage in policy-formulation, programming, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of public authorities policies.
- 5.4 The communication puts emphasis on the reform of public administration and on delivering ENP partners' commitments to gender equality, but there is no mention of the role of civil society in this respect.
- 5.5 The EESC is committed to working with its partner organisations in the ENP countries with the clear objective of jointly monitoring the implementation of the ENP and observing the impact of the new differentiation approach.

6. **Migration and mobility**

- 6.1 Although the EU strategy and concrete action related to migration and mobility are not specific to the ENP, cooperation with partner countries in this respect is crucial.
- 6.2 Finding a solution to the ongoing refugee crisis must be part of a larger EU strategy, but efficient and effective implementation of the ENP migration and mobility agenda may be of great relevance to it.
- 6.3 The communication very rightly states that "addressing the root causes of irregular migration and forced displacement is central to stabilisation in the neighbourhood". However, this is not very coherent with the differentiation approach, which may mean a less ambitious attitude to condemning systematic violations of political, social and economic rights by some partner governments, even if this remains the main root cause of instability.
- 6.4 The EESC also points out that visa facilitation initiatives should be assessed as one of the most crucial instruments with regard to closer interaction with the ENP countries. The EESC firmly supports visa facilitation schemes and warns that dismantling the Schengen Area might put them at stake.
- 6.5 The EESC also supports the declaration included in the communication that "the EU will continue to foster a realistic and fair narrative on migration and to combat vigorously all forms and manifestations of racism and discrimination promoting intercultural dialogue, cultural diversity and mutual understanding".

7. **Economic development for stabilisation**

- 7.1 The EESC welcomes the efforts to strengthen competitiveness, support the economies of the ENP partners and improve prospects for the local population as the main precondition for a stable and safe environment in the EU's neighbourhood. All the neighbouring countries have economic problems; however, they are very different in nature, in terms of both their causes and their scale and impact on stability. Therefore, the aspect of differentiation for the future development of relations with neighbourhood countries is called for, among other things, by their economic and social differences. Reforms in public administration, judicial systems and the security sector, as well as fighting corruption and organised crime, are priority areas for further cooperation. Progress in all these areas is crucial for stability, but also safe and stable environment is necessary to achieve success.
- 7.2 The EESC appreciates the inclusion of the need to fully and effectively implement AA/DCFTA agreements which have already been signed, along with reforms in the ENP countries. However, in order to benefit from the DCFTA, partner countries have to undergo a difficult process of essential modernisation of production and services. The Communication is clear in this respect and declares the EU's support in capacity building to meet the challenges of the DCFTA.

- 7.3 The aim of completed free trade between the EU and ENP countries, striving for closer cooperation, should not be abandoned. The possibility of access to the EU market motivates neighbouring countries to pursue economic reforms and modernise production and businesses. However, even the DCFTA signatory countries have difficulties in modernising their economies due to the unstable political and economic situation, which does not encourage investment. Access to the EU and other international markets is directly related to the issues of employment and young people's prospects of being integrated into the labour market. Entrenchment of oligarchs and corruption obstruct economic reforms. The EU should apply more pressure and use all possible means to improve the situation so as to make it possible to attract investment capital into countries representing sound economic environment.
- 7.4 It is also clear that the implementation of the DCFTA will implicate great social challenges. Therefore, the involvement of all stakeholders in the process, especially social partners, is of crucial importance. Domestic advisory groups and civil society platforms can play a positive role in this respect and should be included in all aspects of implementation of the DCFTA
- 7.5 The EESC is pleased to note that the Communication genuinely gives the question of education and professional training (especially for young people) proper attention. It is likely that there will be increased support for primary and secondary education systems in the countries where this is most needed, and there will be increased possibility for the neighbourhood countries to participate in Erasmus + in terms of scale and funding; other measures will also be used for the development of skills of young people – thus making access to the labour market much easier.
- 7.6 The development of transport links with neighbourhood countries can further contribute to the strengthening of their economies. The provision that the EU should extend the major trans-European networks in the Eastern partner countries and, together with the international financial institutions and other partners, promote investment as well as develop benchmark Euro-Mediterranean transport network plans, should be most welcomed. These plans are also very important for organisations of civil society who should be actively involved in their implementation.
- 7.7 The EU is dependent on neighbour countries in terms of energy supply. Therefore, joint energy projects are mutually important and necessary for both parties. The issues of energy saving and energy efficiency and reduction of emissions and projects in the area of renewable energy are especially relevant. The joint communication rightly stresses the need to strengthen EU's energy dialogue with neighbourhood countries in the field of energy security, energy market reforms and the promotion of sustainable energy economy with the aim of building a resilient Energy Union with an ambitious climate policy at its core.
- 7.8 The EESC welcomes the declaration that "agriculture is a major source of jobs in many partner countries and the EU should continue to support sustainable and inclusive policies and

investment in modernisation of the sector, and diversification to other income creating activities in rural areas where necessary". It should be stressed however, that the harmonisation in the area of agriculture and food production, as a consequence of the implementation of the DCFTA, must not result in lower quality of agricultural products or decrease of labour standards.

