

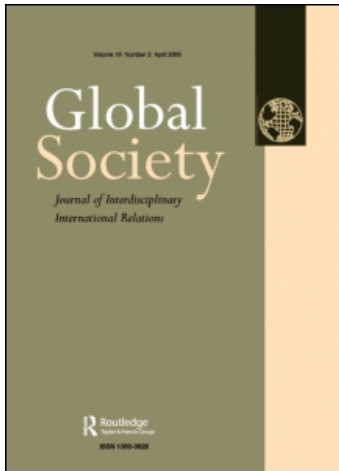
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Normative Power and the Liberal Peace: A Rejoinder to John O'Brennan

DAVID CHANDLER

This rejoinder to John O'Brennan reasserts the case that the EU enlargement process has a depoliticising effect, which weakens the connections between Western Balkan states and their societies. It suggests that O'Brennan's response is more apologia than analysis; evading issues raised by asymmetrical relations of power between the EU and Western Balkans states. Here the EU is idealised, with the ascribed status of a "normative actor" projecting power merely through "soft power" mechanisms. The points raised in rejoinder seek to clarify that the more "muscular" use of conditionality and direct management of policy reforms inevitably limit the possibilities for public and political debate and consensus-making. Moreover, they distance political elites from their societies. In particular, the use of political conditionality is highlighted, to demonstrate that whether "hard" powers of imposition or "soft" powers of conditionality are used matters less to those on the receiving end of external imposition than to the EU itself, which has attempted to distance itself from its use of executive powers in the region.

Introduction

I am very pleased that John O'Brennan's response enables me to attempt to clarify my argument about the depoliticising agenda projected through the EU's relationship with the Western Balkans. O'Brennan explicitly tries to marginalise any discussion of problems with the EU's export of good governance to the region, through framing any problems which might arise as ones which have their roots in the irrationality and criminality of the Balkans rather than in the policies and actions of the EU. This approach is one which mirrors that of the EU's own view of itself as an actor without a political agenda of self-interest, merely exporting frameworks of governance which are technically and administratively in the best interests of the region. Any problems or unintended consequences which arise are not seen to emanate from a governance programme divorced from the engagement of the societies it is aimed at but from the backwardness of the recipients or of the region more generally. This bureaucratic gaze reinterprets the limits to the EU's external attempts at social and political engineering as merely indicating that the EU should try harder and be more "hands on" in its assistance to external state-building.

For O'Brennan, the fact that the EU is exporting its norms and values of peace, democracy and the rule of law to the Balkan region means that the process of member state-building is entirely unproblematic. Rather than looking at the relationship between the exporters of good governance—"the regime makers"—and those receiving EU advice and support—"the regime takers"—O'Brennan wants to look at both as separate objects. It is unfortunate that he can only do this by distancing the EU from the Western Balkans, and creating a fantasy divide between the forward-looking democracy and rights-based approach of the EU and the backward-looking, criminal and corrupt practices of Balkan political elites. O'Brennan's counter-positioning of the EU as "normative power" versus the Western Balkan elites and societies as some sort of normative "Other" may massage the conscience of pro-EU policy elites, but it does little to help social scientists interested in the mechanisms and outcomes of the EU's governance policies in the new states of the Western Balkans.

Exporting Normative Values?

O'Brennan's approach of distancing and dividing the EU from the politics of the Western Balkan potential member states is essentially a call to limit academic critique of the EU's engagement in the state-building process. There is nothing in his response which indicates any relationship between the policies and frameworks exported by the EU and the actions and activities of Western Balkan political elites. In the section of his response which considers the EU, he approaches the EU's policy-making in such an abstract way that he appears to be suggesting that the EU literally is exporting its norms and values, as if so-called "norms and values" automatically constituted a policy package, which just needed to be applied by an implementation mechanism simply understood as "normative power" or "soft power". In fact, he offers no understanding of either the dynamic of EU policy-making, what the EU's policies might be, or of the mechanisms of their implementation.

