This paper will present an excerpt of the literature review chapter of my PhD project entitled: Minority rights in the EU accession process – the cases of Croatia and Macedonia. I am undertaking this research since October 2009 in the School of Politics and International Studies at the University of Leeds, UK.

Protection of minorities is an integral part of the EU political criteria for accession, which are considered to be essential for the start of the accession negotiations. In the Western Balkans, which as a region is in the queue for accession, minority protection is an issue of increasing importance, because of the multiethnic character of the region and the legacy of recent inter and intra-state conflicts. Scholars and practitioners have highlighted that the democratic consolidation of the region depends upon the management of minority issues. In these contextual conditions, the EU has been an actor which has significantly engaged in the promotion of improved minority protection in the framework of its political criteria for accession.

Having in mind the multifaceted nature of EU conditionality and its impact on the Western Balkans’ political transformation, the question how external pressures have affected domestic institutional and policy changes remains still unanswered. In light of the significance of the EU as an actor in the domestic minority politics in the candidate countries, this study aims to examine how the EU conditionality has affected domestic minority protection and majority – minority relations in Croatia and Macedonia. The study adopts the theoretical approach of Gwendolyn Sasse by arguing that the impact of EU conditionality can range from gradual legal changes and ethno political participation in government and opposition to a deepening of structural segregation and an increase in political polarization.

The methodology for this study is grounded in my experience as a former practitioner dealing with the political criteria for EU accession. This study will utilize qualitative methods, i.e. document analysis and open-ended interviews. This specific method and the data it provides contribute to the research originality, because most of the existent literature on Western Balkans EU accession is grounded upon desk based research. Three field trips each lasting approximately three months are foreseen to take place in Brussels, Skopje and Zagreb during the second year of the research.

This research is original, as there is currently no study using Gwendolyn Sasse’s approach to the study of the impact of EU on minority protection in the cases of Croatia and Macedonia. The work of Sasse is limited to the new member states and has not been extended in its application to the Western Balkans. This study will provide original empirical findings on the impact of the EU in the current candidate countries and will be relevant for the rest of the Western Balkans countries which are currently applying for EU membership. Theoretically, it will provide insight into constructivist approaches in international relations which emphasize the importance of the impact of international norms in domestic politics.
Introduction

The following paper examines how academic literature conceptualizes the impact of EU political conditionality in the candidate countries, focusing on the Western Balkans. It presents an excerpt of the literature review chapter for my PhD project which analyzes the impact of EU political conditionality on the minority protection policies in candidate countries of the Western Balkans. Political conditionality as understood for the purpose of this analysis refers to the formal and informal conditions that the EU stipulates to the countries seeking membership in the framework of the political criteria for accession. The main objective of the paper is to argue in support of a process based understanding of conditionality which grasps its formal and informal features, in line with the work of Hughes, Sasse and Gordon. By examining the development of political conditionality in the Western Balkans, the discussion emphasizes the flexible nature of this mechanism which creates difficulties for its analysis as an independent variable. This research therefore highlights the need to analyse the construction and development of conditionality prior to the analysis of its impact.

In order to substantiate this argument, the paper first defines political conditionality and provides clarifications on the terminology. The second section presents a short overview of the two dominant models for analysis of the conditionality in academic literature – the external incentive model and the process-based approaches to conditionality. Having presented the dominant models for analysis of conditionality, the paper analyzes the development of political conditionality in the Western Balkans, emphasizing its transformation and flexible nature. Furthermore, this section examines the most prominent feature of political conditionality in this region focusing on the extension of its scope and its contextualized application. In light of these features, the two models are assessed in terms of their applicability for the analysis of the impact of political conditionality. By focusing on the critiques of the dominant external incentives model, the discussion concludes in support of the optional wide and process based definitions which underscore the flexible nature of political conditionality.

