

Vasile Rotaru, **Russia, the EU, and the Eastern Partnership: Building Bridges or Digging Trenches?** Stuttgart: Ibidem, 2018. 185 pages. ISBN 978-3-8382-7134-7

The dynamics of EU-Russia relations have been affected by a number of events in the past three decades. Among them is the launch of the EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP) in 2009. With the introduction of the Eastern Partnership, the EU created a framework for strengthening its cooperation with six former Soviet republics that lie on the periphery of Europe: Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. The creation of this framework was perceived by Russia as a major challenge to its influence in the territories that the Kremlin refers to as Russia's "near abroad."

Vasile Rotaru is an international relations researcher at the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration in Bucharest. He is the author of numerous papers focused on Russia-NATO and Russia-EU relations. Nearly a decade after the launch of the EaP, Rotaru attempted to define its impact on relations between the EU, the countries participating in the EaP, and Russia in his book *Russia, the EU, and the Eastern Partnership: Building Bridges or Digging Trenches?* The book was published as part of the Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society series. In it, Rotaru explains how the countries' relations evolved both prior to and after the launch of the Eastern Partnership. He explains how Russia's perception of the post-Soviet countries as its "near abroad" evolved and discusses the fundamental differences in the worldviews of the two crucial actors in the Eastern European arena, Russia and the European Union.

The book is divided into two main parts, each with three chapters. Part I focuses on relations between the European Union and Russia since the 1990s. It puts those relations into the context of their two increasingly different, mutually incompatible worldviews. Part II then explores the Eastern Partnership, the causes that led to its founding, and its impact on Russia's relations with the EaP's participating states.

In Chapter 1, the author introduces his theory that most of the conflicts in Russia-EU relations emerge from essential differences in the entities' worldviews. According to Rotaru, Russia sees international relations and issues of sovereignty through the prism of political (neo)realism. He says that Russia clings to archaic Westphalian principles, always putting its own national interests first. In contrast, he describes the European Union as a postmodern institution that perceives the world through the lens of its own liberal institutionalism and therefore focuses mainly on maximizing mutual benefit by enhancing cooperation between countries. These very different worldviews then project themselves into how both entities approach what Rotaru refers to as their "common neighborhood." Thus, Russia believes it is crucial to keep the EaP countries within its sphere of influence in order to secure what it perceives to be its own national interests, including its national security, economic prosperity, and international prestige. He says that the EU, on the other hand, cooperates with its neighbors on a mutually voluntary basis and promotes common values rather than a profit-based agenda.

The following two chapters describe the historical development of EU-Russia relations. Rotaru divides that development into two periods – one before the

Russian-Georgian war of 2008 and another after. EU-Russia relations had been less than ideal since the early 1990s. However, Rotaru suggests that the “common neighborhood” became a primary source of tension between Russia and the EU as Russia’s foreign policy became “economized” during Putin’s second presidential term. The rise in the price of Russian gas and oil was accompanied by a deterioration of the relations between several post-Soviet countries and Russia. That boosted the former Soviet republics’ appetite for European markets. The author states that their voluntary tilt to the West posed a major problem for (neo)realist Moscow, which sought to maintain its sphere of influence.

In the third chapter, Rotaru argues that despite the obvious interdependence of the EU and Russia, Russia actually needs the European Union much more than the EU needs Russia (p. 68). He supports his claim by referring to the EU’s policy of diversifying its sources of energy and Russia’s problems with accessing markets for its oil and gas outside of Europe. Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 certainly led to EU-Russia relations reaching an all-time low. On the other hand, Russia’s move on Crimea contributed to a major consolidation of relations between the EU and the neighboring countries to its East.

