

Rethinking EU Leadership in the “Neighbourhood”: Limits and Ambitions

by Bernardo Venturi and Silvia Colombo

Definitions of “leadership” abound and attempts have been made to operationalise this concept when it comes to the European Union’s external role.¹ In a nutshell, leadership can be defined as “a process of social influence, which maximizes the efforts of others, towards the achievement of a goal”.²

As broad as this definition can be, it can still be applied to gauge the EU’s performance in exercising leadership in foreign policy, an ambition it clearly nurtures both when dealing with its partners and vis-à-vis its own member states. In this respect, calls for the EU to be more geopolitical, improving its ability to project its influence globally³

and lead member states towards a common foreign policy goal resonate well with this definition.

Yet, a concrete assessment of EU leadership over the past years reveals many limits. No other terrain is more accurate to conduct this assessment than the European Neighbourhood, a geopolitical space – stretching from Morocco to Belarus – that represents a litmus test for EU leadership and has to a large extent become a thorn in the Union’s side.

The Neighbourhood is currently in the throes of a protracted crisis. Both the east and the south are characterised by instability. The transformative processes (both economically and politically) kicked-off by the coloured revolutions of the early 21st century in the east or by the events of the so-called Arab uprisings ten years ago in the south have given way to a sharp deterioration

Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy, June 2016, <https://europa.eu/!Tr66qx>.

¹ See, for example, Lisbeth Aggestam and Markus Johansson, “The Leadership Paradox in EU Foreign Policy”, in *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 55, No. 6 (November 2017), p. 1203-1220, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12558>.

² Kevin Kruse, “What is Leadership?”, in *Forbes*, 9 April 2013, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kevinkruse/2013/04/09/what-is-leadership>.

³ European External Action Service (EEAS), *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger*

in socio-economic indicators and the dampening of democratisation prospects from Belarus and Ukraine to Lebanon and Morocco.

This situation is coupled with and mutually reinforced by the existing conflict dynamics that envelop Neighbourhood countries and link them to regional and global cleavages and competition. This has recently been exemplified by the revamped Nagorno-Karabakh conflict followed by a tenuous ceasefire and by the recent developments in Libya. Both examples have highlighted the EU’s sidelining as a mediator largely due to its lack of leadership in dealing with conflict management and resolution.⁴

Nowadays, crises in both “Neighbourhoods” tend to merge, overlap and reinforce each other in ways that create a highly combustible situation for the EU. The Eastern Mediterranean crisis and the complex role played by Russia as well as Turkey to the east and the south of the EU make this distinction and the very concept of Neighbourhood, embedded since 2004 in the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), increasingly non-actionable as a means to promote EU leadership abroad. Another case is represented by irregular migration dynamics which, encircling the EU from both the east and the south, actually have their

⁴ Barbara Wesel, “EU Fails to Act on Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan”, in *Deutsche Welle*, 8 October 2020, <https://p.dw.com/p/3jeIO>; and Nicu Popescu, “How the EU Became Marginalised in Nagorno-Karabakh”, in *ECFR Commentaries*, 13 October 2020, https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_how_europe_became_marginalised_in_nagorno_karabakh.

origins and drivers well beyond these conventional boundaries.

Yet, the EU continues to frame its engagement and to measure its performance within the boundaries of these twin “Neighbourhoods”, an out-dated concept that ultimately only serves the purpose to perpetuate a self-attributed leadership role in these areas that is not matched by concrete results.

We argue that major gains and a better performance in terms of leadership could be attained by discarding this concept and replacing it with other more meaningful units centred around “regions” and “sub-regions”. Targeting geopolitical or thematic clusters of countries both in the east and in the south, thereby establishing ties and synergies that go beyond geography, would allow the EU to sharpen its actorness, better articulate its strategic goals and deploy its instruments and policies more coherently.

To unpack the current limits of EU leadership in the Neighbourhood, it is important to consider three aspects: the “who”, the “what” and the “how”.

Firstly, leadership stems from *social* influence, rather than being based solely on power, and as such it requires the active engagement of others, implying a looser relational setting rather than simple diktats or threats. In the specific context of the EU’s relations with so-called Neighbourhood countries, the “who” can be broken down further, internally and externally.

Concerning the EU itself, the Union has tried to project itself as a normative

power and a model based on its own experience and history, thus fostering a Eurocentric perspective. EU normativity has represented a significant constraint on EU leadership in the region, ultimately reducing its appeal and leverage. With regard to third countries, the EU’s ability to pursue its goals depends on the domestic situation in the partner country. The more stable, democratic and “EU-friendly” – an ambiguous concept to say the least – that country is, the more coherent and efficient the deployment of the EU’s instruments can be.⁵

Furthermore, relations with Neighbourhood countries are rooted in the EU’s enlargement experience (in particular in the East), but accession to the EU is not promised. This approach does not work for countries that do not seek close association to the EU – which means that the power of attraction of Europe is often over-emphasised⁶ – or for those that do aspire to this objective but in the absence of the carrot of future membership feel frustrated by EU actions and conditionality.

