

# A New Theoretical Perspective on EU Policy Toward its Eastern Neighbours

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*Constructivism and rationalism in EU external relations : the case of the European neighbourhood policy* / Petr Kratochvil, Elsa Tulmets. - Baden-Baden : Nomos, 2010. - 200 p. - ISBN 978-3-8329-5357-7

Almost eight years have passed since the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) was launched in June 2003 and many studies have been devoted to the subject. Most of them, both those focused on the ENP's Eastern dimension and those focused on its Southern dimension, have been quite critical of how the policy was conceived and the methods used to promote reforms in the EU's neighbouring countries. A common denominator of most of these studies is their empirical character. Instead, this book by Petr Kratochvil and Elsa Tulmets, respectively Director and Senior Fellow at the Prague-based Institute of International Relations joins the ENP debate from a theoretical perspective, in particular the classical debate that has long divided scholars of International Relations into rationalists and constructivists. Interestingly, the book does not aim solely at interpreting the ENP from the perspective of these two approaches, but also intends to contribute to the theoretical debate.

However, unlike the way in which theoretical studies are usually conceived and carried out, this book does not start out by choosing a single theoretical approach with a set of specific metatheoretical assumptions from which to descend to the level of theory and finally to the empirical analysis. The authors prefer to use the two broad approaches of international relations "as analytical lenses that can be put on and taken off in accordance with the requirements of the empirical context". *Prima facie*, this may resemble the approach of methodological pragmatists, save for one important difference. While the latter start by choosing the method and only subsequently apply it to the empirical case, the authors of this book go back and forth between the methodological and empirical domains. Although this method might raise some eyebrows among scholars of international relations, one has to acknowledge not only that it is original, but also capable of leading to some interesting findings when applied to the field of the EU's external relations, and specifically, the ENP.

The authors start out by reformulating the definitions of both rationalism and constructivism in order to overcome the problems associated with the multiplicity of definitions. They arrive at a distinction

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between the two that is similar to the Weberian notions of goal-instrumental action (*zweckrationales Handeln*) and traditional action (*traditionelles Handeln*). While the former – similar to the main elements that the authors associate with rationalism – is reflective and purely instrumental, its main aim being the maximisation of the actors' own utility, the latter – similar to the main elements that the authors associate with constructivism – is rule-oriented. Traditional action can be rule-oriented, either in the form of unconscious compliance with customs and traditions, or in the form of an explicit but irrational acceptance of a norm as the principle that guides one's behaviour.

Drawing from these definitions, the authors state not only that different actors have different types of behaviour/action, but also that the same actor can switch from one behaviour to the other, depending on the external circumstances. In addition, they warn against the tendency to believe that if the EU behaves in a constructivist (or rational) manner, the same must also hold true for its external partner. Moreover, as the authors stress, it is not always the EU that acts in a constructivist way and the external actor that acts in a rational way. There are a number of cases, well documented throughout the book, where exactly the opposite takes place. Depending on the behaviour of the EU and of its external partners in their mutual relations, four positions are identified: strong constructivism, when the EU and the external actors are basically rule-followers; weak constructivism when the EU acts as a normative actor, but the external actor tries to manipulate EU norms to its advantage; weak rationalism when the EU acts as a rational actor, using its influence to lead the external partner to change its behaviour, and the latter

complies with the EU's requests for normative reasons; strong rationalism when both the EU and the external actor try to maximise their own interests.

This theoretical model is rigorously applied throughout the book, in an attempt to classify diachronically the mode of behaviour of the following three categories of key policy actors in the ENP's Eastern dimension: (1) Eastern and Southern Caucasus countries (the case studies analysed in the book are Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia); (2) EU Member states (France, Germany and Poland); (3) EU institutions (Council of the EU, European Commission and European Parliament). The mode of behaviour of these different actors is analysed through a combination of discourse analysis and interviews. It is interesting to note that, while the analysis carried out using one method was usually confirmed with the other, in some cases the outcome was different.

The analysis produced two interesting results. First, the mode of behaviour of each actor tends to change over time, adapting itself to the different political and institutional context in which it operates. Second, the mode of behaviour of some actors resulting from the research is not in line with what might have been generally assumed. Throughout the book there are many of these counterintuitive results: just to name a few, one might have expected the European Parliament to adopt a constructivist behaviour towards the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood, but the research results show a different outcome. While the EP did take a constructivist approach to the issue from 2002–04, when the ENP was still being conceived and its nature and objectives were not yet clearly defined, it switched to a rationalist approach in the period 2004–07, to return to a constructivist one afterwards. The rationalist approach

that seemed to dominate the EP's approach to the ENP during the period 2004–07 is embodied, for example, in the Tannock Report of December 2005. In fact, while stressing the importance of the human rights dimension within the ENP, this document contains a number of propositions aimed at strengthening the profile of the EP in the ENP and more generally in the broad field of external relations. For instance, the Parliament called on the Commission and the EU Council to be more systematically involved in the negotiations of the Action Plans and, above all, reminded them of its budgetary competences in the financing of the ENP through its co-decision power on the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI).

Another interesting finding concerns the Polish attitude *vis-à-vis* the ENP. In this case the authors distinguish between Poland's positions towards the EU and towards the EU's Eastern neighbours. Initially, the Polish stance towards the Eastern neighbours was constructivist but, contrarily to what one might have expected,

it ended up being rational: the focus of most of the documents and speeches analysed by the authors is more on the lengthy and bumpy path that awaits Ukraine on the way to progressive integration with the Union, than on the country's European identity. As for the stance towards the EU, it starts out being rational and ends up being constructivist.

In the conclusions, the authors bring all the analyses together and find that the rationalist approach prevails in the case studies examined.

The book should be recommended to all those who wish to deepen their knowledge of the debate between rationalists and constructivists: they are likely to find the original theoretical approach interesting. Also, it should be recommended to those interested in an academic analysis of the European Neighbourhood Policy. While the detailed analysis of each case tends to make the book seem rather fragmented, the rigorous application of the theoretical framework and methodology leads to a number of results that go counter to various generally assumed clichés.