IDEALISM OR REALISM IN THE PROCESS OF EU ENLARGEMENT: THE CASE OF SERBIA

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Abstract
This article examines the ongoing process of Serbia’s accession to the European Union from a realist perspective. While much of the discourse surrounding European Union enlargement has celebrated the re-uniting of Europe, enlargement has been a success as it has mutually fulfilled the interests of EU member and accession countries. Thus, the motivation of Serbia as an accession country is to secure stability, modernization and economic growth. The process is best understood through a realist framework that can explain the motivations and incentives of actors. In this realist model EU member states are playing a two-level game where their interests are aggregated at the EU level. However, domestic constituencies and electorates in the EU have become less supportive of integration and enlargement. Furthermore, the key foreign policy challenges currently faced by the EU will not be resolved by enlargement. This questions its future utility for both member states and accession countries.

Keywords: EU, Serbia, enlargement, accession, realism, two-level game

Introduction
The enlargement process has been described in rhetorical terms of reuniting Europe and restoring the continent undivided. However, the impetus of European Union (EU) accession in the case of Serbia has been driven by the interests of member states in a strategically important region. Similarly, the willingness of Serbia as a candidate country to undergo the rigors of the accession process is motivated by the understanding that accession will strengthen and consolidate a relatively weak state. Yet, in recent years this impetus of enlargement has slowed. The economic recession since 2008 has spilled over into the enlargement process and the member states are less
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focused on accession countries. Successive Euro-crises, instability in the EU ‘near abroad’ such as north Africa and Ukraine, and wavering British commitment to membership have undermined member states’ interests in the Balkans. Perhaps more importantly the rise of populist parties of both the left and right in EU member states has changed the domestic sources of foreign policy in key member states and diverted member states’ interests and attention from further enlargement. Thus, the paper will argue that EU accession in the case of Serbia can be primarily understood from a realist perspective. However, changing interests of member states and of Serbia itself mean that accession is becoming less of an interest for both sets of parties. This provides an important alternative perspective on the enlargement process: if the key motivation for the accession of a strategically important candidate country is primarily realist and instrumentalist then it is questionable whether accession will occur at all.

The argument will be made that member states aggregate their interests in the region, namely first and second order security, and the EU pursues this through the tool of conditionality. The EU is playing “a two-level game” where at the domestic level it must adopt EU policies appealing to domestic constituencies, i.e. member states (Putnam 1988). This means that EU institutions, in particular the Commission, subjugate its enlargement agenda to member state preferences at a time when there is little appetite amongst member states to pursue deeper integration or further enlargement. At the international level, the EU tries to accommodate national interests by successfully using conditionality in the accession countries. This paper will argue that the motivation of the EU for enlargement in the Western Balkans is primarily instrumental with the primary aim to extend its writ into the Balkans and stabilize the region to ensure that there is no repeat of the war and instability of the 1990s. The policy of member states, and as a result of the European Union, has been to sustain their position in the Balkans relative to competitors (in particular Russia) and to shape the milieu of a potentially unstable neighboring region. However, this overall policy aim must also be reconciled with changing domestic politics in key member states. As the EU has undergone centrifugal forces of economic crises such as repeated Euro crises and external pressures, such as Russia’s intervention in Ukraine so have the interests of key member states changed.

On the Serbian side the motivation for EU accession is almost purely instrumental. Serbia, with a relatively unstable party system and little genuine public enthusiasm for the EU, regards membership primarily as a means to an end. This end is primarily based on a realist rationale of strengthening the relatively weak institutions of the Serbian state. Thus the “EU is indispensable as the state cannot offer the same measure of security and prosperity” (Milward
...p. 3). Just as European integration rescued the nation state after the Second World so the accession process will bring Serbia on a path of security and economic modernization. The secondary objective is to ensure greater economic prosperity. However, as this paper will examine in more detail, there is decreasing public support for accession amongst the general public in Serbia. At the international level, the Serbian government has treaded a line between greater commitment to EU accession and a closer relationship with Russia. In turn, the questions of Kosovo and Serbia’s relationship with Russia have influenced public perceptions of the EU. Coupled with the highly technocratic and lengthy accession process, this has negatively affected the perception of future EU membership in the accession countries and, in time, potentially reduces the incentives for enlargement.

In supporting this argument the first section of the paper critically examines the key theoretical models used to explain EU enlargement. In the second section the policy of the EU in the Balkans is analyzed. The paper then examines how this realist approach is matched on the Serbian side. The paper concludes by exploring lessons beyond the Serbian case, in particular, broader questions of accession countries’ motivation for membership and the process and goals of enlargement itself.

**A Realist Approach to Serbia’s EU Accession**

The theoretical literature provides explanatory models that can be roughly divided into two categories, constructivist and rationalist (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier 2002). A rationalist approach renders institutions secondary to actors’ interests while a constructivist approach argues that interests are shaped by institutions. In analyzing the Serbian case a constructivist approach has little explanatory force. The key precepts of constructivism are absent in the case of Serbian accession. In particular, the principal assumption underlying constructivist analyses, namely a clear alignment of values between the applicant state and member state is lacking in the case of Serbia. To paraphrase Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, who wrote of the characteristics of applicant state politics, it is highly questionable whether Serbia subscribes to the integrationist project or even fully adheres to the liberal-democratic value foundations of the EU (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier 2002). While international organizations may influence the process of democratization (Pevehouse 2002) any such influence from the EU has not run contrary to Serbia’s pragmatic and piecemeal compliance with the EU. The model of Europeanization (Grabbe 2001; Radaelli 2008), whereby governance models in applicant states become increasingly similar to the EU, is not inconsistent with a realist interpretation. The key mechanism of Europeanization is conditionality, namely if an accession...
country implements the types of governance demanded by the EU and key member states it will be subsequently rewarded, ultimately with EU membership. The member states of the EU have an interest in propagating its own rules, legal order and models of governance.

