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Europeanization should meet international constructivism:

The Nordic Plus group and the internalization of political conditionality by France and the United Kingdom¹

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ABSTRACT: This article is a plausibility probe for the significance of international constructivist ‘mediating factors’ to explain variation in Europeanization outcomes. The article applies a Most Similar Systems Design (or Mill’s Method of Difference) to show that the United Kingdom has internalized political conditionality to a larger extent than France at least partially because it has been the object of stronger socialization pressures within the Nordic Plus Group. The article contributes to the literature on Europeanization and development cooperation in two important ways. First, it enlarges its scope of analysis, both geographically (beyond new European Union Member States) and thematically (beyond simple measures of aid quality and/or quantity). Second, it emphasizes the importance of international (versus domestic) mediating factors. The empirical analysis focuses on three cases of aid sanctions in response to human rights abuses and democratic setbacks: Zimbabwe 2002, Madagascar 2009 and Mozambique 2009.

KEY WORDS: conditionality, constructivism, Europeanization, human rights, internalization

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Introduction

This article is a plausibility probe for the significance of international constructivist ‘mediating factors’ to explain variation in Europeanization outcomes. In particular, the article shows that the United Kingdom (UK) has internalized political conditionality to a larger extent than France at least partially because it has been the object of stronger socialization pressures within the Nordic Plus Group (Denmark, Finland, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, UK and Sweden). Political conditionality is defined as the norm by which aid donors should make the allocation and disbursement of development assistance dependent on respect for fundamental human rights and basic democratic principles by recipient governments.

The article concentrates on France and the UK because, notwithstanding their similar status in world politics (as Member States of the EU, big donors, former colonial empires, nuclear powers and permanent members of the United Nations Security Council), and notwithstanding a formal attempt to coordinate their development policies in Africa (sanctioned by a joint declaration at Saint-Malo in 1998) (Chafer and Cumming 2010a), the two countries have adopted starkly different approaches to the application of aid sanctions. This situation offers a unique vantage point to test potential intervening variables that can explain the different attitude towards political conditionality by influential EU Member States. The Most Similar Systems Design (or Mill’s Method of Difference) suggests to compare cases which are as similar as possible, except with regard to the dependent variable. The ambition is to keep constant the highest possible number of independent variables (Anckar 2008; Yin 2009, 64–67).

The article contributes to the academic literature on Europeanization and development cooperation in two important ways. First, it enlarges its scope of analysis. Even if recent works have pointed at the limited but discernible role played by the European Commission in coordinating Member States’ development practices (Carbone 2007; Carbone 2010; Delputte and Söderbaum 2012; Orbie 2012), research on the Europeanization of development cooperation has been very limited so far. Its

foundations are sketched in only two book chapters (Bretherton 2013; Orbie and Lightfoot 2014). Moreover, researchers have produced only a few empirical studies, limited geographically to new Member States in Central and Eastern Europe, and thematically to aspects such as aid quantity, regional focus, tied aid and use of budget support (Horký 2012; Lightfoot 2010; Lightfoot and Szent-Iványi 2014; Vittek and Lightfoot 2009). This article is the first study ever to deal with the Europeanisation of the development cooperation of EU Member States as old and powerful as France and the UK, and also to concentrate on the issue of political conditionality. In addition, even the most advanced papers so far have not dealt with variation *between* European donors. For instance, Lightfoot and Szent-Iványi explained the similar ‘reluctance’ that several New Member States (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) have shown in approximating their ODA policies to the EU’s *acquis communautaire* in development policy since their accession. Their analysis is not intended to offer a comprehensive comparative study between these countries (Lightfoot and Szent-Iványi 2014).