Secondly, with regards to the “what”, leadership must include a goal or an intended outcome that guides one’s actions. As for EU policy in the Neighbourhood, a clear direction and strategic vision appears to be

missing. In theory, the EU has singled out Neighbourhood countries as the targets of a privileged relationship, built on a mutual commitment to common values as well as leveraging political coordination and deeper economic integration, increased mobility and people-to-people contacts.⁷ However, beyond general statements, a limited vision emerges from the actual policies.

This is mostly due to the multi-layered nature of EU policies. It happens that different sets of policies have contrasting goals, such as pursuing the promotion of resilience while enacting stringent migration-control, securitised policies. Moreover, the principle of conditionality (“more for more”, “less for less”) is applied inconsistently (through ill-defined, unclear and ad hoc benchmarks) and selectively (double standards), thus significantly diminishing the EU’s credibility and leverage.⁸

Furthermore, the fact that EU action often boils down to the minimum-common denominator (such as the 3 Ms: money, market and mobility) among the interests and priorities of the various member states means that the EU’s approach does not truly represent the attitude of a global (or, at least, regional) leader but rather

⁵ Silvia Colombo, Eduard Soler i Lecha and Marc Otte, “A Half-Empty Glass: Limits and Dilemmas of the EU’s Relations to the MENA Countries”, in *MENARA Working Papers*, No. 32 (March 2019), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/10141>.

⁶ Greta Galeazzi, “A Pragmatic Review of the European Neighbourhood Policy That Leaves Some Key Dilemmas Untackled”, *ECDPM Talking Points Blog*, 17 December 2015, <https://ecdpm.org/?p=20656>.

⁷ Mario Damen and Kirsten Jongberg, “The European Neighbourhood Policy”, in *European Parliament Fact Sheets on the European Union*, 2020, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/170>.

⁸ Raffaella A. Del Sarto and Tobias Schumacher, “From Brussels with Love: Leverage, Benchmarking, and the Action Plans with Jordan and Tunisia in the EU’s Democratization Policy”, in *Democratization*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (2011), p. 932-955.

resembles the profile of a simple donor or partner.

Thirdly and finally, the definition of leadership does not mention “how” to achieve the stated goals, which means that there are multiple avenues and tools to achieve them. In this regard, it is to be acknowledged that EU policies have shifted towards a more realist, pragmatic and flexible approach in the Neighbourhood. Although they remain anchored to the ENP, several successive revisions have produced forms of adaptation of the original framework.

While in the wake of the Arab uprisings in 2011 the EU aspired to behave in its own Neighbourhood as the global leader in international democracy promotion, lately and since 2015, the EU has *de facto* changed its direction and prioritised the promotion of stability and security at the cost of democracy as a way to keep and justify its leadership, particularly vis-à-vis certain member states and their independent foreign policies.⁹

The question thus arises whether EU leadership can be exercised through adjustments and adaptation, meaning that the EU recognises the limits of its policies and adjusts them to improve outcomes. This assumption of leadership through adaptation is also visible in the EU’s approach to geopolitics.

In 2004, the ENP was conceived and for a long time sustained as the EU’s

alternative to traditional geopolitics, thus “go[ing] beyond the traditional foreign policy of interacting with the neighboring countries according to ad hoc developments and short-term interests”.¹⁰ Yet, regional geopolitical dynamics, combined with global trends, have led the EU to become involved in competition and conflicts, often through its member states.

At the supranational level, however, the EU has remained trapped in technocratic approaches – for example, insisting with the negotiation of Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTAs) or focusing almost exclusively on humanitarian and development aid – instead of nurturing true geopolitical and geoeconomic strategies and instruments to address multiple cleavages and conflicts.¹¹ Technocratic approaches represent a looser strategy in terms of leadership because they are framed within a short-term perspective that does not fit well with geopolitical ambitions.

Overall therefore, the limits of EU leadership in the Neighbourhood pertain to the actors, the scope and the instruments. It is important to acknowledge these challenges as a first step towards equipping the EU with the right approaches to turn its ambitions into concrete results. In this respect, a reality check needs

¹⁰ Stefan Lehne, “Time to Reset the European Neighbourhood Policy”, in *Carnegie Papers*, February 2014, p. 4, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/publications/54420>.

¹¹ See, for example, Silvia Colombo and Andrea Dessi, “Collective Security and Multilateral Engagement in the Middle East: Pathways for EU Policy”, in *IAI Papers*, No. 20|37 (November 2020), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/12388>.

⁹ Ana E. Juncos, “Resilience as the New EU Foreign Policy Paradigm: A Pragmatist Turn?”, in *European Security*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (2017), p. 1-18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2016.1247809>.

to take into account both the EU's internal constraints to policy change, for example bureaucratic inertia, and the external challenges, including the regional and international geopolitical context, in which the rise of competitive multipolarism makes it more difficult for the EU to pursue its leadership.

