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**Formulating Proposals for a More
Effective Engagement with
Neighbourhood Regions**

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**ENVISIONING A NEW
GOVERNANCE ARCHITECTURE
FOR A GLOBAL EUROPE**



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Executive Summary

This briefing paper draws from research done as part of ENGAGE [Work Package 8](#) 'Engaging with the EU's Neighbourhoods', which analyses how the EU has engaged with the neighbouring countries in the context of the European Neighbourhood Policy (the ENP).

Launched in 2003 to increase the prosperity, stability and security of countries in the EU's neighbourhood and to support their political, economic and institutional reforms, we find that the ENP proved to be a rather technocratic, de-securitised policy, hindered by it being separate rather than an integral part of EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). We find that the lack of consensus amongst the European Union Member States about the aims of the ENP in general and the European Union's role in security in particular was at the root of its mis-conceptualisation. The policy was further hampered by the fact that while the EU adopted a more securitised narrative vis-à-vis the neighbourhood countries, it conspicuously failed to develop into a fully-fledged security actor within the remits of the ENP, most notably by failing to shore up the security of neighbouring countries up to 2022.

In turn this weakness has led to disillusionment with the EU and diminished perception of it as a 'transformative power' especially in the southern neighbourhood countries. We conclude that the EU has two options for addressing this mismatch. Either it can reduce its geopolitical ambitions and refrain from making proclamations which are not backed by deeds; or, it can take actions which are compatible with its narrative, and thereby begin to realise its ambitions to be a fully transformative power.

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1 Introduction

The goal of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), launched between 2003 and 2004, was to increase the prosperity, stability, and security of countries in the European Union's (EU) neighbourhood and to support their political, economic and institutional reforms. Our research within ENGAGE [Work Package 8](#) has explored the ENP's original design, including the underpinning legal and institutional architecture, followed by an analysis of the effectiveness of the various mechanisms available for its implementation (see Sus et. al., 2021 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 3](#))).

The launch of the ENP raised the expectations of at least some of the ENP countries for greater EU engagement (Delcour & Wolczuk, 2020). However, it has become clear that the policy suffers from two major weaknesses.

Firstly, there was a gap between the rhetoric articulated in the policy and the actual actions that stemmed from the policy. This was caused by the fact that the ENP was a technocratic policy lacking the mechanisms necessary for addressing 'hard security' issues. Furthermore, because the ENP was conceived alongside rather than as an integral part of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), the policy was not able to utilise the tools the CFSP has at its disposal. Underpinning each of these issues was the fact that Member States failed to reach a consensus on the exact purpose of ENP, something which became more evident as the domestic contexts and geopolitical climate of the eastern and southern neighbourhoods deteriorated. Overlying these structural problems was the policy's uniform ('one-size-fits-all') institutional design, which could not sufficiently take into account diverse national preferences and motivations in the partner countries. This led to the unravelling of the common approach and to increasingly individualised treatment of the ENP partner countries.

Secondly, the EU's long-term agenda of promoting good governance and economic integration, combined with an indirect approach to conflict resolution, was ill-suited to deal with the existential challenges that emerged. The attack on Georgia by Russia in 2008, the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 not only wrong-footed the EU, but left the ENP exposed as a well-meaning but low-impact policy, with few capabilities and therefore little to offer to help neighbours face new geopolitical realities at a time when an increasingly wide range of tools were being deployed, ranging from migration to disinformation. The EU has been rectifying the situation since 2022, with extensive military and economic assistance to Ukraine. But, while these efforts can certainly prop up individual countries, they are unlikely to spill over to the ENP as a whole (see Explanatory Box on Armenia and Azerbaijan).



2 Diagnosis

2.1 The Design of the European Neighbourhood Policy: Between Aspirations and Disillusionment

Our research indicates that the ENP is best conceptualised as an amalgam of diverse policy objectives and instruments – including bilateral agreements such as Association Agreements and various regional frameworks, such as the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) and the Eastern Partnership (EaP). This composite policy was underpinned by the legal and institutional architecture established by the Treaty of Maastricht in 1992. While a comprehensive and ambitious foreign policy initiative, the ENP was designed as separate entity to the wider CFSP portfolio (Wolczuk et al., 2023 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 26](#))). There were a number of reasons for this.

At the root of this were long-standing disagreements amongst the Member States on the role that the Union ought to play in propping up the security of the eastern neighbours; these disagreements extended to Member States' willingness to bear the related political, institutional and economic costs.

These disagreements are evident but somewhat camouflaged by the non-committal nature of the ENP, particularly in terms of its vague *finalité*. In particular, relations with the post-Soviet states, including Russia, were shaped by the competing interests of particular EU Member States. As a result, the overarching aim of the ENP vis-à-vis the eastern neighbours – whether a temporary or permanent alternative to membership – remained a matter of contestation between the EU Member States, as did the question of the extent to which the EU should prioritise relations with Russia, until 2022. In a similar way, the southern Member States have prioritised relations with their southern neighbours, often uploading their preferences into the EU-wide policy, as has been the case of Spain and Morocco.

