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European Neighbourhood Policy in 2012: Continuing engagement for a stronger cooperation with neighbours despite turbulent political and economic conditions

The cooperation of the EU with its partner countries is stronger and is delivering positive results, indicate the country and regional reports on the progress of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) in 2012 published today. Two years after the launch of a new approach to the ENP, achievements are encouraging in many areas of cooperation, although 2012 has been a challenging year due to political instability and difficult socio-economic conditions. Still, political reforms are uneven in partner countries and progress towards deep and sustainable democracy is not always linear.

The "ENP annual package" presented by Catherine Ashton, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Commission Vice-President and Stefan Füle, EU Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy, shows that many partners remain committed to strengthening relations with the EU and that the EU has deepened its support to those partners embarking on important reform agendas. Indeed, despite the current economic crisis in the EU, financial resources in the form of grants and loans allocated to the region have increased. However, the Communication concludes that much remains to be done to implement the EU offer. For the first time, in addition to the recommendations, the package includes an assessment of last year's recommendations.

Given the different pace and direction of reforms in individual partner countries, the package concludes on the need for bigger differentiation in the EU response to individual country needs and aspirations.

The country progress reports give a mixed picture of progress in democratic reforms undertaken in the Southern neighbourhood. Democratic elections were held in Egypt, Algeria and Libya. The EU increased its assistance for holding free and fair elections in line with international standards and deployed elections observation missions to Algeria, Egypt and Jordan. Civil society in the South has grown more vocal than in the past. Concerns

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remain about freedoms of assembly, association and expression, including media freedom, in many partners, notably Egypt and Algeria. Constitutional reform is slow. The EU has set up Task forces for Tunisia, Jordan and Egypt to improve the coordination of financial assistance provided by the EU, EU member States and international financial institutions.

Countries in the East increasingly take different paths. Moldova, Georgia and Armenia continued democratic reforms, and held elections which were generally in conformity with international standards. Ukraine's parliamentary elections presented a more mixed picture with several shortcomings and constituted a deterioration compared to standards previously achieved. Azerbaijan needs to make significant further efforts to meet its commitments in the field of democracy, including electoral processes. The elections in Belarus took place against an overall background of repression.

Commenting on the achievements and delays in the area of democratic reforms in partner countries, High Representative Catherine Ashton said: *"The European Union will continue to do all it can to help the development of deep democracy in our partner countries. The European Neighbourhood Policy has a vital role to play in supporting this process. Delays in some partner countries are obviously a matter of concern, but must not be used as an excuse for disengagement. For the EU, building sustainable democracies remains a top priority."*

Most partner countries are going through political transitions and the role of a thriving civil society is more and more important to contribute to democracy and good governance building. But reports show that in some partner countries NGOs are still faced with interference from authorities. The EU has continued to support organisations via the Civil Society Facility. The European Endowment for Democracy was set up last year to provide rapid and flexible support for those that work for democratic changes.

EU Commissioner Štefan Füle declared: *"I attach great importance to the partnership with civil society in the ENP. The role of civil society remains central to the democratisation processes. We have significantly enhanced our engagement with civil society of partner countries to maximise public support for reforms. Therefore, it is regrettable that in some partner countries, civil society organisations continue to face serious constraints such as obstacles to freedom of movements, lawsuits against NGOs leaders, cumbersome administrative procedures, acceptance of financial support subject to authorisation, etc."*

Trade relations with neighbours have continued to intensify. The EU continued negotiations of Association Agreements with Moldova, Armenia and Georgia that include Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTA), and of Association Agreement with Azerbaijan. The EU-Ukraine Association Agreement was initialled and awaits signature after Kiev delivers on the necessary steps. In the South, the EU started preparations for DCFTA negotiations with Morocco, Tunisia, and Jordan.

The EU and partners continued work to improve the mobility of people. 2012 saw significant progress towards the goal of visa-free travel within the Eastern Partnership (EaP). Moldova and Ukraine made substantial progress in the context of the Visa Liberalisation Action Plan (VLAP). A visa dialogue was opened with Georgia and Visa Liberalization Action Plan delivered, while Armenia granted visa-free entry to EU citizens as of January 2013. Following the establishment of Mobility Partnerships with Moldova, Georgia and Armenia, negotiations for an EU-Azerbaijan Mobility Partnership were launched. Work was also undertaken to develop closer ties with the Southern partners on mobility and migration. Agreement on a Mobility Partnership with Morocco was reached and negotiations with Tunisia continue. A dialogue was also opened with Jordan in December 2012.

As a result of a better cooperation in specific sector areas, the ENP is more and more influencing people's life in a positive and concrete way. Projects supported by the EU and related to transport (i.e. road safety, public transport improvement), environment (i.e. water management, impact assessments), education (i.e. participation of students and researchers in European programmes allowing more than 3 250 scholarships to be provided to ENP students and academic personnel in 2012) or energy (i.e. development of renewable energies), among many other, are improving daily living conditions in partner countries.

Based on the core principle of "more for more" the EU continued to provide financial support for partner countries' reform efforts by making available additional financial resources worth EUR 1 billion from the EU budget in the period 2011-13. Of this, EUR 670 million is channelled through two umbrella programmes: EUR 540 million for SPRING in the Southern Mediterranean and EUR 130 million for EaPIC in the Eastern Neighbourhood. Both programmes focus on promoting democratic transformation and institution-building and supporting sustainable and inclusive growth. Funds from these programmes have been allocated on the basis of clear evidence of implementation of democratic reforms. The European Investment Bank (EIB) and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) have also extended their lending capacities in partner countries. To leverage funding from these and other financial institutions, the EU has increased resources allocated to the Neighbourhood investment Facility. This is providing greater support for large investments and private sector development.

In both the Eastern and Southern regions, the EU has continued the steadfast implementation of the two roadmaps that were put forward as part of the 2012 ENP packages. In the Eastern Neighbourhood, the EU has stepped up engagement to ensure a successful outcome of the Vilnius Summit next November. In the Southern Neighbourhood, the EU took over the Northern co-Presidency of the Union for Mediterranean and the adoption of a communication proposing initiatives to support for the integration of Maghreb countries.

In supporting the reform processes in the Neighbourhood the EU has intensified the cooperation with other stakeholders, notably all EU institutions, the Council of Europe, the OSCE, the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, the Anna Lindh Foundation or Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum. It has increased efforts aimed at better coordinating with other international donors.

Syria has remained a very specific case in the Neighbourhood. The EU suspended all bilateral cooperation with the government but remains engaged in helping the citizens. It has taken diplomatic actions to facilitate a peaceful solution to the conflict, supporting the UN- League of Arab States Special Envoy, actively participating in Friends of Syria meetings and providing aid to the refugees and neighbouring countries affected by the crisis.

For more information:

Website of Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy, Štefan Füle

http://ec.europa.eu/commission_2010-2014/fule/index_en.htm

Website of High Representative and Vice President of the European Commission, Catherine Ashton

http://ec.europa.eu/commission_2010-2014/ashton/index_en.htm

European Commission: European Neighbourhood Policy

http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/index_en.htm

<http://www.enpi-info.eu>

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