



### **Remarks for discussion for the conference:**

#### **“How to improve the European Neighbourhood Policy? Concepts, perceptions and policy recommendations for its Eastern dimension”**

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### **The EU's relationship with its eastern and southern neighbours**

*Michele Comelli\**

The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) was set up as a sort of “interim policy” to manage the EU's relations with its new eastern neighbours, in a spirit of wishful thinking that the geopolitical void left by the demise of the USSR would continue and the EU could transform its new eastern members by relying on the conditionality and socialisation techniques of enlargement. While the ENP has shown many shortcomings in transforming the EU's neighbours, some of its elements should be maintained, while others should be revised. First, the idea of integrating the EU's (eastern) neighbours more into the EU's gravitational orbit is a good one: the risk is that these countries could feel excluded or even rejected by the EU. At a time when enlargement is at a stalemate, it is important for these countries to be engaged with the EU. The distinction between EU and non-EU members should be more blurred, so that countries that are not candidates can nonetheless cooperate with the EU and even participate in some of its policies. Of course, the membership perspective cannot be denied – in the long term – to European neighbours, such as Moldova and Ukraine. EU engagement is particularly important since the economic and financial crisis has hit these countries severely. Simply underestimating or ignoring this is not an option, given the potential negative spill-overs which could, for example, take the form of a massive influx of immigrants or the exposure of banks from the EU countries that have invested in neighbouring countries, such as Ukraine. Also, the EU needs to reconsider some of its restrictive visa policies towards eastern – as well as southern – neighbours. In other words, the EU has to offer its neighbours more attractive benefits: otherwise the traditional appeal of the EU-model – in terms of democracy, social model and even way of life – will not be enough and they may turn to other countries, meaning Russia. Belarus is a case in point: the policy of isolating Belarus has proved to be counterproductive.

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\* Senior Fellow, Istituto Affari Internazionali, Rome.

The EU should not grant Russia a veto on its Eastern policy, but a dialogue with Russia is necessary on security issues. The Eastern Partnership's decision to involve third countries (read Russia and Turkey) on a case by case basis is a step in the right direction. The real test, however, is to involve Russia on security issues, especially concerning intra- and inter-state conflicts.

The pendulum of the EU's focus in the neighbourhood has currently shifted eastwards: while the ENP has achieved some (although limited) success in the east and a new policy has been launched – the Eastern Partnership – in the south, the picture is less clear. The newly launched Union for the Mediterranean is, as was the case with the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, hostage to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Therefore, the EU should become a more active player in the Middle East Peace Process, taking on real political and diplomatic initiative. Many important goals of the EU's Mediterranean policy have not yet been achieved, such as the creation of a Euro-Mediterranean free trade area or the approval of a Euro-Mediterranean Charter on Security. It is high time to relaunch an attempt to implement them. Secondly, the EU is not considered an anchor for reform in these countries, and the people do not view the EU as a model (even though there is no other third country that acts as a counter-model here). In order to gain appeal, the EU has to offer these countries some benefits, such as visa liberalisation, in particular for students. Thirdly, the EU should show more political ambition in its relations with these countries instead of limiting itself to cooperating on economic projects. Fourthly, an effective communication policy is badly needed when dealing with Southern Mediterranean countries, especially to counterbalance the discourse on the “clash of civilisations” and the doubts and fears that southern neighbours have with regard to the European security and defence policy.

Finally, the EU must understand that with the emergence of new rising powers (especially China in the south) and the comeback of old powers (Russia in the east), it is facing fierce competition for leadership in its neighbourhood.