

Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions — Review of the European Neighbourhood Policy

(2017/C 088/13)

Rapporteur: Anne Quart (DE/PES) State Secretary for Europe and Consumer Protection, Ministry of Justice, European Affairs and Consumer Protection of the Land of Brandenburg

Reference document: JOIN(2015) 50 final

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

General comments

1. takes the view that promoting stability and prosperity in the EU neighbourhood should be a top priority for the EU's foreign and security policy, and calls for the potential of local and regional authorities (LRAs) to be drawn on in the design and implementation of EU external policy. The Committee of the Regions should play a significant role in building trust and in international cooperation at local and regional level;
2. notes that European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) can only have an enduring impact if it brings practical benefits to the people of the EU Member States and of the ENP countries, and urges that this consideration be central when it comes implementing the new strategy;
3. notes that the ENP is above all a project of the Institutions of the European Union and of the governments of the Member States and the neighbouring countries. Stresses that the successful implementation of the programmes and projects has a considerable impact at regional and local level, both in EU Member States and in the third countries involved. Calls above all for cooperation at local and regional level and for interaction between countries' civil societies to be strengthened under the ENP and for adequate resources to be made available to enable this. LRAs and their associations must be involved in every phase of implementing the ENP — from programming to democratic control — and they should take part in the work of the Association Committees and Association Councils and be given permanent observer status;
4. calls for more specific projects to promote interpersonal contacts; believes it is essential to make more resources available for cross-border cooperation, partnerships between local authorities, and scientific, cultural and youth exchanges; reiterates its request that partners be included in Union programmes such as Erasmus; welcomes the Commission's prioritising of visa facilitation and its presentation of specific proposals for Ukraine and Georgia, and reaffirms its support for working on visa and mobility issues with those ENP partners that wish to do so, including visa liberation and facilitation dialogues;
5. reiterates the proposals contained in its opinion of 9 July 2015 on a *New European Neighbourhood Policy* and calls on the European Commission and the EEAS to take these into consideration when implementing the strategy;
6. notes that the armed conflicts, use of force, violations of territorial sovereignty, violations of human rights and of the principle of equal rights of peoples, terrorism, and serious destabilisation in many countries and regions in the EU neighbourhood have led to high rates of human loss, injuries, internally displaced people, forced migration and are hindering the development of lasting partnerships. Stresses the importance of abandoning geopolitical approaches and wishful thinking in favour of realistic objectives based on a realistic analysis and of organising cooperation between those partners who are genuinely interested in cooperating and who also have the capacity to achieve long-term objectives; insists that although it is necessary to make a distinction, a balance must be maintained between the eastern and the southern neighbourhood;

7. points out that a durable partnership can only be developed on the basis of equal rights and mutual benefit, and welcomes the Commission's particular focus on this consideration when reviewing the ENP; calls for the concept of an equal partnership with reciprocal responsibility to be put into practice for ENP partnership;

8. emphasises in particular the importance of not questioning the principle of consistently upholding human rights and the standards of the humanitarian provisions established by international law. In this regard, points out that the conflicts that have shaken many ENP partners pose new challenges in terms of refugee protection, respect for international humanitarian law and the need to adopt new approaches to guarantee the integration of new and more effective instruments which aim to ensure full compliance with European and international standards on refugee protection. Moreover, stresses that the upcoming negotiations on global migration pacts with many ENP partner countries should involve local authorities and ensure that migration policy and neighbourhood policy are more closely integrated to avoid contradictions and misalignments;

Stability of the EU and its neighbourhood

9. notes that the biggest source of Europe's influence on stability and prosperity in its neighbourhood is the attractiveness of the EU's socioeconomic model, the unity and solidarity between the EU Member States, sustainable development, democracy, and respect for human rights and democratic freedoms; the stability of the EU and adherence to its values and principles constitute the most important contribution to stabilisation of the neighbourhood;

