

# Assessing the European Neighbourhood Policy's future

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In 2004, the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) became the policy framework setting the scene for EU interactions with its neighbours. The launch of this policy framework occurred in a context of relative stability and peace in Europe's neighbourhood, at a time when the EU was redrawing its borders through the 2004 big bang enlargement. Nonetheless, the ENP was doomed to face a range of conflicts, crises and even wars. No other policy framework in the EU encountered so many challenges across time and spread across various policy sectors. Twenty years on, the EuroMeSCo Survey reveals a widespread disillusionment regarding the effectiveness of the ENP impact on the areas of priority for EU interactions with the Southern Neighbourhood. A disillusionment that is coupled with the perceived need to change the current ENP, either through another revision of it or through its complete renovation as a policy framework. How did we get here? And what could we do to relaunch the ENP?

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## Ineffective Impact

The results of the EuroMeSCo Survey indicate that the ENP impact has been extremely limited across a range of relevant policy areas for EU interactions with the Southern Neighbourhood. The survey respondents perceive such impact to be largely ineffective concerning conflict resolution in the Southern Mediterranean region, democracy and respect for human rights in the Southern Mediterranean countries, and mobility and mutual understanding between people. While the ENP's impact appears to be slightly more effective on the socio-economic development in Southern Mediterranean countries, trade integration seems to have benefitted the most from the ENP. If one considers that these policy areas largely correspond to the main objectives of the EU and the ENP stated in the EU treaties, these negative responses signal a relevant failure of the EU in dealing with its neighbours, at least in terms of public perception. Indeed, the ENP does not seem to have been able to support the EU's ambitions 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" (TEU, Art. 8). At the same time, it does not seem to have

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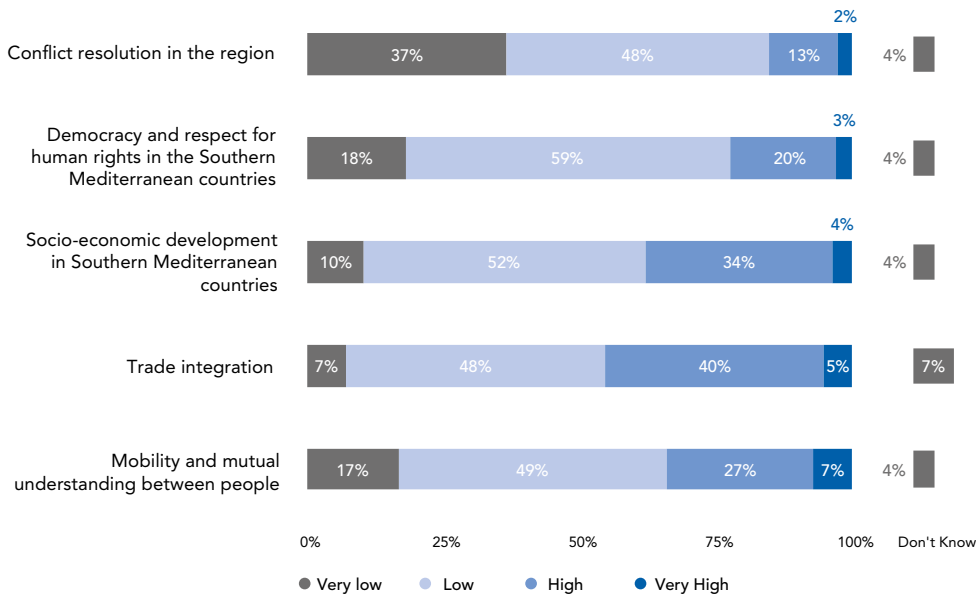
provided the EU with the necessary apparatus for promoting its values and interest, as per TEU, Art. 3.5.

At first sight, these results do not come as a surprise. While multiple crises occurring in the Southern Neighbourhood have marred these policy areas over the past years, the EU has been often unable to provide effective responses to them. Nonetheless, a closer look at the variation in percentages across policy sectors reveals an interesting pattern: the respondents' perception of the ENP's effectiveness on a given policy area seems to be positively correlated with the European integration of that policy area. In essence, the more a policy area features the involvement of EU institutions in member states' related policies, the more respondents have perceived the ENP to have had an effective impact on that policy area.