Second, the article contributes to theorizing those elements that are capable to explain variation in Europeanization outcomes. Without opening the Pandora’s box of what Europeanisation is and what it is not (for a useful primer, see J. P. Olsen 2002), researchers interested in Europeanization processes have concentrated not only on the impact of the EU on its Member States, but also on the transfer of politics, policies and policy making between EU Member States (Bache 2006, 232). The academic literature on Europeanization has already explored a few key “mediating factors” that can help explain variation in the degree of domestic change adjusting to pressure from EU institutions and/or from other EU Member States (Börzel 2005, 53; Risse, Cowles, and Caporaso 2001, 11). From a rational choice perspective, Europeanisation is facilitated by the absence of multiple veto players and the existence of mediating formal institutions (see, for instance, Haverland 2000). From a sociological perspective, Europeanisation is assisted by normative resonance with domestic understandings, strong norm entrepreneurs and consensus-oriented decision-making cultures (see, for instance, Lightfoot and Szent-Iványi 2014, 16).

Against this background, it is rather surprising that little attention has been dedicated to the role of international pressure from other groups or sub-groups of states, within and outside the European Union. For instance, when Swedish and Dutch update their policies, it is plausible that Denmark will find itself under higher pressure than Italy to change its policies too. If Spain changes its behaviour following stimulus from the European Commission, pressure to conform is expected to be higher for Portugal than for Estonia.

The article is structured as follows. The second section compares the two donors on the basis of (1) endorsement of political conditionality in policy documents, and (2) willingness to adopt aid sanctions in response to human rights violations or democratic setbacks. The section shows that the UK has internalized political conditionality to a larger extent than France. The third section clarifies the international constructivist hypothesis. The main idea is that variation between France and the UK can be at least partially explained by reference to the fact that the two donors belong to different groups of states which do not assign the same level of importance to political conditionality. The last section tests this hypothesis against empirical evidence.

In order to test the hypothesis, information from primary sources (such as independent newspapers' articles, government evaluation reports and diplomatic cables) is triangulated with semi-structured interviews with more than 100 individuals. These individuals were selected because of current or past working experience with French and British institutions, other donors and/or development and human rights NGOs. The empirical analysis mainly focuses on three cases of aid sanctions: Zimbabwe 2002, Madagascar 2009 and Mozambique 2009. These countries include a former British colony, a former French colony, and one of the few countries in the world where the two donors have similar influence and interests.

Before proceeding, it is important to specify that this article is not an Europeanisation study *per se*. The article compares France and the UK one against the other, without systematically exploring all mechanisms and processes through which European institutions and other EU Member States

may have influenced the evolution of French and British development programmes. Yet, the article builds on another study that did take into full account other important elements, such as the influence of realist considerations and domestic politics (de Felice 2015).

In this light, the article represents a ‘plausibility probe’, not a fully-fledged test, of the relevance and validity of a new international constructivist hypothesis in the context of Europeanization research (on plausibility probes, see George and Bennett 2005, 75; Levy 2008, 5; for an example, see Heupel and Zangl 2010). This exercise is important because the emphasis of much previous analysis ‘has been on the presentation of empirical results as evidence for Europeanization rather than on systematic theory building’ (de Flers and Müller 2012, 24).

Variation between France and the UK in the internalization of political conditionality

Policies

French policy-makers do not support the idea that allocation and disbursement of development assistance should strictly depend on respect for fundamental human rights and basic democratic principles by recipient governments. In 2006, the French Inter-ministerial Committee on International Cooperation and Development (*Comité Interministériel pour la Coopération Internationale et le Développement, CICID*) – that is, the body in charge of signalling the direction of French aid – adopted a white paper titled “Governance strategy for French Development Assistance”. According to the document, ‘the quality of cooperation should not be measured so much by its ability to lay down universal standards manipulated in the abstract through conditionality as it should be assessed by its ability to provide each partner with specific experience and expertise to enable them to develop their own policies’ (French Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs 2006, 16).

