



EU'S SOUTHERN NEIGHBOURHOOD POLICY TOWARDS LIBYA AND SYRIA

*Vasile-Dumitru RAȚIU**

The EU is actively involved in the dynamics of the states in its immediate vicinity to make them more stable. This involvement requires a high financial effort. In this paper I will analyse how the European Union (EU) implemented and intends to continue the neighbourhood policy with two states that went through the “Arab Spring” and became conflict zones. For the states in question, namely Libya and Syria, EU provides humanitarian aid and wishes them to recover from their failed state.

The main objectives pursued by the EU within the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) are stabilization of neighbouring countries, promotion of EU key interests and facilitation of regional cooperation.

In addition to the neighbourhood policy instrument, between the EU and the two states there is a significant increase in trade relations from year to year. This increase in economic exchanges also leads to a deepening of bilateral relations. This rapprochement can transpose models of good governance from the EU to these failed states, and over time can create an environment conducive to state reconstruction, where the citizen is at the centre of attention and the rulers' own interests are no longer at the forefront.

The purpose of the paper is to analyse the EU southern neighbourhood policy, with an emphasis on Libya and Syria. The starting hypothesis of the research is that the EU's ENP aid to Libya and Syria ensures minimal stability for the two countries and a better neighbourhood for it. As a working methodology, I will use the qualitative analysis of documentary materials.

Keywords: *EU; Southern Neighbourhood; failed states; Libya; Syria; economic cooperation.*

** Vasile-Dumitru RAȚIU is a PhD Student in the field of Political Sciences within the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (SNSPA), Bucharest, Romania. E-mail: uitar@yahoo.com*



Introduction

The world is constantly changing as “in the emerging multipolar order, the international peace architecture (IPA), dominated by the liberal international order (LIO), is challenged through counter-peace processes. These processes challenge the nature of the state, state-society relations and the international order itself” (Richmond, Pogodda, and Visoka 2023, 1), and every international actor tries their best to adapt to these new events.

In order to cope with the changes in its southern and eastern neighbourhood, the EU proposed a European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) that evolved with each major issue that arose. In this regard, in the south, the EU faced the instability triggered by the “Arab Spring”, the civil wars in Libya and Syria, the migrant crisis in this region and an active involvement of Russia in the states’ policies of the region. Each of these issues led to a response from the EU. The appearance of the Israel-Hamas conflict in the Gaza Strip is an additional reason for the EU to be actively involved in strengthening the southern area of its borders.

The EU wants for its partners in the southern neighbourhood an increase in stability and a normalization of public policies so that each state provides well-being for its own citizens. In this respect, in a chronological perspective, the following documents regarding the ENP have appeared since 2002: “Solana and Patten Joint Letter to the Council on ‘Wider Europe’ and Prodi speech on ‘Wider Europe (2002), Wider Europe – Neighbourhood: A new framework for relations with our eastern and southern neighbours, COM (2003)0104 (2003) and European Neighbourhood Policy – Strategy Paper, COM(2004)373 (2004) (Sieglinde Gstöhl 2016, 7).

Furthermore, in order to protect its interests, the EU drew up a European Neighbourhood Policy in 2004. The EU wanted through this policy to achieve peace and development for its neighbours, and through them a protection zone for itself. The two civil wars in Libya and Syria have questioned the effectiveness of this policy. These states became the main areas from which and through which migrants came to Europe to achieve a better life for themselves, away from war and poverty. Since 2015, the EU has faced a migrant crisis caused by a massive influx of people, which although it has decreased in intensity, still persists today.

In addition to the two states mentioned before, there are also problems with the other states in the southern neighbourhood. In countries such as Morocco, Algeria, Egypt and Lebanon, the repression of the authorities towards their own citizens is very high. In these countries, human rights, gender equality and equal opportunities are not respected.