Thus a realist based assessment of these cost benefit calculations motivates not only the Serbian government’s position but that of the EU as well. Waltz’s argument that “only when the United States decides upon a policy have European countries been able to follow it” (Waltz 2000) is unfair as EU member states have consistently articulated a policy of enlargement in Central and Eastern Europe. Germany in particular has interests in the Balkans that it has articulated through the EU and conditionality. While Germany remains a ‘civilian power’, as its participation in the 1999 Kosovo intervention demonstrated (Hyde-Price 2001) it still has a security interest in maintaining stability in the Balkans.

Indeed it is questionable whether a constructivist model accurately reflects the preferences and actions of the EU itself in regard to the Balkans. Much of the discourse around the accession of central and eastern European countries in 2004 celebrated their ‘return to Europe’ (European Parliament 2001). However, this idealistic vision has been absent from EU policy towards Serbia and the Balkans generally. Successive wars, refugees and general violence and instability rendered former Yugoslavia, in particular Serbia and Bosnia – Herzegovina, the object of EU member states’ interests. These included the creation of lasting peace, stability in the Balkans and ensuring that any further political fragmentation would be peaceful and negotiated. This comprises part of a broader overall aim to ensure that the ‘security community’ of the EU is extended to and embedded in former Yugoslavia (Kirchner 2006). However, this focus and interest of member states to the enlargement process has waned with increasing normalization in the Balkans, various crises both within the EU (e.g. the euro) and without (e.g. Ukraine) and, most importantly, increasing levels of populism and anti-EU sentiment within member states.

For realists, in an anarchic international system it is the preferences of nation states that determine the enlargement process. In the case of the EU these are articulated by the member states, particularly larger member states. Whilst there have some differences amongst member states amongst policy questions in the Balkans, for example the recognition of Kosovo's independence, the primary goal of member states in the Balkans has been the maintenance of first order security. While in reality this has been provided by NATO, who deployed stabilization forces to both Bosnia and Kosovo, this is in line with large member
states policy. In terms of second order security, member states have aggregated their preferences and delegated the EU, primarily the Commission through the conditionality tool, to articulate their interests. On the other side of the accession equation, it is the applicant state that interacts with the EU. In the case of Serbia this is articulated, albeit often incoherently, through the state as an actor.

The section on Serbia below will outline how Serbia’s approach to the EU is primarily instrumentalist, there is little European identity and enlargement is mainly regarded as a method of strengthening weak, post-transition institutions of the Serbian state. Rather than aligning the country with European ideals of liberalism and democracy successive Serbian governments have voiced support for EU accession only insofar as it bolsters the Serbian state. The goal of Serbian policy has been to use the accession process instrumentally to support its own long-term existence.

The choice of Serbia as a case study is due to the fact that it is of topical interest as it is likely to be the next country to accede to the EU. However, Serbia is also worthy of examination due to the importance of certain issues have not been as salient for other accession countries. The issues of cooperation with the ICTY and the status of Kosovo and Serbia’s relationship with it are not issues that have affected other accession countries (with the exception of Cyprus and Croatia). The Serbian case is also of note due to the Serbian public’s often negative perception of the EU, the ‘West’ and the idea of European integration.

**EU Member States and the Enlargement Process**

As argued above, member states are the key actors in the enlargement process. However, the EU acts as an intervening variable between member state’s interests and external actors (Hyde-Price 2006). Member states articulate their interests through the EU’s foreign policy. At the EU level member state governments aggregate views of domestic interest groups, whether government ministries or national electorates. Thus, Putnam’s model of the two-level game is particularly useful in exploring the process of EU enlargement. The accession process can be categorized as an international negotiation. The game is played at both the national level and the international level. Thus, “at a national level, domestic groups pursue their interest by pressurizing the government to adopt favorable policies, and politicians seek power by constructing coalitions among those groups” (Putnam 1988, p. 434). At the international level, national governments seek to maximize their own ability to satisfy domestic pressures while minimizing the adverse consequences of foreign developments (Putnam 1988, p. 434). The EU is not a national actor and
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is negotiating with national states during the accession process. However, the EU is an actor on the international stage, both de jure and de facto (Bretherton & Vogler 2006). The benefit of using Putnam's two-level game in to accession is that it is underpinned by a clear cost-benefit analysis at both the domestic and international level and thus provides a clearer explanatory model for member state actors at both the EU and national level.