Significantly, EU activities rooted in the common foreign and security policy area, which functions according to an intergovernmental logic and does not envisage a discretionary role for EU institutions, scored the lowest percentages. Indeed, a vast majority of respondents considered the effectiveness of the ENP's implications on democracy and the respect for human rights, as well as on conflict resolution to have been between low and very low (77% and 85%, respectively). EU activities rooted in highly integrated policy areas, conversely, scored the highest percentages. In particular, the policy area with the highest percentage of positive responses is trade, with 45% of respondents believing that the effectiveness of the ENP's impact has been between high and very high. Socio-economic development is the policy area with the second-highest percentage of positive responses (38%). The ENP's impact on mobility and mutual understanding between people, which is largely rooted in EU migration policy, is considered slightly less effective (34%). It is true that the difference between this area and the area of socio-economic development is not very significant. It is relevant to note, however, that EU migration policy presents more intergovernmental features than EU development policy. Interestingly, this interpretation is in line with the most recent studies on the European integration of member states' foreign policies within the context of the European Neighbourhood Policy, as well as with studies on EU activities in global governance (Amadio Viceré & Hofmann, 2023; Amadio Viceré & Venneri, 2023). At the same time, these results resonate with pundits and scholars calling for a restructuring of the EU institutional construction. Especially, with those calling for a restructuring geared towards a deeper and thorough integration of member states policies across sectors (Fabbrini et al., 2023; Lehne, 2022).

When assessing ENP effectiveness, EU activities rooted in the common foreign and security policy area, scored the lowest percentages, while EU activities rooted in highly integrated policy areas scored the highest percentages.

**Graph 1: Q.1** The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) was designed 20 years ago. It became the structuring framework of Euro-Mediterranean relations. Since then, to what extent do you consider that it has effectively impacted the following areas?



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 14<sup>th</sup> Euromed Survey

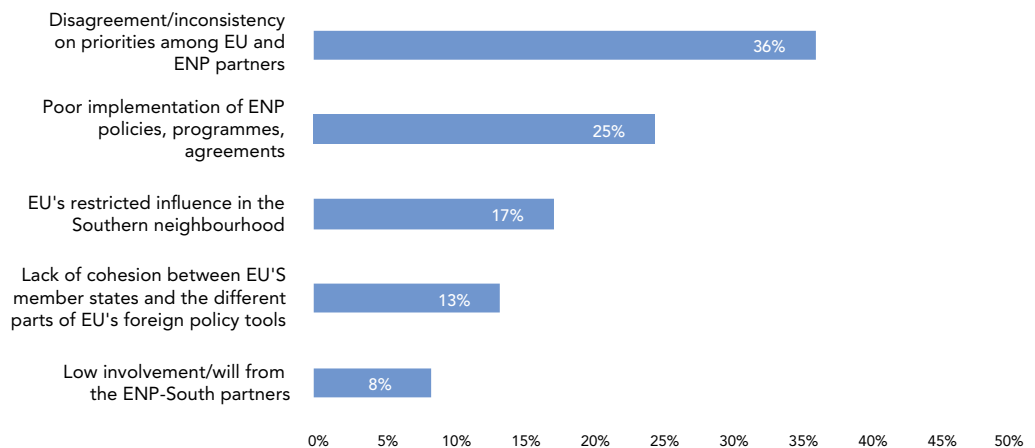
Still, integration dynamics – or the lack thereof – may not be sufficient to explain the ENP's limited impact on these policy areas. In fact, the EuroMeSCo Survey indicates that respondents consider disagreement and inconsistencies on priorities among EU and ENP partners as the main cause of the ENP's limited impact (see graph 2). True, the ENP has been scarred by such criticism ever since its first launch. Yet its persistence calls for the need of a conscious reflection process on the EU side. A reflection process that, according to some, should start from a decentering of EU foreign policy through a post-colonial understanding of its practices (Fisher-Onar & Nicolaïdis, 2013) and a greater effort towards the inclusion of the ethical and practical requests of EU partners (Wolff et al., 2022). Indeed, rather than being considered an ethical, normative power, the EU has been increasingly accused of organised hypocrisy in its approach to the Southern Neighbourhood over the past years (Cusumano, 2019; Longo, Panebianco, & Cannata, 2023).