The European Neighbourhood Policy applies to states in its very immediate vicinity, with which the EU has land or sea borders. “The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) governs the EU’s relations with 16 of its closest eastern and southern



partners. As a key element of the EU's foreign policy, the ENP focuses on stabilizing the region in political, economic and security terms" (European Commission 2018).

The regional and multilateral cooperation initiatives of the ENP are: "Eastern Partnership, Renewed Partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood. The New Agenda for the Mediterranean, Union for the Mediterranean, Black Sea Synergy, Northern Dimension, EU Arctic Policy, Cross-Border Cooperation (CBC)" (European Union External Action 2021).

There are no ENP Action Plans for Libya and Syria, while with the other partner countries EU has adopted bilateral action plans, partnership priorities or association agendas. These are the main instruments for the application of the ENP, through which the EU and each individual partner seek states' development.

The European Neighbourhood Policy aims at the following objectives:

"- stabilization of neighbouring countries through economic development, employment and youth, transport and energy connectivity, migration, mobility and security;

- promoting the EU's key interests of good governance, democracy, the rule of law and human rights;

- facilitation of cooperation at the regional level: the Eastern Partnership, the Union for the Mediterranean" (European Commission 2018, Objectives).

Between 2014-2020, for the European Neighbourhood Policy, the allocated resources were 15.4 billion euros through the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI).

For the period between 2021-2027, the amount granted to the European Neighbourhood Policy is 19.3 billion euros. This is financed through the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) – "Global Europe" -. This instrument "preserves the key features of the ENI in relation to enhanced political cooperation with ENP partner countries" (European Union External Action 2021, Financial Assistance).

This article aims to highlight how an international actor such as the EU manages through peaceful methods to maintain relations with neighbouring states where there are conflicts and to promote sustainable development for its southern neighbours. The purpose of the paper is to analyse the southern neighbourhood policy, with an emphasis on Libya and Syria.

In the analysis carried out, literature was consulted, including books, articles and research reports on the chosen topic. Other sources of information were the official websites of the European Commission, European Union External Action and EU Neighbours South.

In the analysis of the southern neighbourhood Libya and Syria were selected as representative countries because their failed states' situation represents the greatest danger for the EU, as they are neighbouring states of the EU where after the "Arab



Spring” there have been constant armed conflicts that decayed their national security but also regional security as a whole.

According to Samer Bakkour and Rama Sahtout consider Syria to be a failed state because it “cannot meet the economic, political and social needs and demands of its citizens” (Bakkour and Sahtout 2023, 1020). Because of the prolonged civil war, Libya is also considered a failed state. The authors also narrate that there is a close connection between war and the failed state: “War is often a cause of state failure and is almost always a factor in collapse. When the state cannot repel external attacks, preserve regional unity, or eliminate any threat to local structure, it fails. Failed states then face many insurgencies, which are directed at the state and groups within it” (Bakkour and Sahtout 2023, 1022). This idea of the relation between conflict and failure of a state and the potential of their diffusion regionally is strongly supported by the wide literature in the matter (Rotberg 2016) (Ottaway and Mair 2004) (John 2008).

1. The EU and the Southern Neighbourhood

Christopher S. Browning and Pertti Joenniemi present three key elements regarding the Southern Neighbourhood. The first element relates to the concern of EU states in the south, who believe that the EU’s attention is moving more to the east after the expansion of the Union in that part. Moreover, they believe that the EU through the ENP pays more attention to bilateralism in the relationship with the states in the southern neighbourhood, compared to the previous Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) which was based on regional cooperation. The second element presents the EU’s position towards security issues in the region with the increase in migration, human trafficking and terrorism. The third element presented by the authors is related to the issue of identity.

Holm in 2005 argued that “there are two discourses” (Browning and Joenniemi 2008, 538–40) when it comes to the EU focus of its neighbourhood policy: “On the one hand, she notes there is the discourse of the Mediterranean as the cradle of civilization, as a meeting place where cultures are able to fertilize each other. This discourse, she notes, leaves open possibilities of a future profitable co-existence and even of future closer integration. The other discourse, in contrast, is of the southern neighbours as riven by conflict and as cultural others. This discourse easily draws on the role of Islam versus a Christian Europe and in its rightist manifestations can entail racist elements in terms of the fear of the Arab other” (Browning and Joenniemi 2008, 540).

