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## THEORIES OF DEMOCRATIZATION: LOCATING EU CONDITIONALITY IN THE BIGGER THEORETICAL PICTURE

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### Abstract

One of the primary goals of the European Union's membership conditionality is to promote stability and democracy outside its immediate borders. Thus, being subjected to EU conditionality can be a factor affecting democratization processes in candidate countries. The article attempts to locate the study of EU-induced democratization within the bigger theoretical picture of democratization studies. This article starts with a discussion of different theories and approaches to the study of democratization, including the theory of norm diffusion (Risse, 1999) and the theory of linkage/leverage (Levitsky and Way, 2002). After indicating how the study of EU-induced democratization can be and has been approached within those theories, and the article proceeds with an outline and analysis of a rather new approach utilizing an External Incentives Model (Schimmelfennig, 2003), which stemmed from the growing body of free-standing research dedicated specifically to the problem of Europeanization. Thus, the article demonstrates that the study of Europeanization of candidate countries not only invited the application of pre-existing theoretical frameworks from different subdisciplines but also produced a new theoretical framework dedicated specifically to the study of Europeanization.

**Keywords:** EU conditionality; EU enlargements; democratization; Europeanization; linkage and leverage.

### Introduction

The European Union (EU) strives to promote certain norms and values not only within its territory, but also beyond. The EU's particular attention lies on the countries which can potentially become members of the EU, such as potential candidate and official candidate countries. To become a member of the EU, a state has to demonstrate that it fulfils a set of conditions imposed by the EU in order to ensure that the state in question adheres to the principles of democracy and the rule of law. The EU is believed to influence democratization processes (that is, the likelihood of democratic transition and subsequent consolidation of democracy) in the candidate countries primarily by imposing those conditions and evaluating their implementation, a phenomenon commonly referred to as EU conditionality.

After the success of EU conditionality in the Central and Eastern European countries (CEECs), the literature on Europeanization was dominated by research pertaining to the impact of EU conditionality on democratic consolidation in the candidate countries and the conditions under which democratic promotion on behalf of the EU turned out to be successful. Having showed empirically that neighbouring countries not subjected to EU membership conditionality consistently exhibited worse democratic outcomes, with countries like Belarus consolidating autocracy instead of democracy, researchers tended to agree that a credible membership perspective must have played a catalytic role in democratic consolidation in the CEECs (Schimmelfennig et al., 2006; Schimmelfennig and Scholz, 2008).

However, in the following enlargement rounds the effect of EU conditionality ceased to be so uniform. Unlike the CEECs, Turkey and the Balkans provided a whole range of divergent outcomes. Whilst some of the newer candidates - like Croatia - managed to meet the accession criteria, others - like Turkey - are suffering from democratic deterioration. What it demonstrates is that variations in democratization outcomes are possible not only between candidates as opposed to non-candidates, but across candidates as well. Whilst enlargement continues to be a most important policy of the EU, there are growing concerns that EU conditionality may not be equipped to foster democratization further to the East (Bieber, 2011). That points to the need for comprehensive research into the link between EU conditionality and democratization to explain under what conditions EU conditionality succeeds (or fails) to bring about democratic change.

One of the defining characteristics of the studies of the influence of EU conditionality on democratization or, indeed, any kinds of inquiries into democratization is that they almost inevitably have to draw upon different theoretical paradigms and various subdisciplines. Although it was not like that until quite recently, the latest democratic waves and the growing international interdependence brought about a realization that regime change is not an entirely domestic issue, but rather a result of the interaction between the domestic and the international (Flockhart, 2005). What it means for democratization studies, and this transition is indeed a drastic one, is that from now on any kind of comprehensive democratization theory, stemming from any kind of subdiscipline, be it International Relations or Comparative Politics, quite likely will have to include both domestic and international factors.

With that in mind, this article analyses a number of contemporary theoretical approaches to democratization that are immediately relevant to the study of the relationship between the EU and democratization processes in the countries aspiring to join the EU, including general approaches - such as the theory of norm diffusion (Risse, 1999), the theory of Linkage and Leverage (Levitsky and Way, 2002), and specific Europeanization-inspired approaches, such as the External Incentives Model (Schimmelfennig, 2003). Thus, the article demonstrates that the study of Europeanization of candidate countries not only invited application of pre-existing theoretical frameworks from different subdisciplines, but also produced a new theoretical framework dedicated specifically to the study of Europeanization.

