

*European Public Affairs Major*  
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**Position Paper**

**The European Neighbourhood**

**Students of The European Union and its Close Neighbourhood seminar**  
**Under the supervision of Elsa Tulmets**

## • Introduction

**The European neighbourhood** is an evolving concept that has been transformed in the past in line with the enlargement of the European Union. The way it has been taken into account in EU policy has also evolved. From a scattered policy to a global project known as the European Neighbourhood Policy, it is now **at the heart of the soft power of the European Union's foreign policy**. It brings together 16 countries in two main dynamics: the Union for the Mediterranean in the South (2008) and the Eastern Partnership in the East (2009).

Under **Article 8 of the Treaty on European Union**, the ENP is defined as a means "to establish an area of prosperity and good neighbourliness, founded on the values of the Union and characterised by close and peaceful relations based on cooperation.". The latter includes the provision of financial, technical and political support. Aware of the negative consequences that an unstable neighbourhood could have on the European Union, the ENP is a fundamental instrument for addressing political and geopolitical trends that run counter to the European Union's values and interests.

Despite its high ambitions, the ENP has been the subject of much criticism since its creation because of its initial shortcomings. The geopolitical upheavals to the south and west have forced the European institutions, since 2011, to rethink a new approach to the ENP, based on the search for stability at the borders rather than the export of democracy. A new pragmatic vision has replaced an idealistic one.

In the following sections, we will first focus on the original role of the ENP as an exporter of the EU's founding values, then on its stability function in the neighbourhood, and finally, in the light of contemporary events, we will reflect on the challenges facing the ENP.

## • The ENP: an instrument to promote European values and standards

The EU's greatest strength in the spread of its core values and norms lies in the conclusion of international agreements within The European Neighbourhood Policy. As stated in H el ene Colineau's article "Interroger la diffusion des normes dans l'aide europ eenne aux pays en transition", **"the European treaties entrust the European Union's external action with the objective of promoting human rights, democracy and the rule of law beyond Europe's borders"**. Therefore, spreading its values becomes for the EU a challenge in crafting its agreements with neighbouring countries, for example, by making sure access to financial instruments for development aid is conditional on compliance with certain human rights standards. Furthermore, as conceptualised by Heather Grabbe, the EU turns itself into a **"transformative power"**. Escorting neighbouring countries in their political changes as well as ensuring their progress by implementing some model institutions are a way for the EU to impose its soft power. Ultimately, it can be said that the dissemination of European standards remains more effective in the candidate countries.

• **The ENP: a tool for regional stability**

The European Neighbourhood Policy is also defined by its **regional stability instruments**. There are at least four of them:

- Human security by promoting socio-economic development
- Crisis management, with a humanitarian rather than military approach
- Conflict prevention through political dialogue
- Combating cross-border threats, by encouraging cooperation between neighbouring states to deal collectively with cross-border crime and terrorism.

Although the ENP is not a defence or security policy in its own right, it integrates these aspects into a comprehensive approach aimed at **promoting stability and well-being** in the EU's neighbouring regions. The EU can also mobilise other security and defence instruments as part of its overall foreign policy when crisis situations or security threats require a specific response in this area. The conflict in Ukraine, which broke out on February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2022, is an example of this security-based approach to stability in the European neighbourhood.

The crisis in Ukraine has triggered a significant reassessment of the European Neighbourhood Policy, exposing **the imperative need to reinforce stability in the region**. As a result, we have seen a drastic intensification of European efforts to support Ukraine and its neighbouring countries, while reaffirming its unwavering commitment to regional stability and security. Faced with Russia's annexation of Crimea and the conflict in Ukraine, the EU has taken a firm stance by imposing economic and diplomatic sanctions on Russia. Individual sanctions include travel bans and asset freezes, with over €21.5 billion of assets frozen in the EU. These sanctions are designed to deter any perceived destabilising actions in the region, underlining the EU's determination to protect the territorial integrity and stability of neighbouring nations.

**Increased support for Ukraine has been a key pillar of the EU's response.** This assistance was both political and economic and became military with countries sending defensive weapons since the beginning of the war, encompassing measures such as granting financial assistance, promoting institutional reforms and strengthening cooperation in various fields. The aim was to strengthen Ukraine's resilience in the face of the multiple challenges it faced.

**The ENP has also been mobilised in support of political dialogue**, seeking to encourage the conflicting parties in Ukraine to engage in peaceful, diplomatic discussions. The EU has supported initiatives aimed at resolving the conflict constructively, stressing the importance of negotiated solutions for restoring stability. At the same time, the crisis in Ukraine prompted the EU to reflect on ways of strengthening regional security within the framework of the ENP such as the strategic compass and the beginning of the negotiation with Ukraine and Moldova as official candidates for the EU. This included in-depth discussions on security cooperation, crisis management and conflict prevention in the region. The crisis thus served as a catalyst for rethinking and strengthening regional security mechanisms

