

## BOOK REVIEW

**Elena A. Korosteleva, *The European Union and its Eastern Neighbours: towards a more ambitious partnership?*, London: BASEES/Routledge Series on Russian and East European Studies, 2012, 188 pages, ISBN: 978-0-415-61261-6**

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The increasing importance of the European Union (EU) as a strong centre of gravity in Eastern Europe has sparked the development of a broad range of regional cooperative instruments. Such is the case of the European Neighbourhood Policy (2004) and the Eastern Partnership (2009) which sought to concretise the EU's quest for deeper partnership with the newly emerged post-Soviet states. This relationship between the newly independent states and the EU has challenged the academics since the end of the Cold-War.

Beefing up the contributions to this field, Elena Korosteleva's book - *The European Union and its Eastern Neighbours: towards a more ambitious partnership?* - provides an excellent account of the EU's relation with its Eastern neighbours. It is a thorough investigation into the nature of this relation by including extensive original research (i.e. surveys, focus groups, interviews) mainly conducted in Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine, Russia and Brussels. The book is clearly organised and full of stimulating thoughts following the same rigorous writing style and sharp inquiries of the most critical issues professor Korosteleva used us with. It is not surprising her astute academic endeavour has been rewarded. Many of the ideas which undergird this monography have been included into the European Commission's official paper, the 2011 European Neighbourhood Policy Review.

As argued by the author under the umbrella of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the Eastern Partnership (EaP) various policies meant to enhance political dialogue and cooperation in many areas ranging from security issues to trade, migration, visa facilitation, energy or environment have been envisaged. The enlargement experience has considerably influenced the

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EU's approach towards the near abroad which progressively shifted towards a *policy of inclusion*, whose centrepiece focused on the transfer of European values (democracy, rule of law, respect for human and minority rights, liberal market economy etc.) to its neighbours. However, in spite of growing dialogue, several initiatives and institutional collaboration, reform on the ground has been limited. Whereas there is a permanent need to enhance political freedom and civil liberties, the *era* of authoritarian and hybrid regimes has not completely passed. And this is surprising for countries placed in the EU's eastern proximity, where the Union influence is supposed to be strong. The book points out that one of the obvious drawbacks of *this relationship (partnership)* has been the initial design of the ENP/EaP policies. They were shaped chiefly through the EU's internal lenses, despite the advocated joint ownership. By overlooking partner countries' specific needs and regional ties, the EU's strategy has been according to Elena Korosteleva "inherently hierarchical, in-cohesive and prescriptive" (p. 46).

As such, the author's strong criticism of the EU's governance approach is a ubiquitous trait of this valuable monography. The critical, but constructive, engagement is developed alongside the discussion - from a *governance-partnership* perspective - of the challenges the ENP and the EaP are facing in the eastern neighbourhood. This also gives the reader a broader overview of the EU's soft/transformational power and questions whether the Union has enough stamina to play an effective role in the *partnership-building* process with its eastern proximity.

The examples drawn from the case studies (Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus) add up to the already sceptical view of the ENP/EaP dyad and identify a number of obstacles which impede the development of a successful policy: firstly, there is an evident asymmetry of power within the policies where the *neighbours* are the ones required to mould their domestic structure according to Brussels' grievances and not viceversa. Secondly, instead of being a reliable *force for good*, the EU's *external governance* is rather one-sided, following its own internal interests acting in a *Eurocentric* fashion by making the ENP states subjects to EU policy instead of engaging them as equals (p. 13). Thirdly, the EU employs conditionality in an inappropriate way (bearing an *inside-out* perspective); this efficient instrument imported from the enlargement strategy risks to carry insufficient leverage when used towards countries without a clear full-fledged membership perspective. Hence, the obvious question the author seeks to address is how this *relationship* can be fruitfully developed in the absence of the accession carrot? A straightforward answer would underline the urgent need of revamping the current neighbourhood policies by attentively focusing on the *other* (the partner state) and a genuine interest in its peculiarities. Moreover, by including the partner more in the policy-making process, better tailored solutions and legitimacy will be generated. It will also deploy institutional and political models capable to manage the tensions between

inclusion and exclusion (the dichotomy *us-ness* vs. *other-ness* - almost a *leitmotif* in Korosteleva's book - is often employed to depict the EU-Eastern neighbours relationship). The book is divided into five chapters which provide a very thoughtful analysis of the substance of the relationship between the EU and its eastern neighbours.

By drawing on richly contextualized analyses, chapter 1 looks into the notion of *partnership* and builds important arguments on the EU's approach towards its immediate vicinity. In particular, the *one-size-fits-all* rationale behind EU's initiative is met with criticism. Thus, the conclusion is straightforward: Brussels' flawed partnership strategy and the ambiguous discourse wanes the neighbourhood policy's credentials as being a reliable tool to fulfil its agenda.

The second chapter of the book gives very well-structured theoretical insight into the rationale of the EU's *external governance* notion. The theoretical framework guiding the analysis is derived from the concept of *boundary politics* as central to the EU external governance adopted by the EU vis-a-vis its near abroad. The EU's reluctance to meet the membership aspirations of some of the EaP countries continues to hinder the development of deeper relations.

The following three chapters gather relevant empirical evidence collected in three EaP countries - Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova. These case studies (particularly Ukraine and Belarus) emphasise that the EU's rhetoric based on *shared values* and *joint ownership* has not been entirely welcome on the ground. And this was generated by the EU's prescriptive nature premised on its successful enlargement recipe and not on the initially promoted mutual enforcement.

All in all, this book is a highly valuable addition to the literature. It has also opened up new opportunities for further research on the eastern dimension of the EU's neighbourhood policy, serving as an excellent source for both scholars and practitioners. In spite of its critical nature, the book is arguably a plea in favour of the EU to overhaul its approach towards the eastern neighbourhood. Furthermore, the author has succeeded in providing many answers as well as raising new questions regarding the viability of such a neighbourhood project, but even more so for the "precise nature of the EU as a *transformative force* (...) on the international arena" (p. 127). Actually, its originality resides in its strength to incorporate the extensive body of empirical evidence collected into the appropriate theoretical framework. However, it lacks in the necessary attention to the other three members of the EaP, the South Caucasian countries - Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. The spectrum of analysis of the EaP as a whole would have undoubtedly been completed, had the author also engaged in this endeavour.

By identifying many of the shortcomings of the ENP/EaP, this book had anticipated some of the reasons for the mixed results of the Eastern Partnership Vilnius Summit (28-29 November 2013) where two of four EaP members

(Armenia and Ukraine) expected to sign the Association Agreements dropped their bids in the last moment. Apart from the Russian constant pressure, the EU's lack of political determination and its modest transformative power contrary to what the ENP tool-box envisaged largely explain the poor results of the Summit.