### Norm diffusion

One of the possible ways of deconstructing democratization as a process is introduced by the concept of norm diffusion (Risse, 1999). Norm diffusion is based on the idea that it is possible for social norms to spread between regions and populations. As democracy is also based on a set of certain norms and values, norm diffusion is widely used to account for democracy waves (Brinks and Coppedge, 2006) or even spreading of liberal ideas in general. When a new norm becomes fully adopted, which usually happens in the process of socialization and social learning, it becomes internalized (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998), with the actor beginning to act in accordance with that norm.

The concept of norms and their adoption stems from the social constructivist literature. The behaviour of actors depends on their identity and the norms to which they adhere. The relationship is two-fold: the identity of an actor is determined by the set of norms they have internalized no less than the adoption or rejection of new norms is determined by the identity the actor already has. Hence, the identity of the actor defines which norms they can adopt, but the process of the adoption of new norms, in turn, almost inevitably changes the identity of the actor. Both the norms and the identity of the actor are flexible rather than fixed, and the assumption is that they can influence each other.

The result of norm diffusion as a process is affected by factors that either facilitate or obstruct it. Thus, when using the process of norm diffusion to study democratization outcomes, the explanatory factors would be those that exert influence, either positively or negatively, on the process of norm diffusion. As norm diffusion can be an intentional as well as an unintentional process, different actors on the international arena may act as promoters of certain norms and values. Thus, norm diffusion, although it is not an actor-based theory by itself, allows to view international institutions such as the EU or NATO as active participants in the process of externally induced democratization (Schimmelfennig, 2003). The reputation and legitimacy of the international actor promoting the norm may act as a powerful facilitator of norm adoption, however, the quality and content of the norm itself and the domestic context also play a significant role in the acceptance or rejection of the norm. Thus, in the theoretical framework of norm diffusion, it is possible to pin down both the international and the domestic context.

It is also worth noting that for the study of European enlargement the theory of norm diffusion offers additional benefits when compared to other approaches because it allows the researcher to concentrate on internalization of democratic norms rather than formal compliance with EU conditions. Empirical research shows that formal compliance can be instrumental, such as when political parties claim that they have introduced the necessary reforms just in order to get the benefits that are conditional on those reforms (Sasse, 2008). The difference is that when the political elite complies only formally, the reforms are not going to get properly implemented. Whereas formal compliance is all about the legal changes and the formal introduction of rules dictated by *acquis communautaire*, norm internalization is about changes in the assumptions of what constitutes proper behaviour (Flockhart, 2005). As a general rule, a real shift to democratic practices would consist not only of formal legal changes, but also of the implementation of those changes and ultimately a shift in societal norms and values. As such, provided that democratization can only be called successful if

democratic norms are internalized, norm diffusion is equipped to analyse and measure to what extent international norms have 'sunk in' in the target society. Ideally, formal compliance should give way to norm internalization, so that when a candidate country joins the European Union and is no longer subjected to the EU's leverage, it will continue to behave democratically even without external pressure (Risse, 1999). If not the case, the rules adopted under EU pressure can remain 'empty shells' (Dimitrova, 2010).

Hence, looking at democratization of candidate countries through the prism of norm diffusion and assessing the impact of that process could allow the researchers to study and make predictions about the behaviour of the countries once they join the European Union. Without the leverage of conditionality at the disposal of the European Union, new member countries lose the incentives to behave 'democratically', which could potentially lead to democratic backsliding.

That said, norm diffusion theory failed to gain popularity in Europeanization research. In earlier Europeanization research, much emphasis was indeed put on cultural matching as a predictor of norm adoption, and into researching EU conditionality norms as a theoretical concept (Schwellnus, 2006a; 2006b; Vermeersch, 2003; 2004; Sasse, 2005; Toggenburg, 2004). EU conditionality itself is a normative construct, so such a development in the studies was a logical one. At the same time, it soon became evident that EU norms are weakly defined and perceived inconsistently even by the member states (Hughes and Sasse, 2003). As such, it was unclear how the need and pressure to adhere to a broad concept like that would influence both the assessment activities of the EU as well as the formation of new policy trends in the candidate countries. With the empirical data of bringing the concept into practice accumulating, it soon became clear that there is substantive variation in outcomes of EU conditionality, which caused the main research concerns to shift from conceptual and theoretical issues to more empirical problems. Empirical data, in its turn, happened to support the External Incentives Model a lot more than the constructivist alternative (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2004), at least for the CEECs. Nonetheless, later works researching democratization and Europeanization of the Western Balkans tend to come to the conclusion that cultural match (or mismatch, alternatively) can still be a good predictor of whether democratic norms are going to get internalized.

