

Discursive Constructions of the EU's Identity in the Neighbourhood: An Equal Among Equals or the Power Centre?

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Abstract¹

Using critical discourse analysis, this article explores the discursive self-representations of the EU in its official documents related to the European Neighbourhood Policy. Its main claim is that the EU's position towards its neighbourhood basically oscillates between two contradictory positions – that of a power centre, asymmetrically dominating its neighbourhood, and that of an equal among equals, thus offering a more benign face to its neighbours. Two discursive areas frequently mentioned in the documents are analysed: the notion of joint ownership and the EU's stance towards the frozen conflict, showing that each of the two facets of EU's identity may become dominant under particular circumstances.

Keywords: *EU, European Neighbourhood Policy, critical discourse analysis, identity constructions.*

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1. Introduction

The European Neighbourhood Policy is a truly complex policy. Indeed, if we take into account the cumbersome evolution of the policy, the policy's multi-faceted nature comes as no surprise. While it started out as a policy aimed at the Eastern neighbours, the biggest and most important of these, Russia, rejected its participation even before the policy was launched. Meanwhile, to soothe the EU's southern members, who felt that the EU's attention had tilted too much and for too long to the East, the Southern Dimension was added to the original project, hence creating the two regional directions characterising the policy until today. Finally, after Georgia's Rose Revolution, the diversity among the ENP partner countries was further increased by adding the three Southern Caucasian States into the basket.

While this alone would render a reasonable level of consistence for the policy extraordinarily difficult to achieve, another difficulty with the policy lay in the ways the policy was perceived by individual EU member states (cf. Kratochvíl 2006). Some, notably the new EU members in Eastern Europe, saw the policy clearly as a pre-enlargement strategy and fought vigorously for the clichéd 'membership perspective' for their shoo-ins (for the connection between the ENP and enlargement, see Kelley 2006, Tulmets 2006). Others, in particular southern member states, favoured more cooperation with the states on the southern coast of the Mediterranean without, however, pushing for these countries' membership. Finally, a number of old EU members, painstakingly aware of their populations' enlargement fatigue and growing fear of immigrants, came to understand the policy as an enlargement substitute.

However, the main thesis of this article is that besides the South-East tension and the enlargement-non-enlargement tension, there is a third source of friction which has so far been hidden from the analysts' eyes. This tension is rooted in the Union's self-perception as the *dominant power* and, at the same time, a *benign power* which can transform its neighbourhood by the token of its mere existence and attractiveness (for a discussion on the EU's nature as a benign power, see, for instance, Manners 2002). I define the dominant power as a power that plays the key role in the international system

or in its regional subsystem and that uses its asymmetrical position to make other actors in the system comply with the dominant power's requirements. The benign power, on the other hand, is a power that strives to deal with other actors without recourse to force, intimidation or deliberate manipulation and that aims at equality in the external relationships.

In other words, the research question I ask is which of the two elements (dominance and benignness) of EU's role identity vis-à-vis its neighbours becomes dominant in EU's discourse about the ENP. There are two areas where the discursive clash between these two elements in the EU's self-perception causes great difficulties within the ENP. The first is the principle of partnership and joint ownership (Tulmets 2006): On the one hand, the European Union is eager to present its power influence in the neighbourhood as benign, and hence the official documents and speeches on the ENP teem with references to the equality of the partnership, shared values, commonly agreed priorities, etc. But once we start to explore the EU's rhetoric in more detail, we will soon realise that the principle of joint ownership is seriously eroded by the EU's belief that it is primarily the Union itself who should define the contents of partner countries' reforms and, in particular, who should decide whether the partner countries are performing badly or not. Hence, even though the benign elements remain in place, EU's dominance looms equally relevant in the EU's documents.

