

The European Union as Democratizing Actor Through Conditionality: A Comparative Perspective on Hungary and Romania's Accessions

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The European Union as Democratizing Actor Through Conditionality:
A Comparative Perspective on Hungary and Romania's Accessions

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Abstract

From travel freedom to economic integration, the European Union has shaped the European way of life reinforcing democratic values. This dissertation will analyse the democratizing role of the European Union through political conditionality. In adhering to democratic principles, the rule of law, human rights, and good governance, conditionality acts as leverage through which the European Union acts as a democratising actor. In analysing the correlation between democracy and EU conditionality, this thesis will tackle the following research question: *how does EU conditionality address the democratisation process in Europe?* The thesis is developed on the idea that the EU exerted conditionality throughout the pre-accession and the negotiation process through which the countries examined. In this case, the Eastern European countries (EEC), in particular Romania and Hungary, strengthened the quality of their democratic institutions to qualify for EU membership, resulting in enhanced democracies between 1990s and 2000s. By analyzing this process, the thesis aims to contribute to the broader academic literature on the role of EU conditionality in fostering democratization, offering insights into the relationship between external incentives and domestic political reforms in transitioning democracies.

Keywords: *European Union; Eastern Enlargement; membership; conditionality; democratization; correlation; comparative politics.*

Dedication

This thesis marks the culmination of a beautiful journey, both personal and academic, that at times felt endless, yet I cherished every step along the way.

I dedicate this work, first and foremost, to my parents, whose sacrifices have been my greatest source of strength and resilience throughout my academic years. Their unwavering love and support carried me through even the most challenging times, including the profound loss of my sister, Noemi. Her memory lives on in our hearts, inspiring me every single day.

To my friends, who have filled this journey with joy, laughter, and unwavering support, I extend my deepest gratitude and dedication.

I also dedicate this thesis to my professors, Nicholas James Startin and Simona Costagli, whose guidance as readers of this thesis contributed immensely to the realization of one of the most significant milestones in my academic career thus far.

Last but not least, I dedicate this thesis to myself, to the person who never gave up, even when the path seemed endlessly long, and achieving this goal felt almost impossible. Yet, here I am, proud of the person I have become and of the work I have accomplished.

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List of Abbreviations

AP	Association Partnership
CVM	Cooperation Verification Mechanism
ECB	European Central Bank
ECJ	European Court of Justice
ECSC	European Coal and Steel Community
EEC	Eastern European Countries
ESCB	European System of Central Banks
EU	European Union
EURATOM	European Atomic Energy Community
IMF	International Monetary Fund
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
TEU	Treaty on European Union
TFEU	Treaty on the Functioning of the EU
WB	World Bank

1. Introduction

Introductory Overview of the Thesis

The European Union (EU) has long been at the forefront of democracy, influencing political developments across the continent through policies that emphasize the importance of democratic governance, the rule of law, human rights, and economic integration. This thesis, entitled "The European Union as a Democratizing Actor through Conditionality," seeks to analyze the EU's role in fostering democratization, using political conditionality as the main perspective. For the purposes of this thesis research, EU conditionality refers to the requirements set by an organization, in this case, the European Union, that countries must meet to receive benefits, in this case, EU membership (Reinhard, 2010). In essence, the central inquiry of this thesis revolves around how EU conditionality has influenced democracy setting conditions enhancing the democratization process in the aspiring EEC candidates for EU membership. After an introductory overview of the historical evolution of the European Union (EU), the thesis will examine theoretical approaches to EU conditionality based on an extensive literature review and will explain the correlation between EU conditionality and democratization analyzing case studies of Eastern European countries (EEC), focusing on Romania and Hungary. In summarizing and discussing the outcomes of the research on these two case studies, the thesis will reflect on the current role of EU conditionality, incorporating insights from Eurobarometer public opinion polls to illustrate the European Union's role as a democratizing actor.

As a “family of liberal democratic states” operating within an institutionalized system of collective decision-making (Cini & Pérez-Solórzano Borragán, 2019), the European Union exemplifies a unique framework for fostering resilience as a democratizing actor and a pillar of liberal democracy. This thesis analyzes the EU’s capacity to uphold these values in an increasingly complex and multipolar global environment, highlighting its role in shaping democratic governance and promoting shared principles across its Member States.

Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is systematically structured to address the research question comprehensively, beginning with a foundational overview and progressing through theoretical, empirical, and reflective analyses. The research is divided into six distinct chapters, each contributing to a holistic understanding of EU conditionality as a democratizing mechanism. Chapter One lays the groundwork by offering a general overview of the research topic, methodology, and primary objectives of the dissertation.

Chapter Two delves into the historical evolution of the EU and the foundational legal principles of the enlargement process. It outlines the relationship between the EU’s democratic principles and its use of conditionality to foster democracy in the enlargement process, foreign policies and other forms of cooperation. This section will unpack the roots of conditionality and trace how it has become a critical component in the democratization process. By examining historical developments and legal frameworks, this chapter articulates how conditionality has been embedded in the European project while highlighting the distinctions between the concepts of Europeanization, European integration, and conditionality, and exploring their interconnections.

Following this historical and legal analysis, Chapter Three adopts theoretical approaches to EU conditionality. Drawing on an extensive academic literature review, this chapter discusses the competing theoretical frameworks that define and interpret the role of conditionality in fostering democracy. It explores the concept of EU conditionality, focusing on its primary use of reward-based policies to promote adherence to democratic principles, and the conditions under which conditionality is a promising strategy for the promotion of democracy. By presenting these theoretical perspectives, the chapter provides the necessary tools to understand the mechanisms through which the EU aimed at influencing political transitions of the EEC toward strengthened democracy throughout the pre-accession and negotiation stages between the 1990s and 2000s. Connecting Chapter Two and Chapter Three, the methodological section outlines the multifaceted methodological approach of the dissertation, detailing the context behind the selection of the case studies and the process of conducting the empirical research.

Chapter Four provides a contextual bridge between the theoretical and empirical focuses of the thesis, outlining the methodology of the two case studies, Romania and Hungary, to establish a clear foundation for the subsequent analysis.

Chapter Five shifts from theory to practice, taking on an empirical approach that seeks to establish the correlation between EU conditionality and democratization. It employs a comparative politics approach to analyze key case studies from Eastern Europe, highlighting how conditionality has played a role in the democratic evolutions of countries in the region. By focusing on pivotal moments of political transition and the specific mechanisms through which conditionality was applied, the chapter identifies patterns of success and failure of the two cases. The analysis not only illuminates the broader influence of the EU on democratization but also raises critical questions about the effectiveness of conditionality in achieving democracy in the

EEC. Furthermore, this chapter incorporates insights from the Eurobarometer 2024 public opinion polls, transitioning from theoretical approaches to practical analysis to assess the current EU citizens' perceptions of the effectiveness of conditionality and the overall role of the EU in upholding liberal-democratic values.

The thesis culminates with a Conclusion which provides a reflective synthesis of the theoretical approaches applied to the research findings and research limitations, as well as contemporary reflections and future perspectives of the role of the EU on democratization.

The interdisciplinary approach of the dissertation combines insights from comparative politics and international relations, legal studies, economics and statistical analysis of political data. Indeed, the methodology of the thesis is multifaceted, and it encompasses both qualitative and quantitative analyses to provide a comprehensive examination of the EU's role as a democratizing actor.

Ultimately, the thesis aims to integrate this methodological approach to answer the central research question: how does EU conditionality contribute to the process of democratization in Europe? By bridging theoretical approaches with empirical evidence, the research offers a comprehensive perspective on how conditionality serves as a core mechanism through which the EU promotes democracy and political stability both within and beyond its borders. Moreover, the thesis concludes with a focus on current polls highlighting EU citizens' engagement in upholding democratic values, acknowledging the dynamic and evolving nature of EU conditionality in the contemporary world.

In sum, the aim of this thesis is to contribute to the broader discourse on the EU's democratizing role, offering insights into the mechanisms of conditionality and the complex processes through which the EU seeks to shape democratic governance across Europe.

2. Summary of the Constitutional History of the European Union and Introduction to EU Conditionality

Introduction

The evolution of the European Union (EU) is a primary example of the broader shift in international law from mere coexistence to active cooperation, ultimately leading to deeper integration. Understanding the constitutional history of the EU is crucial to fully grasp the current role of political conditionality, which forms the backbone of the Union's efforts to promote the democratization process in the European continent. This chapter will present a concise overview of the EU's historical evolution, the treaties that have defined its path, and the significance played by the Copenhagen criteria and the EU conditionality in shaping the historical and legal frameworks of European integration.

From European Integration to Europeanization

To properly examine the evolution of European integration and the historical foundations of EU conditionality, it is essential to first clarify the key conceptual distinction between Europeanization and European integration, a topic widely debated among scholars in the field of European affairs.

Although it has long been associated with the process of European integration, *Europeanization* mostly refers to the process by which EU laws and regulations directly

influence the domestic policies and practices of Member States (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2005). *European integration*, on the other hand, describes the broader process of deepening cooperation between European states for supranational aims (Buller & Gamble, 2002). While European integration can be described as a holistic process of tightening relations among European countries, Europeanization is the direct penetration of EU rules into the national political systems of the Member States. However, scholars have debated over this rigid distinction between Europeanization and European integration, contending that the ongoing process of Europeanization is a natural outcome of an increasing European integration at the EU level. As Buller and Gamble (2002) explain, “European integration refers to the process of convergence at the EU level,” while Europeanization captures the resulting effects of this convergence, which can vary significantly across national contexts.

Ultimately, interpreting Europeanization as a dynamic evolution of European integration highlights the dual layers on which EU conditionality operates: the overarching integration at the EU level and its distinct impacts within individual Member States. On one hand, European integration sets preconditions that aspiring member states must meet to join the European Union. On the other hand, Europeanization pertains to the subsequent implementation of the entire body of EU laws, policies, and standards (*the acquis communautaire*) which directly influences Member States' domestic policies and governance structures.

In this dissertation, I will explore the concept of *the acquis communautaire* as a set of conditions for EU membership, along with the theoretical frameworks through which EU conditionality operates across both levels—European integration and Europeanization. While most of the academic literature about Europeanization primarily examines how EU rules affect domestic politics, this thesis will focus on the domestic impact of EU conditionality as it relates

to the democratization process, in particular within the Eastern European Countries (EEC). Drawing from the case studies of Romania and Hungary's accession in the early 2000s, this research study will explore how conditionality shapes democratic reforms at the national level, with particular attention to the political and institutional changes driven by EU accession requirements.

The Constitutional History of the European Union

The origins of the European Union (EU) trace back to the aftermath of World War II, when European leaders aimed to secure lasting peace and stability to a continent devastated by decades of conflict. However, the idea of European unity was not solely political; it also crystallized from the peace sentiments of revolutionaries between the 1920s and 1940s, exemplified by Altiero Spinelli's 1941 *Ventotene Manifesto*¹: *For a Free and United Europe* (Cini & Pérez-Solórzano Borragán, 2019).

In this spirit, at the suggestion of the U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson, the French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman unveiled a plan to create a “European Community for Coal and Steel” to foster unity across the continent. The European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), established by the Treaty of Paris in 1951, marked the first crucial step toward European integration. The ECSC aimed to unify the coal and steel industries of its six founding members—Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands. This initiative aimed “to pool coal and steel production, thereby establishing a shared foundation for economic

¹ The *Ventotene Manifesto*, written by Altiero Spinelli and Ernesto Rossi in 1941 during their exile on the Italian island of Ventotene, is a foundational document advocating for European unity. It outlines a vision for a federal Europe as a means to ensure peace, democracy, and freedom, and is often regarded as a blueprint for European integration (Cini & Pérez-Solórzano Borragán, 2019).

development, envisioned as the first step toward a unified Europe” (Schütze, 2018). The choice of coal and steel was strategic, as these industries were crucial to the war economies and armament production. By integrating these key sectors, the plan aimed to make any future conflict between member states economically unfeasible and politically undesirable, fostering peace and cooperation across Europe.

