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Conditionality: Western & Regional Perspectives

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In Spring 2017, the Center for Social Sciences launched the Eurasia Democratic Security Network project funded by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). EDSN established a platform for discussing and addressing issues related to the Euro-Atlantic integration and conditionality. In July 2017, CSS organized kick-off workshop involving the first EDSN cohort. The aim of the workshop was to establish the terms and scope of further discussions and activities of the newly initiated network, aimed at exploring avenues for promoting democracy and the rule of law

BOTTOM LINE

- Western dealings with Eurasia are implicitly conditional.
- For Georgia, the absence of “macro” conditionality is compensated by micro “carrots.”
- In Central Asia, there is little sense of the West as an actor.
- For Azerbaijan, the United States, not the EU, is seen as the main locus of the West.

The Eurasia Democratic Security Network is supported by the National Endowment for Democracy. For more information on EDSN, please visit: <http://edsn.css.ge/>.

in changing geopolitical circumstances of Eastern Europe and Eurasia. The following paper is based on the proceedings of this workshop and covers the concept of conditionality and Western versus regional perspectives. Other topics—conditionality and geopolitics, as well as the role of conditionality in economic growth and democratic development, will be discussed in separate papers.

Conditionality: Concept and Reality

Defining conditionality within the realities of Eastern European and Eurasian politics can be a challenge. It can be defined on two levels, depending on the scope and objectives. In general terms, the definition of conditionality includes the application of political incentives from Western countries and institutions in exchange for adopting more liberal and democratic attitudes, values, and practices by regional states. This definition also implies changing perceptions about the teleology of political change by regional governments, accepting democracy and free market as ultimate end goals of the political process.

Understood more narrowly, conditionality is about offering material resources and technical support in exchange for the delivery of more efficient governance and the relaxation of market regulations or state interventions.

Does conditionality have durable political weight or—in cruder terms—does it exist at all anymore? One way of answering this question is to define conditionality in terms of power: does conditionality make regional

governments carry out the policies that they would not have carried out otherwise?

Academically, there is a methodological question about causality between conditionality and actual change. It is very difficult to disentangle conditionality as an intervening variable in many cases of transformation. Also, even if conditionality can be identified as a causal variable, there is an issue of measuring its actual consequences. Further down, there are more questions about substantive issues as well: Can we meaningfully compare the current conditionality policy with that of the 1990s? Does conditionality have any meaning without the promise of European and Euro-Atlantic integration as an eventuality for the

regional states? Is conditionality losing its effect due to geopolitical changes, ideological struggles, or economic transformation?

Moreover, there are more conditionalities than meets the eye. Alternative notions of conditionality have emerged. One of these is

Russian conditionality, such as membership in the Eurasian Economic Union. The Russian version of conditionality is clearly different from the Western one.

Russian conditionality resembles a deal with a mafia boss: to “make an offer” that one “cannot refuse.” Also, there is a challenge of disentangling general relationships (foreign affairs) from conditionality in bilateral relations between Western countries and institutions on the one hand and regional states on the other. With all these caveats, discussing conditionality in Eastern Europe and Eurasia is a promising way of constructing a discussion about regional affairs and their future.

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Western Perspectives, Regional Perceptions

Pre-1991 history and perceptions of the West largely determined attitudes in the 1990s, which enabled the relative success of conditionality in that decade. However, this leverage diminished in the subsequent decades. The United States never applied conditionality formally. In fact, Western conditionality, in general, may imply “invented leverage”, which depends on interpretation and perceptions by actors on both sides. Conditionality is internalized by the West in its dealings with Eastern European and Eurasian states. On the opposite end, however, things are more complicated. There may have a mismatch between what the West offered and what the regional states perceived.

While the Western attitude was more about substantive change, conditionality might have been “instrumentalized” by local elites, used it as either geopolitical tool for balancing off Russia or as means of strengthening their own political position vis-à-vis their respective opposition forces.

The basic premise of conditionality was the supremacy of Western political and economic systems over post-Communist and post-Soviet experiences. This premise has come under scrutiny lately. More recently, the United States may no longer serve as a credible model for post-Soviet states, which has diminished Washington’s ability (even in case of willingness) to employ “assistance with strings attached” as means of conditionality and to promote democracy regionally.

In order to succeed, there should be more substance to conditionality than the simple exchange of favors, materialized in terms of

rational quid pro quo politics; the subjective element of identity politics may be as important as the practical applications of conditionality policies in governance, economy, and democratic transformation. Conditionality without a normative element is insufficient as an effective means of policy. For instance, for high-performing European neighborhood states like Georgia, the absence of conditionality on macro level (such as a European Union membership perspective) is compensated by micro “carrots” (such as the visa liberalization between Georgia and the EU, etc.).

However, such a “micro” approach may not be sufficient for the scale of reforms that would be adequate to Georgia’s needs and challenges on political, economic, or democratic fronts. But the normative element of conditionality is not confined only to the promise of membership in Western institutions. The normative element is strongly present also in Western understanding of conditionality, which is centered on human development, besides economic growth and economic development.

Among the Central Asian states, even in Kyrgyzstan, which is relatively more democratic, there has never been any incentive to join any Western international institutions. This is despite Kyrgyzstan’s relatively positive legacy from the 1990s, such as relative political openness and some government accountability. The image of the West in Central Asia evolved from the notions of “donor”, “guardian”, and “partner” (especially in the wake of the opening of American bases in Central Asia after 9/11 terrorist attacks) towards an increasing notion of “enemy” (or at least a kind of threat) by the

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end of the 2000s, due to growing phobias of associated with perceived “Western values.” For Central Asian states, there is no “West” as a unified actor and the regional elites understand it very well.

For Azerbaijan, a relatively unique case in the region, the West is primarily defined as the United States, not the European Union, and the most coveted part of Western engagement are greater security guarantees against Russian or Iranian influence. There was a consecutive failure of attempts to establish meaningful conditionality with Azerbaijan by the Council of Europe, the United States, Turkey, and the Russian Federation as early as 1994 following the Karabakh war ceasefire and Baku’s accession to the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

By comparison, under President Saakashvili (from 2004 to 2013), Georgia managed to create “false leverage”: Tbilisi sold its democratic credentials to Western partners and positioned itself as an indispensable nation for enabling democratic change in the wider region.

One major aspect of a conditionality strategy are proper and adequate communications about what conditions entail for regional countries. The goal of such communication should be to explain to regional populations why democracy is important even without conditionality. The lack of clarity of why democracy is beneficial in its own right undermines conditionality’s credibility as a policy, as many regional governments view democracy as unimportant on its own. ◆

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The **Eurasia Democratic Security Network** (EDSN) is a project by the Center for Social Sciences with the generous funding of National Endowment for Democracy (NED). The project aims to cultivate an international network of scholars and practitioners to further develop the intellectual and public policy rationale for the maintenance of Euro-Atlantic conditionality as a peacemaking and economic dynamizing force. Particularly aimed to aspirant states, EDSN also advocates for liberal democratization on its own merits, such as through the increasingly and variously established linkages between democracy, national security, and economic development.



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