### **Linkage and leverage**

The 1990s saw a rise in democratization around the globe. In some countries the process resulted in establishing stable democratic institutions, whilst in others it slowed down, causing the countries to remain 'in transition', or even simply failed. Analysing the reasons behind such a major difference in the outcomes of democratization, researchers spotted a clear correlation between the outcomes of democratization and the international environment. The analytical framework for a deeper analysis of the link between the international environment and democratization was developed by Levitsky and Way (Levitsky and Way, 2002; 2005; 2010).

Building on an institutionalist and a structuralist paradigms, Levitsky and Way propose a model for the relationship between the international environment and regime change, where the variation in democratization outcomes in post-Cold war non-democratic countries is explained by different levels and degrees of the following two factors: linkage (the states' ties to Western-led institutions such as the EU) and leverage (the governments' vulnerability to external democratizing pressure, including political conditionality).

Under this model, EU conditionality is linked both to high levels of leverage and high degrees of linkage, a combination which is presumed to provide for successful democratization even in countries with otherwise unfavourable domestic conditions. This seems to indeed be the case, however, whether the EU's involvement was the reason the candidate countries democratized more effectively, remains unclear. An alternative explanation could be that the countries that had the inclination to democratize better to begin with were more prone to aspiring to join the EU than clearly authoritarian countries. Sasse cites a line from an interview with a Commission official saying that the Commission only helps the countries 'do what they are already doing anyway', suggesting that the EU can only contribute (to a limited extent) to democratization processes in countries that are already undergoing such processes (Sasse, 2008). Finding out which of the explanations is more consistent with the real situation would require a closer analysis of the interplay between the EU and the candidate countries.

Since EU conditionality forms only a part of the much broader concepts of linkage and leverage, the framework does not allow for a close study of the role of the EU as an international actor exercising direct as well as indirect pressure on candidate and potential candidate countries. In the featured framework, external pressures have to be analysed as a given, which dramatically downsizes the role of the international institutions in both exerting the pressure and influencing the end result. In that respect, it is more structurally ori-

ented than would be ideal for capturing the dynamics and effects of the EU involvement. The study of Europeanization based on the External Incentives Model, on the other hand, utilizes an analytical framework which is more narrow and designed specifically with an eye to the phenomenon of European integration.

### **External Incentives Model**

After the success of EU conditionality in the CEECs, the literature on Europeanization was dominated by research pertaining to the impact of EU conditionality in democratic transitions in the candidate countries and the conditions under which democratic promotion on behalf of the EU turned out to be successful. The research comprised several comprehensive studies (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2004; Vachudova, 2005) pointing out that the EU conditionality politics indeed played a substantial role in the establishment of democratic regimes in the CEEC region. The effectiveness of EU conditionality was positively tied to a credible membership perspective for the targeted countries. In their ground-breaking works, Schimmelfennig and a number of co-authors (Schimmelfennig, Engert, and Knobel, 2003; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2004) argued that the external incentives offered by the perspective of EU membership helped to overcome the domestic obstacles for democratic reforms, thus ensuring that the democratic transition took place in the context it would otherwise not have done. Thus, credible conditionality in the form of external incentives was proven a necessary condition for successful democratization. It was also established that in order to achieve sufficient conditions for democratic reforms, credible conditionality has to be paired with favourable domestic conditions. The findings were replicated in a comprehensive comparative analysis researching the role of EU conditionality in the promotion of democracy in third countries and comprising 36 countries neighbouring the EU (Schimmelfennig and Scholz, 2008). It was again established that the strongest and the most robust effect was produced by the incentives provided by a membership perspective.

In general, the Europeanization approach is more in line with the rationalist paradigm in that it explains the relation between EU conditionality and democratization as being a result of a cost-benefit calculation on the part of the target governments. The External Incentives Model starts with a 'domestic equilibrium', where the target governments are adopting liberal reforms (or have already done so) if the domestic conditions are favourable, and not if such an adoption is too costly. The 'domestic equilibrium' is then upset by the introduction of the possibility of material rewards that are conditional on the target governments' compliance with the norms of liberal democracy. If the benefits associated with the rewards exceed the costs of compliance, the target government, being a rational actor, is likely to choose to comply. The higher the benefits and the lower the costs, the more likely compliance is to take place.

