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Evaluating the role of partnership in the European Neighbourhood Policy: the Eastern neighbourhood

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Abstract

After recent enlargements, the EU sought to develop a new strategy that would incentivise rather than compel, in the absence of a membership prospect, the neighbours for reform. The concept of partnership was placed on the agenda as a supplementary tool of EU governance to offset negative externalities of convergence and compliance. However, it has taken the EU three conceptual iterations to finally identify a suitable frame for engagement. This paper posits that the EU is currently at a critical juncture observing an important shift in its modus operandi – away from hierarchical coordination and control, to more networked relations of self-censorship and ownership, designed to operate through a complex matrix of grass-root initiatives to penetrate all levels of society. To make it an effective model for the future external relations, the EU still requires two important elements – institutionalisation of the new governance structure, and learning about ‘the other’, to mobilise partners’ support for reciprocal and sustainable cooperation.

Keywords: European Union, European Neighbourhood Policy, Eastern Partnership

1. Introduction

The 2004 & 2007 enlargements have had a profound effect on the European Union (EU) as a polity. Not only did they alter the EU’s geographical, political and socio-economic landscapes, making it the third largest population in the world after China and India.¹ More fundamentally, they forced a reassessment of the EU’s *way of thinking* regarding its frontiers, and its role vis-à-vis its external environment. Excluding the Balkan region, the EU acquired

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¹ For more factual information visit http://europa.eu/about-eu/facts-figures/living/index_en.htm.

sixteen new neighbours in the South and the East, which were as culturally diverse, as they were different in their levels of GDP and political stability. Therefore, how to frame relations with its immediate neighbourhood – bearing in mind the EU’s ambitions to develop into a “real global player” (Prodi, 2002, p. 2) – became one of the most pressing issues for the EU at the time, also precipitating discussion of inclusion, resource capability and borders.

The toolbox of strategies for EU external relations until recently, had been rather unsophisticated and heavily relied on the *direct governance* framework with hierarchy and conditionality being at its heart. Essentially, pertaining to degrees of geographical proximity, these included the enlargement strategy and aid relations with third world countries.

The *enlargement strategy* has proven rather effective in modelling EU external relations with its immediate neighbours, often being referred to as “unarguably the Union’s most successful foreign policy instrument” (Commission 2003, p. 5). Premised on strict conditionality and top-down rule transfer,² with EU membership serving as a ‘golden carrot’ for compliance, this instrument, however, on its own, would have had limited relevance and applicability to the territories “seen as separate from the question of EU accession” (ibidem).

At the other end of the spectrum - and at a distance - the EU has also enjoyed a proven track-record of aid cooperation with third world countries yet again premised on strict conditionality but not necessarily demanding full convergence with the vast body of EU *acquis*. This model of EU relations with the outside too would have proven less satisfactory to ensure ‘good neighbourhood’, for which it was not the only aid provider or indeed a ‘pole of attraction’, and which did not have a carrot of membership either.

Nevertheless, alignment by the neighbours with EU norms and regulations – *acquis communautaire* – was regarded as strategically important for the EU, to ensure stability, prosperity and security on its periphery, and to increase its influence internationally (European Security Strategy, 2003). Hence, developing a credible and effective framework of engagement with the neighbourhood region (especially eastwards) became a critical priority for the EU.

While striding through a number of conceptual iterations and competing visions,³ the EU sought to offer a more flexible approach to the neighbours – “more than partnership and less than membership” (Prodi, 2002, p. 4) - which would preserve its right for coordination/control, but also safeguard local interest

² This approach is referred here as ‘external governance’, and is premised on hierarchy, involuntary compliance and disciplinary engagement in the process of adoption of EU *acquis communautaire* by the outsiders.

³ For more elaborate discussion of the competing visions of the ENP by the Commission, the European Parliament, and the Council see Korosteleva 2012, Introduction.

and ownership. Hence, from the start, the principles of *differentiation*, *interdependence* (Commission, 2003, pp. 2-6), and *reciprocity* “when the two sides are clear about the mutual advantages and the mutual obligations” (Prodi 2002, p. 4) were directly embedded in the EU discourse of relations with the neighbours. Furthermore, the new framework also aspired to bring neighbours as “close to the Union as it can be without being a member”, especially those who “wish[ed] to implement further reforms... in building their capacity to align with and implement parts of the *acquis communautaire*” (Commission, 2003, p. 10).⁴ Additionally, a *benchmark approach* was identified to supplement traditional conditionality to ensure, where possible, ‘national ownership and commitment’ (ibidem, p. 16). In a nutshell, the new strategy envisaged an increasing role for *partnership* as an incentivising concept, to complement the EU’s traditional approach of coordination and control – *governance* – in the neighbourhood.

By 2004, the concept of *partnership* was firmly on the agenda generally referred to as “the privileged relationship with neighbours” (Commission, 2004, p. 3). However in terms of its substantive underpinnings it remained surprisingly hazy. Conceptually, it was conceived as *distinctive* but supplementary to the traditional *governance* approach, “building on existing policies and arrangements” (Commission, 2003, p. 15). Methodologically, the separation was even less clear cut. Benchmarking in the finalised Strategy Paper (Commission, 2004) and subsequent official documents was replaced by *conditionality* as a driver for reform: “The ENP is based on the same kind of conditionality which we had already used to promote reform [during enlargement]” (Landaburu, 2006, p. 3). Furthermore, the design of policy instruments (Action Plans and assistance instruments) to a considerable degree replicated those used under the enlargement process (Tulmets, 2011); whereas the Commission’s personnel were almost entirely staffed by those with prior experience of formal enlargement (Kelley, 2006).