Interestingly, political conditionality is not considered appropriate even for budget support operations, albeit this aid modality is unanimously recognized to be increasingly subject to the

application of aid sanctions (Hayman 2011; Molenaers 2012). French budget support is dispensed on the basis of two documents: a “Doctrine for the use of comprehensive budgetary aid in foreign States” adopted by CICID in February 2007, and a “Strategy of operational implementation” laid down by in March 2007. Three eligibility conditions have to be satisfied for the planning and disbursement of budget support:

1. a sound and sustainable macroeconomic policy;
2. a growth and poverty-reduction strategy in line with Millennium Development Goals; and
3. a favourable assessment of the public financial management system (CICID 2007).

As can be seen, no human rights requirement is included.

The different with London is evident. The UK presents a firm stance in favour of political conditionality. In March 2005, the UK Department for International Development (DfID), Her Majesty’s Treasury and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) jointly adopted a document titled “Partnerships for poverty reduction: rethinking conditionality”, which ‘sets out the circumstances in which [the UK] will consider modifying or withdrawing existing aid commitments’ (DfID 2005, 4). The UK government clearly affirms that ‘an effective aid partnership should be based on a shared commitment to three objectives:

1. reducing poverty and achieving the Millennium Development Goals;
2. respecting human rights and other international obligations; and
3. strengthening financial management and accountability, and reducing the risk of funds being misused through weak administration or corruption’ (DfID 2005, 1, 8).

DFID, the Treasury and the FCO clearly state that ‘the UK will consider reducing or interrupting aid if:

- countries veer significantly away from agreed poverty reduction objectives or outcomes or the agreed objectives of a particular aid commitment (e.g. through an unjustifiable rise in

military spending, or a substantial deviation from the agreed poverty reduction programme);

or

- countries are in significant violation of human rights or other international obligations; or
- there is a significant breakdown in partner government financial management and accountability, leading to the risk of funds being misused through weak administration or corruption' (DfID 2005, 3, 9).

Since 2005, this conditionality policy has been reaffirmed numerous times (including with respect to budget support operations), even by the new Coalition government. In July 2011, DFID published a "Technical Note on Implementing DFID's strengthened approach to budget support", which affirms that, in considering whether to give budget support or not, it will continue to assess governments against the three commitments mentioned above. In addition, it 'will place more emphasis on domestic accountability by making partner country commitment to strengthening domestic accountability a specific commitment, separating it out from the other commitments, so the commitments will be to:

1. poverty reduction and the Millennium Development Goals;
2. respecting human rights and other international obligations;
3. improving public financial management, promoting good governance and transparency and fighting corruption; and
4. strengthening domestic accountability' (DfID 2011, 1).

Behaviour

Academic researchers have recurrently suggested that that, at least since the end of the Cold War, France has been less willing than the UK to apply political conditionality. For example, Uvin found that, in comparison with other major donors, 'the French policy towards political conditionality is much more modest ... Generally speaking, its position continues to be one of silent support for the

prevailing regimes in its former colonies, whatever their democratic or human rights record' (Uvin 1993, 66). Cumming concluded his lengthy comparison of French and British aid from the end of the Cold War to 1997 by highlighting that there was 'a radical shift with the introduction of political conditionality'. While the shift has gradually been watered down in both countries, this happened more in France, and 'to a lesser extent' in the UK (Cumming 2001, 340).

More recent anecdotic evidence consistently supports this view. After the 2009 coup in Madagascar, France was the only Western donor with operations in the country (in contrast with the EU, Germany, Norway and the US) to continue some bilateral government-to-government programmes (Connolly 2013, 6; Dewar, Massey, and Baker 2013, 13; Vivier 2010, 162). During the 2009 donor strike in Mozambique, France adopted a soft stance and avoided a confrontational position against the Mozambican government (*Agencia de Informacao de Mocambique* 2010b). The UK was among the leaders of the strike and one of the most vocal critics of the political situation (*Agencia de Informacao de Mocambique* 2010a; Wikileaks 2009). When the Zimbabwean government resorted to widespread human rights abuses in connection with its fast-track land reform at the beginning of the 2000s, the UK pushed for the adoption of aid sanctions (Addison and Laakso 2003, 468; International Crisis Group 2002, 15; Taylor and Williams 2002, 556). In contrast with the British position, France tried to profit from the retrenchment of other bilateral donors (Chafer 2002, 351; Cilliers 2001, 124; Grebe 2010, 125).