Subsequently to the accomplishments of the ECSC, the Treaties of Rome (1957) established the European Economic Community (EEC) and the European Atomic Energy Community (EURATOM). These treaties marked the beginning of broader economic integration, aiming to create a common market and a customs union for the free movement of goods, services, capital, and people. The EEC Treaty formally recognized the concept of supranationalism and paved the way for the direct application of Community law, a principle established in the landmark European Court of Justice (ECJ) judgement 6/64 *Costa v. ENEL* (Schütze, 2018). Notably, in *Costa v. ENEL* (1964), the ECJ, headquartered in Luxembourg, stated: *“By contrast with ordinary international treaties, the EEC Treaty has created its own legal system which, on the entry into force of the Treaty, became an integral part of the legal systems of the Member States and which their courts are bound to apply”*. Normative supranationalism was reinforced by granting additional powers to European institutions, including the Council and the Commission, located in Brussels. Indeed, the EEC laid the foundation for the economic and political integration that would define the European project in subsequent decades.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the European project deepened through further economic integration and widened through the accession of new member states. In 1973 the first enlargement saw the accession of Denmark, Ireland, and the United Kingdom, expanding the

European Economic Community (EEC) from the founding six to nine members. The scope of the European project widened even further, with the Single European Act (1986) advancing the core idea of “completing the internal market by 1992” (Schütze, 2028, p. 13). Cini and Pérez-Solórzano Borragán (2019) note that the Single European Act (SEA) was not solely focused on market-oriented reforms; rather, most member states were genuinely pursuing broader integration as the enlargement process progressed. By expanding the decision-making role of the European Parliament and adopting harmonized legislation in EU law and policies, the SEA laid the groundwork for the Treaty on the European Union, often referred to as the Maastricht Treaty (Cini & Pérez-Solórzano Borragán, 2019).

While the enlargement process proceeded with the accession of Greece in 1981 and Spain and Portugal in 1986, the Maastricht Treaty (1992) laid the cornerstone for the structure of the European Union as we know it today. The Maastricht Treaty was formally known as the Treaty on European Union (TEU), and it established the foundational elements that continue to shape its political, economic, and legal framework. The constitutional scholar Robert Schütze refers to the framework of the Maastricht Treaty as a “temple architecture” shaped by common provisions and objectives based on three pillars, each governed by its own set of rules. The first pillar expanded the European Community’s role, advancing it towards a more integrated economic and political union (Schütze, 2018). It established the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU), and it formally introduced the political status of “European citizenship”, giving the citizens of Member States the right to move, reside, and vote across the Union. The implementation of the EMU introduced the EU’s very first supranational monetary policy, leading to the establishment of the European System of Central Banks (ESCB) and the European Central Bank (ECB), located in Frankfurt. The ECB’s primary goals are to authorize the issuance of euro banknotes, maintain

price stability, and coordinate monetary policy across the Union (Schütze, 2018). Additionally, the second and third pillars expanded the competencies of the Union in the areas of foreign and security affairs and immigration and judicial cooperation, respectively. The Maastricht Treaty is fundamental to the development of political conditionality within the EU, as it requires adherence to certain democratic principles for both existing members and aspirant countries. This institutional expansion was soon followed by the 1995 enlargement, when Austria, Finland, and Sweden joined, further strengthening the Union's political and economic influence across Europe.

The Treaty of Amsterdam (1997) and the Treaty of Nice (2001) reshaped the EU's institutional framework, enabling it to manage future enlargements and operate efficiently with an expanded membership. The Treaties opened the way for the "Big Bang Enlargement", as it was the largest single expansion in EU history in which 10 countries, mostly from Eastern Europe, joined at once in 2004: Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia, leading to a total of 25 EU members (Cini & Nieves, 2019). Not only did this historic enlargement contribute to breaking down the Iron Curtain that ran across Europe during the Cold War, but as we will explore in this thesis, it also underscored the importance of the EU's role in the democratization process of the countries from the former Eastern bloc.

The constitutional development of European integration and institutions would be incomplete without referring to the Schengen Area, a border-free zone that guarantees freedom of movement for more than 425 million EU citizens, and includes non-EU countries as well, such as Iceland, Norway, Switzerland, and Liechtenstein (European Commission, n.d.). To ensure the integrity of the border-free area, the Schengen Agreement was signed in 1985 aiming

at gradually abolishing checks at common borders, further implemented by the Schengen Convention in 1990, entering into force in 1995. The developments brought by Schengen constitute the Schengen Acquis, a set of rules and legislation governing external border management, visa policies, security cooperation, and data protection within the Schengen Area, now integrated into EU law pursuant to Article 77 TEU (European Commission, n.d.).

After the Member States finally agreed to incorporate the Schengen Agreement into the EU legal framework, reinforcing the freedom of movement of people and workers, The Treaty of Lisbon (2007) fulfilled the mandate for a “comprehensive reform of the Union” (Schütze, 2018, p. 31). Substantially, the Treaty merged the EU’s three-pillar system into a single legal framework, giving the EU legal personality and allowing it to sign international treaties and be represented on the global stage as a unified entity. Procedurally, the Treaty broadened the EU’s competencies and granted national parliaments a greater role in overseeing EU law, while also strengthening the powers of the European Parliament – primarily seated in Strasbourg²– to promote representative democracy. The Union experienced further enlargements with the accession of Bulgaria and Romania in 2007, which have recently joined the Schengen Area in 2024, with land border controls set to be lifted effective January 1, 2025 (AP News, 2024). Croatia’s entry in 2013 makes it the youngest Member State of the EU and the latest to join both the Eurozone and the Schengen Area in 2023.

Recent years have presented significant challenges to the EU’s unity and legitimacy. The 2009 Eurozone crisis exposed the Union’s economic vulnerabilities, while Brexit marked the first-ever departure of a Member State, the United Kingdom, in 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic

² Although sharing its location with its Brussels headquarters, the European Parliament’s primary seat in Strasbourg symbolizes post-war reconciliation, as its Alsace location, historically contested between France and Germany, embodies unity between these two nations and the unity of overall Europe. (European Parliament, n.d.).

further tested the EU, leading to the establishment of the EU Recovery Fund, which simultaneously showcased the Union's capacity for solidarity and revealed an ongoing crisis of EU identity.

Nonetheless, adherence to the Union's core values of democracy and the rule of law remains robust among its citizens, as evidenced by Eurobarometer surveys analyzed later in this thesis. These developments underscore the importance of continuing to adapt the EU's constitutional framework to maintain its relevance and effectiveness in an evolving global landscape.

Introduction to EU Conditionality

EU conditionality has been a driving force in the Union's evolution, shaping its enlargement policy and integration agenda, influencing the accession of new Member States.

Generally, in the academic literature, "conditionality" refers to "an agreement between two actors, in which actor 1 offers a reward to actor 2, and such reward is granted if actor 2 fulfils certain conditions imposed by actor 1" (Reinhard, 2010, p. 200). Therefore, conditionality involves either a reward-based approach (positive conditionality) or a sanction-based approach in case the reward is withheld (negative conditionality), operating within an asymmetric relationship where actor 1 holds greater negotiating power than actor 2. This dynamic has been reinforced by international organizations that reward countries for meeting specific conditionalities. A prominent example is the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which prescribes economic structural programs as prerequisites for financial aid and rewards (IMF, 2023). Throughout the thesis, we will examine the incentive-driven and interest-based

mechanisms through which conditionality operates. In this chapter, we will explore the significance of conditionality to the EU and how it shaped its evolution.

Conditionality was formally embedded within the Maastricht Treaty (1992), which laid out legal and political criteria for membership, thus creating the foundation for what would later be defined more concretely in the *Copenhagen criteria*³. The Maastricht Treaty, through Article 49 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), set the legal framework for enlargement, stipulating that any European state that respects the principles of liberty, democracy, respect for human rights, and the rule of law (principles pursuant to Article 2 TEU) could apply for membership. This provision established the groundwork for future conditionality policies, ensuring that adherence to these values was a prerequisite for joining the Union.

Conditionality, in the EU context, refers to the requirements that candidate countries must fulfil to gain membership or receive other benefits, such as financial assistance or enhanced cooperation. The concept embodies the Union's leverage to promote democracy and good governance, particularly during its enlargement phases. Conditionality has been critical in guiding the transformation of candidate states, fostering their alignment with the EU's fundamental values and legal frameworks.

A critical moment in the EU's evolution came with the Copenhagen European Council meeting in 1993, which established the Copenhagen political criteria. According to the European Council Presidency Conclusions in Copenhagen, “membership requires that the candidate country has achieved stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human

³ The Treaty on European Union sets out the conditions (Article 49) and principles (Article 6(1)) to which any country wishing to become a member of the European Union (EU) must conform. Certain criteria must be met for accession. These criteria (known as the Copenhagen criteria) span political, economic, legal, and institutional requirements that countries must meet to achieve membership. These criteria were established by the Copenhagen European Council in 1993 and strengthened by the Madrid European Council in 1995 (EUR-Lex, n.d.).

rights and respect and protection of minorities” (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2005, p.17). The Madrid European Council in December 1995 further clarified the accession criteria in terms of EU conditionality for membership, comprising three main pillars (European Council, 1995):

1. Political criteria: Stable institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and respect for and protection of minorities.
2. Economic criteria: A functioning market economy and the capacity to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the Union.
3. Legal and institutional criteria: the administrative and institutional capacity to take on the obligations of membership, including adherence to the aims of political, economic, and monetary union.

The Copenhagen political criteria, later referred to as the “accession criteria”, became “the essential conditions all candidate countries must satisfy to become a member state” (European Commission, n.d.). These accession criteria, which will be examined in depth in the following chapter, were established to guide the accession process for countries seeking to join the Union, ensuring that new members aligned with the EU's fundamental values and principles. As we will later explore the complex relationship between EU accession criteria and democratization, it is essential to recognize how the introduction of these criteria emphasized the importance of conditionality in the democratic evolution of the Union.

This thesis will examine how the accession criteria played a pivotal role in operationalizing political conditionality, ensuring that the principles of democracy, the rule of law, and the free market remained central to the EU's enlargement strategy. In this context, conditionality has served as a lever to drive reforms in candidate countries, making adherence to the EU's democratic values a prerequisite for membership. The next chapter explores the

theoretical approaches that explain how EU conditionality operates as a mechanism to promote reform and strengthen democratic values, positioning the EU as a democratizing actor. This aligns with the Union's broader mission to foster democracy and stability across Europe.

3. Theoretical Approaches to EU Conditionality

Introduction

To fully capture the impact of democratization in Eastern European countries, particularly through the proposed case studies of Romania and Hungary, this chapter will engage with a rich body of academic literature addressing the theoretical frameworks, key concepts, and functioning of conditionality and its relationship with democratization. This chapter provides a comprehensive exploration of EU conditionality as a framework for fostering democratization. It consists of four sections: the first establishes the conceptual foundations of conditionality, examining its mechanisms, principles, and prerequisites; the second addresses the theoretical frameworks of democratization, outlining its correlation with external pressures such as EU conditionality; the third delves into the preamble and substantive elements of EU conditionality, exploring its foundational role in accession processes; and the final section analyzes how conditionality operates as leverage, leveraging the EU's political and economic appeal to influence aspiring and candidate countries, particularly in the EEC. Together, these sections provide the analytical tools to understand how EU conditionality shaped the democratization process during the negotiation stages and accession years.