Member states are, by definition, national actors and they have domestic constituents who have preferences. The difference between the EU accession process and other two-level games, such as trade negotiations, lies in the relative power of the EU vis-à-vis accession countries. As this paper will argue, EU member states are able to use pressure to induce changes in accession countries through the attraction of membership and the political conditionality that accompanies it. However, the incentive for membership in the case of Serbia is largely instrumental and is diminishing as the process continues. In her analysis of political conditionality in the Balkans Noutcheva asks “do the arguments based on cost-benefit calculations predominate the thinking of political actors in government? (Noutcheva 2012, p. 28). With some notable exceptions, such as the Czech Republic, there has been a consensus amongst candidate countries’ political and economic elites in support of accession. However, Serbia may be replicating a pattern identified in other accession countries where there is initial support for integration followed by increasing skepticism regarding the normative basis of enlargement, in particular regarding economically liberal values of the single market (Rohrschneider & Whitefield, 2006). The key difference with Serbia is that this debate has been rendered more salient by non-economic issues, in particular the future of Kosovo and cooperation with the ICTY. However, the cost benefit analysis is underpinned by a realist assumption of the benefits for Serbia. This cost benefit analysis will not guarantee that public opinion is favorable to integration. Gherghina has shown that there is a correlation between worsening economic performance and negative attitudes to integration in recently acceded countries (Gherghina 2010).

There is no doubt that enlargement is considered to be a success story having a democratizing effect in accession countries and ensuring the alignment of national systems with the EU legislation and policies (Vachudova 2014; Epstein & Jacoby 2014). It is also considered to be a most effective foreign policy tool, one that has rendered the EU, through its constituent member states, a truly regional actor (Smith 2011; Grabbe 2014). The objectives of member states through the enlargement process are to extend peace, stability and prosperity and expand their influence in the accession countries, with the rhetorical objective of reuniting the European continent by building a federation of nation
states. However, this federalist idea of further European integration has changed in regard to countries of Western Balkans to reflect a more realist approach. This is the result of the domestic level game within the EU. Domestic constituents within the EU have either become less focused on enlargement as well as more openly Euro-skeptic. Euro-skepticism is understood here as a “public rejection of the EU and public refusals to provide more legitimate power to supranational institutions to deal with policy issues” (Lubbers & Scheepers 2005, p. 224). Finally, since 2011 the EU has faced instability in its ‘near-abroad’ as civil war and instability spread through much of North Africa and Syria. The first order security of EU member states has come under greater threat from these situations than any lag in the enlargement process. The pressure to react to these situations has proved much stronger than the longer-term project of enlargement.

Nevertheless, the articulation of member states’ interests in the enlargement process is not a new development. The importance of member state interests was evident very early on in the process with the introduction of several methodological mechanisms by member states after the enlargement in 2004, including “the introduction of ‘benchmarks’, changes in the very application procedure and through the enhanced emphasis on ‘absorption capacity’” (Hillion 2010, p. 18). As Hillion argues, these changes embodied creeping nationalization of the EU enlargement policy with the objective of operationalizing the member states’ desire to control and slow down the pace of enlargement (Hillion 2010, p. 18). This change is concurrent with an increasingly realist EU at every policy level. One can argue that since the start of the economic downturn in 2008 the Commission has not been a key proponent for deeper integration. At the same time, the key policy mechanisms to deal with the Euro-crisis have been intergovernmental and ad hoc such as Euro bailout troika and the European Council. Likewise, the Euro-crisis and the rise of Euro-skepticism rendered the voice and preferences of member states even more acute. It became evident that all the EU’s political capital for integration will be deployed to addressing these urgent issues leaving aside the discussion on further enlargement. The internal dynamics of integration moved the enlargement down the list of priorities and exposed a lack of federalist agenda in regard to enlargement.

The first trigger was the beginning of the Euro crisis marked by the collapse of the Lehman Brothers in September 2008 and the urgent need to preserve the smooth functioning of financial institutions in the EU. Since then there have been successive banking, financial and economic crises across the EU. This has been the focus of the European political elite both at the national and EU level.
Several bouts of reactive policy making continued right up until the 2015 agreement with Greece on a renewed bail-out. The ongoing response to the financial crisis in Europe has lasted nearly seven years and has diverted attention and resources away from EU enlargement.

The impact of growing Euro-skepticism in large EU member states on enlargement should not be underestimated either. Although the EU institutions are relatively stable and the EU enlargement policy remained intact over the years despite some opposition to further enlargement, it seems that in recent years the EU has had to reconcile the EU institutions’ federalist enlargement agenda with the internal perception of enlargement in member states. In time, Euro-skepticism became an integral part of the political landscape of most member states and the EU institutions had to moderate their pro-European discourse (Brack & Costa 2012). This discourse has come from both parties of the left and right. Usherwood and Startin identify three types of Euro-skeptic party; single issue pro-sovereignty parties (such as UKIP in the UK), parties of the radical right (such as Geert Wilder’s PVV in the Netherlands) and parties of the radical left (Syriza in Greece) (Usherwood & Startin 2013). Many of these parties are either in government or supporting governing coalitions and have performed well at the 2014 European Parliament elections. The reasons for the success of these parties are varied but the effect has been a marked skepticism towards both deeper integration and EU enlargement in many member states. The Euro-skepticism is arising at the EU level too. Although at the EU level the European Commission is considered to be a supranational and pro-European institution, recent studies demonstrate the existence of a sizeable minority of inter-governmentalists who believe that member states should be the key players in the EU policy process (Dehousse & Thompson 2012). The rise of Euro-skepticism in member states also led to the increasing number of Euro-skeptics not just in the European Parliament but also in the Council of the EU (Brack & Costa 2012). There was also a succession of Council presidencies led by states whose governments are openly Euro-skeptic (Brack & Costa 2012). The erosion of public support for the European integration is also noticeable in member states, in particular in France, Germany and the UK (Medrano 2012).

