

BOOK REVIEW

The European Neighbourhood Policy in perspective: context, implementation and impact / Edited by **Richard G. Whitman, Stefan Wolff**, Palgrave studies in European Union Politics, 2012, 274 pages, ISBN: 978-1-137-03123-5 (paperback).

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The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) – the EU’s initiative to launch deeper relations between the European Union and its neighbourhood both in the political and economic fields – was developed in the context of 2004 EU enlargement which aimed at materialising Brussels’ aspirations for deeper integration with the surrounding states, the immediate backyard of the EU. Through the ENP the EU has struggled to preserve the attractiveness of the European model for neighbouring states by using various mechanism of cooperation, however without offering them a full-fledged membership perspective. The ENP was intended to become a tool for shaping a stable environment for the European integration processes, guaranteeing security and stability, supporting democracy and the rule of law. In such way, the ENP was meant to establish a *ring of friends* on the European Union borders.

The book *The European Neighbourhood Policy in Perspective: Context, Implementation and Impact* undertakes an excellent investigation into the main challenges of the ENP seeking to distinguish the main strengths and weaknesses of the neighbourhood project. Having today the current backdrop marked by the persistent turmoil in North Africa and Syria, the escalating conflict between Ukraine and Russia, the bitter tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the geopolitical rivalry raised by the Russian Federation, it is obvious the EU’s approach towards its proximity, in general, and the ENP, in particular, have gained new ground. Studying the ENP still challenges the scholars in the field who have been seeking to clarify to what extent the EU has managed to

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positively engage the neighbourhood and carry through the ENP a transformative impact. Thus, the book has been able to offer a profound collective methodological, theoretical and empirical investigation of the ENP, among which the empirical insight brings significant added value.

The volume is well structured. Firstly, it touches upon the methodological, theoretical and empirical challenges facing the ENP, only after to proceed with contextualizing and analysing the practical implementation of the policy. The purpose of the book is ambitious as it includes a broad overview of the most complex topics and areas covered by the ENP.

In the introduction the authors seek to define the neighbourhood concept. Since its inception the ENP the EU has designed alternative forms of integration *below the threshold of membership* and *above the simple partnership* (limited bilateral relations, Partnership and Cooperation Agreements, Association Agreements). Whilst the membership perspective has never been on the table, the ENP has only aimed to spread security, stability and prosperity. Presenting the ENP as *an umbrella policy* beefed up by additional multilateral frameworks – the Union for Mediterranean and the Eastern Partnership – the striking question raised by the authors is the following: what does the ENP lack more – credibility or leverage? (p. 12)

The first part of the book is devoted to the ENP theoretical aspects. Touching upon the conventional presumptions of “*much ado about nothing*”, Ian Manners points out that these presumptions may be true if to analyse the EU’s policy towards the members. Manners believes there is a necessity of rethinking the theoretical approaches which undergird the functioning and the logic behind the ENP. Moreover, Ben Tonra considers that the deeper comprehension of identity construction is vital and this will enhance the EU’s role in the neighbourhood. Tonra looks into the meanings of “*European*” and “*identity borders*”, underlining the dichotomy between “*insiders*” and “*outsiders*” (the EU vs. neighbouring states, respectively).

Biscops argues the ENP is chiefly serving security objectives. According to his view the ENP cannot stand apart from “hard” security interpretations (p. 79). Biscops’ conclusions are particularly remarkable when he argues that the implementation of the EU standards (i.e. democracy and human rights) would probably fail in countries with non-stable regimes. These ideas were further developed in the third part of the book when assessing the ENP impact and goals.

The second part of the book conceptualises the ENP according to three perspectives: Balkan, Transatlantic and Russian. The EU's 2004/2007 enlargement brought the Union geographically closer to unstable regions and hybrid regimes. This poses challenges to the EU's objectives of achieving stability and prosperity beyond its borders.

Haukkala's chapter looks at Russia's approach towards the ENP. The rationale behind its self-exclusion from the initiative has been particularly analysed. It is obvious that Russia could not welcome the EU involvement in the region and called for an equal basis for cooperation. Moreover, it looks doubtfully *how* and – what is more important and complicated – *to which extent* Russia could have perceived *the European shared values*. The EU and Russia are the most important actors in the shared neighbourhood, both exercising structural and normative power to shape their neighbouring environment and both trying to coordinate the external challenges emanating from the region. Having today the current Ukrainian debacle as background, it becomes evident that Moscow has always perceived the ENP and the very concept of shared neighbourhood as posing a threat to what Russia regarded to be its traditional sphere of influence.