Another cause of the ENP's limited impact, identified as particularly relevant by the survey's respondents, is the poor implementation of its policies, programs and agreements. This result may derive from external institutional dynamics. Some have argued in this regard, that an EU limited influence may be ascribed to the ENP reproduction of hierarchies between EU member states and ENP partners. Insofar as

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the ENP will remain a tool for political and economic integration, they claim, the EU will be largely unable to achieve democratic & economic reforms in its neighboring countries (Aarstad & Bremberg, 2017; Amadio Viceré & Fabbrini, 2017). Nonetheless, institutional dynamics internal to the EU may have hindered EU coherence and capability as well. The institutional architecture structuring the functioning of the ENP has been affected by rivalries among EU institutions, especially the European Commission and the European External Action Service. Additionally, the proliferation of EU institutional actors has often determined a dispersion of control, and hence limited the effectiveness of the ENP.

**Graph 2:** Q.1b In general terms or in relation to the specific areas mentioned above, why do you think the impact has been limited? (categories developed from open-ended answers)



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The survey respondents also ascribed the limited ENP's effectiveness to EU's restricted influence in the Southern Neighbourhood. While the Southern Mediterranean region has been at the center of the EU pursuit of its strategic autonomy, the 2021 New Agenda for the Mediterranean reiterated the region's strategic relevance for the EU (European Commission, 2019, 2021). Certainly, despite increasing competition from China, the United Arab Emirates and the United States, the EU is still the most influent trade partner of Southern Mediterranean countries (Amadio Viceré & Venneri, 2023). Yet, as the EU's absence from negotiations between Israel and Hamas over the past months shows, its influence is considerably limited in the region's security.

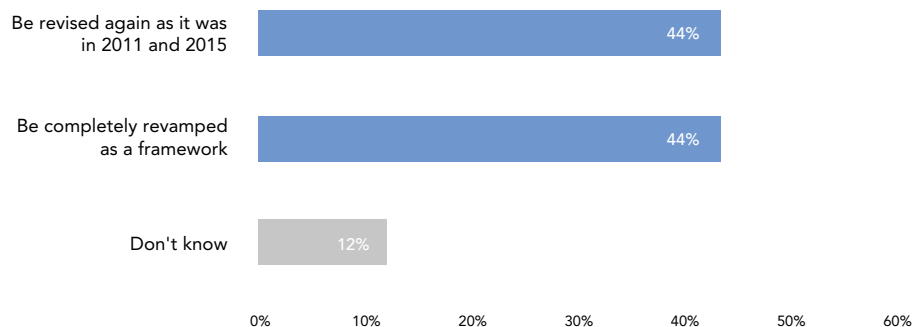
This pattern does not come as a surprise either. Indeed, the ENP has generally relied mostly on regulatory political and economic instruments rather than on security-

related tools. The overall lack of cohesion between EU member states and the different parts of the EU foreign policy tool is also identified as a cause behind the ENP limited impact. As discussed above, in fact, the preeminence of EU member states in certain policy sectors, coupled with the contested nature of EU geographical, political, and economic boundaries, has often led to decisions and policies reflecting the lowest common denominator consensus among member states (Hoffmann & Niemann, 2018). Lastly, only a limited number of respondents identified the low involvement/will on the side of the ENP-South partners as a cause behind the ENP's ineffectiveness. Such a result indicates that, despite the criticisms it faces, the EU is still perceived as a welcome partner by Southern Neighbourhood countries.

## Need for a Change

Is the ENP in need of a change? The EuroMeSCo Survey shows that there is widespread agreement about the need to change the ENP. While 44% of the respondents believe that the framework regulating EU interactions with its neighbors should be revised again as it was in 2011 and 2015, another 44% believes that it should be completely revamped as a framework.