Growing Euro-skepticism can be seen in the trend in public opinion against enlargement. The number of countries where the general public is against the enlargement outnumbers countries whose publics are in favor. According to the latest results from 2013, there is a strong raise of opposition in four EU member states where there is already a steady trend of opposition to enlargement – in Austria, France, Finland and Germany (Eurobarometer 80 2013, p. 130). This change is particularly pronounced in countries that have been traditionally pro-
integration and pro-enlargement such as Italy and Netherlands (Eurobarometer 80 2013, p. 130). This is consistent with Putnam’s two-level game model, where member state governments are aggregating the interests of key constituencies.

These sentiments within EU member states have been reflected in the greater electoral success of anti-EU populist parties of both the left and right. Even the mainstream parties are pushing in the Euro-skeptic direction, while federalist proponents want to “keep the show together” rather to expand to troublesome countries. The rise of asylum applications from candidate countries or potential candidates prompted even more the growing Euro-skepticism in some EU member states. According to latest data from the Europe's Asylum Office there was a 30% increase in number of applications compared to 2012, mostly from Western Balkans countries (EASO Annual Report 2014). Immigration issues are widely used by the right wing populist parties which are making an explicit causal link between the immigration and unemployment. For example, the UKIP poster campaign for local and EP elections in 2014, explicitly claiming that immigrants were taking jobs, was a good illustration. Finally, the perennial British debate on Europe and its latest manifestation as a referendum will also distract from the enlargement process. On a more fundamental level, it could also provide opponents of EU accession in candidate countries with an argument that if a relatively politically and economically successful country such as the UK prefers to leave the EU, then there is little reason for countries such as Serbia and Macedonia to join.

EU international level game and use of conditionality
The international level game entails the endeavor of national governments to maximize their own ability to satisfy domestic pressures, while minimizing the adverse consequences of foreign developments (Putnam 1988, p. 434). As noted above, while the EU is an international organization it acts like a national actor in the enlargement process. The Commission is delegated by member states to undertake negotiations with candidate countries and impose conditionality. It means that the EU, at the international level, has to achieve its own institutional interests while at the same time ensuring that its international agenda is in line with member states’ views of further enlargement. Likewise, the EU not only has to aspire to satisfy its interests but must prove to be a credible and singular actor at the international level. The use of conditionality use is even more important now when member states suffer from enlargement fatigue and tight conditionality is a prefrect risk mitigation tool (Szolucha 2010). In its latest Enlargement Strategy 2013-2014 the Commission underlined that “the accession process today is more rigorous and comprehensive than in the past” and it is based “on strict but fair conditionality with progress towards membership
dependent on the steps taken by each country to meet the established criteria” (European Commission 2013, p. 2). This approach reflects the EU institutions’ awareness of the internal dynamics of integration and how it influences its mandate at the international level. This is best illustrated by Juncker’s view of the enlargement process. In outlining his five priorities during his term, Juncker openly admits that “pause from enlargement so we can consolidate what has been achieved among the 28” (Juncker 2014). He also estimates that no further enlargement will happen in next five years as a result of the need to address internal challenges within the EU (Juncker 2014).

The EU has always regarded itself as a value-based community embracing all those who are committed and share the same values which are expressed through membership criteria (Bretherton & Vogler 2006). Its enthusiasm for enlargement to countries of central and eastern Europe was an expression of the federalist intention to “reconstruct European's identity by returning this region back to Europe” (Bretherton & Vogler 2006, p. 25). There was a general agreement among most European elites and influential member states such as Germany that enlargement is an imperative both for the accession countries and the EU; a “sine qua non for the CEECs” and “the history-centered values-based Community focused on reuniting Europe and the need for reconciliation” (Schmidt 2012, p. 178). The EU has tried to bolster the extension of its political and legal order to new members by certain post-accession mechanisms, in particular Article 7 TEU. This has had mixed results in Hungary and Romania (Sedelmeier 2014).

However, the EU’s policy on enlargement has always been motivated by the interests of member states. The fact that the Balkans in the early 2000s still represented a potential threat to first order security in Europe has driven member state policy since then. Member states’ and thus the EU’s interest in the Balkans are much more than just value based. This supreme goal of rebuilding a European value-based community does not apply to countries of Western Balkans which are “seen to be Balkan rather than European” (Friss & Murphy 2000, p. 780). The interest in this region is often explained by the EU’s responsibility towards the region as it would have been unacceptable for the EU not to act at the international level when main values upon it is based are jeopardized (Friss & Murphy 2000). Likewise, the impact of the ever growing conflicts affecting several countries at the time proved to be a decisive reason for the EU to take action in order to protect the stability of existing and prospective member states (Bretherton & Vogler 2006). The EU's international agenda was self-imposing as the EU was not left with much choice but to act as the conflict was happening on its door step. With the rising influence of Russia,
in particular in Serbia as the biggest country of the region, the EU’s security project, as Grabbe points out, has suddenly returned (Grabbe 2014). Not less important was the opportunity to display and test its ‘actorness’ in the region as a further step in developing the EU as a global actor.

