

*Local Dimensions of a Wider Europe: By-Passing the Traditional Foreign Policy Agenda**

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Introduction

Much of the study of International Relations generally focuses on the actions of states vis-à-vis other states. Likewise, the study of the foreign relations of the European Union also tends to focus on its dealings with the governments of its interlocutors. This applies to many studies of the EU's security strategies and the strategy towards the countries bordering on the union, the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). Such a state-centric approach makes good sense in analysing many of the EU's dealings with the outside world. In many of its foreign relations the EU does indeed act in a manner not entirely dissimilar to that of nation states, and this is an increasing tendency. In this view the objectives pursued under the ENP can be seen as part of an overarching geopolitical strategy aiming to bring countries closer to the European 'norm' and to strengthen Europe's influence in these countries, thus ultimately trying to enhance its own security (Alibioni, 2005; Marchetti, 2006).

While these approaches go a long way to explain the objectives of the EU and the state level interactions, it is at the same time worth exploring some of the processes that are involved and look beyond the traditional state-to-state forms of foreign policy. The theory of complex interdependence (Keohane & Nye, 1977) moves away from seeing states as simple unitary actors. Rather this theory holds that in the modern world several more actors are playing a role in foreign policy, and that the international scene has become much more fluid as a result. These developments do not remove the importance of the traditional role of the state, but they do muddy the picture significantly in a number of important ways, as corporate interests, civil society and various Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) are coming increasingly into focus. At the same time more policy areas have gained prominence in international politics; environmental matters, democracy and human rights, developmental aid among others. The increased fluidity of the international scene, which has partly

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resulted from the processes of globalisation have opened up for a number of alternative styles of foreign policy making and implementation, which can to some extent by-pass the traditional state-based forms of diplomacy. In many of its initiatives under the European Neighbourhood Policy, the EU has tried to reach out to and support, and in effect coopt, NGOs inside the existing member states and in neighbouring countries in order to further its overall policy aims.

This paper will focus on the role that NGOs can play in the broader framework of the ENP. It will do so by firstly laying out some basic ideas of how to use NGOs as agents to promote a foreign policy agenda, bypassing in the process the traditional channels of foreign policy making. It will then proceed to show how the policy objectives of the European Neighbourhood Policy are in many cases suited for just such an approach. Finally, some examples will be given of how Estonian and Russian NGOs have been working to implement some of those objectives in the countries covered by the European Neighbourhood Policy.

Non-governmental Organisations as actors in foreign policy

For state-centric approaches to the study of IR, other actors such as NGOs barely figure as study objects. Their activities use little of the traditional power resources that IR theorists, especially those of a Realist persuasion, consider important. However, in some very important respect it is the very things that set them most apart from traditional state actors that make them most attractive in their foreign policy related activities. In a number of ways NGOs can potentially influence policy and help achieve outcomes that might otherwise have been difficult through traditional channels.

The biggest asset any NGO holds, is its ability to influence public opinion in the country in which it operates. Their expertise in certain fields and their dedicated supporters provide a platform from which they can advocate and create a demand for specific policies that meet their concerns (Ringius, 1997). At the same time the detachment from the normal political processes – standing for election, developing broad policy programmes etc. - give the NGOs a special status, as they can present themselves as being above normal politics. This is a privilege which neither national governments or intergovernmental organisations enjoy (Warleigh, 2001).

That NGOs have gained in significance in International Relations in recent decades owes much to the general processes of globalisation and developments in communication technologies. Contacts with supporters inside countries have become far easier and more efficient, and communications across borders with like-minded organisations, or umbrella organisations, have become

commonplace and outside of state control. Whereas most communication channels were just a few decades ago almost entirely within the control of the states, there are now so many channels open, that blocking them is close to impossible. The implication of this is that groups other than state actors now have the opportunity to vie for attention, and to maintain their own contacts.

This reduction in the power of the state to control interaction with the outside world holds some potent implications for the way in which cooperation can unfold. States are no longer unitary actors like in the past. Several new avenues for building cooperation have opened, and can not easily be controlled. If one given state tries to block exchange at one level, interaction can simply switch to another level, making a certain amount of openness almost inevitable (Filtenborg et. al., 2002).

As already mentioned, NGOs operate outside the traditional political channels. This allows them to position themselves as interlocutors for outsiders, occasionally even in opposition to their own governments. What effect this can have has been most clearly shown, but not exclusively, in the environmental field, where transnational coalitions between non-state actors have frequently been formed on issues of common concern (Ringius, 1997).

