



European Economic and Social Committee

REX/447
Towards a new European
neighbourhood policy

Brussels, 1 July 2015

OPINION

of the
European Economic and Social Committee
on
Towards a new European neighbourhood policy
(JOIN(2015) 6 final)

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On 10 June 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

Towards a new European neighbourhood policy
(JOIN(2015) 6 final).

The Section for External Relations, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 11 June 2015.

At its 509th plenary session, held on 1-2 July 2015 (meeting of 1 July 2015), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 108 votes to 1 with 2 abstentions.

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1. **Conclusions and recommendations**

- 1.1 The European Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS) have initiated a public discussion on the new European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) welcomes this re-examination of the ENP and considers it to be a timely, crucially important review.
- 1.2 The EESC notes that the current ENP does not reflect reality in the EU's neighbourhood and it has faced a lot of challenges, which were not properly addressed. Fundamental changes to the ENP mechanism and instruments are needed.
- 1.3 The ENP countries have differing foreign policy priorities and ambitions for their relationship with the EU. The EESC therefore stresses the need to apply the principles of differentiation and flexibility. The EESC notes that the southern and eastern geographical scope of the ENP should be maintained, but that policies concerning relationships should be developed and improved. Some current ENP countries should be seen as genuine partners of the EU, others as neighbours. At the same time, the EESC emphasises that the acceptance of democratic values and respect for human rights should be applicable to all states, as applying double standards would demoralise other ENP countries.
- 1.4 In its Joint Consultation Paper *Towards a new Neighbourhood Policy*, the European Commission raised many questions. However, in this opinion the EESC will focus on the most important of them: civil society's positions, both the EU and partner states.
- 1.5 The EESC welcomes the recent consultations with Southern partners held in Barcelona, the Informal Ministerial Meeting on the future of ENP (Barcelona, 13 April 2015) – where

participants reaffirmed their intention to work together to create an area of prosperity and good neighbourliness in the Mediterranean – and the Joint Declaration of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) Summit (Riga, 21-22 May 2015) – where participants renewed their commitment to further strengthening democracy, the rule of law, human rights and fundamental freedoms, as well as to upholding the principles and norms of international law. It is important that the EU remains committed to supporting the territorial integrity, as well as the independence and sovereignty of all its partners.

- 1.6 The EESC suggests that the new ENP should focus on activities that strive to increase human security and the stability of the EU's neighbourhood, as well as activities which create better economic and social conditions – and prosperity – in the ENP partner states. The main objective of the renewed ENP should be to ensure the security of the people and to secure their prospect of leading a dignified and prosperous life in their country, free of violence, oppression and poverty. The ENP should actively engage in confidence-building measures and post-conflict action.
- 1.7 The EESC emphasises that better employment, a sustainable and openly-functioning economy, attracting foreign investment, effective and accessible public services and social protection provide a basis for stability, security and even democratisation. Alongside the two major initiatives which contain the main drivers for further integrating ENP countries with the EU, namely trade liberalisation (which mainly consists of Association Agreements – AA and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas – DCFTAs) and mobility and visa facilitation (or visa liberalisation for some countries), the EESC sees education and professional training (especially for young people) as the third initiative of major importance within the new ENP.
- 1.8 The EESC suggests that the ENP must not dissociate from the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). At the same time, while assessing the interests and reactions of stakeholders beyond the ENP area, the EU should stand firm, ensuring that no one can impose its will on independent states, nor dictate the agenda or objectives of the EU and the ENP countries.
- 1.9 The EU should work more closely with other international organisations, such as NATO and the UN, to defend the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of all ENP countries. Better diplomacy and communication outside the ENP area (especially with civil society) is needed as a confrontation-prevention instrument and in order to generate mutually beneficial relations that lead to economic progress and improved living standards.
- 1.10 The EESC calls for the management of mobility and migration by promoting the solidarity of Member States, as a part of EU's global approach. Partnerships with ENP and other countries are important tools for addressing the significant challenges that this policy faces. The EU should act swiftly and in a coordinated manner to solve the humanitarian situation in the Mediterranean.