However, soon after the fifth enlargement round was completed, it became evident that despite being subjected to the same formal conditionality criteria, the remaining and the newer candidates exhibit uneven reform patterns and the effects of conditionality in such regions as Turkey and the Western Balkans are inconsistent with democratization paths of the CEECs (Noutcheva and Aydin-Duzgit, 2012). Empirical investigations that followed tended to produce interesting, but ambiguous results. Thus, analysing the beginning of the process of Turkey's accession to the EU (from the official candidate status acquired in 1999 up to 2005), different researchers view one of independent variables — the credibility of EU commitment — in a directly opposite way. Muftuler Bac (2005) and Kubicek (2011) argue that credibility was high, whilst Saatcioglu's analysis suggests that for Turkey credible commitment never managed to achieve high levels, and thus cannot explain Turkey's compliance in the 1999–2005 period (Saatcioglu, 2010). Such a discrepancy suggests that ambiguous empirical results can be traced back to the vagueness of the independent variables (How credible should credible incentives be? What is credible?) and differences in a set of empirical indicators used to assign values to the variables. In other words, despite coming to dominate Europeanization research, the EIM still requires additional polishing to be able to successfully transfer its theoretical predictions to the less straightforward cases of Turkey and the Western Balkans.

### **Determinants of democratization**

Although there are most likely multiple factors at play to determine the effectiveness of EU conditionality, the scholars looking to identify those determinants tended to identify and study one to two determinants at a time. Whilst such an approach with time did allow to identify multiple determinants, it failed to systematize and structure them. As a rule, the determinants identified fall into one of the two main categories: domestic level factors and EU-level factors. An example of prominent works on domestic level factors is Schimmelfennig et al., who compared data from Latvia, Slovakia and Turkey to establish a negative corre-



lation between the efficacy of EU conditionality and the domestic political costs of compliance (Schimmelfennig et al., 2003). If costs are high, such as when compliance with the EU's conditions would threaten the security or integrity of the state or the survival of the ruling elites, the reforms are not likely to be adopted (Schimmelfennig et al., 2003; 2006). Vachudova, on the other hand, builds her analysis around the level of political competitiveness (the presence/absence of strong opposition elites) as a key determinant for the effectiveness of EU conditionality (Vachudova, 2005). As for the EU-level factors, Kochenov puts together a comprehensive hierarchy of legal-political mechanisms of EU pressure and EU assistance employed by the Commission (Kochenov, 2008).

There have also been attempts to disentangle the democratizing effect of political conditionality from traditional structural predictors of democratization, such as the level of socioeconomic development or transnational exchanges. As modernization theorists posit, economic development with its various aspects (such as industrialization, urbanization, wealth and education) creates structural and social conditions that are conducive to democracy (Lipset, 1960). There are different theories as to whether economic development correlates with the likelihood of democratic transition (Boix and Stokes, 2003) or only democratic survival once the country transitioned (Przeworski et al., 2000), and what the causal mechanism exactly is, but the correlation itself seems empirically robust (Lipset, 1994). As for transnational exchanges, it is theorised that cross-border contacts between the target country and democracies (including trade, tourism, academic exchanges and so on) may help to promote democratic values and practices, and thus contribute to the creation of social conditions of democracy (Lavenex and Schimmelfennig, 2011).

To check whether membership conditionality continues to demonstrate effect once you control for structural predictors, Schimmelfennig and Scholz used data from 36 countries in the EU's neighbourhood and found that membership conditionality correlated with better democratic outcomes even when socioeconomic development and transnational exchanges were controlled for (Schimmelfennig and Scholz, 2008). However, that does not mean that different democratic predictors should necessarily be viewed as alternative explanations. It is quite possible that multiple factors affect the outcome at the same time, or that there are interaction effects between the explanatory variables. One can think of a number of ways EU conditionality could theoretically have an effect on either the economic or the social development of the target country, such as through financial or technical assistance, increased business relations, student exchanges and so on (Lavenex and Schimmelfennig, 2011). The relationship, if indeed present, could also be reverse - as the aspiring countries have to meet some criteria before they receive the candidate status, we are unlikely to see extremely underdeveloped countries with no ties to the West among official candidates (Schimmelfennig and Scholz, 2008:194).