Conceptual Framework of Conditionality

Conditionality has proven to be an effective tool of the EU to foster democracy in its neighboring countries through the prospect of EU membership. The relationship between conditionality and the promotion of democracy is closely tied to how the prospect of EU membership functions within the broader framework of conditionality. As discussed in the previous chapter, academic literature refers to “conditionality” as “an agreement between two actors”, in which the first actor offers a reward to the second actor, and such reward is granted if the latter fulfills certain conditions imposed by the former (Reinhard, 2010, p. 200). The reward may be granted or withheld depending on whether the second actor fulfills the conditions set by the first actor. In cases of non-fulfillment, two possible scenarios arise: “positive conditionality” occurs when the reward is withheld, whereas “negative conditionality” involves punishment as a consequence of failing to meet the conditions (Reinhard, 2010). Essentially, conditionality operates as a reward-based policy structured around asymmetric negotiation power. The two essential conditions for conditionality to function are the power imbalance between the negotiating actors and the allure of the reward. In this asymmetric relationship, the first actor inherently holds greater negotiation power, which can offer a highly desirable reward that the second actor cannot achieve independently. In the context of Eastern enlargement, for instance, Eastern European countries could not access the significant economic advantages of the EU single market without first achieving membership.

This section will delve into the details of each condition that shapes the conditionality mechanism. In this framework, we identify the target actor—in our context, an aspiring or candidate EU country—seeking the desired reward of EU membership, and the conditioning or targeting actor, which, in this context, is the EU itself. The EU sets the conditions that aspiring

countries must meet to obtain the reward. Having already analyzed the essential elements required for conditionality to exist, there are certain prerequisites for the successful use of conditionality as a promising political strategy, particularly in the context of promoting democracy: the desirability of the reward, lack of alternatives for the target actor, the credibility of the targeting actor and the overall asymmetry between the actors involved, a favorable cost-benefit ratio, and the interests of stakeholders (Reinhard, 2010). The desirability of the reward is a crucial prerequisite, as it gives significance to conditionality and the subsequent exertion of power to fulfill conditions throughout negotiations. Without an appealing reward—such as EU membership for the target actor—the conditionality process has little reason to exist. This is closely tied to another essential aspect of conditionality: the absence of viable alternatives for the target actor, which cannot realistically pursue EU membership independently or by other means. The strong appeal of the reward, combined with the lack of alternatives to achieve this goal, leads the target actor to voluntarily submit to the conditions set by the EU, which exerts its influence through this conditionality mechanism. As Reinhard (2010) emphasizes, this influence is not solely based on the desirability of the reward itself but is significantly strengthened by the lack of alternative pathways to achieve the same objective. In the case of candidate countries, the absence of viable alternatives to EU membership amplifies the EU's leverage, making the fulfillment of conditions almost inevitable for the target actors.

Naturally, for the reward to be appealing, the benefits gained must outweigh the associated costs to meet the conditions set in the negotiation stage. For the target actor, a favorable cost-benefit ratio is essential to sustain the conditionality process. In the context of EU membership, the incentive provided by membership must be substantial enough to justify the financial, administrative, and political costs of compliance with EU standards and regulations.

Furthermore, to achieve the desired outcomes for both the EU and the aspiring countries the process must be realistic, bringing us to another essential prerequisite for conditionality: the credibility of the targeting actor. Negotiations must be based on clear and measurable criteria to evaluate the performance of target countries in meeting the established conditions. Thus, either granting or withholding the reward must come from a credible conditioning actor, one that is realistically capable of delivering or withholding the reward as promised.

Credibility provides further incentive for the target country, which is encouraged to meet the conditions set by the conditioning actor. Such credibility stems from a crucial requisite for conditionality, previously discussed: the asymmetry of the relationship between the target and conditioning actor. For conditionality to be credible, the conditioning actor must hold greater negotiating power than the target actor, creating a dependency of the target actor on the conditioning actor rather than vice versa (Reinhard, 2010). In the context of EU membership, this asymmetry must favor the EU, whose political and economic power exerts pressure on the aspiring or candidate country to meet the established conditions, significantly influencing the target country's development, particularly in democratic reforms as we will explore later in the thesis.

Lastly, a final aspect of conditionality involves the interests of stakeholders who may be external to the negotiation process. For instance, influential business figures might stand to benefit from their country's EU membership and may engage in lobbying efforts to sway their government toward meeting EU criteria, thus supporting the realization of conditionality. Politically speaking, lobbying operates independently of a country's democratic status and is a common practice globally. In the context of EU conditionality, lobbying does not inherently undermine democratization. Instead, it can sometimes advance it, depending on the interests and

identities of the stakeholders involved. When key stakeholders, such as influential business leaders or civil society groups, stand to benefit from the democratic and economic stability that EU membership promotes, they may actively lobby their governments to pursue the necessary reforms. This dynamic aligns with the broader framework of Europeanization, where domestic actors leverage EU-driven conditionality to advocate for governance improvements and align national policies with EU norms. An illustrative example is the multi-stakeholder campaign “Let’s Do It, Romania,” a civil society-led mass initiative that played a pivotal role in mobilizing efforts for environmental causes (Martin-Russu, 2022, p. 174). Transitioning from a protest-oriented approach to active advocacy and lobbying shortly after Romania’s EU accession in 2007, this movement assisted the government in aligning environmental policies with EU standards, particularly under Chapter 27 of the *acquis communautaire* (see Appendix 1). Such instances underscore how lobbying can support democratization by encouraging adherence to EU conditionality requirements that promote democratic governance.

The assumptions underlying the prerequisites of conditionality stem largely from a rational-choice model, which views conditionality as a top-down approach primarily applied in inter-state relations. Although third-party actors and influential stakeholders undeniably play a role, conditionality fundamentally involves state actors engaging in cost-benefit calculations to determine compliance (Reinhard, 2010). In this framework, conditionality aligns closely with the realist school of thought, which conceptualizes it as a state-centered mechanism based on cost-benefit analysis. The subsequent outcomes, such as promoting democracy through EU-mandated reforms, are seen as the result of bargaining among major EU members, strategically positioned on the international stage, particularly Germany, followed by France, and to a lesser extent, Italy, who leverage conditionality to safeguard their national interests.

While this realist perspective offers a valuable lens, it contrasts with the European Union's supranational evolution over the past fifty years. Notably, realism need not be limited to state actors alone; it can also encompass EU institutions that benefit from the enlargement process and the broader application of conditionality. In this regard, the European Commission and the European Parliament, embodying the EU's supranational character, play key roles in advancing conditionality as a tool that supports both their institutional mandates and the EU's overarching goals. Consequently, conditionality operates through a top-down power structure in which the most influential actors drive the conditionality agenda, including democracy promotion, ultimately in pursuit of their own interests.

As a counterpart to realism, constructivism offers an alternative mechanism for influencing candidate countries through convergence, a process driven more by social and indirect diffusion of norms and values (Reinhard, 2010). In the constructivist approach, convergence is understood as a process by which aspiring EU countries align with EU norms and values through gradual socialization rather than direct pressure. Convergence operates indirectly through mechanisms such as "social learning and diffusion" and the "diffusion of social norms and values" (Reinhard, 2010, p. 199). Favoring a bottom-up approach, this process grants legitimacy to the EU as aspiring members, through social learning, observe and adopt behaviors and policies to resemble the Union. Additionally, through the diffusion of social norms, aspiring members aim to emulate the EU and its Member States, seeking to join the exclusive EU "club."

This process operates from a dual perspective: social learning and diffusion stem directly from the EU's influence and soft power, which lies in its ability to project its values and standards internationally. Simultaneously, the willingness of aspiring members to adopt these norms further enhances the EU's importance and legitimacy. Unlike the top-down enforcement

characteristic of conditionality, convergence emphasizes indirect influence, where countries adopt democratic principles and governance standards not only to meet formal requirements but to identify with the broader EU community. This fosters a shared European identity that sustains democratic reforms over time.

While fostering a common EU identity can also be a goal of conditionality, the distinction between conditionality and convergence remains largely conceptual, as both mechanisms share similar aims. Constructivist approaches highlight the EU's indirect methods of influence, yet this thesis focuses primarily on conditionality as the more direct and formal mechanism driving political transformations in aspiring EU Member States.

Conceptual Framework of Democratization

Conditionality has proven to be an effective tool for the EU to promote democracy in its neighboring countries through the prospect of EU membership. In this context, neo-functionalism, the first theory of European integration, offers valuable insights into these dynamics. Developed by Ernst Haas, neo-functionalism theorizes that regional cooperation, initially focused on specific sectors, triggers a “spillover effect,” whereby integration in one area creates pressures for deeper cooperation in others. This framework highlights how interconnected policy domains can drive broader integration, reflecting the willingness of member states to deepen their collaboration (Cini & Pérez-Solórzano Borragán, 2019). In the context of conditionality, the EU leverages this interconnectedness to promote democratic reforms, linking progress in specific areas to broader institutional alignment with EU norms. Starting from the conceptual frameworks that shape the concept of democratization, this section

will give foundational basis through which EU conditionality fostered the democratization process in Europe.

Defining democratization exhaustively can be a challenging task, as the precise patterns driving democratization are difficult to determine. The *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Politics* simply defines democratization as “becoming a democracy” (McLean & McMillan, 2009). Given the known characteristics of democracy⁴, democratization is regarded in any country, regardless of the degree of authoritarianism at its initial stage, as a long-term historical process that is progressive and, at times, convoluted (McLean & McMillan, 2009). While democratic governance can take various forms, liberal democracy is characterized by the rule of law, constitutional checks and balances, individual freedoms, and the protection of human rights (Ahn, 2023). This understanding of liberal democracy provides a framework for examining the democratization process, which often encompasses social and economic factors that precede the political stage. This is where modernization theory becomes significant, closely associated with the behavioralist approach in comparative politics.

The behavioral revolution in political science, during the 1950s and 1960s, marked a significant shift from the traditional descriptive approach in the field of comparative politics (O’Neil, Fields, & Share, 2021). Unlike earlier methods, which focused on describing political structures and institutions, the behavioral approach sought to understand the causal relationships, correlations, and predictive patterns underlying the behaviors and motivations of political actors, rather than simply describing institutional arrangements. To achieve this, behavioralists increasingly relied on quantitative methodologies, particularly statistical methods focusing on

⁴ Robert A. Dahl identifies the key characteristics of democracy as including effective participation, equality in voting, enlightened understanding, control of the agenda, and inclusion, which ensure all citizens have equal rights and opportunities to influence decisions. For a detailed discussion, see Dahl, R. A. (1989). *Democracy and its critics*. Yale University Press.

measurable outcomes, to analyze data and identify consistent patterns in political behavior (O'Neil, Fields, & Share, 2021). This shift provided a foundation for theories like modernization theory, which correlates the emergence of democracy with societal modernization and economic development, applying empirical evidence to support its claims.

Among the original behavioralist scholars who significantly shaped political science and modernization theory, Seymour Martin Lipset stands out, particularly with his seminal work *"Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy"* (1959). Lipset argued that economic development and political legitimacy are strongly correlated, asserting that economic prosperity directly contributes to the emergence and stability of democratic regimes. Modernization theory thus explores the relationship between societal advancement and democratization, emphasizing factors such as education and the rise of a middle class (O'Neil, Fields, & Share, 2021). It posits that education fosters innovation and economic growth, leading to a more educated and prosperous society. Consequently, individuals and groups form organizations to protect their interests against state dominance. The burgeoning middle class becomes instrumental in advocating for their rights, thereby promoting democratization through civil society and economic elites.

In the previous section, we discussed how economic elites, through lobbying, have influenced democratization in the EEC, particularly in Romania and Hungary, by pushing for adherence to democratic norms as prerequisites for EU membership to gain associated benefits. The involvement of the middle class and civil society underscores the societal impetus in driving democratization. Active civic engagement from the lower and middle classes facilitates democratization, as civil society vehicles ideas and mobilizes efforts, enabling democratic practices to permeate from the grassroots level.