- 1.11 The EESC stresses that visa facilitation and liberalisation remains a key initiative from the ENP partners' point of view. The EESC welcomes negotiations on a Readmission Agreement with Morocco and the start of negotiations on a Visa Facilitation Agreement. It is looking forward to negotiations on Visa Facilitation and Readmission Agreements with Tunisia and Jordan. Visa liberalisation (with Moldova) and Visa Facilitation Agreements, (with Ukraine, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia) should be fully implemented and should become successful examples for all ENP countries.
- 1.12 The EESC suggests that civil society's role be further enhanced in three main ways: by empowering civil society, rendering it better able to support stabilisation and democratisation processes; including civil society organisations more in ENP related commitments and activities and finally, making better use of European civil society's expertise and resources to support the development of civil society in the ENP countries.
- 1.13 The EESC calls for compliance with fundamental human and social rights – in particular, freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining – to be fully recognised. Social dialogue should also be encouraged in both the eastern and southern dimensions of the ENP. The EESC calls for the independence of the social partners and civil society organisations (CSOs) to be respected.
- 1.14 The EESC emphasises that it is important to encourage cultural (as well as economic and political) institutions for dialogue and consensus building. In the EESC's view, stabilisation and democratisation in the ENP countries depends on the viability of cultural and religious models, which should be tolerant and inclusive.
- 1.15 The EESC suggests that the EU send a clear signal to ENP citizens, indicating that the policy is for their people, their security and their welfare. Co-ownership at civil society level should become a priority throughout the whole EU. A review of the ENP must encourage better communication on EU interests and values, both within the EU and in the partner countries.

2. **The Challenges for ENP**

- 2.1 The EU needs cooperative neighbours to feel secure and prosperous itself. The ENP ambitiously aimed to encourage neighbouring countries to implement political and economic reforms, in exchange for receiving access to EU markets, greater mobility and financial support. Heightened security challenges and geopolitical shocks in the EU's neighbourhood further emphasised the importance of a stable, democratic and prosperous neighbourhood area.
- 2.2 Dramatic changes in the EU neighbourhood also pose a threat to EU countries. The implementation of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) provoked Russia's aggressive policy not only towards the EU's neighbours, but also towards EU Member States — particularly the Nordic and Central and Eastern European countries. Violent conflicts in Syria, Iraq, and

Libya have led to a humanitarian crisis and terrorism risks that may also spill over into the EU.

- 2.3 The EU must recognise its role and influence on ENP countries and their neighbours – which contributed to political and social disturbances and galvanised the interest of certain stakeholders beyond the borders of the ENP countries. The Arab Spring and its consequences and the Ukrainian crisis should be seen as proof that the EU has a significant impact on social and political processes. The EU has contributed to people's awareness and has increased their aspirations with regard to their governments; the EU, at least in part, has woken the civil powers which initiate political activities.
- 2.4 At the same time, the ENP has had some disappointments, both in the EU and the ENP countries. Therefore, fundamental changes are needed to revise the ENP and its instruments, which should be based on the principles of differentiation and flexibility. The southern and eastern geographical scope of the ENP should be maintained, but policies on relationships should be developed and improved. The ENP should encourage all neighbouring countries to become real partners for dialogue and cooperation.

3. **Principal Pillars of the New ENP**

3.1 **Economy and prosperity**

- 3.1.1 The EESC notes that improving relations between the EU and ENP countries will depend on four conditions: stability, transparency, free market rules and a long-term strategy. The revised ENP should concentrate on creating conditions for sustainable economic and social developments in the ENP countries. Better employment and an openly-functioning economy create high added value for society as a whole, thereby providing a basis for stability, security and even democratisation. The EU should focus more on better-financed instruments that provide support for: the economic adjustments that will be necessary to enhance competitiveness, initiatives for sustainable business investment and the adjustments to economic production which aim to generate higher quality employment. Special attention should be paid to the economic empowerment of young people, women and marginalised groups. Economic growth and employment initiatives must receive adequate funding and be accompanied by tailor-made programmes. The implementation of such programmes could draw on good practices from the Initiative for Social Cohesion programme relating to the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe¹.
- 3.1.2 Education and professional training would be the best long-term investment in economic growth and sustainable security. The EU should consider opportunities to extend the Erasmus+ programmes to allow ENP countries to increase their participation. These

¹ EESC opinion on Social dialogue in the Eastern Partnership countries [OJ C 161, 6.6.2013, p. 40](#).

programmes provide the best mechanism for sharing EU academic and professional skills with the most advanced ENP partners. The EESC welcomes the first Erasmus+ international call launched in October 2014 and encourages the EU to extend opportunities for the ENP countries to take part, in addition to increasing financing for other educational and professional training instruments.