Secondly, the contradictory nature of a benign power reveals itself very clearly in the way the EU talks about security issues, in particular potential sources of threat to its security, such as frozen conflicts. On the one hand, the Union as a friendly actor (and also as a composite actor whose stance is frequently on the verge of fragmenting into individual national positions) does not wish to take sides and tries to remain strictly neutral in these conflicts. This neutrality, coupled with the intrusion of outside powers, however, slows down any progress toward solutions to these conflicts. As a result, the EU's self-perception as a dominant power is seriously challenged since apparently, the EU is not able to stabilise its own neighbourhood, not speaking about the global projection of its power. Interestingly, the ambiguity surrounding the question of the EU's role in the neighbourhood feeds back into the discussion about

the two tensions mentioned above and hence can further reinforce the division between the Eastern and Southern Dimensions of the ENP since the EU stresses its dominant nature in the East, hence adopting a position of a teacher, while maintaining a more equal, benign stance in the South, thus playing the role a friend.

These two discursive areas were chosen for two reasons: First they constitute the strongest and weakest element of EU's policies: While the voluntary spread of EU's norms based on local ownership is clearly the most effective tool the EU has at its disposal, its security policy is still rather underdeveloped, fragmented and at times contradictory. Second, the two notions are applied differently in the East and in the South which may reveal some interesting differences in the overall approach of the Union to the two neighbouring regions.

2. Conceptual Framework: Critical Discourse Analysis

The methodology used in this article is based on critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1992, 1995; Wodak, Meyer 2001; Toolan 2002). We analyse documents on the ENP published by the European Commission. We start from the assumptions that (1) texts and discourses are not reducible to material conditions and that (2) discourse analysis can reveal much about the authors of the texts, the structure of meanings they assign to themselves and others, and the overall interpretation of their social environment. At the same time, critical discourse analysis maintains that the social world cannot be reduced to discourse only and that discourse is closely related to actual social practices, such as construction of power asymmetries, exclusionary practices aiming at hierarchisation of actors, and ascribing positive and negative values to their actions. In short, discourse is the primary vehicle through which ideology can be reproduced and thus have an effect on society (or international relations, for that matter).

Discursive constructions, especially those expounding relations to other actors, are directly related to the role identities the self is prepared to play in the particular environment. For instance, locating oneself at the top of a hierarchically structured cluster of actors im-

plies a superior identity for the self and the self's right to asymmetrically influence the others. Obviously, others advocate different discourses that may or may not be compatible with the discursive strategies of the self and the resultant identity of both self and others depend on the outcome of clashes among the competing discourses.

We start from the structural-synchronic analysis of *texts*, exploring their internal structure and the differences in stresses in the preambles and in the technical parts dealing with the policy's substance and implementation. Then we move forward to *intertextuality*, comparing the changes in the texts in time (comparative diachronic analysis), whereby we are mainly interested in the question of whether the dominant principles highlighted in the older documents retain their importance in the newer texts or whether they recede to the background. Finally, this allows us to make the final move to the analysis of the social *context*, showing what impact the inconsistencies in the application of the leading principles might have for the policy as a whole (importance of context for critical theory is also stressed in Campbell 1992, Fierke 2001).

In this study, we focused on the analysis of seven documents published by the European Commission. These documents cover a period of almost exactly five years, from March 2003 to April 2008, thus describing the policy's evolution from its early beginning (the first communication on Wider Europe (COM(2003) 104 final), through the Strategy Paper (COM(2004) 373 final), to two documents calling for improvements in the policy (COM(2006) 726 final and COM(2007) 774 final) and three reports assessing the progress in the policy's implementation (COM(2008) 164, SEC(2008) 402 and SEC(2008) 395).² All of these documents were drawn by the bureaucrats of the European Commission and while some may have different authors (in particular the three progress reports), their contents are finally always harmonised within the ENP Coordination Unit of the EC.

² In the analysed sample, no Action Plans were included since these do not contain virtually any references to joint ownership. While it may be true that the Action Plans reflect more than other documents the equal nature of the partnerships, this is not evident from the texts themselves and hence not identifiable through discourse analysis.

