



Review of the publication: Elsa Tulmets, *East Central European Foreign Policy Identity in Perspective: Back to Europe and the EU's Neighbourhood*, Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2014, ISBN 9780230291300

Reviewer: Dr. Andriy Tyushka
Editor: Dorothea Traupe
Date of publication: 29.06.2016
DOI: 10.11584/opus4-1107

Turned into a political platitude today, the contention about, and the increasing evidence of, history tending to repeat itself, revives the scholarly interest in historically shaped phenomena, such as national identities. It also refines the focus on regions whose actorness remained for decades overshadowed by great power politics, and resurrects the old notions, like Halford Mackinder's 1919 'Heartland Theory' with its particular focus on Eastern Europe's strategic importance, or Józef Piłsudski's post-WWI 'Intermarium' plan for a federation of Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries. As hundred years ago, the socio-economic, geographical and (geo)political space composed of East Central European countries represents today an area of high political contention and securitization of both region-internal and external developments. Not surprisingly, the academic interest in East Central Europe has been revived in the recent years as well, with Elsa Tulmets' 2014 take on the region's foreign policy identity in a comparative perspective representing a valuable contribution to the burgeoning academic debate. One has to acknowledge from the beginning that Tulmets' *'East Central European Foreign Policy Identity in Perspective: Back to Europe and the EU's Neighbourhood'* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) stands out for its ambitious endeavor to provide a broad-brush macro-regional account of the politicized East Central European homogeneity in terms of identity, as well as a fine-grained country-specific comparative research into identity/foreign policy connections in her analysis of six representative countries. While particularistic debates on Western Balkan, Baltic, Eastern or Central European identity-based foreign policies are well covered in the literature, macro-regional accounts are certainly all-too-infrequent, if at all featured in the field.

Whereas essentially concerned with the CEE countries' historical 'return to Europe' since the collapse of bipolarity, Tulmets' (2014) book has ironically appeared in politically turbulent times inevitably drawing the policymakers' and analysts' attention 'back to Europe and the EU's neighbourhood'. The book tries to un-puzzle 'how did the post-communist EU members (re)define their relations to the East after achieving their main foreign policy goals – the EU and NATO accessions?' (p. 2). Focusing on identities and narratives as puzzle threads, the book develops an argument that 'the ECE countries' engagement in the Eastern post-communist space opens the possibility to define further their foreign policy identity in accordance with their differentiated past' (p. 2) – a rather anticipated and not uncommon assumption indeed. The book is however quite original in its compound and rigorous analytical approach that links, under the social constructivist ontological and methodological frame, the concepts of foreign policy identity and foreign policy behaviour (p. 4-18). Post-Communist foreign policies, that represent the main object of the study, are explored and explained with the help of the cases of six geographically representative country studies – Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic, Romania, Slovenia and Estonia. Drawing on the extensive and distinct source basis (p. 23-24), the underlying comparative case study analysis is structured in two parts – the first elaborating on the conditions of CEE foreign policy identities' (re)definition and the second verifying the consistency between the concerned countries' identities and their foreign policies vis-à-vis post-communist Eastern neighbours. To this end, the author disentangles the countries' political and historical 'Self' and places these in the context of CEECs' relations with their post-communist neighbourhood. Then, Tulmets (2014) traces the translation of six countries' (re)defined 'Self' into their own foreign policies as well as their projection to EU-level policies towards the Western Balkan and the Eastern European neighbourhoods. Two concepts seminally find their application in this regard: 'solidarity' with, and even more originally – 'responsibility' for, post-communist neighbourhood. By identifying the competing camps of the so-called 'Internationalists', 'Europeanists', 'Atlanticists', and 'Autonomists' that emerged in the late 2000s (p. 79-83), the book determines a sustainable trend that epitomises the shift from a consensual to a heterogeneous political identity of East Central European states. Sub-regionalisation of the CEE geostrategic space (p.100-114) comes to represent the case for either well-shaped regional identity (e.g. 'Central European identity' within the Visegrad Group (V4) consisting of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia), competing micro-regional identities of the Western Balkan states or institutional unity as a substitute for a common identity (e.g. within the Baltic states). Perhaps unsurprisingly, the study unveils distinct identity-informed international roles of the CEE states, as well as their solidarity-and-responsibility policies

towards the neighbourhood. Common norms and values are believed to be shaping a well-articulated 'solidarity' policy, such as Poland's policy vis-à-vis Ukraine. Common history alone is predicated to feed 'responsibility' policy, such as Poland's 'between-Germany-and-Russia' (p.131) mediation policy. The claims are supported by the author's succinct case studies on Slovenian, Czech, Hungarian and Polish EU presidencies (p. 198-219) and investigations into the countries' participation in EU's assistance policies in the region concerned (p. 220-275). All in all, drawing on the two-order identities study (political 'Self' and historical 'Self'), the book points to the incrementally heterogeneous and mutually distancing foreign policies of CEE countries depending on the articulation of their either political or historical identities. It also discovers the practices of pronounced '*othering*' in CEE discourses and policies with regard to the Soviet past and some countries in the post-Soviet space – predominantly, Russia.

In times of 'big choices' to be made (again) in European politics, framed by the manifold challenges– from financial and migration to 'Brexit' and security crises, the policymaker and expert community's attention is drawn 'back to Europe and the EU's neighbourhood'. Tulmets' (2014) richly sourced and thoroughly researched comparative account of East Central European foreign policy identity may well facilitate understanding of CEE countries' past and future choices, particularly with regard to the EU's turbulent neighbourhoods.

This review was originally published on www.pol-int.org.