A significant difference between France and the UK is also confirmed by statistical studies that have investigated whether the human rights performance of potential recipient governments have influenced the decisions of bilateral donors on (a) who their recipient governments should be and (b) how much aid these governments should receive. The large majority of analyses show that human rights and democracy variables have little influence on French aid allocation patterns, and in any case lower influence than on British aid allocation. For instance, Alesina and Dollar found that 'the strongest positive response to democratic institutions is for the U.S., the Dutch, the U.K., the

Nordics, and Canada. Of the major donors, France is the one that seems to pay no attention to the democracy of the receiving country' (Alesina and Dollar 2000, 49). According to Hoeffler and Outram, 'most bilateral donors seem to place little importance on recipient merit ... The UK and Japan are exceptions: they allocate more aid to countries with higher growth, higher democracy scores, and fewer human rights abuses' (Hoeffler and Outram 2011, 237; see also Berthélemy 2006; Neumayer 2003; the only exception is Carey 2007).

International constructivism: the hypothesis

In contrast with the domestic focus of both rationalist and sociological "mediating factors" suggested by Europeanization researchers so far, international constructivism concentrates on the foreign dimension. The main argument is that states' behaviour is heavily influenced by the (active as well as involuntary) ideational and social pressures exercised by other international actors (mainly states, international organisations and transnational movements) (Wendt 1999).² The behaviour of states is norm-driven (not goal-oriented), and norms are constructed (as well as deconstructed) through social interaction at the international level (Ruggie 1998). As highlighted by Brysk, foreign policy can be 'constructed outward. The identities that shape interests are constructed in relation to others' (Brysk 2009, 33). Finnemore and Sikkink best exemplified this approach through a model of norms' cascade. Once a critical mass of states adopt an international norm, 'states and state élites fashion a political self or identity in relation to the international community', and seek 'legitimation, conformity and esteem' (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 902–3)

On the basis of these insights, international constructivist scholars explain similarities and differences between foreign policies through social processes at the international level: foreign policies are similar when states construct their identities (and therefore adopt the norms dictated by

² I call this approach 'international' constructivism in order to distinguish it from 'unit-level' constructivism, whose focus lies on the relationship between local/domestic norms and the identities, interests and actions of states (Reus-Smit 2002).

these identities) together with each other; foreign policies are dissimilar when states construct their identities without, or even against, each other (Checkel 1999; Finnemore 1993). For example, Rittberger suggests that norms ‘emerge in, and are restricted in their validity to, particular regional contexts, producing cross-regional variation in state behaviour’ (Rittberger 2004, 25).

Importantly, even though international constructivism stresses the influence of social pressures at the international level, a distinctive characteristic of this approach is its agnosticism over which social pressures matter most in influencing a specific state’s identities, norms and actions. This is a question for empirical research (Boekle, Rittberger, and Wagner 2001, 110).

A potential explanation for variation in the extent of Europeanization of political conditionality by France and the UK is therefore that the two donors belong to different groups of states, inside and/or outside the EU. The hypothesis that will be considered in this article revolves around participation in the Nordic Plus Group (which includes the UK but not France).

At the beginning of the 2000s, the four Nordic donors (Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden) plus Ireland, the Netherlands and the UK formally joined forces under the heading of the ‘Nordic Plus Group’. Since then, the groups has gained in importance. In 2006, Selbervik and Nygaard argued that ‘the Nordic Plus group appears as a more important point of reference than the Nordic countries per se’ (Selbervik and Nygaard 2006, 51).

A constructivist explanation has strong plausibility in the field on foreign aid and human rights promotion. Several scholars have already explained the diffusion of development cooperation programmes by the force of ideational and social processes (Lumsdaine 1993; Riddell 1987). Even specifically on political conditionality, researchers reported the emergence on ‘common features’ in the methodology of country-level human rights assessments evaluation (D’Hollander, Marx, and Wouters 2014, 236). Del Biondo and Orbie reported that, in the case of Ethiopia, coordination after the 2005 human rights violations was driven by ‘peer pressure and the hope of having some effect through coordinated action’ (Del Biondo and Orbie 2014, 422).