The Eastern Partnership, North Africa, the Southern Caucasus and the Middle East come specifically into the spotlight in the third part of the book. The relations between the states from the mentioned regions and the EU are studied mostly taking into account the main interrelated functions of the ENP: *socialization* and *mobilization*. As far as the eastern dimension of the ENP concerns, the cases of Ukraine and Moldova are considered to be ultimate tests for the viability of the ENP project. According to Sasse, the mentioned states are positioned in an obvious conundrum whether to embrace or not the EU agenda. The author claims that the ENP provides a loose framework for socialization (without the membership *carrot*), hence the negotiated Action Plans turned to be more *illusory* than reality. Sasse points out that Ukrainian politicians passed “a transition from an initially deeply negative reaction to the ENP to a more pragmatic approach which recast the ENP as a platform for preparing for Ukraine's eventual accession” (p. 188). Indeed, at that point, nobody could have predicted the harsh shift which occurred in the eve of the November 2013 Vilnius Summit. Thus, the question whether Ukraine is still the *front runner* among the eastern neighbours remains debatable in the light of the latest developments.

The third part of the book illustrates that the ENP's main problem is that it still remains the *space for possibilities*, despite of the planned broad benefits which the ENP was going to offer. These conclusions should be easily and fairly mentioned in particular regarding the Southern Caucasus region that could not have been excluded from the ENP due to its geographical position and the role for the regional security.

The analysis of the EU relations with countries of the Middle East region overviews the position of the Middle East countries in the global context and considers the future of the region important also for the future of the ENP. The relation with the Middle East has been established by building a *country-to-country* approach, taking into account the instability existing in the region. As debated by the author, "the question for future debate is whether deeper EU engagement in the Middle East could help to transform this region into a peaceful and prosperous scene" especially taking into account the fact that the ENP is mostly focused "on producing national change than on promoting regional transformation and integration" (p. 255).

As far as North Africa concerns, the states under the ENP are defined by Bicchi in a very original way. "The good, the bad and the ugly" are actually the attributes of Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria, depending on the success of the cooperation (p. 219). Indeed, the ENP brought a set of advantages to the particular states, but at the same time, it marked a clear gap between "successful" and "failed" states.

Finally, the book claims that the ENP has potential. However, this has not been yet successfully tapped. As the authors of the book argue, the ENP is constructed on a "*conditionality-line*". Commitments and incentives of the "*Outer Seventeenth*"¹ are quite vague and limited. The authors argue the ENP failed both in (1) spreading stability, security and prosperity in the EU's neighbourhood across the EU's borders, (2) preventing the feeling of exclusion.

It could be mentioned that the current events in Ukraine which followed the refusal to sign the Association Agreement by the then president Yanukovich, the annexation of Crimea by Russia and the conflict in the Eastern regions of Ukraine soon afterwards, could also be explained by the ENP partial failure to positively impact the country. In

¹ The ENP was initially expected to deal with 17 neighbours, "the outer seventeenth", to paraphrase the famous definition on the seven initial members of the EFTA created in the late 1950 to counter the newly founded six strong European Economic Community.

the book the reasons of the ENP's failure are explained with the lack of long-term practical benefits for the neighbouring countries, which were willing to see something comparable to a membership perspective. One of the main differences between the ENP and enlargement can be expressed in the following statement: "candidates for accession can be chosen, whereas geographic neighbours cannot" and at the end of the day, the ENP is suffering from "*being neither enlargement nor foreign policy proper*" (p. 261-262). Furthermore, the neighbourhood project *unfinished business* has been also caused by the lack of clear of political will on the EU member states' side. Yet, according to Missiroli, the ENP could still be considered *work in progress* and could carry a stronger impact, if overhauled. Provided the ENP is the product of *a peculiar time* in the European integration process, as emphasised in the book, we are faced with the opened question – whether the ENP is ready to correspond to the new challenges posed by a transformed geostrategic context.