**Graph 3:** Q.2 Since its inception in 2004, the ENP has been reviewed several times. The 2011, 2015 reviews, 2021 New Agenda for the Mediterranean. The ENP should:



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 14<sup>th</sup> Euromed Survey

In principle, revising the current ENP could be a first step towards tempering its limited impact on the effectiveness of EU engagement with the Southern Neighbourhood. Nevertheless, a simple revision is unlikely to be groundbreaking. Since its inception, the ENP underwent two major revisions, in 2011 and in 2015. Rather than addressing EU structural shortcomings, however, these revisions embodied EU rhetorical impulses and pragmatic – at times cynical – setbacks. The 2011 review was a response to events in the Arab world and was mainly geared towards sup-

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porting democratisation processes to change the EU pace after decades of implicit acquiescence to authoritarian regimes in the Southern Neighbourhood. With the 2015 review, against the backdrop of conflicts in the region and the “refugee crisis”, stabilisation once again became the main paradigm of the ENP. A securitising trend like this still taints EU’s approach to the region. The recent EU migration policy in Tunisia is an important example. While the EU de facto externalised the management of migration to Tunisia, its strategy failed from the very beginning with only minor decreases of migrants’ arrivals in Europe. Even worse, as the EU did not introduce meaningful accountability mechanisms for migration management by Tunisia, it led to widespread human rights’ violations (International Refugees, 2024).

More recently, as the Covid-19 was still raging, the 2021 New Agenda for the Mediterranean, proposed in the framework of the ENP, sought to relaunch and strengthen the strategic partnership between the EU and its Southern Neighbourhood partners.

An Economic and Investment Plan for the Southern Neighbours attached to the Agenda was to sustain the region’s long-term socio-economic recovery (European Commission, 2021). This notwithstanding, the Southern neighbourhood continued to face structural obstacles towards inclusive growth and competitive markets, which significantly impeded the region’s recovery from the pandemic-induced economic crisis, (OECD, 2021). Attributing these countries’ structural problems to the EU would not do justice to its engagement with the Southern Mediterranean region. Yet while capable of harmonising rules and boosting trade flows, the ENP’s overall reliance on the political use of economic interdependence has proven insufficient to address state fragility, poor governance structure, and the spread of corruption in the countries’ security sector (Amadio Viceré & Bonomi, 2021).

Conversely, revamping the ENP completely as a policy framework would address its shortcomings more effectively. A first step in this direction, as indicated by many of the survey respondents, could be employing a more geographically tailored approach to the Southern neighbourhood. The 2022 outbreak of the Russian war in Ukraine has provided the opportunity to do so. The war triggered a systemic change in the ENP by setting the basis for the accession of three ENP-East countries into the EU, namely Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. Albeit the ENP will still cover part of the Caucasus, such a change reflects a pattern that was already present in the past. Eastern European countries had been willing to access the EU ever since the demise of the Soviet Union. While their participation in the ENP was often perceived as an intermediate step towards becoming EU members, with the aspiration of escaping Russia’s imperialism, these countries have been generally keener than ENP-South countries to adapt to EU requests. Southern Neighbourhood countries, on the contrary, have often perceived the EU as a continuation of European countries’ colonial aspirations. This considered, the EU’s renewed approach should also be more compartmentalised, to consider specific countries’ aspirations and needs while striking a balance between them and EU priorities in the region.

The EU renewed approach should be more compartmentalised. Consider specific countries’ aspirations and needs while striking a balance between them and EU priorities in the region.

As a second step, the EU should go beyond the mere use of economic interdependence to achieve its political results. On the one hand, it should devise a strategy focused on its neighbours’ economic growth and make investments in its social and

human resources to foster these countries' societal resilience. Consistently engaging Southern Mediterranean countries in EU climate strategy, for instance, could catalyse structural changes in the region while fostering inclusive economic growth and good governance (Tocci et al., 2023). On the other hand, it should monitor more consistently these countries' use of its support, including when they manage migratory flows on its behalf. Finally, the EU should embed more consistently its common foreign and security policy tools into a revamped framework. As the US 2024 elections are looming over the US engagement in the Southern Mediterranean and the duration of the Israeli-Hamas war remains uncertain, this will be a crucial challenge for the EU. True, given the intergovernmental functioning of such tools and member states' divisions on security-related issues, achieving such a consistency may be very hard. Yet, as the EU response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine through the Instrument for Peace and Facility taught us, EU institutions could devise arrangements that may bridge the gap between EU security aspirations and its capabilities without excessively hindering member states' willingness to keep a tight control over EU foreign policy processes.

The EU should embed more consistently its common foreign and security policy tools into a revamped framework. As the US 2024 elections are looming over the US engagement in the Southern Mediterranean and the duration of the Israeli-Hamas war remains uncertain, this will be a crucial challenge for the EU.

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