Such developments may on the one hand have undermined the traditional authority of the state to some degree. On the other hand, they have also opened up for new approaches from outside powers pursuing certain agendas. In other words, connecting with and supporting NGOs in other countries, or supporting own NGOs who then interact with similar groupings in the target country, may allow states to pursue a 'bottom-up' approach to achieving foreign policy objectives. This has been the case in development policy, where donor countries often rely on NGOs to implement various policies. The status of NGOs as being not linked to political parties or governments often make them acceptable to local people for carrying out such projects (Warleigh, 2001). Thus NGOs work with governments, implementing their policies, but officially remaining independent.

The problem that can occur with this kind of cooperation, though, is that the agendas of NGOs and governments are not always identical, and that NGOs can at times be hard to control. This poses a problem for the donor states. Working relationships can be strained, and priorities may differ. That states often remain in charge of the purse strings for projects is another contentious aspect which can result in friction. More problematic from the point of view of NGOs is that in order to meet the often very strict requirements for getting funding, grants and subsidies, they must submit to a high degree of control from the states or IGOs that they cooperate with. This can make the formulation of independent stances harder, blur the profile of the NGO, and thus ultimately undermine the very thing - their independence - that made an NGO attractive in the first place (Warleigh, 2001).

The European Neighbourhood Policy and NGOs

The concept of a 'Wider Europe' and the subsequent formulation of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) in 2004 marked yet another step in the gradual emergence of the European Union as a genuine actor in foreign policy. The stated aim of the ENP is to create 'A Ring of Friends' among the countries bordering the EU, but having no immediate prospect of membership (COM (2004) 373). Put another way, the idea of the ENP is to export the values and workings of the EU, drawing the targeted countries closer and achieving a measure of integration without taking the full step towards actual membership. The ENP thus entails a process of 'Europeanisation', as the target countries will ideally move towards the EU norms in a variety of fields such as market economy, law and order, respect for human rights and democratisation.

The ENP doesn't stand alone as a strategy formulation of the EU. The European Security Strategy, published in December 2003, highlighted a number of threats to the security of the EU, the most important of which were: Terrorism, environmental disasters, crossborder crime, failed states, and weapons of mass destruction. While the last of these clearly falls completely outside the scope of the ENP, the others can in various ways be seen within this broader framework. Thus the ENP envisages enhanced cooperation with these states, pulling them closer to the EU in order to minimise the risk of any of these problems reaching an acute level in the first place.

In formulating a strategy such as the ENP, to meet the challenges spelled out in the Security Strategy, the EU is wielding what Joseph Nye (2005) would undoubtedly have called its 'soft power'. This term refers to the ability to attract and entice other states to want the same things as one self, relying on persuasion and example rather than simple coercion. In this case the EU tries to present its values, norms, even its legal base, as desirable to the partner states in such a way that they will be willing to achieve a measure of integration on the EU's terms. The key idea being stressed is that of *effectively sharing* certain values. Thus while the means being employed are primarily economic, other important areas included in the so-called 'Action Plans' – the agreements which the EU enters into with the partners - are democratisation and strengthening of the respect for human rights. The action plans are partly built on the tested principle of conditionality in that they offer 'carrots' or rewards for good performance in implementation, by further integrative measures becoming available as the initial agreements are fulfilled. The ENP thus offers the EU the possibility for strongly influencing the internal policies and politics of the neighbouring states in

various spheres. Not for nothing has the ENP been referred to as possibly being the ‘most powerful foreign policy tool’ the EU possesses.

The full impact of the ENP is still hard to gauge, given the newishness of the policy. Yet one particular feature already look clear: A sharper distinction must be made between ‘borders’ and ‘boundaries’. The former is a fixed line, geographically defined. The latter refers to more to the ‘reach’ of the EU’s influence. Borders will remain as an important part of the EU’s presence, marking the outer limits of the actual union, and will remain strictly enforced under the Schengen Agreement. The boundary, on the other hand, will become more blurred, as new governance patterns will be established. How blurred will depend on how successful the ENP is in drawing the partner states closer to the EU policymaking process and making them adapt to EU norms without extending the actual prospect of membership (Filtenborg et. al., 2002). Potentially, and that is an implicit ambition of the ENP, the division between those in- and outside of the EU will be lessened. This initial overview focuses on the traditional diplomatic channels operating between the EU and the partners covered by the ENP. But in this second definition, the boundary of the EU, the potential scope for NGO involvement is not insignificant. As Warleigh (2001) points out, trying to use NGOs and civil society as a ‘Europeanising’ force has already for some time been an area of interest in the present EU. Surely applying this same logic to the countries covered by the ENP is only obvious.