We also examined the interaction between the top-down realist approach of conditionality and the bottom-up constructivist approach of convergence in promoting democracy, noting that both share similar aims. Just as economic elites have vested interests in pressuring governments to meet the demands of conditionality stemming from other states and international organizations to gain benefits, civil societies also play a crucial role. Similarly to the lobbying activities of economic elites, civil societies have also actively pushed for adherence to EU conditionality, particularly in promoting democracy. For instance, Romania's adoption of "Law 544/2001" ensured free access to public information, a step aligned with EU recommendations to enhance civil society engagement and governmental accountability (Jurje, 2013, p. 33) By mobilizing to align with European ideals of modernity and democracy, civil society has played a critical role in fostering the democratization process. The adoption of Law 544/2001, which regulates and ensures free access to public information in alignment with the EU *acquis communautaire*, significantly contributed to the enhanced role of civil society in collaborating with the government and furthering the democratization process. This legislation set a clear precedent for the growing influence of civil society in Romanian policy-making. A notable example is the grassroots-led organization "Let's Do It, Romania," which supported the Romanian government in meeting the EU's environmental standards as outlined in the *acquis communautaire* (Martin-Russu, 2022). This example further strengthens the argument that EU conditionality played a crucial role in driving democratization in candidate countries during the Eastern enlargement, particularly through adherence to the *acquis communautaire*.

Drawing from the influence of EU conditionality on the democratization process of aspiring and candidate countries, this underscores the recent developments in modernization theory, which highlights not only domestic variables but also international factors in explaining

patterns of democratization (O’Neil, Fields, & Share, 2021). International factors, such as foreign investments, globalization, international trade, and membership in international organizations, can indeed pressure governments to embark on a process of modernization and, consequently, democratization. However, this depends significantly on the influence of the international community and the power of specific international organizations in enforcing certain conditionalities. From a realist perspective, this process also hinges on the interplay between the cost-benefit analysis undertaken by state institutions and the influence of domestic variables, such as economic elites and civil society, in shaping modernization and democratization trajectories. Within the context of the Eastern enlargement, it can generally be assumed that the benefits of compliance with EU standards have consistently outweighed the costs, largely due to the prospect of membership in the single market. However, this dynamic has also worked in reverse. For instance, the outcome of Brexit can be interpreted as the result of a similar interplay, where the United Kingdom’s decision to leave the EU reflected a cost-benefit analysis weighing perceived sovereignty gains against the advantages of economic and political integration, despite the undeniable influence of populist propaganda. Returning to the central focus of this discussion, the external pressures exerted on Eastern European countries following the fall of communism were fundamentally different from those experienced by Western European countries.

Considering the relationship between the EU and EEC between the 1990s and the and the 2000s, it is evident that the EU wielded significantly greater influence over the Eastern candidate countries. This power dynamic compelled these countries to embark on democratic reforms to gain the benefits of EU membership. In this context, the democratization process was strongly shaped by the variables of conditionality discussed earlier in this chapter. Among these

prerequisites, the asymmetry between the EU as the conditioning actor and the candidate countries as the target actors emerged as a critical factor driving democratization. The EU's superior political and economic power created a framework where meeting conditionality requirements became imperative for candidate countries. This asymmetry not only exerted external pressure but also mobilized domestic actors, including economic elites and civil society, to advocate for compliance with EU conditions. The promise of EU membership, combined with the EU's ability to leverage its influence through conditionality, created a significant interplay between external and internal factors that collectively fostered democratization in these countries.

The Evolution and Functioning of EU Conditionality in the Context of Eastern Enlargement

While focusing on formal procedures, we have explored how conditionality engages a complex interplay of various actors to foster democratization. This demonstrates that the top-down approach of conditionality can also significantly influence the grassroots level, contrary to mainstream academic literature (Reinhard, 2010), which argues that conditionality primarily paves the way for the “formal institutionalization of democracy” rather than its complete “consolidation” (p. 203). Naturally, fostering democratization does not equate to the full consolidation of democracy, as this depends on factors extending beyond formal conditionality. However, the long-term effects of conditionality can meaningfully impact the overall democratization process, depending on the leverage exerted by the conditioning actor, in this case the EU. Given the asymmetrical nature of the relationship, the EU wielded significant

leverage over EEC countries during the accession period in the 1990s and 2000s. To understand this leverage, we must first define the exact nature of EU conditionality.

Recalling the Copenhagen Criteria introduced in Chapter Two, the “Accession Criteria” are defined by the Commission as “the essential conditions all candidate countries must satisfy to become a member state” (European Commission, n.d.). These criteria represent the core of EU conditionality, establishing the fundamental requirements that aspiring countries must meet to align with the Union’s core values and standards. They derive their name from the Copenhagen European Council of 1993, a milestone in EU conditionality that formalized these criteria as part of the enlargement process (Andrews, 2000). The enlargement process involves distinct stages, with the pre-accession stage focused on preparing aspiring countries for future negotiations by aligning their domestic frameworks with the EU’s standards (Andrews, 2000). The accession stage, in contrast, begins once a country achieves candidate status and formally initiates structured negotiations to meet the Copenhagen Criteria and align with the *acquis communautaire* (Andrews, 2000). These stages represent a progression from voluntary alignment to formalized compliance, driven by EU leverage. Aspiring countries refer to those seeking EU membership and actively preparing to meet the Union’s requirements, while candidate countries have officially been granted this status, marking the start of structured negotiations to align with EU standards (European Commission, n.d.). Out of clarity, even if these terms have sometimes been used interchangeably, it is essential to distinguish them now that we examine the specifics of the pre-accession and accession stages.

Fundamentally, the accession criteria address three key dimensions: political stability and adherence to democratic principles, economic capacity to integrate into the single market, and institutional ability to implement and enforce EU laws and policies. Substantially, these criteria

are designed to ensure that candidate countries possess stable democratic institutions capable of upholding the rule of law, protecting human rights, and respecting minorities. Economically, they must demonstrate a functioning market economy with the resilience to withstand competitive pressures within the EU. Institutionally, they must show the ability to adopt and implement the EU's *acquis communautaire*, encompassing its entire body of laws, regulations, and objectives.

Despite appearing deceptively straightforward, the EU's institutions have never provided explicit definitions of “democracy” or “market economy” (Grabbe, 2002). However, the preparedness of aspiring countries to join the Union in terms of democratic governance and market economy can be implicitly inferred from the Commission's opinions and annual reports—documents that will be examined in the next chapter concerning Romania and Hungary's status during their accession period between the 1990s and 2000s. By contrast, the definition of *acquis communautaire* is relatively explicit, described as “the whole body of EU rules, political principles, and judicial decisions” (Grabbe, 2002, p. 251). Grabbe (2002) further highlights that the *acquis communautaire* serves as one of the most explicit components of EU conditionality, consisting in 80,000 pages of written legal texts divided into 31 distinct “chapters” (see Appendix 1) for the purposes of accession negotiations' stages. These chapters encompass various sectors of EU law and policy, ranging from the single market to agriculture and judicial cooperation, and form the framework through which candidate countries align their systems with EU standards. This dimension of the accession process is particularly significant because it is easily measurable. Progress is demonstrated by opening and provisionally closing chapters, with candidate countries devoting significant effort to achieve these milestones. Each

closed chapter signifies that the candidate country has met the conditions required in the related policy area.

Building upon this measurable framework, the EU sought to bolster its pre-accession strategy further in the late 1990s. Recognizing the importance of preparing candidate countries to align with EU standards even before formal negotiations began, the Luxembourg European Council of December 1997 approved the “Commission’s Agenda 2000” proposals (Andrews, 2000, p. 14). The agenda introduced “Accession Partnerships (APs)”, tailored agreements designed to address each candidate country’s specific needs (Andrews, 2000, p. 14). These documents outlined short- and medium-term goals tied to the Copenhagen Criteria, along with the financial assistance available to support these priorities, and the conditions attached to that assistance. The first wave of negotiations, involving the so-called “Luxembourg Six”—Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovenia—marked the beginning of this enhanced pre-accession strategy, setting a precedent for structured engagement with candidate countries (Andrews, 2000). By strengthening the preparatory phase through these structured measures, the EU reinforced its leverage over aspiring members, ensuring alignment with the *acquis communautaire* before the formal accession process commenced.

Building on these developments, the Helsinki European Council of December 1999 introduced the principle of “differentiation”⁵, marking another shift in the EU’s approach to enlargement (Grabbe, 2002). This principle shifted the EU’s accession strategy by allowing candidate countries to progress at different speeds based on their individual achievements in

⁵ The principle of “differentiation” was coined by Grabbe (2002) to explain the shift in the EU’s strategy, whereby better-prepared candidate countries could advance more rapidly through the chapters of the *acquis communautaire*. This approach introduced an “accession at two speeds” dynamic to the Eastern enlargement process. Notable examples of this principle in practice include the 1997 Luxembourg Council and the 1999 Helsinki Council, where Eastern candidate countries were divided into two groups based on their pace of compliance with the *acquis communautaire*.

meeting the accession criteria. This replaced the earlier “regatta” model, in which all candidates were expected to advance together (Grabbe, 2002). In the context of our analysis of conditionality prerequisites, the principle of differentiation reinforced the EU’s credibility and provided stronger incentives for reform. By linking progress directly to measurable achievements, this approach enhanced the credibility of EU conditionality and motivated candidate countries to implement necessary reforms more effectively. Recalling the earlier example of Romania’s legislation, the adoption of Law 544/2001, which ensured public access to information and strengthened collaboration with civil society, serves as a clear precedent for the credibility of EU conditionality in fostering reforms in candidate countries.

Another significant innovation introduced by differentiation was its impact on the negotiation dynamics between EEC candidates and the EU. The principle further strengthened the asymmetry of power in favor of the EU (Grabbe, 2002). By tailoring the monitoring of conditionality to each country’s progress, differentiation narrowed the flexibility in negotiations for candidate countries. The increasingly detailed and specific conditions drastically reduced the scope for negotiation, further consolidating the EU’s leverage in the accession process. This evolution highlights how differentiation not only increased the measurability of progress but also emphasized the EU’s dominant role in shaping the democratization and reform agenda of aspiring Member States, further strengthening the Union’s leverage over candidate countries, particularly those from the EEC. Furthermore, the Helsinki European Council of 1999 paved the way to the second wave of negotiations, expanding accession talks to include Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Romania, and Slovakia (Andrews, 2000, p. 23). This development reflected the growing application of differentiation in tailoring the EU’s engagement with candidate countries.

Leverage of the European Union on Eastern European Countries

After analyzing the substance of the EU conditionality, we have established the foundational basis for understanding how conditionality operates as a mechanism of leverage, rooted in the EU's ability to make membership both politically and economically attractive. Therefore, leverage refers to the power of the EU to exert influence on aspiring and candidate countries, particularly the Eastern European Countries (EEC), by linking the prospect of membership to compliance with democratic norms and institutional reforms. In essence, democratization becomes both a prerequisite and a result of the conditionality process. By aligning their domestic institutions with EU standards, candidate countries not only fulfill accession criteria but also enhance their democratic governance. EU membership emerged as a primary national interest for many Eastern European countries following the collapse of communism in 1989. These countries viewed EU accession as an anchor for democratic promotion, economic growth, and increased geopolitical significance. This aspirational integration not only underscored the strategic importance of EU membership but also reinforced the imbalance of power between the EU and the candidates from EEC, further solidifying the Union's position as a decisive actor in shaping their domestic reforms.

As recalled from the previous section, the European Union's enlargement process during the late 1990s and early 2000s was marked by distinct stages, notably the pre-accession period and the formal accession negotiations (Andrews 2000). These phases reflect the EU's "dual leverage"⁶ over candidate countries. Vachudova (2005) distinguishes between "passive leverage" and "active leverage" in the context of EU conditionality. The former refers to the influence

⁶ Recalling the distinction made by Vachudova (2005), "dual leverage" refers to the two phases through which the European Union's leverage operates toward Eastern candidate countries, encompassing both "passive leverage" (the EU's inherent attractiveness) and "active leverage" (the EU's deliberate use of incentives and conditionality).

exercised by the inherent attractiveness of EU membership, particularly in the initial period after the fall of communism from 1989 to 1994. The latter, in contrast, pertains to the deliberate and structured conditionality applied during the EU's pre-accession process, exemplified by mechanisms like the principle of "differentiation" and the system of opening and closing chapters in accession negotiations.

