

Book Review: Policy Experiments, Failures and Innovations: Beyond Accession in Central and Eastern Europe edited by Agnes Batory, Andrew Cartwright and Diane Stone

In Policy Experiments, Failures and Innovations: Beyond Accession in Central and Eastern Europe, Agnes Batory, Andrew Cartwright and Diane Stone examine how European Union accession has contributed to institutional and policy change in Central and Eastern Europe and consider whether these diffusions constitute success stories or failures. The collection serves to challenge simplistic binary models, finds Simeon Mitropolitski, showing the often complex nature of policy transfers and diffusion in the new EU nations.

***Policy Experiments, Failures and Innovations: Beyond Accession in Central and Eastern Europe.* Agnes Batory, Andrew Cartwright and Diane Stone (eds). Edward Elgar Publishing. 2018.**

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How did European Union accession contribute to institutional and policy changes in former communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe? Was the institutional and policy diffusion from West to East a success story or a failure? In *Policy Experiments, Failures and Innovations*, a dozen contributors, mostly connected to the Centre for Policy Studies at Central European University, answer these questions, providing examples from different national cases and policies. Their conclusions predominantly stand apart from simplistic models that point towards only one result: either positive or negative. Institutional diffusion within the new EU nations has been rich in experiments, and the results often depend not only on rational choice factors, but also on the specific national background.

Structurally, the book is divided into ten chapters, including a general introduction by the editors and one with concluding remarks. Editors Agnes Batory (Central European University), Andrew Cartwright (Central European University) and Diane Stone (University of Canberra) set the stage by introducing the main questions, such as how foreign policy and ideas are adopted in Central and Eastern Europe, and by identifying the main concepts, such as policy diffusion and policy transfer. The authors define policy diffusion as a process by which an innovation is communicated among members of a social system driven by structural forces and path dependencies (5). By contrast, policy transfer emphasises the role of agency and the decision-making dynamics (5). The last chapter, written by B. Guy Peters, summarises the main conclusions from the book and the possibility of transferring policies from one setting to another. In between there are eight chapters focusing on different topics, from pension reforms and domestic violence to Euroregions and international development aid.

Methodologically, the chapters do not follow one particular approach. There are single case studies that focus on a particular post-communist country as well as comparative studies including two or more cases from Central and Eastern Europe. Approximately half of the chapters offer analytical narratives combining empirically rich historic descriptions with formal analysis and modelling. The other half stay clear of empirical data and focus exclusively on formal analysis. Most data comes from secondary analysis of previous studies. Statistical data is quite rare.

Theoretically, the contributors follow established models of policy transfer and diffusion applicable to their topics. They tend not to explicitly question these models at the beginning of the research. It is only when they meet hurdles that they start questioning the theoretical premises and adding elements based on different models. The following sections provide examples of these paradigmatic shifts, which are by far the most interesting elements in the collection.





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Chapter Eight, written by András Tétényi (Corvinus University, Hungary), discusses the establishment of international development programmes in Hungary. The former communist country does not have a long history of providing international aid, unless we include the communist era aid to revolutionary movements, and therefore it followed established models in the field from advanced Western countries. On the surface, Hungarian policy resembled international standards by focusing on areas of comparative advantage, working through multilateral programmes and by cooperating with domestic civic associations. However, the targets of international aid are heavily tilted toward ensuring that Hungarian companies benefit from enhanced market access. Furthermore, an important part of Hungarian international aid is sent to neighbouring countries with significant Hungarian ethnic minorities.

Chapter Seven, written by Sara Svensson (Central European University), presents and discusses another interesting topic made possible with EU integration: the establishment of Euroregions, which are voluntary associations aimed at promoting peaceful cooperation and mutual aid across national boundaries. In the context of Central and Eastern Europe, Euroregions have very different goals: to bolster ties with ethnic communities which, for historic reasons, happen to be on the other side of the border. The evidence from Hungary is particularly illustrative because the country is literally surrounded by ethnic Hungarians living on the territories of its neighbours.

These two chapters illustrate well the paradox of West-East policy transfer and diffusion. Formally, the countries in Central and Eastern Europe have become part of institutional arrangements that were set up by older EU members. In this respect, the transfer represents a success story. Looking closer, however, shows that the main motivation for policy implementation is often quite different from its original design. One of the goals of international aid becomes helping local companies and ethnic kin living in neighbouring countries. One of the goals of European integration becomes bolstering ties with ethnic communities living in neighbouring countries. Can we still call such policy transfer a success?

The contributors give an ambivalent answer to this question. Most examples are located within an in-between grey zone, far from clear cases of transfer success or failure. Peters, in his concluding remarks, calls this zone 'residual' success or failure, with the degree of both to some extent a function of the framing of the outcomes (193). The editors are even more relativistic in their general assessment. They claim that success and failure is in the eye of the beholder: it is a question of who is asking and where that person is looking (23).

I will make a somewhat less relativistic conclusion given the data presented by contributors. To use the examples already presented, I consider Hungarian international aid policy as a clear success despite the preferences given to Hungarian companies. Such preferences, both economic and political, are part of the international aid policy of many Western donors of long date and the case of Hungary does not cross the line of internationally acceptable practices. As far as the Euroregions are concerned, I consider this as a failure because it follows a logic opposite to that of the first Euroregions. However, this failure here should also be qualified. Many countries in Central and Eastern Europe have no perfect congruence between ethnic and political borders. In this respect, European integration, since the beginning, was considered as a tool for fixing this issue. The costs of the failure to transfer the logic of the original institutional design are outweighed by the benefits in terms of peace and prosperity, two core pillars of European integration.

Simeon Mitropolitski, PhD, teaches courses in political science and methodology at the University of Ottawa. He is author of over thirty peer-reviewed articles and book reviews. His research interests include post-communist political development, EU integration, political culture, methodology and the state of contemporary political science. [Read more by Simeon Mitropolitski](#).

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.