Still, EU’s pursuing its own interest at the international level and satisfying the domestic, i.e. member states’ interests, depends on its ability to aggregate these interests, present itself as a coherent policy actor and deliver. The fact that the EU is able to act in this way in the enlargement process is bolstered by conditionality and the EU’s position in relation to accession countries. Again conditionality is one of its preferred and most successful policy tools which is a testament to EU’s success in playing the international level game. Besides changing the behavior and preferences in candidate and potential candidate countries, conditionality ensures the credibility of the EU’s enlargement policy (European Commission 2013). The case of Serbia represents a good example of how member states can use conditionality successfully even when it comes to modifying behavior on issues that are not the traditional remit of the enlargement process, such as cooperation with the ICTY and Kosovo.

The EU first deployed positive conditionality with Serbia in the European Partnership Agreement 2003 by promising the assistance which depended on further progress in satisfying the Copenhagen political criteria (Council of the EU 2004). Just few months after the opening of the negotiations on a Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) with Serbia in October 2005, the Commission decided to call off the negotiations with the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro in May 2006 “due to the failure of Serbia to meet its commitments on cooperation with the ICTY” (European Commission 2006, p. 7). After the parliamentary elections in 2007 Serbia made required institutional changes, handed over the documents requested by the ICTY and arrested two ICTY indictees which was sufficient for the Commission to continue with the negotiations one year after the stalemate. The cooperation flourished again in 2008 when Serbian authorities arrested Radovan Karadzic, one of the highest profile indictees, and transferred him to The Hague. Still, the Commission emphasized that full cooperation would require the arrest and transfer of the two remaining fugitives, Ratko Mladic and Goran Hadzic (European Commission 2008, p. 19). The arrest of Karadzic together with the significant progress in visa liberalization talks with the EU secured Serbia a reward in the form of the visa-free regime with the EU in December 2009. This was a significant gain for the pro-European Serbian government in power at the time. Serbia was also encouraged to apply for membership, which took place at the end of December 2009.
The necessity of addressing the issues with Kosovo was already powerfully pronounced in the Commission’s Feasibility Study Report where the Commission emphasized that only “constructive engagement on the Kosovo issue will help to advance Serbia and Montenegro’s European perspective, while obstruction could turn into an obstacle” (European Commission 2005, p. 9). This was a key issue for several large member states, in particular those who subsequently recognized Kosovo’s independence. However, the turning point came after the declaration of independence by Kosovo authorities in 2008. In the first place this act presented “a major setback” for regional cooperation as the question of representation of Kosovo became a significant issue that needed to be resolved quickly (Papić 2013, p. 557). It also created a situation where the EU had to be more reactive in formulating its foreign policy response. Finally, the declaration influenced domestic Serbian politics whereby the “disagreements regarding links between Kosovo and EU integration, particularly in the context of the SAA, finally led to the fall of the government and brought a more EU oriented coalition” (European Commission 2008, p. 8). It also further politicized the perception of the European integration in Serbia as the future EU membership became equated with the recognition of Kosovo independence.

However, the use of political conditionality in regard to regional representation was not very effective until 2010 when the EU successfully used its new powers to turn a fresh page in the use of this tool. In September 2010 the EU was entrusted by the UN with the responsibility to facilitate a dialogue between the two parties. This recognized the importance of member state’s influence in the region, as the main political actors in the Balkans (GA Assembly 2010). Since the decision on the application for membership was pending, the EU took its chance to use political conditionality and conditioned the opening of accession negotiations as soon as Serbia achieved “further significant progress in taking further steps to normalize relations with Kosovo” (European Commission 2011, p. 12). This proved to be a powerful incentive for Serbia which agreed to the Agreement on Regional Cooperation and Integrated Border Management technical protocol. This agreement allowed for Kosovo to participate and sign new agreements on its own account and to speak for itself at all regional meetings, thus marking a new phase in establishing relations with Kosovo. Although the practical application of the agreement was not smooth for both parties and it risked stalling the negotiations, it coincided with the election of the new Serbian government which embraced every chance to prove its new European affiliation. The landmark outcome of political conditionality came in the form of the First Agreement of Principles Governing the Normalization of Relations between Serbia and Kosovo (known as Brussels Agreement)
negotiated on 19 April 2013 the by then Serbian Prime Minister Ivica Dačić and Kosovo Prime Minister Hashim Thaci. Several more agreements on specific technical issues followed. This decision of the Serbian government was crucial as on 22 April 2013 General Affairs Council and Foreign Affairs Council of the EU discussed the state of play of negotiations between Serbia and Kosovo (Council of the EU 2013). On the same day the European Commission recommended the start of accession talks with Serbia (www.seio.gov.rs). Despite the fact that negotiations were stalled for almost two years, Serbia and Kosovo signed another four agreements in August 2015 on energy, telecoms, establishment of the Association/Community of Serb majority municipalities and the Freedom of Movement/Mitrovica Bridge (www.eeas.europa.eu 2015).

**Enlargement as a means to an end for Serbia?**

While the process of accession is not purely motivated by European idealism on the part of the EU, it is even less so from a Serbian perspective. The motivation for membership in Serbia is almost wholly instrumental. Serbia, with a relatively unstable party system, weak institutions and little genuine public enthusiasm for the EU, regards membership primarily as a means to an end, namely greater economic prosperity and political stability. This phenomenon is present both within the political elite and the general public. Other studies have focused on the variable of ‘national identity’ in accession countries (Pawalec and Grimm 2014; Freyburg & Richter 2010). While the concept of national identity is helpful in understanding the motivation of EU member states or accession state governments during the membership process it is more productive to examine the actions of the participants. Thus, as Pawalec and Grimm note, ‘national identity’ cannot explain full compliance with EU conditionality but a realist argument based on the strengthening of the Serbian state can (Pawalec and Grimm 2014).