During the pre-accession stage in the early 1990s, the mere prospect of EU membership acted as a significant motivator for EEC aspiring members to voluntarily undertake democratic reforms and economic restructuring. From 1989 to 1994 passive leverage manifested through the political and economic allure of EU membership, which motivated democratic reforms even before formal pre-accession negotiations started. The political appeal of EU membership stemmed from its strategic significance during this historical period of massive enlargement, as well as the protection afforded by EU rules and the voice in EU policy-making that official membership granted.

Unlike full membership, simple association with the EU did not provide equivalent benefits, particularly regarding participation in decision-making processes. For instance, the EFTA states—Austria, Finland, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, Sweden, and Switzerland—were required to adopt significant portions of the *acquis communautaire* without gaining any substantial say in EU policymaking (Vachudova, 2005). Notably, Austria, Finland, and Sweden later departed the EFTA and joined the European Union in 1995. By contrast, the six EEC aspirants at the time—Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, Romania, and Hungary (the latter two being the case studies analyzed in the next chapter)—saw full EU membership as essential to achieving political and economic influence in Europe.

The desire to participate in EU policymaking, particularly regarding economic governance, significantly drove the desirability of membership. The EU's enormous trade power and its single market, free of tariffs and charges, made membership especially attractive to aspiring candidates. The single market's scale encompassed large economies and key manufacturing countries like Germany, France, and Italy, and it offered unparalleled economic opportunities. This economic power, in turn, bolstered the EU's asymmetric leverage over candidate countries, enabling the Union to wield substantial influence through conditionality. The economic attractiveness of the EU remains vivid today, as it encompasses some of the world's largest economies and key manufacturing and exporting hubs. Countries continue to aspire to gain access to its tariff-free trade opportunities and to participate in shaping the policies of one of the largest and most influential trade blocs globally.

The "active leverage" exerted by the EU, as discussed earlier, primarily involved the deliberate use of conditionality to drive reforms in candidate countries, aiming at domestic political transformation (Vachudova, 2005). Unlike "passive leverage", which relies on the inherent attractiveness of EU membership, active leverage consists of setting explicit conditions, measurable benchmarks, and tailored strategies to ensure alignment with the EU's democratic values and standards, as outlined in the Copenhagen Criteria. The Luxembourg Council of 1997 marked the initiation of structured active leverage by approving the *Agenda 2000*, which established the first wave of negotiations during the pre-accession stage with Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovenia (Andrews, 2000). Accession Partnerships (APs), introduced under this agenda, significantly strengthened and accelerated the EU's influence over candidate countries. These partnerships outlined short- and medium-term goals tied to the Copenhagen Criteria, alongside financial and expert assistance tailored to each

country's needs, such as the PHARE program, which provided €1.5 billion annually for institution-building and investment support (Andrews, 2000). This framework underscores how the EU leveraged conditionality to impose stringent conditions while providing financial aid as both a structuring tool and a provisional reward for EEC governments. This dual approach reinforced the EU's active leverage, rendering the "carrot-and-stick" mechanism a tangible driver of reforms (Reinhard, 2010). The "carrot" represented financial aid and eventual membership, while the "stick" symbolized the credible threat of exclusion for non-compliance.

Vachudova (2005) identifies three core mechanisms underpinning the EU's active leverage: asymmetric interdependence, enforcement, and meritocracy. Asymmetric interdependence describes the imbalance in the relationship, where candidate countries depended heavily on EU integration for economic survival and political legitimacy, while the EU was comparatively less reliant on them. This dynamic, bolstered by the financial incentives of the PHARE program, enhanced the credibility of EU conditionality by enabling the EU to issue believable threats of exclusion. For instance, Slovakia and Romania were initially excluded from the first wave of EU accession negotiations at the Luxembourg Council in 1997 due to insufficient compliance with democratic standards (Andrews, 2000). They were later included in the second wave of negotiations initiated at the Helsinki Council in 1999. This imbalance highlights the realist perspective of conditionality: Western governments prioritized the geopolitical stability of a post-Cold War Europe, recognizing Eastern enlargement as a strategic foreign policy goal rather than a genuine commitment to improving EEC governance (Vachudova, 2005). On the other hand, EEC governments were swayed by the financial aid provided by the PHARE program and the broader geopolitical and economic advantages of EU membership.

Enforcement directly stems from the asymmetric interdependence favoring the EU. This mechanism underscores how candidate countries voluntarily “subject themselves to compliance with EU rules” (Vachudova, 2005, p. 110). Enforcement gained prominence during the Eastern enlargement due to the high stakes and the significant number of candidate countries. The non-negotiable nature of compliance acted as a powerful driver of domestic reforms, consolidating the EU’s active leverage over EEC governments. This rigid framework ensured that candidates adhered to EU standards, reducing the flexibility of negotiations and compelling states to enact substantive changes.

Meritocracy became a cornerstone of the EU’s active leverage through conditionality, particularly after the Helsinki European Council of 1999, which introduced the principle of differentiation. This principle allowed candidate countries to progress at their own pace based on individual achievements in meeting EU criteria. With the initiation of negotiations with the second wave of candidates, Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Romania, and Slovakia, a more tailored approach to monitoring reforms emerged (Andrews, 2000). The pre-accession process evaluated candidates based on objective, measurable progress in adopting EU rules, exemplified by the system of opening and closing the 31 chapters of the *acquis* (see Appendix 1 for a complete list of the chapters of the *acquis communautaire*, European Commission n.d.). Meritocracy underpinned the negotiation process from its earliest stages, ensuring that compliance was rewarded tangibly and maintaining the credibility of the conditionality framework. Together, asymmetric interdependence, enforcement, and meritocracy formed a cohesive strategy that underpinned the EU’s active leverage, transforming conditionality into an effective tool for driving political and institutional reforms in candidate countries.

The interplay of asymmetric interdependence, enforcement, and meritocracy has shown how conditionality extends beyond formal procedures to shape political and institutional transformation. This reinforces the broader argument that EU conditionality has been instrumental in advancing democratization processes. As we transition to the next chapter, we shift from theoretical and historical analysis to empirical evidence, examining Romania and Hungary as case studies to evaluate the tangible impact of EU conditionality on democratization.

4. Methodology and Political Overview of Case Studies: Romania and Hungary

Introduction and Methodology

The interdisciplinary methodology of this dissertation combines analysis of comparative politics and international relations theories, legal studies and economic concepts and statistical analysis of political data, as stated earlier in the Introductory Chapter. Indeed, this multifaceted methodology encompasses both qualitative and quantitative analysis to comprehensively explain the role of EU conditionality in the democratization process.

The qualitative component of the research focuses on textual analysis and theoretical examination, as witnessed in the last chapter. Scholarly works from a diverse range of political theorists and EU specialists are reviewed to understand how conditionality has evolved and how it has been embedded in EU practices. Key treaties, legal documents, and EU policy frameworks are also critically analyzed to develop a multifaceted understanding of the topic.

Having analyzed the theoretical concepts, components, historical evolution, and tools of EU conditionality, the next chapter will empirically measure the success of this conditionality in favouring democratization in the EEC, taking two countries as case studies: Romania and Hungary. In tandem, the quantitative analysis involves a data-driven approach to assess the impact of conditionality. Statistical data, primarily sourced from Freedom House and supplemented by Eurobarometer polls, is utilized to analyze trends between democratization and the effectiveness of EU conditionality policies, as well as public perceptions of the EU's current role in promoting democracy and upholding the rule of law in member states.

This empirical analysis provides concrete evidence to substantiate the theoretical arguments, allowing for a well-rounded exploration of the research question. The use of comparative case studies of Romania and Hungary enables a contextualized examination of the real-world applications and outcomes of EU conditionality.

In particular, the empirical approach to conditionality will be provided by the statistical correlation between the enhancement of democracy and the role of EU conditionality in CEE countries, taking Hungary and Romania as the main case studies. Using the results drawn from the Freedom House dataset as initial indicators of democracy, this analysis examines how these democratic indicators have evolved in response to EU conditionality. By tracking changes in Political Rights and Civil Liberties scores over time, the impact of conditionality mechanisms in Hungary and Romania will be considered. By examining this data, I will assess whether there is a statistical correlation between the improvement of democracy and EU conditionality using Pearson's correlation coefficient⁷.

Based on Freedom House scores as key indicators of the democratization process, the analysis is structured around two primary variables: the independent variable, representing the progression of EU conditionality over the years of the accession process, and the dependent variable, capturing the state of democratization as reflected in Freedom House scores.

⁷ To measure the relationship between EU conditionality and democratization, the study employs the Pearson Correlation Coefficient (r). This statistical tool measures the strength and direction of a linear relationship between two variables. A negative correlation ($r < 0$) suggests that as the independent variable (years/EU conditionality) increases, the dependent variable (Freedom House scores) decreases, reflecting improved democratic governance. Conversely, a positive correlation ($r > 0$) would indicate a deterioration in democratic standards over time. For a detailed explanation of the Pearson Correlation Coefficient, see Popescu, B. G. (n.d.). *Statistical analysis: Lecture 9 – Bivariate regression*. John Cabot University. https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/6gqx4s68gxaindi2w18rb/Stats_undergrad9.pdf?rlkey=6ygaytn5o4r4eizaev8r5w3q0&e=1&dl=0.

The independent variable, spanning 1990–91 to 2023–24, captures the full influence of EU conditionality across pre-accession, accession, and post-accession periods for Hungary and Romania. This extended timeframe enables an analysis of both the immediate impacts of EU conditionality during accession and its long-term effects on democratic governance. The starting point of 1990–91 reflects the initial democratic reforms in Central and Eastern Europe after the fall of communism, when the EU began employing conditionality as a foreign policy tool, using “Association Partnerships (APs)” —discussed in Chapter Three—as its main instrument for promoting reforms (Andrews, 2000, p. 12). This approach was formalized with the 1993 Copenhagen Criteria, setting requirements for democratic governance and market economy compatibility. Hungary’s invitation to negotiations at the Luxembourg European Council in 1997 and Romania’s at the Helsinki Council in 1999 became significant milestones in the evolution of EU conditionality (Andrews, 2000). Their accession in 2004 and 2007, respectively, marked the culmination of EU conditionality during pre-accession, while the extended timeline to 2023–24 allows an evaluation of long-term trends, including democratic backsliding in Hungary and democratic consolidation in Romania. This comprehensive scope provides a holistic view of the role of EU conditionality in shaping long-term democratization.

The dependent variable consists of Freedom House scores, which combine assessments of Political Rights (PR) and Civil Liberties (CL). These scores, widely used in political science research, range from 1 (the highest level of democracy and freedom) to 7 (the lowest). Lower scores correspond to greater democratization, reflecting improvements in governance, electoral processes, and individual freedoms (Freedom House, 2024). By using these composite scores as a proxy for democratization, the analysis quantifies progress in political rights and civil liberties, which are essential indicators that define the nature and depth of democratization in a country.

In addition to correlation analysis, the study uses time series visualizations to track trends in democratization over the selected timeline. These visualizations highlight the progression of Freedom House scores for both Romania and Hungary, illustrating key shifts during pre-accession, accession, and post-accession periods. Correlation graphs and time series visualizations together provide a comprehensive view of the dynamics between EU conditionality and democratization.

This statistical analysis will be followed by insights from the 2024 Eurobarometer public opinion polls, which provide current perceptions of the EU's influence on democracy and the rule of law in Member States, offering a bridge between past conditionality impacts and present public opinion. This multifaceted methodological approach employed in these case studies not only contextualizes the successes and challenges of EU-led democratization efforts but also helps draw broader conclusions on the role of political conditionality as a democratizing tool.

Political Background of Case Studies

The selection of Romania and Hungary as case studies is rooted in their contrasting yet illustrative experiences with EU conditionality and democratization. These countries provide critical insights into the interaction between EU leverage and domestic reforms, offering a comparative basis to analyze the correlation between EU conditionality and democratic advancement in the EEC.

