

# Book Review

Lašas, A. (2010)

## *European Union and NATO Expansion: Central and Eastern Europe*

Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

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The idea of the historical right of belonging to Europe was a central argument for leaders from the former Soviet states in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) in their bid for NATO and EU membership. After the end of the Cold War the shelves of libraries in the new CEE democracies were filled with a variety of books and pamphlets vilifying the West for the way it had abandoned such countries either to the Nazis or to the Communists. Albeit very pervasive in CEE popular culture – including in the public and political spheres –, such claims have been marginalized in the scholarly literature, which has either ignored them or treated them as factors with little influence. In *European Union and NATO Expansion: Central and Eastern Europe*, Ainius Lašas seeks to confirm that the choice for a ‘return to Europe’ discourses was, looking in retrospective, an effective strategy for the CEE states. Western countries like France, Germany, UK or the US were thus made to feel guilty about the historical injustices they were part of in first half of the 20th century. Not only did this sense of guilt drive forward the idea of enlargement but its degree also shaped the regional and temporal dimensions of the way NATO and the EU expanded. Although Lašas presents a thesis that can be considered highly controversial, he constructs a taught provocative and well-documented analysis, making the book an important read for all interested in European integration.

The book is structured into five chapters: the first sets out the theoretical framework, followed by a very detailed account of the way historical injustices were viewed during the Cold War in the second chapter and an empirical analysis of both NATO and EU enlargements in the next two chapters; while the last focuses on the limits of the concept of collective guilt and how might the conclusions of the book be applied to other areas of international relations. Contrary to rationalists which focus on cost benefit analyses of geopolitical and economic interests and constructivist approaches centred on the importance of institutional norms to the expansion of NATO and the EU, Lašas posits that a sense of responsibility or collective guilt legitimized the claims of the CEE states and instilled a sense of historical obligation into Western leaders. Collective guilt is seen here as associated ‘with a group that has perpetuated injustice to another group’ which leads to a self-assessment bent on making repairs and undoing malign actions from the past (p. 8). The book analyzes three such injustices grouped under the term ‘black trinity’: the Munich agreement, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, and the Yalta Agreement. Countries that have been affected by the ‘black trinity’ are considered to have a comparative advantage over other countries. However, not all CEE countries in questions have acceded to the EU or

NATO due to other factors external to collective guilt. For example, Moldova lost its victim status which was intrinsically linked to its reunification with Romania.

Throughout the book, the subject of collective guilt shifts confusingly from Western states to their leaders. While the theoretical framework conceptualizes states as being sensible to feelings of guilt, Lašas' empirical analysis presents a wide range of statements from public and political leaders from Western and CEE states supporting the idea that historical injustices played a role in the expansion of NATO and the EU. Little space is awarded to the mechanisms through which political discourse is transformed into practical decisions and incorporated in the national interests of the state. Norm socialization is briefly presented to explain how opposing ideas have been delegitimized and marginalized by mainstream arguments of collective guilt both within Western states and Europe as a whole. Two major discrepancies between the authors' aims and his methods can be identified: firstly, while Lašas overtly differentiate his approach from constructivist ones, he relies on a norms based argument to account for the way discourse becomes translated into political decisions. Secondly, the historical narrative he constructs in order to present the evolution of idea of guilt in Western states doesn't fully legitimize the idea that responsibility and reparation were the mainstream discourse that marginalized others, but merely that this rhetoric was existent and at times surfaced through various likeminded leaders. An overarching agreement towards the existence of a deep sense of guilt in the West is taken for granted, with few opposing discourses being analyzed. In instances when dissenting views from Western decision makers are analyzed, they are easily discarded as containing logical inconsistencies determined by various domestic or international constraints.

Notwithstanding these conceptual and empirical inconsistencies, the collective guilt model proposed in the book successfully tests seven hypotheses. In his well-documented analysis, Lašas skilfully shows that guilt related discourse was present in Western and CEE countries in both cases - EU and NATO (H1); that the discourse of collective guilt gradually transformed into one of obligation, and moral and economic restitution (H2); early Western commitments to enlarge were made in both cases by Western leaders (H3) which led to a regionalization (H4) and cyclicity (H5) of the expansion processes based only a certain group of victim states from Central and Eastern Europe. Institutional norms (H6) proved to be more powerful in the case of the EU – through its effective use of conditionality - than that of NATO, in determining short term differentiation between candidate countries. Opposite to this, national interest (H7) was constrained in a larger degree within the expansion of NATO, as France was convinced to relinquish its support for Romania's accession at the Madrid summit. According to Lašas, these hypotheses lead to the conclusion that collective guilt is to be considered the most important factor in shaping the decision to enlarge NATO and the EU, while institutional norms and national interests acted only as constraints. Consequently, the book insightfully challenges both rationalist and constructivist views of NATO and EU enlargements towards Central and Eastern Europe.