The reality is that EU collaborated between 2004 and 2010 for good neighbourliness with totalitarian regimes in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The fall of dictators after the Arab Spring made institutional collaboration



between the EU and these states difficult. Also, “the problem of resources allocated to European policies in the region is another factor that explains the limits of the EU’s influence on regional dynamics. Beyond the exact size of the allocated funds, the limited nature of the European reaction is given by the implicit geopolitical reality of the EU – states and societies in the region are not considered to have the potential vocation to become “European”. If EU enlargement remains unlikely in Europe, in the Middle East and Southern Neighbourhood Region it seems impossible” (Cucută 2015, 212).

In the approach to the “Arab Spring” sources, the EU and some of the researchers close to the EU institutions considered that these revolutions are only pro-democracy. This comes from the fact that “the common understandings of the EU are largely oriented towards the community model of civil society, which reflects idealistic notions of basic autonomy, self-empowerment and claims for natural rights” (Bürkner and Scott 2019, 27). The EU mistakenly believed that civil society organizations (CSOs) and NGOs in the southern neighbourhood really have a large influence in their own society, “consequently, there has been a more general misrecognition of the role of civil society in the Arab uprisings, marginalizing the argument that the uprisings were popular reactions to the mass impoverishment resulting from neoliberal reforms in MENA countries, rather than a struggle for more democracy” (Bürkner and Scott 2019, 28).

In the southern neighbourhood there are 10 states with which the EU cooperates: Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, the Palestinian National Authority, Syria and Lebanon. This cooperation is done both bilaterally, where almost all states have an ENP action plan, and multilaterally, in the form of a regional cooperation called the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM).

Within the framework of EU-Libya cooperation in the ENP (also without a signed Association Agreement), for the period 2014-2020, 98 million euros were granted through the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI/ENI), the assistance being focused on the following sectors: Governance; Economic development; Health and Support for civil society and young people” (European Commission n.d, Libya).

For the period 2021-2027 at the bilateral level, the EU started funding through the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe (NDICI- Global Europe). In this framework, “the EU adopted in 2021 two programs aimed at supporting democratic governance, the rule of law, private sector development and sound economic policies (20 million euros in total), and, in 2022, two new programs aimed at supporting health and the climate change environment (EUR 32 million in total)” (European Commission n.d. Libya). Thus, the assistance given to the Tripoli government in the first two years through the new financial package was already 52 million euros, which represented an increase in budget allocations through that instrument. It is a considerable amount granted by



the EU to support the reforms. If these allocations are maintained in the next four years, the EU will grant aid of approximately 150 million euros to Libya.

In Syria, the EU wants to support population resilience and post-conflict transition and recovery (European Commission n.d., Syria). “Assistance is provided in sectors such as education, livelihoods, civil society capacity building, health, accountability and transitional justice. EU support through ENI is provided as far as possible throughout Syria and is delivered through United Nations agencies, international and Syrian NGOs, as well as EU Member State agencies, in complementarity with humanitarian aid. 349.4 million euros has been mobilized through ENI for the interior of Syria since the start of the conflict in 2011. On February 9, 2021, the European Commission adopted a joint communication on the renewed partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood, which will help guide EU policy and programming for the coming years” (European Commission n.d., Syria).

In the case of Syria, between 2021-2027, the EU started funding through the NDICI-Global Europe, therefore, since 2021 it has granted 87 million euros (European Commission 2023).

Across Africa the EU wants to support a strong transformation of the entire economy on this continent. The EU proposes a transformation of the African economy through investments of 150 billion euros. The EU aims to accelerate the green transition, digital transition, and sustainable growth and creating decent jobs, to consolidate the health systems and to improve education and training (EU Neighbours South 2023).