Romania

Romania established a semi-presidential political system in 1991 following the dismantling of the communist regime led by Nicolae Ceaușescu. The executive power is held by

the government and the President of the Republic, who is independent of Parliament in most cases because they are directly accountable to the electorate (Jurje, 2013). While the President acts independently and can issue decrees requiring “the Prime Minister’s countersignature”, the Prime Minister and their cabinet rely on “Parliament’s confidence” to govern (Jurje, 2013, p. 30). Despite the formal system of checks and balances, Romania’s early constitutional framework faced significant challenges in balancing political power with democratic accountability due to the lingering influence of Ceaușescu’s authoritarian regime. Early democratic institutions lacked resilience, undermining the independence of the Constitutional Court and the judiciary, and contributing to political instability and widespread corruption (Jurje, 2013).

EU conditionality, formally introduced with Romania’s invitation to negotiate accession at the Helsinki European Council in 1999, became a transformative force for democratic reform. A pivotal moment was the 2003 Constitutional Amendment, which strengthened judicial independence and improved executive transparency. The domestic impact of EU conditionality began to materialize significantly after 2000, when Romania officially commenced EU integration negotiations (Jurje, 2013). The Freedom House metrics provide a clear illustration of Romania’s democratization journey: Political Rights (PR) and Civil Liberties (CL) scores, where higher scores indicate lower levels of democracy, improved from 6/5 (total 11) in the early 1990s to 2/2 prior to its EU accession in 2007, maintaining these levels through 2024. This empirical trend highlights how EU conditionality, particularly through the *acquis communautaire*, served as a catalyst for aligning Romania’s governance with EU standards, as declining scores reflect progress toward greater democratic freedoms.

In conclusion, Romania’s inclusion as a case study in this analysis demonstrates one of the most compelling examples of how EU conditionality can successfully foster democratization

within the EEC. Its trajectory underscores the transformative power of EU conditionality in advancing democratic reforms and institutional alignment with EU norms.

However, as of December 2024, the recent scandal in Romania’s presidential elections highlights the potential drawbacks of what seemed to be a stable democratic trajectory under EU conditionality. The unprecedented first-round victory of far-right and pro-Russian candidate Călin Georgescu prompted the Romanian Constitutional Court to annul the elections on “national security grounds” (Rainsford, 2024). Despite Moscow’s firm denials, allegations of Russian meddling raised significant concerns about Romania’s democratization—a process this thesis analyzes up to 2020. According to Stothard (2024), writing for *Politico*, the EU summoned TikTok’s CEO to the European Parliament after evidence showed the platform’s misuse for propaganda and misinformation, which significantly influenced the election in violation of the EU’s Digital Services Act (DSA)⁸. Further controversy ensued when Georgescu, appearing at his polling station, described the court’s decision to cancel the ballot as “fatal for democracy” (Reuters, 2024). These developments, coupled with ongoing geopolitical tensions with Russia, underscore the fragility of democratic processes in the region which demands constant vigilance to safeguard against emerging threats.

Hungary

Hungary’s transition to democracy began after the collapse of János Kádár’s communist regime in 1989, culminating in the adoption of its 1989 Constitution, which “significantly strengthened checks on governmental powers” (Halmai, n.d., p. 4). This Constitution established

⁸ The Digital Services Act (DSA) regulates online intermediaries and platforms, including marketplaces, social networks, content-sharing platforms, app stores, and online travel and accommodation platforms. Its main objective is to prevent illegal and harmful activities online and curb the spread of disinformation in line with EU regulations. For more details, see European Commission (n.d.), *Digital Services Act*.

a parliamentary system with a robust framework of checks and balances, where the Parliament exercises legislative power, and the Prime Minister, elected by a parliamentary majority, heads the executive branch.

Unlike Romania, Hungary experienced a smoother transition because of a “pacted transition” between the ruling Communist Party and opposition parties, who mutually agreed on the framework for regime change, ultimately paving the way to democracy (Bunce, 1999, p. 11). The policy of “goulash communism” under Kádár’s leadership facilitated Hungary’s gradual liberalization, which ultimately contributed to its democratization (Nyysönen, 2006, p. 153). This approach was characterized by relatively liberal economic reforms and a degree of political openness compared to other Eastern Bloc countries. This era significantly eased Hungary’s eventual transition to democracy by reducing public resistance to reform and creating a favorable environment for political and economic change.

EU conditionality became a decisive factor when Hungary was included in the first wave of negotiations initiated by the Luxembourg European Council in 1997 (Andrews, 2000). The accession process required compliance with the Copenhagen Criteria, catalyzing significant political and institutional reforms. Conditionality mechanisms, such as the PHARE program and the detailed monitoring of legislative alignment with the *acquis communautaire*, reinforced Hungary’s democratization efforts (Grabbe, 2002). By the year of Hungary’s formal accession in 2004, the country’s Political Rights (PR) and Civil Liberties (CL) scores improved from an initial 4/3 in the early 1990s to 1/1 upon EU accession, reflecting enhanced democratic practices and civil freedoms (Freedom House, 2024).

These advancements occurred amidst growing tensions between domestic political elites and the EU’s enforcement mechanisms, which later became evident in post-accession challenges,

particularly after the election of Viktor Orbán as Prime Minister in 2010. Orbán’s government implemented policies that were widely criticized for undermining democratic norms and consolidating power. As will be explored in the thesis, after 2010, democratic backsliding led to a transition from a consolidated democracy to a “hybrid regime” or “illiberal democracy”⁹, as underscored by the *Nations in Transit Report* by Freedom House (2020).

A critical turning point in Hungary’s democratic backsliding was the introduction of the new Fundamental Law in 2012, which replaced the 1989 Constitution. This new constitutional order was adopted solely with the votes of Orbán’s political bloc, sidelining the opposition and cementing control. The Fundamental Law failed to uphold the separation of powers or guarantee fundamental rights, leading to widespread criticism that “Hungary could no longer be considered a state governed by the rule of law” (Halmai, n.d., p. 6). This development underscored the limitations of EU conditionality in sustaining democratic progress post-accession, as domestic political dynamics began to erode the democratic gains achieved during Hungary’s pre-accession and accession phases. Nevertheless, Hungary’s inclusion in this study demonstrates how EU conditionality played a pivotal role in fostering democratization during the pre-accession and accession stages.

⁹ Albeit subject to extensive academic debate, the term “illiberal democracy” can be briefly defined as a governing system in which democratic institutions formally exist but are undermined by leaders who curtail civil liberties and weaken the checks and balances essential to the rule of law. Zakaria (1997) characterizes it as a regime that combines electoral legitimacy with the erosion of liberal principles, including the rule of law, the protection of individual rights, and the separation of powers.

5. Empirical Analysis of EU Conditionality: Insights from Romania and Hungary

Introduction

In the previous chapter, we explored the conceptual frameworks of conditionality and democratization, establishing a theoretical link between these two variables. This preamble has enabled us to analyze the theoretical underpinnings and operational mechanisms of EU conditionality, particularly in the context of pre-accession and accession negotiations during the Eastern European enlargement process of the 1990s and 2000s. Building upon this framework, the chapter intends to empirically assess the relationship between EU conditionality and democratization in the Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, with Hungary and Romania serving as primary case studies.

This chapter focuses on analyzing the correlation between democratization and conditionality, as defined by the Accession Criteria, in the enlargement process. By utilizing statistical data from Freedom House, as anticipated in the Methodology Section, the thesis will compare the democratic trajectories of Hungary and Romania during their pre-accession and post-accession stages to the European Union. The goal is to determine whether a measurable correlation exists between the enhancement of democratic governance and the EU's conditionality mechanisms.

Freedom House metrics, widely recognized for assessing political rights (PR) and civil liberties (CL), serve as key indicators for evaluating the state of democracy in a country. PR

scores measure the extent of electoral processes, political pluralism, and the functioning of government, while CL scores assess freedoms of expression, association, and individual rights. These scores are ranked on a scale from 1 to 7, where 1 represents the highest level of democracy and freedom, and 7 the lowest. Therefore, as PR and CL scores decrease, the level of democratization increases, indicating significant progress in achieving democratic governance (Freedom House, 2024). By employing these metrics, the chapter aims to empirically assess whether EU conditionality mechanisms effectively fostered democratization in Hungary and Romania, examining how PR and CL scores evolved during their EU integration journey. All the graphical representations in this chapter, including the correlation scatterplots and time-series democratization trends, are created by using R, a statistical analysis program widely used in political and social sciences for interpreting and visualizing data (R Core Team, 2024). The empirical analysis aims to evaluate the relationship between EU conditionality and democratization in Hungary and Romania by examining Freedom House scores over time. The analysis utilizes both quantitative tools, such as Pearson Correlation Coefficients and time-series visualizations, and qualitative interpretations to assess democratization trends during the pre-accession, accession, and post-accession periods.

In addition to statistical analyses, the chapter incorporates analytical explanations to contextualize the findings within the broader framework of EU conditionality. Complementing this analysis, sociological insights from Eurobarometer polls are incorporated to explore public perceptions of the EU's role in enhancing democracy and upholding the rule of law, providing a contemporary lens on the long-term impacts of EU conditionality in Member States, focusing on Romania and Hungary.

This integrated approach evaluates the effectiveness of EU conditionality in shaping democratic governance in aspiring Member States while considering the broader implications of the enlargement process, including current public perceptions on the role of the EU in fostering democracy and enhancing the rule of law in the Member States. Indeed, the findings of this chapter aim to contribute to the ongoing academic discourse on the democratizing impact of EU conditionality and its relevance in contemporary European politics.

Empirical Analysis of Romania: Statistical Data and Visual Insights

Romania provides a compelling case study for assessing the impact of EU conditionality on democratization. As one of the key countries in the Eastern European enlargement process, Romania underwent significant democratic reforms during its pre-accession phase, culminating in its accession to the European Union in 2007. By analyzing Freedom House scores from 1990 to 2020, this section examines how EU conditionality influenced democratization during the pre-accession, accession, and post-accession periods.

Data Presentation

The table below presents Romania's Freedom House scores and the calculated values necessary for the Pearson correlation analysis, which quantifies the relationship between EU conditionality (measured by years) and democratization (measured by Freedom House scores).

Table 1: Data Presentation of Freedom House Scores for Romania (1990-2020)

Year (X)	PR (Political Rights)	CL (Civil Liberties)	Total Freedom House Score (Y)	XY	X²	Y²
1990	6	5	11	21890	3960100	121
1995	4	3	7	13965	396025	49
2000	2	2	4	8000	4000000	16
2004	2	2	4	8020	4020025	16
2007	2	2	4	8028	4020049	16
2010	2	2	4	8040	4040100	16
2015	2	2	4	8060	4060225	16
2020	2	2	4	8080	4080400	16

As shown in the table, Romania's Freedom House scores steadily decreased following the initiation of pre-accession negotiations after the 1999 Helsinki European Council, reflecting an improvement in democratic governance that remained stable throughout the post-accession period.

Pearson Correlation

Computing the data from the table using the Pearson formula in R, the correlation value is calculated as -0.769, indicating a negative correlation. A negative Pearson correlation indicates that as one variable increases, the other decreases. This means that as the years progress,

accession negotiations advance, and EU conditionality becomes more influential, Freedom House scores decrease, reflecting improvements in Romania’s democratic performance, as lower scores signify better political rights and civil liberties. Therefore, a negative Pearson correlation in this case indicates an improvement in the democratic performance of the country as the accession years to the EU progressed.

Graphical Representations

Below is the scatterplot, illustrating the negative correlation between years (representing EU conditionality) and Freedom House scores (indicating democratization), alongside a time-series visualization highlighting Romania’s democratization trajectory during the pre-accession and post-accession phases.