In order to address these internal tensions, the Commission adopted a technocratic approach to external action, focussing on low-politics, consensus-driven policies, prioritising economic and sectoral cooperation, thereby bypassing the more contentious issues related to security.

The subsequent Lisbon Treaty did not alter this institutional set up in a significant way. Under the Lisbon Treaty, the architecture was designed to facilitate coordination of the CFSP and the Commission's areas of EU external action, namely the ENP, the pre-accession process, trade, and development policy, among others (see Szép & Wessel, 2022 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 6](#))). However, *de facto* it left the Commission responsible for the ENP. Following an informal agreement to avoid a competence overlap, the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security had a lesser role in the ENP than the President of the Commission. This was clearly in evidence in the EU's responses to Russia's war against Ukraine.

Because the Lisbon Treaty failed to clarify where leadership of the ENP resided, there was extensive double-hatting and shared competences with other external actions. Yet because



the ENP was ring-fenced from other areas of European integration process, like the CFSP, external action remained within the remit of the Member States rather than the supranational institutions.

As challenges in implementation accumulated, steps were taken to address them (Wolczuk et al., 2023 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 26](#))). The creation of the European External Action Service (EEAS), bolstering EU Delegations, allowed for a greater utilisation of the knowledge of the partner countries, which in turn resulted in better coordination. Another example is the relationship that evolved between the High Representative and the Commissioner for Enlargement & Neighbourhood which proved to be critical in programming for the financial instruments. Thanks to more flexible and informal relations, the EU was able to mobilise better and more rapid support, which was more focussed on addressing real issues. For instance, the EU was able to swiftly suspend its assistance to Moldova in 2018 amidst concerns over state capture and democratic backsliding thanks to this newly found *modus operandi*. Furthermore, periodic ENP reviews allowed policymakers to accommodate the different aspirations and expectations of the partner countries. In sum, the Lisbon Treaty helped the EU bolster the effectiveness of the ENP on a bilateral level with individual countries, such as Ukraine or Morocco.

However, despite these efforts, our research indicates fissures between Member States continued to linger within the ENP, on the role the EU should play as a driver of reforms, and the incentives (potentially very costly for the Union and its Member States) it should offer. This was linked to diverse perceptions of risks emanating from the neighbourhood and the costs of “doing nothing” (Wolczuk et al., 2023 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 26](#))). The question of the nature of relations and the EU’s ‘rewards’ in sensitive areas, such agriculture or movement of people, was particularly vexed. Tying political rewards to economic benefits complicated decision-making within the EU, especially at the Council level, as foreign ministers had to gain the approval of their counterparts in charge of trade, industry or agriculture, for example, before being able to negotiate and reach consensus on offers to the neighbours. Therefore, the implementation of the neighbourhood policy most often involved *not* implementing a single set of preferences shared by the Member States, but instead negotiating away the differences that exist between them. When differences could not be reconciled, it was often left to individual Member States to take initiatives on behalf of the EU (for example, France with regard to Armenia).

Overall, the policy served as a vehicle for the extension of the internal modes of governance beyond the borders of the EU, while trying to minimise its effects on the internal functioning of the Union, including any tensions over institutional competences. Therefore, the policy focused on what the Member States agreed on, such as promoting good governance and export of the *acquis*, whilst avoiding fields where they disagreed, such as conflict management and relations with external powers like Russia. The focus on what the Member States agreed on was sufficient to launch and implement the policy, but was not sufficient to make it effective and sustainable, as the EU was not able to address the needs and demands for engagement in important areas such as security (see Schumacher, 2018). Thus, from the very



beginning, ambiguities and tensions were built into the most ambitious and multi-layered foreign policy ever launched by the EU.

Addressing these challenges over time resulted in the *de facto* fragmentation of the policy, not only between the southern and eastern neighbourhoods, but also increased differentiation between individual countries *within* the neighbourhoods as well as diverse responses to the conflicts in the neighbouring countries (Wolczuk et al., 2023 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 26](#))). The resulting regional fragmentation of the ENP demonstrates the structural flaws of the original uniform institutional design. These led to the subsequent unravelling of the common approach and growing differentiation in policies not only between eastern and southern neighbourhoods, but also between individual countries in both regions.

2.2 The European Neighbourhood Policy and the EU's Discursive Securitisation of the Neighbourhood

As part of our research, we have analysed how the ENP has been framed in the key policy documents. At the launch of the ENP (2003/2004), cooperation and dialogue appeared as its primary policy objectives. Over time, however, more ambitious aims appeared, such as the promotion of security.

Our analysis of ENP-related documents from the EU institutions indicates that key concepts (policy frames), such as democracy, security, cooperation, rule of law and human rights have remained unchanged since the inception of the policy (Gamkrelidze & Väisänen, 2022 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 15](#))). However, over time, differences have developed between the ENP-related documents and policy frames: policy frames evolved into diversified, multi-dimensional and interconnected concepts with the security policy frame, and in particular, they became more tightly connected to other policy issues through 'active framing'.¹

ENP-related documents relate to three key themes: pre-empting conflicts, ensuring peace and security, and economic growth in the neighbouring countries. From this it is clear that the EU has elevated security as a key policy frame. It now constitutes 20% of the total policy issues raised, and hence takes centre stage in ENP-related documents (Gamkrelidze & Väisänen, 2022 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 15](#))). From being a marginal issue at the launch of the ENP in 2003/2004, security evolved into a four-layered concept by 2011. By 2015, it had become a five-layered concept in the ENP Review, and by 2022, a complex six-layered conceptual constellation, involving cyber, hybrid, outer space, maritime, land, and air, each with various sub-dimensions ranging from gender and climate, to governance and the economy.