## • Adapting the ENP to contemporary challenges

There has been a relative failure of the EU's neighbourhood policy. This idea is often symbolised by the expression "**ring of fire**" to designate the EU's neighbourhood, as opposed to the "**ring of friends**" evoked by Romano Prodi in 2003. In concrete terms, the EU has not achieved its objective of creating a "ring of friends" and an area of prosperity on its doorstep. On the contrary, conflicts on Europe's borders are on the increase. First, there is the Ukrainian conflict in the east, which poses a major risk. There is also the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the Syrian civil war and the Israeli- Hamas crisis. On the Union's southern flank, the Libyan conflict is a major **risk of instability**. Libya has become one of the busiest migratory routes, over which the EU has very little control. In addition to these conflicts themselves, there is a **growing tension at the EU's borders**. Turkey's highly aggressive foreign policy is a case in point. Turkey's policy is characterised by claims on the islands of the Aegean Sea and by the incursion of trick warships into Greek territorial waters. Closer to home, we can mention the persistence of tensions in the Balkans, with regular clashes between Serbia and Kosovo. These various conflicts and tensions could not be prevented by the current neighbourhood policy, in particular because of the persistence of major differences in the approach adopted by the Member States towards their neighbours. For instance, Germany continues to sell Turkey weapons despite its threats against Greece, while France has concluded a non-NATO military alliance with the latter. In another, more serious example, Hungary, despite being a member of the EU, is positioning itself as close to Russia at the height of the war in Ukraine, notably by opposing the release of military aid to Ukraine. This raises the question of the **need to adapt the neighbourhood policy** in order to ease tensions. In this tense context, it seems worthwhile to look back at three key points: the adaptation of the ENP to the consequences of enlargement, the current effectiveness of conditionality mechanisms and the current strengthening of the neighbourhood policy in certain key sectors.

- Firstly, with regard to the consequences of enlargement of the Union, the EU has taken on board the **need to develop its neighbourhood policy by stepping up support for institutional reforms** in neighbouring countries that are to be integrated into the EU. One example is the ambitious anti-corruption reform agenda in Ukraine.
- Second, concerning the **conditionality mechanisms** within the ENP, these are strongly criticised as ineffective. One example is Azerbaijan, which was able to arrest several human rights defenders and close NGOs without withdrawing European aid.
- Third, the priority sectors currently covered by the ENP. There are at least 5 at present: the environment, defence, trade, energy security and good governance (democracy and human rights). In the context of climate change and the cross-cutting nature of the climate issue, the environment is an essential dimension of every European policy, including the ENP. As far as defence is concerned, regional instability has forced the EU to step up the security approach of its neighbourhood policy, as explained above. The trade dimension remains as central as ever since it is one of the EU's exclusive competences. Furthermore, economic development remains one of the essential means of contributing to the stability of the neighbourhood. Finally, strengthening the

promotion of democratic values is essential for the EU to assert itself as a geopolitical entity. This is why the EU has supported the implementation of an ambitious anti-corruption reform agenda in Ukraine, notably through a law passed in September 2023 which obliges civil servants to declare their assets.

## • A few recommendations

Our recommendations aim to optimise the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) by making it more aligned with the contemporary priorities of the European Union (EU).

- **Integrating the European Union's contemporary challenges into European Neighbourhood Policy strategies**

The ENP could better reflect EU's priorities by integrating contemporary transnational challenges. The ENP should be seen as an additional means for the EU to achieve its priority objectives (digital, environment, democracy, etc.). It would then be interesting to see neighbourhood policies evolve in line with major contemporary priorities. In view of the environmental challenge facing us, the ENP could, for example, be a means of **raising environmental standards** in the EU's neighbourhood.

- **Reinforcing conditionality clauses in the European Neighbourhood Policy**

With regard to the weight of the ENP and the respect of commitments made by stakeholders, the aim would be to **develop conditionality clauses** while integrating specific clauses relating to priority subjects. Echoing the previous point, we could imagine adding clauses relating to sustainable development.

- **Strengthening cross-border cooperation**

It would also be interesting to consider **closer cooperation between border states**. This would enable states directly concerned by a specific cross-border issue to become more involved than other countries. For example, Spain or Portugal could take a closer look at an aspect of the UfM that particularly concerns them, and which would not be of interest to other, more geographically distant Member States (e.g. the migration issue in the Mediterranean). With regard to eastern neighbourhood policies, enhanced cooperation between candidate countries and member states such as Poland, Hungary and Greece would be an interesting way of tackling the issues associated with further EU enlargement.

- **In-depth sectoral cooperation for regional security and stability**

We recommend the adoption of a "Deepened Sectoral Cooperation for Regional Security and Stability" approach within the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). This

recommendation aims to intensify collaboration between the European Union and its neighbors by **collectively addressing security and stability issues**. By adopting a regional approach to security, the ENP could foster the creation of enhanced cooperation mechanisms, encouraging the coordination of efforts in areas such as the fight against terrorism, organised crime and migration management. Implementing this recommendation will contribute to a more stable environment, strengthening mutual trust between the EU and its neighbours, and paving the way for closer collaboration in other aspects of the ENP.

- **Promoting academic and cultural mobility**

We recommend **strengthening sectoral cooperation in education, research and culture** within the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP). This initiative aims to promote academic and cultural mobility between the European Union and its neighbours, focusing on educational programs, student exchanges, research partnerships and artistic collaborations. By promoting mobility, the ENP can facilitate deeper mutual understanding, strengthen cultural ties, and contribute to the sharing of knowledge. Implementing this recommendation will foster closer cross-border cooperation, strengthening the ENP's cultural and educational foundations.

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## Contributions

This position paper has been written collectively during the *European Union and its Close Neighbourhood* seminar. Every contributor has agreed for the document to be shared.

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