My point, in the article and in my recent book *Empire in Denial*,¹ is not merely that the EU is acting in an "imperial" fashion. It seems clear that the relations of power and influence are asymmetrical between the EU and aspiring member states in the Western Balkans. The question at issue seems to be how we understand the projection of EU power in the Balkans, that is, how we understand the mechanisms of the EU enlargement process and, in particular, how we understand what O'Brennan calls "the normative nature of EU power". It is clear from O'Brennan's discussion of the EU's normative power that this is a power being instrumentally projected by the EU:

the EU has sought to use its revolutionary "soft power" to export its norms and values to the region and draw it into the integration process. In this sense the instruments employed under the SAP [Stabilisation and Association Process] are familiar from previous enlargement rounds and designed to lead to a decisive transformational outcome in the region. The rationale behind the EU approach is that the enlargement

1. David Chandler, *Empire in Denial: The Politics of State-building* (London: Pluto, 2006).

process helps to consolidate and stabilise democratic structures, build institutional and administrative know-how, and over time, draw applicant states closer to EU standards.²

There is an instrumental use of power and influence to achieve certain aims of consolidation and stabilisation in the Western Balkans. O'Brennan argues that the export of power in the Western Balkans is not "neo-colonial" because it is a matter of free choice, not one of imperial subjugation. Apparently it is not the case that the vacuum caused by the collapse of the Soviet empire is being filled by the new empire of the EU. There is no irresistible force being projected counter to the national interest of these new states. He highlights that both elite and popular opinion in the region have converged around the necessity of being part of the European club. The EU is being embraced by Western Balkan states on a voluntary basis, not a coercive one. The EU argues that it is merely a partner, helping Western Balkan states achieve what they want to achieve, which is integration into the Euro-Atlantic alliance, through membership of the EU and of NATO.

O'Brennan's failure to provide any empirical detail reflects the fact that he does not appear concerned with the nature of these policies (although he does give some lip-service to potential questions of social welfare, where it appears that there is some room to question the ease with which the EU can take social and economic questions off the political agenda). Most importantly, O'Brennan gives us little idea of the means of exporting this policy agenda. Presumably, even the best administrative and technical agenda would be deleterious to the political processes in the Western Balkans if it was exported in ways that allowed little public debate or engagement with an externally derived policy programme. It seems that rather than wish to engage with EU policy or its method of export, O'Brennan is most concerned with its ascribed status as the projection of "normative power". Even more problematically, it seems that, for O'Brennan, once the process is understood as a normative one—as the export of "soft power"—it is somehow beyond criticism by being in counter-position, implicitly, to "neo-colonial" or "hard power" approaches. This fails to engage with the points made in my original article, where it was precisely the problematic nature of normative soft-power approaches to the "liberal peace" which were highlighted.

It seems that it is at this abstract level that O'Brennan seeks to argue that the policy agenda and its framework of export and implementation are no different, in the later rounds of enlargement through the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP) in the Western Balkans, than the earlier processes of accession with the Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) states. He explicitly seeks to make the point that the similarity of the policies means that problems in the Balkans are indicative of specific regional factors rather than any problems with the export of governance *per se*. At this level of abstraction, O'Brennan's piece makes little sense. Surely, even if the same policies lead to failure in the Balkans and success in CEE, we still need to discuss and understand why the policies failed and how they could be adjusted. Singing the praises of the earlier enlargement rounds seems to have little relevance then to the discussion of the EU's relationship with the Western Balkans through state-building.

2. John O'Brennan, "The EU in the Western Balkans: Enlargement as Empire? A Response to David Chandler", *Global Society*, Vol. 22, No. 4.

“Hands-on” Approaches to State-building

O’ Brennan argues that the fact that CEE states and their political elites gain from membership of the EU club, that they do not feel that they have “second class” membership or that they cannot express their national interests, means that I am wrong in arguing that “the process of negotiating accession leads inexorably to a hollowing-out of state capacity in prospective member states”. Such assertions offer little clarification and, in fact, appear to be offered *in lieu* of any comments on the relationship between the negotiation of accession and state capacity. It seems clear to me that, in shifting the locus of policy-making away from domestic processes to external frameworks, accession weakens the opportunities for domestic policy discussion and takes issues which would have been part of the political agenda and transforms them into technical and administrative requirements for EU accession. Political elites do not necessarily recoil against a depoliticisation of the policy process. Even Western elites have been keen to use the argument of EU necessity to evade difficulties of justifying their policies domestically.³ Using the EU to obviate domestic relations between elites and an increasingly distanced and alienated public, may offer short-term solutions for weak elites but in the long run it merely institutionalises the hollowing-out of the political process.