10. calls for security threats to be analysed in all their complexity, starting with the causes of instability; underlines the need to tackle the socioeconomic root causes of the current security and migration challenges as a matter of priority, and welcomes the EU's commitment to engage with the ENP partners in implementing the UN sustainable development goals; calls for increased focus on promoting social rights, since sustainable economic and social development are crucial for a stable neighbourhood; stresses that job creation is the decisive issue for the future of most neighbourhood countries, and welcomes the specific focus on youth employability and on promoting small and medium-sized enterprises; emphasises that this requires a multilevel approach, from national to regional and local level as well as regional, subregional and cross-border cooperation; urges that sectoral cooperation programmes be designed in such a way that they can be implemented by LRAs;

11. welcomes that the European Commission has brought up a proposal for a New Partnership Framework with third countries and for a new European External Investment Plan aimed at tackling the root causes of migration by mobilising investment, stepping-up technical assistance and supporting economic and structural reforms to improve the business and broader policy environment; calls for the European regional and local authorities to be involved in this process;

12. expects that the new 'Migration Compacts' that the EU is negotiating with Jordan and Lebanon in the framework of the Communication on 'Establishing a New Partnership Framework' of 7 June 2016 find a good equilibrium between the needs of the refugees, the needs and circumstances of these countries and the expectations of the EU and its Member States while respecting the human rights and standards of the humanitarian provisions established by international law;

13. renews its commitment to the Tunisian people and calls for a genuine deep and comprehensive partnership between the EU and Tunisia; stresses that the continuation of its peaceful and democratic development towards economic and security stability would send a very positive signal to the whole ENP countries; underlines the need for a substantial increase in EU aid to Tunisia to support the consolidation of the democratic transition and foster investment and development in all sectors of the economy and society, in particular employment creation and maintaining quality public services that are accessible to everyone; notes the launch of negotiations on an ambitious free trade agreement (DCFTA) between the EU and Tunisia and calls on the Commission to take a holistic approach ensuring that this agreement will be mutually beneficial while taking proper account of the significant economic disparities between the two parties;

14. calls for LRAs in both the EU and the ENP countries to be given support as a matter of priority in providing refugees with adequate basic services instead of externalising refugees to third countries, and in the longer term in efforts involving those people to achieving sustainable social and economic development for their municipalities and regions of origin; points out that refugees coming from the neighbourhood countries to Europe could in future be a bridge between the EU and its neighbours;

15. in view of religious radicalisation, nationalism, extremism and terrorism, advocates developing strategies and providing adequate instruments to foster intercultural dialogue within the EU and with the societies of its neighbours, stressing the responsibility and potential of LRAs in this area, we need this dialogue between politicians, but also between civil society and, especially, between citizens;

16. notes that good-neighbourly relations with the European Neighbourhood countries and their neighbours are essential for stability in Europe. Notes that economic cooperation and political dialogue between the EU and the Russian Federation are of particular importance; points out that normalising economic and political relations with Russia is dependent on the full implementation of the Minsk Agreement; and notes that at the subnational level and between civil society and business stakeholders cooperation and dialogue have continued and that this potential should be better harnessed to overcome differences;

Differentiation and regional cooperation

17. notes that cooperation with the EU should not lead to competition between the neighbourhood countries for the best relations with the EU but to regional and territorial cooperation, and stresses that the multilateral dimension of the ENP is indispensable. The complex challenges in relation to stabilisation in the neighbourhood can only be met if all partners in a given region cooperate systematically; greater commitment is required from the EU to stimulate the multilateral approach of neighbourhood policy and to give LRAs a central role in this process;

18. draws attention to the engagement and the potential of the Committee of the Regions in relation to regional cooperation — especially through the Euro-Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly (ARLEM), the Conference of Regional and Local Authorities for the Eastern Partnership (CORLEAP), and the Ukraine Task Force — and calls on the Commission and the EU delegations to make better use of the expertise provided by these three bodies;

