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The 2015 European Neighbourhood Policy Review: more realism, less ambition

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The Current Column

of 26 November 2015

The 2015 European Neighbourhood Policy Review: more realism, less ambition

Bonn, 26 November 2015. The European Commission released its latest review of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) on 18 November 2015. The revised ENP is more focused than earlier versions, which were heavily premised on the idea that neighbouring countries should transform themselves into liberal democracies in the EU's image. The EU has retreated from proposing models for its neighbours, instead concentrating on cooperation in areas where there are concrete interests on both sides. The result is that European interests, especially regional stability, security and controlled migration, are outlined much more explicitly than before. Mutual interests in trade, investment and energy cooperation are also highly prominent, as they have been since the beginning of the ENP.

The review raises new expectations for EU engagement in the Middle East and North Africa. Disappointment with the results of the last review, which was conducted shortly before the 2011 Arab Spring, was a major factor in prompting the new European Commission of president Jean Claude Juncker, High Representative Federica Mogherini, and Neighbourhood Commissioner Johannes Hahn, to ask fundamental questions about the policy framework, its objectives and the instruments the EU uses in its relations with neighbouring countries. The publication of the 2015 review follows an extensive consultation process. The Commission received more than 250 written submissions and it canvassed both government and non-governmental stakeholders behind the scenes.

EU officials say that neighbouring countries wanted the ENP to be more focused, more flexible, less bureaucratic, and more 'political.' The Commission says that it has listened to what has been told: that the EU should stop telling neighbouring countries what to do, that there should be one policy framework which combines the EU's foreign and security policy, development aid, migration policy and justice and home affairs, and that there needs to be more money on the table.

The ENP review is certainly presented in a less hectoring tone than its predecessors. The ENP's main problem is that it was based on the EU's enlargement model, which successfully transformed eight former communist Eastern European countries before the EU's 'big bang' enlargement in 2004. The original ENP was designed by the same officials who worked on enlargement policy and it was unsurprisingly similar in terms of its language, emphasis on values, and attempted use of conditionality and socialisation to incentivise the reforms the EU considered desirable. That EU membership was never on the table was not considered an issue, because most southern neighbours were not interested anyway and the EU's political and economic model was in any case considered something which all countries should aspire to intrinsically.

However, the ENP was never backed by sufficient financial

support or other incentives, such as Schengen visas, to have any leverage with southern neighbouring governments. This has not changed. The ENP is backed by the €15.4 billion European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI), which has not been increased despite the region's crises. Some longer-term bilateral ENI programmes have been cut and the funds reallocated to short-term initiatives such as the new Madad Trust Fund for responding to the Syria crisis. European Commission officials are reportedly hoping that a mid-term review of the EU budget in 2016 will result in funds being shifted from the EU's domestic budget lines, such as the common agricultural policy and structural funds, to the ENI.

Whether the review is really more 'political' is not as clear. In keeping with the spirit of pragmatism, the EU's positions on the most politically sensitive issues, such as conditionality, cooperation with authoritarian regimes, and the access of neighbouring country citizens to the EU labour market, are not clear and unambiguous. Close cooperation with neighbours on policing, border security and counter-terrorism, which has been going on for years, has been intensified and is discussed more openly than in the past.

The review's explicit focus on interests does not mean that the EU has abandoned its values entirely. References to democracy, good governance and human rights remain prominent, and there is specific focus on programmes that support the judiciary, accountable public administration and civil society, which are all areas where the EU has extensive expertise. Nevertheless, the most political idea at the heart of the ENP – the transformational power of Europe – has all but disappeared amid all the realism. This has not happened because of conviction, but because of the EU's weakness in the face of repeated crises. This reality casts a big question mark over whether the EU is strong enough to stand up for its values when the time comes, for example if the military were to overthrow a democratically elected government in a neighbouring country like in Egypt in 2013.

The timing of the 2015 review naturally raises the question of whether the ENP is able to offer solutions to urgent crises such as terrorist attacks in Europe, the plight of Syrian refugees or the civil war in Libya. The ENP is, however, not a crisis response mechanism. The EU has developed other crisis frameworks for the Syria/Iraq and Libya crises in parallel to the ENP review, reportedly with little coordination or exchange. Indeed, the ENP is the tortoise rather than the hare: it is an overarching framework for working with partners on longer term 'root causes' of crises, like weak governance, economic stagnation and conflict. Since 2011, the ENP has been largely irrelevant to the epoch-defining upheavals in the MENA region. Whether the 2015 review can change this depends on how it will be supported and implemented by the EU, its member states and the neighbouring country partners.