



Yearbook of the Institute of East-Central Europe (Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej)

Publication details, including instructions for authors:
<http://www.iesw.lublin.pl/rocznik/index.php>

ISSN 1732-1395

Book review: Central and Eastern Europe in the EU: Challenges and Perspectives Under Crisis Conditions by Christian Schweiger and Anna Visvizi (eds)

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Published online: 10 Dec 2018

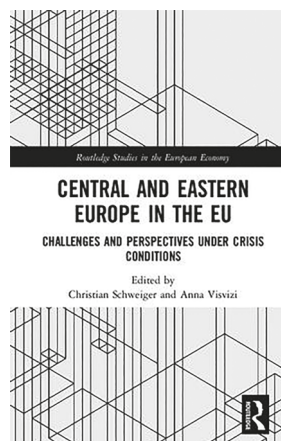
To cite this article: Izabela Czepirska, 'Book review: Central and Eastern Europe in the EU: Challenges and Perspectives Under Crisis Conditions by Christian Schweiger and Anna Visvizi (eds)', *Yearbook of the Institute of East-Central Europe*, Vol. 16, No. 3, 2018, pp. 197-201.

Yearbook of the Institute of East-Central Europe (Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej) is a quarterly, published in Polish and in English, listed in the European Reference Index for the Humanities and Social Sciences (ERIH PLUS), Central and Eastern European Online Library (CEEOL), BazEkon and IC Journal Master List (Index Copernicus International). In the most recent Ministry of Science and Higher Education ranking of journals published on the Polish market the Yearbook of the Institute of East-Central Europe received one of the highest scores, i.e. 14 points.

**Book review:
Central and Eastern Europe in the EU:
Challenges and Perspectives Under
Crisis Conditions**

Reviewed by Izabela Czepirska

Central and Eastern Europe in the EU: Challenges and Perspectives Under Crisis Conditions by Christian Schweiger and Anna Visvizi (eds), London: Routledge (2018), 218 pp., ISBN 9781138714021 (hb), 9781315230986 (eBook)



The nearly three decades (1989-2018) that passed since the collapse of communism in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), well referenced in the literature¹, have been marked by several processes and developments that effectively changed the image, performance and perspectives of the entire region and respective countries. The latter's accession to the European Union (EU) constitutes one of the most symbolic developments of that period, one that at the same time has had profound impact on the CEE countries' role in the EU and their capacity to influence processes shaping the EU. When joining the EU, the CEE represented the 'other' part of Europe, i.e. largely absent from the popular discourses and marked by the heavy burden of communist past. Therefore, the distinction between the 'old' and the 'new' EU

1 K. Żukrowska, *Transformacja systemowa w Polsce* [System transformation in Poland], Warszawa: Oficyna Wydawnicza SGH, 2010.

member was particularly striking at that time. The volume reviewed here examines to which extent and how the eleven 'new' EU member states succeeded in establishing themselves as actors on the EU scene, considering that simultaneously the EU itself was exposed to a number of challenges too, incl. Brexit², drift toward nationalism, the euro area crisis, migration and refugee crises to mention just a few.³ As the volume edited by Professors Christian Schweiger and Anna Visvizi proves, a great number of domestic and EU-level circumstances affected the CEE countries strive to effectively influence the EU-level policy-making, hence not only highlighting growing divisions among the countries from the region, but also consolidating the initial division between them and the 'old' EU member states.

The volume consists of fifteen chapters organized in three parts, titled accordingly: (i) Central and Eastern Europe in the EU's changing internal and external dimension; (ii) National perspectives: between *good citizenship and backsliding*; (iii) The Visegrad cooperation – challenges for a semi-institutionalized regional group. Following the introductory chapter (Chapter 1), by Schweiger and Visvizi, a multidimensional examination of the ongoing transformation of the region remains the central tenet of discussion presented in Chapters 2-5. Accordingly, the chapters included in the first part of the volume adopt a broader perspective to the developments in the region. Schweiger examines how the CEE region positions itself in the EU's core-periphery divide. Farkas and Mate-Toth make a case for 'neglected shadows' of the transformation in the region. By focusing on the V4 countries only, Visvizi argues that in as much as several developments in the region are worrying, it is impossible to understand them in a disconnect from developments and mechanism at play at the broader EU- and international levels. Farkas continues this argument by focusing explicitly on economic relations in the region.

Chapters 6-11 offer a review of developments in specific parts of the region, incl. Poland (Duszczuk), Hungary (Arato and Koller), Slovakia (Gál and Malová), Bulgaria and Romania (Lindstrom and

- 2 C. Schweiger, 'Germany's Role in the EU-27 Leadership Constellation after Brexit', *German Politics and Society*, vol. 36, issue 2, 2018, pp. 100-117.
- 3 Cf. M. Pachocka, 'The twin migration and refugee crises in Europe: examining the OECD's contribution to the debate', *Yearbook of the Institute of East-Central Europe*, vol. 14, issue 4, pp. 71-99.