This expanded conception of security – in the sense put forward by Buzan et. al. (1998) – has affected other ENP policy areas, arguably leading to their "securitization" to a significant degree. Therefore, security is invoked not only in matters of violence but also the economy,

¹ Framing is defined as "a bridging process that shapes, redefines, and links different frames, actors and events" (Gamkrelidze & Väisänen, 2022, p. 7 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 15](#))).



health, international law, environment and so forth. Indeed, security is now an important dimension in nearly all of the ENP policy areas due to its importance for prosperity and democracy. Increasingly, therefore, the EU has positioned itself as a security provider, building upon its fundamental values as outlined in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union.

In line with this emphasis on security, the Commission has argued for some time already that the persistence of protracted conflicts in the region, which hinder development and pose security threats, underscores the ENP's significance as a catalyst for the international community to support democratic change, economic development, and social progress in the EU's neighbouring regions (European Commission/High Representative, 2011, p. 2). This can be interpreted as a call for action for EU Member States to address the security concerns of the partner countries.

However, despite the recognition of the correlation between security and integration within the neighbourhood, the EU's involvement in the security dimension has remained constrained by internal divisions and challenges in decision-making. These internal hurdles have hindered the effective implementation of the ENP and effective integration of/with the EU's neighbouring countries (see the Explanatory Box on Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict). Consequently, this limitation negatively affects cooperation and diminishes the EU's capacity to exert its influence and persuade neighbouring countries to fulfil their ENP commitments.

Overall, the EU's self-identification as an ambitious and multi-faceted transformative power – with an increased focus on security – has been subjected to a severe test (Gamkrelidze & Väisänen, 2022 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 15](#))). The EU has had little influence, if any, on the evolution of conflicts, and their resolution, in the neighbourhood (Sabatino et al., 2022 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 9](#))).

2.3 The EU's Selective Engagement in Conflict and Crisis Situations Within its Neighbourhoods

One of the unwelcome truisms that has come to inform much of the expert views on the EU's turbulent neighbourhood is that it has turned into a 'ring of fire' over the past two decades – coinciding with the time when the ENP was conceived as an instrument to promote good neighbourly relations with the Union's 'ring of friends'. Over a longer – tri-decadal – perspective, over 65 domestic (political and socio-economic) *crises* with external nexuses occurred, spreading nearly equally across the EU's two neighbourhood regions (Tyushka et al., 2023, pp. 5–6 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 29](#))). It should be noted as well that crises have not only multiplied (cascaded), they also have dangerously mutated (escalated) – as in the case of the Libyan and Syrian crises that transformed into civil and regional proxy wars, or the Ukrainian crisis, which escalated into a hybrid and then a full-spectrum armed conflict of global magnitude. On the *conflicts* side, out of over one hundred armed conflicts fought in the world today, thirteen are in the EU's neighbourhood, including the first major conventional war in



Europe since WWII – the Russian war in/against Ukraine.² Just as in the case of crises, the conflicts – some of which have long been considered ‘frozen’ – showcase evolving, escalatory and cascading dynamics. Vivid examples include the unprecedented escalation of the Russian-Ukrainian hybrid war (the so-called ‘Ukraine crisis’), the ‘unfreezing’ of the Armenia-Azerbaijan, and the Israel-Palestine conflicts. The EU’s first-ever defence doctrine, the 2022 Strategic Compass, repeatedly acknowledges this lasting and evolving instability and insecurity across the Union’s southern and eastern neighbourhoods as a reason for EU security concerns and engagement (Council of the EU, 2022, esp. pp. 10, 19).

In view of these proliferating and cascading crises and conflicts, it is unsurprising that the EU’s relations and engagement with both neighbourhoods have become incrementally securitised (Gamkrelidze & Väisänen, 2022 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 15](#))). The post-Lisbon Article 8 TEU constitutionally mandates that the EU shall ‘develop a special relationship with neighbouring countries’, thus stipulating an obligation to engage. Alongside this constitutional (EU Treaty) imperative, the growing great-power competition in the EU’s southern and especially eastern neighbourhoods, seen conjointly with the EU’s recently proclaimed ‘geopolitical’ course, entail yet another – geostrategic and geopolitical – imperative for the EU to meaningfully engage in shaping bilateral and region-wide relations with its neighbours, as well as to effectively respond to crises and conflicts therein (De Man et al., 2022, pp. 25–32 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 14](#))).