19. notes that in the expectation of long-term benefits for their democratic and economic development, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine have decided in favour of very close relations with the EU by signing association agreements; is concerned about the social costs of reform processes, which could jeopardise public acceptance of approximation, and calls on the EU to work even closer with the countries concerned to find ways of managing this challenge; underlines the importance of these countries' decentralisation reforms when it comes to implementing the agreements and urges that priority be given to promoting the democratisation processes at local and regional level;

20. calls for strategies to avoid a situation in which countries have to decide between closer cooperation with the EU or with other partners, and welcomes the new avenues explored in the latest agreements between the EU and Armenia to allow close cooperation with the EU without undermining other international obligations; this experience should also be drawn on in the development of relations with Belarus and Azerbaijan;

21. calls for subregional strategies that meet the very different challenges and situations in the southern neighbourhood, notably in the form of strategies respectively for the Adriatic-Ionian region, the western Mediterranean and the eastern Mediterranean;

22. urges the High Representative and the Commission to present a specific strategy for involving the neighbours of the neighbours in the ENP countries, notably with the Russian Federation, in order to dynamise this approach;

23. notes that partnership begins in border regions, and calls on the Commission to recognise its role and support the growing cross-border cooperation between LRAs in the neighbourhood countries and thus set an example for other ENP countries; calls for a longer-term, comprehensive plan to be drawn up going beyond the current financial framework; in this respect calls for implementing the use of EGTCs between EU and neighbourhood regions, as well as a swift agreement on the harmonised use of EU funds between Interreg Europe and the European Neighbourhood Instrument to be drawn up for developing all the EU regions bordering on ENP countries;

Responsibility and focus on citizens

24. notes that local and regional responsibility is essential for a successful ENP and that EU policies and measures, as well as financing, must be determined in the light of regional needs. A comprehensive approach must be adopted which benefits all sections of society and supports regional development. The role of LRAs in bilateral action plans should be strengthened, especially those on borders, which means strengthening the rights and responsibilities of LRAs, as well as making adequate financial resources available that the LRAs can draw on;

25. observes that understanding of the EU and the agreements between it and the ENP countries is still limited at local level and among the general public, and calls on the Commission to work together with the EU delegations to substantially increase the visibility of the cooperation programmes at regional and local level, to ensure that local and regional players are better informed and better trained, in particular via training programmes for teachers and the exchange of educational materials, and to strengthen capacity-building at subnational level for using the ENP programmes;

26. believes it is essential to strengthen young people's interest and participation among women as key factors in the neighbourhood countries' development;

27. calls for more specific projects at local level that produce tangible results and have positive effects on the daily lives of ordinary people;

Good governance, rule of law, and respect for human rights and civic freedoms

28. notes that good governance, the rule of law, democracy, and respect for human rights and democratic freedoms are fundamental for stability; points out that the societies of the EU neighbourhood have different historical experiences and conditions, and that democratic and human rights standards can neither be imposed from outside nor imposed from above, but have to develop from the ground up; emphasises the role of LRAs in entrenching democracy and the rule of law in society; underlines that these basic values are the fundamentals for the ENP, which cannot be compromised; highlights the need to include more effective institutional mechanisms in the partnership agreements that are capable of monitoring partners' compliance with these principles;

29. points out that administrative capacity needs to be improved in most of the neighbourhood countries, and affirms the readiness of the CoR and its members and the local authorities concerned, as well as their national associations, to be involved in the programmes to build administrative capacity in the neighbourhood countries, calling on the Commission to provide the necessary administrative and financial resources; urges that more support be provided for decentralising reforms in the neighbourhood countries, and recommends agreeing on sectoral pilot projects whose implementation would be the responsibility of local and regional authorities so that experience can be gained with decentralisation processes;

30. calls on the Commission to develop projects for local and regional elected representatives and local administrations under which exchanges of experience can be organised with LRAs in the EU; urges that more support be given to national associations of LRAs so as to promote exchanges of experience between LRAs within the ENP countries; is in favour of significantly expanding town twinning programmes and the Technical Assistance and Information Exchange (TAIEX) instrument, as well as the Twinning programme; and asks the Commission to provide not just adequate political, but also adequate financial, support for activities led by the CoR and developed through ARLEM, CORLEAP and Task Force Ukraine;