International constructivism: the plausibility probe

The hypothesis that the UK has been at least partially ‘socialized’ into political conditionality through participation in the Nordic Plus Group faces a two-step test:

1. Nordic countries should have internalized political conditionality to a larger extent than other EU Member States;
2. The UK should have been more amenable than France to social pressure from the Nordic group.

Regarding the first point, there is little doubt that the group of Nordic donors have always set the highest standards in terms of value-based development policies, including the integration of human rights into development programmes and the adoption of aid sanctions against repressive regimes (Stokke 2005, 41). According to Selbervik and Nygaard, the Nordic countries ‘were among the pioneers in linking development aid and human rights’ (Selbervik and Nygaard 2006, 26). Employing a dataset covering the period 1980 to 1999 and as many as 91 recipient countries, Gates and Hoeffler found that ‘unlike the average donor, Nordic donors allocate aid according to democracy and human rights records but not to political allies’ (Gates and Hoeffler 2004, 11).

The analysis of specific cases of aid sanctions confirm that Nordic countries are very often among the hardliners against repressive regimes. Sweden strongly argued in favour of aid sanctions against Mugabe at the beginning of the 2000s (Laakso 2002, 450; G. R. Olsen 2011, 99). Norway immediately suspended development cooperation after Rajoelina toppled Ravalomanana in Madagascar (Lough 2009). Denmark and the Netherlands have always been among the strongest supporters of sanctions against the Burmese regime (Egreteau 2010, 28). Sweden was among the hardliners after the 2005 elections in Ethiopia (diplomat in Addis-Ababa, 10 September 2014).

Regarding the second point, almost all interviewees validated the hypothesis that Nordic countries put lower social pressure on France than on Britain. Chafer and Cumming suggested that ‘France is

never happy to copy others, it takes inspiration and then adapts itself' (Chafer and Cumming 2010b, 59). A former diplomat in numerous African countries confirmed the general unwillingness of France to coordinate and, above all, to 'be coordinated', which can be equated to 'be persuaded' (former diplomat in Harare, 26 April 2013). When asked about French development cooperation in their countries of competence, almost all development officers from Nordic countries confessed that they know very little about the programmes of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and AFD (diplomat in Harare, 9 September 2014; diplomat in Mozambique, 26 August 2014). A diplomat in Antananarivo shared his surprise when the new French Ambassador in Madagascar, who arrived in the middle of the political crisis, showed no interest in knowing what other local diplomats thought about the crisis and how they would have reacted to the unilateral French decision to continue development assistance to Rajoelina (foreign diplomat in Antananarivo, 16 September 2014).

Loose cooperation between France and Nordic countries is confirmed by the *Donor Atlas* published by the European Commission and the OECD in 2006. At that time, nine donors (including Denmark, Finland, Ireland, the Netherlands, the UK and Sweden) claimed that their coordination with other EU Member States was 'strong'. Italy, Portugal and Greece reported weak coordination, while France and Spain failed to respond to the question altogether (Development Strategies 2006). When these results were pointed at a Nordic diplomat commented: 'You can see by yourself who coordinates more and who coordinates less among Member States' (diplomat in Antananarivo, 1 September 2014).

Lack of persuasion through close coordination is accompanied by limited chances for imitation. The French diplomats who have been interviewed did not demonstrate any deference to the Nordic approach. They talked about the Nordic Plus donors as 'a group of donors who *believe they are* the best in class' (emphasis added, diplomat in Paris, 6 September 2014). Even when they acknowledge that Nordic donors score better than anybody else in most aid quality rankings (Knack, Rogers, and Eubank 2011), they differentiate France on the basis of the argument that 'we are a much greater

power, with larger interests. In the end, the only interest of Nordic countries is to be at the top of these rankings. It is not a fair comparison' (diplomat in Paris, 21 March 2014).

