

Not the European Neighbourhood Policy Some iconoclastic tips to start rethinking the EU's relations with its neighbours

Rosa Balfour

It is not very glamorous to talk about process rather than strategy in foreign policy. Yet process underpins any strategic thinking. Devising a strategy requires cognitive, analytical, political and institutional processes. The European Commission's President Jean-Claude Juncker tasked the Commissioner for 'European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations' with rethinking the European Neighbourhood Policy within the next 12 months. After a decade of regular reviews of the ENP, a new approach will not be pulled out of a magician's hat. The shape of the next generation of relations with the EU's neighbouring countries will depend on *how* the process will be carried out.

This process will require a set of broad steps: 1) stocktaking what has been carried out over the past ten years; 2) an analysis of the political developments in the countries surrounding the EU and beyond, of what these mean to the EU and what they mean to the citizens there; 3) a political process bringing together national capitals, EU institutions and other stakeholders to understand the nature of the challenges and to find a higher common denominator to contrast the logic of diversity which has hitherto been the main culprit of the ENP's problems; 4) consultation with the countries and societies in the so-called neighbourhood to understand what expectations exist, what influence the EU wields, where and how.

In view of the challenge ahead it is striking that, after ten years in which much ink has been spilt on dissecting the ENP, the terms of the debate have hardly changed. The many analyses of the intellectual, political, institutional and instrumental weaknesses of the ENP have not produced much by way of new ideas. The state of the debate stridently contrasts with the emerging disorder, which is a consequence of the structural fragility of the previous status quo as much as of a catalogue of misguided external interventions – or lack of.

To stimulate creative thinking, making a clean slate of past concepts can be useful. So the ENP 'reset' button should be a cognitive 'reset' too. Here are some provocations to help the brains of those dealing with the ENP review to break the mould of the old concepts.

~~European Neighbourhood Policy.~~ There is no such thing. It need not be reiterated that this is a self-referential, euro-centric definition not a geographical description. It reflects the compromise on the EU's main external interests, the bargain between its Eastern neighbourhoods, which moved further East as the EU enlarged, and the Southern and Eastern shores of the Mediterranean. The point is that the countries populating the EU's neighbourhoods would appreciate being called by name. Furthermore, the concept misleadingly suggests that the ENP is a regional or sub-regional policy, whereas its origin lies in an attempt to strengthen bilateral relations.

Far from challenging these assumptions, the debate is even referring to the 'neighbours of the neighbours' continuing this process of defining countries and issues in purely relational terms. Defining these countries as 'neighbours' has impeded an empathy with how the world and the region are seen from their perspective.

In this light, the debate over splitting the 'neighbourhood' in two, one to the East and one to the South, is irrelevant beyond the organisational and financial aspect. There is great diversity between and *within* these two 'neighbourhoods', with some countries keen to benefit from some of the tools the EU has to offer and others whose lack of interest is of an Olympic nature.

~~European Neighbourhood Policy.~~ The ENP was never a policy, not even in its early enthusiastic days. It was a framework approach and a collection of tools, both of which have been through reviews, additions, modifications and improvements during these ten years. There are principles and ideas – prosperity, political pluralism, economic development, stability – everyone agrees with. But having a few good ideas and some tools does not add up to a policy. A policy requires the political process describe above.

Differentiation. It is indeed correct that the sixteen countries are very different from each other and require flexible and targeted policies. Yet the use of 'differentiation' implies that there is a standard from which some states and policies deviate. Does it make any real sense that the EU's policies towards Belarus are a differentiated version of those towards Syria or Morocco? Ending the 'differentiation' terminology will force a different perspective on the countries, and will be better understood outside Brussels.

Ownership and partnership. These concepts reflected good will and a recognition of the limits of EU influence. Yet they caused more trouble than good, as the 'partners' were never really such, never really 'owned' the process, and given that more frequently than not they tended to be governments mostly with a track record of repressing their citizens, they were the wrong partners in the first place!

Implementation. This is not just linguistic 'bureaucratese' but is a misconception. In international politics, policy-makers do not implement policies on the basis of a blueprint but make political choices around a range of options, most of which are not ideal. It reflects a bureaucratisation of a set of relationships which cannot be governed by years'-old blueprints and shopping lists of desired aims.

In light of the track record of the past, it is not unreasonable to fear that the next ENP will just be a rebrand of past formulas. The linguistic choice of maintaining the 'European Neighbourhood Policy' in itself straightjackets the review process. But Europe's relations with its neighbours will require self-critical thinking and an inclusive, deep and honest political process to produce a framework of substance rather than of marketing value. It needs to include reflections on relations with Russia and Turkey. It needs to ask the difficult questions of whether and how the EU should seek engagement with countries which show no interest in relations with Brussels. It needs to explore political relations with other countries active in these regions. But, before addressing these operational questions, it needs to ensure that it reflects and pioneers the policies of the member states, to avoid further divergence between the toolbox and Europe's already fragmented relations, and that it is grounded in solid and shared understanding of how North Africa, the Middle East and Eastern Europe are changing. In short, what is needed is not a neighbourhood policy but a foreign policy.

Rosa Balfour is Director for Europe in the World programme at the European Policy Centre (EPC).