Conditionality and political conditionality – definitions

Despite its widespread use in literature, a consensual understanding of EU conditionality and its nature is missing in academic debates. Conditionality is commonly approached from the perspective of rational choice institutionalism and sociological institutionalism. Both these theoretical strands are correlated respectively with the logic of consequences and appropriateness originating in the work of March and Olsen (March and Olsen, 1998). Rational choice studies commonly follow the logic of consequences, linked to the perceived benefits of conditionality. On the other hand, authors like O’Brennan have recognised the importance of the logic of appropriateness, stressing that normative explanations of the enlargement prove much more compelling than either geopolitical or economic-centred arguments (O’Brennan, 2006 p.177). Börzel and Risse have argued that the two logics, despite their analytical differences can operate at the same time (Börzel and Risse, 2000). In her analysis of the relative impact of membership conditionality incentives and socialization, Kelley concludes that combining both socialization-based efforts and conditionality appears not only effective, but also wise (Kelley, 2004 p.453). This research recognizes the importance of both logics and thereby emphasizes the need for simultaneous examination of literature from both strands for the thorough examination of this mechanism and its impact.
Political conditionality in its widest terms is a policy instrument which involves “the linking of development aid to demands concerning human rights and (liberal) democracy in recipient countries” (Sørensen, 1993). This wide notion of political conditionality is most commonly used in relation to development studies and although it shares some similarities with EU political conditionality, there is a substantial difference between these two instruments. The main instrument used in the former is the “threat of the reduction or ending of development assistance funds” (Uvin, 1993). In turn, the main instrument used in the EU political conditionality is the carrot of membership in the Union, while the main threat is exclusion. In light of this differences, Smith defines political conditionality as a mechanism that entails the linking of perceived benefits of membership in the organization to the fulfilment of conditions relating to the protection of human rights and the advancement of democratic principles (Smith, 2001 p.37). For this purpose, when dealing with EU conditionality, this study will use this definition and focus on the literature linked with the EU accession process, rather than general conditionality literature due to its focus as well as time and space constraints. Furthermore, it is also important to note that inferences from economic conditionality (IMF and the World Bank to political conditionality are problematic because of the different nature of the problems they address (Kelley, 2004 p.430).

Whereas literature commonly uses both the terms democratic and political conditionality, Anastasakis in his work on the Western Balkans supports the use of the term political conditionality instead of democratic conditionality. The objective of the use of this specific terminology is to underline the importance of the political transformation without the unquestionable inclusion of the democratization aspect (2008 p.366). Anastasakis also highlights that “from a substantive point of view EU political conditionality can run counter to democratization, at least in the short term when some of the prescriptions and order instead of elections and/or civil society development” (2008 p.366). While taking into account these debates and the official terminology adopted by the EU, this analysis for the purpose of consistency will accepts the term political conditionality. This term is suitable since the analysis will deal with the political criteria for EU accession and will also reflect on the impact of the political criteria on the democratic consolidation of the countries under examination.

Models for analysing conditionality – external incentives model and process-based approaches

The most common analytical tools for the examination of political conditionality have revolved around the previously examined logics of consequences and appropriateness. In line with this division, Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier have developed three models for the examination of the effectiveness of conditionality – the external incentives model, the social learning model and the lesson drawing model. The three models were applied in two alternative contexts: democratic and acquis conditionality. In their research, conditionality is understood as a bargaining strategy of reinforcement by reward, under which the EU provides external incentives for a target government to comply with its conditions (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2004). The conclusions of their research indicate that rule transfer from the EU to the Central and Eastern European (CEE) and the variation in its effectiveness are best explained according to the external incentives model and are linked to the high credibility of EU conditionality and the low domestic costs of rule adoption (2004). Furthermore, the authors shown that the effectiveness of EU conditionality depends on the initial conditions, i.e. EU influence was less effective with respect to democratic conditionality, but pervasive in terms of acquis conditionality (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2005 p.210). Having in mind that the credibility of political conditionality is quite low, because of its contested
nature and high domestic costs the chances for success of the external incentives model are low. In light of these bleak predictions for success, Sasse has argued that the link between low domestic adoption costs and effective conditionality undermines the very notion of conditionality (Sasse, 2009 p.18).