Consequently, by 2006/7 the EU’s partnership-building with neighbours vividly stagnated becoming rhetorically driven, and in the light of neighbours’ reluctance to reform under the rigid hierarchical framework of *governance*, had to be substantially revisited to make the ENP stronger and more appealing for the partner countries (Commission, 2007). Thereafter, references to partnership in EU official documents noticeably increased, leading to the development of new regional partnership initiatives in 2008 – the Union for the Mediterranean in the South and the Eastern Partnership (EaP) in the East. The EU also expanded its engagement to all levels of society (e.g. Civil Society Forum) thus moving further towards more networked and seemingly more effective relationships of ‘self-censorship’ and ‘local ownership’. These developments consequently raise a number of important questions explicitly alluding to the *role of partnership* in

⁴ ‘More for more approach’ as it came to be known in 2011 (Commission, 2011).

EU relations with neighbours. In particular, one would posit whether the concept of partnership has finally assumed its centrality in the EU's discourse and practice in the neighbourhood; and if so, what consequences and potentially new dynamics this would entail for the EU traditional governance⁵ framework? What are the principal features of the EU's *new modus operandi* under the EaP, and what implications this might have for the promotion of the EU's image as a "credible force for good" (Solana, 2007) in the region and globally?

These and other questions are examined in this article focusing on the evolution of partnership as an important concept and practice (to make EU governance work), and its role in EU relations with the (eastern) neighbours.⁶ The article will proceed as follows. First, the nature and role of partnership as a concept in IR and in EU external relations will briefly be defined and juxtaposed against the governance framework. It will be suggested that partnership, although considered crucial for developing a more flexible approach to the neighbourhood to offset the rigidity of EU governance, was not initially prominent on the agenda. In the second section we will examine the EU's 2nd generation policy, the *Eastern Partnership*, launched in 2008 as 'a more ambitious' and focused regional instrument of EU governance in the east. It will be demonstrated that whilst partnership has gradually assumed more prominence, it still remains deficient of its intended impact. In the final section, and by way of conclusion, we will explore the EU reflexive attempts to propel the notion of partnership, after its 3rd iteration (Commission, 2011), to its proper meaning engaging all levels of society in a complex matrix of networked interactions. It will be contended that partnership, nevertheless, still omits a core element – the EU's understanding and inclusion of *the other* into the partnership formula.

2. Defining partnership in IR

Partnership as a concept in IR has proved to be as elusive to "realize as to analyse" (Milner, 1992, p. 466). Scholars nevertheless agree to define it as occurring "when actors adjust their behaviour to the actual or anticipated

⁵ Governance here is interpreted as a system of coordination and control signifying both structure and process whereby the *former* relates to the institutions and actor constellations, while *the latter* reflects modes/ways of coordination/control by which actors adjust their behaviour (Börzel, 2010, p. 194). EU external governance more specifically implies top-down rule-transfer and conditionality to assure partner countries' convergence with the body of EU regulations and norms – *acquis communautaire* (for more discussion see Korosteleva, 2012 - chapter 2; Lavenex, 2004, 2009; Börzel, 2010; Kohler-Koch and Rittberger, 2006).

⁶ Although the concept of partnership in its earlier iterations will be discussed with reference to the ENP as a whole, its actual practice and evolution thereafter will be traced by focusing on the eastern dimension only.

preferences of others, through a process of policy coordination” (Keohane, in Milner, 1992:467; Oye, 1986; Axelrod, 1984; Grieco, 1990). For partnership to occur actors should employ with *two elements*: first, they should align their strategies to achieve *mutual goals*; and second, that such cooperation should entail *mutual gains* or rewards for the participating sides. “The gains need not be the same in magnitude or kind for each state, but they are mutual” (Milner, 1992, p. 468). Partnership, therefore, presupposes both a *process* whereby each set of actors learn about the other as well as the adjustment of each set of actors behaviours to suit the other, and the *outcome* should lead to the joint ownership of goals and benefits.

There also seems to be a general scholarly consensus regarding the strategies by which partnership may be achieved. Oft-cited instances include the strategy of reciprocity (Axelrod, 1984; Keohane, 1986), iteration hypothesis (Axelrod, 1984; Snidal, 1991) and international regimes hypothesis (Krasner, 1991).

The strategy of reciprocity is of particular relevance to the analysis of EU relations with neighbours. As Keohane contends, reciprocity refers to:

...exchanges of roughly equivalent values in which the actions of each party are contingent on the prior actions of the others in such a way that good is returned for good, and bad for bad. These exchanges are often, but not necessarily, mutually beneficial; they may be based on self-interest as well as on shared concepts of rights and obligations; and the value of what is exchanged may or may not be comparable (Keohane, 1986, p. 8, italics original).

Reciprocity may be *specific* entailing immediate trade-offs, or *diffuse*, anticipating long-term benefits engendered through joint commitments and mutual trust. In order for diffuse reciprocity to take effect, specific reciprocity should prove beneficial. Such a *consequential* relationship is more likely to generate trust and commitment, based on mutual experience as a result of recurrent or expanding forms of cooperation, and may lead to more intensified exchanges in the future, in anticipation of long-term gains. This *dialectic* of specific and diffuse reciprocity is instructive in the sense that it explicates the formation of the virtuous circle of trust in partnerships: the relationship driven primarily by *self-interest* of participating sides progresses from initially experiencing immediate revenues to eventually assuring commitment to the pursuance of shared goals. In relation to the EU partnership approach in the neighbourhood, tangible benefits are essential to initiate cooperation; however, in order to induce a long-term relationship, developing a reciprocal sense of *commitment* to mutual goals and gains, is essential.

The iteration hypothesis, in turn, acknowledges the importance of *continuing* cooperation, and partners' awareness of their determinate future. It argues that effectiveness of cooperation is influenced by the future certainty of their relationship: "the more heavily the future is discounted, the less likely is cooperation" (Milner, 1992, p. 474).

