Jacques Rupnik (ed.) Géopolitique de la démocratisation. L’Europe et ses voisinsages
(Geopolitics of Democratisation. Europe and its Neighbourhoods)

Reviewed by Zuzanna Nowak
The Polish Institute of International Affairs

While it may seem everything has already been written and said on the European Union’s limits, the authors of “Géopolitique de la démocratisation. L’Europe et ses voisinsages” have managed to bring a breath of fresh air to these considerations. Under the direction of Jacques Rupnik some of the best analysts, specialists, and observers of the EU have provided a short but concise, a global but in depth, analysis of the EU’s democratisation processes in its neighbourhood, in the light of existing geopolitical challenges.

Taking into account insufficiencies of theoretical frameworks traditionally used to examine European construction, Rupnik in his introduction underlines the need to make a reference to the geopolitical approach to international relations. This is all the more an unavoidable perspective as the EU’s normative power is currently discovering its limits through a confrontation, in its southern and eastern neighbourhoods, with the protracting destabilisation deriving from post-imperialist realpolitik preoccupations. All this happens at a time when the EU finds itself in a political and economic impasse in conjunction with the awakening of populisms and xenophobia in some member states, a growing democratic deficit, doubtful solidarity, and internal – eurozone and migration – crises. Hence, this is all the more an interesting perspective since, as the authors point out, “the EU does not have geopolitics in its DNA” (p. 69) and only recently, after the Vilnius conference, the word ‘geopolitics’ long banned from the Brussels’ language, made its appearance in the official lexicon. Therefore, the questions asked by Jacques Rupnik are the extent to which the EU can and should expand and the type of borders which should be established at the EU’s peripheries. The aim of the book is to provide a comprehensive overview of Europe’s ability to re-establish itself in its neighbourhood under the rules of the new-old geopolitical order. Nevertheless, the authors are far from giving simple answers. The analysis provided draws from an inventory of examples and observations taken from an extensive experience with 16 countries covered by the EU’s neighbourhood policy.

1 All translations are the reviewer’s
After Rupnik’s preliminary observations, in the chapter on the ‘Enlargement and neighbourhood’ follows Pierre Mirel’s statement on the transversal challenges that the EU faced and will have to face in relations with its peripheries. He points out the most important ups and downs of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), emphasising incertitude linked to partners’ expectancies towards Europe and Europe’s capacity of prospective enlargements. Mirel drafts a line of division between the outcomes of the eastern and southern facets of the ENP claiming that while the Eastern Partnership requires mainly adjustments (especially the convergence of the EU member states’ approaches towards Russia), the Union for the Mediterranean brought very limited outcome and hence must be rethought, bringing precise solutions to the migration problems. Moreover, Europe’s performance in the Balkans and in Turkey, countries with some membership prospective, is limited by their attitudes and conditions, but also by the EU’s enlargement fatigue and own internal problems. Mirel concludes that the neighbourhood and enlargement policies can work under several conditions, such as consensus, both in the EU and within its partners, on the objectives of partnership, freedom from external foreign interference, as well as Europe’s effective (whether financial or normative) ability to influence.

Annie Daubenton, in her chapter, undertakes a detailed description of the situation in Ukraine, explaining how ‘the European idea has become a national idea’ (pp. 105–133) for this country located between two, European and Russian, worlds. Daubenton sets out the Ukraine’s European narrative from the point of view of successive authorities in Kiev and subsequent historical events, as the westward move of the Ukraine has been strengthening and fading depending on the episodes of Ukrainian political life. Referring to the most recent events, the author questions the possibility of constructing democracy in a country at war. This time however, only assisted rather than pushed by the EU. Wary for its energy supplies and weakened by internal problems – the Ukraine, once again, seems to be determined to adhere to European norms concerning rule of law, sovereignty and integrity.

Thorniké Gordadzé sketches a factual analysis of the diverging trajectories of the three Southern Caucasus countries – Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, that try to find their place at the crossroads of the European Union and the Eurasian Union. The author delivers the story of a dilemma to which the majority of post-Soviet countries are confronted: how does one preserve national sovereignty and economic independence with regards to Russia, while fearing the necessary internal reforms linked with the rapprochement with Europe. If Georgia has marked the most radical rupture with Moscow, Armenia has chosen, under several successive pressures, to remain in Putin’s camp, while Azerbaijan stands between Europe and Russia. As the author notes, however, these choices are not irreversible and it seems that the future of these countries will largely depend on the EU-Russia bilateral relationship.