In response to these difficulties, more recent studies of conditionality have pointed to its flexible nature and have proposed process-based definitions attempting to incorporate the variety of different influences in the application of conditionality. As already explained in the introduction, EU political conditionality for the purposes of this research includes not only the formal technical requirements on candidates but also the informal pressures arising from the behaviour and perceptions of actors engaged in the political process. Hughes et al have argued that conditionality is better explained as a multiplicity of actors, perceptions, rewards and sanctions, including both its formal and informal features (Hughes et al., 2005). Hence, these authors distinguish between formal conditionality, which embodies the publicly stated preconditions as set out in the broad principles of the Copenhagen criteria and informal conditionality which includes the operational pressures and recommendations applied by actors within the Commission to achieve particular outcomes (Hughes et al., 2005 p.26). This definition, according to Sasse highlights the pitfalls of linear causality models and the need to take seriously the inherent politicization of conditionality over time (Sasse, 2009 p.19). Sasse argues that political criteria are a construct, thereby recognising that any notion of compliance is a construct and a political judgement (Sasse, 2009 p.20).

The above outlined models present the two dominant approaches for analysing the impact of EU conditionality in the candidate countries. Whereas the external incentives model is most useful for the analysis of areas with clearly defined EU rules, the latter emphasizes the constructed nature of conditionality in the ‘thin’ acquis areas or the political conditionality which consists of vaguely defined norms and principles. Having presented these two models, the next section examines the development of EU political conditionality in the Western Balkans focusing on its most prominent features.

### Developments of EU political conditionality in relation to the Western Balkans

As a region, the Western Balkans has been subject to EU conditionality since the mid 1990s through various instruments and policy frameworks, ranging from the Union’s foreign policy to the enlargement portfolio. In the late 1990s, the EU introduced the regional approach for the Western Balkans with the purpose of inciting reforms in the political area, such as return of refugees and inter-ethnic reconciliation. The regional approach, however, did not provide the prospect of membership as the major incentive of conditionality, and did not deliver tangible results. Literature has largely considered the regional approach as inadequate to bring about stability and prosperity among other reasons for not having a core perspective nor an elaborate strategy (Fakiolas and Tzifakis, 2008 p.380-381). Until the end of the 1990s, the Western Balkan countries were managed via the Union’s foreign policy. In the late ‘90s, these countries also became the ground where the EU deployed its first peacekeeping missions in Bosnia and later in Macedonia. Overall, by the end of the 1990s, the EU did not provide a framework for accession for the Western Balkans. On the other hand, its on-the-ground involvement through the peacekeeping missions indicates the unique involvement as an actor in the domestic affairs of the region under examination, in contrast to the countries of the previous enlargement.

The end of the 1990s, however, denotes a slow shift towards the EU as a framework for integration of the Western Balkans with the launching of the Stabilisation and Association

---

1 General Affairs Council Conclusions, Luxembourg, April 2007 PRES/97/129
Process (SAP). The SAP combines three main instruments in supporting the countries from the Western Balkans to advance their development path towards membership: “the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA), the autonomous trade measures and substantial financial assistance”. The SAAs represent the core formal contractual relationships between the countries of the Western Balkans and the EU. In addition to the SAAs, the EU at the Thessaloniki summit in June 2003 introduced the common instruments for EU accession, such as the European Partnerships (EPs) and the Progress Reports for the Western Balkans. The aim of the EPs, inspired by the Eastern enlargement, is to identify political and strategic priorities “with due consideration to the Copenhagen accession criteria and to issues particular to the Western Balkans” in order for the countries to carry out short and medium-term reforms.

The combination of the SAAs and the EPs, the Progress Reports and financial assistance represents a formal similarity with the Eastern enlargement. Despite this initial similarity, literature analysing the application and the substance of the conditionality towards the Western Balkans has highlighted the extended scope of political conditionality. Braniff argues that the EU has conformed to a policy learning model which has resulted in extending the political conditionality and the timeframe for accession (Braniff, 2009 p.547). In addition, while it has been widely acknowledged that, once the EU political conditionality stepped in at the end of the 1990s, the democratic transition in East-Central Europe was largely over, in the case of the Western Balkans political conditionality appears to be one of the main drivers of transition to democracy. Pridham similarly concludes that compared with accessions during previous decades, the EU enlargement to the East, was both more demanding and more likely to affect profoundly countries seeking membership (2007b). Furthermore, rather than providing recommendations and standards, the Commission is at times engaged in assessing the domestic political scene and the relations between the domestic political actors. Literature links this attitude with the role the EU has acquired through the brokering of peace-deals in Bosnia and Macedonia especially (Anastasakis and Bechev, 2003). In this sense, the Commission has pursued a more interventionist attitude in comparison, to the previous enlargement, a shift noted already with respect to Bulgaria and Romania by academic literature (Pridham, 2002). Overall, the EU has resolutely moved down the path of high and low politics, thereby, into areas traditionally regarded as internal to states (Pridham, 2002).

