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Comparative Political Economy of Social Assistance in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus

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The Eastern Partnership Initiative (EaP) is a recently launched political project which eventually intends to promote welfare in the EU neighbouring countries – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. One of the EaP policy objectives is to promote economic and social development and reduce socio-economic imbalances through political, economic, and social reforms based on the EU model. There exists an impressive body of literature on the welfare state development in the new post-communist EU member states, but the researchers of comparative social policy so far have overlooked welfare provisions in the abovementioned economies. This paper tentatively tries to define the nature of welfare regimes in the selected economies by analysing fiscally minor but socially important part of their social protection systems – the non-contributory social assistance programmes. As the latest comparative data indicate Belarus and Moldova continue to maintain mostly categorical social assistance systems, Armenia and Ukraine have simultaneously developed universal as well targeted social assistance programmes, while Georgia and Armenia mostly relies on its strict means-tested social assistance schemes. Therefore, the central puzzle of this study is that EaP countries, which shared the same institutional settings before the dissolution of the Soviet Union, significantly diverged in the structures of their social assistance systems, which cannot be only attributed to the standard explanations of need, affordability, inequality and democracy. I hypothesise that, in line with social-structural, political-institutional and transnational determinants, distinct normative perceptions and public attitudes affect the patterns of social assistance in these states. To test this hypothesis I employ historical institutionalism approach and quantitative methods such as multivariate and binomial regressions, while data derive from various national and transnational databases, including the Life in Transition and World Values Surveys.