



EU and Neighbours: a turning point in relations

EU relations with its Neighbours are at a turning point, says **Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Commissioner Štefan Füle** in

an exclusive interview with the EU Neighbourhood Info Centre on the occasion of the release by the European Commission of the latest ENP Progress Reports. *"The EU has been quick and determined in establishing the foundations of a new European Neighbourhood Policy" as well as in "responding to the historic events in the Southern Mediterranean,"* the Commissioner points out one year from the launch of the renewed ENP, *"and is now better equipped to develop links with each partner as far as their aspirations, needs and capacity allow".*

Interview with Commissioner Štefan Füle



What is your assessment of EU relations with its Neighbours at this point in time?

EU relations with its Neighbours are probably at a turning point. Since the adoption in May 2011 of a new European Neighbourhood Policy, based on mutual accountability and a stronger partnership with societies, the EU has been quick and determined in establishing the policy's new foundations. We can say that we are now better equipped to develop our links with each partner as far as their own aspirations, needs and capacity allow. We have new Instruments and after the Lisbon Treaty a much more coherent approach.

This approach is already yielding encouraging results. After years of relative stagnation, democracy is increasingly taking root in the neighbourhood. The general trend points towards a more accountable form of governance and increased respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. Structural reform, where pursued, has helped to reduce poverty and attract foreign investment, while important social challenges remain. Continued approximation to EU norms and standards has helped to contribute to strengthened trade links, notwithstanding the unfavourable economic climate. Increasingly intense sector co-operation with the EU is helping to address transport and energy bottlenecks and to tackle environmental and climate challenges. The EU and its Neighbours must now keep the momentum to strengthen their relations.

You have travelled across the Neighbourhood extensively. From the feedback you get on the ground, how would you say the EU is viewed? Is it considered an honest and reliable partner?

Without indulging in self-congratulation, I think the EU is seen as a reliable partner that delivers on its commitments. I am not referring only to the views expressed by governments of partner countries but also to the perception of civil society that I had the opportunity to meet frequently in the last year. This perception is supported by facts. The EU has covered a lot of ground in twelve months. Let me give you some examples. We have adapted our policy instruments. We have continued our work to upgrade contractual relations, obtained mandates for new trade negotiations, initiated mobility dialogues, re-oriented and increased our financial assistance (€600 million to support democratic transition, economic development and people-to-people contacts). And through extended EIB and EBRD mandates we have opened the door to substantial additional investments in partner countries.

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Obviously, this needs to be sustained. But most partner countries have welcomed the new European Neighbourhood Policy proposed by the EU and have indicated their readiness to pursue political and economic reform with increased determination and to engage more deeply with the EU.

What are the priorities in the South in the light of the Arab Spring?

As I already said, the EU response to the historic events in the Southern Mediterranean was quick and determined, contained in the two joint Commission/ High Representative communications on "A partnership for democracy and shared prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean" adopted on 8 March 2011 which clearly stated the EU support for the call for change and more democratic and open societies; an incentive based approach was outlined ("more for more"), to assist political economic and social reforms in the countries of the region. Furthermore a Communication on the review of the European Neighbourhood Policy was adopted on 25 May 2011, providing additional direction on how to address those priorities. While fine tuning its approach in its Neighbourhood Policy, highlighted in the conclusions of the recent European Council on 1-2 March 2012, the EU is also developing its regional response to the ongoing challenges which includes inter alia the Union for the Mediterranean of which it has just taken over the Northern co-presidency.

The EU, more than any other international actor, must engage and support successful transitions; sharing history and a common fate around the Mediterranean Sea, the EU must not be afraid of the electoral successes of political actors inspired by Islam. Its approach is based on the following:

- engaging in a political dialogue which requires mutual understanding and respect for universal values, at the core of any community of free and equal individuals;
- addressing the dire economic situation in the region which remains the major challenge for the new leaderships which have to deliver growth and jobs and respond to the social expectations of their youth; their success depends on our economic support;
- dealing with the security challenges thus ensuring success of the political and economic transition devoid of sources of insecurity and threats;
- conceiving regional responses for regional challenges: hence a renewed EU engagement with key regional organisations, i.e. the Arab League, the OIC, UMA and others.

With regard to the Union for the Mediterranean, the EU has taken over the role of co-presidency from France; what are the implications of this change for the future?