3. The EU as a Dominant and Benign Actor

All analysed documents are framed in the general understanding that it is the European Union that is the key actor in the region as well as the actor that is behind the reform and modernisation drive in the neighbouring countries. The best metaphor describing this position of the EU is that of a teacher: The EU is the dominant actor here and the actor who leads others and aims at their modernisation, social learning and adoption of the EU model of governance. It is usually in the introductory parts of the documents where explicit references to this double role of the EU are mentioned. The first document (COM(2003)) is already very clear on both of these points: It starts by reiterating that

“An enlarged Union of 25 countries, with a combined population of more than 450 million and GDP of almost € 10000 billion, will fundamentally increase the political, geographic and economic weight of the EU on the European continent” (COM(2003): 3)

This document also entails the clearest allusion to the EU as a benign power which positively influences its neighbourhood:

“The EU has a duty, not only towards its citizens and those of the new member states, but also towards its present and future neighbours to ensure continuing social cohesion and economic dynamism. The EU must act to promote the regional and sub-regional cooperation and integration that are preconditions for political stability, economic development and the reduction of poverty and social divisions in our shared environment” (COM(2003): 3)

The same ethos has remained remarkably constant over time as can be demonstrated by citing a document published three and a half years later. Here, the double nature of the EU as both a benevolent actor and the most powerful actor is put even more pithily:

“The premise of the European Neighbourhood Policy is that the EU has a vital interest in seeing greater economic development and stability and better governance in its neighbourhood. The responsibility for this lies primarily with the countries themselves, but the EU can substantially encourage and support their reform efforts” (COM(2006): 2)

This self-perception is coupled with the growing stress on an EU-centred understanding of the European continent. For instance, while the original initiative consistently talked about the “new EU neighbourhood policy”, thus keeping up the distinction between “EU” and “Europe” (cf. COM(2003)), all later documents refer to the European Neighbourhood Policy and hence make an EU policy identical with a “Europe’s policy”. It is indeed striking that even though the EU covers less than half of the continent’s territory, it is able to discursively push through the identification of the two notions to such an extent that it is often accepted by outsiders as well. Similarly, although the catchwords are “reform” and “modernisation” in all the documents, there is little doubt that the EU stands at the centre of these reforms, and this interpretation frequently comes to the fore, for instance in the phrase “implementation of EU-oriented reforms” (COM(2008): 2).

The following two sections explore the mutual relation of these two roles of the EU by exploring (1) the joint ownership principle; (2) the EU’s stance in regard to the frozen conflicts in the neighbourhood.

3.1 Case I: Discursive Treatment of the Joint Ownership Notion

It is not difficult to understand why the principle of partnership and that of joint ownership constitute a key pillar of the whole policy.³ The main reason for its relevance lies in the EU’s experience with past projects whose failure was seen as directly originating in the missing identification with the projects on the part of the partner countries. One such project is the Northern Dimension. Here, the frustration caused by the low level of responsiveness on the side of Russian authorities was so high that an allusion to the Northern Dimension as a negative example of unsatisfactory ownership even made it into the Strategy Paper on the ENP which says that “the importance of local ownership is one of the most pertinent lessons that can be drawn from the Northern Dimension” (COM(2004): 21). After the decision was taken to include the Southern dimension in the

³ Both of these are frequently mentioned in the bilateral Action Plans between the EU and the partner countries. See ENP – Reference Documents, http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/documents_en.htm

neighbourhood policy, the importance of the principle further rose. Again, the reason is clear: The lack of a co-ownership by both the EU and the countries of the Southern Mediterranean belonged to the most frequently raised critiques in the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership or within the Barcelona Process (cf. Edis 1998, Del Sarto, Schumacher 2005).⁴

The term “joint ownership” is first introduced in the Strategy Paper from May 2004. Here, it is presented as the first substantial principle (followed by differentiation), and it is underlined as “essential” (COM(2004): 8). However, the emphasis on ownership is omnipresent in all documents which swell with phrases related to the principle, such as “an equal stake”, “shared interests”, “joint approaches”, “mutual commitments” or priorities “defined by common consent” (see COM(2003), COM(2004), COM(2006) etc.).

A mirror reflection of the extreme efforts to underline the joint ownership is the strict avoidance of the term *political conditionality*, which by many, especially in the South, is seen as condescending and patronising. In its stead the key word used is “benchmarks”, sometimes even “agreed benchmarks”. The Commission maintains that benchmarks “offer greater predictability and certainty for the partner countries than traditional ‘conditionality’” (COM(2003): 16), but the substance of the measure, irrespective of its name, remains virtually the same. Notwithstanding the claim that benchmarking can “ensure national ownership and commitment” (*ibid.*), benchmarks are undeniably factual criteria specifying under which *conditions* rewards from the EU are bestowed upon the partner country.