Our ENGAGE project research shows, however, that the EU’s engagement is extensively hindered by both internal and external constraints far more often than it is enabled by the varied opportunities to engage (Wolczuk et al., 2023 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 26](#))). This remains especially pertinent in cases of the EU’s engagement in crisis and conflict situations across its neighbourhoods, as demonstrated in our case study analysis of four diverse crisis/conflict cases – two from the EU’s southern neighbourhood (the Israel-Palestine conflict and the Libyan cascading crises), and two from its eastern neighbourhood (the protracted war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh and the so-called Ukraine ‘crisis’, including its current form of an all-out Russian military aggression against Ukraine) (Tyushka et al., 2023 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 29](#))).

Tyushka et al. (2023 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 29](#))) explored: (a) the rationale of EU and member state-level engagement in crisis management and conflict resolution (that is, interests, goals and strategies pursued); (b) the capacities and capabilities of the EU to address such situations; and (c) the resulting effects (particularly in terms of coherence, sustainability and effectiveness, or EU ‘goal-attainment’).

The findings from the case studies suggest that, while faced with similar EU-internal constellations (especially as regards the EU’s capacity to act), the forms and scope of the EU’s

² According to the Geneva Academy’s *Rule of Law in Armed Conflict Online Portal (RULAC)*, seven armed conflicts are taking place in (Eastern) Europe and more than 45 in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA region).



engagement in these crisis/conflict situations actually varied. Several structural and operational factors are arguably responsible therefor.

Among *structural conditions*, the EU's overall capacity to act in crisis/conflict situations, as shaped by context-specific (enabling or constraining) opportunity structures, are to be singled out. Security crises and conflicts in the EU's neighbourhood, just as elsewhere around the world or within the EU proper, are extraordinary events whose high levels of urgency, uncertainty and risks (threats) entail that any delayed or derailed responses count as ineffective almost by default. Alongside the specific pressures emanating from a crisis/conflict situation and the overall constellation of external opportunities for the EU to act (whether in accord with or against influential third powers), the *EU's variational capacity* to quickly make an informed decision, formulate a stance on the crisis/conflict issues, articulate its preferences and goals (as well as to committedly and consistently pursue those by adequate means) is presumably (De Man et al., 2022 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 14](#))) as well as observably (Santopinto et al., 2023 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 30](#)); Tyushka et al., 2023 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 29](#))) directly consequential for the outcomes of the EU's crisis management and conflict resolution endeavours. Across the four case studies analysed, the EU's capacity to act faced similar (though, developing, in a longer-term perspective) material preconditions (economic strength, defence spending, etc.), yet it proved to be differently tailored as regards the EU and Member States' ability to agree on a course of action, coordinate and committedly pursue it. It is increasingly the EU's capacity for (inter-) institutional, joined-up decision-making and coordinated agenda implementation, or the 'ability for collective and impactful decision-making', as recently put by Helwig (2023, p. 2), that is of great importance in defining the form and scope of the EU's response to extraordinary – crisis and conflict – situations in both of its neighbourhoods (see also De Man et al., 2022, pp. 16–25, 32–39 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 14](#))).

In view of such general and rather 'fixed' EU-internal opportunity structures (including the EU's decision-making, (inter-)institutional action capacities, or varied foreign-political preferences and divergencies among EU Member States), there are *external opportunity structures* that substantially shape the EU's posture and performance in a given crisis/conflict situation or the whole affected region. In Ukraine, for instance, the failure of the EU's 'Geneva Format' led to the 'Normandy Format' under the leadership of Member States, leaving the EU to deal with the less (geo)politicised areas – civilian security sector reform; state- and capacity-building; resilience, etc. It was only after February 2022 that the EU embarked on an (externally at least) unconstrained actorness.

In another example, the changing – first constraining and later on enabling – external opportunity structures played a crucial role in initially pre-empting and, since 2020, 'inviting' the EU's engagement in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict management (Tyushka et al. 2023, pp. 42–44 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 29](#))); Ghazaryan 2023). In particular, since 1997, it was only France that was engaged in conflict mediation efforts, together with the US and Russia, with the latter one radically marginalising, from 2008 on, the position of the other two co-chairs of the so-called Minsk Group. Renewed clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan in 2020,



which precipitated the tacit collapse of the OSCE Minsk Group, and Russia's weakening grip on Armenia (even in spite of its increased military presence in the region), presented a new opening for the EU's involvement, which saw a radical uplift more recently as the EU deployed its first-ever CSDP mission to a Russian CSTO-allied country. After years of the conflict's 'benign neglect' and playing a secondary role (in the shadow of Russia and the Russia-dominated OSCE Minsk Group of Co-Chairs), the EU proved capable – under enabling external circumstances – of radically stepping up its engagement and providing a fairly sustained intervention in resolving the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict (as shown in greater detail in the Explanatory Box below).

Explanatory Box 1: Diagnosing and Assessing the EU's Role in the Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh

While the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict has been ongoing for over 30 years, the EU only in recent years joined mediation efforts,³ hindered by France and Russia in particular arguing that its contribution was not needed. The EU default position was to support the OSCE Minsk Process, despite misgivings that it had become a 'conflict management' or 'mitigation' process. Instead, the EU engaged in background work such as funding Track Two projects, which had little traction in a conflict where maximalist narratives were widely accepted in society. This position reflected a broader problem of the EU's failure to develop an overall regional policy, focusing instead on bilateral engagements with the three countries of the South Caucasus, who tended to be viewed through prism of the EU's policy on Russia.