This specific role of the EU in the Balkans has been recognised by authors such as Chandler who argues that EU member state-building in the Western Balkans is a clear example of the dangers of the liberal peace approach to post-conflict situations (Chandler, 2008). In his work, Chandler is highly critical of the role of the EU in the Western Balkans arguing that “the externally driven nature of the policy process means that political elites seek to lobby external EU actors rather than engage in domestic constituency-building” (Chandler, 2008 p.529). Quite contrary to Chandler, O’Brien argues that that “the policy being pursued by Brussels is consistent with the expectations of the “normative power Europe” approach to enlargement” (O’Brien, 2008 p.508). Similarly, Manners argues that the EU is a normative power with a normative quality, which should act to extend its norms into the international system (Manners, 2002 p.252). Albeit this research will not deal with the role of the EU as a normative power in the Balkans, it recognizes that there have been instances

---


when the EU’s involvement raises concern for the democratic consolidation of these societies.

Despite this increasing on-the-ground involvement, literature has also recognized that the credibility of membership which is offered to the Western Balkans is far weaker than the credibility of the membership prospect which was offered to the candidate countries in the Eastern enlargement. Croatia is an exception from the region, as the only country which has a clear perspective of accession, following the resolution of the bilateral border issue with Slovenia. The credibility of the membership perspective offered to the other Western Balkan countries on the other hand is much weaker. In addition, the conclusions of numerous European Council meetings have underlined that the Union will refrain from setting accession dates and that every country will proceed in the accession process according to individual merits. Anastasakis highlights that “the EU (a) is adding further, yet necessary, political conditions and criteria to weaker or more reluctant partners and emphasizes the ‘journey’ rather than the outcome of accession, affecting the credibility of the strategy” (Anastasakis, 2008).

Challenges from the Western Balkans

In a setting in which the EU has pursued a more interventionist attitude in the candidate countries, the Western Balkans present challenges on their own side which were not present in the case of the Eastern enlargement. The laggards in this group, Romania and Bulgaria brought to the forefront the difficulties of reforming the judiciary and curbing corruption only at a later stage in the negotiations process when different incentive structures are in place. As a result of this situation, the Western Balkans challenge EU conditionality from due to the different timing of political conditionality and the application of conditionality to areas with high domestic costs.

First, political conditionality has been employed at an earlier stage in the pre-accession process affecting the incentive structures that operate both in the Union and in the candidate countries (Pridham, 2007b p.234). In the Eastern enlargement, political conditionality was mostly enforced when the countries had advanced well in the negotiations process, as the cases of Romania and Bulgaria indicate. On the other hand, the timing of the use of political conditionality has an impact upon the incentive structures that operate both in the Union and in the candidate countries Pravda emphasizes this point in terms of the international position of the states with respect to the EU in on a scale of insiders and outsiders (Zielonka and Pravda, 2001). In the case of CEE, once promising applicants have become locked into the process of negotiations, the resultant pressure placed on the candidates further guarantees the fulfilment of the required political conditions, since backtracking could harm the successful outcome (Dimitrova and Pridham, 2004 p.109). In the case of the Western Balkans, the only country which fulfils the condition of locking in the negotiations process is Croatia.

Second, political conditionality in the Balkans is being applied to areas which have high domestic costs and have traditionally been outside of the acquis, such as reforms of the political system, and even to issues like state and nation building. Due to the unresolved security and constitutional problems that are still open in most of the Western Balkans, the EU in fact has had to move into fields of state and nation building, which have been unknown to the EU in the previous enlargements. In the Western Balkans, therefore, the EU has undertaken a role of both a framework for association and a direct negotiator in drawing up constitutions and constitutional agreements. For example, in Macedonia the EU is an external guarantor of the Ohrid Framework Agreement which set the grounds for changes in the constitutional order of the country. This is a rather novel approach in comparison to the
previous enlargement, where statehood issues were largely resolved before EU conditionality stepped in. In the Balkans, the processes of EU integration, state and nation building do not go into a sequence as in the previous enlargement, but are intertwined and the EU has become an actor in all of them.