In the new patterns of network governance that are emerging as the EU looks beyond its borders (Filtenborg et. al., 2002), using NGOs as an agent for pursuing policy goals will be a potentially attractive option for the EU. What makes civil society organisation potentially attractive interlocutors for the EU is that some of these will be particularly susceptible to those aspects of the EU’s appeal that makes up its Soft Power. The EU has long presented itself as a group of nations sharing a commitment to the furthering of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. It has a strong track record in promoting environmental awareness, and the rule-based Single Market, and the opportunities for free movement that comes with it, adds to its appeal. Many NGOs are staffed with younger people eager to take the opportunities the EU can offer, have a high level of expertise in their fields, have a developed contact network with partners in Western Europe, and are usually very adaptable to changing circumstances (Raik, 2006). Thus for some of the NGOs in the Neighbourhood countries that are committed to similar values, the EU can seem to offer an alternative to their own less efficient (or in some cases authoritarian) governments. In this sense the EU is in a position to influence political decisions from below, and become the main partner for organisations working for change.

By seeking to strengthen the non-governmental sector in the partner states, the EU will increase the potential number of influence channels in these countries. Creating more networks between people, through f.ex. educational exchange which the EU has been working hard increase through the ERASMUS and SOCRATES programmes, can also expose more people in the ENP countries to European values, an important facet of Nye's soft power concept.

At the same time civil society can be used to put pressure on the partner states' governments, through raising public awareness and through trans-national coalitions, as described in the previous section. Thus while certain aspects of proposed action plans may not immediately appeal to national governments, pressure from below can influence their willingness both to implement what has already been agreed, and to agree to more ambitious targets in the future. Also, by using NGOs as a go-between in securing political objectives, the appearance of direct meddling by the EU in another country can be partly avoided.

While this approach certainly has potential for yielding some of the desired results, it is also not without some potentially significant problems. Some of these are general, relating to the general nature of civil society, others are more specific to the Neighbourhood countries.

As stated above, NGOs are not always easily controlled. What Warleigh (2001) also discovered in his analysis of British NGOs was, that few of them viewed the EU in more than instrumental terms. Their focus was on better policy outcomes in their particular field, not on furthering the cause of the EU as such. This difference in emphasis between EU institutions and the NGOs which may play a large role in actually implementing the EU's policy objectives should not be lightly dismissed. What's more, there is some evidence to suggest that NGOs may not in fact have much of a 'Europeanising' influence, as most members continue to think in national terms, even as some of the professional staffers work intensively with EU officials.

The state of civil society in the former Soviet states also presents some challenges. While acknowledging the role NGOs can play in helping bring reform about, Kristi Raik (2006) lists a number of severe weaknesses, that should not be underestimated. In general civil society participation is weaker in the Neighbourhood countries than in Western Europe, and domestic funding sources are often sparse making NGO either less effective or more dependent on foreign aid. What's more, many of the NGOs most eager to cooperate along the EU's agenda are often seen by the local population as being somewhat aloof, elitist, and narrow in their membership, thus not being representative of society in general. To some extent this is inevitable, but it should not be underestimated either, that some of the more authoritarian-minded governments in the

Neighbourhood countries have consistently tried to portray NGOs as such, or even as stooges for foreign interests, thus generating a significant amount of scepticism towards the motives of these organisations. Another major obstacle a civil society approach faces is the sheer weight of EU bureaucracy. The long, exhausting processes required in order to gain support and funding can drain the energy from many a good project. In relation to this many NGOs in the target countries have a shortage of people with the necessary language skills and technical expertise to maintain the kind of intensive contacts required with the EU.

To some extent the same is true of NGOs in the Neighbourhood countries as in Western Europe, that the contact and cooperation with the EU is seen not just as for ideological reasons but just as much in instrumental terms. As a means to an end. This is not necessarily a problem for the EU as such, though. Many of the reforms being advocated by NGOs and supported by the EU, should not primarily be seen as being for the benefit of the EU. Efforts towards democratisation and economic reform have value in and of themselves, and should be pursued for their own sake. Thus while the motivations for cooperation may not always be entirely similar, it seems that where a convergence, even if temporary, exists between the objectives of the EU and NGOs, the EU has the potential, in spite of the inherent challenges, for using such approaches, and, as we shall see in the following, has been willing to try and make use of them.