Figure 1: Correlation Scatterplot of Democratization and EU Conditionality in Romania (1990-2020)

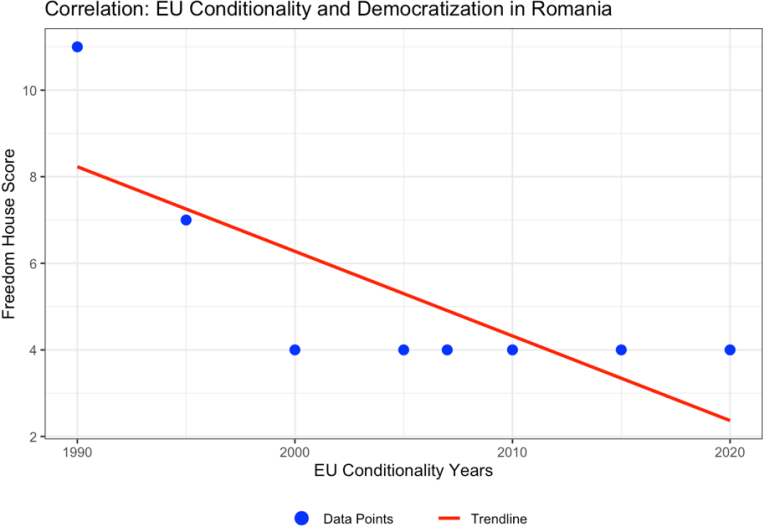
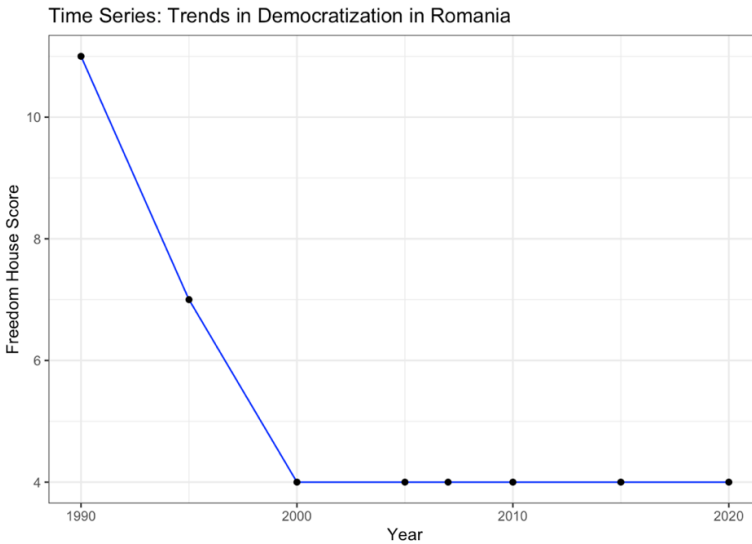


Figure 2: Time-Series Democratization Trend in Romania (1990-2020)



While the correlation highlights the negative relationship between EU conditionality and democratization, the time-series visualization provides additional context. The steep decline in Freedom House scores during the pre-accession phase (1990–2007) demonstrates significant democratic progress under EU conditionality, while the stable scores post-accession (2007–2020) reflect the consolidation of Romania’s democratic governance, apart from other factors that may have played a role, as will be explained in later sections of the chapter.

Empirical Analysis of Romania: Findings and Interpretation

This section summarizes the statistical analysis of EU conditionality and democratization in Romania, incorporating findings from Table 1, the negative correlation value, and the time-series visualization of democratization trends. It also contextualizes these results with examples of democratic reforms under EU conditionality, highlighting their impact on democratization, including improvements in political rights and civil liberties, during the pre-accession, accession, and post-accession stages.

Evidence and Contextualization

The table presents Romania's Freedom House scores across key years, showing a continuous decrease in scores from 1990 to 2000. This decline coincides with significant milestones in Romania's path toward EU membership, particularly the 1999 Helsinki European Council decision to open negotiations with the so-called "Helsinki Six" (Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, Malta, and Romania) starting February 2000 (Andrews, 2000, p. 23). The steady reduction in scores during this period reflects the gradual democratization of Romania's governance structures under the influence of EU conditionality. During the post-accession period, following Romania's official EU membership in 2007, Freedom House scores stabilized, suggesting a consolidation of the democratic gains achieved during the pre-accession phase. This pattern is confirmed by the negative Pearson correlation value, which indicates a negative relationship between EU conditionality (measured in years) and democratization (measured by Freedom House scores). This negative correlation demonstrates that as EU conditionality became more prominent over time, Freedom House scores decreased, reflecting significant improvements in Romania's political rights and civil liberties. In essence, the findings highlight the impact of EU conditionality in fostering and sustaining Romania's democratization process.

However, as will be discussed in detail in the section on the limitations of this empirical research, the findings should be interpreted with caution. Factors beyond EU conditionality may have influenced the democratization process in Romania, such as Romania's membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 2004 and the roles of international organizations like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB) in providing financial incentives tied to structural reforms. Additionally, the oversimplification of Freedom House scores as sole indicators of democratization and the correlation's reliance on years as a proxy for

EU conditionality may be misleading. Using years as an independent variable assumes a direct, linear influence of EU conditionality over time, potentially overlooking the complexity of Romania's democratization process, as evidenced by the annulment of the 2024 presidential elections in Romania, previously discussed in the section of political context. Thus, this analysis provides only one perspective on the extent to which EU conditionality influenced democratization in Romania.

The time-series democratization trend graphs offer an integrative perspective by contextualizing the partial findings of the correlation value and scatterplot. The steep decline in Freedom House scores during the pre-accession phase (1990–2007) illustrates significant democratic progress under the pressures of EU conditionality. The stable democratization trend observed during the post-accession phase (2007–2020) indicate that Romania successfully consolidated its democratic governance, maintaining the gains achieved under EU conditionality. Indeed, the time-series graph enriches the statistical findings by providing a longitudinal perspective, shedding light on the positive impact of EU conditionality on the democratization process over time. This dual approach—combining statistical correlation with trend visualization—highlights the transformative role of EU conditionality in Romania's democratic development while acknowledging the complexity of isolating its influence from other concurrent factors.

Romania's democratic evolution under EU conditionality is illustrated by the comprehensive reforms in judicial independence, anti-corruption measures, and governance transparency outlined in the 2003 Regular Report of the European Commission on Romania's Progress towards Accession. The report identifies three key areas of reform: enhanced governance transparency and anti-corruption measures, judicial reforms connected to the 2003

comprehensive constitutional amendments, and immigration and asylum policy, all crucial for meeting the Copenhagen criteria. For example, Law 544/2001 on free access to public information and Law 52/2003 on public administration transparency were promoted by both the EU and the Council of Europe (Jurje, 2013). Enhancing governance transparency also increased the role of civil society in collaborating with state bodies in the policymaking process, as required by the *acquis communautaire*.

The 2003 European Commission report highlights Romania's adoption of anti-corruption measures in alignment with Chapter 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights) and Chapter 24 (Justice, Freedom, and Security) of the *acquis* (European Commission, 2003). See Appendix 1 for a complete list of the chapters of the *acquis communautaire* (European Commission, n.d.).

Despite challenges and attempts at rollback, the EU's stricter conditionality mechanisms, particularly the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM), played a critical role in safeguarding these reforms. The CVM was "specifically imposed on Romania and Bulgaria" and focused on judicial and anti-corruption measures, ensuring compliance with the rule of law and Copenhagen criteria (Martin-Russu, 2022, p. 41). Designed to address procedural and structural challenges, the CVM effectively prevented significant governance regressions, as the threat of delaying accession acted as a deterrent against democratic backsliding. Romania's experience with the CVM contrasts with countries like Hungary, where the lack of post-accession conditionality led to greater democratic erosion. In Romania, the prolonged EU exercise of conditionality, especially through the CVM, emerges as the most plausible factor for sustaining democratic stability post-accession, even if other variables may have contributed.

The overall reform of Romania's judiciary system, tied to the 2003 constitutional amendments, further bolstered governance transparency and compliance with the Copenhagen

criteria. These amendments, praised in the 2003 European Commission report, strengthened the separation of powers, established the principle of judicial independence, and reinforced the presumption of innocence (European Commission, 2003). Such reforms positively impacted civil liberties and overall democratization, as reflected in Freedom House scores. Judicial reforms, such as strengthening the independence of the judiciary and ensuring transparent governance, directly contributed to the institutional capacity needed to uphold democratic principles. These changes fostered greater accountability and reduced political interference, thereby enhancing civil liberties. For instance, progress in child protection reform exemplifies how EU conditionality drove improvements in human rights. Previously, the dire state of childcare systems was deemed a “failure of political criteria” (Andrews, 2000, p. 16). However, subsequent reforms aligned with the EU’s governance framework, not only improving Romania’s human rights record but also reinforcing a transparent and democratic governance structure capable of addressing societal challenges effectively.

Another area of significant progress was immigration and asylum policy, governed by Chapter 24 of the *acquis*, which pertains to the area of Justice, Freedom, and Security (See Appendix 1). Jurje (2013) notes Romania’s alignment with the Schengen *acquis* and EU directives as “instrumental” in strengthening migration management and asylum frameworks (p. 40). These reforms ensured Romania’s institutional capacity to implement freedom of movement and manage external migration flows. Concrete measures included setting minimum standards for temporary protection and adopting EU norms for the treatment of asylum seekers and displaced persons. The establishment of the Office for Immigration further exemplified Romania’s institutional adaptation to the *acquis communautaire* (Jurje, 2013). Immigration

policies represent a notable case where EU conditionality catalyzed significant domestic change, enhancing governance and civil liberties and contributing to the broader democratization process.

In conclusion, this contextualization provides concrete examples of Romania's national reforms driven by EU conditionality, particularly in governance transparency, judicial independence, immigration and asylum policies, and civil liberties. These reforms illustrate how EU standards shaped Romania's democratization process, albeit with certain limitations, as evidenced by the recent annulment of the ballot due to Russian meddling at the time of writing (Reuters, 2024). The analysis on Romania's democratization trend will be supplemented, later in this chapter, by current public opinion polls from the 2024 Eurobarometer to underscore the continuing influence of EU conditionality in fostering democracy and enhancing the rule of law in Member States, including Romania.

Empirical Analysis of Hungary: Statistical Data and Visual Insights

Hungary provides an intriguing case of the mixed impact of EU conditionality on democratization. As a key participant in the Eastern European enlargement process, Hungary initially demonstrated significant progress in democratic governance during its pre-accession phase, with Freedom House scores steadily improving from 1990 to its EU accession in 2004. However, post-accession, Hungary's scores began to deteriorate, reflecting challenges such as democratic backsliding and weakened institutional frameworks. By analyzing Freedom House scores from 1990 to 2020, this section examines how EU conditionality influenced Hungary's democratization trajectory during the pre-accession, accession, and post-accession periods, highlighting the complexities of sustaining democratic reforms over time.

Data Presentation

The table below presents Hungary's Freedom House scores along with the calculated values required for the Pearson correlation analysis. This analysis quantifies the relationship between EU conditionality (represented by years) and democratization (indicated by Freedom House scores).

Table 2: Data Presentation of Freedom House Scores for Hungary (1990-2020)

Year (X)	PR (Political Rights)	CL (Civil Liberties)	Total Score (Y)	XY	X²	Y²
1990	2	2	4	7960	3960100	16
1995	1	2	3	5985	3980025	9
2000	1	2	3	6000	4000000	9
2004	1	1	2	4008	4016016	4
2007	1	1	2	4014	4028049	4
2010	1	1	2	4020	4040100	4
2015	2	2	4	8060	4060225	16
2020	3	3	6	12120	4080400	36

As shown in the table, Hungary's Freedom House scores steadily decreased during the pre-accession period following the initiation of accession negotiations with the 1997 Luxembourg European Council, reflecting notable improvements in democratic governance. However, in the post-accession period the scores began to increase, particularly after 2010,

coinciding with the rise of Viktor Orbán's new government. This marked the beginning of a continuing negative trend in Hungary's democratization trajectory. By 2020, Hungary's scores had worsened to levels even lower than those recorded during the pre-accession period.

Pearson Correlation

Computing the data from the table using the Pearson formula in R, the correlation value is calculated as +0.346, indicating a positive relationship between the variables. A positive Pearson correlation suggests that as one variable increases, so does the other. In this case, as the years progress, Freedom House scores tend to increase, reflecting a deterioration in democratic governance, as higher scores indicate weaker political rights and civil liberties. However, the value is relatively close to zero, signifying a weak positive relationship overall. This weak correlation reflects Hungary's mixed democratization trajectory, where initial improvements during the pre-accession phase were later overshadowed by democratic backsliding in the post-accession period. This will be explored in greater detail in the section related to findings and contextualizations.