Even more problematically, the accession process applied to the CEE states is explicitly different from the Stabilisation and Association Process to which aspiring member states in the Western Balkans are joining. O’ Brennan also seems to agree that this is the case, arguing that there are sound reasons for the more “muscular” conditionality being applied to the region. While he states that various new mechanisms have been applied with regards to monitoring and implementation he does not seek to examine what relationship “muscular” conditionality might have to the state-building process. This is unfortunate, as my original piece was concerned precisely with the idea of EU member state-building, that is, the application of EU conditionality within the process of accession not merely as a set of conditions to which candidate countries have to aspire. This more engaged and “hands on” relationship is exemplified by the EU Special Representatives in Bosnia and Kosovo, who have access to the use of executive powers.

The EU missions in Bosnia and Kosovo use soft power mixed with access to the “hard power” of executive controls. However, the EU is keen to distance itself from “hard power”. This distancing results in a fictional situation where the same individual—the EU Special Representative (EUSR)—wears two different “hats”. From his assumption of the administrative role in Bosnia in 2002, Paddy Ashdown was the first double-hatted EUSR; encouraging politicians to agree voluntarily to reforms with his EU hat on and threatening them with dismissal or the withdrawal of party funding when wearing his OHR hat. Similarly, the EU instigated a double-hatted role for itself in post-“independence” Kosovo in 2008—with the EU’s hard powers emanating from the *ad hoc* Kosovo Steering Group. The separation of “hard powers” from the formal EU mission to *ad hoc* international bodies, makes the use of these powers less accountable than

3. See James Heartfield, “European Union: A Process without a Subject”, in C. J. Bickerton, P. Cunliffe and A. Gourevitch (eds), *Politics without Sovereignty: A Critique of Contemporary International Relations* (London: UCL Press, 2007), pp. 131–149.

they would be if they were built into the EU's mandate itself.⁴ The EUSR's office denies that it has executive powers while at same time having access to them at will.

More to the point, the distinction between "hard" and "soft" powers in the context of the EU's relationship with the Western Balkans is not of fundamental importance. Once tied into the SAP, the alleged "pull of Brussels" is no different from the "push from Bonn" (the executive powers of the Office of the High Representative (OHR)). The EUSR does not need to use executive powers once the policy process is institutionalised and incremental conditionality is used to oversee the policy process, setting the timetable for reforms and the policy content. While the fact that Bosnian politicians themselves vote for the requirements of EU accession is vital for the EU's own credibility, the fact that policy is presented to the legislature as a *fait accompli* makes the policy process little different viewed from the domestic perspective.⁵ Whether the policy is brought with the "hard" threat of dismissals or with the "soft" threat of funding withdrawals and the stalling of the accession process, there is still little opportunity for political parties to debate policy alternatives, and the external framework of policy-making means that political parties negotiate with the international administrator behind closed doors rather than with each other in public.⁶

Where O'Brennan focuses on the EU he seems to be merely concerned with apologetics. On the one hand, the policies in the Western Balkans are the same as those earlier and therefore cannot be to blame for the continuing weakness of the states being "state-built" by the EU. On the other hand, the policies are different and more "hands on" but this is justified on the basis of the changing needs of the EU and the continuing experience of managing enlargement. Neither of these points, which seek simplistically to defend the policies of the EU, adds anything to an understanding of how the EU's "hands on" state-building in the Western Balkans affects the political process or the success of these policies in strengthening states in the region. My points in the article about the hollowing-out of the political process, the transformation of states into purely administrative organs, and the blurring of the lines of policy accountability—with little clarity of the relationship between the domestic political process and external relations with the EU—are simply not engaged with.