This section has presented the development of the EU political conditionality in relation to the Western Balkans. It has delineated its evolution from the pre-2000 period which was largely limited to the inter-ethnic reconciliation to the post-2000 period and the introduction of the SAA as the main framework for the potential accession of this region. Moreover, it has demonstrated that through the direct engagement of the Union in these countries, EU political conditionality has acquired a much more prominent role than in the previous enlargement. However, despite this increasing involvement, with the exception of Croatia, the credibility of membership offered to these countries is weaker. On the domestic side, the section has argued that the Western Balkans pose unique challenges to the effectiveness of EU conditionality due to the different timing of conditionality and the high domestic political costs of the extension of conditionality. Political conditionality in the Balkans is being applied to areas which have high domestic costs and have traditionally been outside of the *acquis*, such as reforms of the political system, and even to issues like state and nation building.

**Accommodating the analysis of the impact of EU political conditionality in the Western Balkans in the dominant conditionality models**

Having provided an overview of both dominant approaches for analysing conditionality and the main features of political conditionality in the Western Balkans, this section moves on to assess the usefulness of both approaches for the analysis of this specific region. The external incentives model, albeit useful has been under criticism from several aspects of its usefulness for the assessment of EU’s impact in relation to the political criteria. First, in the case of the political criteria for accession, the external incentive model has been under criticism in relation to the presupposed determinacy of the EU rules. Rational choice explanations of conditionality presuppose an existent consensus between both sides on the content of EU rules and the benchmarks for their fulfilment. On the other hand, as already explained, the political criteria are highly flexible. Grabbe points to the analytical difficulties of grasping conditionality since it has become a moving target, thereby contesting the rational choice hypothesis of conditionality as a set of clearly defined rules (2006). Moreover, the EU puts different emphasis on the way it justifies its policy of conditionality to domestic actors in the various Western Balkan countries – a differentiation closely linked to the specificity of each case” (Noutcheva, 2007). As a result, this underlying hypothesis of existence of a consensual understanding on the side of both the candidate country and the EU is highly contested in academic literature, especially in relation to political conditionality.

Pridham concludes similarly that compared with accessions during previous decades, the EU enlargement to the East, was both more demanding and more likely to affect profoundly countries seeking membership (2007b). In this sense, the Commission has pursued a more interventionist attitude in comparison, to the previous enlargement, a shift noted already with respect to Bulgaria and Romania (Pridham, 2007a). This shift is especially prominent in the case of minority politics, thereby moving the EU “down the path of high and low politics, thereby, into areas traditionally regarded as internal to states” (Pridham, 2002). In these conditions, the costs of compliance of target states inevitably rise, especially having in mind the low credibility of membership, thereby creating bleak predictions for the effectiveness of conditionality in the Western Balkans. Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier in light of these difficulties qualify their findings by emphasizing the context-dependent
influence of the EU as an actor (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2005 p.223). This contextdependence is evident in the attempts to extend their model to the more difficult cases of the Western Balkans, where it encounters significant problems. Nevertheless, in his recent analysis of the effectiveness of the external incentives model, Schimmelfennig concludes that in the Balkans the troubles in the EU accession process are related to the legacies of ethnic conflict and are likely to create significant political costs to the target governments because of their high relevance for national identity (Schimmelfennig, 2008). Hence, albeit being able to sufficiently warn against difficulties in the Western Balkans, the external incentive model does not provide further tools for analysing the role and impact of EU in these complex conditions.

