Sustainable Development: A Common Denominator for the EU's Policy towards the Eastern Partnership?

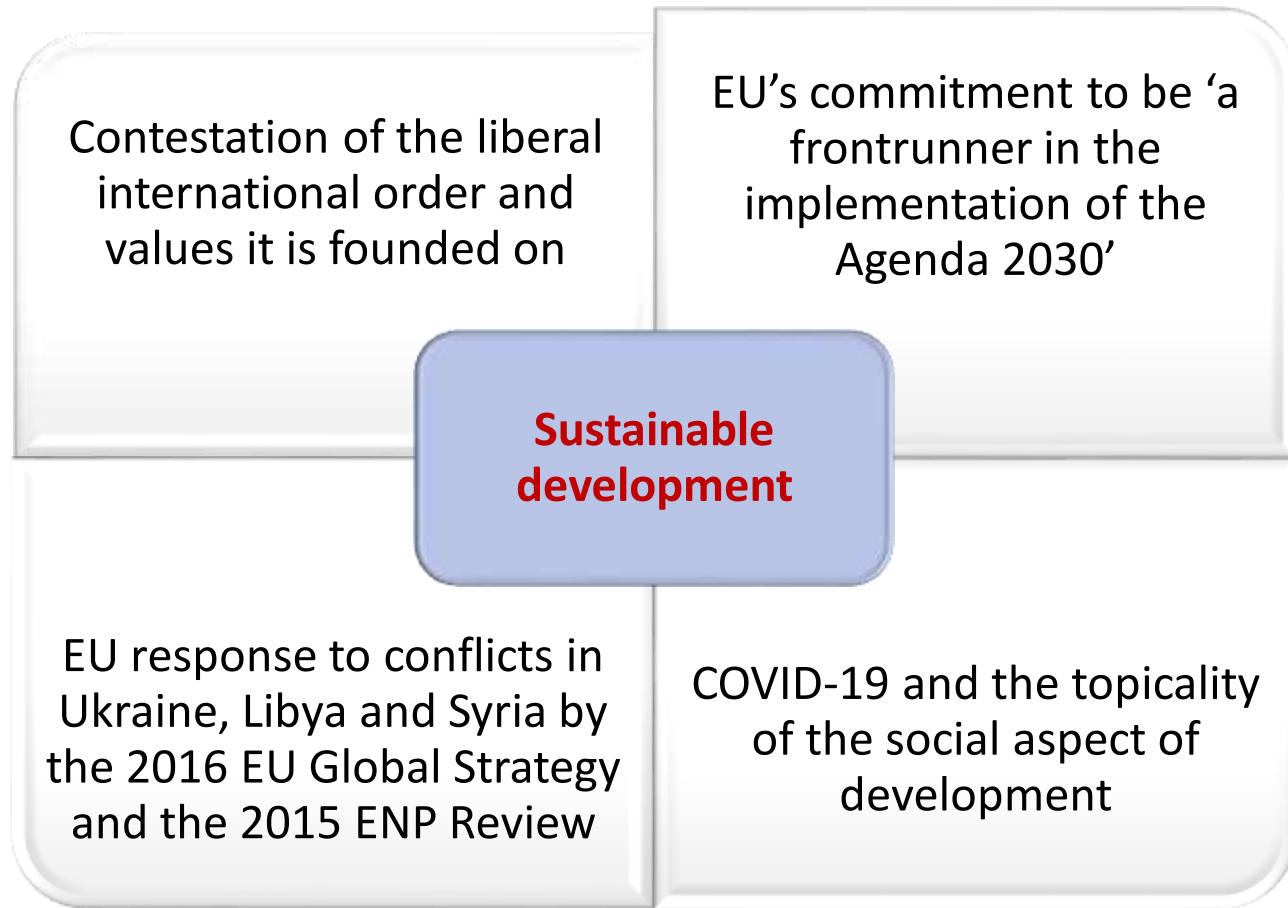Anne Pintsch and Maryna Rabinovych, UiA

Contents

- Introduction

- The origins and mapping of the sustainable development concept

- Methodology

- The ENP/EaP and sustainable development (until 2015)

- Factors behind the SD as a common denominator for the ENP/EaP

- The consolidation of sustainable development in the ENP/EaP context (since 2015)