Florent Parmentier, in turn, describes Moldova's experience with the Eastern Partnership, underlining dilemmas, paradoxes and constraints that this country has to face. Small and one of the poorest European countries, long neglected by the EU, Moldova has become since 2009 the ‘champion’ of the eastern dimension of EU’s neighbourhood policy. Moldova committed itself to improve its political system, adapt its economic structures, and face sociodemographic challenges. As the author notes, geopolitical issues still remain salient however and Moldova’s position, even if the country has a number of cards in its hand, remains dependent on the policy orientations of the EU and Russia, especially because of the unresolved Transnistria
problem. If Moldova wants to come closer to Europe, it has to maintain a relatively correct relationship with Moscow.

Rupnik in the analytical chapter on the Balkans ‘From containment to integration’ observes that the region which was in the 1990’s a theatre for EU’s collective impotence, has become a laboratory for the European common foreign and security policy. Using regional implementation of a security community, governance through norms, and integration through the market, the EU sets the condition: “cooperate among yourself and we will cooperate with you” (p. 207). The EU, as Rupnik writes, “constitutes for the peoples of the region a possibility to overcome nationalist fragmentation through the perspective of integration with the European project”. (p. 224) This, however, is subject to finding a common understanding of what this project really is.

Riva Kastoryano explains how Turkey has made its integration with Europe one of the most important axes of its internal and external policies. As she observes, “social relations, national values, political culture have evolved under the normative regard of the EU and its institutions.”(p. 227) Despite some developments, there remains plenty of scope for improvements in terms of necessary Turkish reforms, but also European member states’ attitudes towards Turkey. The problem the author underlines is how to define precisely the link between Europe and Turkey. And further, how to make this link resistant to political changes in Turkey, internal impasses in the EU, as well as external influences from other entities.

Álvaro de Vasconcelos’ chapter outlines the ambiguities and inconsistencies of the southern dimension of European neighbourhood policy. It has been hard to adapt one European policy to the multitude of actors, needs, and attitudes in the south. Local turbulences made the democratic objective of the Union for Mediterranean vanish, reappear, and substitute (for example with stability) over time. As Vasconcelos claims, the question of the weakness of the EU towards the southern countries is linked to the question of internal weaknesses and unresolved challenges of migration, Islam, multiculturality, and so on within the EU itself. This very interesting chapter, however, provokes a regret, that there is only one analysis in this book devoted to all of the southern European neighbours.

All chapters of the book edited by Rupnik provide a fresh (yet not completely new) dimension of the analysis of the ENP. They re-establish the EU’s relationships with its neighbours in a currently necessary perspective of geopolitics and invite a rethinking of the Union’s project and its borders. Admittedly, there is a certain amount of overlap between the chapters, while some aspects of the ENP would deserve much more analysis, nevertheless most importantly the book lacks some more transversal conclusions drafted from all of the separate analyses (even if the afterword discussion between Rupnik and Gilles Kepel constitutes a tasty cherry on its top).

Nevertheless, overall, what is common to all contributors is that each adds something to the basket of paradoxes, contrasts, incoherencies, gaps or deficiencies of the EU itself and the European Neighbourhood Policy. Without of course disregarding obvious but still limited successes of the ENP, from their analyses emerges the picture of the enlarged, hence tired Union, trying to bring a change in its neighbourhood but lacking a vision, strength and tools. First, the authors often agree that the EU did not manage to acquire and spread a coherent image of what entity it wants to be, how it wants to develop and what the limits are of its sphere of influence. This results in
different perceptions of the EU by its partners, ranging from a promised land where grass is always greener and living standards are higher, to the vision of an alternative, to the Russian, empire. The latter seems to provoke the biggest problem, as Europe’s’ zone of stability, prosperity and democracy is in geopolitical terms indeed rival to the Russian Eurasian idea. Not without reason, therefore, the Russian problem occupies a central place in all narratives concerning the Eastern Partnership and appears as a main challenge to any external eastward EU policy. Second, what stems from separate analyses is that the ENP is marked by constant but chaotic adaptations which made it weave a path from one ENP, through the Eastern Partnership (EaP) and the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), towards progressive but necessary differentiations within these policies (e.g. between Moldova and Belarus, the Middle East and Maghreb). This sometimes inadvertent reactivity proves that the EU’s soft power based on export of norms, commercial relations and regional interdependency is inadequate to face events of a geopolitical nature happening in its surroundings. Third, Europe seems surprised that as it changes its neighbours, its neighbours change the EU. What is often underlined by the authors, problems with the external policy have an obvious and unavoidable impact on the internal considerations in the EU, with the migratory crisis as an often quoted example. Domestic problems, in turn, weigh on Europe’s capacity and willingness to enhance cooperation with countries outside its own borders. As is accurately pointed out in the afterword, this raises questions on European internal cohesion and its external credibility.

The EU needs to change its attitude towards external partners and, if it wants to be a ‘Space Europe’, it has to first become a ‘Power Europe’. It is hard to disagree with such a statement. As the book concludes, the whole European Neighbourhood Policy requires to be reinvented. What remains, however, is the question – how?