

Prospects for Europe's Neighbours

An interview with Dr Kai-Olaf Lang

What role does Germany play for Europe's neighbouring countries? What characterises the European Neighbourhood Policy? Where lies the appeal of the EU for Europe's neighbours? What items should be on the agenda of the European Neighbourhood Policy in the next few years? Dr Kai-Olaf Lang, Senior Fellow in the EU/Europe Research Division at the “Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik” in Berlin answers these questions and more in the following article.



What role does Germany play for Europe's neighbouring countries?

Germany is one of the most important actors in Europe's neighbouring countries. Many countries consider Germany to be the central partner and anchor of the European Union, both politically and economically. Germany is seen by the countries beyond the eastern borders of the EU as one of the few member states who continue to be interested and involved in their situation to some degree. While it can be seen that Germany has a traditionally close relationship with Russia, it can also be observed that Berlin has also always promoted the interests of other neighbours over the past years. For countries in the Southern Mediterranean Germany is not an important reference point like for its neighbours to the east but their contact with other EU countries which are present in this region, such as France, for example are partially expanding.

Germany offers a large number of specific aid and assistance measures to all neighbouring countries. In addition to at the political level, Germany is an attractive partner in many ways with its diverse tools in the areas of transformation assistance, technical cooperation, promoting civil society, economic reform management and preparing for dialogue, even if some of these plans are met with scepticism in authoritarian countries and the risks to political power of such soft power are identified from the perspective of the rulers.

What characterises the European Neighbourhood Policy?

In the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) the European Union has devised a comprehensive cooperation programme for its direct neighbours to the east and in the south. The ENP is characterised by its broad geographical scope "from Belarus to Morocco", the considerable heterogeneity of the partner countries and its rather generally formulated aims which range from supporting economic and political reform, to technical cooperation to partial inclusion in the EU single market and political associations. The Neighbourhood Policy has, however, had to live with a series of ambivalence and tense relationships since it was launched. In some ways it aims to stabilise neighbouring countries and in others it strives to remodel them by way of economic or democratic change. Accordingly it partially promotes non-specific measures associated with

economic or social independence for partner countries, and partially would like to practice the "more for more" principle, so-called conditionality, i.e. granting assistance which is conditional upon advancements made in reforms. It is also unclear whether the ENP is merely a modernisation policy or whether it should also have foreign policy and strategic components. This all results from the fact that from the outset the ENP was an institutionalised compromise between the EU member states and their very different interests. Due to their geographic location some look more to the south, whilst others look more to the east. A few want more involvement and a greater opening up of the EU culminating in awarding membership prospects, others would rather keep the neighbouring countries at a distance. Consequently many partner countries complain about inadequate offers and growing indifference. The EU is aware of these shortcomings and has made adjustments to the ENP. "Differentiation" for instance should enable more precision and grant partner countries more possibilities to better bring about their preferences in order to work out suitable cooperation arrangements.

Where lies the appeal of the EU for these countries?

Ultimately the EU promises prosperity, innovation, modernisation and solidarity. The closer you are to the EU, to its economic and political institutions, the higher the chance of benefiting from this. Even when the EU suffers numerous crises these prospects are still extremely interesting for countries with substantial economic, internal or foreign policy political problems. Nevertheless a distinction must be made between large sections of society on the one hand and elite factions on the other. Societies have an interest in converging with the EU because "European standards" also promise better governance, i.e. less corruption, arbitrariness of public authorities and arrogance of power. However, from the point of view of influential interest groups in many neighbouring countries - let's say the oligarchs - more Europe means the risk of their business models being threatened. It therefore comes as no surprise that such actors thwart reforms either openly or in secret and are less excited about the EU-isation of their countries. These elite factions potentially have other cooperation interests with the EU, for example to avoid unilateral dependence (e.g. on Russia), to modernise commerce and infrastructure or to improve internal and external security.

What items should be on the agenda of the European Neighbourhood Policy in the next few years?

The conflict with Russia in the Ukraine, the Syrian crisis and the growing flood of refugees from the Middle East and Africa demonstrate that an effective neighbourhood policy is not possible without an effective security policy dimension. A "securitisation" of the neighbourhood policy means also non-exclusively thinking strategically about the relationships with neighbouring countries. In practice this is twofold. On the one hand the EU must be more aware of the fact that the ENP is an element of its common foreign and security policy and therefore must be accompanied by foreign policy and diplomacy. Increasing coordination and involvement with (interested) member states will be vital. On the other hand there are neighbouring regions in which the improved defence and military capabilities of the EU as part of a "security union" could appreciate supporting and stabilisation tasks.

Supporting economic reform and commercial development is a second important area. It is important to promote reform in terms of increased transparency, legal certainty and commercial freedom, particularly in countries which strive for closer ties with the EU in the form of free trade agreements. In some cases it is initially about macro-economic and fiscal stability in such a way that the ENP must always have one eye on international financial institutions. The Neighbourhood Policy must also ensure that it is not perceived as a factor of increased civic inequality. Even if the ENP is unable to develop a "social dimension" it should, however, punctually and noticeably contribute to alleviating the social consequences of economic transformation.

Going forward the topic of good governance is highly relevant. This monumental task is difficult to achieve but there are powerful vested interests who wish to continue the systematic patronage systems and opaque grey areas between the state and the economy. It has been observed that major deficits still exist in this area in the member states of the EU themselves. Better "governance" is thus mostly likely to be achieved in individual sectors, for example in the energy industry, provided attractive offers of inclusion are available from the EU and there is a particular interest in cooperation on the part of the neighbouring country. After a long period of going back and forth real steps towards increased transparency in the Ukraine are emerging in this area so that integration into the European Energy Community will come to fruition and the country's energy security can be improved.

Finally the major area of interpersonal relations remains. In addition to further deepening civil society contact this is concerned with the reduction of obstacles to movement, primarily visa liberalisation. As slow progress is made here, both reform requirements in neighbouring countries and increasing restraint in EU member states caused by domestic concerns are linked. The fact that after a long period of going back and forth, even for a large country such as Ukraine the elimination of visa requirements will finally be signed off at the end of 2016 is an important step to increased mobility and interchange, but also a long awaited political signal of openness on the part of the EU.

Overall in years to come it will involve laborious, less spectacular initiatives and small but significant progress in important individual areas. The requirement for the coming years will not be large new prospects, but rather the effective implementation of those previously aspired to.

Dr Kai-Olaf Lang

Dr Kai-Olaf Lang is a Senior Fellow in the EU/Europe Research Division at the "Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik" in Berlin. His specialist areas are Central and Eastern Europe, transformation, political development, foreign and security policies, bilateral relations with Germany, EU enlargement and the consequences thereof, safety issues in Central and Eastern Europe and the European Neighbourhood Policy.

© European Academy Berlin, November 2016
This paper reflects the opinion of the author.

Contact

European Academy Berlin
46/48 Bismarckallee
14193 Berlin, Germany
+49 30 895951 0
eab@eab-berlin.eu
<http://www.eab-berlin.eu>