

East or West? An Excursion Into The Dynamics of Foreign Policies of the Post-Soviet States

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Stephen White and Valentina Feklyunina: *Identities and Foreign Policies in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus: The other Europes*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014.

Abstract:

The book maps out the dynamics of the relationship between Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, the European Union (EU) and Europe throughout the post-Soviet period. The aim is to demonstrate how competing perceptions of the EU coupled with self-images vis-à-vis Europe shape foreign policy preferences and directions in these three states. The discourses of Europe among political elites and the general public constitute the main focus of this study. By developing categories of ‚Europeanness‘ that prevail in contemporary public space, the book poses new questions and provides valuable perspectives for those concerned with the international relations in the post-Soviet Europe and beyond that.

Perhaps one of the most contentious debates between both academics and practitioners of international politics relates to what constituent factors determine foreign policy directions. Published amidst the outburst of the military conflict in Eastern Ukraine, the timely book by Stephen White and Valentina Feklyunina “*Identities and Foreign Policies in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus: The Other Europes*” provides a thoroughly researched and detailed account of relations between Europe and its Eastern neighbours – Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. Drawing upon a prolonged study by several other scholars working on identity transformation in the three post-Soviet states, the authors take a further step towards establishing the ways in which the dominant vision of the self and the significant other has affected the foreign policy preferences

in these three countries.

The investigation starts with an introductory chapter that explores the highly contested concept of ‚Europe‘. In their analysis, the authors transgress the straightforward geographical boundaries by convincingly pointing out that the divisions do not only exist between Eastern and Western perceptions of ‚Europeanness‘ (p. 1). In fact, and at this point I agree with the authors, there are numerous differences in interpretations within the ‚east‘ itself that must be accounted for. In the following, second and third chapters White and Feklyunina discuss the ambiguity of attitudes towards the EU that have been taking shape throughout both Soviet and post-Soviet periods. This discussion then lays ground for the debates that follow in the rest of the book.

The evolution of elite identity discourses in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus and the ways political classes imagine the place of their respective countries in relation to Europe and the EU form the backbone of this study. The authors suggest using the degree of otherness as the key criterion for identifying the basic discourses prevailing in the three post-Soviet states and for understanding current relationships between them and Europe (p. 25). The approach employed in this book comes in contrast to many previous studies of the post-Soviet countries that see othering as a dichotomy defined in terms of ‚Western choice‘ versus ‚Slavic choice‘. The book, however, provides us with a broader conceptualisation of these divisions by identifying three basic identity discourses. First comes the ‚Russia/Ukraine/Belarus as Europe‘ discourse that conceptualises the countries as unconditionally European. At the other extreme end of the countries‘ political spectrum is the ‚alternative Europe‘ discourse that conceives the three post-Soviet countries as radically different from the mainstream European countries and in fact as carriers of genuine conservative European values which appear to have been lost by other EU member states (pp. 25-26). While the two discourses go in line with the previous findings of the East/West divide, the real contribution of this book is the ‚greater Europe‘ discourse that constructs the three countries as culturally European but different from it in political terms. According to White and Feklyunina, and in comparison to other frameworks, the ‚greater Europe‘ is considerably less normatively charged and is thus more sensitive to the changes in the material and internal political environment. For example, the representatives of this discourse in Ukraine and Belarus see the cooperation with either the EU or Russia beneficial only if it could bring material gains (p. 231).

To help crystallise a link between the perceptions of the self and Europe and preferences in foreign policy that result thereafter, the book combines a variety of theoretical frameworks with a special focus on social constructivism. The authors then convincingly demonstrate how a shift

from one discursive field to another might be associated with a shift in official foreign policy preferences among these three post-Soviet republics. For example, perceived rejection by a significant other – Europe – is likely to push Russia, Belarus or Ukraine to redefine their statehood as well as their foreign policy orientation. At the same time, while the book emphasises the importance of identity contestation for the foreign policy dynamics, it also accounts for other factors. White and Feklyunina rightly acknowledge the accountability of material or pragmatic interests, regime legitimacy, and other domestic affairs for the foreign policy choices (p. 238).

A further strength of this study lies in its mixed methodological approach that matches well with the theoretical framework. It applies extensive empirical research, including interviews, focus groups, national surveys, public speeches, and documents to investigate the construction of statehood on the elite level as well as among the members of the mass public. The evaluation of the individual perceptions of a country's belonging and foreign policy preferences among 'ordinary' people adds a particular relevance to this book. The interpretation of the data collected from the public in the three states is in line with the 'greater Europe' discourse proposed by the authors and suggests that the mass public by and large supports foreign policy that exerts a balancing out between the West and the East (p. 228). These findings, in turn, further challenge the bi-polar divide often promoted by other academics and politicians. Yet, what could perhaps add to this study is a more nuanced discussion of the relationship between the state official discourse, elites, and mass public opinion. Especially the question of how the public opinion participates in certain foreign policy decision-making processes might require further elaboration.

Overall, the book is an important contribution to the study of foreign policy making and the function of the dominant interpretations of identity in it. Furthermore, it provides a new breadth for understanding official foreign policy discourses in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus towards the EU and Europe. This book is useful on many counts, and not only for those concerned with the post-Soviet space, but also for anyone invested in the future of the EU in general.

German Abstract:

Ost oder West? Ein Exkurs in die Dynamik der Außenpolitik post-sowjetischer Staaten.

Das Buch stellt die Dynamik der Beziehungen zwischen Russland, der Ukraine, Weißrussland, der Europäischen Union (EU) und Europa innerhalb der postsowjetischen Zeit dar. Ziel ist es zu zeigen, wie konkurrierende Wahrnehmungen der EU, verbunden mit bestimmten Selbstbildern gegenüber Europa, außenpolitische Präferenzen und Ausrichtungen in diesen drei Staaten formen. Die Diskurse innerhalb der politischen Eliten und in der breiten Öffentlichkeit Europas bilden den Schwerpunkt dieser Studie. Durch die Entwicklung von Kategorien einer „Europeanness“, die sich im zeitgenössischen öffentlichen Raum durchsetzen, wirft das Buch neue Fragen auf und liefert wertvolle Perspektiven für diejenigen, die sich mit internationalen Beziehungen im postsowjetischen Europa und darüber hinaus beschäftigen.

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