The officials in the office of the EU Special Representative in Bosnia, which seeks to manage the process of accession, argue that the situation in Bosnia is not comparable to that of CEE. Allegedly, because of the war and other problems, the Bosnian state is too weak to be left to its own devices in meeting the conditions of the accession process. The more "hands on" approach of the SAP is held to be essential for the EU to replicate the success of the enlargement process in earlier rounds. Here, where states are weaker, state-building is part of the enlargement process itself. For the process of state-building, the EU needs to have much

4. See Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, *Arithmetic of Irresponsibility—Political Analysis of Bosnian Domestic and Foreign Affairs* (Sarajevo: FES, 2005). Available at: <http://www.western-balkans.info/upload/docs/Arithmetic_of_irresponsibility.pdf>.

5. See Lord Paddy Ashdown, "The European Union and Statebuilding in the Western Balkans", *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2007), pp. 107–118.

6. Darragh Farrell, "Democracy Promotion, Domestic Responsibility and the Impact of International Intervention on the Political Life of Republika Srpska", unpublished PhD thesis, National University of Ireland, Maynooth, January 2008.

more leverage than in relation to the CEE states. From the perspective of the EU administration, the reforms being insisted upon are in the Bosnians' own interests. While they are held to be legitimate policy goals in their own right, they cannot be left to Bosnians to decide upon. In these circumstances, EU conditionalities operate as a process of relationship management rather than merely establishing the end goals of membership of the EU club.

Conditionality: The EU's Democratic Diktat

On the level of the EU itself, O'Brennan disputes my understanding of the Brussels bureaucracy—as an expansionary and unaccountable power imposing a “neo-colonial” imprint through its push for more and more reforms in advance of accession. My point is that this power is unaccountable to those in whose names policy is being made, that is, the citizens of aspiring member states. O'Brennan chooses to portray the EU as a democratic body, asserting that the role of the Commission may be an *ad hoc* one and that it is part of a complex division of labour between separate institutions, with representative bodies such as the Council and the European Parliament playing a central role in enlargement, particularly at the point of collective decision-making on whether to accept a new state or not. The view of asserting the democratic nature of the EU's decision-making, in counter-position to what could be understood as the unaccountable nature of the Commission, misses the point that whatever the shortcomings of the EU as an internally democratic actor, these have little relevance to its external relations. In terms of the export of democratic norms and rights frameworks it is clear that a gap remains between “regime-making” and “regime-taking”.

The centrality of conditionality in the Stabilisation and Association Process in the Western Balkans is rarely fully drawn out. There is an assumption that conditionality is explicitly projecting the EU's norms and values in a way which promotes democracy and strengthens state institutions. In fact, the reality is very different. The EU promotes its right to assert conditions for EU membership as a democratic one. Fair enough; it is important to stress, as O'Brennan does, that it is up to the members of the EU to decide whether to enlarge and upon which basis and conditions. The right to meet certain conditions for joining is easily acceptable as is the right to assert conditions in order to give out financial aid and the like. The EU spends the tax money of its citizens and is entitled to justify this expense or make payments conditional. Conditionality, in these examples, clarifies the relationship between the EU and external actors or potential member states.

O'Brennan is also right that aspiring member states have formally decided to accede to the EU and that this decision is therefore a voluntary and autonomous one. However, the decision to sign up to the Stabilisation and Association Process blurs the clarity of the relationship between the EU and aspirant states. This is because the member states are signing up to a process where the conditionality is a continuing one. The democratic and voluntary aspect of the process in effect ends with the signing of the agreement as the following steps and conditions are managed through bypassing the democratic political process. From the position of the EU, the candidate countries only need to make one democratic decision, which is to subordinate themselves to the accession process. The EU Special Representative then allows little room for democratic consideration as the policy process becomes an external one, where the external advisers state

why policy reforms need to be made and when they need to be achieved, leaving the specific content up to the local authorities, albeit with external advice and support.