- 3.1.3 The EU should strive to complete a free trade area between the EU and all ENP countries. This can be considered a critical instrument for enhancing lasting economic and social prosperity. The EU should seek to integrate the ENP partners into the EU single market more actively; in particular by establishing DCFTAs as soon as the necessary conditions are met. ENP countries which prioritise further integration may focus on the AA/DCFTA signing process, while others could engage into alternative cooperation platforms (such as the European Energy Union, etc.). However, AAs/DCFTAs should not be viewed as an end in themselves, or as the only path available. Their value should be assessed in terms of their positive impact on sustainable economic development, innovation, stable employment and enhanced fiscal capacity in ENP countries.
- 3.1.4 The EESC welcomes the launch of the EU DCFTA Facility for SMEs, which is dedicated to supporting SMEs from Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, helping them to seize new trade opportunities arising from DCFTAs and reach higher quality standards in line with EU best practices. The 3rd EaP Business Forum (Riga, 21 May 2015) stressed that in order to benefit substantially from the AAs /DCFTAs, additional instruments to help businesses transform and adapt to higher standards should be provided. It also suggested that entrepreneurial activities and trade should be better promoted in the region.
- 3.1.5 The new ENP should make supporting reform of the public administration, justice, the security sector, legal regulation and effective implementation of legislation one of its most visible activities. Positive trends, such as increasing investment in ENP countries and enhancing cooperation between EU and ENP businesses, can only be generated by making visible progress in the fight against corruption and organised crime in the EU's neighbourhood. All EU neighbouring countries are faced with widespread corruption. Despite efforts to curb it, it persists and penetrates all layers of public and private life. The EU should, therefore as part of its financing programmes improve the conditionality for credible anti-corruption measures and develop a robust mechanism to monitor implementation. Equal attention should be paid to enhancing the effectiveness, viability and accessibility of social, education and health services in ENP countries, as these are of vital importance to the quality of life and safety of people living in these countries.

3.2 **Stability and security**

- 3.2.1 Stability and human security should become the most critical ENP objective. The EESC believes that a safe and prosperous neighbourhood can be established only if human security in the region significantly increases. Quality of governance and respect for human rights, the

absence of crime and physical danger, inclusive economic development and social and environmental protection are all factors that determine the stability of the region in the medium- to long-term. Instability in the EU Neighbourhood and the lack of credibility that the ENP model and its instruments suffer from should not lead to a decline in ambition or a refusal of the EU's commitments. Programmes and instruments for stability and conflict prevention should be among the new ENP's highest priorities.

- 3.2.2 The EU should work more closely with other international organisations, such as NATO and the UN, to defend the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of all ENP countries. Better diplomacy and communication outside the ENP area (especially with civil society) is needed as a confrontation-prevention instrument and in order to generate mutually beneficial relations that lead to economic progress and improved living standards.
- 3.2.3 The ENP has a fundamental role to play in preventing radicalisation and fighting terrorism and organised crime. In addition to taking necessary and proportional measures to combat terrorism, the EU must use existing ENP instruments to address the structural determinants of its spread. Investment in education and economic opportunities is needed, together with measures to improve governance².
- 3.2.4 The new ENP should refer to harmonising "hard" and "soft" powers. The ENP must not be dissociated from the common foreign and security policy (CFSP) and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). The current review of the ENP should be closely linked to the revised EU Security Strategy.
- 3.2.5 The issue of "neighbours of neighbours" is of the utmost importance. No one can impose its will on independent states, nor dictate the agenda or objectives of the EU and the ENP countries. The EESC stresses that it would be more beneficial for Russia to get involved in efforts to create stable, democratic and economically advanced countries, rather than to confront the ENP countries that are pursuing further integration with the EU.

3.3 **Mobility and migration**

- 3.3.1 Visa facilitation remains a key initiative from the ENP partners' point of view. The EESC welcomes negotiations on a Readmission Agreement with Morocco (launched in January 2015) and the start of negotiations on a Visa Facilitation Agreement. It is looking forward to negotiations on Visa Facilitation and Readmission Agreements with Tunisia and Jordan. Visa liberalisation (with Moldova) and Visa Facilitation Agreements, (with Ukraine, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia) should be fully implemented and should become a successful example for all ENP countries. The EESC sees visa liberalisation agreements with Ukraine and Georgia as a powerful tool, which encourages those states to integrate with EU more

² [OJ C 218, 23.7.2011, p. 91.](#)

quickly. However their implementation should be accompanied by increased international support, to secure territorial integrity and control of the countries' borders.

