

## The European Neighbourhood and its Security Landscape: An Increasingly Integrated Picture

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### Executive Summary

- > Zones of conflict in the European Neighbourhood are interconnected. Going beyond a country-specific approach and paying attention to interconnections between volatile developments in three neighbourhood ‘hotspots’ – Libya, Syria, and Ukraine – would enable the European Union (EU) to build a more comprehensive approach to Russia’s attempts to establish and maintain frozen conflicts and instable zones in the neighbourhood.
- > The increasing tensions across the entire European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) area represent a test case for the EU’s capacity to think comprehensively about its newly moulded geopolitical character. The ENP provides a context that calls for a thorough analysis transcending country-specific considerations highlighted by ENP Action Plans.
- > The launch of the European Political Community (EPC) provides a window of opportunity to think in an integrated, cross-country fashion and pay more attention to complementarities between various EU policies and programmes dedicated to ENP countries.
- > The importance of seeking a more integrated approach is underscored by Iran’s support for Russia during the ongoing war on Ukraine. The case of Iran illustrates a direct and malign involvement of the ‘neighbours of the neighbours’ in the immediate vicinity of the EU. The geopolitical resonance of such cases should be reflected in a future revised Strategic Compass.

The strategic and geopolitical dimensions of the European Union (EU)’s approach towards its neighbourhood are gaining increasing saliency. This is especially the case because it becomes clear that Russia’s war on Ukraine has much broader implications than typically acknowledged, both for a European security strategy and the EU’s policy towards its neighbourhood in the East and South. The aim of this policy brief is to examine some of the overarching implications of the ongoing military operations and Russia’s presence in three strategic theatres across the European Neighbourhood – Ukraine, Syria, and Libya. It explores what they mean for the EU’s ability to counter spill-over into its borders from nearby armed conflicts, especially considering the short-term strategic outlook for 2023. Examining how the current policy framework for the neighbourhood is challenged in the East and the South by Russia and, also, by a ‘neighbour of the neighbours’, Iran, the policy brief offers recommendations for the future of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). It argues that while the principles of the 2015 ENP review are not obsolete, they need to be revisited in light of the evolving geopolitical situation and the forthcoming revision of the Strategic Compass as well as the launch of the European Political Community (EPC).

### The EU’s current approach to the Ukrainian, Libyan, and Syrian hotspots

The Strategic Compass, released in March 2022, outlines inter alia the EU’s stance towards the Russia-Ukraine war during the initial stages of the conflict. It explicitly highlights the far-reaching international implications of Russia’s actions: “Through the unprovoked and unjustified military aggression against Ukraine, Russia is grossly violating international law and the principles of the UN Charter and undermining European global security and stability” (Council of the EU 2022, 17). Ukraine has been involved in the Eastern Partnership. The 2014 Association

Agreement is the key reference document for EU-Ukraine relations. Summits and Association Councils facilitate political dialogue concerning the agreement. Since February 2022, the EU has implemented a broad range of policy measures in solidarity with Ukraine. Most notably, in June 2022 Ukraine was granted EU candidate status.

The Compass also clearly highlights the enduring instability around the Mediterranean: “In our southern neighbourhood, the crises in Libya and Syria remain unresolved, with lasting and pervasive regional consequences” (ibid., 19). In so doing, the Strategic Compass positions the conflicts in Libya and Syria as specific ‘issue areas’. The relations with both countries have been stalled: Libya has not concluded an Association Agreement with the Union, and relations with Syria have been suspended since 2011. Libya and Syria are also the only countries on the southern flank that have not concluded a free trade agreement with the Union.

The EU’s engagement with Libya aims to counteract the negative effects of the conflict. On a political level, the EU is actively engaged in the United Nations (UN)-led ‘Berlin Process for Libya’, e.g. by assisting the country in translating its oil revenues into better economic investments. The assumption underlying this initiative is that a better governed, more prosperous, and more stable Libya would have positive implications on adjacent countries. Regionally, Libya is an observer of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and the EU supports the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum. In terms of hard power, the European Union Naval Force Mediterranean Operation (EUNAVFOR MED) IRINI was launched in 2020 to implement the UN arms embargo on Libya until 2023. The EU provides humanitarian aid and other assistance across various policy domains.