The international regime hypothesis, in turn, recognises the relevance of specific functions that international organisations may perform to imbue best practices and uphold the rules of the game (Keohane, 1986; Abrahamsen, 2004; Nappini, 2005; Wilkins, 2012). In the context of EU external relations, it is certainly the EU who should take the lead, but should do so in a manner whereby reciprocity and learning are adequately maintained.

In summary, partnership in IR recognises the importance of *equivalence* in partners' behaviour, as well as *reciprocity* with pertinent rule/incentive structures and *determinate future* to imbue sustainable cooperation. Hence, in order to be effective, partnership presumes both *a learning process* about partners' needs and preferences, as well as *an anticipated outcome*, which may initially be driven by *self-interest* and eventually shaped by joint *commitment* to the assured future of *mutual* benefits and goals.

3. The concept of partnership in the ENP: 1st generation

As originally stated, partnership is as difficult to realize, as to qualify. As the EU's experience with third countries has proven, partnerships often become "more illusion than reality (Fowler, 1998, p. 137), and signify many 'big ideas' (Crawford, 2003, p. 139) but have little substance to draw upon. Indeed, in the words of a senior External Action Service official, 'the EU does not have a fixed, but an evolving meaning of "partnership", also deploying different meanings for different parties'⁷. This instrumental rather than substantive use of partnership has also been corroborated by ENP officials in framing relations with the neighbours, implying that partnership is merely 'a means to an end', an 'instrument for co-opting partner countries' in the process of convergence with the EU.⁸

In the light of this instrumental utility of *partnership* in EU external relations, a three-type taxonomy of the concept vis-à-vis the EU traditional governance framework may generally be discerned: (i) partnership as *subordinate* to EU governance best exemplified by EU aid relations with third countries; (ii) partnership as *supplementary* to EU governance framework, as conceived for the neighbourhood, and finally, (iii) partnership as *autonomous* of governance, as illustrated by EU strategic partnerships with key international players (i.e. the US, Russia, China). While partnerships in EU aid relations

⁷ Author's interview, Bruges, 6 September 2010.

⁸ Author's interview, Bratislava, 3 March 2011.

largely remain ‘externally driven, shaped and influenced by international agencies, in contrast to a sovereign process where national actors direct and control a reform programme, which is then implemented jointly as a shared goal by internal and external actors’ (Crawford 2003, p. 143), as is envisaged in the case of the ENP; strategic partnerships imply more balanced and interest-driven relations of equivalence and generally adhere to mutual principles of game-keeping (Grevi and Vasconcelos, 2008).

As noted earlier, the concept of partnership in the ENP seems to occupy the middle ground on the partnership-governance nexus. It was conceived to supplement the EU’s existing arrangements with the third countries (governance framework), but also to develop its own apparatus⁹ to offset the deficiencies of hierarchical governance, and aid the implementation of mutual goals and the maximisation of mutual gains.

There seems to be, at least on a discourse level,¹⁰ an important conceptual shift to view partnership not merely as an additional instrument to enforce *unquestionable* compliance in the process of transference of EU rules and norms (as is in EU aid relations with third countries). In the new iteration, partnership has essentially begun to designate an act of *negotiated or deliberated* compliance supplementary to the *hierarchical mode of governance*, thus affording some forum for joint decision-making, in this way bringing ‘the other’ into the equation. In this case, the EU’s traditional *acquis*-approach to third countries under the ENP, at least in theory, now envisages more room for *reciprocal* measures and *joint* initiatives to ensure motivated and sustainable cooperation between the parties.

Nevertheless, this conceptual ‘in-betweenness’¹¹ of partnership *as a supplementary instrument of governance* – that is, no longer serving as a governance tool, but not yet a fully autonomous framework either – deployed to make EU coordination and control more credible for the neighbourhood, has added little utility to the concept and its realisation. In real terms, the concept of partnership, in the earlier pronouncements of the ENP, remained poorly defined, controversial and under-utilised in practice.

⁹ This not only refers to the method of benchmarking, which is non-binding and partner-conscious, but also to the partnership’s instruments of joint ownership and shared values.

¹⁰ One has to note that the EU rhetoric does not often coincide with practice: this was particularly instructive in the early iterations of the ENP policy in relation to the notion of ‘partnership’.

¹¹ For more discussion on the ‘in-betweenness’ and ‘undecidedness’ of EU foreign policy, see Bulley (2009).

3.1. Definition

Essentially the notion of partnership was propelled into the EU discourse by what was perceived to be an obvious asymmetry of power relations between the EU and candidate countries during the enlargement process (Lynch, 2004; Grabbe, 2006; Kelley, 2006; Smith, 2005). Hence, with the launch of the ENP, the partnership's mission was to reconcile potential asymmetries and to placate the prospect of partners' discontent with EU top-down governance, by offering them stake in the process of agenda setting and in the form of reform outcomes. Although the concept of partnership remained scantily defined in the earlier versions of the ENP, its meaning received some elaboration with the launch of the partnership's instruments – of joint ownership, mutual responsibilities and shared values – which were put in place to facilitate motivation and commitment on the neighbours' side.

3.2. Controversy

These new instruments, especially of 'shared values' and 'joint ownership', however, brought more controversy than they offered prospective utility. In particular, while 'shared values' were often used interchangeably with 'common values' in the EU official discourse, thus causing etymological confusion,¹² their actual meaning also precipitated a discussion of ownership. The resultant '*whose values*' debate posited whether 'shared values' should be EU-owned, internationally based (then raising a question of EU exclusivity as a club, Tonra, 2010) or indeed jointly gestated. This acknowledged the plurality of normative discourses and forced the concept permanently onto the EU democracy promotion agenda (Sadiki, 2004; Kurki, 2010; Youngs, 2010). Essentially, it questioned the unilateral right and legitimacy of EU governance in third countries, whose relationship with the EU was explicitly devoid of a membership prospect.¹³

Joint ownership, as another constitutive instrument of partnership, in the early ENP documents, built on the implicit understanding of 'shared values'. It contended that it was not only the outcome but the actual process of partnership-building that should equally satisfy all parties concerned:

Joint ownership of the process, based on the awareness of shared values and common interests, is essential. The EU does not seek to impose priorities or conditions on its partners. The Action Plans depend, for their success, on the clear recognition of mutual interests... There can be no

¹² 'Shared' essentially implies 'having ownership', while 'common' means 'often occurring'.