The Activities of Estonian and Russian NGOs in the Wider Europe Framework

The launching of the ENP coincided with Estonia's accession to the European Union in 2004. Since then the Estonian government has enthusiastically embraced the ENP as a major channel for foreign policy initiatives, aiming to help other countries undergo the same transition it has itself been going through in the past 15 years (Berg, 2005). Estonia has been actively engaged in developmental cooperation since 1998, placing "...ensuring peace, democracy, observance of human rights, economic and social stability and the eradication of poverty in the world as an integral part of Estonian foreign policy" (*Principles of Estonian Development Cooperation*, 2003). Estonia's own reform experiences form the basis for much of the development cooperation initiatives undertaken with partner countries, with Estonia providing expert assistance in handling a transition process. In this the ENP is the major point of reference, with policies being coordinated with the EU. The three countries to which Estonia has devoted most attention in recent years are Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, which are all three currently undergoing some of the same processes that Estonia went

through in the 1990's. In these objective the Estonian Foreign Office explicitly acknowledges the role played by civil society organisations in both formulating and implementing developmental aid policies. The Developmental Cooperation Roundtable, which the Foreign Office set up, is an umbrella organization for all interested civil society organizations in Estonia, thus providing access for NGOs to the policy process. The involvement of the voluntary sector has been strong in recent years; in 2003, NGOs implemented 7 Foreign Office financed projects out of 13, in 2004 11 projects out of 16, and in 2005 10 projects out of 19. As more money for such projects are becoming available, this trend looks set to continue (*Estonian Action Plan for Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid, 2006-2010*). Interestingly, Estonian NGO's see their own role as being pivotal in ensuring good cooperation between the EU and the governments of the ENP countries by being able to act as mediators. In case of serious disagreement, it could even be NGOs directing the entire ENP. "This process should be governed by civil society organizations and not governments", as Florent Sebban from EUROSTEP put it (Open Estonia Foundation Press Release, 22/5/2007).

In the 'Wider Europe' framework Russia is a special case. It is not content to be one of several countries covered by one EU policy, as was envisaged by the original Commission policy paper from 2003. Instead the so-called 'Strategic Partnership', which has somewhat different working procedures, has been developed since the middle of 2003. The content of this, however, is largely the same as that of the ENP, and the issues handled within it are too.

For a range of historical reasons, Estonian-Russian relations have been rather tense on the governmental level since Estonia re-gained its independence in 1991. The discourses employed by leading politicians in both countries have tended to heighten tension rather than reducing them, playing on mutual suspicions rather than trying to overcome them. This has often acted as a block to deep cooperation and developing of ties between the two countries, to the detriment of border regions in particular, as their interests are not the same as those of the central governments. While the latter have a political interest in stoking the conflict and in national posturing, the former have a much stronger interest in active cooperation (for a short, concise overview of some of these points, see Viktorova, 2006). This, however, only serves to illustrate the point made above, about the benefit of being able to establish contacts at lower levels than the state one. In fact, on a lower level a range of initiatives have been taken by NGOs to increase contact and cooperation. Among the most succesful ventures so far have been environmental policy initiatives in the border areas, where Estonian and Russian partner organisations have developed several joint projects (see f.ex. Eesti

Looduse Fond, www.elfond.ee, and the Peipsi Centre for Transboundary Cooperation, www.ctc.ee). The environmental field is naturally an easier one to establish cooperation in, as its technical nature tends to make it less politically controversial, and the benefits are more obvious than in many other potential areas for cooperation. The same goes for economic crossborder cooperation, another field which has seen increasing activity. In this field the EU has been particularly active, having dispensed funding through the TACIS programme to several projects in the Russian border regions (*Znamya Truda*, 27/10/2006). Funding has been forthcoming to both business and cultural projects. An interesting preliminary finding is that the Russian media is far more aware than their Estonian counterparts of the role the EU is playing in energising the voluntary sector. Thus Russian local and regional newspapers from border areas have in recent years carried a fair number of stories of projects which have been carried out by either Russian local authorities or by Russian NGOs in partnership with organisations from other countries using EU funding. What's more, the general tone of the press coverage has tended to be rather positive towards this kind of cooperation. This would suggest that at least to some extent a European dimension is present in the activities of Russian NGOs. Whether this is an instrumental linkage, as Warleigh suggests is true for British NGOs, remains to be seen. At least it can be ascertained that NGOs on both sides of the border have been active in securing funding for their projects. That would suggest that the EU has managed to direct part of their attention towards Brussels - creating new linkages, in effect creating some kind of 'Europeanisation' in Russia. The recent, more illiberal, moves by the Kremlin has furthermore made some Russian NGOs, especially more liberal-minded ones, tend to look more to Europe for support.