Syrian participation in the Euro-Mediterranean partnership was suspended in 2011. The 2017 EU Strategy for Syria is the main document that outlines the EU’s aims regarding the country. Its primary objective is to end the war and proceed with a political transition within the spirit of the UN Security Council Resolution 2254, which outlines a roadmap for a peace process. The Brussels Conferences organised throughout 2017-2022 and co-chaired by the EU with the UN on ‘Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region’ have facilitated political dialogue towards a sustainable solution for the Syrian crisis. One of the significant sources of EU assistance to Syria is channelled through the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO). The neighbourhood funds and the ‘Instrument Contributing to Stability and Peace’ are invested across a

broad range of policy domains. Building on this existing architecture of political steering, policy planning and programming of funded actions, projects and various forms of assistance, the future of the ENP should continue forging complementarities between the different dimensions of this ever more complex set of multilateralism-guided and stability-enhancing – layered – EU efforts.

### **The future of the European Neighbourhood Policy**

The 2015 review of the ENP highlighted the importance of the EU’s engagement with neighbouring areas by underlining the Union’s “own interdependence with its neighbours” (European Commission and High Representative 2015, 2). Whereas the ENP goals to foster security, stability and prosperity in the neighbourhood were confirmed, stabilisation was defined as the ENP’s main priority. This was particularly visible in the emphasis placed on reinforcing the cooperation in the security sector with neighbourhood countries, which emerged from a public consultation preceding the drafting of the 2015 review (ibid., 4). What remains unclear at this stage is how the 2015 ENP is compatible with the security cooperation envisaged within the framework of European Political Community. The EPC’s main hard security focus is on aiding Ukraine amidst the war. More broadly, the EPC discusses various soft and hybrid threats’ implications, and non-traditional security concerns related to Russia’s escalatory steps in relation to energy supply and various economic sectors.

The envisaged initiatives raise the question to what extent the EPC can forge complementarities with the existing range of EU instruments, and in particular with joint country-specific ambitions enshrined in the ENP Action Plans agreed and implemented with the non-EU EPC countries. In this context, the roles of EU institutions, such as the European External Action Service (EEAS), DG ECHO, the Directorate-General for International Partnerships (DG INTPA), and the Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR) in the EPC remain to be clarified as well, especially in relation to their ongoing missions. This multiplicity of actors and the increasing amount of *de novo* bodies dealing with ENP, such as European Commission’s Service for Foreign Policy Instruments, suggests the emergence of a layered approach to the neighbourhood.

The revision of the Strategic Compass, expected by 2025 but to be prepared over the coming years, provides a window of opportunity to clarify the future constellation of this layered approach. The revision process should build upon the substantial framework agreement and progress

achieved during EPC meetings that will be hosted by Moldova, Spain, and the United Kingdom throughout 2023 and 2024. This will help grasp how the EPC fits in the broader context of the EU's international partnerships and the securitisation of the ENP that has already been ongoing since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014 (Cadier 2019). The key question is what added value the EPC can ultimately provide for the EU to achieve its aim of stabilising and maintaining the EU27's resilience and absorption capabilities. The answer depends on the political choices to be made concerning the post-2024 modalities for shouldering administrative, financial, in-kind and other contributions to keep the EPC going and strategically relevant in the context of the current composition of EU strategies and initiatives. These choices, in turn, will depend on the evolving security landscape in ENP hotspots, which – to varying degrees – are influenced by Russia.

### **Evolving landscape of ENP hotspots: Russian interference and the necessity for an integrated response**

As of autumn 2022, the situation in Ukraine can be considered as an element of a broader spectrum of enduring governance failures and military operations affecting the European neighbourhood and posing direct and indirect security risks for the EU. The way this conflict will evolve during the upcoming months will influence how major powers will address volatility in global politics in the future (Melvin 2022).

