



Commissioner Füle “The *philosophy* of Cross-Border Cooperation programmes addresses exactly the core of the new EU approach to its changing Neighbourhood”

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The Joint Managing Authority had the honour of interviewing Mr. Štefan Füle, EC Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy. Commissioner Füle explained that following the review of the Neighbourhood Policy and the recent events in the Mediterranean region, the European Union has adopted a new approach allowing for “greater support to partners engaged in building deep democracy” and “real partnerships, not only with governments but also with societies”.

While highlighting that the EU is “ready to support these more ambitious objectives with increased resources and better incentives”, Commissioner Füle said that Europe has “moved to an understanding that the new scenarios are people-driven”.

In this context, “CBC programmes perfectly represent the EU’s new approach of fully inclusive cooperation with its Neighbours, whereby societies and citizens are fully-fledged partners in EU programmes”, said Štefan Füle. “Cross-border cooperation concentrates on building direct contacts between societies and local administrations. It strives to stay away from ‘big politics’ and provides a valuable tool for the cooperation of people on the ground for the benefit of local populations”.

Commissioner Füle also stressed the progresses made by the ENPI CBC Mediterranean Sea Basin Programme, warmly welcoming the “substantial interest” for the calls for proposals, and acknowledged the “strong commitment the Joint Managing Authority and of the 14 participating countries”.

1. Commissioner Füle, what is your general impression after 4 years of implementation of the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument, especially regarding the cross-border component?

With regard to the functioning of the ENPI, I think it serves its intended purpose quite well. It provides the EU with a single, policy-driven instrument for our cooperation with the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) countries and with the Russian Federation. National programmes, the two regional strategies and the interregional strategy under the ENPI are functioning well and allow the Commission to finance a large number of different projects targeted to partners’ needs. The flexibility of this instrument has allowed us to plan long- term cooperation with the partners, but at the same time has enabled us to review our condition when and if the conditions have changed, and to respond adequately where needed.

This is the case especially in the Mediterranean region, where after the ongoing events of the Arab Spring, we have modified some of our cooperation programmes with Tunisia, Egypt or even Algeria.

The specific CBC component has been a new feature in our external cooperation. Cross-border programmes at the external border of the EU existed in the past; however, it was only with the introduction of the ENPI, that we established the conditions for truly locally-owned, programmes of territorial cooperation, based on equal partnership between the participants from both sides of the border.

In this context, we have established 13 programmes of territorial cooperation with most of

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our ENPI Partners, with an overall allocation exceeding €1 billion, stimulating additional contributions from the Member States as well as from the Partners. The programmes have been jointly agreed between the Member States and the Partner countries, paving the way for sustainable good cooperation between the local administrations on both sides of the border.

We need to draw the appropriate conclusions from our experiences so far, and better adapt the delivery mechanism of the CBC programmes by linking them more closely to the internal EU Cohesion Policy.

2. What are the current and future challenges of the ENP?

The EU cares enormously for our neighbourhood; indeed, our security and prosperity largely depends on events originating in the neighbourhood. We hope that peoples in our entire neighbourhood will be able to enjoy greater freedoms, prosperity, and respect for their fundamental rights, while living in peace.

This is why we have embarked in July 2010 on a comprehensive process of review of the European Neighbourhood Policy, with a view to make it more effective. The review was concluded by the adoption on 25 May of a joint communication by the Commission and the EU High Representative. The joint Communication identifies four main goals for the new approach:

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- we need to provide greater support to partners engaged in building “deep democracy”;
- we need to create real partnership; not only with governments, but also with societies;
- we must support inclusive economic development of our Neighbours, so they can trade, invest and grow in a sustainable way, reducing social and regional inequalities;
- we should strengthen the two regional dimensions of the ENP, the Eastern Partnership and the Union for the Mediterranean, so that we can develop consistent regional initiatives in areas such as trade, energy, transport and migration.

3. To what extent has the ENP changed the relations between the EU and its Mediterranean Partners?

Since its launch in 2004, the European Neighbourhood Policy has transformed relations between the EU and its neighbours, bringing both sides much closer together. Political contacts have increased in profile and intensity. Joint Action Plans were agreed and established with most partners, and have allowed

to increase the breadth and scope of our dialogue and cooperation, well beyond that foreseen in the Association Agreements. Partner countries committed themselves to engage in reforms with a clear blueprint that set the parameters of the bilateral relations. This resulted in more

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ownership and differentiation of policies in each region and each country. Trade has increased at double digit rates, aided by a steady process of liberalisation and regulatory convergence. EU assistance has been tailored to partners’ reform needs and its

volumes have increased. In fact, the ENPI envelope in years 2007-13 amounted to €12 billion, a large increase compared to the previous period. We have also developed new instruments, such as twinning, or offered the possibility for our partners to participate in selected EU programmes and agencies.

4. What is the response adopted by the EU to a changing Neighbourhood?

As a result of recent events in the Neighbourhood, the Commission and the EU High Representative have adopted two joint Communications, the first one on 8 March which deals with events in the Southern Mediterranean and one on 25 May which deals with the ENP.

The new approach involves a much higher level of differentiation, conditionality and mutual accountability. This should ensure that each partner country develops its links with the EU as far as its own aspirations, needs and capacities allow. This is not a one size fits all approach. Also, in line with the 'more for more' principle, increased EU support to its neighbours will depend on progress in building and consolidating deep democracy and respect for the rule of law. There is no standard blueprint for what "deep democracy" is, but certain core principles must be part of it: genuinely free and fair elections, freedom of assembly and of expression, including an efficient functioning of the free press and the media, an independent judiciary, public transparency and democratic control over security and armed forces. These are some fundamental benchmarks against which we will carefully measure our partners' progress.

