Theorizing the European
Neighbourhood Policy
EU INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND DIPLOMACY STUDIES

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On 17-18 September 2015, the Department of **EU International Relations and Diplomacy Studies** at the College of Europe in Bruges, with the financial support of the European Commission, organised an international conference devoted to theorising the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). The conference aimed to contribute to the further development of EU external relations theory by explaining the origins, development, (in)effectiveness, and (in)consistency of the ENP, as well as the role played by other global actors, from various theoretical perspectives.

Jörg Monar, Rector of the College of Europe, welcomed the participants and stressed the importance of both the ENP and of theory-building. He introduced the keynote speaker **Johannes Hahn**, Commissioner for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations. Commissioner Hahn took stock of the first decade of the ENP, pointing out some of its shortcomings, before commenting on the review process currently underway. Described as a 'reform' rather than a 'revolution', he outlined the main changes of the new strategy that the European Commission and the European External Action Service will jointly publish in mid-November 2015. First, the revised ENP will put greater emphasis on differentiation among individual partners, allowing for different bilateral partnerships and a less mechanical 'more for more' policy instead of the 'one-size-fits-all' approach of the past. Second, the new ENP will focus on a more limited number of priorities reflecting the interests of the EU and its citizens, including an emphasis on stabilisation and economic development. Third, the revised ENP will be more flexible in the way it is operated by the European Union, with new working methods, greater involvement of the member states, looser financial procedures and lighter reporting. Finally, the new policy will be less Brussels-centred and ensure greater ownership by the neighbourhood countries themselves.

The academic part of the conference was structured around five different thematic panels aimed at explaining several aspects of the ENP. In her introduction, **Sieglinde Gstöhl**, Director of the Department of EU International Relations and Diplomacy Studies, argued that although the ENP developed into an important pillar of EU external action, theory-building has remained underdeveloped. Sieglinde Gstöhl reminded the participants of the guiding questions for the conference, as they had been stipulated in the call for papers. She highlighted three points that need to be addressed to go beyond EU-centric mainstream theories: first, the path-dependency resulting from the 'shadow' of EU enlargement and the related approaches to external Europeanisation; second, the current divide in International Relations theory between rationalism and constructivism; and third, the role of neglected actors and factors such as Russia and the Eurasian Economic Union or insights from critical studies.

The first panel was dedicated to explaining the origins and the development of the ENP. **Elsa Tulmets** discussed the relevance of rationalist and constructivist approaches. She argued that the beginnings of the ENP followed partially a rationalist logic, as illustrated by the debates on the policy's geographical scope. At the same time, constructivist approaches to the ENP can be traced back to the 'letter diplomacy' between EU members states and their neighbours and in the Commission's insistence on stability, prosperity and security through shared values. The EU subsequently adopted a predominantly constructivist approach with a focus on values and norms.

This was seriously challenged by the Russo-Georgian war in 2008 and the crisis in Ukraine since 2014. The impact of these external events on the ENP led to a stronger focus on 'hard security' issues in recent years. Despite these changes, constructivist arguments still remain relevant for explaining the ENP.

Panagiota Manoli offered a structural power perspective of the Eastern Partnership. She underlined the innovative nature of the initiative, the first comprehensive EU policy especially directed towards the Eastern neighbourhood and a *sui generis* policy located between integration and external affairs. The Eastern Partnership, understood as a Structural Foreign Policy, can be seen as a project aimed at shaping the structure of the regional policy economy and establishing sustainable conditions in the long run. For this purpose, comprehensiveness, a multi-level approach, a variety of instruments, and the perception of the institutional structures as legitimate are fundamental. As Structural Foreign Policy, the Eastern Partnership is characterised by the consistency between internal politics of the EU and external governance, a focus on the long-term challenges rather than short-term conflicts, attention to both universal norms and second-degree norms, and the inclusion of all relevant actors and levels.

Theodor Moga recalled that the ENP has often been criticised as being flawed in its original conceptualisation and as too technocratic. He argued that cognitive heuristics – bounded rationality – can account for these shortcomings. In this perspective, the discontinuities in the ENP are caused by a distorted cost-benefit analysis, modelled after the enlargement process. Moreover, faulty assumptions on the similarities and differences among the ENP countries have contributed to inefficiencies. The actors' intended rationality and their cognitive misperceptions or mental shortcuts (such as the inclination to rely on more recent or similar policies) can produce unexpected outcomes. According to Moga, bounded rationality in the framework of the ENP provides a useful means for building a bridge between constructivism and rationalism.

