

Book Review: The European Union and the Baltic States: Changing forms of governance

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*Following their accession to the EU, the Baltic states continue to approach the EU through a Nordic lens. Allan Sikk finds that *The European Union and the Baltic States* holds excellent insights into the micro-processes of accession, relevant to anyone interested in how states respond to EU pressures and adapt to the role of being members.*

The European Union and the Baltic States: Changing forms of governance. Bengt Jacobsson (ed). Routledge. 2010.



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Could the experience of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia joining the European Union be relevant for the UK? Differences seem to abound – the Baltic states are small, rather remote and their recent historical experiences are obviously very different. However, at a closer look one discovers that the UK and the Baltic states share certain perspectives of the world and even the EU (despite the British elites remaining far more Eurosceptic than their Baltic counterparts). More crucially, both the UK and the Baltic states have a shared affinity to the Nordic countries – an obvious source of inspiration for the Baltic states, but increasingly also for Britain.

Recently, the Prime Ministers of the UK, the Nordic and the Baltic states have twice met for [UK-Nordic Baltic summits](#), initiated by David Cameron in 2011. For someone with an academic interest in Baltic and Nordic affairs, the links are obvious; together with three colleagues at University College London we started a [ESRC seminar series](#) on Nordic and Baltic countries a year prior to Cameron's initiative.

The edited volume addresses the issue of how domestic politics, more specifically central state administration, has been shaped by the EU accession. Its aim is to go beyond a crude notion of conditionality: that the rewards of membership force states to undertake specific reforms. Some of the critique of conditionality literature in the opening chapters may be on the harsh side, but the book does provide original insights. It focusses on micro-processes and soft forms of influence – where aspiring member states adapted to formal requirements and, perhaps more importantly, to the Western ways of doing things according to the logic of appropriateness, termed (somewhat cryptically) “scripts”.

It is argued that the direct leverage of the EU, through the mandatory adoption of the *acquis*, only partly explains reforms in the Baltic states. Particular changes, especially in areas where the EU has limited powers (e.g. labour market policies), can be explained by the influence of “soft rules” and “script-providers” that lack formal leverage – e.g. individual member states.

The influence of Nordic perspectives and methods of dealing with European issues is evident throughout the volume. Through twinning arrangements, Sweden provided Lithuania with pre-accession assistance and expertise. For parliamentary EU scrutiny, all three countries adopted the “Nordic model”. However, in other areas, the Baltic states have been markedly different from their Nordic neighbours – for example in the enthusiasm for New Public Management in Estonia. There the influence of alternative “script-providers” like the UK, might have been more important.



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Particularly fascinating was the chapter which focussed on the adaptation to the European environment by the Estonian Social Democrats. They drew inspiration (but also money, expertise and external legitimacy) from both the Blairite “Third Way” and the more traditional Swedish notions of social democracy. That brought international recognition (especially by party internationals), yet satisfied the domestic need to not appear *too* socialist. In a country with a strongly neo-liberal political mainstream, even a name remotely reminiscent of the socialist era was seen as a liability; hence the party was called the “Moderates” for nearly a decade.

The volume is well written by a competent team of scholars from Sweden – itself a testament to the links between the Nordic and Baltic countries. The excellent insights on the micro-processes of accession are relevant to anyone interested in how states respond to EU pressures and adapt to the role of being members. Such questions are increasingly relevant – be it for understanding national views on EU efforts to save the Eurozone, the UK balancing act of combining Euroscepticism with the obvious need to remain actively involved in the EU, or how a member state and the EU are adapting in the unfolding controversy surrounding Hungarian constitutional changes (both interested in being flexible yet sticking to their guns). It is more obvious than ever that while the EU does give rise to harmonization, the members states have quite a bit of wiggle room in their responses to pressing issues – witness the recent perspectives on the primacy of deficit cutting versus economic growth.

Besides the broad relevance of topics discussed, the book advances understanding of European democracies that are relevant for the UK despite being small (the total population of the three Baltic states is 6.6 million) and seemingly obscure. Who would have once thought that investing in a tiny and seemingly reliable Nordic country (Iceland) involved substantial risks? Obviously, the Baltic countries provide investment and business opportunities (but also pose risks!) at the time of successful recovery from recession. Yet, the UK may also benefit from learning from the experiences of various neoliberal policy experiments and from the adaptation in the EU of countries with fairly similar political mind-set and instincts.

Allan Sikk is a lecturer at [University College London School of Slavonic and East European Studies](#). He joined UCL in 2007, after working for the Estonian parliament’s research service. Allan has published articles on party and electoral politics in *European Journal of Political Research*, *Party Politics*, *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* and *Journal of Baltic Politics*. His main research interests relate to new political parties, electoral change in Europe and to the impact of country size on politics. [Read reviews by Allan.](#)

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