Institutional differences further limit the possibility of imitation. French officials often argue that 'AFD is not a development agency like Sida and Norad' (AFD senior manager in Paris, 25 March 2013). According to Naudet, this attitude may also derive from scepticism regarding international norms. The priorities of French aid 'have been somewhat removed from the constantly changing international priorities ... there is a widespread feeling of mistrust within the French system with regard to the new priorities ... these are sometimes considered as 'fashions' which are likely to falter or disappear as new ideas emerge' (Naudet 1997, 177).

As far as the UK is concerned, almost all interviewees emphasized a good level of harmonization with Nordic countries. To start with, there is high resonance in terms of values and principles. A UK diplomat highlighted that, 'even though the UK and the Nordics might disagree on the appropriate response to specific abuses, I always trust them to share our own values and objectives. This is why I pay attention to what they say' (former diplomat in Rangoon, 10 September 2014). A Nordic diplomat confessed that 'sometimes we are worried by the way in which a large organisation like DfID works, and I can give you examples of situations when we thought that it operated too close with the government. However, I have never questioned their values. In that respect, we are very similar' (diplomat in Addis Ababa, 10 September 2014).

According to a DfID official, similar values are not the only feature that makes UK-Nordic harmonization easy.

Between UK and Nordics, not only is there agreement on the principles of development programmes, there are also frequent high level meetings between the heads of the development aid departments from the countries involved. There are joint visits to countries receiving aid from Britain and the Nordics as well as joint programming in these countries (DfID senior manager in London, 19 May 2014).

In terms of joint programming and coordination, the Nordic Plus group takes centre stage. The group actively promotes the ‘Joint Action Plan of Effective Aid Delivery through Harmonisation and Alignment of Donor Practices’, and has mainly concentrated on aid coordination and delegated cooperation (“Nordic Plus Launches Ambitious Goals for Harmonisation” 2006; for an example in Zambia, see OECD 2004, 69). However, the Group has also covered human rights and conditionality. Human rights were perceived as a natural element for cooperation among the countries. In 2006, the seven countries carried out a joint assessment of policies and administrative practices in order to identify possible barriers for delegated cooperation among the Nordic Plus partners. One of the main findings was that ‘certain cross-cutting issues and themes are common to all the donors. These include Governance (Human Rights and Democratisation)’ (COWI 2006, 23). The Nordic Plus Group also actively worked to harmonize (and thus reduce) the conditions in the programmes they supported (Development Finance International 2009, 6).

Close coordination within the Nordic Plus group offers ample opportunities for both persuasion and imitation. As far as persuasion is concerned, Ingebritsen has already suggested that Scandinavian countries deliberately act as ‘norm entrepreneurs’ in foreign aid: they have ‘consistently and actively sought to influence more powerful states in establishing and strengthening global norms of cooperation’ (Ingebritsen 2002, 11).³ Herman spoke of the Netherlands as a *gidsland*, a ‘mentor state’ (Herman 2006, 863). Dahl categorized Sweden as a ‘moral superpower’, a country that sees ‘itself as a natural role model in the international community’ and takes ‘it upon itself to act as a guide to other actors in the system’ (Dahl 2006, 897).

The attempts of Nordic countries to persuade the UK to adopt joint sanctions make perfect sense from the perspective of small states (Thorhallsson 2000; Egeland 1984). Small states do not possess numerous sources of influence over large organisations like the EU. However, sometime they are able to punch above their weight. As recognized by Panke, ‘small states are neither per se political

³ Importantly, influence is reciprocal. For instance, Browning warns that the ‘exceptionalism’ of the Nordic ‘brand’ is being challenged, in particular because of the ‘medling of Nordic with European practices and processes’ (Browning 2007).

dwarfs nor power-brokers' (Panke 2011, 137). Two recurrent mechanisms of influence help explain their behaviour in cases of political conditionality. First, small states often try to influence larger players by putting forward arguments that appeal to shared ideas, a strategy which Björkdahl referred to as 'normative framing' (Björkdahl 2007, 140). Second, small states need to cultivate 'network capital' (Nasra 2011, 168). The UK is the ideal candidate for coalition-building with powerful actors on the basis of norms and values.

