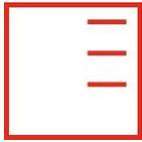


## Blog

# A New Agenda for the EU Southern Neighbourhood?

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2021 has seen a number of initiatives at the European level towards the Southern neighbourhood. One such is ‘A New Agenda for the Mediterranean’ issued in February. It covers the Southern dimension of what we now call the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). The Southern Neighbourhood is of vital importance to the EU. “In light of their geographical proximity and crucial strategic importance, the European Union has long identified cooperation with the countries of the Mediterranean region a central priority of its external relations” ([Fontana 2019](#)). Since the 2016 EU Global Strategy, the EU has gradually concretized its aims to become a global leader in facing the external challenges such as climate change, migration, transnational organised crime, unreliable energy supplies, and other hybrid threats. The destabilized MENA region arguably suffers most acutely from such threats, which in turn impacts the EU and, indeed, the rest of the globe.

Nowadays “throughout the region, extremists thrive on poverty, high unemployment and political polarisation, which also fuel migration towards Europe” ([Scazzieri 2020](#)). Together with the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant and the Syrian conflict, the situation undermined the local authorities in the eyes of European democratic allies and reduced the role of the EU to a humanitarian donor to the population. Does the Union want to change this situation through A New Agenda? Social unrest, religious pressure and gender discrimination are driving the attention of progressive European and humanitarian and other activist groups based on the core democratic values, non-discrimination and multilateralism. As the EU faces several internal challenges associated with the rise of nationalism and EU-skepticism, the proof of its ability to achieve the stable neighbourhood is not

only meaningful for the appreciation and trust of its own citizens but also to establish its soft-power image globally. It is thus pertinent to analyze whether there has been a significant shift in the EU’s strategy towards the South reflected in the New Agenda as well as the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, and what implications it may have for the both sides’ interests.

### **Background.**

25 years ago, in 1995 the Barcelona Declaration established the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, initiating the ENP for the South. It covers Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Syria and Tunisia. In its framework, the EU and 8 individual partner countries (except Libya and Syria) have adopted bilateral action plans, partnership priorities or association agreements.

The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership was revised several times, and the latest version has just been adopted on February 9, 2021. The first revision, however, dates back to 2003 and is called [Wider Europe – Neighbourhood: A New Framework for Relations with our Eastern and Southern Neighbours](#). It implemented “the carrot and stick approach, stating that the EU’s neighbourhood can benefit from the prospects of closer economic integration with the EU if it makes concrete progress demonstrating shared values and if effectively implements political, economic and institutional reforms” ([Soproni&Horga 2016:499](#)). Later, this approach was revised and turned into more equal dialogue under the new [ENP in 2011](#), in response to the uprisings in its southern neighbourhood (SN). It was further reviewed [in 2015](#), and since then, stabilisation remains the main policy goal for the EU in the South in political, socio-economic and security-related terms.



The huge jump in progress on communication and cooperation was done through these 25 years, nevertheless, several problems were always pushing the partners away from each other. Many of the researchers, for instance [Pastore and Roman \(2020\)](#), voice the same concerns – the EU’s and European countries’ approach to cooperation with third countries being driven by Euro-centric security concerns and economic interests while overlooking the partner countries’ perspectives, needs and priorities.

### Change?

The 2021 Joint Communication of the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee, and the Committee of the Regions is called “[Renewed partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood: A new agenda for the Mediterranean](#).” It seems to finally recalibrate EU’s discourse towards Southern Partners: “growing interdependence, and in a spirit of partnership, we will turn common challenges into opportunities, in our mutual interest; common and people-centred agenda” ([JOIN 2021:1](#)). However, the stress on European interests and stability remains actual: “Our partnership will be based on common values and dialogue, and progress on our shared socio-economic and political agenda, including on reforms in areas such as governance and the rule of law, and macroeconomic stability and the business environment” ([Ibid:2](#)).

What is more, in the New Communication, the previously mentioned “carrot and stick” approach is combined with the “more for more” principle on the financial side of the deal (i.e., the more respect for human rights – the more money received): “the level

of EU financial support will be *proportionate to each partner’s ambitions* and commitment to *shared* values, the agenda of reforms, including on governance, and their implementation” ([Ibid:21-22](#)). However, this political conditionality of the ENP is seen negatively and “has not survived as an instrument applying to all countries in the region. What is at stake in the fields of energy (e.g. with Algeria), geopolitics (e.g. with Egypt and Israel), or migration (e.g. the controversial March 2016 agreement with [Turkey](#)) is cooling down any willingness to act,” – claims [Vincent Forest](#), EuroMed Rights Advocacy Director.

Some may argue that the ENP with the South is currently no longer a priority issue for the EU. The lack of interest can be explained by “enlargement to the East, the Brexit shock, the financial crisis of 2008 and today the Covid-19” ([Dubessy 2020](#)). As Henry Marty-Gauquie, honorary Director of the European Investment Bank, opines: “The EU no longer has a Mediterranean vision as a region. The only ones who still believe in it are the UfM and the MIC! The Mediterranean appears too divided. The divide between Maghreb and the Middle East is widening. And what is more, it is the only region in the world that does not have regional governance.”

The current global situation is indeed not inspiring. The Covid-19 pandemic has brought much loss to all the countries around the world. It has become urgent for the EU to rethink the strategy towards Southern Neighbours. Even though most of the region was not hit by the virus itself, it is suffering from its economic fallout, with which Europe will have to deal.



## Conclusion.

The Southern Neighbourhood countries are believed to be of high importance to the EU being so close, with the ENP playing a key part in the Union's foreign policy ([UNESCO 2017](#)). However, different dimensions of the ENP appear to be in uneven positions regarding the amount of attention and communicative effort allocated by the EU. The Eastern Partnership has its East StratCom Task Force, while the Southern Neighbourhood lacks such a tool.

Therefore, the main focus of EU's communication to the Southern Neighbours still revolves around security and stabilisation. It concentrates on facilitating democratic political transition, promoting good governance, combating trans-border threats - the features of the transformative power concept. The EU wants to influence the transformation of Southern Partners and their transition to the kind of partners EU would benefit from dealing with. It wants to be associated with the role of "the main provider of humanitarian and development assistance" ([JOIN 2021:13](#)). However, the Union fails to make a more ambitious offer to the SN, which could naturally bring stability from an inside will to match the EU's expectations.

Southern Partners are less enchanted with the EU values, being culturally more distant and religiously

more attached, as compared to Eastern Neighbours. They are not considered to be (or potentially become) European, due to their location, therefore, have to face an attitude that may seem far from promising an equal partnership with the EU. As some researchers show, in contrast to Eastern partners, "the EU does not offer countries to its south a real partnership, but only a relatively modest upgrade of trading relations," which is not "appealing enough to convince governments in these countries to undertake politically costly reforms" ([Scazzieri 2020](#)).

Yet, the further EU expansion is an unrealistic incentive given the long prospects of Western Balkans 6 enlargement. So, the EU should look for other ways to achieve the main objective for the upcoming years – resilience in the southern neighbourhood, which it does by supporting the building of democracies, establishing privileged partnerships and being the major coronavirus crises resolver. Will that be enough for East and Africa? And is it possible for the EU to achieve an equal partnership with these countries without offering a membership? As it seems the relations are growing towards a better understanding of each other's issues and more cooperation on common threats, such as conflict resolution and creating local possibilities for the mostly young population of the region to stop refugee fleeing to Europe.