¹³ For more discussion of this see Korosteleva, 2012, chapter 1.

question of asking partners to accept a pre-determined set of priorities. These will be defined by common consent... (Commission, 2004, p. 8).

Many scholars (Sasse, 2008; Nikolov, 2008; Kelley, 2006) however noted 'the inherent tension' between joint ownership and conditionality highlighting that 'joint ownership emphasized the (potential) equality in the relationship', whereas the ENP remained "inherently unilateral [as] was epitomized by the highly specific conditionality [of the Action Plans]" (Cremona and Hillion, 2006, p. 21).

3.3. Practice

In the light of the limited transcription of partnership and its instruments, the utility of its practice became inhibited and indeed unfit for the purpose of fashioning EU governance as a more flexible and credible framework to engender partners' commitment. Consequently, partnership in the EU's earlier interactions with the neighbourhood (2004-07) was ascribed a residual role in the process of agenda-setting and reform administration. It was also unequivocally regarded by Brussels officials as an instance of governance involving 'projection of *our* model into the neighbourhood', and 'enabling *us* to decide for them and reform them'.¹⁴ Relations with neighbours became explicitly framed by EU strategic interests and priorities revealed a security-predicated rationalism of EU rhetoric (Youngs, 2004, p. 421), and driven by non-negotiable compliance to fulfil the EU's objectives:

It was a long overdue recognition that the EU's interests are tightly bound up with developments in its eastern and southern borders and we need stable and predictable relationships with our neighbours. In short: if we don't 'export' stability, we risk 'importing' instability (Ferrero-Waldner, 2009, p. 2).

The residual view of partnership had not only framed the EU official discourse; it affected partners' perceptions and behaviour too, resulting in their criticism of and disengagement with the process (Korosteleva, 2011; Wolczuk, 2011):

The partnership is rhetoric only. When it comes to real interests, Ukraine is critically restrained in choice and ambitions (Member, Party of Reform and Order, Kyiv, January 2009).

¹⁴ Author's interview with a senior official, RELEX DDG2 E2, 6 October 2009 (emphasis added).

If partners are equal, they negotiate to reach common grounds. It looks like though EU officials have their own explanations for not following this rule: they clearly choose partners to their liking (Deputy Minister, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Minsk, September 2009).

Of course we are not equal partners, and we should realise and accept this! We aspire to become a younger brother, who should look up and obey the big brother's orders (Member, Social Democratic Party, Chisinau, December 2008)¹⁵.

As the Commission's assessment report on the implementation of the ENP in 2006 expressly indicated, "within each Action Plan, the governance field is perhaps the most difficult in which to achieve and measure progress... The ambitious reform agendas can only be achieved in the longer haul, and much remains to be done" (Commission, 2006, p. 2, p. 6). Partner countries pointed to increased pressure and demand from the EU, and insisted on a renewed *reciprocity* and dialogue: "A far more promising position is such that rests on a reverse sequence of actions: joint interests first, then these interests will evolve into common and even shared values. Only through equal interaction we can build shared values: some odd ones will erase, and the shared one will surface" (Chairman of Foreign Affairs Committee, House of Representatives, Minsk, September 2009).

In summary, partnership as it had been first gestated under the ENP, should have added greater value to the EU governance framework, but owing to its insufficient transcription, instead resulted in limited practicable use. In its initial reading, partnership appeared to be contradictorily guided by both mutual goals/benefits, as in the manner of true partnership, but also demanded partners' allegiances and unconditional commitment to the *EU's* rules and norms. The structure of incentives offered to the partners, in the absence of a membership perspective, was loose and indeterminate, while the instruments used to promote governance strongly echoed the enlargement process albeit without a defined finality. Devoid of tangible (immediate) benefits of specific reciprocity (Keohane, 1986), it is hard to envisage the conversion of long-term promises into partners' commitment to painful reform and the gains of an uncertain future.

Partnership's 'in-betweenness' or indeed 'undecidedness' impelled the EU's reversal to its traditional governance by setting agendas and driving convergence through conditionality and rule transfer. This conceptual ambivalence of partnership whereby partners' needs/preferences were 'heard'

¹⁵ Author's interviews, ESRC project (RES-061-25-0001). For more information visit <http://www.aber.ac.uk/en/interpol/research/research-projects/europeanising-securitising-outsiders/>.

rather than ‘listened to’, evidently failed to render effective cooperation (Milner, 1992). Instead it revealed a considerable power imbalance embedded in the EU’s developing relations with its neighbours. In 2007 the Commission communicated to the European Parliament and the Council, that the ENP should become, once more, a “partnership for reform that offers “more for more”: the more deeply a partner engages with the Union, the more fully the Union can respond, politically, economically and through financial and technical cooperation” (Commission, 2007, p. 2). The Commission identified three conceptual areas – differentiation, ownership and regional focus – that needed further reinforcement to make EU coordination and control in the neighbourhood more effective. Consequently, in 2008, regional partnerships – Union for Mediterranean and the Eastern Partnership (EaP) – were proposed, with ‘partnership’ as a concept and practice resuming its centrality once again.¹⁶

4. The EaP: the 2nd generation of partnership

Proposed by Polish and Swedish governments, the Eastern Partnership (EaP) was launched in 2009 having received full official endorsement from all 27 Member States and 6 partner countries involved. It became “a specific Eastern dimension within the European Neighbourhood Policy” (Commission, 2008a, p. 2), and was unambiguously conceived as “a **more ambitious partnership** between the European Union and the partner countries” (Council, 2009, p. 5, emphasis original).