O'Brennan argues that even if the relationship between Western Balkan elites and the EU is asymmetrical, this does not mean that domestic elites have no influence on this relationship and upon policies and their implementation. This is undeniable since, as O'Brennan states: "The European Union thus has to tread a delicate balance between the desire to pursue candidate states for non-compliance and the political momentum within the enlargement process." It is important to realise that the incremental use of conditionalities is not some technical process; it is entirely political. When the EU is considering which "benchmarks" are important or what level of reforms are necessary for the next stage, a large number of factors come into play. These include "enlargement fatigue", which tends to add further conditions to satisfy member states which are more hostile to enlargement as well as broader policy concerns with security or crime and corruption and specific views with regard to the perceived needs of state-building in particular aspirant states. Incrementalised conditions are designed to ensure that the process of EU relationship management continues. This blurs the clarity of goals with a focus on the means; in other words, the process of external state-building takes centre stage.

Marginalising Politics

O'Brennan wishes to argue that the policies being pursued in the Western Balkans are little different from those that were pursued in the enlargement process for the CEE states and that therefore, the reasons why there appears to have been less success on the ground are to do with the specific context of the region. This includes outstanding issues of borders, status and territorial integrity which have not yet been resolved and the persistence of high levels of crime and corruption. It is the problems of criminalised elites, of rent-seeking and state capture, which are asserted to explain the EU's lack of success in transforming states and societies in the region. The hollowing-out of the political process in the Balkans is not a product of EU policies but of symptomatic of state weakness in the region and indicative of the need for a greater EU role.

On the level of indigenous explanations for the limits of the EU's normative power in the Western Balkans, O'Brennan's assertions about crime and corruption have little relationship to the policy discussions in this area. He does not appear either to agree or to disagree with my perspective that the relationships of external dependency with the EU make it more difficult for the domestic sphere to be able to legitimise political authorities and to cohere societies. He states merely that no-one would disagree that there is a "governance vacuum" in much of the Western Balkans today. He then goes on to evade discussion of the relations with the EU by changing the focus to independent reasons for the weakness of state legitimacy and a gap between political elites and societies, located in what are alleged to be specifically Balkan problems of crime and corruption. The discussion shifts from the impact of the EU upon the domestic political sphere to independent problems of the domestic political process. Clearly the existence of independent problems or issues could indeed be relevant to how EU policy and practices need to be rethought. However, this does not seem to be the point O'Brennan seeks to make.

While issues and perceptions of corruption could well be seen to have an inimical impact on the Balkans and held to be responsible for low levels of foreign investment and for disillusionment with the political process, there has been little evidence that political elites have been “criminally captured”.⁷ Levels of crime are no higher in the Balkans than elsewhere in Europe but clearly corruption—understood in terms of the blurring of the private and public spheres—is an issue due to the weakness of both the market economy and the state sector. The black market or grey economy plays an important role in providing incomes and employment while access to restricted public services can often involve private payments. However, these points are different from those intimated in O’Brennan’s piece, which seeks to explain the actions of political elites as shaped by a local or regional “culture” of crime and rent-seeking. He provides little evidence for his assertion that “the structural cancer of organised crime has a hold over state officials and structures” or of “the nexus between organised crime and politics”. While this type of rhetoric was strong in the immediate post-war elections in Bosnia, where there were held to be links between post-war elites and war-time criminals, today the understandings of the barriers to EU reform are rarely posed in such terms.

It seems that once O’Brennan has located local problems of crime and corruption as the key factors for weak states in the region, he feels as if his point has been made. But surely indicating that states and markets are weaker and less sustaining in the region is then a factor which might indicate that the one-size-fits-all approach of the EU *acquis communautaire* needs to be reconsidered. As O’Brennan himself indicates, there is apparently a “clash of agendas” between the EU’s concerns for structural unity in economic and social policy reforms and regional concerns for domestic manufacturing and agricultural competitiveness and for policies which take into account the specific nature of their economies and social and welfare needs. This indicates that resistance to EU policy reform may have specific local or regional causes, but this does not make that opposition any less relevant to those societies. In fact, it indicates that there is a greater need to have a public debate about the economic and social policy prescriptions of EU accession.

