

European Neighbourhood Policy in a Constructivist Perspective. Actors, Narratives, Strategies

Summary

For rationalists, foreign policy formulation is a reaction to events and processes taking place in the external environment. Accordingly, the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) constitutes a response to well-defined collective problems that the European Union (EU) is facing in its neighbourhood. As a result, rationalists assume that goals declared in policy documents are real political objectives and their achievement is possible with the tools and resources that are at the EU's disposal (political, institutional, financial, military). In classical public policy terms, policy effectiveness is measured with the extent to which the goals have been achieved. If this is not the case, the policy is considered a failure. But constructivists point out to the fact that policy fiascos are not objective and are difficult to verify empirically. In fact, they are the result of assessments made by politically relevant actors who construct a narrative of failure in order to further their own political objectives.

The research problem discussed in this book concerns the limited effectiveness of EU foreign policy. The objective is to analyse ENP in the context of internal functions that this policy performs with regard to the political system of the EU. The main hypothesis stipulates that EU policy towards its neighbours can be better explained by what

happens internally in the EU, rather than by external challenges and threats. ENP is not and cannot be a coherent, centrally formulated and implemented external policy as it essentially remains a function of political games between various EU actors that seek to accumulate resources and maintain (or gain) a dominant position within the policy field. The emphasis of the analysis is not on making the EU an effective international actor but, rather about understanding the political game in the ENP field as this game determines the shape and functioning of the policy. As a result, we can re-formulate the problem of (or lack of) ENP effectiveness: instead of asking why the policy is ineffective, we focus on explaining why so much effort was put into creating, sustaining and developing a policy that brings limited results. It is argued that the policy does not (only) provide solutions to external challenges, but, more importantly, strengthens the position of some actors against others on the one hand and legitimises the European integration project as a whole, both internally and externally, on the other.

This does not mean that the EU does not try to manage challenges stemming from its immediate neighbourhood with the ENP toolkit. However, it is argued that external problem solving is not the only, and not the most important, function of the neighbourhood policy. Its form and evolution are determined by actors' preferences in the ENP field. The key function of ENP is to boost the legitimacy of individual actors, especially EU institutions, as well as of the entire integration project, especially in the context of the growing legitimacy deficit resulting from the EU's internal and external crises.

The innovative nature of this work relies on three premises. Firstly, at the theoretical level, it applies sociological constructivism to analysis of external actions of the EU, whereas this approach has been, so far, mainly used in the case of internal policies. This entails moving away from the social constructivism that is largely dominating EU studies. Secondly, at the methodological level, elements of discourse analysis are linked to field analysis, the latter inspired by Pierre Bourdieu's field theory. Thirdly, and empirically, analysis of the game in the ENP field – with analytical categories of actors, narrative and strategies – is complemented by analysis of perceptions of this game by selected ENP partners and third parties.

Following the scholarly work of Sabine Saurugger, Frédéric Merand, Adrian Favell, Virginie Guiraudon, Niilo Kauppi, Andy

Smith, Jay Rowell and Didier Georgakakis, this book adopts a socio-political perspective in EU studies. The added value of this approach is that sociologists focus on individual actors, interactions, conflict and power, and not only on institutions and systems, as political scientists often do. For sociologists, shared norms and values are a result of power struggles and reinforce actors' dominant positions in the policy field. The EU is not only an institutional system, it is also a power structure. Moreover, sociologists underline that researchers are not completely 'free', but operate in a social context. Dominant actors monopolise resources, engage in gate-keeping and indirectly influence research output with funding rules, peer reviews and imposition of discursive representations of the research area or the entire discipline. One consequence for European studies is that scholars often portray the EU in a more positive light than it actually deserves. Thus, some theories may achieve a dominant status, not because they provide the best explanations, but because their proponents have more resources at their disposal and, thus, more tools to delimitate what is considered mainstream within the discipline. Finally, there is a link between a scholar's political preference and their assessment of the integration process and the choice of theory. Therefore, constructivist scholars underline the importance of critical approaches and reflexivity in the research process.

Four theoretical and methodological assumptions guide research presented in this book. Firstly, ENP should not be analysed exclusively in terms of a rationalist response to an exogenous collective problem. Secondly, EU foreign policy is a talking shop and this should be accepted rather than normatively criticised. This, in turn, allows adoption of an appropriate research perspective in order to fully understand the nature of EU foreign policy – reflect on what the ENP actually is and not on what it should be. If EU foreign policy is about articulation rather than action, scholars should explore it by means of adequate research tools. Thirdly, analysis of actors, resources, narratives and their interaction in the ENP field is carried out in a similar way and with similar analytical categories as in the case of EU internal policies. Finally, it is argued that we should move away from treating the EU (and its institutions) as uniform actors with given preferences. 'State', 'Union' or 'institution' do not have preferences and does not act on their own – thus analysis of individuals, groups and the relations

between them becomes indispensable in order to fully grasp the mechanisms that drive EU foreign policy.

The analysis seeks to address a number of theory-driven and empirical problems. How can we move beyond the limitations of rationalism and social constructivism in European studies, or the dichotomy between interests and values in EU foreign policy analysis? How has the constructivist perspective been used so far in analysis of the European Neighbourhood Policy? How does analysis of narratives produced in the ENP field help us to understand the political game involving EU institutions, member states and non-institutional actors? Moreover, what are the key actors in the ENP field, what kind of resources do they possess and what are their objectives in the game? What is the structure of ENP narratives produced by relevant actors, how and why are these narratives reconstructed? Why is there no strategic vision of the ENP: where does the ambivalence of the strategy papers come from? Under what conditions do the dominant actors integrate elements of contesting narratives into their own narrative? How do actors – both dominant and contesting – seek to strengthen their position in the field? To what extent are external EU perceptions in line with the dominant narrative produced by the EU? What are the key components of narratives about the EU produced by external actors? To what extent does the external contestation of EU narratives affect their reconstruction?

