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The Eastern Partnership 3.0: Change or Continuity?

By Elena Korosteleva, Irina Petrova and Igor Merheim-Eyre

In an effort to address multiple challenges the EU is facing in its eastern neighbourhood, Brussels has recently published a new strategy 'Eastern Partnership Policy beyond 2020'. Elena Korosteleva, Irina Petrova and Igor Merheim-Eyre reflect on the proposed changes and argue that success will depend on the EU's ability to realise the full potential of resilience, with a particular focus on local ownership and genuine partnerships.

The EaP 2020: revising again?

The 2020 [Eastern Partnership \(EaP\) Revision](#) marks a new step in the EU's evolving approach to its neighbourhood to make its governance more effective and tangible. Two themes continue to run central to the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP)'s various iterations (2008/2009; 2011; 2015 and 2020) demonstrating both change and continuity with the past. These are *differentiation* and *flexibility*, being underdeveloped from the onset, and becoming progressively more ambitious – now aiming to strengthen local ownership as partners' core commitment, and to facilitate resilience as a new paradigm for more effective EU governance.

Initially launched as a single policy template ('Enlargement-lite') for 16 neighbouring countries, the ENP was revised in [2008/2009](#) to bring in much-needed differentiation accounting for profound differences between two regions - the Union for Mediterranean and the Eastern Partnership - and the need to embrace [all-level actors](#) via a two-track approach to make EU governance more effective. This and the next rounds of revisions ([2011](#) & [2015](#)) also initiated more flexibility introducing a variety of *instruments* and *modes of partnership* to better cater for partner needs. This included new tailored bilateral framework agreements, multiple financial, technical and thematic instruments, as well as revised progress reporting procedures. By 2015 one could observe a [gradual shift](#) away from viewing 'differentiation' and 'flexibility' as a form of 'deviation' from a common EU template, to develop more 'decentred' and [locally-vested partnerships](#), between Brussels and the neighbours. The question, however, remained how much real change did the EU want to contemplate, still being driven by pre-set reforms and instruments, with partners feeling increasingly disappointed about professed [differentiation](#) and their [ownership](#) of the initiative.

And yet, greater involvement of local stakeholders, articulated as the 'whole-society approach' in the [2015 ENP review](#), served as a stepping stone towards engendering a new governance paradigm - 'resilience' inaugurated by the [EU Global Security Strategy](#) in 2016. Resilience was meant to encapsulate all the [reflective changes](#) in the EU policy cycles towards the wider neighbourhood to date, aiming to make EU governance, finally, ['more adaptive'](#) and responsive to change, and the needs of partner-countries, drawing more on the bottom-up stakeholder engagement and local ownership, with external assistance as necessary.

Putting resilience to practice however has proven even more challenging, not least because this vision has not synced well with a stabilisation package of ['20 deliverables for 2020'](#) aiming to streamline partners' priorities. It also required radical change in [EU governance-thinking](#) - to enable self-organisation to resolve local problems. [In theory](#), the resilience approach naturally shifts attention from international and state actors and their predefined development policies to local actors, directly zooming into a problem, because in a complex world these can only be dealt with via bottom-up and inside-out means, employing local knowledge, preferences and resources.

What's 'new' in the new EaP iteration 2020?

The [Joint Communication 2020](#) identifies five common aims: of better integrated economies; functioning legal institutions; sustainable environment; digital transformation; and more inclusive societies - all connected to resilience as an 'overriding policy framework' (p. 4) to 'deliver tangible results for people' (p.2). It is arguably the most detailed EaP strategy that has been produced by the Commission to date. It seemingly goes beyond the rhetorical normative demands with little substance or direction for their implementation, and instead focuses on concrete sector-specific initiatives relevant to everyone - e.g. support for public health, energy efficiency, digital transformation, inclusion and better connectivity via the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) and support for SMEs.