- Summary and implications

Introduction

- **Eastern Partnership** was launched as an Eastern dimension of the ENP in 2009
- Challenge of targeting a heterogenous region with partner countries' varying political regimes, cultures and foreign policy aspirations
- Exacerbation of differences with the creation of the 'Association Trio' and EU's response to Russia's war against Ukraine
- **Sustainable development as a common denominator for the policy and a relatively safe, depoliticized and a difficult to contest solution?**
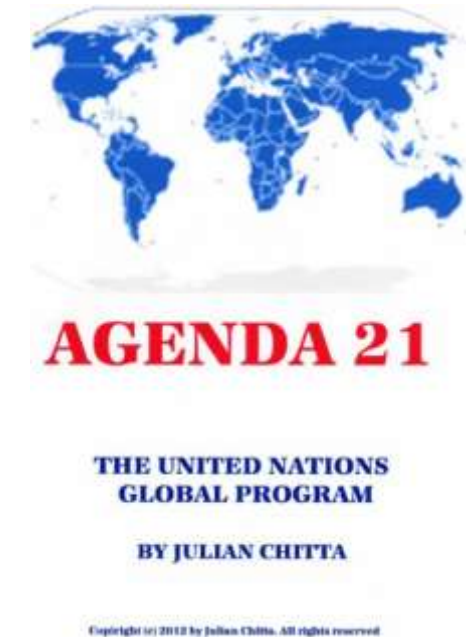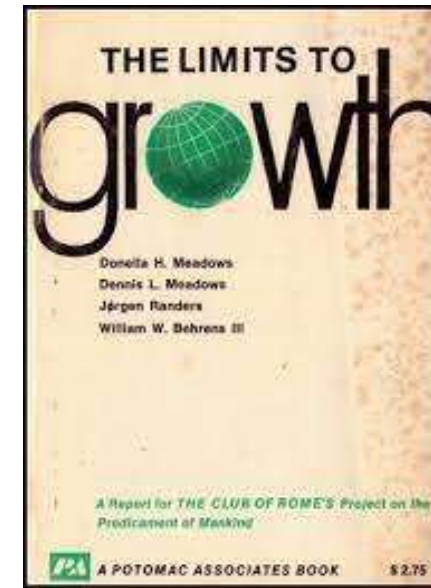
Introduction

Contestation of the liberal international order and values it is founded on

EU's commitment to be 'a frontrunner in the implementation of the Agenda 2030'

Sustainable development

EU response to conflicts in Ukraine, Libya and Syria by the 2016 EU Global Strategy and the 2015 ENP Review

COVID-19 and the topicality of the social aspect of development

Against this background, we find that:

- The SD is not entirely new for the ENP/EaP but became more consolidated and paradigmatically important since 2015
- The SD can be seen as partly compensatory for the EU's weakening emphasis on fundamental values and European integration
- Rule of law, institutions and governance transform from ideational 'common values' to the means of SD

The Concept of Sustainable Development: Origins

- Origins of the **SD**:
  - 'Sustainable yield' in forestry and timber industries
  - Impact of population growth on food supplies
- 1972 Report "Limits of Growth" by the Club of Rome (emphasis on the needs of future generations)
- 1987 Brundtland Report referring to sustainable development as a means to counter resource limitedness
- **Agenda 21 of 1992 integrating economic, environmental and social aspects of SD**
- 2000 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)
- **2012 Rio+20 Declaration giving rise to the Agenda 2030 and the SDGs**

Agenda 2030 and SDGs

- Agenda 2030 as a "plan of action for people, planet and prosperity" (UN, 2015)

- Manifestation of the "governance through goals" approach (Biermann, et al., 2017)

- **Key novelties of the Agenda 2030:**
  - Focus on stakeholder motivation and positive leeway, rather than hard law
  - Many ways by which the Agenda 2030 connects various dimensions of SD (interlinkages between the Goals, Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development)
  - Supplementing the three-dimensional SD concept with the governance dimension (Goals 16 and 17)
  - Multistakeholder partnerships for sustainable development

Methodology

- **Document analysis and recourse to secondary sources**
- Categories of documents:
  - Key policy documents
  - Relevant legal acts
  - Regional and country programming (Ukraine as a case study for country programming)
- **Close reading and coding with the help of NVIVO 12**
- Process closed to structured coding analysis based on the notions of "European integration", "common values", "nexuses" and "enabling environment"
- Qualitative process being conducive to an in-depth understanding of the documents' key focus points and the manner and extent to which they reflect the SD concept and its components.