8. The security dimension

- 8.1 The EESC welcomes strong emphasis on the security dimension in the Joint Communication. Strengthening partners' resilience to external and internal threats, as well as promoting modernisation for long-term economic and social stability, is of key importance.
- 8.2 The EESC supports the priorities listed under ENP security, placing fundamental importance on fighting terrorism, preventing radicalisation and organised crime, disrupting corruption and fighting cybercrime. These priorities could be underlined as constituting the core task of increasing security in both the ENP and the EU itself.
- 8.3 It should be stressed, however, that not only terrorist or criminal organisations represent a threat to stability of the ENP countries, but also certain governments which break international law and provoke conflicts and crises in the ENP region.
- 8.4 The EESC welcomes the initiative to give fresh impetus to cooperation on matters related to the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), pointing out in particular the possibility of using CSDP missions and operations, EU Battlegroups when necessary, in practical implementation of shared responsibility and security interests. However, the CSDP instruments and diplomatic efforts should be used not only as a response to crises, but also as a political tool for crisis prevention. The EU should emphasise the need for greater involvement in conflict prevention and diplomatic mediation between potentially conflicting countries or non-government actors.

9. Regional dimension

- 9.1 The EESC welcomes the Joint Communication's position of preserving the existing principal regional cooperation formats – strengthening of the Eastern Partnership programme and regional cooperation in the Southern Neighbourhood. However, it should be stressed that, within existing regional frameworks, significant discrepancies and diversities have evolved during last several years. It might be encouraging to propose a clearer distinction between the ENP partners, between those who have already achieved a higher level of integration with the EU (through association agreements and deep and comprehensive free trade areas – AA/DCFTA) or intend to do so, and the remaining countries.
- 9.2 It remains unclear how the new ENP will promote further closer cooperation with those partner countries which are successful in AA/DCFTA implementation and have European aspirations. The EESC reiterates its opinion that a clear European perspective of accession

should be offered to some countries in the Eastern Neighbourhood . This would mobilise and motivate not only their governments in efforts to transform their countries and align their legislation with the *acquis communautaire*, but also encourage organised civil society to contribute to these efforts. This would also bring European values and identity closer to the citizens of partner countries.

9.3 The EESC supports the idea of thematic frameworks, which should promote the general movement towards more tailor-made initiatives and projects for interested parties from the Southern and Eastern Neighbourhood. However, the proposed idea seems to be just too broad and lacking a clear aim. Forums for discussions on such issues as migration, energy and security are the very first step towards deeper cooperation on the aforementioned challenges. The EU should be clearer about the specific outcomes it wants to achieve in using these thematic frameworks.

9.4 It should be taken into account that some neighbours of neighbours (particularly Russia) were invited to participate in the ENP, but have never taken up this opportunity. Therefore, the thematic platforms should be used exclusively for specific purpose-oriented objectives and not to provide opportunities for third party actors to promote their objectives at the expense of ENP principles. The format of cooperation with "neighbours of neighbours", as described in the Communication, is far from being well defined, therefore, any case of such cooperation must be closely monitored so as to make sure it is not abused by any third party to undermine the interest of partner countries, the EU or the ENP itself. Involvement and cooperation with other actors beyond the neighbourhood (or neighbours of neighbours) should be based on a goodwill and sovereign decision of the ENP partners to include new actors in their cooperation with the EU.

10. **Flexibility of financial instruments**

10.1 The EESC welcomes the initiative to "leverage considerable additional funding by further enhancing its cooperation with major International Financial Institutions and through the Neighbourhood Investment Facility (NIF)" and the mid-term review of EU external financial instruments in 2017. It should be clearly stressed that increased needs and challenges in the EU neighbourhood require not only more effective redistribution of aligned EUR 15 billion through the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) over the period 2014-2020, but also substantial additional resources.

10.2 The EESC supports the proposals to use a "flexibility cushion" within the ENI for urgent allocation of resources for unforeseen needs and to adapt financial regulations so that unused funds can be carried forward to the following year.

10.3 However, we think that the primary focus of the ENP should be on improving the existing financial instruments instead of emphasising new financial structures or "trust Funds". Closer cooperation between Member States and partner countries should result in greater transparency of expenditure and accountability. This will include the ability to react faster to

the changing political and security situation on the ground, redirecting funds where necessary. The EU should also adopt a clear approach in cases where partners do not choose closer integration, creating incentives for respect for fundamental values and further key reforms.

10.4 The EU and the Member States should explore opportunities to expand joint programming in the ENP. Enhanced transparency of programming and reporting on results must be made available to Member States and other stakeholders. Civil society organisations can play an important role in this respect.

11. **Visibility, communication and outreach**

11.1 The EESC welcomes the determination to increase the visibility of EU policies and promote more effective communication of the new ENP. The Communication very rightly points out that "improved public diplomacy will contribute to better explaining the rationale of EU policies and the positive impact of concrete EU actions". It is equally important not to ignore the damage resulting from misinformation, disinformation and propaganda, which are in conflict with EU values and the principles of the ENP.

11.2 The EU should find proper instruments and sources to deal with communication challenges in the ENP partner countries and within the EU. The EU East Stratcom Task Force established by the EEAS is just the very first step in increasing awareness among the EU and ENP partners' citizens of hostile and disruptive discourses in public communication. The EEAS should not step aside from commitments to strengthen EU strategic communication much further.

11.3 Migration challenges both in the ENP region and within the EU should be given the highest priority in terms of strategic communication and public diplomacy. The EU and its Member States should acknowledge that miscommunication on migration and refugee policy may do a lot of damage to the coherence of the Member States and ENP partners' trust, and even to the stability of the EU.

Brussels, 25 May 2016.

The President
of the
European Economic and Social Committee

Georges Dassis
