

## **Credible commitment or incredible demands? EU conditionality in the Western Balkans**

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With its conditionality policy, the EU seeks to promote democracy and foster peace and stability in its direct neighbourhood. However, the project of European integration, let alone external European integration, is facing challenging times. EU membership conditionality is generally considered to be a powerful and effective tool employed by the EU in order to foster democratisation outside its borders. In Europeanisation literature, much research has been done into the transformative power of the EU and democratisation in Central and Eastern European countries. Researchers tend to agree that the EU with the incentives provided by the possibility of accession to the Union indeed played a catalytic role in democratic consolidation in the aforementioned countries (Schimmelfennig et al, 2003), and that credible membership conditionality was an individually necessary variable explaining the success of democratisation (Schimmelfennig et al, 2006). However, after the success of the 2004 enlargement round, the EU's approach to membership conditionality altered. With the credibility of the membership incentives questioned, the transformative power of the European Union may not prove strong enough to overcome the difficult historical legacy of the Western Balkans (WB).

This study assessed the size and the credibility of membership incentives for the Western Balkan countries building up on a theoretical framework set forward by the External Incentives Model (EIM), widely used in Europeanisation research (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2004). The EIM captures a rationalist cost-benefit calculation on the part of the target governments. It starts with a 'domestic equilibrium' (the initial conditions in the country), which 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, it is not only the size of the incentives that matters for compliance, but also their credibility.

Credibility of the incentives reflects how tight the rewards are tied to compliance and how plausible it is that compliance will indeed be rewarded with the promised benefits. Being the sole agent responsible for assessing compliance and allocating the rewards, the EU is the main bearer of credibility. In order to offer a country a credible membership perspective, the EU itself must be committed to the accession process. For that commitment to be credible, the EU should be able and willing to pay out the promised benefits if a candidate country fulfils the conditions. Additionally, the conditions according to which the EU judges the candidates' compliance should be clearly determined. When conditions are vague or ambiguous, they can become a 'moving target', jeopardising the candidate states' confidence that compliance with the conditions will definitely lead to acquiring the rewards.

Having assessed the differences between the EU's approach in the Western Balkan and the CEECs and evaluating them against a number of factors identified in previous research, it was established that candidate countries are indeed faced with more uncertainty when it comes to

their membership perspective. Whilst the EU remains committed to the enlargement process as it still falls under the EU's interests, the ability of the EU to speak with a single voice is questioned. The enlargement process serves the EU's interests only as long as it helps to foster peace and stability in its direct neighbourhood. To safeguard itself from admitting unprepared countries in, as some argue was the case with Bulgaria and Romania, the EU introduced a number of additional phases to the pre-accession process, making the process lengthier and the membership perspective even more remote. At the same time, the EU strives to counterbalance the effects of the declining credibility by showcasing its commitment. However, proclaimed commitment is not the only factor that determines the overall level of credibility, which is still lower than it was for the CEECs. The EU is prepared to welcome the Western Balkans, but only after they have achieved a sufficient level of democracy and stability. On the one hand, the rewards are tied to compliance, which is the epitome of conditionality policy. On the other hand, given the initial conditions in the Western Balkans, achieving democracy and stability is likely to be a long and difficult process. After years of participating in the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP), the Western Balkans are still suffering from deficient institutions, clientelism, organised crime and other deep structural and behavioural problems.

That is not to say that the WB countries did not comply with the EU's demands throughout the SAP. However, not least because the EU chose to pressure for compliance in other areas, such as cooperation with the International Tribunal or normalisation of relations with neighbouring countries, most of the lingering, Balkan-wide problems have not been resolved. Arresting a war criminal or signing a normalisation agreement may require a certain leader coming to power, but it is at the end of the day a single-action episode of compliance. Compliance in other areas, however, may require longer periods of complex reforms and their implementation. As such, an adequate resolution of structural problems requires time no less than effort. In other words, after years of the SAP and considerable, although not sufficient, compliance with a number of the EU's demands, the Western Balkans still have a long way to go, with membership perspective being real, but worryingly distant.

### **Источники и литература**

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