It is also vital to highlight that crime and corruption fail to explain why it is that elites might be reluctant to accept EU policy reform in a number of central areas. Rather, the problems of generating local elite consensus around pro-EU reforms are often seen to lie in the unresolved issues of borders and territorial integrity. O’Brennan flags up this issue early in his response but, surprisingly, declines to place much emphasis upon this, except near the end of his piece, where he suggests that “strong-arm tactics” pushing through political reforms may play into the hands of nationalists, reducing the space for moderate political parties. Many leading policy advisors in this area, such as Judy Batt, from the European Centre for Security Studies, argue that as long as the EU fails to resolve the border issues (particularly the status of Kosovo) there will be uncertainty about

7. See, Transparency International, National Integrity Systems Transparency International Country Study Report: Bosnia and Herzegovina 2004 (Berlin: TI, 2004); Transparency International, National Integrity System Study: Bosnia and Herzegovina 2007 (Berlin: TI, 2006); David Chandler, “Building Trust in Public Institutions? Good Governance and Anti-corruption in Bosnia-Herzegovina”, *Ethnopolitics*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (2006), pp. 85–99.

the status of new states in the region and a tendency for people to vote for nationalist parties because of uncertainty about the future.

In Bosnia, the EU is in the process of winding down the Bonn executive powers of the High Representative and the key question is how conditionality can be used to provide the leverage previously provided by the threats of dismissals and direct imposition by the OHR. The SAP is seen to be contractually tying-in and committing politicians to work on the EU road. Conditionality is not about final membership conditions, which are open-ended due to uncertainty over enlargement criteria and which depend on a number of political considerations, not some abstract set of technical or administrative factors. Conditionality is a process of relationship management which aims at incremental progress ensuring that reforms happen without stand-offs between politicians and EU administrators. The conditionality of the SAP is seen to be about the day-to-day management of the accession and reform process, with the EU officials wary of conflict if they ask for "too much too soon". This delicate process of reform management transforms the political centre from the domestic sphere to the international one. The EU is not just deciding upon its own standards for new members; the EU political missions in the Western Balkans and the offices of the EU Special Representatives (SRs) are important political players in the societies which they seek to manage, attempting to make delicate political decisions on how to move the reform process forwards.

This process of political management under the auspices of the SAP, or the "soft power" pull of Brussels, results in not just an externally driven political process but one that is openly manipulative. Rather than clarifying what EU membership will involve, the pressure is for elites to evade open or public discussion and instead to attempt to buy social acquiescence. The strategic use of conditionalities also means that the EU openly seeks to turn political issues into technical ones in order to massage and facilitate the reform process.⁸ This was clear in Bosnia when police reform was billed as a technical necessity and conditional for signing the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA), when there was no agreed EU framework for centralised policing.⁹ This was an attempt to reshape the Dayton framework and weaken the powers of the Bosnian-Serb entity, but it was framed as a technical necessity. This instrumental and manipulative use of conditionality can also be seen in continuing discussions to use human-rights requirements to reform the tri-partite voting for the Bosnian presidency. Rather than openly state policy goals, which would be controversial, the dynamic is to push controversial reforms under the guise of technical or administrative necessity. The political shaping of Western Balkan society by external managers tends to degrade the entire political process, not just hollowing-out the opportunities for domestic debate and engagement, but encouraging the collaboration of political elites and external administrators against the citizens of West Balkan states.

8. Giulio Venneri, "The EU 'Hands-Off' Statebuilding: From Bosnia-Herzegovina to Kosovo", Paper presented at the International Studies Association's 49th Annual Convention, San Francisco, USA, 26 March 2008.

9. See, European Stability Initiative, *The Worst in Class: How the International Protectorate Hurts the European Future of Bosnia and Herzegovina* (Berlin: ESI, 2007). Available at: <http://www.esiweb.org/pdf/esi_document_id_98.pdf>; Thomas Muehlmann, "Police Restructuring in Bosnia-Herzegovina: Problems of Internationally-led Security Sector Reform", *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (2008), pp. 1-22.

