

Guest Editorial

The European Neighbourhood Policy: The EU's Newest Foreign Policy Instrument

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Giving the EU a stronger voice in the world is one of the four priorities of the Barroso Commission, together with prosperity, solidarity and security. Our most urgent task is to restore dynamic and sustainable growth in Europe and provide more and better jobs to Europe's citizens. All of which requires a strong EU, able to promote and protect its interests on the international stage.

We are also facing another major challenge – the gap between the EU's achievements and the way its citizens perceive it. Across Europe people are asking what the EU is for, what it is doing to respond to their concerns and how it will help meet twenty-first century challenges.

The EU has to deliver results in areas its citizens deem important – jobs, security, energy and migration. The stronger we are, the more we can deliver. By achieving concrete results we will re-establish confidence in the EU and demonstrate to our citizens the benefits of European Union in the twenty-first century.

The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), the EU's newest foreign policy instrument, responds to these demands.

The EU's aim is to expand the zone of prosperity, stability and security beyond our borders. The question is how to use our soft power to leverage the kinds of reforms that would make that possible.

The answer, in the decade following the fall of the Berlin wall, was enlargement. This has been a tremendously successful policy, with a momentous impact on the European continent. EU enlargement has made an extraordinary contribution to peace and prosperity, thanks to our strategic use of the incentives on offer.

Nor is it over – we still have work to do to consolidate 2004's enlargement and there are new enlargement commitments on which we must deliver.

Yet it is clear that the EU cannot enlarge *ad infinitum*.

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So how else can we pursue our geostrategic interest in expanding the zone of stability, security and prosperity beyond our borders? How best can we support our neighbours' political and economic transitions, and so tackle our own citizens' concerns? ENP provides the answer.

At its heart is the question of borders – not as a way of defining ourselves, but because they are key to many of our citizens' urgent concerns – security, migration and economic growth. Borders cannot be solely about barriers and obstacles. They must work flexibly as a facilitator of economic, social and cultural exchanges.

That, in its essence, is what the European Neighbourhood Policy is about. It is a way of responding to our citizens' concerns for prosperity, security and stability, not with an abstract concept but with concrete, measurable results. And it is about helping our neighbours towards their own prosperity, security and stability, not by imposing reforms, but by supporting and encouraging reformers.

We offer our eastern and southern neighbours many of the benefits previously associated only with membership, such as a stake in our internal market, involvement in EU programmes, and cooperation in transport and energy networks.

It is designed to offer a privileged form of partnership now, irrespective of the exact nature of the future relationship with the EU.

ENP is based on the same kind of positive conditionality that underpins the enlargement process. We agree Action Plans with our partners which set out the path to a closer relationship. Differentiation is key – each country's Action Plan responds to its particular needs and capacities. In addition, progress is rewarded with greater incentives and benefits. Only as our partners fulfil their commitments to strengthen the rule of law, democracy and respect for human rights; promote market-oriented economic reforms; and cooperate on key foreign policy objectives such as counter-terrorism and non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, will we offer an even deeper relationship.

Questions have been raised as to whether the incentives on offer are sufficient to encourage reform, and whether this is not simply a repackaging of old policies in new clothes. My response is two-fold. First, the impetus for meaningful reform must always come from within. If that desire is not there, no amount of external assistance or pressure will build sustainable reform. That is why the EU believes in encouraging not imposing reform. Second, the EU's offer through ENP is not a second-best option to enlargement, but rather a highly-desirable step-change in our relations offering substantive benefits to all involved.

ENP has enabled us to tackle some of our citizens' most pressing concerns, like energy supplies, migration, security, and stability.

Energy

Energy has been an important component of ENP since its inception. But the events at the beginning of 2006 between Russia, Moldova and Ukraine were a wake-up call, reminding us that energy security needs to be even higher on our political agenda.

We need to continue to pursue close energy cooperation with our partners in Eastern Europe, South Caucasus, and the Mediterranean. In all my visits to neighbourhood countries energy features heavily. ENP promotes integration with Europe's energy market and helps to create the regulatory environment in which private sector investment in infrastructure can take place. It also helps the countries concerned come in line with European standards and norms.

In 2006 we will be boosting our energy cooperation as part of a broader EU effort on energy supply outlined in the Commission's Green Paper from March.

Migration

Migration is a highly sensitive issue for EU public opinion. In uncertain times, it is understandable that our citizens are worried about employment and increased competition for jobs.

Yet Europe needs migration. Our populations are getting smaller and growing older.

Through ENP we are trying to manage migration better: welcoming those migrants we need for our economic and social well-being, while clamping down on illegal immigration.

Throughout our neighbourhood we support projects to strengthen institutional capacities; improve border controls; upgrade reception facilities for asylum applicants and refugees; and fight illegal immigration and people trafficking. We are also helping to build institutions that enforce the rule of law and promote respect for human rights.

Security

We are also using the ENP Action Plans to help increase security. The EU's border assistance mission to Moldova and Ukraine is designed to contribute to resolving the long-running sore of the Transnistria conflict. The Action Plans with Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia will address issues relating to Nagorno-Karabakh and Georgia's internal conflicts.

We have also fostered practical cooperation between Israel and the Palestinian Authority on issues such as trade, energy and transport. Increasing

cooperation and economic growth are absolutely vital for a sustainable solution to the Middle East conflict. We hope to continue these actions as the situation in the region allows.

Stability

An important part of ENP is the commitment partner governments make to political reform. We are offering extra financial assistance to those countries making real progress in implementing political reforms and promoting human rights.

ENP also promotes economic and social reform, both for reasons of solidarity, but also because we want stability in our neighbourhood and thus added security for ourselves. So we are tackling poverty through employment creation schemes; funding health and education projects; and promoting economic development by improving the trade and investment environment and stimulating small businesses and entrepreneurs.

Through the Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation, we are working to build bridges between peoples and cultures. This must remain an important focus of our attention as we work for mutual respect and understanding between all faiths, religions and cultures.

In conclusion, the European Neighbourhood Policy is a pragmatic response to our citizens' demands and questions about the EU's added value, and to our neighbours' demands for closer ties. It is a win-win policy, based on mutual interest and shared values. We share our neighbours' desire to press forward with reform and become more prosperous and stable. We want to increase our security, prosperity and stability, and theirs. And we want to tackle our citizens' most pressing concerns. I am convinced ENP will help make the European Union and its neighbourhood an area of peace, security and stability. And in so doing will bring a brighter future for both our citizens and those of our neighbours.