However, a major difference between benchmarks and direct political conditionality lies in the fact that benchmarks (1) are more loosely connected to rewards and (2) their determination is – unlike with political conditionality – usually preceded by a period of consultations. Benchmarks thus leave space for deliberation and social

⁴ Although the EU may have been slow in recognising the relevance of joint ownership and partnership, it is worth noting that it is still the only major international actor who realises that the perceived power asymmetry between the Union and its partners might be detrimental to its efforts at speeding up the reforms in the partner countries (I thank one of the anonymous referees for this insight).

learning which may ultimately lead to a greater level of real joint ownership of assessment criteria thus established.⁵

Even with this qualification, the excessive stress on joint ownership and commonly agreed benchmarks generates the illusion of a completely equal partnership between the EU and the partner countries, thus giving the EU a penchant to continue exclusively in its benign nature. This illusion can be maintained as long as the documents stay on the general level. However, once we descend to concrete measures provided for in the bilateral Action Plans, the asymmetry, i.e. the conviction of the EU that it can and indeed should define to contents of the Action Plans between the EU and the partner countries becomes clearly visible. In other words, in the general, declaratory parts of the Commission's communications, the joint ownership coupled with the image of the EU as a benign actor is prevalent, but in the practical parts where more space is dedicated to details of the implementation of the partnership, the EU's dominance takes over.

The clearest example of this asymmetry is legal harmonisation, one of the most fundamental tools used by the EU, also used in the process of enlargement. Legal harmonisation means, to put it bluntly, a one-sided adoption of EU-inspired legal norms in the legal systems of the partner countries. To give just a few illustrations, partners are "encouraged to approximate their legislation to that of the Internal Market" (COM(2003): 5), they are also asked to adopt measures leading to their convergence in areas of more general normative harmonisation as diverse as the Bologna Process and the Lisbon Agenda (cf. COM(2007): 9), and their reforms should aim at "close approximation to the fundamental standards prevailing in the EU" (COM(2008): 3). Even though obviously, legal harmonisation also depends on the partner countries, this is bracketed in the texts, which resemble rather homework given by a teacher than commonly agreed documents.

⁵ I thank one of the anonymous referees for drawing my attention to the difference between benchmarks and political conditionality and to the relation of benchmarks to social learning and deliberation.

The prior analysis has focused on the structural-synchronic aspects of these documents' textual structure, but the same trend is noticeable also in the diachronic sense. Not only was the word "EU" replaced by "European" in the policy's name soon after its inception, but also the spatial directions have been reversed. While the first document still speaks about the EU "drawing closer" to the neighbours (COM(2003): 3), thus reflecting the geographical extension of the EU's territory, the subsequent documents turn this on its head and speak about the neighbours approaching the EU. This is indeed surprising since this reversal is present even when geography is the primary focus. For instance, the Strategy Paper from 2004 begins the section "geographic coverage" by saying that "the ENP is addressed to the EU's existing neighbours and to those that have drawn closer to the EU as a result of enlargement" (COM(2004): 7). This reversal of geographic imagery then dissolves in the general call for measures "which will bring the partner countries closer to the EU in a number of priority fields" (COM(2004): 9) and finally smoothly transmutes into the above mentioned convergence through the adoption of the *acquis*.

This asymmetry does not pertain only to the EU's agenda-setting power but also to the unequal obligations taken up by the EU and its member states on the one hand and the partner countries on the other. The ultimate embodiment of the EU's dominance in the region is the evaluation mechanism. Although the Commission insists that the principle of joint ownership means that "both the ENP partner country and the EU can hold each other accountable for living up to their mutual commitments" (COM(2007): 3), the evaluating mechanisms do not provide for any institutionalised course of action in which the partner countries could hold the EU accountable.