Marking for SD Dimension/Nexus	Linkage to overarching SD Approach
(-) – no emphasis	(*) – no emphasis
(+) – medium emphasis	(**) – medium emphasis
(++) – strong emphasis	(***) – strong emphasis

UiA

Coding exercise (early ENP/EaP documents)

	European integration	Common values	Reference to SD	Economic dimension	Environmental dimension	Social dimension	Governance dimension	Linkages between the aspects	Enabling environment
2003 "Wider Europe" Communication	+++	++	+	+++ *	+ *	++ -	++ -	Economic-social + Economic-environment +	++ Integration Trade
2004 ENP Strategy Paper	+++	++	+	++ *	+ *	++ -	+ -	Economic-social + Economic-governance + Environment-governance +	++ Integration Trade Regulatory approximation Finance
2004 Action Plans for Eastern Neighbours	+++	++	++	++ *	+ *	+ *	++ -	Economic-governance +++ Environment-governance -	+ Integration Regulatory approximation EU assistance

UiA

Early ENP/EaP policy documents: integration, common values and sustainable development

- **Strong emphasis on integration** ("enhanced relations", "moving beyond cooperation to a significant degree of integration", "deep" bilateral integration)

- **Common values** as a "red thread" in early ENP/EaP documents:
    - Going broader than the SD's governance dimension
    - Focus on liberty and democracy, civil liberties and civil society support

- **SD as a "buzzword" BUT (!)**
    - Uneven coverage of various dimensions of SD
    - Focus on economic dimension and the linkage between the economic dimension and integration
    - Closer interplay between various dimensions of SD, rather the overall SD concept

Factors behind the SD as a common denominator for the ENP/EaP

- **Crisis of liberal international order**
  - Contestation by rising powers
  - Opposition within liberal democracies
  - EU's rethinking its approach to foreign policy and its normative aspects (principled pragmatism)
- **Changes to the ENP/EaP following the crisis in Ukraine, Syria and Libya**
  - Lowering of the EU's transformative ambitions vis-à-vis Neighbours
  - Focus on stabilization and resilience (close to the Goal 16)
- **EU's commitment to SD and policies' reformulation**
- **Growing demand for development cooperation amid the COVID-19 pandemic**

Coding exercise 2 (post-2015 ENP/EaP documents)

	European integration	Common values	Reference to SD	Economic dimension	Environmental dimension	Social dimension	Governance dimension	Linkages between the aspects	Enabling environment	Resilience
2015 ENP Review	++	++	+	+++ *	+ -	++ -	++ -	Economic-social +++ Economic-environment +	+	+
NDICI Regulation	+	+++	+++ (incl. specific SDGs)	+++ ***	++ ***	+++ ***	++ ***	Economic-social ++ Economic-environment ++ Environment-governance + Environment-social +	+	++
NDICI programme for Eastern Neighbours 2021-2027	+	++	+++ (incl. specific SDGs)	+++ ***	++ ***	++ ***	++ ***	Economic-environment ++ Economic-social ++ Social-governance +	++	++

The consolidation of sustainable development in the ENP/EaP context (since 2015)

Document	Substance
ENP Review	Focus on stabilization, economic development and governance under the ENP Review (though SD remains a 'buzzword')
20 Deliverables for 2020	'Pragmatization' of economic development and governance in a quest for tangible achievements
2020 Joint Eastern Partnership Communication	• Resilience paradigm as a central axis • Virtually equal attention to all SD aspects and nuanced linkages between
NDICI Regulation and programming	• Agenda 2030 and SD as an umbrella 'transformative framework' for the EU-funded action • Virtually equal attention to all SD aspects • Nuanced linkages between various SD aspects • New interlinkages between SD and European integration and common values leitmotifs

Summary

- **An increasingly salient role of SD in framing the ENP/EaP over the period since 2015 to 2022, especially in programming**
- Decreasing prominence of European integration and common or shared values narratives
- Confluence of the crisis of liberal order, impact of conflicts in Ukraine, Libbya and Syria, COVID-19 and the EU's commitment to SD
- **Features of the SD in ENP/EaP**
  - Not novel for the policy but increasingly consolidated
  - Increasing focus on the social aspect and nexuses between various SD aspects
  - Pragmatic framing of the rule of law and governance in contrast to common values

Implications

- Threat of reform backsliding in a hunt for pragmatic successes
- Autocratic regimes' misuse of EU SD efforts to their benefit
- Need to reconcile integration, common values and SD objectives amid Russia's war against Ukraine

Financial Times