As far as imitation is concerned, Lumsdaine has already argued that 'some countries, such as the Dutch and the Swedes, ... consciously see their role in the aid process as one of seeking to set higher standards, to reform and correct the aid process by example' (Lumsdaine 1993, 66). A UK diplomat confirmed that 'if human rights violations take place, if a coup is staged, it is very likely that one of the first diplomats I would contact would be a Nordic official' (diplomat in Guinea, 11 September 2014).

Importantly, persuasion and emulation of Nordic countries have played an important role at all levels of political conditionality:

1. the adoption of policies,
2. the inclusion of human rights clauses in development agreements, and
3. the application of aid sanctions.

Policies. British adoption of advanced policy documents on political conditionality is linked to emulation of Nordic countries. Interviewees suggested that Nordic-UK synchronization goes back to the end of the 1990s, when the Ministers for Development Cooperation in Germany, the Netherlands, Norway and the UK (Heidemarie Wiczorek-Zeul, Eveline Herfkens, Hilde Johnson and Clare Short respectively) were all women. Named the 'Utstein Group', and later enlarged to Canada and Sweden, this forum assumed a coordinating function and a proactive role in the international donor community (in particular on poverty reduction, anti-corruption and donor coherence) (Lawry-White 2003, 4). A former DfID official commented that, at the time of the

creation of the Department, the affinity between Clare Short and the other Development Minister meant that the new-born British Department, eager to position itself as a leader in the development sector, recurrently looked at the policies of the Nordic countries to draw inspiration (DfID senior manager in London, 28 March 2014).

International agreements. The UK found itself under pressure also to mainstream the inclusion of human rights provisions. The Joint Financing Arrangement promoted by the Nordic Plus Group explicitly include a human rights clause (Nordic Plus 2007, 11). The Nordic Plus Group also drafted a template for arrangements on delegated cooperation. This document reveals the important role played by other countries (in this case the Netherlands) in pressing for the inclusion of human rights clause: ‘The Programme Arrangement will be based on the principle of national ownership, and will cover at least the following issues: ... if the Netherlands is Co-Donor: A provision on respect for human rights and adherence to democratic principles, rule of law and good governance’ (COWI 2007, 36).

Sanctions. Pressure from Nordic donors on British decisions was detected also before specific responses to human rights abuses. In Maputo, the main donor coordination group is the G19. However, smaller informal groups ‘are not a secret to anyone in Mozambique’. The EU is one of these groups, even though ‘EU coordination is weak’. The reason is that ‘it reproduces the European North/South distinction which is already present within the G19’ (diplomat in Maputo, 22 August 2014). The more cohesive group is, again, the informal coordination among Nordic Plus (or ‘like-minded’) countries. The four Scandinavian countries share the same building, and their coordination is therefore ‘logistically’ easy. However, they often reach out ‘similar agencies, like DfID’. This is perceived to be ‘spontaneous’ because ‘we share the same value’. The diplomat continued:

It is true. The donors which participate in the Nordic Plus Group adopted a similar stance ... during the donor strike ... This is not surprising if you think that we consider ourselves to be obvious collaborators in numerous circumstances (diplomat in Maputo, 4 September 2014).⁴

Evidence of Nordic Plus coordination on good governance and human rights issues can be found in other programmes as well. Shortly before 2011, the Nordic Plus donors launched an initiative to strengthen partnerships between donors and civil society organisations. The objective was ‘to establish a set of principles for donors to follow to increase civil society capacity at the local level, as well as to improve donor effectiveness and co-ordination between civil society organisations and Nordic Plus donors’ (Manning and Malbrough 2012, 14). A foreign diplomat reported that, in a rather unusual step for a highly coordinated environment like the Mozambican one, in March 2013 Nordic Plus donors unilaterally (that is, without consultation with other Western donors) sent a letter to the Prime Minister asking for explanation about governance in the forestry sector (diplomat in Maputo, 26 August 2014).