This construction of the evaluation process is also the reason why one can hardly find any references to joint ownership in the progress reports. These reports are written in a seemingly neutral style, merely reiterating the areas in which progress was achieved and the areas where there is still a lack thereof. However, as it is the European Commission who prepares the reports, and no mirror reports of a similar level of importance are drafted by the partner countries, it clearly betrays the asymmetry in the relationship. In order to make obvious that the reports do contain a strong normative ele-

ment, we can make a brief comparison of two progress reports, one assessing Egypt (SEC(2008)a) and the other assessing Ukraine (SEC(2008)b). Let us note that the overall evaluating report on the implementation of the ENP in 2007 (COM(2008)) states that Ukraine belongs among the four best performers. As a result, we could reasonably expect that the report on Ukraine will contain fewer negative references than that on Egypt since both of them are of approximately the same length (twenty and eighteen pages).

However, when counting negative references to lacking progress, such as “no progress can be reported”, “no real progress has been made”, etc., we come to the surprising conclusion that whereas there are seventeen such references in the case of Ukraine, there is only one such negative allusion in the report on Egypt. This shows not only that the reports, without a doubt, give the EU’s assessment and not just some “objective” depiction of reality, but also that the Commission strongly differentiates between the partner countries. Even though Ukraine is (most probably unjustly) applauded for its reform zeal, it is also criticised in places. The probable explanation for this strange mixture of praise and critique lies in the Commission’s understanding that Ukraine, as a potential future candidate, can be dealt with in a more straightforward manner, resembling more closely the assessment reports published during the last enlargement process. Egypt, on the other hand, retains the more distanced position of only being the EU’s long-term neighbour, and so the report is much more restrained. In other words, with Egypt, the principle of joint ownership only recedes to the background, whereas with Ukraine it is entirely overruled by the EU’s dominance, which is so much present in the enlargement process.

3.2 Case II: Discursive Treatment of Conflict Settlement

While the previous example highlighted a situation in which the tension between the benign and dominant elements in the EU’s nature was resolved in favour of the EU’s dominance, the second example we have chosen points in the other direction. Frozen (or sometimes even actual) conflicts are the greatest problem in the whole policy. The EU gropes uncertainly for the solution of the conflicts, without however being willing to engage directly in the conflict settlement. This is caused first by the fact that some part-

ners are parties to the conflicts on opposite sides (Israel – Palestinian Territories, Armenia – Azerbaijan), which increases the premium for the EU on remaining neutral. Secondly, a number of external actors are involved in the conflicts as well – ranging from Russia to the United States to Iran.

At the same time, however, frozen conflicts are seen as the first priority by many partner countries (Georgia, Moldova, Palestinian Territories, Armenia, Azerbaijan, etc.). Hence, these partner countries, and particularly their political elites, would like to see finding solutions to these conflict as the first priority on the list of priorities in the Action Plans as well (cf. Kratochvíl, Lippert 2007). As is obvious from the Action Plans, this wish has never come true, and the documents list frozen conflicts as being on a par with other priorities. In addition, while in other priority areas, very specific goals are frequently mentioned, in the sections dedicated to frozen conflicts, the EU typically stays on the very general level and talks about constructive cooperation or the need for confidence building. Because of the high visibility of the conflicts and their extremely sensitive nature, the relatively low importance given to the solution of frozen conflicts by the EU does not prevent the partner countries from coupling their expectations of the EU exactly with these conflicts, as recently seen in Georgia (see Emerson, Noutcheva, Popescu 2007).

The resultant problem is that the EU not only repeatedly avoids proposals for solutions but also repeatedly declares that it is not ready to engage in the conflicts, frozen, “simmering” or hot. As an alternative, the EU tries to transform the ominous territory of conflict resolution into a safe ground for spreading its soft power through conflict prevention and legal harmonisation. For instance, one of the documents maintains that

“The EU can make an important contribution by working around the conflict issues, promoting similar reforms on both sides of the boundary lines, to foster convergence between political, economic and legal systems, enabling greater social inclusion and contributing to confidence building... In other cases, depending on the nature of the conflict, increasing the capacities of ministries dealing with refugees, promoting the integration of minorities through language instruction, supporting post-conflict infrastructure rehabilitation, including cultural heritage, or implementing local

income generation projects can constitute appropriate confidence-building measures” (COM(2007): 6, emphasis in the original).