All in all, one of the biggest challenges constraining EU leadership in the Neighbourhood has to do with the notion of “Neighbourhood” itself. This is at the same time too vague and too rigid a concept to account for the transformations and interconnections that have flourished, thus making the classical separation between “us, our Neighbours and the rest” as well as, more specifically, between the Eastern and the Southern Neighbourhood increasingly misleading.

As important as the relations with the countries in the EU's immediate, strategic surrounding can be, grouping them as part of one single framework looks increasingly unfeasible. This policy concept has been adopted to tame complexity and identify a preferential space for EU action. Yet, complexity, fragmentation and inter-regional connections have tremendously increased in the past 16 years, making it impossible to justify the continued use of this concept.

The idea of “neighbours of our neighbours” that appeared in the EU Global Strategy (EUGS) of 2016 highlights the need to cooperate across clusters, regions and sub-regions connecting different geopolitical spaces such as North and sub-Saharan Africa or the Horn of Africa and the

Middle East/Gulf as well as in view of the role of Turkey as a linkage between the Eastern and the Southern Neighbourhood.

Policy-wise and thematically, it is misleading to speak of the Neighbourhood as it once again refers to a diverse set of actions and programmes that sit uneasily next to each other. The strong bilateralism and the prevailing tailor-made approaches stemming from the fragmentation both in the east and in the south have diluted this policy framework to the point that it is increasingly difficult to speak of a common and coherent set of policies.

Instead, with the EUGS the need has arisen to go beyond the existing compartmentalisation of different policy areas and to introduce the fostering of resilience as the new unifying principle of the EU's external action. Adding this extra layer has further contributed to distancing the EU from its focus on the Neighbourhood and to projecting it onto the global dimension, as a means to fulfil its leadership ambition.

Ultimately, instead of focusing on the Neighbourhood, EU leadership should be pursued in the geopolitical and thematic cracks of “multiple layers of regional formats”.¹² This would mean identifying those geopolitical areas (for example, the Middle East stretching as far as to include the Gulf and the Southern Caucasus and the North Africa/Sahel security continuum)

¹² Alfonso Medinilla et al., *ECDPM Contribution to the EU Consultation: “Towards a New European Neighbourhood Policy”*, July 2015, <https://ecdpm.org/?p=18619>.

and thematic dossiers – for example, migration and mobility, energy and sustainable development and humanitarian assistance – in which the EU can aspire to make a difference through its actions.

Being surrounded by regions or sub-regions by design or by chance – for example as a result of conflicts as in the case of the Eastern Mediterranean or the issue of energy conflicts/diplomacy – the EU should not miss this opportunity to deeply revise its actorness, strategic goals and toolbox to underpin its quest for leadership where it has better chances to have a solid impact and provide a meaningful contribution. Otherwise the EU risks becoming irrelevant under the impact of multipolar competition and its own internal hurdles.

5 January 2021

Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) is a private, independent non-profit think tank, founded in 1965 on the initiative of Altiero Spinelli. IAI seeks to promote awareness of international politics and to contribute to the advancement of European integration and multilateral cooperation. Its focus embraces topics of strategic relevance such as European integration, security and defence, international economics and global governance, energy, climate and Italian foreign policy; as well as the dynamics of cooperation and conflict in key geographical regions such as the Mediterranean and Middle East, Asia, Eurasia, Africa and the Americas. IAI publishes an English-language quarterly (*The International Spectator*), an online webzine (*Affarinternazionali*), three book series (*Global Politics and Security*, *Quaderni IAI* and *IAI Research Studies*) and some papers' series related to IAI research projects (*Documenti IAI*, *IAI Papers*, etc.).

Via dei Montecatini, 17 - I-00186 Rome, Italy

T +39 06 3224360

iai@iai.it

www.iai.it

Latest IAI COMMENTARIES

Director: Andrea Dessì (a.dessi@iai.it)

- 21 | 01 Bernardo Venturi and Silvia Colombo, *Rethinking EU Leadership in the "Neighbourhood": Limits and Ambitions*
- 20 | 98 Dario Cristiani, *Italy, Atlanticism and the Biden Administration: Greater Convergence to Defuse Ambiguity on China*
- 20 | 97 Carisa Nietzsche, *Broadening the Transatlantic Partnership to Address the China Challenge*
- 20 | 96 Marta Massera, *Why Europe Should Care about Energy Poverty in its Green Transition*
- 20 | 95 Martin Ruhs, *Expanding Legal Labour Migration Pathways to the EU: Will This Time Be Different?*
- 20 | 94 Tamirace Fakhoury, *Lebanon as a Test Case for the EU's Logic of Governmentality in Refugee Challenges*
- 20 | 93 Nathalie Tocci, *Peeling Turkey Away from Russia's Embrace: A Transatlantic Interest*
- 20 | 92 Lucia Bird, *Learning from COVID-19: Implications for the EU Response to Human Smuggling*
- 20 | 91 Liselotte Odgaard, *The New Normal in Transatlantic Relations: The US and Europe Eye China*
- 20 | 90 Olimpia Fontana, *Italian Euroscepticism and the COVID-19 Pandemic: Survey Insights*