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The Eastern partnership in Georgia: Europeanizing civil society?

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ABSTRACT

Through the Eastern Partnership the EU specifically attempts to strengthen democracy in Georgia. Lacking strong conditionality, the EU has to rely on a different approach to democracy assistance, such as a network governance mode. The implementation of EU policies has led to an expanding institutional network where NGO inclusion has been strengthened. However, this form of network governance operates within the realities of the domestic political and international context, influencing its effectiveness and impact. Despite the increased involvement of NGOs in EU policies the role and impact of civil society within Georgian politics and society has remained limited.

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1. Introduction

The European Union (EU) has increasingly stepped up its involvement in its neighbourhood during the last twenty years. Confronted with a new geopolitical reality after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the fall of its satellite regimes in Central and Eastern Europe the EU needed to come up with a coherent policy towards the region. A number of targeted policy programmes such as Poland and Hungary: Assistance for the Restructuring of the Economy (PHARE) or Technical Assistance for the Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS) were created to cope with the transition towards democracy and market based economies of these countries. Already in 1993 the accession of the Central and Eastern European countries was explicitly stated as the main objective for the EU's policy for the region ([European Commission, 2012](#)). From that moment until the actual enlargement rounds of 2004 and 2007, conditionality constituted the main mechanism through which the EU influenced its neighbouring countries. The ultimate goal of EU membership was the co-called golden carrot that could outweigh the costs of implementing changes towards democratization and liberalization incurred by the accession countries.

Only during the last years of the accession process, institutions and politicians within the EU started to reflect upon how the EU should cope with the imminent reality of Eastward shifting borders. Confronted with an internal enlargement fatigue, further accession of Eastern European countries was off the table, making use of the tried and tested mechanism of conditionality impossible. The EU, being the *sui generis* international organization believed that it could not rely on conventional instruments of foreign policy. As a result, the EU needed to introduce a new form of policy that would enable it to influence its neighbourhood without eventually making the countries concerned members of the EU. The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) was the EU's answer to this challenge. Launched in 2004, this policy sought to emulate the previous successes of the accession process in the countries bordering the EU. From the onset the ENP was criticized by both practitioners and analysts as being maladjusted to the new context, underfinanced and Eurocentric ([Kelly, 2006](#)). These issues were partly addressed through the introduction of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) in 2008, which strengthened relations between the EU and the Eastern neighbours both bilaterally and multilaterally. This shows how relations between the EU and its Eastern neighbours have been slowly evolving over the last ten years.

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The development of these policies has been the subject of different strands of research and theorizing. Analyses within a conditionality based framework, often used when studying the earlier rounds of enlargement, appear no longer applicable and fail to encompass the specific nature of ENP and EaP (Sasse, 2008). Other scholars looked at these policies through the lens of foreign policy studies. The EU only has limited explicit competences in this matter through its Common Foreign and Security Policy; conventional frameworks for analysis thus always need to be broadened and adapted to the specificities of the EU. This leads to the conceptualization of the EU as an international actor going beyond the traditional modes of foreign policy to more long term, overarching and multi level and actor modes (Keukeleire and MacNaughtan, 2008). This article applies an external governance approach to the study of the ENP and EaP. It does not start from the theoretical underpinnings of the frameworks mostly applied during accession that focused on conditionality, the logic of consequence and hierarchical relations. Instead it looks to how the EU projects its policies and the connected modes of governance externally. With the lesser importance of conditionality, other mechanisms may have become more decisive in determining relations between the EU and its Eastern neighbours. This leads to less direct ways of Europeanization: through the detour of external governance this framework still specifically inquires into how the EU influences the domestic level of non-member states (Schimmelfennig, 2009). Here, this theoretical framework is applied to the case of Georgia for the period between 2006 and 2012 when relations between the EU and Georgia were expanding under the ENP and EaP. The aim of this article is not so much to further develop existing theories on external governance and Europeanization, but rather to give a hard case example linking theory to empirical data.

The first part of the article offers an overview of the theoretical foundations of the concept of external governance. I give a brief overview of the ascent of the concept and link it to the debate on external Europeanization. In the second part the policies of the ENP and EaP are discussed; both the growing body of policy specific institutions and the financing is dealt with and this is fitted in the theoretical model. Subsequently I look into how Georgian Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have reacted to these policies, their institutional inclusion and whether they make use of the opportunities created by the ENP and EaP. Finally, the influence of the EU is framed in the wider domestic and international setting in order to check the applied theoretical framework to empirical dynamics on the ground.

2. Theoretical framework

Literature on the process of Europeanization within the EU has demonstrated convincingly that member states indeed have undergone the process of Europeanization, although in an unexpected manner (Featherstone and Radaelli, 2003; Graziano and Vink, 2006; Schimmelfennig, 2009): the equal pressure the EU has exerted on the different member states have facilitated domestic reforms but has not led to convergence of national policies and politics. To solve this puzzle, the literature has drawn on two different strands of institutionalized thinking: rationalism and constructivism. The former focuses on cost-benefit calculations of rational actors in order to explain why certain actors are in favour of Europeanization and is rooted in the logic of consequentialism. Domestic changes as a result of Europeanization thus only materialize when strategically motivated domestic actors make use of opportunities and constraints at the European level. The latter draws on a normative logic of appropriateness which argues that actors are guided by collective understandings of what constitutes socially accepted behaviour. By adhering to social expectations, new rules, norms, practices and structures of meaning emerge which can be incorporated into domestic structures (Börzel, 2010). Although other perspectives have been developed, it is safe to say that these two approaches have dominated the initial phase of research on Europeanization.

The accession process led to a boom in Europeanization research on the impact of the European level on the aspiring member states. The existing models based on rationalist mechanisms and socialization were adapted to the specific context of the accession of the post-communist countries. The communist heritage weighed heavily on the domestic structure of these countries. At a moment when they were still coping with the transformation process away from the former communist structures, these countries were simultaneously confronted with the demands from the accession process. Societal and economic actors were not as developed as in the “old” member states, making their incorporation into the implementation of EU policies unfeasible. As a result, the accession process strongly centred around national governments as the main actors of implementing EU demanded reforms. These reforms were more profound and extensive compared to the “old” member states. The accession countries had to adopt the entire body of EU laws and regulations, the so-called *acquis communautaire*, in the course of only a couple of years. Through the use of conditionality, the EU was able to pressure candidate countries into adapting their legislations and introducing the demanded reforms. The extensive use of conditionality fits into the rationalist institutional approach and most studies on accession Europeanization concluded that this form of Europeanization had dominated the Eastward enlargement of the EU (Grabbe, 2006; Vachudova, 2005). However, studies showed that socialization did also occur, although generally in less decisive ways than conditionality based Europeanization (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2005). The rhetoric on the “return to Europe” served as a rallying point for both social actors and governments pushing for domestic change regarding democratization or liberalization. This way, EU accession did modify existing norms and values, leading to a reinforced identification with Europe (Risse, 2010). This predominance of Europeanization through conditionality has provoked discussion on the nature of Europeanization, with claims of Europeanization being attained only on paper and not on the ground (Börzel, 2010).

With the introduction of the ENP, studies on how the EU impacts the domestic level shifted to countries in the neighbourhood of the EU. These countries from North Africa, the Middle East and the Eastern neighbourhood of the EU are a heterogeneous group based on their political, economic and social characteristics. First analyses generally built on the

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