In the North African region through the EU-Africa programme: Global Gateway Investment Package, the EU proposes a growth of the inclusive economy. In this perspective, “through the Economic and Investment Plan for the Southern Neighbourhood, the EU will seek to promote sustainable trade and investment in the largest sectors that bring added value and support vocational training to take advantage of the new opportunities offered by the twin green and digital transitions. The initiative will also support entrepreneurship for young and female entrepreneurs, especially in forward-looking areas. The target set for 2030 is: increasing the private sector’s contribution to Africa’s growth and economic transformation” (EU Neighbours South 2023).

For a more in-depth analysis of how the EU helps Libya through the Southern Neighbourhood program, we need to see what the investments in this country are. Thus, it is acknowledgeable that the EU supports trade and investment sectors as:

“- The EU is Libya’s main trading partner. In 2021, 35.3% of Libya’s imports came from the EU, while 66.4% of Libya’s exports went to the European Union. Between the EU and Libya, in both directions, trade in goods amounted to 28.3 billion euros;

- In 2020, total trade in services between the EU and Libya amounted to 600 million euros;



- In 2019, the EU's foreign direct investments in Libya amounted to 19 billion euros, and Libya's foreign direct investments in the EU are 1.4 billion euros" (European Commission 2022).

In the case of Syria, financial relations with the EU are much lower as the "Bilateral relations are currently suspended on trade in crude oil, petroleum products, gold, precious metals and diamonds. Negatively affected by the conflict, trade volumes have contracted substantially over the years: by 2016 imports from Syria had fallen by 97% and exports by 85% from 2011 levels. Economic fragmentation, the war economy and the failure of the Syrian regime to engage in political or economic transition are the root causes of weak trade" (European Commission 2023).

2. Perception of the EU in Libya and Syria

Although there is a West-East debate within the EU regarding respect for democracy and the rule of law in Eastern European states (an increase in illiberalism in Central and Eastern Europe), authors Olga Burluk, Assem Dandashly and Gergana Noutcheva argue in their article that this debate does not affect the image of the EU for its neighbours to the east and south. At the same time, their research shows that this unchanged attitude of neighbouring societies towards the EU is based on: "1) local notions about the EU as the main economic power and development actor predominantly associated with economic gains and opportunities, against a paler image of the EU as a promoter of democracy and defender of human rights; 2) local understandings of the EU that it is doing better compared to other regional actors and providers of assistance, security and order; and 3) local feelings of being similar (Eastern Neighbourhood) or different (Southern Neighbourhood) from (a group of) EU countries" (Burluk, Dandashly, and Noutcheva 2023, 18).

By means of an opinion poll financed by the European Union on citizens' perception towards EU and its actions through the Southern Neighbourhood Instrument, it has been observed the way of reaction of the Libyan citizens. Thus, Libyans who answered the six questions "managed to give an average of 2.45 correct answers to a total of six questions asked about the EU on average, reflecting a high 'objective' understanding of the EU, in fact, of the second largest in the entire Southern Neighbourhood region. Almost 60% of respondents knew that the EU has a parliament elected by its citizens. Almost 70% of respondents knew that the EU is a political and economic union consisting of 27 European countries. 53% knew that the EU headquarters is in Brussels. 36% had a positive perception of the EU in Libya, and 65% believed that Libya has a good relationship with the EU, and 67% believed that the partnership with the EU is important. The EU is mostly associated with gender equality (64%), followed by human rights (62%), democracy (61%), press freedom (58%) and peace and security (58%)" (EU Neighbourhood



South 2022, Libya (factsheet)). This survey “was conducted in Libya between July and September 2021, with 1,000 people consulted in face-to-face interviews” (EU Neighbourhood South 2022, Libya (factsheet)).