The interconnection between foreign military presence in Ukraine and geopolitical and military confrontations elsewhere in the neighbourhood is, to a certain degree, linked to the presence and actions of Russian fighters and auxiliaries across several volatile and war-torn areas, such as Libya. This observation transcends the general description of the current situation found in the Strategic Compass, which mentions “a dangerous mix of armed aggression, illegal annexation, fragile states, revisionist, and authoritarian regimes” (Council of the EU 2022, 18). The military presence of Russia in several countries neighbouring the EU demonstrates an increasingly committed policy of the Kremlin to foster the creation of poorly governed areas prone to flare-ups of conflict and socio-economic vulnerabilities. The deteriorating situation in these neighbourhood areas makes it increasingly difficult to draw them closer together or integrate them more deeply into European institutions and intergovernmental forums.

Russia's engagement pattern in regional and international forums, such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), displays a propensity towards

subordinating others' security concerns to Russia's great power ambitions (Burns et al. 2020, 46). Russia uses its economic and military resources in the European neighbourhood to attempt to alter the preferences and strategic orientation of countries away from the values and aspirations of Europe as a joint project of enduring peace and sustainable prosperity. This action has grave implications for ‘international system trust’ (Ku and Mitzen 2022). For example, a distorted understanding of self-defence results in a long-term downgrading of socio-economic conditions in areas affected by Russian military presence and military activities in several locations across the European neighbourhood (Schmitt 2022). Such practices are not in line with the spirit and ideals of cohesive and peaceful development of Europe.

In light of all this and of the core idea of the Strategic Compass (Council of the EU 2022, 14), namely that this is an era “of growing strategic competition, complex security threats and direct attack[s] on the European security”, the EU would do well in revisiting the principles that have governed ENP since its last review in 2015, as well as the security and defence aspirations articulated in the 2021 Joint Declaration of the Eastern Partnership Summit (‘Recovery, Resilience and Reform’), and peace and security aims included in the 2021 Renewed Partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood (‘A new Agenda for the Mediterranean’). A reinvigorated focus is needed on the linkages between hotspots and their cumulative implications on the EU's ability to withstand major shocks and strengthen its resilience amidst the growing spectrum of diverse and unpredictable risks and threats.

Reviving the reasoning of the 2015 ENP review, focussed on stabilisation, influenced by the 2014 Ukraine crisis and the migration crisis, will strongly resonate with the emerging agenda of the EPC. Such a ‘refreshed’ focus would enable a more integrated EU response within and across these geographical zones. It would provide a clearer sense of the significant challenges standing in the EU's way towards promoting adherence to internationally agreed rules and principles across both flanks of its neighbourhood. This new need for policy coherence and cross-cutting policy complementarities gains even further salience when considering the direct, detrimental interference of a prominent ‘neighbour of the neighbours’ in the EU's adjacent territories, Iran.

### **Iran's interference in the EU's neighbourhood: linking East and South**

The Strategic Compass defines Iran as “central to the security” in the Middle East and Gulf Region (Council of the EU 2022, 20). EU-Iran relations are defined by the 2016

Joint Statement, revisited in the 2019 Conclusions of the Council of the EU. EU engagement with Iran aims to cover a broad range of policy areas financially supported by the Multiannual Indicative Programme 2021-2027.

The military equipment and training provided by Iran to Russia in Ukraine suggests that the security challenge posed by certain ‘neighbours of the neighbours’ – via their actions in the EU’s neighbourhood – cannot be ignored any longer but has overarching implications for the geopolitical interlinkages across the European neighbourhood. Its move away from its “sense of insecurity”, “strategic loneliness”, and its alarming “aspiration ‘for more’” international involvement (Bower and Metais 2016, 116) highlights an even more interconnected ENP dynamic. First, Iran’s presence in Ukraine attests to increasingly intertwined security interdependencies which pose challenges, risks, and threats to the EU from the Eastern and Southern neighbourhoods. The geopolitical tensions surrounding Iran’s engagement in Syria thus seem to have spilled over into the Eastern neighbourhood (Azizi and Çevik 2022). Second, Iran’s support to Russia highlights a much more detrimental involvement of the ‘neighbours of the neighbours’ in the EU’s proximity. Iran’s military assistance brings to the fore direct security implications to EU borders, for example by challenging Western aid delivery (Knights 2022).