Related to this is a field of activity by Estonian NGOs, which, to Russian eyes, is far more controversial than environmental protection, economic development and cultural exchanges. This is the promotion of democratisation and human rights protection in countries such as Belarus and Ukraine, which Russia has traditionally considered its sphere of influence (or 'Near Abroad'). Following the successful campaign for Estonian EU accession the Estonian European Movement started to look for new opportunities to restructure their previous activities. When the ENP was launched the International European Movement asked its Estonian branch to develop contacts with relevant CSOs in Belarus, where the opposition was being strangled by the Lukashenka regime, and at the same time start raising awareness in Estonia about the situation in Belarus (telephone interview with Mr. Aivar Roop, Estonian European Movement). Among the activities, funded by the IEM, have been training for democracy activists from local organisations, and assistance with

information campaigns. In this kind of activities an NGO from an EU member state can often act as a more 'acceptable' partner for local movements, taking on a role which the EU itself or a national government from a member state might not as easily be able to fulfill, as their active, direct participation might be seen as untimely interference. In pursuing these goals, NGOs from Estonia are clearly better placed than organisations from many Western European countries might be. The shared history Estonia has with the Eastern CIS countries, and the similar experiences of the Soviet occupation and the subsequent transition towards democracy and market economy, gives a quite unique understanding of the issues faced in these countries, and a better ability to empathise and understand the needs in the target area.

This only suggests, however, that the EU is indeed pursuing a very deliberate strategy of activating civil society in the Neighbourhood countries, and relying on the best-placed actors to accomplish the aims hoped for. In the fields mentioned, Estonian NGOs are clearly fulfilling the role of agents of the EU's foreign policy agenda, promoting certain values, even against the wishes of some of the governments (the Lukashenka regime) of these countries. To this should be added, that some NGO activity is also directed at softening the consequences that EU policies may have for some of the individuals involved. Thus when a number of Belarusian students were expelled from their home universities in recent years, because of their pro-democracy political activism, the Estonian state and the Open Estonia Foundation (Soros Foundation) created a number of scholarships to allow them to continue their studies at the University of Tartu.

A similar venture has been the East-gate programme, which the EEM, the Open Estonia Foundation (an offshoot of the Soros Foundation, www.openestonia.ee), and Peipsi CTC launched in 2005. This project, which is largely financed by the Soros Foundation, also aims at democratisation and strengthening of civil society in Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova and North-West Russia, through the organising of training seminars and conferences. Thus far, only Peipsi CTC has been working in Russia, while the other organisations have been working in the other target countries.

That the Kremlin is not at all blind to the potential impact that civil society mobilisation can have, can be read in the new laws on NGOs which have been passed in recent years. The rules have been tightened significantly in order to bring the third sector under much firmer control from the centre. In the words of President Putin; "Russia supports NGOs [but doesn't want them run] by puppeteers from abroad" (BBC news, 31/12/2006). What impact this clampdown will have on cooperation with Western NGOs is not yet clear.

Conclusion

The EU is clearly pursuing a policy of engaging with NGOs to pursue its overall goals. This is entirely in keeping with the Soft Power approach that the EU is pursuing with the ENP. As noted above, this is not an entirely unproblematic policy. Civil society in the Neighbourhood countries remains weak compared to Western Europe, and the NGO sector is still fragmented and somewhat open to pressure. The partner organisations clearly push their own agendas at the same time as implementing the EU's agenda, and the socialisation effect that is supposed to spring from this cooperation is not always clear. Yet, a fair number of projects are clearly taking place within the ENP framework, which would suggest that a certain convergence of interests between NGOs and the European Union are occurring. Furthermore, some of these projects are in fields where the EU could be expected to face trouble acting on its own.

To look at the activities of Estonian and Russian NGOs working under both the ENP and the Strategic Partnership, it is clear that a number of projects attempting to further the EU's goals are taking place across the EU's outer border. In effect, the EU is trying to influence the course of events in these countries 'from below'. Whether this will in the longer term lead to a 'Europeanising' effect is too early to say, but the mere presence of an ongoing process might suggest that NGOs working together under the EU umbrella may gradually help foster the improved relations between Estonia and Russia, which the two national governments seem so unwilling to bring about.

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