Between November and December 2021, an opinion poll similar to the one carried out in Libya was conducted in Syria. The results are not as optimistic, as 71% of respondents had a negative perception of the EU. However, even in these conditions there is hope that comes from the fact that “12% of the respondents in Syria have a positive image of the EU. This rises to 25% among 15-24-year-olds and 14% among 25-39-year-olds, indicating that young Syrians are much more likely to have a positive image of the EU” (EU Neighbourhood South 2022, Syria (factsheet)).

3. Obstacles Preventing a Rapprochement of Libya and Syria with the EU

In the case of Syria, a first obstacle is the presence of Russian military bases that represent a factor in expanding Russia’s influence in the Mediterranean Sea and the entire MENA region. Moscow’s goal is to replace the weak US presence and compete with the EU and NATO presence in the region. Naval and air bases pose a threat to EU states near Syria. “The US has a force of 900 troops in Syria, near the border with Iraq, with the mission of supporting Kurdish groups to fight Islamic State terrorists, while Russia has several military bases in Syria, with at least 5,000 of the military, since 2016, when it intervened in the civil war in favour of the Syrian president” (Jipa 2023). Also, the presence of pro-Iranian Shiite militias in Syria that are a constant threat to Israel is an obstacle, as the EU and NATO have privileged relations with the state of Israel.

As almost all the states that are members of the EU are also NATO members, there is a correlation between the decisions of the two entities. In this sense, Zsolt Csepregi says that NATO has among its new basic tasks: cooperative security, as well as the prevention and management of crises in its neighbourhood (Csepregi 2023). Moreover, these tasks “are designed to provide stability in regions affected by insecurity, such as MENA, and do everything in their power to avoid a situation where a collective defence threat could arise from these areas” (Csepregi 2023, 25).

Another obstacle is the retention in power of the dictator Bashar al-Assad who does not want a rapprochement with the EU and believes that the EU together with the US are the main culprits for the current state of Syria. He sees in Russia an ally that will help him stay in power.

In the case of Libya, first obstacle is the presence of the Wagner Group. “In Libya, up to 1,200 Wagner Group mercenaries are fighting alongside rebel leader Khalifa Haftar” (Ehl 2023). This private group is in Libya under the guise of providing security services, but they are also involved in lucrative economic activities.



Another obstacle may be the presence of fighter planes in the Jufra base. “Meanwhile, in the south of the country, at the Jufra air base, the Russians are building new runways, hangars and communication centres with the aim of bringing more MiG-29 military aircraft here. Russian planes do not have the official insignia of the Air Force” (DIGI24 2021).

A third obstacle as regards Libya rapprochement to EU is the involvement of Turkey, which supports the side opposing Marshal Khalifa Haftar.

Conclusions

The more the economic relations will increase between the EU and the two failed states, Libya and Syria, the more it is expected that the situation in these states will also improve. The EU can increase its humanitarian aid and offer new ways of engaging member states in these two states.

Through the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), the EU is trying to normalize relations with these states in the southern neighbourhood. For most of them it has its own strategy (action plan), which is carried out at the bilateral level, but at the same time it also has several regional projects, which are carried out at the multilateral level. In the case of Libya and Syria, due to the long conflict there are no such ENP action plans, however the EU acts in Libya supporting the internationally recognized Tripoli government, and in Syria at the level of citizens through local organisations.

The perception of the EU in Libya is important to underpin future projects to help stabilize this country. Building strong institutions in Libya would be beneficial to the international community.

The perception of the EU in Syria is much different than in Libya, as two-thirds (71%) of Syrians have an anti-EU stance. This is due to the fact that the head of the state has close relations with Russia, which helped him stay in power. However, also in the case of Syria, there is an increase in the favourable position for the EU among young people (by 25%) aged between 15 and 24.

The EU must continue to provide a perspective for southern neighbourhood states that strive to ensure a better life for their citizens and through this well-being stop emigration, especially for Libya and Syria.

The EU’s ENP aid to Libya and Syria ensures a minimum of stability for the two countries and a better neighbourhood for them. Consequently, the establishment of ENP action plans between the EU and the two states would be an important step in relation in the Southern Neighbourhood.



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