This development in the overall unfolding of the war in Ukraine underlines the need to ‘mainstream’ the EU’s geopolitical posture (briefly described in the Strategic Compass) into the ongoing implementation of the ENP and the EPC in a concerted way, paying due attention to avoiding overlaps between the ENP and the Political Community’s action. Simultaneously, Iran’s presence in Ukraine goes beyond its geopolitical role defined by the Strategic Compass within the regional confines of the Middle East and Gulf. It shows that the country is a concern for stability not only in the Southern neighbourhood but also on the Eastern flank. As a substantial ‘risk multiplier’, Iranian power projection should therefore also be factored into the forthcoming revised threat analysis (expected in 2025) and the revised Strategic Compass. The role of other ‘neighbours of the neighbours’, such as the Central Asian countries, should equally undergo particular scrutiny.

## Conclusion

Due to persistent conflicts in Libya, Syria, and Ukraine, the security of the EU is increasingly challenged by a wide range of hard and soft threats. The prominence of these three hotspots affects the core security of the EU’s borders

and strains its capacity to withstand spill-overs from these unstable areas.

The expansion of conflict from poorly governed spaces in the vicinity of the EU is expected to pose a growing burden on the Union’s defence and internal security capacities. It might increasingly challenge the internal cohesion of European societies. For example, over the last few years, Europeans have had to continuously expand their ability to welcome and integrate people fleeing war-torn or otherwise troubled areas. Moreover, Europeans (like many other societies elsewhere) bear the burden of increasing living costs associated with the weaponisation of various commodities, notably energy, amidst Russia’s war in Ukraine. These are not simply matters of internal socio-economic development and sound resource management for the Union. The increasing tensions across the neighbourhood put the EU’s capacity to reflect comprehensively about its newly moulded geopolitical character to the test. It increasingly requires looking beyond ad-hoc country-specific issues and national portfolios captured by the ENP Action Plans.

The recently established EPC highlights the need for a more thorough look at how to build complementarities between the ENP framework, other EU instruments, and this nascent political forum. This includes clarifying the relationship between various EU institutions and the EPC from 2024 onwards. It makes it necessary for the EU to engage in a reflection on how to forge complementarities between policy areas and its geopolitical aspirations so as to ensure that each of its initiatives deliver well-tailored synergies instead of duplicating overlaps. The 2025 Strategic Compass Review will provide an opportunity to outline these details comprehensively. Specific attention should be paid to defining the unique responsibilities that should be shouldered by the support structure designed for the EPC, distinguishing from the ongoing planning and implementation of the EU neighbourhood consultative formats and funds. The declaratory documents issued by political leaders during the EPC meetings in 2023 and 2024 offer excellent windows of opportunity to provide the required high-level guidance for the preparatory work of the 2025 strategic steering, renewed or redefined policy competencies, and burden-sharing across the multi-layered planning and programming set-up of actions, projects and other initiatives, including provisions for the revised Strategic Compass.

Studying neighbourhood hotspots in isolation from each other or through strict East-South demarcation is an increasingly fruitless activity. This applies also to their articulation in the revised Strategic Compass, especially



when it comes to the heightened role of 'neighbours of the neighbours' at the EU's doorstep. Recent developments in Ukraine and the Iranian choice to foster closer geopolitical ties with Russia attest to the need to look at these hotspots in an integrated manner. From 2023 onwards,

the immediate security considerations of the EU will be increasingly defined by the interconnected geopolitics of several areas of concern across the Eastern and Southern dimensions and the geopolitical tensions associated with each of these conflict-ridden areas.

## Further Reading

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