Catuti), the Baltic States (Gudzinskas and Bekisas) and Croatia (Bartlett). The thrust of the argument that authors seem to be making is that domestic political developments serve as a testimony to limitations of Europeanization through conditionality. Duszczuk provides a concise summary of Poland's membership in the EU. The author outlines the net benefits of EU membership and flags up the implications of the failure to assume responsibility for the EU's future. Arató and Koller present a conceptual background apt to explain Hungarian foreign policy as set in the context of the V4 cooperation. Slovakia's semi-peripheral position, contradictions and paradoxes that lead to a struggle to define its place within EU define the thrust of Chapter 8 by Gál and Malová.

In Chapter 9 (Lindstrom and Cátuti) examine the cases of Romania and Bulgaria and their accession to the EU. As the authors argue both countries were subjected to unprecedented requirements and pressures. Despite asymmetrical relations between EU and these two countries, as the authors argue, there is room for their active policy shaping, hence not only policy taking. Chapter 10 (Gudzinskas and Bekišas) examines the Baltic countries' strong and definitive pro-EU orientation, resulting from the Russia proximity and historic direct Soviet rule. The authors observe, however, that some obligations arising from EU membership are not perceived positively by societies in respective countries. In Chapter 11, by focusing on the case of Croatia, Bartlett explains how the legacy of communism informed domestic politics and economy of Croatia prior to and right after EU accession.

Chapters 12-15 introduce an interdisciplinary framework for the analysis of regional cooperation in the V4 format. It provides a detailed account of the Visegrád Group's (V4) cooperation and its challenges, given the differences in geopolitical position, size, economic capacity and historic experiences of the four countries, where it seeks to prove it to be the most efficient CEE cooperation model and one of the most remarkable models of regional cooperation at the EU level. Internal and external aspects, including four dimensions of cooperation (political, sectoral, with EU and with non-V4 countries), differences in perspectives on perceiving threats and regional cooperation as well as identification of future opportunities are analysed in Chapter 12 by Strážay. The next chapter (Ágh) deals with the geopolitics comeback and its effect on V4 in the 'new world order'. Molnár and

Szenes (Chapter 14) examine the question on defence integration within V4. The authors taking into account the military strength and experience of the V4 countries, which might prove to be an unexpected benefit from and for the V4 partnership. The concluding chapter (Schweiger and Visvizi) outline several considerations related to the CEE's membership in the EU. The chapter also sheds light on the most persistent challenges the CEE countries. It also identifies policy fields where the CEE countries could effectively engage in the shaping of the EU's future.

All in all, the volume *Central and Eastern Europe in the EU: Challenges and Perspectives Under Crisis Conditions* documents and examines the complexities of the CEE countries multidimensional transformation and development process. Written by academics and practitioners, this volume is a unique account of Central and Eastern Europe at a turn. Given the breadth and depth of the analysis, it represents a significant contribution to the overlapping debates on Central Europe, European integration, democratization, liberalization, systemic transition and transformation.⁴ While there is an agreement among the contributing authors that the EU accession has been economically beneficial for the region, a relative absence of socially-balanced growth – a reflection of the EU coordination weaknesses – overshadows the relative success and triggers backsliding; an issue essentially foreseen in earlier research.⁵

The book was published in May 2018 and so remains the most current account of the developments in the region and its specificity. The discussion in the volume unfolds against a well-defined and well-conceptualized background populated by issues pertinent to history, politics, economy and society. The format and the structure of the book as well as the style of narration are user-friendly and so render the book

- 4 Cf. A. Visvizi, 'A country is never on its own, others can be helpful. External linkages: institutionalization and support of individual states', in: K. Żukrowska (ed.), *Transformation in Poland and in the Southern Mediterranean. Sharing experiences*, Warsaw: SGH/Poltext, 2010, pp. 60-80.
- 5 Cf. A. Visvizi and P. Tokarski, 'Poland and the Euro: between lock-in and unfinished transition', *Society and Economy*, vol. 36, no. 4, 2014, pp. 445-468, <http://www.akademai.com/content/no6q579u42h248xh/>; M. Gorynia and B. Jankowska (eds), *The Influence of Poland's Accession to the Euro Zone on the International Competitiveness and Internationalisation of Polish Companies*, Warsaw: Difin, 2013.

not only an invaluable resource for teaching and learning at graduate and post-graduate levels but also a very good read.

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