The changed with the formation of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) in 2009 and of the EEAS in 2010, following the Lisbon Treaty, not only thanks to increased funding, but primarily due to *new institutional structures which* deepened bilateral cooperation, shifting the agenda more to domestic reform and energy issues. This brought early dividends, with the signing of an Association Agreement with Georgia in 2014. However, the EU continued to struggle when it came to the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, as conflict resolution was not addressed in ENP and EaP documents.⁴ The newly formed EEAS absorbed the position of the EU Special Representative for the region, paradoxically making it less dynamic than before. For their part, both Armenia and Azerbaijan used the EaP as a platform to push their positions on the conflict, with EaP summits becoming a rhetorical battleground.

Following the '*44-Day Armenia-Azerbaijan war of 2020*', Azerbaijan reversed its losses from the conflict of the 1990s, recovered territories taken by the Armenians and took a dominant position vis-à-vis Armenia. By 2020, Azerbaijan rejected the OSCE mediation format, and both Baku and Yerevan invited the EU to facilitate negotiations, with European Council President Charles Michel chairing many meetings. Initially at least, the EU it lacked both the capacity and institutional knowledge on the conflict, despite both countries participating in the ENP since mid-2000s. Over time, the EU's role broadened and the EU deployed its first-ever CDSP mission to a Russian-allied country, by setting up

³ For 28 years, from 1992 until 2020, international diplomacy on the conflict was the preserve of the OSCE. From 1997, diplomats from France, Russia and the United States took the lead, with Russia being the main negotiator from around 2010.

⁴ The 2015 ENP review partly rectified this by noting that "protracted conflicts continue to hamper development in the region", but without further elaboration.



the EUMA civilian monitoring mission in border areas of Armenia.⁵ However, EU engagement did not prevent *the Azerbaijani military operation of September 19, 2023*, in which Baku captured Nagorno-Karabakh by force and almost the entire Armenian population (more than 100,000 people) fled their homes.

At the heart of this failure was the EU's lack of influence over Azerbaijan, in contrast to Turkey, which fully supported its military operation. Russia continued to maintain a separate mediating track to that of the EU and convened its own meetings of high officials. This enabled both Baku and Yerevan to engage in 'forum shopping' between different mediators.⁶

Issues of internal coordination – between the Commission, the Council and the EEAS, as well as among Member States – also weakened the EU mediation effort.⁷ For example, the Commission had different priorities. In July 2022 Commission president Ursula von der Leyen travelled to Baku to negotiate a gas purchase agreement. In her public remarks she called Azerbaijan a “crucial partner” for the EU and did not mention the conflict with Armenia. Von der Leyen's visit was reportedly not coordinated with the EEAS. Member States have been openly divided as well.⁸

Source: own elaboration

Yet another to-be-seized opportunity for the EU's engagement in the South Caucasus within and beyond conflict-resolution agendas is only starting to take shape as Armenia demonstratively embarks on a Russia-dissociational (if not yet confrontational) path. Armenian society has become deeply distrustful and suspicious of Russian intentions and credibility as both as an ally and a security actor in the (sub-)region. Popular and political calls have started multiplying for yet another Armenian 'U-turn' – this time away from Russia – and even for forging 'as close as possible' ties with the European Union. Armenia's iterated démarches of the CSTO meetings and activities also indicate that Russia-distancing direction – an opportunity to (re)assert the EU's role as a player and partner on security and further afield.

⁵ Although the initial talks did not include the future of Nagorno-Karabakh and its Armenian inhabitants, this also became a subject of the negotiations, with Michel saying that a settlement needed to protect the “rights and security” of the Armenians of Karabakh.

⁶ Russia was also the only outside actor with 'boots on the ground' in the form of its small peacekeeping force in Karabakh.

⁷ For example, in October 2023, the European Parliament passed a resolution which called Azerbaijan's military takeover of Karabakh “a gross violation of human rights and international law” and an “unjustified military attack”. A total of 491 MEPs voted in favour, with nine voting against and 36 abstentions.

⁸ In 2022, several EU Member States – notably Italy, Bulgaria and Greece – relied on Azerbaijani gas supplies to replace deliveries from Russia, making them more inclined to be supportive of Baku. Hungary also reportedly vetoed an EU statement critical of Azerbaijan's military operation. France takes a markedly more pro-Armenian position than the rest of the EU, and is repeatedly criticized by Azerbaijan. In June 2023, French President Macron even criticised Armenian prime minister Nikol Pashinyan for not sufficiently supporting the Karabakh Armenians.



It is noteworthy that the EU appears to have firmly seized an opportunity for a more substantive and multifaceted – including geopolitical – engagement with the region’s other country, Georgia, that in November 2023 was granted an EU candidate status, in spite of the Russian ongoing war (an obviously constraining factor) or geopolitical interests.

