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**EU AS NORMATIVE EMPIRE:**

**FROM REGIONAL HEGEMON TO PRINCIPLED PRAGMATISM?**

**ABSTRACT**

**Over the past 15 years, the EU’s values-based integration project and the projection of European/EU norms and values in its immediate neighbourhood have been regularly discussed as some particular form of (soft power) Empire building.**

**Broadly speaking, in the EU itself this is mostly envisaged as a benign form of (civilian) Empire, in which the (long-term) interests of member states and partners, including accession and associated partners, would be best served by not only subscribing to broader international obligations in the context of the UN, OSCE or Council of Europe, but to the EU’s more particular “acquis communautaire” as well. A large part of this debate has focussed on the “Normative Power Europe”-concept, as developed by Ian Manners, whereas the idea of “Europe as Empire” has been critically discussed by political scientists like Jan Zielonka.**

**The EU approach as a Normative Power has been most successful in accession negotiations, when applicants for membership had little room to negotiate differentiation, based on their own historical or cultural background: the Copenhagen criteria have remained leading, including the EU’s own official interpretation of what kind of obligations in democracy, rule of law, governance and human rights, these would entail. But under the present circumstances some new member states, like Hungary and Poland, have been criticizing the EU’s supra-national institutions about the (legal) enforcement of such obligations, even calling Brussels the “new Moscow”.**

**In the European Neighbourhood/ Wider European context, the EU has basically taken the same approach as in membership negotiations, albeit that the “acquis” was not to be adopted in whole or all at once. But the benchmarks as such are set by the EU and not negotiable in the relations with Eastern and/or Southern partners. In practice, some differentiation applies, in accordance with the ambitions of particular (groups) of countries to strive for more or less closer integration/association with the EU. However, as a whole these relations remain highly assymetrical, especially in economic terms and issues like people mobility. Main problem is that the EU calls for fundamental and sometimes costly and painful reforms in the countries concerned, whereas the advantages of closer integration and association are mostly long-term and EU membership is no realistic perspective or not on the agenda at all.**

**As from 2004, Russia has increasingly questioned the EU’s approach in pretending to be the ultimate judge on European norms and values and started to promote alternative interpretations of such (European and/or international) norms, values and international obligations. In an increasingly “contested neighbourhood” this has led to confrontation and promotion of an alternative form of Eurasian integration in the post-Soviet space.**

**Both the conflict in the Eastern Neighbourhood and a wider crisis in the spread of liberal democracy, accompanied by the rise of nationalism, have led to some soul searching inside the EU: tense and increasingly conflictual relations with an authoritarian Turkey, unwillingness of the US to continue to actively promote democracy in other parts of the world and internal tensions within the EU with its member states Hungary and Poland on democratic values and rule of law, have undermined the “European model” and questioned the EU’s ability to further act as a Normative Power Empire. Brexit and the rise of populist, anti-immigrant and anti-EU movements and parties further exacerbate this crisis. In this context, how far could further EU enlargement, especially on the Balkans, still be taken as a realistic perspective? And could the EU’s Neighbourhood policies not be best qualified as “imperial overstretch”?**

**These debates have been partly reflected in the EU’s latest Global Strategy (2016) and in the revised Neighbourhood Policy, which are both based on a slightly more realist approach, based on “principled pragmatism”.**

**This introduction will reflect on these changes and the possible consequences for the EU’s broader role in the world and in particular in the wider neighbourhood, including for relations with the “neighbours of the neighbours”, such as Russia. It also attempts to draw some comparisons between the EU’s integration and normative power projection and Russia’s efforts to construct an alternative form of Eurasian integration, officially taking EU integration as its model. Does the Russian approach to Eurasian integration also include the construction of a kind of new Empire and how far could this construction also be developed as a normative/soft power Empire, compared to the original EU integration project?**

**KEYWORDS: EU, Europeanisation, Eastern Partnership, European Neighbourhood Policy, Normative Power Europe, Russia, Eurasian integration**