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The more and the faster a country progresses in its internal reforms, the more support it will receive from the EU. We are ready to support these more ambitious objectives with increased resources and better incentives, such as increased opportunities for mobility or trade. We also aim to make our delivery of assistance more flexible and more rapid to enable us to respond more quickly and more effectively to a constantly changing neighbourhood.

In this regard we have made several concrete proposals that have been endorsed by EU Heads of State and Governments:

- Developing a real partnership with societies, not just with governments. In this context, we are setting up a civil society facility and reflecting on the creation of a European Endowment for Democracy;
- Intensifying our political and security cooperation with neighbours, in line with the Lisbon Treaty, in particular with a view to addressing the protracted conflicts that still threaten peace in our neighbourhood;
- Promoting sustainable growth and job creation in the ENP region, notably with a view to increase investment and SME developments in the southern Mediterranean region;
- Strengthening trade ties by offering greater market access, and also the perspective of deep and comprehensive free trade areas;
- Easing mobility of people through greater financial allocations for student exchanges, the perspective of visa facilitation agreements with selected partners (together with readmission agreements) and the possibility to conclude mobility partnerships with selected partners from the Southern Mediterranean, drawing on the experience acquired with Eastern ENP countries.

In the Communication of 25 May, we also proposed to increase our assistance for the ENP by an additional €1.242 million for the 2011-2013 period. And for the 2014-2020 period, we have also proposed to increase the financial allocation by over 40% compared to 2007-2013.

5. What role could the cross-border cooperation play within this framework?

Cross-border cooperation concentrates on building direct contacts between societies and local administrations. It strives to stay away from ‘big politics’ and provides a valuable tool for the cooperation of people on the ground for the benefit of local populations. In this respect, the *philosophy* of the CBC programmes addresses exactly the core of the new EU approach to its “changing Neighbourhood”.

It allows for people-to-people cooperation, enables the establishment of programmes where the representatives of society, including civil society, are the real owners of the cooperation.

Thus it fulfils the concepts provided for in the last two Communications of the European Communication on the ENP¹. CBC programmes perfectly represent the EU’s new approach of fully inclusive cooperation with its Neighbours, whereby societies and citizens are fully-fledged partners in EU programmes.

6. How will the EU support the need for strengthening the role of civil society in the countries engaged in political change?

Civil society organisations have a crucial role to play in communicating the peoples’ wishes in the political arena, in ensuring inclusiveness of the reform process and public accountability. The ENP review process and lessons from recent events have made it clear that Europe needs to enhance its dialogue with civil society organisations by further developing the consultation mechanisms.

That is why the Communication on the ENP review proposes two new instruments to strengthen existing EU support towards democratic change – the Civil Society Facility which will help CSOs develop their advocacy capacity and support them in their monitoring of reforms; and the European Endowment for Democracy which will support political actors striving for democratic change in their countries and bring greater influence and consistency to the efforts of the EU and its Member States. While consultations on the European Endowment for Democracy are still on-going with many stakeholders, the Commission intends to launch the Civil Society Facility very soon with the first actions to be financed before the end of the year.

“Europe needs to enhance its dialogue with civil society. That is why the ENP review proposes two new instruments to strengthen existing EU support towards democratic change: the Civil Society Facility and the European Endowment for Democracy.”

1. “Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean” of 8 March 2011 and “European Neighbourhood Policy Review A new response to the changing Neighbourhood” of 25 May 2011.

7. What could the added value of cross-border cooperation be to support ongoing political reforms in the Mediterranean area?

The CBC programmes - in the territories where they operate - are cornerstones of the grass-roots collaboration with local societies and representatives of local administration and self-government. Allowing these groups to develop contacts with their European counterparts as well as between each other is an important contribution to their empowerment and an indispensable component of the overall change in the Southern Mediterranean region.

8. The interest for the various calls for proposals launched under cross-border cooperation programmes proved very high, especially under the Mediterranean Sea Basin Programme with almost 600 projects submitted. How to build on this success and encourage long-lasting partnerships between the civil society and local authorities in the Mediterranean region?

I warmly welcome this substantial interest and I hope it will be reconfirmed in the framework of the next call of the ENPI CBC Med Programme to be launched swiftly.

I am aware that the Programme progresses at a good pace with projects under implementation in different fields of intervention such as sustainable tourism, protection of the environment, cultural dialogue and local governance. These actions carried out at cross-border level complement the efforts exerted by the ENP Action Plans with each neighbourhood country. In this sense, I acknowledge the strong commitment of the Joint Managing Authority and of the 14 countries participating in the ENPI CBC Med Programme.

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By selecting good quality projects that aim for sustainable results, the CBC programmes will surely stimulate partners to continuously work together, even under other projects and even in other programmes. We hope to build lasting links to the benefit of the population. Considering the recent events in the region I hope that civil society will become even more actively involved in replying to the programme's calls for proposals.

Finally, we intend to maintain an ambitious cross border cooperation programme in 2014-2020, under the new EU budget for external cooperation.

9. Do you have any specific message to the policy makers and the people in the Mediterranean Partner Countries?

My message is one of support and solidarity for all actors involved in the difficult process of democratic transition. While Europe may not have always got it right in its past dealings with partner countries, we have moved to an understanding that the new scenarios are people-driven. We offer our partners our experience, our expertise and our assistance towards democratic reform. But there can be no one-size-fits-all or blanket approach.

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Diversity and differentiation are the watchwords. Our proposals will allow partners to tailor their relations according to their own, intrinsic needs and aspirations.