Differentiation remains a core theme of this iteration, exemplified by set-aside 'association agendas' for the front-runners and sectoral negotiations with the other partners. Joint programming, support for reform policies (rather than projects) including collaboration with international financial institutions (IFIs) are seen as part of the continuing flexibility thread, vital for further policy enhancement. Both components aim to 'strengthen joint ownership and partnership' (p. 17) between the EU and neighbourhood countries, inclusive of all-level stakeholders, with a particular emphasis on civil society organisations as a cornerstone for developing more resilient EaP architecture.

The core challenges however still remain: first, the 'existing structures' have been developed following the EU-predicated templates, which may have limited resonance with finding adaptive solutions to the problems at source (locally); and second, 'the overriding framework of resilience' still requires radical change in EU-thinking, to precisely ensure bottom-up, and inside-out self-governance, to better respond to the increasingly [complex and uncontrollable world](#).

Will it work: no more a buzzword but not quite a silver bullet?

The new strategy is clearly more than just resilience-based 'buzzword' but not yet quite a 'silver bullet' to solve all the deficiencies of EU partnership with the eastern neighbourhood. Despite all the continuing limitations pertaining to 'differentiation' and 'flexibility', there may be some silver-lining in the new revision, though it depends on how the following three issues are resolved.

Resilience and local ownership: Fostering societal resilience, as part of the [composite resilience framework](#) (of state, society and community) is crucial, for this is the most adequate way to manage complexity and unpredictability. While resilience was set as a new governance paradigm in [2012](#) and further developed in [2016](#), [2017](#) and [now](#), in practice the EU has done little to break away from the mainstream [modernisation paradigm](#) (which over the past two decades has proven irrelevant). There is still a long way to go to live up to the goal of embracing [resilience as self-governance](#), with partners defining their priorities and dealing with problems using local knowledge and resources, with EU advice and assistance as necessary.

For this to happen, not only should the EU allow more differentiation; it must also be more flexible with its instruments to encourage bottom-up capacity-building and wider participation in its programmes. This also means going beyond the established and professionalised NGOs with a financial absorption capacity (using re-granting) to make support for smaller/local initiatives more accessible for all types of stakeholders (e.g. SMEs & local authorities). An EaP CSF-lite type initiative to give voice to businesses and other actors in local agenda-setting would go a long way to engender true local ownership and secure solutions befitting their 'good life' aspirations.

Genuine Partnership: Despite the capital letter 'P' in the Eastern Partnership, much work is still to be done on developing individual partnerships. In particular, there may well be concerns that increased differentiation might challenge the cohesion of the framework; and so would the equal treatment of the less 'inclined'. However, as the [analysis](#) shows, more inclusive engagement and tailored incentivisation, especially of the latter, are more likely to yield benefits for all. This is to say that if more is in store for the three Association Agreement (AA) frontrunners; an equal (if not greater) engagement is needed for the non-AA partners, to avoid disenfranchisement.

The EU must also be clearer on how to engage with other global actors present in the region. The lack of reference to the specific actors (e.g. Russia and China) who are concurrently engaged with the region, signals ambiguity and indecisiveness which is exactly the opposite to the EU's own vision for more [cooperative orders](#) to be facilitated across the wider region.

Beyond the pandemic: finally, like all policies, the EaP too will need to face the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the initially slow response on the EU level, the Commission [announced](#) the redirecting of up to €700m in funding to support the six countries, be it in the purchase of strategic medical equipment, or providing credit to SMEs and liquidity to the governments. These are impressive measures to help fend off the crisis. Its aftermath, however, will require more - especially in terms of understanding how economic downturn will impact the EU multiannual financial framework and, thereby, the EaP priorities, and what help is needed to jump-start developing economies.

The EU has an important stake in helping all six countries in weathering the current storm and addressing the broader socio-economic and geopolitical challenges by fostering resilience and mutualising partnership. In this regard, the 2020 EaP revision offers an important strategy which must now be backed by a political will, and continued solidarity across the EU. The current pandemic and its effect will make this all the more necessary.

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