As for the *operational modalities*, the EU institutional and EU Member States’ choices (on why, when and how to engage) seem to have predicated (un)sustainable commitments and thus (un)effective, or at least mixed, outcomes across the four case studies.

The *selectivity of EU engagement* in crisis management and conflict resolution in its neighbourhoods, while shaped by both the internal and external (as well as enabling or constraining) opportunity structures, is largely determined by the interplay of three key factors: proximity, severity and salience (Tyushka et al., 2023, pp. 63–64 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 29](#))).

Clearly, the greater the geographical proximity of the conflict to the EU, the greater the risk it represents to the EU. However, political-institutional proximity plays a role, too: the scope and dynamic of bilateral ties between the EU and a neighbour state, including future prospects and ambitions for such a relationship, determine the depth, breadth and sustainability of the EU’s engagement. In that regard, the Ukraine case study vividly contrasts with the remaining three.

Similarly, the severity of the conflict, in terms of the nature and scale of atrocities, appears to also play a role in the extent to which the EU engages. At first glance, this puts the “normative power” EU on a collision course with its core values and value-driven foreign policy, where every life and human rights should matter equally. On the other hand, and in connection with the EU’s transformation into a geopolitical – and thus a “normal” – actor, evidence from the four case studies suggests that the EU’s (more) substantial and resource-intensive tools (such as CSDP missions, substantial financial and humanitarian aid, sanctions, state- and capacity-building programmes) are more likely to be deployed where mass killings, including of civilians, intensive armed struggle and massive infrastructure destruction occur.⁹ At the same time, the examples of EU’s limited commitment and engagement beyond humanitarian concerns are only too evident in the case of the Israel-Palestine conflict, which has lasted over 70 years. The recent intensification of the EU’s efforts towards conflict resolution following Hamas’ October 2023 atrocious attacks against Israel seems to be yet another case confirming that the severity is a factor at play.

Finally, the salience of a conflict or crisis situation – that is, the importance the EU attaches to the risks each specific conflict or crisis poses for the EU’s own security and stability, including

⁹ In this regard, the EU’s multifaceted engagement in Libya (where 526,000 Libyans required humanitarian assistance, including 160,000 internally displaced persons, and ca. 650,000 refugees further exacerbated the toll of the Libyan civil war and the internationalised conflict fought for the past decade) and Ukraine (where Russia’s continued war and territorial annexations triggered a regional security crisis, massive civilian and military casualties in Ukraine, and humanitarian and ecological catastrophes, including nearly 11 million refugees, over 8 million of whom fled to EU countries) confirm the case.



factors like massive refugee flows (whether from Libya or Ukraine) – impact the EU’s resolve and involvement in crisis resolution and conflict management. The risk of conflict escalation, especially military escalation, appears to directly and highly correlate with the radical step-up of the EU’s crisis response, as Ukraine’s case vividly shows.

In what regards the outcomes (effects) of EU engagement, the inquiry into this aspect, as carried out in Tyushka et al., (2023 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 29](#))), demonstrated that the dimensions of *coherence, sustainability and effectiveness of EU engagement* manifest themselves unequally across the four cases, with some – rather concerning – similarities. Our research identified problems with both horizontal coherence (cross-policy and EU inter-institutional coordination and action) and vertical coherence (contending interests of select EU Member States) in all case studies.

Whereas our case studies – just as much of the existing field literature – indeed confirmed that the EU’s performance is largely determined by (*in*)*coherence* of the Union-level policies and institutional interactions (horizontal coherence) and (*in*)*consistency* of Member State-level actions (vertical coherence), we also showed that the *articulation (rightsizing and firm communication) of goals* that are to inform the EU’s and EU Member States’ engagement is critical to mobilise joined-up efforts and the pursuit of the EU’s preferred end-states in specific crisis and conflict contexts (Tyushka et al., 2023, pp. 29–35, 43, 48–50, 61, 63 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 29](#))). Narrow(er) and (more) specific goal-setting is by design more conducive to goal achievement; firm and consistent communication of the goals and principles that underpin the EU’s engagement matters for the effectiveness – conceived of herein as goal-attainment – as well.

Some burgeoning accounts in the literature similarly ponder the relevance of coherence (unity/diversity) and goal-orientation (focus/diffusion), as well as commitment (intensity/dispersion), in the EU’s crisis bargaining and preferred end-states pursuit, in Syria and Ukraine for instance (Driedger & Krotz, 2023, pp. 5–6). The EU’s own institutional accounts of the commitment-effectiveness nexus also point to the relevance of goal articulation and coherent and committed action for the outcomes of EU engagement. So, following the October 7, 2023 Hamas attack against Israel and the renewed escalation of some of the most lasting conflicts in the EU’s neighbourhood, the EU’s High Representative openly admitted that the Union and its Member States “have not been very effective” in addressing the underlying causes of the conflict: “For too long we have tried to dismiss the Palestinian issue as if it no longer existed or as if it would resolve itself” (Borrell, 2023).

