

STRENGTHENING THE EU NEIGHBOURHOOD POLICY

On 3rd of September 2007 the foreign ministers and senior officials from the twenty-seven EU member states and the sixteen eastern and southern neighbours met for their first conference in Brussels since the launching of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) in 2004. (http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/conferences_2007_en.htm)

During the high level meeting the EU reiterated its commitment to enhance political, economic and socio-economic relations with its neighbours. EU Commissioner for external relations Benita Ferrero-Waldner identified the specific areas of economic integration, mobility and energy as sectors where closer ties should be established. Commissioner Ferrero-Waldner also invited participating representatives of civil society and business, journalists, academics and government officials to share their thinking with the EU Commission on the best way forward when it comes to mapping out the individual paths of relationships between the EU and the different countries.

EU Commission President, José Manuel Barroso, underlined the fact that the fundamental principle of the ENP is differentiation. The greater the individual neighbours are committed to reform, the more the EU will be prepared to offer in terms of both assistance to achieve these goals and opportunities to expand and deepen relations.

Since 1995 the EU has been implementing the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), which despite modest results, has succeeded in achieving closer political, economic and cultural ties between Europe and the Mediterranean countries of North Africa and the Mashreq. More recently the EU launched the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) which complements the EMP and offers participating EU neighbours from the Mediterranean and Eastern Europe direct access to the EU's single market.

The nature and intensity of future EU relations with its neighbours will depend on the progress the new neighbours would make in critical areas like rule of law, respect of fundamental human rights, multiparty systems, free elections and market economy.

Following the EU enlargements of 2004 and 2007, the EU finds itself seeking to nurture closer relations with a diverse grouping of countries that now share its borders. First, the EU is seeking to complete the unfinished business in the Western Balkans resulting from the implosion of Yugoslavia. Here the final goal is fixed: full-fledged membership for all successor states, plus Albania. The accession process will be staggered over some 10 years, starting with Croatia. But accession fatigue within the Union will not facilitate matters.

Second, through the EMP and the ENP the EU is pursuing its neighbourhood policy towards the countries on the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean. None of these countries is eligible for EU membership. They have no other option but to knit close economic and political links with the EU.

Third, the EU has to shape its future relations with its new Eastern neighbours: Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. It was essentially with these seven very diverse grouping of countries in mind that the EU

has launched its ENP. The ten Euro-Mediterranean partnership states were integrated into the ENP afterwards.

Looking at the diversity of conditions and the wide geographic spread of the EU neighbours one has to admire the courage of EU policy makers to design a single set of policy with similar objectives, tools and methodology. Procedurally, the EU negotiates with neighbouring governments a package of legislative and administrative acts that neighbour countries agree to implement in a period of three to five years. The EU and the neighbour country lay down the results of these negotiations in «Action Plans» whose implementation is subject to joint monitoring.

These Action Plans are ambitious documents. The most recent one negotiated with Egypt contains no less than 18 priorities ranging from political dialogue to energy, poverty reduction, south-south trade, migration and organised crime. In order to tackle these priorities, it lists no less than 300 specific activities to be undertaken by Egypt and/or the EU.

Through the ENP the EU is offering its neighbours a set of – mostly tailor-made - incentives in return for the modernisation programme in which they engage. Among these the most attractive seem to be the following four:

First, the EU has earmarked a significant amount of financial support amounting to € 12 billion in its Financial Perspectives 2007-13 for all neighbour countries that engage in ENP programmes. In addition, the EIB has promised to set aside an amount of €15 billion long-term loans.

Second, the EU has expressed its willingness to open certain aspects of its single market to its neighbours, essentially through mutual free trade and alignment on EU technical standards. The EU offer does not include free access to its labour market, which for most of its developing neighbours would constitute by far the most attractive part of the single market.

Third, the EU is offering participation in EU scientific and educational programmes and fourth, the EU is inviting neighbours to participate in policy dialogue meetings. This constitutes probably the most attractive aspect for most neighbouring countries. It is non-committal, but allows them to widen their horizon by learning from EU experience how to handle sensitive policy issues and reforms.

The ENP is therefore a long-term initiative. There are not quick fixes to sustainable reforms. The EU will have to invest a lot more in terms of human resources if implementation of the ENP is to be successful. Implementation of action plans requires a huge effort for every government, in terms of planning, logistics, persuasion, finance and legislation. The EU should stand ready to assist its neighbours, as it has successfully done with the accession countries.

Professor Stephen C. Calleya
International Relations Analyst