4.1. Definition

Although envisaged to enhance partnership as a concept and practice, the EaP’s official documents yet again had fallen short of its proper definition. The concept instead was qualified through a number of important referents. First, the ‘guiding principle’ of the new relationship with eastern neighbours “should be to offer the *maximum possible*, taking into account political and economic realities and the state of reforms of the partner concerned, bringing *visible benefits* for the citizens of each country” (Commission, 2008a, pp. 2-3, emphasis added). This corresponds to the strategy of building *specific reciprocity*, through tangible benefits and maximum opportunities for all, discussed in the earlier sections. Second, the new relationship should be based “on *mutual commitments*” to a range of principles – from the rule of law, good governance etc. to market economy – which in previous iterations were referred to as “common values” (Commission, 2004, p. 3). The emphasis on *mutual commitments* short of common values is instructive, as it marks an important shift in EU *modus operandi* - coordination from a distance by conferring

¹⁶ From here, the Eastern Partnership will become the prevalent focus of analysis.

partners with a stronger sense of commitment and self-censorship for *their* reforms – or what Foucault termed as governmentality (1978). Third, “joint ownership is essential, and both sides of the EaP have their responsibilities” (Commission, 2008a, p. 3). Once again, the emphasis on responsibility rather than ‘shared values’ as hitherto predicated, corroborates the shift in the EU governing mode. Finally, it is important to point out that the Commission’s communication avoided references to shared/common values altogether, whereas the Declaration only mentioned commitment to the principles of *international* law and fundamental values (Commission, 2009, p. 5, emphasis added). This altogether may suggest a possible shift towards developing a common/flexible ground for partnership-building, and perhaps even less (direct) governance from the EU. Alas, this rhetorical move to a more inclusive normative lexis has been subsequently vitiated by an explicit stipulation of *EU values* as a foundation for partnership-building with the near abroad, in the revised *Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union* (TFEU), Title I, Article 8.1:

The Union shall develop a special relationship with neighbouring countries, aiming 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 (OJ C 83 30.3.2010, emphasis added)¹⁷.

In short, although still lacking a proper definition, partnership has nevertheless received further renewed momentum with the EaP’s launch as a regional and more focused initiative. In an attempt to make EU governance more credible for neighbours, there has also been a critical shift towards less direct and hierarchical governance, devolving more responsibility and ownership to the participating side, and gradually moving away from the EU-centred principled approach, to offer maximum reciprocity, at least on the discourse level.

4.2. A complexity of instruments

The EaP has also rendered a new and complex structure of policy instruments and accompanying measures in search of a more accommodating approach to the neighbourhood. More specifically, the policy envisaged a novel two-track approach of bi- and multi-lateral relations with neighbours – through new contractual agreements, joint policy platforms, flagship initiatives and a variety of supportive technical and financial instruments – to ensure their closer approximation with the EU.

¹⁷ Retrieved from <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/treaty-of-lisbon.aspx?lang=en>.

The *bi-lateral track* (BLT) has identified a host of deeper and more comprehensive initiatives. First and most importantly, the institutional framework of relations has foreseen the *upgrading* of Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs), which have been in place since about mid-1990s, to more inclusive Association Agreements, to be operationalized through annual Association Agendas to ensure their manageability.¹⁸ The upgrade should also entail the development of:

- Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTAs, currently under negotiation);
- Mobility and Security pacts including visa liberalisation and labour mobility facilities (under negotiation);
- Closer cooperation on Energy Security including promotion of partners' membership in the EU Energy Community;
- Comprehensive institution-building programmes (CIB) to offer capacity-building support;
- Support for economic and social policies to reduce regional disparities.

The *multi-lateral track* (MLT) has, in turn, prioritised inter-regional cooperation, to be realised through a range of flagship initiatives and policy platforms. As Delcour argues, this dimension was a *real innovation* in the EU external institutional cooperation, as “for the first time, it gathers all six Eastern partners and the EU at various levels of representation, and in different arenas” (2011, p. 7), and was designed to offer a truly multi-level, inclusive and polycentric forum for a partnership dialogue.

Operationally, the EaP's multi-lateral track dimension has anticipated a complex structure of instruments, engaging all levels of society – from biannual meetings of heads of states/government, and responsible ministries through the four main *thematic* platforms down to their specific technical panels operating through ad hoc meetings and working groups (Commission, 2008b, p. 9).¹⁹ The four *thematic policy platforms* would focus on the issues of democracy and good governance (political dimension); economic integration and convergence geared towards the establishment of a Neighbourhood Economic Community (economic dimension); energy harmonisation and diversification (energy security dimension); and finally, contact between people referring to research, education and cultural inter-change (socio-cultural dimension). Platforms in turn are further broken down into panels to support work on specific issues.²⁰

¹⁸ As the practice with Ukraine suggested: narrowing focus to specific and manageable targets and monitor them on an annual basis may yield better result and assure commitment (Korosteleva, 2012, chapter 4; Langbein and Wolczuk, 2011).

¹⁹ A model similar to the working of the Council of Ministers (involving all levels and new comitology structures) in the EU.

²⁰ For more information see http://eeas.europa.eu/eastern/platforms/docs/panel_en.pdf.

Furthermore, the MLT objectives should also be advanced through selected *flagship initiatives* “providing visibility and focus to multilateral cooperation” (ibidem, p. 12). The Commission proposed five such initiatives, comprising integrated border management programme, a Small and Medium-size Enterprise (SME) facility, regional energy programmes, development of the Southern energy corridor,²¹ and finally, cooperation on natural and man-made disasters (PPRDs).

This operational structure of the EaP’s MLT was to be supplemented by a gamut of additional thematic and technical activities co-opting international, EU and domestic (as a rule, non-governmental) organisations to ensure all-level participation (ibidem). The launch of the following lead-initiatives has been planned: *Civil Society Forum* to facilitate dialogue between civil society organisations (CSOs) and public authorities; *EuroNest* parliamentary assembly to develop cooperation between the European and local parliaments; and forum between the *Committee of the Regions* and regional and local authorities.