The absence of any ‘natural partnership’ between France and Nordic countries in the application of political conditionality is confirmed by researchers who have analysed other cases. In the 2009 political crisis in Niger, France made it clear that it was very interested in maintaining Danish involvement in the country. However, Denmark decided to postpone a new phase of its cooperation in the water sector and to consider adjustments in the overall country programme (G. R. Olsen 2011, 97). According to Olsen,

The Swedish experience from holding the EU Presidency in the second half of 2009 confirms the existence of the North–South divide within the Union when it comes to other policy issues linked to Africa. During the Swedish Presidency, a number of Francophone countries were on the agenda. France considered Mauritius, Guinea Conakry, Niger and Madagascar as its genuine interests; therefore, it was very difficult for the Presidency to find common ground among the member states for policy initiatives directed towards these four countries. Based on the

⁴ It is important to recognize that influence is a two-way street: ‘DfID is influenced, but also heavily influences what others do’ (journalist, 28 August 2014).

experiences during the Presidency and other examples, Swedish decision-makers in general consider France as a difficult partner to work with in an African context (G. R. Olsen 2012, 416).

In sum, as argued by Chafer and Cumming, there is “a natural partnership between the UK and the Nordics ... and a less fruitful alliance between France and the Scandinavian States” (Chafer and Cumming 2011, 10). Today British representatives feel much closer to their like-minded counterparts than French officials do. Both journalists and researchers have already suggested that, because of participation in the Nordic Plus Group, UK policies are therefore becoming ‘increasingly’ similar to those of Denmark, Sweden, the Netherlands and Norway (*The Economist* 2002; Knack 2013, 348).

Importantly, close coordination between Nordic Plus donors sometimes takes place at the expenses of European coordination. As reported by Delputte and Orbie,

Some Nordic Plus interviewees ... suggested that more intense EU coordination conflicts with their identity, which corresponds more with ‘supporting the principle of multilateralism’ than ‘being an EU donor’. This opinion also rests on a perception that through EU coordination, the EU Delegations aim to strengthen a common European identity rather than making EU aid more effective (Delputte and Orbie 2014, 11).

Delputte and Söderbaum reported that, in Zambia and Tanzania, the Commission suffers from administrative delays and a burdensome hierarchy. Hence, it is the complete opposite of some Nordic Plus donors, who are considered as more flexible agencies: ‘by the time the Commission gives the green light, its ideas are already superseded by what we have already agreed in the sectors’ (Delputte and Söderbaum 2012, 43).

Conclusion

While past research has emphasized the significant role played by domestic politics to explain variation in the degree of internalization of political conditionality by EU Member States (de Felice 2015), this article showed that the UK has internalized political conditionality to a larger extent than France also because it has been the object of stronger socialization pressures within the Nordic Plus Group.

The article contributes to the expanding literature on the Europeanization of development assistance in two important ways. To begin with, it is one of the few studies ever to explore convergence or divergence in the internalization of political conditionality by EU Member States. So far, research on the Europeanization of development cooperation neglected variation *between* countries, and focused on other aspects (such as aid quantity, regional focus, tied aid and use of budget support).

Second, the article confirms the plausibility of international constructivist explanations for variation in Europeanization outcomes. In their attempt to explain why common European pressures often result in different impacts at the national level, Europeanisation researchers concentrated on *domestic* mediating factors, overlooking the potential role of *international* mediating factors. EU Member States participate in different international organisations and informal networks. The social pressures exerted within these groupings can significantly affect their willingness to comply with European 'ways of doing things'. As shown in this article, Nordic donors often took the leadership in the application of aid sanctions, thus encouraging other EU donors (but not all of them) to follow their example.

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