Rotaru describes the process of creating the Eastern Partnership in the fourth chapter of the book. He dates its origins to a joint initiative of the United Kingdom and Denmark in the early 2000s. A number of events, however, accelerated the inception of the EaP. Among them were the 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia, the 2008 Russian-Georgian war, and the 2009 Russia-Ukraine gas crisis. The 2004 and 2007 EU enlargements also played a role because the EU’s new member states became the main proponents of the Eastern Partnership. The author then recalls examples of the Kremlin’s mostly hostile reaction to the foundation of the EaP, and likens the steps Russia took to chastise the EaP participants to the United States’ proclamation of the Monroe Doctrine in 1823 (p. 88). Rotaru points out several ways the EaP challenges Russia and its worldview and how it supports the worldview of the European Union.

Chapter 5 focuses on how Russia itself contributed to the inception of the Eastern Partnership. Rotaru argues that Putin’s aggressive foreign policy, which focused on Russia’s “near abroad,” made it virtually inevitable that the EaP countries would establish closer relations with the West. The author emphasizes that Russia’s hostile energy diplomacy, its “food wars” waged against imported foodstuffs, and its interference with the sovereignty of other post-Soviet states made even traditional allies such as Belarus and Armenia turn to the West (p. 114). He implies that it was Russia’s behavior that pushed the EU into creating the EaP. He supports this claim by pointing out that the inconsistencies in Russia’s energy forced the EU to deepen its relationship with other energy exporters and transit countries.

The last and most extensive chapter of the book deals with events in the years following the inception of the Eastern Partnership. Rotaru analyzes the subsequent development of relations between Russia and each of the EU’s Eastern European Partners individually. He puts special emphasis on Russia-Ukraine relations, and shows how Russia’s annexation of Crimea affected Moscow’s relations with the other post-Soviet states. Citing several examples, Rotaru shows a close link between the enthusiasm of those

countries for the Eastern Partnership and a corresponding increase in Russian meddling in their domestic affairs. At the end of the chapter, Rotaru challenges the common assumption that Russia is a country with imperial ambitions. He suggests, for example, that Russia's annexation of Crimea was a purely strategic step aimed at securing Russia's interest in its own security, rather than the result of the Kremlin's imperial ambitions. In that regard, he notes the location of the Crimean peninsula, surrounded as it is by NATO countries, and the port of Sevastopol, which hosts the Russian Navy's largest warm-water fleet of ships (p. 159).

Rotaru brings a fresh perspective to the relations between Russia, the EU, and their common neighbors. Besides describing developments in their relationships, he provides insight into the inner motivations of those actors. He explains that many of the conflicts between them originate in essential differences in their worldviews. In six chapters, he provides a number of arguments and examples that illustrate the notably different natures of both Russia and the EU.

However, some of Rotaru's claims are confusing. One can scarcely agree with Rotaru that Russia "seeks to keep order" in neighboring countries and wants to prevent them from "falling prey to general instability" (p. 23). Rotaru himself cites any number of examples of Russia meddling in the affairs of its neighbors, destabilizing them and violating their territorial integrity. Similarly, the author's claim that Russia generally puts an emphasis on sovereignty (p. 33) may be confusing at first, but at the end of his book he explains that Russia approaches the concept in a very specific and hypocritical way (p. 156). An occasional lack of clarity most likely originates in Rotaru's writing style rather than his basic ideas. Nevertheless, the book as conceived overall is of quite practical use. The author's decision to assess the general characteristics of Russia-EU relations early in Part I of the book and only then focus on the Eastern Partnership allows him to present his topic clearly and in detail. Although Rotaru describes the post-2009 relations between Russia and the EaP participants precisely and synoptically, it might have been a good idea to focus as well on developments in the relations between the EU and the six EaP countries in a separate chapter.

Vasile Rotaru delivers an interesting piece that analyzes a very complex triangle of relations between the European Union, Russia and the countries in their "common neighborhood." In 180 pages, he describes three decades of changing policies, good and bad decisions, and simmering conflicts. He provides reasonable explanations for them that are rooted in Russia's and the EU's differing worldviews. Thus, despite making a few disputable claims, Rotaru's book is a valuable contribution to the topics of Russia-EU relations and the Eastern Partnership. It remains relevant even two years after its release, given that no work with such a focus and the same scope has since been published.

Jiří Růžek

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