The implementation of the EaP’s complex roadmap has been matched by the main financial instruments covered by the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI), Macro-financial assistance instrument (MAFI), Neighbourhood Investment Facility instrument (NIF), as well as through the co-optation of the International Monetary Fund, European Bank for reconstruction and development, and the European Investment Bank, to leverage more investment funding. In addition, these financial facilities were to be supplemented by a range of thematic, regional and technical policy instruments, to ensure inclusive and comprehensive alignment of neighbourhood regional practices with those of the EU.²²

In light of the complexity of the emerging policy structure, for the implementation of partnership with neighbours, two possible conclusions surface. First, the EU appears to be seriously committed to improving its engagement with the eastern region, and, as the complex matrix of proposed interactions attests to, has now earnestly embarked on a new aggrandizing course of partnership-building with neighbours (bottom-up initiatives) to offset the rigid requirements of traditional governance, exemplified by negotiations of the AAs and DCFTAs. Second, the EU also seems to be gradually changing its *modus operandi* by way of adopting a more networked approach, entailing deep(er) penetration of both the political and the social, which clearly marks a

²¹ This flagship initiative later was placed under the rubrics of the regional energy programmes, and replaced by the environmental governance programmes. See EuropeAid ‘Update’, 2011.

²² Examples include European Instrument for Democratic and Human Rights; Instrument for Stability; Black Sea Economic Cooperation instrument; INOGATE (energy initiative), TRACECA (transport initiative), etc. For more extensive discussion of policy instruments for the EU eastern region see Korosteleva *et al.* (2013).

critical juncture in the EU's approach and understanding of its external environment.

4.3. Taking stock of the ambitious plan

Despite the complex *apparatus* of the EaP's expanded resources and instruments, the year 2010, however, proved rather challenging for the implementation of the ENP in the eastern region. To be sure, the external circumstances which swathed the world and Europe into the enduring financial and economic crises, topped up by the EU's post-Lisbon restructuring²³ as well as the increasing instability in the South – have not been conducive to facilitating more attention in the eastern direction, and also required finite resources to stay the course. Notwithstanding these developments, the new EaP's structure surprisingly yielded little interest (if anything) or reinvigorated sense of commitment on the partners' side (Commission, 2010). Instead, what seems to have rather occurred, is the continued oscillation of Ukraine to the East; quiet entanglement of Belarus into the Russian orbit; slow progress of reform practice in Moldova and Georgia, and a ready-to-erupt-anew conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan – all showing signs of inertia and disengagement with the EU's stepped up efforts at reform (Korosteleva, 2011, 2012; Delcour and Duhot, 2011; Raik, 2011; Wolczuk, 2011; Marin, 2011). To ensure progress and stability in the eastern region, and to prop up the momentum, the EU has recently gone through another cycle of reflection in an attempt to offer a more coherent and robust framework for the neighbourhood, thus confirming its serious intentions for chose course.

5. A 3rd generation of Partnership & the missing other

5.1. A complete partnership?

A more reflexive iteration of the ENP strategy, inclusive of the eastern region, thus was communicated by the Commission in May 2011 (Commission, 2011). The revised version comprised of an extensive set of documents encompassing countries' progress reports, sectoral and regional progress overview, and the ENP's updated medium-term programme. *A New Response to a changing neighbourhood*, as it came to be termed by the Commission (ibidem), expressly endorsed *partnership* as its progressive mode of engagement with its near abroad. It once again stressed the underlying principles of *reciprocity* and *differentiation* of the proposed format of relations to be predicated on “greater flexibility and more tailored responses in dealing with rapidly evolving partners and reform needs”, as well as “much higher level of differentiation allowing each partner country to develop its links with the EU as

²³ External Action Service.

far as its own aspirations, needs and capacities allow” (ibidem, pp. 1-2). The renewed axiom of the framework has become a ‘more for more’ approach, contagiously coined by Commissioner Füle in his speech in Baku:

We plan to increase our assistance to the partners based on the so called ‘more for more’ principle: the more reforms the partners do, the more support they get from us. Let me make it clear once again, ‘the more for more’ is not for Southern neighbours only. It does not reflect the Arab Spring only. It applies to the Eastern partners as well (speech /12/256, 3 April 2012)²⁴.

The above may suggest that not only the policy instruments and tools of engagement in the EU’s approach to the (eastern) neighbourhood are changing; the prospects of the future may too: after all, the closer the aspiring neighbours will come to the EU’s convergence requirements, the more the EU seems to be pledging to offer.²⁵

The revived partnership formula has also reflected some important *new* developments. Not only does the new discourse tick almost all the boxes for a successful partnership-building, as far as the theory goes, by referring to (once again) to mutual benefits, mutual accountability, common interests, and shared commitment to the universal (rather than the EU’s) values (Commission, 2011, p. 2). Additionally, it also insists on increasing cooperation within the Union - between Member States and EU institutions – what seems to be a reflexive response to the earlier criticism by scholars and practitioners of the EU’s disjointed actions, and lack of strategy (Smith and Webber, 2008; Whitman and Wolff, 2010; Korosteleva, 2011).

More importantly though, the revisited ENP document explicitly states that: The EU does not seek to impose a model or ready-made recipe for political reforms, but it will insist that each partner country’s reform process reflect a clear commitment to universal values that form the basis of our renewed approach. The initiative lies with the partner and EU support will be tailored accordingly (Commission, 2011, pp. 2-3).

Fundamentally, the document corroborates the observed critical shift, at least on a discourse level, in *the EU’s way of thinking* towards its neighbours: away from the hierarchical and involuntary governance approach, and closer towards more reciprocal and commitment-based relations, predicated on a

²⁴ Available at <http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference= SPEECH/12/256& format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=en>.