The EU and Civil Society

Bearing in mind the social and economic context and the uncertainty hanging over the borders of the new states, O'Brennan is willing to accept that EU policy-making could perhaps be improved. He suggests that:

At a practical level one could argue that the focus on democratic regime-building needs to be recalibrated in favour of a more direct effort to engage Western Balkan societies and citizens (a more open and accessible visa regime, further support for civil society programmes) in tandem with a much greater level of economic subvention. Similarly, an opening up of the SAP towards a much more substantive focus on economic development and welfare outcomes would also help to marginalise the local actors who continually contest and obstruct progress in the enlargement process.¹⁰

The assumptions made here by O'Brennan are astounding. Any contestation or obstruction of the process of EU accession on the part of Western Balkan elites is clearly seen to be illegitimate and a problem to be addressed through their "marginalisation". Here questions of economic and social welfare are addressed merely instrumentally, as short-term tangible gains to be offered to buy acquiescence rather than as goods in themselves. Despite the cravenness of the perspective, there is the glimmer of consciousness that, notwithstanding his abstract rhetoric of crime and corruption, Western Balkan states and citizens might just have a genuine case justifying less than enthusiastic support for EU "norms and values".

The visa regime relaxations for Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina have been seen as important "sweeteners" for the electorates in these countries, as a way of demonstrating the tangible gains of EU membership. More important has been the EU's support for civil society. The EU argues that it is more democratic than elected representatives and has shared interests with the citizens of Western Balkan states. For example, opinion polls in Bosnia show that 85 per cent of the population support joining the EU, including over 80 per cent of each of the three main ethnic constituencies. For the EU, its interests are therefore the same as those of the Balkan peoples in that there is a mutual interest in a better future of peace, stability and prosperity. The EU is therefore not forcing anything on anyone.

However, the passive opinion poll support for the EU is not reflected in major political party positions. The national question still plays a defining role for many Western Balkan states, for fairly obvious reasons. Rather than take on board the realities of the region, EU officials argue, along the lines of O'Brennan, that the EU needs to "help bridge the gap" between political elites and the people. This "gap-bridging" is held to be the task of civil society. Civil society groups are funded and encouraged to talk about single issues which the EU is keen to promote—from the importance of small and medium enterprises to issues of jobs, crime, corruption and healthcare. The EU argues that its missions and SRs listen to the people and civil society, while the elected politicians do not.

This "democratic" discourse, which portrays the EU as the genuine representative of the people against the illegitimate or immature politicians, fits well with the

10. O'Brennan, *op. cit.*

allegations that politicians do not have the citizens' public interests at heart and therefore must be motivated by private concerns of greed and self-interest. It also tends to discount the votes expressed in elections as being the product of elite manipulation or electoral immaturity. The process of conditionality around an external agenda is then seen to be stymied by the processes of domestic representation—much as the Irish electorate are seen to be irrationally blocking the Lisbon treaty—implying that the votes of the public should count for less than the consensus of international experts. This elitist discourse then results in a manipulative view of conditionality where political decision-making seeks to evade public accountability. In Bosnia, EU experts and political elites talk about a “window of opportunity” for reforms. This window is alleged to be after the municipal elections in October 2008 and before the next state-level elections in 2010. A process of manipulation develops where politics is actively excluded from the public sphere and decision-making is a matter of elite negotiation with Brussels. In short, the EU is reproducing itself in the Western Balkans. It may be that this is the reason some commentators feel the need to mute academic criticism of the process.

Conclusion

EU member state-building in the Western Balkans is a clear example of the dangers of the liberal peace approach to post-conflict situations. Where states have a tenuous relationship to their societies, the relationship management of the EU sucks the political life from societies, institutionalising existing political divisions between ethnic or national groups through undermining the need for public negotiation and compromise between domestic elites. The externally driven nature of the policy process means that political elites seek to lobby external EU actors rather than engage in domestic constituency-building. Even more problematically, the fact that it is in political elite and EU officials' interests to keep the process of relationship management going means that local political elites are increasingly drawn away from engaging with their citizens (in a similar way to political elites in member states). Rather than exporting democracy and legitimising new state structures, the process of EU member state-building in the Western Balkans is leading to a political process in which the voters and the processes of electoral representation are seen to be barriers to reform rather than crucial to it. O'Brennan, in taking the EU's public relations view of its own actions as good coin, rather than seeking to examine the impact and practices of the EU's “normative power” on the ground, inevitably produces a response which appears to be more interested in apologia than in analysis.