- 3.3.2 EU Neighbourhood Policy should be part of the Global Approach to Migration and Mobility. It is important that the EU stimulates immigration for the purposes of employment or education, via legal, flexible and transparent procedures³.
- 3.3.3 In response to the recent events which lead to a surge in migratory flows from Northern Africa – flows which tragically resulted in a significant numbers of deaths – the EU should move urgently to protect the lives of those who intend to reach EU territory. The EU should commit to a more serious and far-reaching involvement with countries involved in these migratory flows – countries of origin and transit.
- 3.3.4 The EU should conclude agreements with third countries, especially neighbouring countries, immigrants' countries of origin and transit countries, taking into consideration the specific circumstances in each country. Priorities set out in these mobility partnerships incorporate factors relating to economic migration and mobility. Greater priority should be given to organising legal migration and visa policy, the recognition of qualifications, educational mobility, social security rights, and migration and mobility's contribution to development⁴. A reform of Frontex is a priority, transforming it into European body of border guards that supports Member States, and developing a more effective and standardised system of accountability for its activities⁵.

3.4 **Differentiation**

- 3.4.1 The ENP should be re-formulated in order to apply the principle of differentiation more flexibly, both in terms of geography and – within the regions – in accordance with the aspirations of the ENP countries, civil liberties and human rights, institutional capacity and security needs. While supporting the differentiation principle, all the partner countries should commit to adhering to the fundamental rights and the rule of law. The acceptance of democratic values and respect for human rights should be applicable to all states equally, as applying double standards would demoralise other ENP countries.
- 3.4.2 The EU remains interested in and committed to the principle of conditionality. The EESC emphasised the principles of differentiation and conditionality in its relations with partner countries⁶. At the same time, the Committee expressed its desire to ensure that a "less for less" approach would not undermine a country's potential to implement reforms at its own

³ [OJ C 458, 19.12.2014, p. 7.](#)

⁴ [OJ C 451, 16.12.2014, p. 1.](#)

⁵ [OJ C 458, 19.12.2014, p. 7.](#)

⁶ [OJ C 43, 15.2.2012, p. 89.](#)

preferred pace and in accordance with its absorption capacity. When national governments in ENP countries refrain from closer involvement with ENP instruments, EU "soft power" should be directed towards civil society.

- 3.4.3 The ENP is distinct from the Enlargement Policy; however, European states are free to apply for the EU membership if they satisfy the criteria and conditions of admission under Article 49 of Treaty on the Functioning of the EU. If the ENP inspires a European country to comply with the Copenhagen criteria, we should welcome such a result – gained through the “more for more” approach.

4. **Focus on Civil Society and Communication**

4.1 **Civil Society**

- 4.1.1 The role of civil society in developing the ENP should be re-evaluated and further enhanced. The Committee has named civil society's activities; the state of human rights; economic, social and cultural rights and the protection of religious freedom as the essential criteria for assessing a country's governance⁷. Co-ownership at civil society level should become a priority throughout the whole EU. Cooperation instruments such as the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP Civil Society Forum) should be strengthened and extended.

- 4.1.2 There are three main directions that the reform should take, namely: empowering civil society, thereby rendering it better able to support stabilisation and democratisation processes; including civil society organisations more in ENP related commitments and actions and finally, making better use of expertise and resources that European civil society can offer to support the development of civil society in the ENP countries.

- 4.1.3 As demonstrated during the transition to democracy in Central and Eastern European, civil society is a key player in the process of creating stability and democratisation. Using its instruments, the ENP should allocate significant resources to improving the civil society's organisational capacity and including it in governmental processes⁸. A key aspect of this is to support social dialogue and institutionalised public consultation, as they are instruments which facilitate consensus building and democratic progress⁹.

- 4.1.4 The EU should include clauses on the protection of democratic freedoms and individual rights in bilateral agreements, but crucially, with regard to their implementation, the EESC calls for the criteria for assessing a country's governance to include benchmarks on the treatment of

⁷ [OJ C 43, 15.2.2012, p. 89.](#)

⁸ See also [OJ C 351, 15.11.2012, p. 27.](#)

⁹ See also [OJ C 248, 25.8.2011, p. 37.](#)

civil society (legislative framework, capacity building, dialogue etc.), human rights and economic, social and cultural rights¹⁰.