²⁵ For more discussion on the finality of convergence in the neighbourhood see Made 2011, and also research on responses of EU in-country officials to the prospect of neighbours’ membership (Korosteleva, 2012).

greater sense of motivation, ownership and responsibility on the partners' side, which is further motivated by a 'more for more' support from the EU. The EU also pledges "to provide mechanisms and instruments fit to deliver these objectives" (ibidem, p. 2), and anticipates all-level engagement keeping "channels of dialogue open with governments, civil society and other stakeholder" (ibidem, p. 3), to which we now turn.²⁶

5.2. A complex matrix of relations

Indeed, in the light of recent EU activities, roadmaps and initiatives, and following the recommendations of the Warsaw Summit (Council, 2011) a new and multi-level governance structure of both the ENP and EaP has now become apparent. Notably, the ENP structure currently involves three strands of initiatives - Deep Democracy, Economic Development and Regional Partnerships - each broken down by a number of activities and supported by a whole range of policy instruments, including newly conceived tools of the European Endowment for Democracy (EED); the ENP for Agriculture and Rural Development (ENPAID), which from 2012 covers the eastern neighbourhood too; Agreements on Conformity and Acceptance of industrial products (ACAAs) as part of the DCFTAs negotiations; the expanded Technical Assistance and Information Exchange Instrument (TAIEX); the Mobility Partnerships and Asylum Pacts including specific Regional Protection Programmes (RPP) for Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine (Commission, 2011). The matrix of existing and proposed relations is presented below.

²⁶ The signposts of the developing EU's *modus operandi* point in the direction of governmentality, as Foucault termed it (1978) as a new framework of relations that presumes more freedom (of initiative), and ownership on the partners' side (self-censorship); as well as closely networked relations between the parties, which entail deeper penetration and a prospect of governing from a distance for the EU.

Figure 1. The ENP multi-level structure of governance

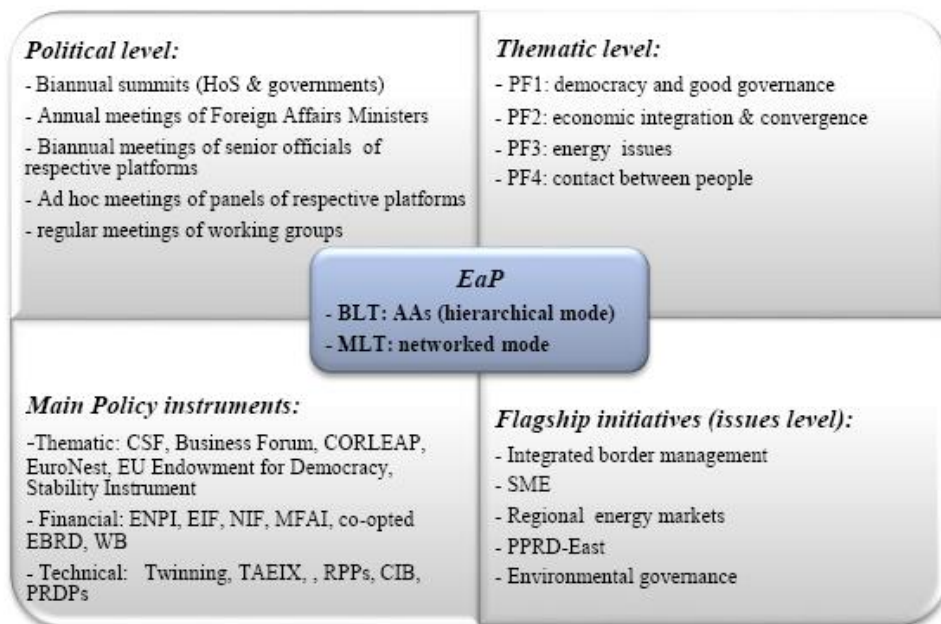
Source: Commission, 2011

The ENP's Eastern dimension, the Eastern Partnership Initiative, has also gained more complexity since its initial launch. The developments in the EaP's *bi-lateral track* included new Pilot Regional Development Programmes (PRDPs), which comes to force from 2012, and was inspired by the EU cohesion policy to overcome structural deficiencies and regional disparities.²⁷ The EaP's *multi-lateral track* has now expanded to mobilise "all strands of society" (Commission, 2011, p. 2), from Civil Society Forums (CSFs), and conferences of regional and local authorities (CORLEAP), to forums for business interests (Sopot) and national parliaments (EuroNest). Technical, thematic and financial instruments also abound, often co-opting international stakeholders to ensure success, legitimacy and credibility of the EU's engagement with the eastern

²⁷ For more information see EuropeAid 'Update on Eastern Partnership implementation', EaP Summit -29-30 September 2011, Warsaw, available at http://eeas.europa.eu/eastern/docs/2011_eap_implementation_en.pdf. For more comprehensive overview also see Casier *et al.* (2013).

region. The figure below reflects new and existing configurations of the EU-neighbours networked relations in the east:

Figure 2. The EaP multi-level structure of governance



Source: author's design; EuropeAid, 2011

It is important to bear in mind the *newness* of the policy which is currently developing through both consolidation and growth. Hence while some fresh initiatives are still in the stage of development and some slowly coming to fruition, one could only make tentative observations and speculate about their future progress.

In the light of the emerging unique structure of the EaP, owing to its dual-core approach, it makes possible to draw some comparisons between the progress and difficulties that both bi- and multi-lateral tracks of EU interactions with neighbours encounter. It appears that the MLT in comparison, despite its virtual spatial location and regional differences, seems to have enjoyed a rather speedy expansion of its sub-structure, within a short period of time. Furthermore, as Delcour (2011, p. 7) contends, the MLT also seems to privilege the *logic of socialisation* instigated by shared learning experiences and practice, rather than that of compliance, as is the case of the BLT. Furthermore, joint ownership also takes precedence drawing on common interests, self-censorship, and reciprocity of goals and gains, as per the earlier discussed partnership formula. The MLT gradually becomes to epitomise a networked relationship

germinating on a plethora of bottom-up initiatives, between regional/local agents vis-à-vis the EU, and is observed to be more effective in terms of committing and empowering the partners in the process of cooperation with the EU.

