



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

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Presentation of the European Neighbourhood Policy package

Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

European Parliament Foreign Affairs Committee, Brussels

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Mr Chairman, Honourable Members,

I am delighted to be able to come directly to you from today's meeting of the Commission where we adopted this year's set of reports on the European Neighbourhood Policy. Let me start right away with the conclusions we have drawn from the reports.

First, we are still only at the beginning of a process. It is clear that the transition to democracy, and its consolidation, where the transition has happened, will need time. What we have seen happening in Egypt, in Tunisia and in Libya, shows that the road to democracy is neither smooth nor short.

Second, our reports also show that elections are an important, but often only a first step towards democracy. Political reforms to ensure respect for fundamental rights and freedoms of assembly, association, expression and the media are still incomplete. In particular, it is important that the transition process leads to further progress regarding the equality of women before the law and in society. The lack of judicial independence remains a strong concern in many countries and so does corruption.

Third, socio-economic reforms will need even more time to yield results – however, the lack of results in itself threatens to undermine, or slow down, the process of democratisation. Our neighbours' citizens expect democracy, but they also need jobs. Let us not forget that the Arab Spring itself was triggered by economic frustrations as much as by political ones.

Fourth, irrespective of the difficulties, we need to maintain engagement in the Neighbourhood. Many of our neighbours want to come as close as possible to the European Union. And we have strong interests for Peace and Prosperity. While I am confident that we have the right policy framework, I think we need to focus our efforts on implementing our offer and communicating to populations in partner countries so that they can understand the concrete benefits of the European Union offer.

The challenges are still huge, but a number of our partners have also made significant efforts, and achieved results in the implementation of their reform commitments. We need to respond to the different pace and direction of reforms by differentiating even more between partners, in line with the 'more for more' principle.

The European Neighbourhood Policy works when the willingness to reform is there and civil society plays an active part in the process. A stronger partnership with civil society is central to this policy and will continue to remain central to this policy. We have continued to live up to our commitment to work with civil society, national parliaments and other key stakeholders such as social partners and business.

I am proud to note that in a recent Eurobarometer survey, people from our Neighbourhood, both in the East and South, noted that 'human rights' and 'solidarity' are the characteristics which best represent the EU. I feel that this is also the result of our continuing engagement.

We want to ensure that the reform objectives agreed with partner countries are a true reflection of their societies' concerns and aspirations and this is where the engagement of the European Parliament with parliaments of our partners is crucial. In Georgia, for instance, we have seen a challenging cohabitation after last October's democratic transfer of power – but constructive dialogue is taking place between the majority and minority in the Georgian parliament, and important practical steps have been taken to remedy post-election tensions around justice-related issues. This deserves the strongest possible encouragement.

The European Endowment for Democracy, which was set up last year, will also play an important role, supporting peaceful forces that work for democratic changes to happen, supporting the actors of change in our neighbourhood that face obstacles in accessing European Union funding.

Honourable Members,

Let me turn now to our on-going negotiations of association agreements, including Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas. We have made progress in negotiations with Moldova, Georgia and Armenia. Negotiations on an Association Agreement continue with Azerbaijan. Also, we have been able to conclude negotiations of the association agreement with Ukraine, but before signing it we need to see determined action and tangible progress in reform agenda, as well as in addressing concerns of selective justice and electoral shortcomings. We hope that the Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius this November will be a milestone in bringing our Eastern European partners closer to political association and economic integration.

In the South, we launched negotiations for a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area with Morocco a couple of weeks ago. We hope to be able to launch negotiations with Tunisia in the not too distant future, and we will continue the preparatory process with Jordan.

We continued to improve the mobility of people. Moldova in particular has taken an important step forward in the implementation of the Visa Liberalisation Action Plan, passing to its second phase, and we have started to discuss Visa Liberalisation with Georgia. Negotiations on a Mobility Partnership were concluded with Morocco, and have progressed with Tunisia. A dialogue on migration and mobility has started with Jordan. We also supported the mobility of students, academics, researchers, and young people through programmes like Tempus, Erasmus Mundus and Youth in Action.

Progress on this often sensitive topic is crucial – not only because it responds to one of the key expectations of our neighbours, but mobility of people brings with it the mobility of ideas and mobility of values. I intend to put more focus on this aspect of our cooperation in the near future.

Turning to our financial support for reforms in partner countries, we have continued using the whole range of instruments at our disposal. SPRING and EaPIC funds have been allocated to those who made more efforts in democratic reforms and respect for human rights. The second phase of the Civil Society Facility was adopted with a new budget of EUR 45.3 million for 2012–13.

You have probably noticed that this year the package of reports is published 2 months earlier than last year. This will allow us to take the assessments of the progress reports better into account for the annual programming of financial assistance to partners, according to the principle of "more for more".

We have also continued to promote regional cooperation both in the East and in the South. In the South in particular, the EU has been active to give a new sense of direction: we have taken over the northern Co-Presidency of the Union for the Mediterranean, and promoted regional cooperation in the Maghreb, through making concrete proposals in our Communication of last December and participation in the 5+5 meetings.

The European Neighbourhood Policy is a good example that shows how a comprehensive approach can be used to generate coherent action involving all relevant European Union actors – the European Union's institutions, the European Union's member states, and their financial institutions.

The European Neighbourhood Policy is not offering quick fixes. But it is the most comprehensive, and flexible, policy we have to engage with, and support our partners in the neighbourhood over the coming years.

Today more than ever, slower economic growth, higher unemployment, persisting inequalities, increasing environmental challenges and often declining socio-economic indicators make an even stronger case for the kind of reforms that are at the heart of the European Neighbourhood Policy.

Eastern Partnership countries need our continuous support to deliver on their commitments, and it is my conviction that they deserve an ambitious future. I'm talking here about the most powerful foreign policy instrument of the European Union and the expression of its ultimate transformative power - the perspective for a country to accede, as provided by Article 49 of the Treaty on European Union if it shares our principles of freedom, democracy and respect for the rule of law.

In the South, we are offering integration in the extended European economic zone. This will be of course a gradual prospect, but at the end of it, our partners should enjoy the benefits of integration in the vast EU single market. Of course, this requires accepting the values and principles on which our single market is based. In this context, we hope to see democratic transitions continue in the South, and will continue supporting them.

I appreciate your growing and active role in the implementation of the European Neighbourhood Policy. Democracy is at its heart and it is parliaments, together with the civil society, who need to be the main drivers of democratic reforms.

In conclusion, let me stress that the EU's relationship with each one of its partners is unique. We will increasingly need to differentiate our policy response, in line with the different developments, ambitions and needs of our partners. The ENP provides us with the framework to respond to our partners' aspirations for their relationship with the EU.

As I said at the beginning, the EU needs to remain engaged in our neighbourhood all the more at this point in time, and I count on the continuing commitment of this Parliament that our joint endeavours are successful.

Thank you for your attention.