31. reaffirms its request that the European External Action Service as a practical measure appoint a contact partner for LRAs in each of the sixteen Commission delegations in the ENP countries;

Energy cooperation

32. notes that close cooperation on energy issues is a significant component of the EU's relations with its neighbours, many of them being significant suppliers of energy to the EU Member States; believes that the EU can reduce its dependency on external suppliers and sources by improving energy efficiency at all stages of the energy chain maximising its use of renewable and other indigenous sources of energy and giving preference to fuels and technologies that are environmentally sustainable. In this way, it will also contribute to achieving the COP 21 targets as agreed in Paris; stresses that energy cooperation between the EU and its neighbours should include above all projects to develop energy infrastructure and energy efficiency;

33. points out that the Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy can be one of the platforms for cooperation in this field, in that context offers the expertise and know-how of the CoR Covenant of Mayors Ambassadors to implement the climate and energy objectives in the ENP countries;

34. recognises states' right to decide on their energy supply; calls for local and regional authorities' and citizens' positions on this to be consistently taken into account, and points out that there has been huge resistance in many EU localities against gas and oil extraction by hydraulic fracturing, and calls for energy cooperation with the ENP countries to include adherence to the highest EU environmental standards in gas and oil drilling and processing;

35. calls for energy interconnectivity to be improved not only within the EU, but also between the EU and its neighbours and those neighbours' neighbours;

36. is concerned at the massive increases in energy prices seen in some ENP countries and calls for the Commission to translate its commitment to promoting affordable energy into practical strategies to support populations affected by energy poverty in the ENP countries;

37. strongly believes that new energy projects should focus on energy diversification and should not undermine the status of ENP countries as transit countries;

Building synergies

38. recommends improving the sharing of experiences of cooperation with both the eastern and the southern neighbourhood, and welcomes the engagement of the ARLEM, CORLEAP and Task Force Ukraine members in this regard;

39. calls for closer coordination between the ENP and the programmes developed by the EU in order to ease the refugee situation in the neighbourhood countries;

40. welcomes that the Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign And Security Policy acknowledges the role of the regions as 'representing critical spaces of governance in a de-centred world' and pledges to 'promote and support cooperative regional orders worldwide'; calls for the HR and the EEAS to consider and make use of the experience gained by LRAs;

Financial resources

41. emphasises that the funding provided through the European Neighbourhood Instrument is not commensurate with the political ambitions and the challenges in the EU neighbourhood, and regrets that the ENP review did not result in a recommendation to increase the financial resources;

42. observes that the EU is currently facing more crises than ever before, in particular the refugee crisis, natural disasters and armed conflicts, which have created a risk to key values. These crises were not yet anticipated at the time the 2014-2020 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) was finalised, and the Commission is asked to present a proposal for a revision of the MFF with a view to raising the ceilings under this heading 4 as well as heading 3, so as to substantially increase ENP resources, inter alia, in order to address the migration and refugee crises and ensure the reception and integration of migrants, for which regional and local authorities are mainly responsible. The new MFF provides an opportunity to step up the resources earmarked for implementing the priorities of the European Agenda on Migration also in its external dimension;

43. calls for the practice of concentrating ENP financial resources on cooperation with the national level to be gradually reduced, and for percentages that are as appropriate as possible to each country's situation to be laid down for financing projects at subnational level. EU financial resources must be adapted to target the needs of local and regional stakeholders, including by supporting small-scale projects and organising co-financing in a flexible way. The Commission should consider the possibility of bringing back the Local Administration Facility (LAF) used by the accession countries and broadening the scope of its use to the ENP countries with stricter reimbursement rules requiring more specific and more sustainable projects. The way in which financial resources are used must be carefully monitored, including by civil society.

Brussels, 11 October 2016.

*The President
of the European Committee of the Regions*

Markku MARKKULA