This work is of an interdisciplinary nature, linking theoretical insights in EU studies, international relations (IR) and political sociology. Theoretically, the analysis relies on the constructivist perspective, with particular focus on sociological constructivism. Methodologically, discourse analysis is linked to the field theory of Pierre Bourdieu. This method allows for analysis of narratives that are produced by dominant actors in the ENP field, as well as contesting actors that are competing for resources (cognitive, social, political) available in the field with the objective to strengthen their position in the game. Actors act strategically, while pursuing their individual and collective interests. However, their preferences and actions are constituted and constrained by the structure of the field, relevant resources at their disposal, the discursive framework imposed by the narratives at the systemic and institutional levels, as well as the logics of path dependence and practical creativity (*bricolage*).

In order to analyse narratives produced in the ENP field, I develop a model allowing for operationalisation of the narrative's structure and the process of its reconstruction. This involves exploring narratives that legitimise actors' actions in the field of neighbourhood policy with regard to three major external challenges which the EU was facing: EU enlargement to the east (creation of the ENP 2003–2004), the so-called Arab Spring (ENP review of 2011) and further destabilisation of southern, as well as eastern neighbourhood, including the Russian–Ukrainian conflict (ENP review of 2015).

The book consists of five chapters, introduction and conclusion. Chapter 1 is dedicated to general reflection on EU foreign policy, which ENP is part of, in light of three major IR theoretical traditions. Firstly, the contested notion of 'EU foreign policy' is defined and then juxtaposed against other terms, such as 'EU external action' or 'European foreign policy'. Realist and liberal theoretical traditions are briefly addressed before a detailed account of the varieties of constructivism is presented. Due to the relatively limited reception of constructivism in Polish IR and EU studies, the objective is to provide an in-depth analysis of constructivism(s) at the continuum between rationalism and post-structuralism. This allows depiction of the full spectrum of the consequences of theoretical choices in the context of EU foreign policy: from conventional constructivism (between rationalist and liberal approach) to the post-structural analysis of shifting discourse boundaries. Finally, a promising perspective of sociological constructivism is presented, preparing the ground for narrative analysis in subsequent chapters.

The rationale for chapter 2 is to critically discuss key existing concepts and approaches to analysis of the European Neighbourhood Policy. Thus, two objectives are formulated. Firstly, the chapter aims at systematisation of theoretical approaches to the ENP and familiarisation of the Polish reader with both classical and recent non-mainstream Western European conceptualisations in this area. This is justified as theory-driven research on the ENP is scarce in Poland and relies mostly on Europeanisation and (to a lesser extent) normative power concepts. Secondly, the chapter aims at identifying constructivist elements within the six approaches discussed. The ENP is thus analysed:

- in terms of external Europeanisation;
- as a form of external governance;

- in the context of democracy promotion;
- as a form of regionalism and region-building;
- in the context of EU normative power;
- as a manifestation of the *sui generis* imperial power of the EU.

The perspective of sociological constructivism outlined in chapter 1 is then applied in chapter 3 to analysis of the narratives produced by relevant actors in the ENP field. Firstly, the narrative in EU studies is discussed. Secondly, the general patterns of the political game in the field are outlined by means of identification of narrative producers, their articulations and the field structure. This is followed by a presentation of a model, which allows for operationalisation of the evolution of the narrative. Finally, the issue of interdependence of levels of narrative is discussed in order to explain the limitations of a radical narrative change.

Chapter 4 is dedicated to empirical analysis of production, reproduction and reconstruction of the narrative in connection with the political game in the ENP field. The analysis explores the structure and evolution of narratives produced by the European Commission and European External Action Service, Council and European Council, European Parliament and non-institutional actors (for example, the Brussels think-tank, Centre for European Policy Studies). The content analysis of narratives produced by individual and collective actors is linked to accumulation and use of resources by various players aimed at reinforcing their position in the field. Numerous documents and statements under scrutiny are not regarded in terms of the strategic vision of the policy, where realistic assessment is coupled with the definition of objectives that respond to external challenges and threats. Instead, they are discussed in terms of stories, constructed in order to legitimise actors' strategies within the EU political system.

Finally, chapter 5 goes beyond the inward-looking orientation of EU studies, often considered Euro-centric. The aim of this chapter is to analyse perceptions of the EU abroad and assess the credibility of the ENP narrative, namely to what extent it performs legitimising functions externally, beyond EU borders. Another objective is to analyse narratives of external actors with regard to the EU and its actions in the neighbourhood, as well as establishing the extent to which EU actors integrate elements of external contesting narratives

in the process of narrative reconstruction. In other words, whether and to what extent neighbours are co-owners of the EU narrative about themselves. As a result, two case studies are analysed – an ENP country that has signed an association agreement with the EU (Ukraine) and a third country, not covered by the ENP, but competing with the EU for regional influence (Russia). The selection is determined by the relevance of these cases for Polish readers. It also allows for juxtaposing legitimising and de-legitimising strategies of European integration project, reflected in the narratives produced by political elites of third countries.