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Economic liberalisation trumps democratisation in EU Neighborhood Policy

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The functioning of the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) vis-à-vis the Southern partners has received considerable international scrutiny over the past weeks, with revolutions in North Africa in the spotlight. Some of the criticism aimed at ENP effectiveness in the South seems to imply that, at least by comparison, the ENP has worked well in the East.

What barely made it on the international media radar this week is a [protest](#) by ten thousand opposition supporters in the Armenian capital: on March 1st, the protesters took to the streets on the anniversary of three years since the brutal oppression of opposition forces following national elections in 2008. Demonstrators argue the 2008 transfer of power took place undemocratically and they condemn the use of political violence against the opposition at the time. Clearly, not all Armenians consider their country politically stable or a functioning democracy. Yet this has not prevented the May 2010 [report](#) on Armenia's progress in implementing the ENP Action Plan from stating that the country has made progress on many political aspects, including on addressing the internal political crisis following the 2008 elections.

Looking at the Armenian case gives a sense the ENP could do more to encourage the respect for political rights and the functioning of democratic principles in its partner countries. In theory, the ENP was designed to promote “common values, principally within the fields of the rule of law, good governance, the respect for human rights, including minority rights, promotion of good neighbourly relations, and the principles of market economy and sustainable development”. Again, in theory, political rights and democratisation should be promoted with the same intensity as economic liberalisation.

This is, however, not how the policy works in practice. Eight years since its inception, the ENP continues to prioritise economic liberalisation over the social and democratic goals it is [mandated to promote](#). In the majority of Eastern countries targeted by the policy, national Action Plans completely lack provisions regarding agriculture, poverty eradication, the development of a reliable social security net, or health services.

In Georgia, since the signing of the ENP, authorities have pushed for a complete liberalisation and deregulation of the economy, leading to the abolition of 85 percent of all licensing legislation, including in the food, industry and vehicle safety spheres. Even though the EU itself has taken a critical attitude towards some of Georgia's reforms concerning environmental issues and labour and consumer rights, the ENP does little to remedy such deficiencies.

The ENP review launched by the European Commission last year should certainly be used as an opportunity to balance the policy, making sure that democratic institutions, human rights and environmental sustainability are not neglected at the expense of economic liberalisation. Recent events in North Africa are surely forcing a rethink of ENP priorities in the region. It is important to remember that such imbalances exist — and need to be addressed — also in the functioning of the ENP in Eastern countries, not just in the South. An important step in the right direction would be the introduction of clear Commission guidelines to ensure civil society participation in the elaboration and implementation of national Action Plans. This would heighten transparency and increase chances that the ENP indeed answers the needs of partner societies.

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