Here, the EU, to a large degree, gives up its political power, which could directly contribute to the conflicts’ solution, and retreats back to the position of a benign actor who focuses on confidence building and, possibly, post-conflict measures. Neither the synchronic nor the diachronic analysis reveals any substantial changes in the way frozen conflicts are tackled. Even in the two recent documents through which the Commission addressed the EU member states and where they are urged to take action, frozen conflicts are not linked to any concrete proposals, and the text remains superficially general for the most part (COM(2006) and COM(2007)).

The most lucid example of how quickly the self-perceived dominance of the EU in the neighbourhood recedes once it is challenged is the role of Russia in the frozen conflicts. Both EU institutions and EU member states cannot have any doubt that Russia is the key factor in the resolution of virtually every conflict in the Eastern neighbourhood, and thus the discussion of the EU’s measures in the area of conflict resolution should undeniably also include the steps the EU proposes vis-à-vis Russia. However, all analysed documents anxiously avoid any references to Russia in this context (for the only exception, see the general comment in COM(2006): 9).

It would be premature to jump to the conclusion that the reason for this is the general tabooisation of Russia in the EU’s external policies, since that would mean that Russia would not be addressed at all. But this is not true. For instance, *Wider Europe – Neighbourhood* (COM(2003)) refers to Russia, among others, in the following areas: stake in the Internal Market, energy policy, cross-border cooperation, legislative and regulatory approximation, lending from the European Investment Bank, etc.⁶ But the part on frozen conflicts (op. cit.: 12) is entirely silent on Russia’s role. Also, the long subchapter on “regional conflicts” in the communication from 2007 (COM(2007)) starts the list of frozen conflicts with Transnistria,

⁶ We should bear in mind, however, that at the time of the release of *Wider Europe – Neighbourhood*, Russia was still expected to join the initiative. I thank one of the editors for this remark.

Abkhazia and South Ossetia, all of which are directly linked to Russia's involvement in these conflicts. But again, not a single reference is made to Russia's role, and it remains completely unclear as to how the EU's Russia policy is (or is not) related to these sensitive issues.

4. The Implication for the South/East Divide

Although we started from the assumption that the previous tensions are no longer the key to understanding the current evolution of the ENP, they are still substantially influenced by the policy's primary contradiction – the role the EU plays in the neighbourhood. Especially the tension between the South and the East is particularly reinforced by the different roles preferred by the EU.

The first repercussion for the two geographical dimensions is obvious. The EU's rhetoric toward the South is much more cautious, stressing the equality of the partnership. While this is clearly appreciated by the Southern partners (or it is at least better appreciated than the approach hidden behind the Barcelona Process), at the same time, it means that this cautiousness diminishes the chances of the South for a quick convergence with the EU. The Eastern part of the neighbourhood is, on the contrary, seen as an arena where the EU should act asymmetrically. As a result, both political conditionality and requirements for a stricter compliance in law harmonisation are palpable here.

The result will undoubtedly be a gradual, if informal, differentiation between the Southern and the Eastern ENP partner countries. In the East, this will be reflected both on the symbolical level, for instance, through the probable replacement of 'partnership and cooperation agreements' with "association agreements" or "enhanced agreements", and on the level of practical policies. Here, the Eastern neighbours' prospects for attaining deep free trade areas, eventually extending to cover all four of the fundamental freedoms of the EU, stand much higher than those of most of the Southern partners.

Surprisingly, our research revealed an opposite tendency as well. While the EU's status as a dominant power is virtually unchal-

lenged in the South, Russia is rapidly rising in the East as a strategic competitor, offering the countries in the common neighbourhood an alternative model of governance. Indeed, with the growing disillusionment about the democratic credentials of the leaders of East European colour revolutions, and with Russia's economic rise, the EU option is no more the only obvious way for many countries in the region. Although we could argue that Russia does not, in fact, offer any viable modernisation option, the public discourse in the partner countries may not be aware of these shortcomings. What the public is, nevertheless, clearly aware of is – as indicated above – the issue of frozen conflicts. It is in this area where the EU will either rise up to the challenge of dealing directly with the solutions to the conflicts, or its influence will dwindle.