The MLT as a framework seems to be more propitious for the realisation of partnership as a concept within the broader governance framework of the EU: it offers forum for discussion and deliberation, it induces a sense of motivation and ownership, and also, essentially, offsets negative externalities caused by the process of unilateral convergence and EU rule adoption. This way, once properly framed, the concept of partnership offers more utility drawing on the bottom-up initiatives and more inclusive practices of the MLT.²⁸ The partnership as a concept now has gone a full circle, from its initial launch as an *idea* albeit without a shape or form, to its full embeddedness within the policy structure and instruments under the ENP and EaP. Now, what about its practice?

5.3. The missing other

Given the newness of the policy and its intended structure, one could only tentatively conclude that partnership, as a concept, may now be on the right track. Its practice however needs further understanding, by both sides of the partnership nexus.

Deficiencies are still plentiful. Not only does it seem that the agenda-setting still is the prerogative of the EU, the practice of relationship as well continues to be expressly Eurocentric. As Laure Delcour observes:

Joint ownership of the policy process is critical for the EaP's multilateral track, which is underpinned by logic of socialisation. However, the extent to which this track is jointly owned is questionable as the whole process appears to be framed principally by the EU, as a general rule, platforms are chaired by the Commission and the EEAS, which places the EU at the centre of what currently resembles a hub-and-spoke rather than a cobweb model of relations (Commission, 2011, p. 11, emphasis original).

Furthermore, the practice of partnership on the EU side requires proper institutionalisation, to ensure that these regular meetings and forums under the CFS, Business, CORLEAP and EuroNest headlines and other relevant events will have the force to impact on the decision-making vis-à-vis the neighbours. Otherwise, these germinating grass-root initiatives designed to channel up the needs and requirements of civil society are likely to stagnate as the unhelpful 'talk shop' and turn into a wasted resource before long.

²⁸ This is particularly relevant for the more reluctant neighbours, like Belarus and Azerbaijan.

On the other side, an awareness campaign concerning the opportunities now available under the EaP amongst the eastern partners is critical, in order to properly activate this ‘more for more’ approach, and to ensure continued reciprocity in the relationship. Many eastern think-tank representatives observed that “we are still walking in the dark, and we need more local knowledge and understanding of what we could do for ourselves with the EU’s support” (Georgian representative, Bratislava, 12 April 2012). To this end, the Commissioner Füle indicated that new roadmaps were underway to be individually delivered and discussed at all levels of society with each partner country involved.²⁹ This however needs to be buttressed by long-term relationship-building to develop a common understanding of available tools and joint objectives, to make the partnership work.

To be succinct, the Eastern partnership has leapfrogged since 2008. Being intended as a networked relationship with partner countries, the policy has now put in place a vast amount of useful initiatives and resources, supported by respective instruments and increasingly articulated through the partnership discourse. Their realisation however depends on whether the EU can and is willing to learn from the other - the partner countries themselves - which not only involves ‘hearing them’, but also ‘listening to’ their needs and concerns, and attending to their ideas and suggestions:

If partners are equal, they negotiate to reach common grounds. It looks like though EU officials have their own explanations for not following this rule: they choose partners who close to their norms, which is fine from practical reasons. Foreign policy is however conditioned by national interests and should be independent from regime or specificity of any government. Interests are not values. As partners we may have different potentials, but as independent polities, we are equal, and should be treated with respect, which is the basis for a normal and progressive dialogue (Deputy Minister, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Belarus, 21 September 2009).

6. Conclusions

In summary, as the above analysis of the evolving role of partnership in the ENP/EaP has demonstrated, some considerable progress has been made by the EU to develop more accommodating solutions for building strong and sustainable relations with its neighbours. By introducing regional partnerships, and expanding their remit and policy instruments to allow for more horizontal and network interactions, the ENP seems to be gradually gaining pace and

²⁹ Author’s interview, Bratislava, 13 April 2012.

legitimacy on the ground, which will be important for assuring its effectiveness in achieving the desired outcomes.

A number of strategic and procedural limitations, however, are still in place. The EU is still grappling with the understanding of a proper definition of partnership and occasionally slips into the vicious circle of the unproductive and rigid governance approach - of coordination and control through compliance, conditionality and top-down rule transference. Conversely, more awareness and knowledge of EU intentions is needed by the other side, to engage in reciprocal relationship-building. The recently introduced roadmaps for participating partner countries should enable better signposting and reciprocal commitment on both sides. However, respective institutionalisation of EU practices, and the understanding of 'the other', including their geopolitical challenges and incentives, continue to dominate the agenda, requiring closer engagement by and specific reciprocity on the part of the EU, to ascertain once again its leadership and attractiveness for the region (Korosteleva *et al.*, 2013).

As initially contended, in order to be effective, partnership cannot be simply *supplementary* to governance: It should be premised on joint interests and gains. It should also involve a process of learning and adjusting to each other's patterned behaviours and practices, which should eventually lead to a defined and sustainable future for both the EU and the neighbourhood. If the EU wishes to become a "credible force for good" (Solana, 2007), without 'the other' in the partnership formula - no matter how perfective it may be - EU governance, on its own, will not succeed. The Eastern Partnership summit in November 2013 will serve as testimony to the growing relationship of partnership. The future of this new *modus operandi* is still full of challenges, predicated on the EU leadership and understanding of its relations with the eastern region, including Russia as a new leader for the Eurasian economic integration (Dragneva and Wolczuk, 2013).

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