4.1.5 The EESC calls for civil society to be more closely involved in drafting, implementing and monitoring the agreements between the EU and the ENP countries¹¹. ENP Progress reporting should not only reflect official government data and positions but should factor in wider contributions from governmental and non-governmental actors. The EESC believes that civil society from both the EU and partner countries should be involved in drawing up a Sustainability Impact Assessment prior to the negotiations, and that civil society mechanisms should be included in the future DCFTAs¹².

4.1.6 The ENP instruments should be easily accessible to civil society organisations in the member and ENP states. They should encourage dialogue, commitment and an exchange of ideas. The EESC underlines that the social partners, civil society organisations and the Economic and Social Councils of the Member States have a vital role to play in terms of sharing experiences and knowledge, disseminating information, benchmarking, transferring expertise, and managing administrative resources¹³.

4.2 Social dialogue

4.2.1 The EESC has constantly stressed the importance of social dialogue for promoting economic development and democratisation. It has also highlighted the general success of the ENP¹⁴. Social dialogue should be encouraged equally in both the eastern and southern dimensions of the ENP. The EESC calls for respect for the independence of social partners and civil society organisations (CSOs). This is one of the fundamental human and social rights defined by international and European organisations¹⁵.

4.2.2 The EESC calls adherence to these fundamental rights – in particular, freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining – to be fully recognised. It calls on the countries concerned to make the necessary effort to move towards integrating European and international norms, defined by the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, the European Social Charter (Council of Europe) and the International Labour Organisation

10 [OJ C 376, 22.12.2011, p. 32.](#)

11 See also [OJ C 299, 4.10.2012, p. 34](#) and [OJ C 12, 15.1.2015, p. 48.](#)

12 See also [OJ C 248, 25.8.2011, p. 37.](#)

13 [OJ C 376, 22.12.2011, p. 32.](#)

14 See: EESC opinion on Involvement of civil society in the Eastern Partnership, [OJ C 277, 17.11.2009 p. 30.](#); [OJ C 248, 25.8.2011, p. 37.](#)

15 EESC opinion on Social dialogue in the Eastern Partnership countries, [OJ C 161, 6.6.2013, p. 40.](#)

(ILO) and establishing the "social rule of law". Compliance with these norms must be included in the formal criteria used to draw up and evaluate association agreements¹⁶.

4.2.3 Despite the fact that employers' and workers' organisations exist in all ENP countries, social dialogue – which has to play an important role if sustainable growth and social peace within society is to be achieved – has so far been rather weak in these countries. A systematic programme should be developed, with the aim of promoting exchanges of best practice drawn from experience in the area of social and employment policy, in the EU and the partner countries

4.3 **Cultural dialogue**

4.3.1 The ENP should encourage greater understanding – both between ENP countries and between the EU and ENP countries – of each other's cultures, religious dialogue and cultural diversity. In the long term creating stability and democratisation in the ENP countries also depends on the viability of cultural and religious models and how tolerant and inclusive they are.

4.3.2 It is important to encourage cultural – as well as political and economic – dialogue and consensus building. This should translate into effective, substantial financial and networking support for inter-cultural dialogue, independent cultural production and public debates. It should enhance the voice and visibility of independent thinkers, artists and activists from ENP countries and promote their productive interactions with domestic and European audiences.

4.4 **Visibility and communication**

4.4.1 A review of the ENP must serve as a stimulus to improve communication on EU interests and values, both within the EU and in the partner countries. This becomes particularly important when a wave of propaganda from terrorist groups and Russia is rising¹⁷. The EU is obliged to send a clear signal to the ENP citizens that this policy is concerned with people, their security and welfare. This will require the creation of new instruments which can reach local authorities, the media, and NGOs.

4.4.2 General awareness is essential in order to evaluate and appreciate the ENP influence for people's needs. Freedom of expression, beliefs, media, and information security in the EU's neighbourhood is of a critical importance. Supporting people's access to internet, free and independent media, investigative journalism, and media cooperation initiatives (media twinning) between the EU and ENP countries should become one of the most important objectives in order to strengthen society's resilience to aggressive propaganda.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ See: EESC information report on REX/432 How media is used to influence social and political processes in the EU and Eastern neighbouring countries,(not yet published in the Official Journal).

Brussels, 1 July 2015

The President
of the
European Economic and Social Committee

Henri Malosse