No matter whether the EU finds enough internal political will to become more deeply involved in the East or not, Russia's presence in the Eastern neighbourhood further adds to the growing gap between the two regions. As a consequence, the EU will be required to develop distinct strategies to cope with the challenges particular to the East. The differentiation will be sooner or later palpable in the South as well. The different regional setting, the influence of other players (Iran, United States, etc.) and the fear of radical political Islam will mean a further separation of the approaches to the two regions. Even though the EU will most probably try to do so within the ENP framework, the policy's internal consistency will necessarily diminish.

5. Conclusion

The rhetoric of the European Commission in documents dealing with the ENP is characterised by the tension between the two competing roles the EU plays in the neighbourhood. On one hand, the documents maintain that the EU is a *benign power* whose primary objectives are the stability, prosperity and equality of the continent. On the other hand, the EU sees itself also as the hub in the integration process on the whole continent and as the *dominant power*, which can teach others and invites them to adopt its norms and practices. No matter how strongly the equality of the relationship between the neighbours and the EU is stressed and how often the

principle of joint ownership is invoked, the partnership is unequal for a number of reasons: It is the partner countries that carry out reforms that bring them closer to the EU and not vice versa, and it is the EU who decides about the rewards given for outstanding performance. Legal harmonisation also translates into a one-sided *acquis* adoption, to some extent not dissimilar to the enlargement process. Hence, in the areas where the EU deals directly with reform in the partner countries, the EU's dominance is the prevalent feature, and not its benign nature. This element is much stronger in the East than in the South, where historical experience and the unwillingness of the partners to accept political conditionality preclude the EU's deeper engagement.

On the other hand, the EU's dominance is challenged once two conditions are fulfilled: First, when the EU has to tackle security concerns of or even disputes between the partner countries, the EU perceives its weakness and lacking capabilities and, as a consequence, it retreats to stressing its benign identity, striving not to take sides, and instead supports only indirect measures leading to conflict resolution. Second, this retreat from the position of dominance is farther strengthened when other external actors are present who challenge the EU's self-identity as the dominant power and thrust their weight behind one of the conflicting parties. The resulting tendency is to avoid tackling regional conflicts between partner countries as well as to ignore the role external powers play in the conflicts. Since such a challenge is strongly felt in the East (Russia) and only much less so in the South (the United States and Iran), the retreat to softer policies is more obvious in the Eastern neighbourhood. Moreover, for reasons of internal disunity, Russia is kept separate from the ENP.

While both of these problems can be managed separately, taken together, they pose a grave danger to the success of the policy. The EU is unable to deal with regional conflicts to which high priority is given by partner countries, especially those in Eastern Europe. This causes a high level of frustration among the partners who criticise the EU for insufficient support and its low level of engagement in

the search for conflict solutions.⁷ Finally, the EU's perceived passivity discourages the partners from aligning themselves more closely to the EU, and hence, the sense of local ownership is seriously eroded.

Ironically, the EU behaves as the dominant power in those areas where the partner countries would appreciate a more equal approach and more possibilities for expressing their dissatisfaction with the policy's failures. But where a more resolute stance of the Union would be welcome (even though admittedly difficult), particularly when supporting the partner countries against the claims of external powers, such as Russia in the Moldovan or Georgian cases, the EU's rhetoric loses its edge and reveals the limits of the EU's capabilities and determination to exploit its potential as the dominant power.

Further research could proceed in two directions: The first candidate would be the exploration of conditions under which one of the other elements of the EU's identity prevails over the other. While the analysis of the two areas chosen shows that sometimes, the EU's dominance takes upper hand and sometimes its benign nature, it remains unclear how this inconsistency is discursively justified. Secondly, more attention should be dedicated to the alternative discursive strategies employed by the ENP partner countries. It would be certainly interesting to find out to what degree these discourses comply with the EU's self-perception and whether the partner countries are more inclined to perceive the EU as a benign "equal among equals" or as the only regional power centre.

⁷ On the disappointment in Georgia see Emerson, Noutcheva, Popescu 2007, but cf. also Popescu 2005.

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