The second panel aimed at explaining the relevance and (in)effectiveness of the ENP. **Sara Kahn-Nisser** applied a spatial econometric approach in assessing the EU's influence on human rights promotion in its neighbourhood through the convergence mechanisms of both coercion (manipulation of cost-benefit calculations) and socialisation (emulation of positive normative example). Her research design, based on the observation of increases and decreases of financial assistance (reward and punishment) as well as of the records of the peer group of EU and ENP countries, includes the collection of data across 31 countries from 1990 to 2015. The findings showed that socialisation tends to work in conjunction with rewards to effectuate change in neighbouring countries, while in the absence of a socialising effect the EU would still be able to exert influence through coercion, but not vice versa.

Elena Korosteleva's presentation drew on post-structuralism and other critical as well as normative theories in analysing the EU's 'external governance' approach in order to identify more sustainable forms of the EU's interactions with its Eastern neighbours. She argued that the EU pursues a 'reflexive', yet 'one-sided' way of framing its presence abroad by exporting its norms and practices. Korosteleva made a clear distinction between 'politics', characterised by a bureaucratic approach, and 'the political', which she sees as currently lacking in the Union's approach. In contrast to a construction of hegemony, the pursuit of 'the political', which implies genuine exchanges on an equal footing, would feed into the EU's better understanding of the 'other' and its relations with the Eastern neighbours, seen as distinct rather than different. Equally, contestation and a strengthening of 'the political' would foster a deepened mutual understanding of the 'normal' and of the common political space the EU shares with its neighbouring countries.

The <u>third panel</u> tackled the (in)consistencies of the ENP, focussing in particular on democracy promotion. Objectives in this realm are often met with certain shortcomings. Indeed, as demonstrated by **Lusine Badalyan**, the EU's assessments of democracy in the Eastern Partnership countries have to some extent been questionable and unreliable. Although these assessments have become more accurate after 2009, their bias remains pronounced in the cases of Azerbaijan and Armenia. In its annual Progress Reports, the EU sometimes turns a blind eye to human rights abuses and/or fails to criticise rigged elections. Badalyan concluded by underlining the importance of publishing accurate assessments to be taken into account in the ENP.

Nicola Del Medico focused on the relation between secessionists conflicts and EU democracy promotion, using Georgia as a case study – an ENP country that is affected by several protracted secessionist conflicts. He advanced a hypothesis about the reasons behind EU democracy promotion based on a theoretical framework drawing on cosmopolitanism and post-structuralism. In spite of their differences, these approaches appear to converge in their explanation of EU democracy promotion around the belief that the latter favoured the emergence of new forms of post-national, multi-layered and de-territorialised governance that, through the dispersion of power, would be conducive to security. The study of Georgia showed that this might not be the case, and that the hypothesis about EU democracy promotion, derived from cosmopolitanism and post-structuralism, needs to be reconsidered by taking into account the specificities of the ENP and of the regional context.

The presentation by **Ryhor Nizhnikau** focused on the EU's democratic institution-building in Ukraine after the 2014 revolution. The EU's policy towards Ukraine follows the general pattern of the ENP that attempts to induce change by providing incentives and by socialising elites, whereby economic integration is considered to be the major trigger for rule transfer. Although the EU has indeed engaged with local actors in Ukraine, there is a problem in the way it has selected these local actors, focusing on actors that can speak the 'EU language' and that have been socialised in the 'EU way of being'. Nizhnikau's research demonstrated that there is a recurring pattern of selecting the same actors based on these criteria in Georgia and Moldova. He argued that it might be more useful to visualise the neighbourhood as a geopolitical space and to empower domestic stakeholders in order to shift from an outcome-oriented to a process-oriented Europeanisation in the ENP countries.