This only confirms one of our earlier findings: in certain contexts, the EU is practicing a ‘placebo engagement’ (Tyushka et al., 2023, pp. 5, 64 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 29](#))), thus largely resorting to ‘muddling through’ tactics, rather than strategically and proactively committing to conflict resolution. The HR/VP’s call to transit from “call[ing] for a two-state solution” as “the only viable one” to “proactive commitment”, and thus actually investing all the EU’s and Member States’ political energy to (helping to) make it happen (Borrell, 2023), also concurs with our case study findings that the EU’s available (diplomatic, economic,



institutional, as well as military) instruments are used selectively (Tyushka et al., 2023, p. 63 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 29](#))).

In sum, the effectiveness of the EU's engagement does not appear to be high in any of the cases analysed, not least as the EU has not been able to formulate specific and attainable goals in all cases. The case of Armenia and Azerbaijan illustrates shortcomings when it comes to coherence, sustainability, and effectiveness, resulting in the preservation of the 'status quo', which ultimately undermined the role of the EU in conflict resolution and the South Caucasus in general. In the south, the ENP turned the EU into a bystander in the collapse of the Libyan and Syrian regimes, which in turn led to an increase in migration through the Mediterranean and exacerbated economic and governance challenges in the region. The rise of migration and deterioration of the southern neighbourhood in the aftermath of the Arab Spring contributed to a greater focus on stability and resilience by the EU. This entailed a more short-term EU perspective, driven by the Member States and the *de facto* abandonment of the neighbourhood-wide approach initially championed by the ENP.

With the exception of the Ukraine case, the *sustainability of the EU's engagement* in the other three crisis/conflict situations show mixed results. Furthermore, even the future sustainability of the EU's engagement with the Russia-Ukraine war is not guaranteed. In political and academic discourses, accounts that regard the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, and the EU's profoundly changed response to it, as "the war that changed everything" (Casier, 2023), continue to proliferate: they point to a paradigmatic change. Indeed, the EU's response demonstrated that even the staunchest and 'traditionally established' divisions among EU Member States, including on Russia, can be overcome. Whether such a change is sustainable *within* and *beyond* the Ukraine's case, remains, however, an open question. Some argue that the EU's response to the most recent escalation of the Hamas-Israel armed conflict points to the contrary, and that the EU's varied posture in Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Palestine conflicts actually inaugurated "the rise and fall of geopolitical Europe" (Tocci, 2023). Thus, lesson-learning is imminent to help the EU maintain the 'Ukraine moment' and sustain its newfound role as a security actor in its neighbourhoods.

That the EU learns lessons and reconsiders its past practices of engagement in crisis management and conflict resolution *after Ukraine* is quite evident, in its reinvigorated (upscaled) response to the newest stages of escalation in two lasting conflicts in its eastern and southern neighbourhoods. One of the reasons for this change in the EU's approach is arguably the dramatically increased severity of the conflicts that were long considered 'frozen', as well as their salience to the EU's own ontological security and image as a liberal-democratic and humanitarian force in international relations.¹⁰ This echoes our case study findings about

¹⁰ Although not directly addressed in the [Work Package 8](#) case studies, the EU's engagement in crisis/conflict situations in its neighbourhood seems to be, furthermore, affected by the Union's identity politics. Such a *crisis/conflict-identity nexus*, which arguably informs the EU's vision of, and strategy-making towards, both the neighbourhood 'regions' and individual neighbour states, ought to be further explored in both conceptual and empirical analyses.



conflicts' salience and the severity of atrocities as driving factors for the EU's engagement (Tyushka et al., 2023, pp. 63–64 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 29](#))).

The 'lesson learning' side of the EU's engagement in crisis and conflict situations in its neighbourhoods is also noticeable in – so far only conflict-specific – revisions of its crisis/conflict response repertoire in general as well as relevant tools in particular. For instance, the mandate adjustments of ongoing CSDP missions and the launching of new (civilian and military) ones amidst increasing great-power conflict, especially in the EU's eastern neighbourhood (De Man et al., 2022 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 14](#)); Tyushka et al., 2023 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 29](#))), or the constant rescaling and redesigning of the EU's sanctions tool (Müller et al, 2023 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 25](#))) can be mentioned in this context. As the sanctioned actors, such as Russia, find ways of bypassing the sanctions, and thus relativise the tool's impact (Ahapova, 2023; Portela & Olsen, 2023), the Union needs to constantly (re)assess and (re)adjust its forms and formats of engagement in crisis management and conflict resolution to act and remain effective, as also stipulated in the ENGAGE project's other related work (De Man et al., 2022, pp. 24–25 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 14](#))).

As the Russian armed aggression in Ukraine takes on 'a long(er) war' course, the EU's hitherto pursued approach, which relied heavily on the unprecedented – shock-driven and value-driven – unity among EU Member States and the firm cohesion in the transatlantic link (not least due to the US leadership and congruence of the Euro-Atlantic visions of the war), needs to be adjusted again in order to remain relevant and impactful. In view of the uncertainties emanating from the forthcoming 2024 electoral cycles in the US, European countries as well as the EU itself, the EU – and its Member States – need to invest efforts in providing an sustainable and effective EU engagement in Ukraine's defensive war effort and peace-making endeavours post-2024 already *now*. Strategically aligning with Ukraine's war-termination and peacebuilding strategies (Tyushka & German, 2023), including by ensuring long-term security assistance to Ukraine, engaging Ukraine more broadly in EU capability development programs (within both the EDA and PESCO frameworks), and synergising the EU's and NATO's efforts in what regards building up Ukraine's resilience and future security guarantees (Zandee & Dijkman, 2023), is clearly the way forward.