It is nevertheless necessary to qualify that the setting of criteria in the political sphere is difficult due to the qualitative nature of these policies. Pravda, similarly explains the practical difficulty in setting democratization criteria and evaluating political performance, because political targets are typically qualitative and hard to define as precisely as economic goals (Pravda, 2001 p.13). Brusis also concludes that EU policies are likely to have a more tangible direct impact in issue areas where the EU has a more prescriptive acquis (Brusis, 2005 p.316). Fryberg and Richter consider that if the conditionality criteria pertain to an issue area perceived as problematic for national identity, a different line of reasoning will be triggered than in cases where the criteria are considered unproblematic. According to them, national identity determines the logic of social action that governments will follow when responding to the Union’s conditionality criteria (Freyburg and Richter, 2010 p.266).

Overall, as a result of these difficulties of framing the EU’s impact in relation to political conditionality in an external incentives model, research has recommended its use in relation to prescriptive acquis policies.

Second, rationalist explanations of conditionality have been under criticism due to their focus on power politics, which is not always adequate for grasping the nature of conditionality. To illustrate this point, Grabbe looks at the restrictions of the free movement of people in the 2004 and 2007 accession, thereby concluding that “the candidates did not just respond to the material incentives provided by the EU’s exercise of power” (2006 p.202). Hence, if rational choice theory explains the nature and behaviour of national governments, governments in many cases do not respond to EU conditionality in terms of their most favourable choices. Grabbe goes on to argue that “for the CEE candidates, the puzzle lies in their continued implementation of EU policies despite the imposition of a transition period and despite high levels of uncertainty” (2006 p.3). She explains this phenomenon through the locking in the process of Europeanization which had a momentum and logic independently of the negotiations (2006 p.3).

Last, the external incentives model has been under criticism because of the risk to overestimate the effects of the EU conditionality. Having in mind that the processes of Europeanization were simultaneous to the democratic transformation of these societies, the separation of the developments linked to each of them is increasingly difficult. Moreover, as the EU appeared as an actor in the CEE countries at a point when early transition choices had already been made, there is no possibility to study the effectiveness in absence of alternative setting without the EU as an actor. As a result, demonstrating causal links between the impact of the externally induced conditions and the domestic policy choice have been increasingly difficult. Brusis by analysing the use of European Union conditionality in the regionalization in the Czech Republic and Slovakia argues that “domestic factors were of key importance for the trajectories and outcomes of regionalization” (2005 p.295). The external incentives model, according to Brusis “does not allow the interference that the domestic change is driven by EU incentives because the Union applies conditionality or because domestic actors justify their decision as driven by EU conditionality” (2005 p.297). As a result of these
difficulties the external incentives model does not provide sufficient tools for the analysis of the impact of the EU political conditionality in the Western Balkans and its flexible nature as demonstrated in the previous section.

As already explained, process-based explanations of conditionality emphasize its constructed nature and emphasize the need to trace its development and evolution over time, rather than considering it as an independent variable. Having explained that the most EU conditionality in the Western Balkans is flexible, extended into politically sensitive areas and the characterised by high level of EU interventionism, the process-based explanations are suitable for the study of the impact of EU political conditionality in due to several reasons. First, this definition and approach provide for the possibility to examine the process of construction, application of conditionality and its outcome, thereby taking into consideration the changes of conditionality over time. Similarly, this approach provides for the possibility to examine the role of the EU as an actor on the domestic political scene, due to the interventionist attitude the EU has pursued in this region.

Second, a narrow definition of conditionality is not appropriate because the Copenhagen political criteria do not define the benchmarks or the process by which EU conditionality could be enforced and verified (Hughes et al., 2005 p.25). Third, the process-based definition of conditionality is necessary due to the contextual peculiarities of this process. As Schwellnus has argued EU applied differentiated pressure across applicants, dependent on whether minority protection was regarded as problematic and security relevant in the particular case (Schwellnus, 2008 p.187). Fourth, the process-based approaches highlight the importance of domestic actors for the success of EU conditionality and thereby include them as important elements for analysis. Lastly, this approach is much more suitable when looking at the case of the Western Balkans, because of the multifaceted nature of the conditionality process. Studies on political conditionality in the Western Balkans which have appeared recently highlighted the different role of EU political conditionality, which in this case is multi-dimensional and multi-purpose instrument geared towards reconciliation, reconstruction and reform (Anastasakis and Bechev, 2003). Having in mind all the functions conditionality performs in the Balkans, the need for a more encompassing definition is evident.

