

REVIEWS

Paulina Pospieszna, *Democracy Assistance from the Third Wave: Polish Engagement in Belarus and Ukraine*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2014. 245 pp.

Democracy assistance is an important aspect of the democratization process in the region of Central and Eastern Europe and post-Soviet countries. The central research question of this book concerns how young democracies participate in delivering democracy assistance to other countries. The author goes about answering this by way of a comparative study of Poland's democracy assistance to two neighboring countries—Belarus and Ukraine. Pospieszna extensively describes these two cases with an original focus on their broad political context and the projects realized there with Polish support. While the book tends at times to be insufficiently critical in its approach to Polish assistance policy, overall it provides an original overview on the democracy assistance to neighboring Eastern Partnership states by a country which had itself only recently undergone the transition period with all its challenges.

One important aim pursued in the book is testing the idea that Polish democracy assistance might be more efficient than its Western counterparts, on the grounds that socio-cultural, geographical, and other similarities between transmitters and adopters are likely to facilitate greater efficiency in democracy assistance. In this context Pospieszna examines the case of Poland as a third-wave democracy that has changed status from recipient to donor of aid provision. The book also addresses the under-investigated topic of democracy transfer via civil society networks operating across national borders. The study covers the period from 2003, when the Polish national programs of assistance started, through to the year 2011.

The author locates her work within a wide range of political science literature. She draws upon both international relations theories, focused on analysis of the external influences on domestic politics, and a comparative politics approach to cross-border de-

mocratization, in order to elaborate hypotheses regarding strategies of assistance. The book offers a critical assessment of the current state of democracy assistance literature in an accessible manner.

From a comparative politics perspective, the book provides an interesting case study of political regimes and civil societies in Belarus and Ukraine (Chapter 1). The author examines the characteristics of non-democratic regime consolidation and repressions against civil society in Belarus within a wider socio-cultural context, including consideration of national identity-building processes, the linguistic situation, and the post-Soviet ideological legacy in the country. Analysis of the Ukrainian case is based on the interpretation of the political situation in the country as problematic when it comes to democratic consolidation. The author identifies key barriers on the Ukrainian road to democracy, including difficulties regarding commitment to democratic rules and adherence to democratic practices, as well as the weakness of political culture and civil society.

The insights into the political situation in the recipient countries are followed by a review of the Polish aid programs (Chapter 2) and an original analysis of the situation in Polish civil society itself (Chapter 3). The main conclusion of the former chapter is that Polish programs do not fit into the existing twofold typology of democracy assistance characteristic of the relevant literature, whereby programs are classified as either political or developmental. Rather, the Polish programs represent a balanced mixture of both sets of features, with a special focus on the local peculiarities of the recipient countries. The author claims that this specific approach is channeled via the following actors: representatives of central and local administrations, Polish embassies, and civil society organizations (the book focuses on the latter). In parallel, the author makes a comparative analysis of Belarusian and Ukrainian projects realized with Polish support. This comparison of two countries, of their national contexts and specific democracy assistance projects, is one of the book's main strengths.

The chapter about Polish civil society is focused on exploring the Solidarity movement's legacy and its positive influence on

Polish NGOs. It also demonstrates the importance of foreign assistance for the development of civil society in Poland and subsequent reciprocal processes, when Polish organizations became important actors first in the process of democratization in their own country, and later in providing democracy assistance to neighboring countries.

The book's main findings (Chapters 4 and 5) indicate that Polish democracy assistance differs considerably in its goals, principles, methods, and actors compared to its Western counterparts. These differences, in the author's opinion, lend the Polish programs many advantages, including the possibility to reach broader target audiences in Belarus and Ukraine. Pospieszna stresses the fact that Polish NGOs as partners in transnational democracy assistance networks are potentially more effective democracy promoters than other organizations. However, the book does not always succeed in providing clear and convincing evidence in support of its broad conclusions.

Much of what is problematic about this book arises out of the very methods and materials of the research. Thus, the sources include interviews, analysis of relevant documents, and case studies of several projects. Interviews were conducted with a number of Polish democracy assistance actors, including officials from the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs; representatives of NGOs working with Belarus and Ukraine; and representatives of one foreign donor sponsoring Polish NGO projects, the National Endowment for Democracy. The book's findings indeed demonstrate certain differences in the design of the Polish assistance programs. But no comprehensive framework or tools for the assessment of the results and efficiency of Polish–Belarusian or Polish–Ukrainian cooperation is provided here. The assessment is based mostly on the opinions of the respondents, their personal evaluations of own projects and organizations. The author herself acknowledges this problem with evaluation, pointing out that “it is difficult to gauge the tangible results” (151) and “[i]t is up to future research to determine the long-term outcomes of third wave democracy assistance” (162). This makes it difficult to see on what grounds the

results of Polish assistance programs are evaluated so positively, or to judge the validity of the author's policy recommendations.

Furthermore, nowadays we are witnessing very different tendencies in Polish Foreign Ministry assistance policy, including the demise of some of the cross-border projects that are positively evaluated in this book. For example, the *Radio Racyja* and *Belsat* television channel projects have both recently suffered serious funding cuts, to the point where their very existence is now in question. In addition, the information on Ukrainian projects used as typical examples of assistance (Appendix 5) is already out-of-date. Thus, the websites of many organizations and projects mentioned in the book are no longer active; related Internet searches do not turn up any reliable information; and in general, the current status of these projects is very unclear. The apparent failure of these projects is evidence that Polish assistance policy outcomes may not be as successful in the long-term perspective as the book suggests.

Nonetheless, given the original and under-researched topic of cross-border democracy assistance and the richness of the data marshaled by the author, this book is well worth the time for those who are interested in the political situation in Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine. It is also useful for understanding the policies of international and national donors in the region, and the specifics of democracy assistance tools, goals, and actors.

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