The Serbian case is unusual given its ambivalent position towards the EU and Russia and unresolved issues over its territorial status. However, Serbia has committed to membership partly as Russia does not offer a realistic alternative. Wallace noted in 2002 that “the alternative to EU membership is often portrayed as a kind of wilderness of exclusion, a scenario of weak voice and asymmetrical dependency” (Wallace 2000, p. 622). This situation remains the same. The primary motivation for Serbia is to ensure that it will have a voice relative to its regional rivals and, more significantly, leverage the prospect of membership to ensure the country’s modernization.

The EU renewed its formal relations with Serbia immediately after the democratic changes in October 2000. At the time, Serbia as a part of the Federal
Republic of Yugoslavia, accepted to join the stabilization and association process and began preparing for the negotiations on the SAA. In February 2002 the FRY was transformed into the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro which affected the negotiations on the SAA. The subsequent proclamation of independence of Montenegro on May 2006, as well as insufficient cooperation with the ICTY, stalled the SAA negotiations for over a year and half.

The SAA negotiations were reopened in June 2007 and five months later the SAA between the EU and Serbia was ratified. Soon after the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, Serbia submitted its application for EU membership. In October 2011, the European Commission gave a positive opinion on Serbia’s application for membership to the EU, provided that the Serbian Government demonstrated progress in normalizing the relations with Kosovo. Though Serbia was granted a status of a candidate country in March 2012, the formal start of negotiations and the opening of individual chapters were delayed for two years due to the EU’s insistence on Serbia opening talks with Kosovo representatives.

Instrumental use of EU as a way to success at the national level
Putnam’s two-level game can also be applied to the national level. Political parties, as aggregators of public opinion, have differing views on European integration. Other interest groups in Serbia such as big business have not been particularly vocal in support of integration, perhaps due to the fact that increased competition would prove challenging. At the national level, Serbian political parties successfully changed their programs and made themselves more appealing to the general public but also to the international community. This was partly a result of the successful use of EU’s conditionality which slowly led to change of social and political behavior among political elites. In addition, political parties realized that a purely instrumental use of the prospect of the EU membership is a way to secure votes at elections and ensure international support. The promise of prompt accession to the EU became a main electoral slogan which has significantly influenced the outcome of the elections in recent years (Herranz-Surralles 2012). This realist approach in Serbian political life is best illustrated by continuous and calculating change of views on the EU membership even by right wing parties which have a history of strong opposition to the EU membership.

The Serbian Progressive Party (SPP) is the most striking example of a purely realist approach. SPP did not find it difficult to change course once it became clear that this was the only option to gain political advantage. Before the party came to power in 2012, its president Tomislav Nikolic was very vocal in expressing his negative views on membership to the EU by stating that “there
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will never be any negotiations with the EU” (newsweek.rs 2015). Similar views were expressed in regard to the status of Kosovo, which he considered as an “inalienable part of Serbia” (newsweek.rs 2015). The sudden change of heart was also apparent in the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), once led by Slobodan Milosevic. Indeed, it was Ivica Dacic, once a close political associate of Milosevic, who signed the agreement with Kosovo. The two parties with clear and unchanging positions towards the accession to the EU are the Democratic Party of Serbia, which is against the EU membership (Democratic Party of Serbia Manifesto 2014) and the Liberal Democratic Party of Serbia, which strongly supports membership and recognizes the lack of future Serbian control over Kosovo (Liberal Democratic Party Manifesto 2012).

Successive governments were also quite skilled in the instrumental use of the prospect of membership in pursuing partisan interests and ensuring a wider support for numerous governmental policies. The need to fulfill membership criteria is declared as the main reason for almost all economic and administrative reforms both within the public and private sector, instead of undertaking reforms for the benefit of the country and its citizens. What is interesting about the domestic level game is that successive governments were able to undertake unpopular reforms under the EU pretext, despite the lack of European idealism and support among the general public in Serbia. The latest cut of state employees’ salaries and pensions in 2014 was vocally justified by the external pressure to cut the budget deficit. The general trend in support for EU membership has gradually decreased since 2009, despite expectations it would rise with the start of the negotiations with Serbia in 2013 (Cavoski 2013). It was also surprising that significant progress milestones in the integration process have had little or no effect on public support for the EU. This was evident in 2008 when there was a decrease in support from the previous year despite the fact that Serbia signed the SAA in that year (Public opinion polls 2008). The decision on visa liberalization resulted in a slight increase in support (Public opinion polls 2009)

1 These polls are undertaken every six months by the Serbian European Integration Office. The sample size is usually around 1000 respondents and is random nationally representative sample of adult citizens of Serbia. More information is available at http://www.seio.gov.rs/documents/national-documents.223.html
individual rights or guarantee of long-term peace in the EU (Public opinion polls 2013). Thus, successive Serbian governments have cited the EU, or even ‘Europe’ generally, as the justification for many of their policy choices and actions.