The process-based approaches of conditionality as well suffer from limitations especially with respect to grasping the informal aspects of conditionality and the difficulties in posing a universally testable hypothesis. In relation to the former, this approach advocates the use of process tracing in order to be able to determine the points at which the EU has interacted with the domestic actors. However, the use of process tracing has been under criticism because it is “at odds with process tracing is fundamentally at odds with more interpretative epistemologies” (Checkel, 2005 p.5). In addition, by emphasising contextual differences, this approach undermines the possibility of devising a general analytical tool, which would be applicable to a group of countries. Despite these problems, having in mind the features of political conditionality in the Western Balkans, the process-based explanations provide the much needed scope for the researcher to initially examine the process of construction of EU political conditionality as a flexible, rather than independent variable. Therefore, this discussion considers that the process-based approach provides sufficient scope for grasping the multifaceted nature of the conditionality process.

This section has examined the applicability of the external incentives model and the process-based approaches for the study of the impact of EU political conditionality in the Western Balkans. The section has provided an analysis of the operation and critiques of the external incentives model in relation to its applicability for the study of political conditionality. The discussion has focused on the difficulties the model faces in accommodating the flexibility and constructed nature of EU political conditionality. It has
also reflected on the criticism of this model in light of its focus on power-politics, which does not always explain the domestic response and its risk to overestimate EU conditionality. In response, the analysis supported the use of wide and process based definition of conditionality which underscores the political and flexible nature of political conditionality as appropriate for this study, while at the same time recognising the limitations in terms of generalization of the findings of this approach.

Conclusion

The objective of this paper was to examine how literature has conceptualized the study of the impact of EU conditionality on the candidate countries for EU accession in order to draw findings for the analysis of the Western Balkans. The paper argued in support of a process based understanding of conditionality which grasps its formal and informal features, in line with the work of Hughes, Sasse and Gordon. The paper therefore highlighted the need to analyse the construction and development of conditionality, rather than conceptualizing political conditionality as an independent variable.

For this purpose, the paper conducted the discussion in three parts. First, it presented the external incentives model and the process-based approaches as the dominant frameworks for the analysis of conditionality in the context of EU accession. Second, the paper examined the evolution of EU political conditionality in relation to the Western Balkans since the 1990s. It delineated its evolution from the pre-2000 period which was largely limited to the inter-ethnic reconciliation to the post-2000 period and the introduction of the SAA as the main framework for the potential accession of this region. Moreover, it has demonstrated that through the direct engagement of the Union in these countries, the EU political conditionality has acquired a much more prominent role than in the previous enlargement. However, despite the increasing involvement, with the exception of Croatia, the credibility of membership offered to these countries is weaker. On the domestic side, the paper has argued that the Western Balkans pose unique challenges to the effectiveness of EU conditionality due to the different timing of conditionality and the high domestic political costs of the extension of conditionality. Political conditionality in the Balkans is being applied to areas which have high domestic costs and have traditionally been outside of the acquis, such as reforms of the political system, and even to issues like state and nation building.

Having explained the features of the EU political conditionality in the Western Balkans, the paper turned to an analysis of how the examination of the impact of EU political conditionality on the Western Balkans fits within the conditionality models. The analysis of conditionality focused on unpacking the dominant external incentives model and its critiques for the purposes of analysing the impact of EU political conditionality. The external incentives model faces difficulties when applied to the political conditionality in Western Balkans context, primarily due to its unpromising forecasts. However, it also does not provide tools for further examination of EU’s interaction with the domestic political structures and their respective role in mediating the impact of conditionality. The primary difficulty in this respect is that the external incentives model considers EU conditionality as an independent variable, thereby neglecting its politicised and constructed nature.

In light of these difficulties, the paper turned to an examination of the wide and process based definitions of conditionality proposed by Hughes et al, which underscores the constructed nature of EU conditionality. While encountering difficulties in terms of the possibility of generalization of findings, this paper considered this approach is more suitable for the contextualised analysis of the impact of EU conditionality. The process-based approach provides sufficient scope for the analysis of EU conditionality as a construct and also takes into consideration its formal and informal features.
Bibliography:


