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Assessing international aid for local governance in the Western Balkans

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This article investigates the impact of international efforts to cultivate effective and authoritative local governing institutions in the Western Balkans, a prime testing ground for democratization aid to post-war states. It explores three hypotheses, each of which argues that a particular approach of international actors toward domestic officials best improves the quality of local governance. The study’s gathering of interview and survey data from field-based actors enables it to evaluate local government reforms’ impact on domestic communities. This investigation arrives at three findings. First, in the view of Western Balkan peoples, local governance reforms do not produce benefits when they are either imposed or ignored by international authorities. Secondly, reforms produce benefits for local communities when they are designed to meet domestic concerns. More specifically, reforms valued by local communities are designed in ways that respond to domestic, rather than international, concepts of good local governance that emphasize socioeconomic aspects and produce tangible benefits. Well designed reforms also include significant aid targeting local governance that is coupled with the promise of a larger political settlement that is attractive to powerful domestic elites and contingent on clearly articulated local governance reforms. Thirdly, such aid best characterises European Union efforts only in Macedonia.

Keywords: political decentralization; Western Balkans; international assistance; democratization; international intervention

This paper explores substantial international efforts to develop local democratic institutions in states that have been some of the key testing grounds for international attempts to promote democratic state building in post-conflict states – the Western Balkans. Well-functioning governing institutions, including those at the local level, that Western organizations seek to cultivate, are critical for effective and equitable delivery of services, political competition, broad political participation and decision-making, and a vibrant and inclusive civil society. Decentralization involves the devolution of authority over administration, budgets and

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financial decisions, the allocation of resources, and the provision of services in a manner that is responsive to local communities and largely independent of higher levels of government. Viewing democratic decentralization as part of their neo-liberal strategy, international financial institutions and international organizations (IOs) have championed it in developing countries. Donor governments, such as the US, assert that when democratic local governance is combined with decentralization, ‘local governments – and the communities they govern – gain the authority, resources, and skills to make responsive choices and to act on them effectively and accountably’. In divided post-conflict societies like those in the Western Balkans of focus here – Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia, and Kosovo – programmes to improve the quality of local governance are also expected to provide a context in which social and ethnic conflicts can be constructively addressed out of the politicized light of the national government.

Many studies focus either on democratic decentralization or on international aid for democratization. For example, a cross-national investigation of the impact of democracy and governance aid of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) found a positive impact on countries’ Freedom House measures of national-level democracy, but it did not assess the impact of aid on sub-national institutions. This study takes a rare look at the complex question of international efforts to promote democratic decentralization. This four-case investigation analyses newly gathered information from domestic officials and citizens to do what few studies of democratization aid have attempted: judge the impact of internationally supported local governance reforms on domestic communities, who will significantly determine whether the reforms survive the exit of international patrons.

In the rest of the paper, I outline hypotheses derived from post-conflict democratization and decentralization literature on the impact of internationally supported local governance reforms. I then describe the cases for investigating these hypotheses. Next, donor and Western Balkan citizens’ assessments of local government reforms are explored. The local governance programmes of international donors are outlined and assessed through surveys, interviews, and reports. Finally, I explore why internationally sponsored reforms have had varying impact on the quality of local governments and discuss the conclusions of field-based research.

**Expectations from post-conflict democratization and decentralization literature**

Comparative analysis of political decentralization reforms suggests that the road leading to an envisioned virtuous outcome of good local governance is littered with potholes, including increased possibilities for political capture. Divided, post-war societies into which the international community has significantly intervened, such as those in the Western Balkans, present complicated environments for
reform. Literature suggests three hypotheses for explaining the varying impact of international aid for good local governance.

The first hypothesis this research considers is that the more frequently international officials use executive authority in domestic decision-making to bring about reforms, the more significant the obstacles to developing authoritative domestic institutions for self-sustaining good local governance. This proposition argues simply that imposing democracy is undemocratic and unlikely to garner the domestic support needed for reforms to outlive the exit of international organizations. Also, as international authority increases, arrangements become more complex – the number of foreign decision makers in domestic politics increases and the diversity in basic values, interests, and networks of accountability also increase. The logic argues that this complicates the development of effective domestic mechanisms for accountability, in particular. The hypothesis contends that heavy international civilian intervention fosters dependency on the international community, rather than helps build institutions responsive to domestic citizens. This hypothesis expects that countries where the international community most frequently imposes reforms will experience the least progress in local governance reforms. It also implies that countries where domestic actors design, support, and implement local government reform without international interference will experience the most progress.

A less rigid interpretation of the implications of international imposition of reforms, together with literature on democratization and policy making, suggest the positive potential of well designed international aid for local governance reform. The second hypothesis expects that carefully designed international aid programmes that appeal to the interests, needs, and values of key actors involved in local governance reform, particularly domestic ones, are most likely to help develop effective local institutions valued by domestic peoples. The second hypothesis stems partly from the idea that the nature of decentralization as a policy issue – on the softer side of security – opens greater possibilities for internationally supported reform than harder security issues like policing. While decentralization affects the distribution of political power, it does not fundamentally threaten essential mechanisms of power used by national and regional-level politicians. As a result, the stakes over local governance reform are lower than over reform at the national level. USAID supports local governance reforms partly out of frustration with efforts to reform central government institutions. Through dividing local governance into the ‘win-win’ solutions of pork barrel policy making, international officials may design successful aid programmes. The very idea of decentralization invites different degrees of shared ownership (locally, regionally, and nationally) on a variety of components, such as local development and service provision.

This is important, since even traditional development assistance for building capacity often generates principal-agent relationships that can hinder positive community impact. Western aid agencies often hire intermediaries – international and sometimes local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) – to implement
their aid projects. This ‘long aid chain’ creates multiple accountability mechanisms and requires cooperation among actors with diverse interests.\textsuperscript{14} As McMahon argues in the case of international aid for Bosnian civil society, agents and principals behave in self-interested ways that can ‘easily slight the needs of Bosnian society in favour of their own organizations’ viability.’\textsuperscript{15} Thus, the second hypothesis asserts that successful local governance reforms must be designed to meet domestic interests.\textsuperscript{16} International officials can use framing to provide a framework to meet multiple interests.\textsuperscript{17} For example, the frame of improved municipal ‘citizen services’ appeals to the interests of donors, domestic officials, and citizens. Also, international officials have dangled political rewards to bring on board ethnic majority elites dominating national politics, who were initially reluctant to accept internationally backed decentralization considered as catering to minority demands for more autonomy.\textsuperscript{18} Rewards include Western guarantees for the territorial integrity of Bosnia, integration into the EU and NATO for Macedonia, and independent statehood for Kosovo. Finally, the second hypothesis acknowledges empirical research on democracy aid that suggests a well-designed aid package includes recognizing that building democratic institutions is a process by offering targeted aid that is sustained over multiple time periods.\textsuperscript{19} Importantly, a well-designed aid programme also forges an international-domestic partnership that builds on local knowledge and garners the interest of local officials.\textsuperscript{20}

Students of EU accession, however, argue for a middle ground approach to international influence over reforms that is exercised by the EU.\textsuperscript{21} The third hypothesis expects the EU’s active leverage to be more successful than bi-lateral or other IOs’ efforts in developing effective and authoritative local institutions. Observers of EU accession assert that of the three existing state-building models – the authoritarian, where internationals are vested with executive authority; the traditional, development; and the EU-member state – only the latter’s voluntary process that offers the prize of EU membership has been successful. This is because the EU requires aspiring member states to reform their governments to meet democratic standards. At the same time, it does not dictate particular institutional reforms, allowing domestic politicians to come up with their own solutions.\textsuperscript{22} Such requirements, EU aid for reforming institutions, and the desire of Western Balkan states to join the EU club, supposedly work together to produce an administrative revolution that deepens democracy in credible candidate countries.\textsuperscript{23}

In sum, literature suggests the following three hypotheses. Hypothesis one expects small, but more significant, progress in local governance reforms in countries where international officials have not imposed reforms. Hypothesis two anticipates that international actors who design local governance programmes that most successfully address diverse interests, needs, and values of multiple stakeholders, particularly domestic ones, will spur the most reform progress. Hypothesis three expects the EU’s leverage and aid to generate more significant progress in local governance reforms than bi-lateral or IOs’ efforts.
The advantages of a cross-national investigation in the Western Balkans

Countries in the Western Balkans are excellent cases for investigating these hypotheses about the success of internationally supported aid for local governance. These countries have experienced varying levels of international authority into domestic decision-making but they share being the recipients of significant internationally sponsored local governance reforms and the heritage of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. International authority has been the strongest in Kosovo and Bosnia. The UN mission in Kosovo initially exercised executive authority which transitioned later into the power to overrule domestic officials up until Kosovo’s declaration of independence in winter 2008. In Bosnia, the UN High Representative is empowered to impose laws and remove domestic officials at all of Bosnia’s multiple levels of governance. In both Kosovo and Bosnia, international authorities have not hesitated to impose laws. In contrast, international officials who co-signed Macedonia’s peace agreement in 2001 obligated Macedonia to adopt a revised law on local self-government that reinforces European standards, but can only assist Macedonian officials in implementing it. In local governance in Croatia, the international role has been largely limited to Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and EU monitoring, after the exception of a brief period in a slice of disputed territory in the mid 1990s. All of the countries of focus are also subject to the pull of the EU accession process and aid; Croatia and Macedonia are candidate countries, while Bosnia and Kosovo are pre-candidates. The EC has made additional demands about local governance on Macedonia by making the implementation of decentralization contained in the peace agreement a prerequisite for EU membership.

Countries’ pre-existing political traditions impact decentralization efforts. Socialist Yugoslavia implemented decentralization, albeit within a one-party system, because it viewed it as a key mechanism for accommodating ethnicity. Municipalities (općine) were considered centres of innovative social self-government reforms, which attracted the attention of Western scholars and practitioners despite the modest power actually devolved. During both the socialist and post-conflict period, municipalities possessed a civil service, a mayor, and a legislature, and engaged in public works projects, basic health care, primary education, local development, and other social welfare programmes. Nationalizing elites in the immediate post-socialist period, however, weakened local governance and pursued centralization in an effort to strengthen their new states that faced external and internal threats. Violence during the 1990s and early 2000s further debilitated local governance capacity. Ethnic cleansing also altered the local demographics of the Western Balkans, increasing the percentage of municipalities dominated by one of the countries’ primary ethnic groups. Recent efforts to enhance municipal governments are further complicated in Croatia and Bosnia by federal structures that include powerful intermediate levels of government – counties (županije) in Croatia and entities and cantons in Bosnia – whose officials
oppose further devolution of power. In fact, the internationally written Bosnian constitution invests intermediate levels with the bulk of political power in the state.

Finally, domestic resources and political will influence decentralization reforms. What is important for the impact of reforms may not be the frequency of the international community’s imposition of reforms, but the prior domestic conditions that compel high levels of international intervention into those countries. Namely, those countries where internationals are invested with strong executive authority are those where domestic actors lack the political will and resources to democratize on their own, which create obstacles to improving local governance.

One measure of the domestic political will for local democratization is the Freedom House ranking of local democratic governance prior to significant international assistance, which commenced just after the end of violence. Using this measure (see Table 1), Croatia is considered to have the highest level of political will, followed by Macedonia; Bosnia and Kosovo share the lowest level. The Human Development Index, which measures the average achievement in a country based on a long and healthy life, access to knowledge, and a decent standard of living, can provide a measure of the countries’ resources. According to this index, Croatia has the highest level of human development, followed by Macedonia, Bosnia, and then Kosovo.

Divergent concepts of good local governance and reform progress

Because there is not an agreed-upon way to measure the quality of local governance and the success of local governance reforms, we consider data for multiple measures of quality and progress. One measure of good local democratic governance was collected by Freedom House; this is firmly rooted in liberal democratic concepts that emphasize processes. Another measure of good local governance was collected by us and our domestic partners in nationally representative sample surveys about local governance; it is rooted in Western Balkan ideas of good local governance. Putnam found a strong positive correlation between citizens’ approval of local democratic governments and independent measures of high performing local democratic governments. These two sets of data suggest that there exists no clear relationship between reform progress and degree of international authority in the Western Balkans.

Freedom House’s annual rankings of the quality of liberal democratic governance at the local level suggest that Bosnia has achieved the most significant progress since the end of war (Table 1). Contrary to hypothesis one, it assesses Croatia, the country where international authority has been the weakest, domestic resources are the greatest, and EU candidacy the strongest, as achieving the least progress in democratic local governance.

Popular attitudes about local governance reforms differ from Freedom House assessments. Our surveys consider agreement with the proposition that ‘municipal government reform has improved benefits for all citizens, regardless of ethnic or political affiliation’ as an indicator of citizens’ positive assessment of reform
Table 1. Local democratic governance ratings, over time.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1999–2000</th>
<th>2001</th>
<th>2002</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>Progress achieved since each country’s conflict</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Croatia</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macedonia</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>4.25</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bosnia</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>5.25</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.75</td>
<td>4.75</td>
<td>4.75</td>
<td>4.75</td>
<td>4.75</td>
<td>1.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kosovo</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>5.25</td>
<td>.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ave. of Balkans</td>
<td>4.65</td>
<td>4.55</td>
<td>4.35</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>4.43</td>
<td>4.07</td>
<td>3.96</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>.76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Freedom House, ‘Local Democratic Governance’.

Notes: 1. Freedom House (‘Methodology’) evaluations of local governance take into account whether: the principles of local democratic government are enshrined in law and respected in practice; citizens are able to choose freely their local leaders; citizens are ensured meaningful participation in local government decision making; democratically elected local authorities exercise their powers freely and autonomously; democratically elected local authorities have the resources and capacity needed to fulfill their responsibilities; and democratically elected local authorities operate with transparency and accountability to citizens. N.A. = not available. *This figure measures the progress achieved since the time period of recorded data closest to the end of each country’s conflict. For Croatia, whose conflict ended in November 1995, it is 1999; for Macedonia, whose conflict ended in August 2001, it is 2002; for Bosnia, whose conflict ended in December 1995, it is 1999; and for Kosovo, whose conflict ended in June 1999, it is 2004.
progress. The most popular response for respondents in Macedonia and Kosovo was that local governance reforms have improved benefits for all (Table 2). Respondents in Bosnia and Croatia were less impressed; their top response was that local governance reforms had not changed the quality of local governance.

Turning to citizens’ views of what decentralization reforms should achieve helps make sense of the discrepancy between Freedom House and citizens’ assessments of the progress made in local governance reforms. We directly asked citizens what they wanted from decentralization. In our surveys, citizens prioritized employment far above political goals, such as greater voice or closer citizen–government relations, as important responsibilities of local governments (Table 3).

Citizens in the Balkans view local government less as a source of political rights and procedures and more as a vehicle to satisfy substantive needs. A Macedonian colleague emphasized, ‘The key priority of the population and local government is local economic development; they are not so concerned about good governance.’ This domestic concept of local governance makes sense given the function of local governance in Socialist Yugoslavia and the priority that ordinary people have placed on economic needs in the post-conflict Balkans. Though emphasis on outputs leaves open the possibility that citizens’ satisfaction with local government may depend on their ability to use personal contacts rather than transparent institutional procedures to achieve desired outcomes, a survey in Croatia suggests against this.
Breaking down public opinion by ethnicity indicates that decentralization has neither dramatically reduced nor exacerbated inter-ethnic relations. The survey results indicate that ethnic Macedonians in Macedonia and Albanians in Kosovo chose as their top choice agreement that decentralization has improved benefits for all. All of Croatia’s and Bosnia’s primary ethnic groups felt that decentralization had produced no change. Only Kosovo’s Serbs felt negatively about decentralization, with few of them believing that it had produced benefits for all citizens. This view should be seen in the context of Serbs’ general hostility toward international intervention and support for the independence of Kosovo, as well as Serb formation of parallel municipal governments.

Ethnic Macedonians, however, have warmed up to decentralization according to two surveys conducted by other organizations. While a plurality of ethnic Macedonians viewed decentralization negatively in 2003, a plurality viewed it positively by 2008. It suggests that over time, decentralization may become decoupled from controversial peace agreements intended significantly to meet minorities’ concerns, and viewed by citizens as a normal part of democratization.

In sum, if decentralization reforms are judged by standards close to the international donors who sponsor the programmes, Bosnia has made the most progress in local democratic governance, followed by Kosovo, Macedonia, and finally Croatia. On the other hand, if citizens of the Western Balkans assess the progress in local government reforms, those in Macedonia and Kosovo judge reforms positively, while those in Bosnia and Croatia judge the reforms as ineffective. Neither the pattern of Western-defined nor citizen-defined progress in reforms is consistent with the first hypothesis on international imposition, the endogenous explanation of domestic resources, or the third hypothesis on EU leverage. Interviewing is needed to clarify why citizens view local governance reforms the

Table 3. What citizens want from decentralization.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Croatia</th>
<th>Macedonia</th>
<th>Bosnia</th>
<th>Kosovo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>67.0%</td>
<td>42.7%</td>
<td>74.9%</td>
<td>82.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improvement of interethnic relations</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better public services</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
<td>13.1%</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater voice</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Territorial autonomy</td>
<td>.9%</td>
<td>.5%</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Municipal government closer to citizens</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nothing</td>
<td>.7%</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
<td>.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
<td>12.1%</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
<td>.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td>.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Notes: 1. The survey question asked: ‘What do you most want from municipal government reforms?’ N = 1000 in Croatia, 1100 in Macedonia; 1538 in Bosnia-Herzegovina; and 1000 in Kosovo.
way they do. But the difference between Western notions of good local governance, which emphasize process and capacity, and Balkan citizens’ ideas of good local governance, which emphasize socio-economic outcomes, suggest that internationally supported reforms must be sensitive to domestic needs and interests in order to have a positive and sustainable impact on communities.

Methodology for assessing the impact of international aid for local governance

Evaluating the role that international actors have played in local governance reforms is even more difficult than measuring improvement in the quality of local governance. First, it is necessary to clarify what aid international actors have provided. Virtually all key donors active in the Western Balkans have developed local governance programmes. USAID, in partnership with the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) in Bosnia, has sought to improve municipal-level governments’: citizen-oriented services; management and information systems; policy and accountability procedures; transparency and citizen participation in decision-making; and revenue generation and financial management. The World Bank and the UN Development Programme (UNDP) have promoted local economic development and better public service delivery, while OSCE programmes aim to reform municipal administrations and increase public participation. Finally, European institutions have provided aid that seeks to make local governments comply with European norms and EU accession requirements. Data on international aid for local governance between 1999 and 2007 indicates that Macedonia has received the greatest amount of aid per capita, followed by Kosovo, Bosnia, and Croatia.

This research project seeks to measure the impact of international aid on domestic communities primarily by using data collected in the field from donors, implementers, and particularly recipients. This differs from measures of international reforms that rarely get at domestic attitudes. For example, a key indicator of the quality of local governance that international implementers use is regular holdings of public discussions of the municipal budget. This is despite the cogent arguments of scholars of democracy aid that such quantitative measures of outputs do not adequately capture aid’s effect. External project evaluators have urged increasing the independence of the assessment process. Quite a few USAID officials acknowledge their beleaguered agency needs greater resources for monitoring and evaluation.

Fieldwork is critical for understanding how international officials based in the region and domestic actors influence the effectiveness of local governance reforms. Following the suggestions of scholars and practitioners to consider local elites’ and ordinary citizens’ perceptions of the effectiveness of institutions, we conducted over 60 in-depth interviews in the field in 2008 and 2009 with international donors, local officials, and local activists involved in local governance reforms. Domestic academics advised our investigation. Surveys conducted by our domestic survey
partners help uncover the views of the ultimate recipients of these governance reforms – domestic citizens – whose perspectives have often been undervalued in assessments. Our domestic survey partners helped develop survey questions about local governance reforms rooted in the country-specific competencies, regional experiences, and donor concepts. We also consider data from programme reports and external assessments.

Judging international involvement in local governance reforms

Our surveys indicate that most citizens believe that international actors have played a modestly positive role in decentralization reforms.

Most citizens in Macedonia, Bosnia, and Kosovo viewed international organizations’ role in decentralization positively (Table 4), though if given the choice between labelling it as ‘very or somewhat positive’, they chose the latter. In contrast, citizens in Croatia, where IOs have played a tiny role, logically believed IOs had no impact. More ominously, 40% of Kosovo Serbs viewed negatively the role of international organizations in local governance reforms. This suggests they consider such reforms as preparing Kosovo for independence and counter to Serb interests. These survey results do not support hypothesis one, which would expect citizens in a country where internationals have not imposed reforms – Croatia – to be most satisfied with the merely supportive role for local governance reforms that international officials have played.

But to better understand the impact of international officials on the progress in local governance reforms across and within different countries, we must look at the details of international reforms through elite interviews and project assessments. These data indicate that internationally supported local governance reforms have helped bolster the capacity of local governments, though their impact on local governance performance is less clear, which undermines the reforms’ impact on local communities.

Table 4. Citizens’ view of the international community’s role in decentralization reforms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>By country</th>
<th>Croatia</th>
<th>Macedonia</th>
<th>Bosnia</th>
<th>Kosovo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>31.4%</td>
<td>49.7%</td>
<td>44.0%</td>
<td>70.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No impact</td>
<td>43.6%</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>29.6%</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
<td>29.0%</td>
<td>8.1%</td>
<td>11.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>15.3%</td>
<td>12.7%</td>
<td>18.4%</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Puls, Into the Weeds-Croatia in Croatia; CRPM, Into the Weeds-Macedonia in Macedonia; Prism, Into the Weeds-Bosnia-Herzegovina in Bosnia; Strategic Plus Research Kosova, Into the Weeds-Kosovo in Kosovo.

Notes: 1 The survey question asked, ‘What is your view of the role of international organizations (e.g. the EU, OSCE, UNDP, and similar) in decentralization reform?’. N = 1000 in Croatia, 1100 in Macedonia; 1538 in Bosnia-Herzegovina; and 1000 in Kosovo.
International programmes have sought to build the capacity of local democratic governance. One part of this strategy is helping develop a positive inter-governmental enabling environment, which they view as a prerequisite for improved performance. Key components of promoting a positive enabling environment are new legislation and the strengthening and reform of pre-war domestic Associations of Local Self-Government. With American and European support, the most professional and progressive staff and members (mayors) of these associations in all four countries became more active in writing and influencing laws strengthening local governance. After Ohrid, the Macedonian Association drafted roughly one-third of the country’s laws relating to local governance. The US and the EU succeeded in bolstering efforts by Bosnia and Macedonia’s Associations of Local Self-Governments for legislation increasing local governments’ resources – the Value Added Tax (VAT), a proportion of which goes directly to local governments. The VAT is an important example of governance legislation in Bosnia that was passed without international imposition. Bosnia’s High Representative and USAID’s concerted effort to cajole Bosnians into drafting, adopting, and implementing reform legislation for local governance resulted in the Federation (entity-level) parliament passing a law on principles of local self-government. This law complied with European norms but contained only ‘guiding principles and main rules,’ rather than more clearly assigning competencies to and funding for local government. In Kosovo, legislative reforms for decentralization gained domestic support only when international officials in 2004 included domestic officials and the Association of Kosovo Municipalities in the reform process. The 2004 international-domestic partnership was formed after a 2002 reform effort involving only international experts ran into significant local resistance. These laws and others on direct elections of mayors have contributed to small improvements in local governance in all four countries. Comparing legislative reform efforts for decentralization in the Western Balkans demonstrates that reforms attract significant domestic support only when international officials allow domestic officials to take significant responsibility for developing and passing decentralization laws, which is consistent with hypothesis two.

Yet internationally designed reforms have not been successful in improving key aspects of the inter-governmental enabling environment. International efforts to frame decentralization as apolitical technical assistance have not convinced many domestic officials at higher levels of government that they will not be threatened by local governance reforms. EU and OSCE aid for the professionalization and de-politicization of public service, a part of the enabling environment, has encountered resistance from national-level politicians. In Bosnia, politicians at intermediate levels have ensured that there exist two, ethnically divided Associations of Local Self-Governance and thwarted local governments’ ability to fulfill their competencies, according to project assessments. The EU’s use of active leverage to encourage ruling Bosnian politicians to come up with their own solutions for creating a more functional state structure that would weaken intermediate levels of government has thus far not worked. Croatia’s national-level elites...
have failed to restructure their county level of governance in a way that empowers municipal governance even though legislation since the 1990s has weakened counties.\textsuperscript{70} Furthermore, the EU, who has not pressed Zagreb into adopting local governance reforms, assessed Croatia’s local governance as ‘not properly organized’.\textsuperscript{71} In contrast, the EU has pressed national-level politicians in Macedonia to pass decentralization laws stipulated by the Ohrid peace agreement.\textsuperscript{72} US and UN officials in Kosovo have convinced some Kosovar Albanian officials, though not Serbs, to ‘go along with’ decentralization in order to garner international support for Kosovo’s independence.\textsuperscript{73}

These cases emphasize the benefits of international officials making progress on local governance reforms a clear prerequisite for domestic officials to achieve larger political goals in Europe. That the EU has not applied evenly its active leverage on local governance calls into question hypothesis three. The EU focused very little leverage on local governance reforms in Croatia and Bosnia, contributing to little reform progress in domestic peoples’ eyes. In contrast, it focused its leverage on local governance reforms in Macedonia, contributing to more progress there. International efforts to improve the inter-governmental enabling environment also speak to hypothesis two, emphasizing that reform project designs that fail to address the interests of domestic politicians at the top and intermediate levels of governance undermine the impact of local governance reforms.

International programmes for the enabling environment are intended to create the space for bolstering local government administrative capacity. As part of its effort to evaluate their programmes seeking to develop local governments’ capacity, the implementer of USAID’s local governance projects in Macedonia and Bosnia developed a Municipal Capacity Index (MCI). This index judges local governments’ performance on five dimensions: (1) citizen-oriented services; (2) management and information systems; (3) policy and accountability procedures; (4) transparency and citizen participation in decision-making; and (5) revenue generation and financial management.\textsuperscript{74} Annual data gathered for these indices provide evidence that those municipalities receiving USAID-led aid improved between 2005 and 2009 their governance capacity along all five dimensions.\textsuperscript{75} Survey data conducted by implementers showed that both citizens and businesses who used USAID-supported Municipal Service Centres in Bosnia and Macedonia expressed increased satisfaction with municipal service delivery of documents.\textsuperscript{76} The apparent success of USAID-supported citizen services centres in the eyes of domestic citizens suggests that USAID’s market democratic frame of ‘customer service’ resonates with domestic interest in local governments’ provision of citizen services, contributing to reform progress. These findings support hypothesis two. However, the non-random selection of control municipalities prevents the implementer from asserting that USAID-aided local governments systemically improved more than those that did not receive aid. Judging the impact of reforms requires analysis of additional sources of data.

Our interviews and outside project assessments suggest that reforms seeking to increase governments’ capacity to encourage and incorporate citizen participation
in local decision-making have had more mixed success than the MCI claims. A 2007 survey conducted by OSCE in Bosnia found a correlation between citizen proposals and the proportion of a locality’s budget allocated to capital investment.\textsuperscript{77} The same survey, however, concluded that only 19 Bosnian municipalities had a transparent process for selecting citizens’ funding requests.\textsuperscript{78} Other efforts to increase citizen participation in local governance include public hearings, feedback lines, ombudsmen, designated open office hours for municipal representatives and mayors, and neighbourhood community (mesna zajednica) sessions.\textsuperscript{79} While these initiatives provide local officials the opportunity to listen to citizens, the extent to which local officials acted upon concerns expressed by citizens in these venues is unclear.\textsuperscript{80} Most respondents in a 2006 survey conducted by Croatian academics felt that citizens had little to no influence on local governance.\textsuperscript{81} Conversations I had with citizens in Macedonia and Bosnia during 2008 and 2009 echoed the views expressed by outside evaluators’ focus group participants in Serbia that such hearings were ‘just for show’.\textsuperscript{82} These data support an IO staffer’s view that internationally supported projects for local governance that sought increased participation by local officials and citizens were least likely to be successful.\textsuperscript{83}

Citizens’ keen interest in local governments’ generation of economic development urges reformers to design projects that produce visible economic improvements. International actors have taken advantage of the logic that generating local economic development embodies a variety of goods attractive to different actors, which creates opportunities for win-win policies. For example, international donors and implementers argued that mayors cooperated on internationally backed local development planning and projects because they realized that improving the local economy was complex, needed international support due to the concentration of power for development in higher levels of government, and was highly desired by their constituents.\textsuperscript{84} Meeting constituents’ priorities appeals to mayors’ self-interests in re-election. One sign of the buy-in of local elites is cost-sharing. But until recently, UNDP efforts to assist local development in Bosnia focused on forming inclusive but ad-hoc local committees rather than on bolstering the capacity of elected local officials and civil servants to lead economic development programmes.\textsuperscript{85} Some municipalities in Macedonia remain mired in debt.\textsuperscript{86} Many citizens, who judge local governments on their delivery of tangible benefits rather than their capacity, expect more development and jobs from their local governments. Our survey respondents in Croatia and Bosnia rated local economic development as the competency that local governments were least successful in fulfilling. This suggests that the design of local development programmes has resonated better with domestic elites at the local level than with domestic elites at the national level or with citizens, limiting the community impact.

Finally, for international efforts to cultivate local government capacity they must engage myriad local officials spread throughout recipient countries. USAID’s local government projects have had the broadest impact in Macedonia, where its international implementer supported a project in every municipality.\textsuperscript{87} This breath has allowed USAID in Macedonia to avoid the pitfalls of the
common donor strategy of initiating pilot projects in selected municipalities with mayors who demonstrate political will. For example, the USAID-SIDA-funded local governance project in Bosnia reached only 41 of 147 municipalities by 2005, though its second wave now includes another 30. This ‘win where we can’ strategy often leaves the more troubled or recalcitrant municipalities to fend for themselves, at least for a while, an approach which can reinforce gaps in local governance.

In sum, programme assessments and our interviews that detail internationally-sponsored reforms and views of them strongly suggest that neither international imposition (as initially in Kosovo) nor reliance largely on domestic initiatives (as in Croatia), have contributed to what domestic citizens consider improved local governance. Data also indicate that the EU’s leverage helped improve the quality of local governance when it made specific demands on local governance reforms, as it did only in Macedonia. Finally, designs of internationally sponsored local governance reforms that respond to diverse domestic concerns and interests appear to increase the community impact of reforms even though such efforts to reach out to stakeholders are difficult and can lead to compromises such as watered down legislation.

How the approach of international actors shape the impact of reforms

In-depth interviews we conducted of domestic officials and field-based international reformers help explain why international actors have had varying levels of success in improving the quality of local governments. While international donors judged increasing local ownership of reforms as a priority for increasing their progress, they tended to emphasize local initiatives in the implementation, rather than in the design, of programmes. Domestic officials, along with some international implementers and the majority of external evaluators, argued instead that increased partnership with domestic officials in designing and implementing programmes would improve the community impact of reforms. Such inclusive efforts could incorporate multiple concepts of, and meet multiple interests in, good local governance. This is consistent with hypothesis two, rather than when internationals either defer only to local officials or use executive powers, which challenges hypothesis one.

In response to interview questions asking them to assess the strategy of international organizations and officials in decentralization reforms, domestic officials involved in decentralization almost uniformly urged international donors and implementers to more significantly involve them in formulating and implementing reforms. Outside evaluators and some programme assessments echoed domestic officials’ suggestion that international donors do more to partner with domestic institutions on programme development. One Bosnian official pointed to the practical necessity of such an approach: ‘the international community can’t give directions to locals or impose a particular model of good local governance... because [reformers] must understand the local laws and practices’.
A Macedonian official complained that international donors for a local governance project on which she had worked failed to express an interest in understanding local needs and concepts of successful local governance. Donors rejected her proposed changes to what she viewed as misinformed indicators for evaluating the project and did not ask citizens about their ideas of good local governance. Despite these problems, the donor labelled ‘everything in the project a success’, a conclusion about which she and her colleagues still laugh. These interviews demonstrate how principals who fail to incorporate domestic expertise in the design of reforms weaken the positive impact that aid could have on Western Balkan citizens, which is consistent with hypothesis two.

Domestic interviewees asserted that the types of local governance reform programmes that worked well were those that empowered domestic reformers. Many interviewees considered technical assistance for local governance as the most successful and sustainable type of local governance reform, since it is concrete, targeted, useful, and empowering. Domestic officials and staffers also singled out international support for hiring more educated and technically savvy municipal staffers as key to improving local governance. A Bosnian official praised one international official whose strategy worked because: ‘he understands that he doesn’t understand the situation here’ and must rely on locals to play key roles in developing programmes and leading implementation. Macedonian officials viewed several internationally sponsored local government projects that allowed domestic officials to design and implement them as successful. Domestic officials and activists lauded the efforts of those international officials who listened to domestic voices and acted on domestic advice, including IO’s domestic staff, as well as those who had significant field experience living and working outside of Balkan capitals. While acknowledging that international donors initiated reforms, domestic officials identified those international officials who worked together with local officials to find common solutions to local problems as using the most effective approach to reforms.

But one diplomat in Bosnia vividly illustrated the reluctance of at least some international officials to cede power to locals, a proposition they may consider difficult not only for their self-interests but also because of weak local mechanisms for accountability and the prior involvement of some local officials in violence. He described his disdain for the idea of local ownership of reforms by equating it to ‘giving a drunk ten-year old the keys to my car’. The priorities and values of donors, their power over domestic actors, and the pressure on donors and implementers to achieve speedy ‘results’ often impede the design of reforms that appeal to domestic stakeholders, which is needed to improve the community impact of reforms.

Conclusions and implications

This research suggests that internationally supported local governance reforms have produced small improvements in the eyes of Western donors and
implementers, but have generated incremental or no benefits in the view of many Western Balkan citizens. While Western donors and implementers are focused on building the capacity of local governance rooted in liberal democracy, Western Balkan citizens judge the quality of local governance according to their outputs and seek visible improvements. Cultivating authoritative local institutions relies critically on positive assessments by domestic elites and citizens, rather than by Western donors, about internationally sponsored local governance reforms.

Evidence is not consistent with the expectations of hypothesis one. International imposition of local governance reforms creates obstacles to the development of institutions valued by domestic citizens, as illustrated best in Kosovo. But contrary to the implications of hypothesis one, domestic control over reforms without significant international involvement, as in Croatia, did not improve the quality of local governing institutions by citizens’ standards.

In comparison, internationally supported local governance programmes designed to respond to domestic stakeholders’ interests, values, and concerns were better able to achieve progress in the eye of the Western Balkan peoples, as expected by hypothesis two. Coupling substantial aid for local governance with the promise of European integration or another coveted international prize that is conditional on achieving specific local government reforms helps increase powerful domestic elites’ interest in improving local governance. These conditions occurred most often in Macedonia, as illustrated by the accomplishments of the internationally-supported Association of Local Self-Government and local governments’ citizen service centres; the considerable, targeted aid it received; and the EU’s clear demands on it about local governance reforms. In contrast, internationally supported local governance reforms have not been designed in ways to get on board Bosnia’s powerful intermediate-level politicians and Kosovo’s Serb elites, who have diminished the reforms’ community impact in Bosnia and Kosovo. Indeed, while interviews with domestic elites suggest that reform programmes that engaged domestic experts in both the design and implementation of reforms could best address domestic interests, combine complimentary knowledge, and produce progress in the eyes of Western Balkan peoples, they indicated that this infrequently occurred.

Contrary to the predictions of hypothesis three, the EU’s active leverage was limited in Croatia, Bosnia, and Kosovo. This is largely because it did not clearly link progress in the EU accession process to the prior achievement of well articulated local governance reforms.

Under international-domestic partnerships, local governance reforms will take significant time, as well as follow more closely domestic-based social and economic-oriented concepts of local governance. These are significant costs to international donors. But in the medium term, the costs of this approach are likely outweighed by the higher probability that such reforms will be sustained by domestic peoples. These findings could inform international efforts to improve local governance in other post-conflict areas.
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Notes

1. Huntington, Political Order in Changing Society; Rotberg, When States Fail; Fukuyama, State-Building; and Roeder and Rothchild, Sustainable Peace: Power and Democracy After Civil Wars.
5. UN Institute for Training and Research, ‘The Process of Decentralization in Asia, Africa, and Latin America’, 18. My description of the Western Balkans as ‘divided’ refers to the fact that their peoples possess overlapping, reinforcing social cleavages such as, ethnicity, religion, and often territorial concentration.
7. Strong accountability mechanisms beyond elections are necessary for direct elections of local representatives to prevent political capture and improve the quality of local democratic government. See, Hadiz, ‘The Localization of Power’, 874.
10. See Zimmerman, ‘Issue Area and Foreign-Policy Process: A Research Note in Search of a General Theory’. Thanks to Mark Baskin for suggesting the relevance of the issue area approach for this research project.
12. Thanks to Mark Baskin for making this insight.
14. Martens, The Institutional Economics of Foreign Aid. In Eastern Europe, see Wedel, Collision and Collusion: the Strange Case of Western Aid to Eastern Europe.
19. The value of targeted democracy aid is demonstrated in Lankina and Getachew, ‘A Geographic Incremental Theory of Democratization: Territory, Aid, and Democracy in Postcommunist Regions’. Finkel et al., Deepening Our Understanding, showed that democracy aid sustained over multiple time periods contributes to more progress in democratic institutions than a one-time aid investment.

20. USAID, Decentralization and Democratic Local Governance Programming Handbook. Gagnon found that internationally supported civil society projects worked best in Bosnia when international implementers formed ‘authentic partnerships’ with local actors. Gagnon, ‘Catholic Relief Services, USAID, and Authentic Partnership in Serbia’. See also Carothers, Revitalizing Democracy Assistance.


22. Ibid.


24. Serbia is not included in this investigation because international civilians have never been vested with executive power there.

25. UNSCR 1244; Baskin, ‘Local Governance in Kosovo’, 79.


27. Framework Agreement. International officials have in some cases – Mostar and Brčko – imposed municipal boundaries and governance laws in Bosnia.


31. Ramet, Nationalism and Federalism in Yugoslavia; Woodward and Brookings Institution, A Balkan Tragedy.


33. Currently, Croatia’s municipalities lack competencies for primary education and basic health care, while Bosnia’s municipalities are responsible only for educational buildings.

34. I use the term ‘primary ethnic group’ to identify ethnic groups that comprise the most significant percentage of the country’s population and who have struggled over defining the state. Croatia’s primary ethnic groups are Croats and Serbs; Bosnia’s primary ethnic groups are Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats; Macedonia’s primary ethnic groups are Macedonians and Albanians, and Kosovo’s primary ethnic groups are Albanians and Serbs. Each Western Balkan country also contains a number of smaller ethnic groups, such as Roma.


36. This hypothesis is rooted in Manor (The Political Economy, 55) who argues that political will, financial resources, and administrative and accountability capacities significantly influence attempts at democratic decentralization.


38. Freedom House, ‘Methodology’.

39. Centre for Research and Policy Making (CRPM), Into the Weeds-Macedonia; Prism, Into the Weeds-Bosnia-Herzegovina; Puls, Into the Weeds-Croatia; Strategic Plus Research Kosova, Into the Weeds-Kosovo.

40. Putnam, Leonardi, and Nanetti, Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy, 78.
42. Author interview with EU in Skopje, June 2008. To maintain the anonymity of these officials, I use initials based on pseudonyms to refer to interviewees and refrain from specifying with which organizations or institutions they are affiliated. In this paper, I focus on analysing the interviews that I conducted in Macedonia and Bosnia.
43. A survey conducted in Croatia found that respondents were slightly more likely to try to resolve problems in the local government by contacting municipal officials than by using personal contacts. See Grdesić and Ćular, ‘Hrvatska lokalna demokracija’, 16. As Drew Gilbert suggests, further research on the possible link between use of personal contacts and satisfaction with local government performance is needed.
44. Thirty-six percent of ethnic Macedonians and 31.8% of Kosovo Albanians responded that local governance reforms have achieved benefits for all citizens, these groups’ most popular response. The most popular response that local governance reforms bring no change held for 39.7% of Croatia’s Croats, 61.3% of Croatia’s Serbs; 34.9% of Bosnia’s Bosniaks, 33.1% of Bosnia’s Serbs, and 34.9% of Bosnia’s Croats. Only 7.5% of Kosovo Serbs responded that local governance reforms have achieved benefits for all.
45. ARD, Limited Scope Assessment of Local Governance in Kosovo.
46. UNDP, Early Warning System; CRPM, Into the Weeds-Macedonia.
47. The World Bank considers ‘good governance’ to consist of the following dimensions: voice and accountability; political stability, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law, and control of corruption. See Kaufmann, Kraay, and Mastruzzi, Governance Matters VIII.
48. Development Alternatives Inc. (DAI), Governance Accountability Project (GAP) in Bosnia-Herzegovina: Performance Monitoring and Evaluation; DAI, Bosnia and Herzegovina GAP Completion Report. Other bi-lateral donors with local governance programmes in the Western Balkans include the UK’s Department for International Development and the Canadian International Development Agency.
51. Data from key donors of local governance aid between 1999–2007 indicate that Macedonia received a total of 24.19 USD/capita, Kosovo a total of 21.5 USD/capita, Bosnia a total of 16.0 USD/capita, and Croatia with 6.2 USD/capita, see: http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement; http://www.usaid.gov; http://www.undp.org
52. DAI, Decentralization Project; DAI, Governance Accountability Project.
53. Brown, Transacting Transition; Carothers, Revitalizing Democracy Assistance; McMahon, ‘Much Ado about Nothing?’; 37.
56. Pickering, Peacebuilding in the Balkans: The View from the Ground Floor; Brown, ‘Do We Know How Yet?’; Kaufmann, Kraay, and Mastruzzi, Governance Matters VIII.
58. For donor’s ideas of good governance, see, Kaufmann, Kraay, and Mastruzzi, Governance Matters VIII. Domestic laws include: Law on Local Self Government, Republic of Macedonia; Law on Local Self-Government, Republic of Kosovo; Law on the Principles of Local Self Government in the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina; and Law on Local and Regional Self-Government.
59. The familiarity of ordinary citizens with the international assistance provided to local governments is unclear. The relatively low percentage of ‘don’t knows’ in our surveys; other survey data indicating citizens’ high interest in decentralization; the relative smallness of municipal communities; and the prominence of donor plaques placed on local governance projects all suggest a moderate level of familiarization. Statistical analysis did not find support for the possibility that Croatian respondents’ more ‘jaded’ views of the impact of international organizations is due to their higher levels of education.
62. DAI, Decentralization Project; Democracy International Inc., Bosnia-Herzegovina Democracy and Governance Assessment; World Bank, Local Governance and Service Delivery in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 26; Mikelsons, ‘Decentralization Paradigm and the Legacy of USAID’s Local Government Reform Project in Croatia’.
63. Author Interview with EQ in Skopje, June 2008.
67. Commission of the EC, Bosnia, 12; Commission of the EC, Croatia, 7; Commission of the EC, The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, 11; Commission of the EC, Kosovo, 12.
68. World Bank, Local Governance and Service Delivery in Bosnia and Herzegovina, i; Commission of the EC, Bosnia.
70. Freedom House, ‘Methodology’.
71. Commission of the EC, Croatia, 8.
73. Interview by Mark Baskin with BM in Prizren, June 2008.
74. DAI, Governance Accountability Project, 91.
75. Ibid., 92–3; DAI, Decentralization Project, 117.
76. DAI, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 103–5; DAI, Decentralization Project. Citizen satisfaction with delivery of documents is higher than with public services, such as sewage. See, OSCE Spillover Monitor Mission to Skopje, Survey on Decentralization, 6–7; World Bank, Local Governance and Service Delivery in Bosnia and Herzegovina.
77. Though Bosnia has 147 municipalities, the OSCE (‘Report’) survey on citizen participation in the budget involved only the 74 municipalities participating in its Municipal Administration Reform Programme.
79. World Bank, Local Governance and Service Delivery in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 32.
83. Author interview with EC in Central Bosnia, October 2009.
84. Author interviews with DI in Sarajevo, June 2008; SC in Skopje, June 2008; and UX in Sarajevo, June 2008; Rojas, Local Development in the Context of the Local Government Reform Project, Croatia; Interview by Mark Baskin with AB in Priština, June 2008.
85. UNDP, Early Warning System.
86. OSCE Spillover Monitor Mission to Skopje, Survey on Decentralization, 74.
87. DAI, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 4.
88. DAI, Governance Accountability Project.
89. Democracy International, Bosnia-Herzegovina Democracy and Governance Assessment. Some local officials may seek to reform without the ties of international aid. Author interview with NH in Washington, DC, October 2008. One notable exception is the OSCE mission in Bosnia’s ‘Local First Program’, which began in 2008 to help ‘troubled’ municipalities improve governance.
90. Commission of the EC, Bosnia, Commission of the EC, Former Yugoslav Republic of Yugoslavia, Commission of the EC, Kosovo; World Bank, Local Governance, ii.
92. Author interview with TI in Sarajevo, June 2008.
93. Author interview with H in Skopje, June 2008.
95. Author interview with TI in Sarajevo, June 2008.
98. Author interviews with JK in Central Bosnia, October 2009; DI in Mostar, June 2008; and IB in Central Bosnia, October 2009.
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