Overall, the EU's engagement in the four case studies demonstrated that, in spite of the varied forms and scope of EU and Member States' engagement, as well as the omnipresent (even if distinctly manifested) issues of horizontal and especially vertical coherence, there are similar – sub-optimal – outcomes in effectiveness. In terms of effectiveness and sustainability, therefore, there are noticeable areas of improvement.



3 Recommendations

The authors conclude that there are three areas in which the EU needs to improve if it is to be an effective actor in relation to the neighbouring countries. Within each of these areas, we make a number of recommendations.

Communication and Expectation Management

The rhetoric on ENP policy aims led to expectations on the part of neighbours that were not subsequently met on the part of the EU. Simply speaking, the EU has failed to live up to expectations that it itself created. The EU promised 'more for more' to the partner countries, in terms of rewards for reforms, but with the ENP, it has overpromised when it comes to what the policy can deliver, until and unless the countries are interested in enacting domestic reforms and/or integration with the EU.

Recommendation 1: The EU needs to be much more realistic in what it is able to offer and achieve and communicate this more effectively, particularly in terms of, for example, what support it can offer for reforms if and when the countries are interested in reforms themselves. Most importantly, it needs to recalibrate the narrative on enhancing security (see below).

Recommendation 2: The Union should enhance its visibility in the neighbourhood and maintain a continued presence at the domestic level by increasing its media appearances and engagement with civil society organisations. Furthermore, the EU must transition from being a project of the future or a 'European perspective' to becoming a 'present' force in the lives of people in the neighbourhood, similar to the approach in the Northern Dimension (Browning & Joenniemi, 2003). To achieve this, the EU needs to create a narrative in which neighbours are portrayed as an integral part of the European project. This transformation is likely to turn the Union into an 'emotional force' (Laclau, 2007) in the neighbourhood. Neighbours require EU-driven prisms through which they can see and identify themselves. Such an approach will, at the very least, help the EU maintain a presence in the neighbourhood, regardless of future changes in central political authorities.

Differentiation

The EU initially implemented a uniform and consistent policy across the whole of its diverse neighbourhoods. The ENP exposed the limits of the 'one-size-fits-all' policy towards a diverse set of countries. Yet, this policy was received in different ways in the neighbouring countries. Thus, in order to be able to implement the policy, the EU had no choice but to pursue differentiated relations with each of its neighbours and respond to the vastly different aspirations of the partner countries and the crises emerging in the neighbourhood. Over time, this led to the differentiation of the policy and a focus on bilateral ties, thereby almost reverting to the status quo ante. As of 2023, the ENP formally exists, but *de facto*, it has become a highly fragmented policy with a plethora of multilateral and bilateral frameworks, agreements and instruments.



Recommendation 3: In many respects, it is time to acknowledge the futility of the original design. The granting of the membership perspective to Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia puts into question the very concept of the eastern neighbourhood, when three out of six countries (Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) have migrated to the enlargement policy portfolio. At the same time, there is a growing demand and rationale for launching a new regional policy for the southern neighbourhood. Therefore, the EU needs to acknowledge that the overarching ENP has lost its rationale. It is difficult to continue with a regional approach to the eastern neighbourhood, so the EU needs to rely on bilateral relations. At the same time, the southern neighbourhood deserves a specific initiative, but, importantly, also needs to differentiate between the partner countries, in recognition of the sheer diversity and complexity of the MENA region.

Security

The ENP provided the post-Lisbon EU with the opportunity to test its newly acquired actorness in the field of crisis management and resolution in the countries that are geographically close to its external borders and with which various EU Member States share important connections and historical legacies. Yet, as our research indicates, the neighbourhood context exposed the extent to which internal fragmentation, incoherence and disunity have contributed to the limited presence and impact on conflicts.

The EU still needs to develop the capacity and sufficient resources to reconcile different priorities in different fields in interactions with a range of third countries. Overall, the EU policy has tended to be 'siloed': democracy, trade or conflicts were pursued as different portfolios, whereas they need to be more integrated, requiring not only closer cooperation of the ENP and CFSP policy aims, but also pooling of sufficient human resources within the EU institutions.

Recommendation 4: The EU needs to adopt a proactive approach towards crises, in order to avoid being dependent on external actors which have much more sway over local actors and do not shy away from utilising coercive (military) means, such as Turkey and Russia. As part of this effort, a clear vision and goals of EU engagement need to be articulated in each specific case to underpin the EU institutional and EU Member States' responses to conflict and crisis situations in the neighbourhood.

The role of the EU Member States cannot be glossed over. When it comes to individual conflicts, the EU is often fragmented internally, given the strategic interests and positions as well as the policy entrepreneurship of individual Member States, such as France in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, which sought to exclude the EU from the OSCE-led negotiating format (see the Explanatory Box).



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