The EU commitment to play a central role in assisting the ongoing profound changes in the Southern Mediterranean region was illustrated by the taking over by the EU of the Northern co-presidency of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM). Since the assumption of the UfM Northern co-presidency by the EU bodies on 27 February 2012, all UfM related activities are examined, reviewed and discussed also at EU level. The EU bodies shall strive to share with its Southern partners the efforts undertaken by the EU in several policy areas to the benefit of the people in the region in a spirit of coherence, consistency and partnership. Also important is to intensify sectoral cooperation and to achieve the synergy between this sectoral cooperation and the work of the secretariat in delivering concrete projects.

In this Partnership, what does the EU consider as the most serious challenges that are common for the Neighbours in the East and in the South?

I would mention three major interrelated challenges. First, the resolution of existing conflicts. Finding peaceful settlements to protracted conflicts remains a key challenge throughout the neighbourhood. But let's be clear: the main responsibility for this lies with the conflicting parties, which must enhance their efforts to find agreements in a genuine spirit of compromise. Otherwise, continued international mediation efforts in established formats cannot be expected to lead to a breakthrough. The full realisation of the potential of the ENP will require more credible and sustained efforts on the part of concerned neighbouring countries to make progress towards conflict resolution. Conversely, the EU stands ready to provide necessary support for the implementation of settlements once they have been agreed.

Building and consolidating sustainable democracies remains another major challenge. Progress is being made but there is still a long road to go in some countries. Freedom of expression, association and assembly needs to be fully guaranteed in law and in practice, and a strong culture of respect for human rights must be established across the board in particular the protection against all forms of discrimination in politics as well as day-to-day life. This will secure a space where civil society can play its crucial role as an agent for democratisation ensuring the sustainability and inclusiveness in the reform process.

The third challenge is the promotion of inclusive economic development. Unemployment, social exclusion, inequality and poverty are at the heart of people's concerns for the future in all countries. They are among the root causes of instability and unrest and need to be addressed to make democratisation sustainable. They require partner countries to reform and adopt an integrated

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approach of economic, fiscal, employment, social and education policies. The EU is ready to support such reforms through targeted measures aimed at promoting social cohesion and employment (in particular for young people).

Could you please elaborate on the “more for more” (more funds for more reforms) principle the EU applies in its policies towards the Neighbours? Does it mean more conditionality?

It is not just about balancing funds against reforms! The “more for more” approach on which the EU is placing increased emphasis means that only those partners determinedly embarking on political reforms and respecting shared universal values of human rights, democracy and rule of law are being offered those elements that relate to the most ambitious aspects of the EU offer, notably economic integration, mobility of people, as well as, indeed, a greater EU financial support.

The EU is the biggest donor in the world. Does the impact of its support to modernisation in the Neighbouring countries match the strength of its commitment?

The impact of EU support to modernisation is considerable. The track record of the last twenty years amply demonstrates this. The EU Member States have themselves undertaken important reforms and modernisation efforts, and they have a wealth of experience to share with third countries. I believe that our impact is constrained not so much by the volume of our funding – which as your question points out is rather generous – as by the willingness of our partners’ to travel down the road of reform. While we would like to accompany our neighbours in addressing the challenges with which they are confronted, we cannot, and we have no desire to substitute ourselves for them.

How will the EU’s policies towards its Neighbours evolve in the near future?

I see a number of areas where, on the EU side we also need to make significant progress in the near future. We need to do more to promote EU investments in partner countries. We need to take forward the mobility agenda both in the eastern and in the southern Neighbourhood inter alia by persuading EU Member States to make more systematic use of the possibilities provided by the European Visa Code. We need to do our best to accelerate the process leading to opening DCFTA negotiations in the South. Ongoing bilateral negotiations on the liberalisation of trade in services and establishment should be accelerated. Sector co-operation should be re-enforced with the view to achieving concrete results in the next few years. And progressively we should open EU programmes and agencies to partners’ participation. The reviewed European Neighbourhood Policy defines the “end game” in this regard, an ambitious one with a concrete idea about what we want to see as results.

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In Focus

Commissioner Štefan Füle on Twitter <http://twitter.com/#!/stefanfuleEU>

ENP – key reference documents http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/documents_en.htm

EU Neighbourhood Info Centre Press pack - The EU's response to the 'Arab Spring'

http://www.enpi-info.eu/mainmed.php?id=291&id_type=3&lang_id=450

EU Neighbourhood Info Centre Interview with Marcus Cornaro - The EU and the Arab Spring: helping a new generation build a new society

http://www.enpi-info.eu/mainmed.php?id=515&id_type=6&lang_id=450

A New Response to a Changing Neighbourhood - A review of European Neighbourhood Policy

http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/pdf/com_11_303_en.pdf

A partnership for democracy and shared prosperity with the southern Mediterranean

http://ec.europa.eu/commission_2010-2014/president/news/speeches-statements/pdf/20110308_en.pdf

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