Moreover, membership of the EU is regarded as a vital and strategic objective for Serbia and its main foreign policy aim. It is also a safe way for the government to ensure support of both the EU and individual member states. Key EU member states and the European Commission embraced the new coalition government of the SPS and the SSP in 2012 as it proved a long awaited counterpart willing to address the Kosovo issue. This is particularly illustrative of the strength of conditionality to achieve the interests of large member states in an accession country by bringing about significant political change. It also demonstrates the ability of the EU to act as a coherent international actor capable of pursuing and delivering its international agenda and effectively delivering interests of its member states. At the Serbian level, greater international support for domestic policies invariably raises the government’s profile at the national level and gives more confidence to citizens to offer their support.

Although the prospect of membership is an overwhelming catchword in daily rhetoric of the political discourse in Serbia, neither the government nor political parties actually have an accurate or precise understanding of membership and its implications. This realist approach, though beneficial for successful domestic level game, is problematic for two main reasons. First, it seems that every reform taken in almost any policy area is justified by the need to approximate national legislation and standards with the EU acquis. The ‘EU’ is often invoked as the driver for change in areas where there are no harmonized rules at the EU level such as education policy or health. On the other hand, it is always easier for national governments to subsequently “blame Brussels” for unpopular or costly measures. This further fosters a negative perception of the EU for citizens who are already pessimistic about the prospects of enlargement.

In order to satisfy pressures at the domestic level, successive Serbian governments have portrayed the EU primarily as a source of money and not as an institution that would help to bring stability and modernization to the country. It may be often heard in media and stated by politicians that the one of the main reasons to join are the EU structural and cohesion funds. Moreover, there is no public discourse regarding the future obligations and potential costs of membership. Undoubtedly, the funds are extremely significant for countries such as Serbia where there are large differences in prosperity levels between regions. Again, this purely instrumental approach as propagated by successive Serbian governments is problematic for two reasons. First, the EU should not be
regarded as a ‘cash machine’ as membership entails much more. Moreover, the high expectations of citizens may be put under question if the regional policy is reformed in the meantime as a result of a more stringent EU budget. Secondly, membership comes with obligations and costs but these are not publicly discussed in Serbia. The general public in Serbia is not aware that integration is a costly process and may have ‘winners and losers’ as was the case in other accession countries.

Taking sides at the international level?

Bearing in mind its geopolitical position and importance of history and cultural ties with Russia, the Serbian government still wants to maintain this relationship. However, with the onset of crisis in Ukraine since 2013 Serbia has been forced to choose between support for Russia and aligning itself more explicitly with the EU. In terms of the domestic level game, there are constituencies in Serbia that advocate closer ties with Russia. With the Ukrainian crisis EU member states’ concern about Russia’s relative influence in the region has affected Serbia’s ability to maintain its relationship with the EU while also satisfying domestic pressures. At the same time, EU conditionality regarding the resolution of Kosovo issues as a pre-requisite of the accession process and the further delays of negotiations negatively impact the ability of the Serbian government to reconcile the domestic level game with its international agenda.

As Grabbe points out, the EU’s appeal comes from its combination of stability, prosperity, security and personal freedoms (Grabbe 2014). In the case of Serbia, the attraction of joining the EU is predominantly explained by security and economic reasons, a European rescue of the Serbian state to paraphrase Milward (Milward 2000). From the vantage point of key EU member states the major benefit in Serbia acceding would be ensuring long-term peace in the region. Still, accession to the EU is undoubtedly seen as a major priority on Serbia’s international agenda. This is both confirmed by Serbian political leaders and is identified in all major political documents. Despite this general agreement on the EU as a major foreign policy objective, most political parties try to find a balance between a pro-EU agenda and allegiance to Russia. In the political manifesto of SPS there is a strong emphasis on maintaining links with other important countries such as Russia (Socialist Party of Serbia 2010). In the party manifesto of the Serbian Progressive Party there is a rather non-committal approach to the EU membership where the “Serbian decision to join the EU should not be disputed, although Serbian can only join together with Kosovo and Metohija as its inalienable part. At the same time Serbia must foster close ties with Russia” (Serbian Progressive Party Manifesto 2011, p. 2).
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However, with the increasing assertiveness of Russia it becomes a challenge to maintain this balance between the two foreign objectives and preserve unity within the government. The Ukrainian crisis proved to be an additional test for Serbia's relationship with Russia, which resulted in intensifying diplomatic relations with Russia and releasing cautious statements about the territorial integrity of Ukraine. Even still, there is a latent disagreement between the minister of foreign affairs and the Prime minister about the territorial integrity of Crimea. At the same time, Russian presence in Serbia is more than noticeable in the last year starting with Putin’s visit in October 2014 followed by other political representatives from Russia as well as promises of Russian investments into the Serbian economy. Even the decision to stop South Stream gas pipeline project, did not weaken the developing links with Russia.

Nevertheless, these foreign policy objectives create visible differences within the majority party SPP and within the governing coalition. The president of Serbia, Tomislav Nikolic has been quite vocal in pledging his allegiance to Russia and uses every opportunity to demonstrate his loyalty, best illustrated by meetings in 2015 with Russian President Vladimir Putin at Yerevan and Victory Day parade in Moscow, an event which was conspicuously avoided by western leaders. According to Nikolic, Serbia represents a bridge between the East and the West with the aim to ensure more effective cooperation between both sides (www.politika.rs 2015). On the contrary, the Prime Minister Vucic is more inclined to develop links with the United States and reduce energy dependence on Russia (www.blic.rs 2015). Still, the government is for the moment in agreement that Serbia remains neutral and Serbia would not impose sanctions on Russia. It may be expected that this may prove to be the point of disagreement in future both within the SPP and within the collation government as it is clear from High Representative Mogherini’s statements that the EU member states expect Serbia to align its foreign policy with that of the EU (www.danas.rs 2015).