The <u>fourth panel</u> opened the second day of the conference and was devoted to explaining the role of Russia in the ENP. **Serena Giusti** presented Russia's realist perceptions of the ENP. She questioned the normative nature of the ENP, which she characterised as a policy with geopolitical implications. Giusti outlined the core concepts and evolutions in Russia's foreign policy. According to her, under Vladimir Putin's second presidency, foreign policy has become a means to achieve domestic consensus. Hence, he sees a need to pursue a proactive foreign policy, including in the 'near abroad'. This has led to direct competition with the EU over countries in the shared neighbourhood. There is, however, room for reviving EU-Russia cooperation, for instance by re-launching the 'Partnership for Modernisation' and by looking at foreign policy dossiers – such as Iran or Syria – that require Brussels and Moscow to cooperate.

In contrast to Giusti, **Natalia Zaslavskaya** discussed Russia's perceptions of the ENP from a constructivist angle. While Russia's interpretation of the ENP is usually explained through a rationalist lense, she pointed out that it is important to take into account the EU's influence on how Russia's policy in the neighbourhood is formed. According to Zaslavskaya, a learning process explains how Russia adapted to EU practices, and how it moved from emphasising similarities to identifying

differences with the EU. She stressed that constructivism offers explanatory potential as a theoretical framework for grasping Russia's role in the shared neighbourhood.

Nikki Ikani examined Russia's impact on the ENP by outlining a theoretical framework based on Foreign Policy Analysis. She aimed at explaining the EU's policy changes in the case of Ukraine. The speaker showed that, in spite of the strong Russian pressure, the EU was rather reactive and only changed the ENP to a minor extent. In her view, the reason for this lack of policy change was strongly related to the fact that the external pressures needed to be processed in a system with institutional filters and cognitive constraints that, as demonstrated in the Ukrainian case, has limited the possibility for the EU to actually introduce significant changes in the ENP.

The fifth panel of the conference focused on explaining the role of other global actors in the ENP with an emphasis on Europe's eastern neighbourhood. **Laure Delcour** presented a comparative analysis of region-building projects by examining both the Eastern Partnership and the Eurasian Economic Union. She started from the premise that regions are constructed entities: the EU's Eastern neighbourhood is the stage for two competing region-building projects which indicates a struggle for hegemony between Russia and the EU. These two competing projects have a different rationale: the EU focuses on soft, indirect region-building, while the Russian project seems to emphasise hard, direct regional integration combined with 'region spoiling'. Delcour concluded that these different rationales limit the possibilities for inter-regionalism.

Michal Natorski presented his qualitative research into the power relations between the EU and international organisations in Kiev. He emphasised that the EU Delegation in Kiev takes on both of the classic tasks of a foreign representation: the diplomatic and the donor mission. As a donor, though, the EU applies 'hard' conditionality for political reforms, whilst international organisations prefer to advertise for 'educated domestic choice'. In the relationship with international organisations present in Kiev, the EU is known for its fuzzy hierarchies and connections. It is recognised as a big donor with plenty of economic capital but with a limited capacity to deliver policies because of the lack of knowledge capital, for which it counts on international organisations. Despite its strong interdependence with international organisation, the EU remains a central actor in the Ukrainian local context.

Ueli Staeger took a more theoretical approach by analysing the Eurasian Economic Union according to three dimensions of regionalism: geo-political, economic governance and multilateralism. On the basis of this analysis, he concluded that EU-Eurasian Economic Union inter-regionalism focused on economic governance could represent the most probable option for cooperation. Staeger argued that this potential inter-regionalism entails certain risks and rewards: while it would constitute a technocratic challenge for the EU to liaise with another customs union, it could also provide economic stability for the ENP countries. However, above all, this form of inter-regionalism might risk the validation of Russian geopolitics.

In his conclusions, **Simon Schunz,** Professor in the Department of EU International Relations and Diplomacy Studies, stressed the importance of theory-informed reflection on the European Neighbourhood Policy. The conference had proven that theorising, while providing no immediate solutions to pressing problems in the neighbourhood, can be a meaningful endeavour laying the foundations for improved strategies and policies in the medium to long term. Participants had responded to the challenge of theorising the ENP in a variety of creative ways, reflecting among others on explaining the origins and development paths of the neighbourhood policy. A rich research agenda had thus emerged, including multiple opportunities for combining theoretical approaches to advance the thinking about the ENP beyond the current state-of-the-art.