An obvious limitation of concentrating on a single determinant or even a single level of determinants in an analysis of a multifactorial phenomenon is the inability to produce a theoretical model of how different variables affect and counterbalance each other in producing a combined effect. In other words, there is no clarity as to the relative importance of variables at play. One of the few studies that do make an attempt to study the relative importance of the domestic factors against EU conditionality factors in the democratization outcomes is Glupker (Glupker, 2013). Focusing on EU conditionality in the areas of minority rights and anti-corruption policies, the author explores the subject by applying a number of determinants identified in the previous literature to two countries with similar historical paths but differing democratization outcomes - Croatia and Macedonia. The findings suggest that the strength of correlations between domestic factors and the effectiveness of EU conditionality vary for different cases and policy areas, whilst the effect of the EU-level factors is more stable. It is also worth noting that Glupker's results do not seem to support a considerable number of previously formulated hypotheses. Thus, political competitiveness seems to play by far a lesser role than argued by Vachudova (2005), whilst material incentives prove to be effective only at the earliest stages of the (pre-)accession process. The fact that assumptions from previous research projects are not supported highlights the need for more comparative studies that could shed light onto how transferable the previously acquired knowledge of the effectiveness of EU conditionality to new candidates is and what kind of generalizations can be made. For example, some studies credibly argue that the limited impact of EU conditionality in the Western Balkans may be related to weak state capacity (contested statehood and low administrative, financial and infrastructural capacity) most Western Balkan countries suffer from (Borzel, 2013). Relevant as it may be for the Western Balkans, state capacity cannot explain the lack of the EU's democratizing influence in Turkey, which does not suffer from the same problems as its Balkan neighbours. Whereas general democratization theories can in times be too broad to comprehensively explain the developments in specific EU candidates, too close a focus on specific factors drawn from a single case (or a single region) may result in findings that are not generalizable.

## Conclusion

The EU has played a massive role in democratization processes around its borders and further. Although the organization itself is a regional one, the influence of its bare existence and the policies it pursues extends far beyond a single region. That explains why the phenomenon of the influence of the European Union on democratization made its way into a whole array of subdisciplines such as International Relations, Comparative Politics, Regional Studies. The result is a distinct body of work with its own theoretical and conceptual assumptions, inspired by the more conventional research paradigms, but not dictated by them.

Because European Studies do not fall under a certain discipline per se, they are free from methodological and conceptual narrow-mindedness and adherence to a single research paradigm, and as such, they can utilize different theoretical and empirical approaches. As it has been demonstrated in this article, research into the effects of EU conditionality forms only a part of democratization studies as seen within a rationalist, constructivist or indeed any other kind of approach. At the same time, theoretical foundations and empirical findings originally stemming from other subdisciplines and research paradigms have allowed Europeanization studies to create its own theoretical models and assumptions. In order to investigate the transformative power of the EU and its active role in the democratization processes, future research needs to aim to fully capture both the domestic and the international dimensions, as well as the roles of the agents and the context.

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## **ТЕОРИИ ДЕМОКРАТИЗАЦИИ: МЕСТО ЕВРОСОЮЗНОЙ ПОЛИТИКИ КОНДИЦИОНАЛЬНОСТИ НА ТЕОРЕТИЧЕСКОЙ КАРТЕ**

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### **Аннотация**

Одной из основных задач политики кондициональности Евросоюза является продвижение стабильности и демократии в близлежащих регионах. Таким образом, участие в процессе вступления в ЕС, построенном на принципе кондициональности, может быть рассмотрено как фактор, влияющий на процессы демократизации в странах-кандидатах. Данная статья стремится определить место изучения индуцированной Евросоюзом демократизации и европеизации в странах-кандидатах как отдельного направления научных исследований в более широком контексте теоретического изучения демократизации в целом. В статье обсуждаются разнообразные теории и теоретические подходы к изучению демократизации, включая теорию диффузии норм (Risse, 1999) и теорию linkage/leverage (Levitsky and Way, 2002). Рассмотрев, как в рамках уже сложившихся теоретических подходов была и может быть теоретически проанализирована индуцированная Евросоюзом демократизация, автор статьи переходит к описанию и анализу нового подхода — модели внешних стимулов (External Incentives Model; Schimmelfennig, 2003), начало которому было положено развивающимся направлением научной мысли, посвященной изучению конкретно проблемы европеизации. Таким образом, в статье продемонстрировано, что изучение демократизации и европеизации стран-кандидатов не только побудило к применению уже имеющихся теоретических подходов в рамках различных субдисциплин, но и стимулировало разработку принципиально новой теоретической базы, посвященной изучению непосредственно европеизации стран-кандидатов.

**Ключевые слова:** кондициональность; ЕС; расширение ЕС; демократизация; европеизация.