The resolution of issues regarding Kosovo also has had a negative impact both on the stability of the coalition government of the SRS and SPS and also on the perception of the EU among the general public. This question invariably weakens the ability of the government to play its international level game successfully as it involves an issue of territorial dispute and national sovereignty. Thus the complexity of the two-level game increases as Serbia must satisfy domestic political pressure on questions regarded as impinging on ‘sovereignty’ while maintaining a credible negotiating position with the EU. As Grabbe points out, the reality is that after the Cyprus experience the EU will never allow in a country with an unresolved conflict over its status (Grabbe 2014). In the Serbian case,
this is interpreted by the EU officials as “normalizations of relations with Kosovo”. However, for the Serbian government it begged the question of what exactly it is expected to do and what are the conditions for membership? According to the Minister of Foreign Affairs Dacic, Serbia fulfilled all the provisions of the Brussels Agreement and requested clarification of what needs to be done in order to practically start with negotiations with the EU, which were formally opened in January 2014 (www.politika.rs 2015). It is also quite clear that this issue caused strains within the coalition government illustrated by the statement of Dacic that even if Serbia recognized Kosovo there always will be some new membership conditions (www.blic.rs 2015). Similarly, the Prime Minister Vucic has said that ‘patience is running thin’ with the EU (www.blic.rs 2015). This issue is also used as a weapon for interparty fights as is the case with the SPP. The President of Serbia, Tomislav Nikolic, has fiercely used Kosovo and has proposed a so-called “Kosovo platform” to regain his position within the party which has been undermined by those loyal to Prime Minister Vucic.

At the same time, conditions for membership play an important role in justifying the lack of public support for the EU among the general public. These conditions are raised in the political discourse at times when issues of significant importance are on the agenda for the coalition in government (Public opinion polls 2011). Pertaining to membership criteria is the perception that the EU has double standards when it comes to Serbia. From 2008 there is a general perception that the EU’s continuous conditionality politics was perceived by the public as blackmailing of Serbia and as a major impediment to joining the EU in the future (Public opinion polls 2013). What is even more disconcerting is that a significant proportion of the public believe that the EU will constantly impose new requirements for Serbia (Public opinion polls 2008-2015). Serbia is also characteristic with its low European identification unlike some other Western Balkans countries such as Macedonia and Albania (Balkan Monitor 2009, p. 2). According to the available official polls, there is an increase in the number of people who hold a negative opinion of the EU, while there is steady decrease of the number of those who have a very positive perception of the EU (Public opinion polls 2013).

Conclusion

Before assessing the findings of this paper it is worth addressing possible areas of further research. This paper is a single case study – a broader comparative analysis of Balkan accession countries would be an obvious avenue. Many of these countries share similar challenges to Serbia in the enlargement process. The two-level game model raises questions of other important national constituencies. For example, an assessment of the business communities in
Balkan accession countries, who in Serbia who have not been particularly vocal in support of accession, would be fruitful. Finally, at the time of writing, a new chapter of EU member state involvement in the Balkans is unfolding in the form of the migration crisis. This would benefit from further research.

There are several broad findings that can be drawn from this analysis of the accession process in Serbia and its implications for enlargement and the region. The first is that enlargement may cease to become a key foreign policy tool of the EU. The reasons for this are evident in the Serbian case. The initial interest of EU member states in the early 2000s was to ensure the first order security of the Balkans. The enlargement process and conditionality gave member states the tools to pursue these interests in the region. As the decade progressed these changed to shaping the milieu of the region and extending the norms and values of the EU and its member states. More recently, it has also meant countering the relative influence of Russia. However, as the two-level game analysis in this paper has shown, the domestic pressures within member states have rendered them less focused on enlargement. Furthermore, the key foreign policy challenges faced by the EU in recent years, namely instability in North Africa and the Middle East and the Ukrainian crisis, will not be addressed by EU enlargement. The risk for the enlargement process is that if it no longer secures the main foreign policy interests of large member states then they will have little incentive to support it. At the domestic level game, key constituencies such as populist parties, are opposed to further enlargement and the European project. Thus, there is a risk that enlargement may have outlived its usefulness for member states.

This will have an effect on candidate countries as the case of Serbia has shown. While Serbia’s motivation for enlargement has primarily been ‘a European rescue of the Serbian state’ the complexity, length and impediments of conditionality have changed the equation for Serbia. This is the perception both at the level of the political elite and amongst the general public. As enlargement becomes less of a focus for EU member states, partly due to other crises and partly due to domestic opposition, this will render it less attractive for candidate countries. This may lead to a vicious circle of lowered interest and expectations of enlargement amongst EU member states and thus lowered incentives for accession countries. This would render enlargement, a key success of EU and thus member state foreign policy, largely impotent. This pessimistic conclusion is not at odds with a realist explanatory model of the enlargement process. Enlargement can only succeed in the future if the interests of both member states and accession countries are fulfilled and this may not be the case.
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