Graphical Representations

Below is the scatterplot illustrating the positive correlation between years (representing EU conditionality) and Freedom House scores (indicating democratization), alongside a time-series visualization highlighting Hungary's mixed democratization trajectory.

Figure 3: Correlation Scatterplot of Democratization and EU Conditionality in Hungary (1990-2020)

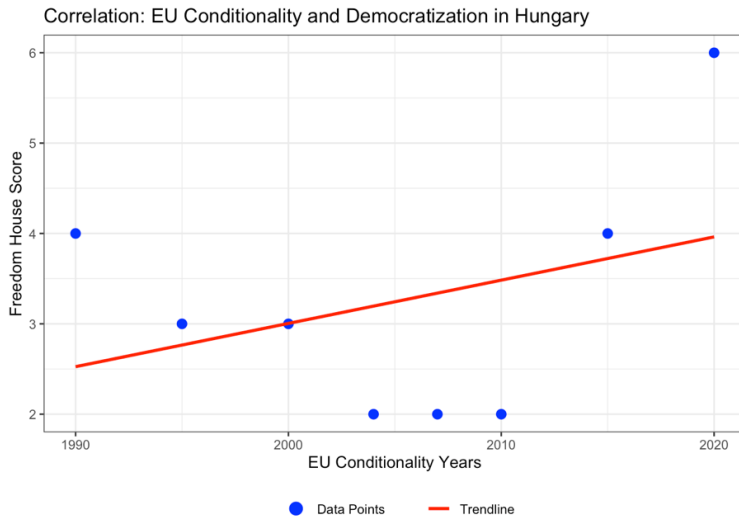
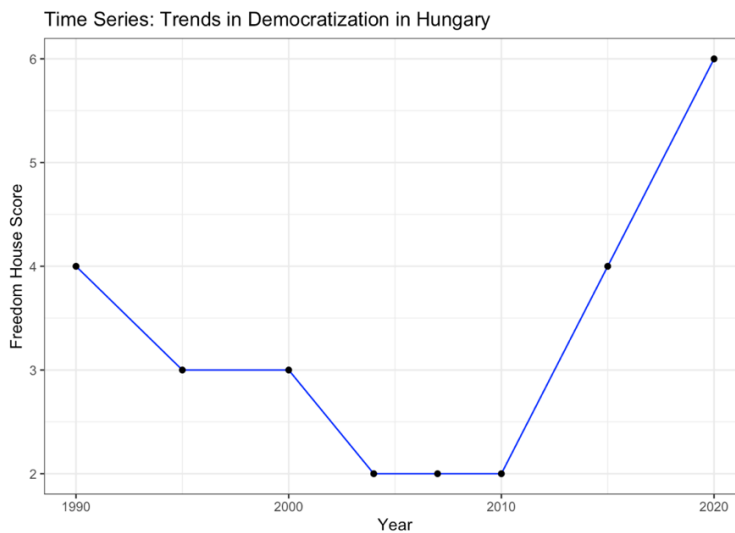


Figure 4: Time-Series Democratization Trend in Hungary (1990-2020)



While the correlation highlights the positive relationship between EU conditionality and democratization, the time-series visualization provides additional context. The steady decline in Freedom House scores during the pre-accession phase (1990–2004) demonstrates initial democratic progress under EU conditionality. However, the post-accession period (2004–2020)

shows a marked increase in scores, with scores worsening significantly after 2010 following the establishment of Viktor Orbán's new government. This trend reflects a clear regression in democratic governance and highlights Hungary's mixed democratization trajectory over time, as evident from the time-series graph.

Empirical Analysis of Hungary: Findings and Interpretation

This section summarizes the statistical analysis of EU conditionality and democratization in Hungary, incorporating findings from Table 2, the positive correlation value, and the time-series visualization of democratization trends. It also contextualizes these results with examples of democratic reforms under EU conditionality, highlighting their impact on democratization during the pre-accession, accession, and post-accession stages. Unlike Romania's democratization trend, however, the empirical analysis reveals a mixed democratization trajectory in Hungary, where initial improvements during the pre-accession period were later overshadowed by democratic backsliding in the post-accession period, which will be explained and contextualized as well within the context of Hungarian national reforms.

Evidence and Contextualization

The table presents Hungary's Freedom House scores across key years, showing a steady decrease in scores from 1990 to 2004. This decline coincides with Hungary's accession negotiations, initiated following the 1997 Luxembourg European Council, which marked a significant milestone in its path toward EU membership. Hungary's pre-accession phase demonstrated notable improvements in democratic governance, as reflected in declining Freedom House scores, which reached their lowest level (2) in 2004, the year of EU accession.

Aside from the fact that, as in the case of Romania, other factors may have contributed to strengthening democratization in Hungary—such as NATO membership in 1999 and the influence of institutions like the IMF and the World Bank—this pattern reflects the gradual strengthening of democratic institutions and governance under the influence of EU conditionality during the pre-accession phase.

However, post-accession trends show a marked departure from this progress. After joining the EU in 2004, Hungary's Freedom House scores began to increase, particularly after 2010, coinciding with the rise of Viktor Orbán's government. By 2020, Hungary's scores had worsened to levels even higher than those recorded during the early pre-accession phase, reflecting significant democratic backsliding. This pattern of initial progress followed by regression is confirmed by the positive Pearson correlation value of +0.346, which indicates a weak positive relationship between EU conditionality (measured in years) and democratization (measured by Freedom House scores). Unlike Romania, where EU conditionality fostered sustained democratization, Hungary's trajectory highlights the challenges of maintaining democratic reforms in the absence of strict conditionality mechanisms post-accession.

The time-series democratization trend graph further contextualizes these findings. While the pre-accession phase (1990–2004) reflects significant democratic progress under EU conditionality, the post-accession phase (2004–2020) illustrates a stark regression in democratic governance. The increase in Freedom House scores after 2010 aligns with Hungary's move toward democratic backsliding, characterized by weakened institutional independence, reduced transparency, and erosion of civil liberties. This mixed democratization trend underscores the limitations of EU conditionality in ensuring long-term democratic stability post-accession, as evidenced in the time-series visualization.

As with Romania, Hungary's democratization trajectory under EU conditionality can be analyzed through the lens of specific national reforms during the accession period. The 2003 European Commission Regular Report on Hungary's Progress Towards Accession (European Commission, 2003) provides valuable insights into the reforms implemented to align with EU standards, such as, judicial reforms and improvements in the immigration and asylum policies and in civil rights.

Within the context of the judicial system, several important steps have been taken to implement substantial provisions of Chapter 23 of the *acquis* concerning the Judiciary and Fundamental Rights (See Appendix 1). In line with the requirements of the *acquis*, five Regional Courts of Appeal were established, introducing a new tier of courts and reducing the backlog of cases before the Hungarian Supreme Court, enabling it "to guarantee the uniform application of law and provide judicial guidance" (European Commission, 2003). This judicial reform was first mandated by Act LXIX of 1997, which faced significant delays until the Hungarian Parliament finally passed legislation on July 9, 2002 (Kúria of Hungary, n.d.). The legislative process was accelerated during the EU accession negotiations with Hungary. This decision was warmly welcomed by the Commission in its Regular Reports, as it strengthened the rule of law by implementing a significant part of the *acquis communautaire*. These reforms coincided with the peak of improvements in political rights and civil liberties, as underscored by the empirical analysis. Indeed, during this period, the Commission welcomed significant progress in civil and political rights. This included the enhancement of possibilities for legal aid in criminal and civil proceedings and the 2001 law concerning the liability of legal persons, which came into force "upon Hungary's accession to the EU" (European Commission, 2003). In this context, it is safe

to assume that the rule of law in Hungary was significantly enhanced under EU conditionality through the implementation of the *acquis communautaire*.

Similarly to Romania, the implementation of the *acquis* concerning the area of Justice, Freedom, and Security of Chapter 24 (see Appendix 1) played a major role in improving asylum and immigration policies in Hungary. These reforms introduced essential elements into the human rights framework of the Hungarian democratic system. In particular, Act XXXIX of 2001 on the Entry and Stay of Foreigners and Act CXXXIX of 1997 on Asylum came into effect in January 2002. Through these laws, Hungary implemented legislative reforms in asylum policies, including legal remedies for visa applications, the reduction of detention for illegal migrants from 18 to 12 months, the definition of “unaccompanied minors,” and the re-definition of “temporary protection” and “safe third country” (European Commission, 2003).

The implementation of the *acquis* related to asylum and immigration policies is significant proof of the role of EU conditionality in the period immediately before Hungary’s accession in 2004. These reforms were also crucial in establishing the framework for one of the main four freedoms of the EU single market, the freedom of people, which is contained in Chapter 2 of the *acquis communautaire*, under the Freedom of Movement for Workers (see Appendix 1)

Undoubtedly, EU conditionality had a strong influence on the Hungarian legislative system, particularly in the area of civil rights, as shown by empirical analysis. In response to EU directives and as part of accession requirements, Hungary enacted Act CXXV of 2003, titled “Equal Treatment and Promotion of Equal Opportunities Act” (European Commission, 2003). These commitments represented a significant part of implementing the *acquis communautaire* under Chapter 19 on Social Policy and Employment (see Appendix 1). Act CXXV of 2003 focused on harmonizing directives related to equal treatment, particularly the Racial Equality

Directive (2000/43/EC) and the Employment Equality Framework Directive (2000/78/EC), as highlighted in the text of the law (Act CXXV, 2003). This Act was highly significant in transposing key EU legislation, including directives and provisions from the *acquis communautaire*. By doing so, the Hungarian legislative system became more democratic in combating discrimination on various grounds, such as race, gender, age, disability, and sexual orientation.

However, these significant achievements in anti-discrimination and civil rights faced sharp declines starting in 2010 with Viktor Orbán's election, as highlighted by the empirical analysis. This marked a sharp departure from the progress achieved during the pre-accession and accession phases under EU conditionality. Despite the advancements made under EU pressure, the post-accession period exposed the fragility of these reforms.

Without mechanisms like the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM) to ensure ongoing compliance, Hungary experienced a regression in governance and democratic standards. The absence of post-accession oversight, unlike in Romania, highlights the difficulties of sustaining reforms based solely on pre-accession achievements. However, the effectiveness of the CVM in ensuring democratic compliance after accession remains highly debatable. While the CVM plays a role in assessing improvements in the rule of law, its primary function has been to identify structural and procedural challenges in the enforceability of judicial and anti-corruption measures, as seen in the cases of Romania and Bulgaria (Martin-Russu, 2022). In contrast, Hungary's democratic backsliding reveals a more nuanced and complex dynamic, presumably emerging after 2010, as signaled by the empirical analysis and coinciding with Viktor Orbán's second premiership. Indeed, rather than resulting from structural and procedural challenges,

Hungary's democratic decline appears to be primarily driven by deliberate and strategic political actions taken during Orbán's second term as prime minister after 2010 parliamentary elections.

While Orbán's first premiership from 1998 to 2002 did not seem to undermine Hungary's democratic trajectory, as our analysis suggests, democratic regression only became evident after the 2010 Hungarian parliamentary elections. In the 1998 elections, Viktor Orbán's party, Fidesz, did not secure enough seats to govern alone, and his premiership was the result of a broader center-right coalition (Scheppelle, 2022). Moreover, Hungary was not yet a Member State of the EU, having just been invited to official accession talks the year before the Luxembourg Council (Andrews, 2000). It would not have been politically credible for Orbán's first premiership to exhibit antidemocratic tendencies prematurely, as this could have jeopardized Hungary's EU membership prospects and the associated rewards and benefits.

Almost a decade later, the situation had changed significantly. After eight years as leader of the opposition, the 2010 parliamentary elections allowed Orbán to secure 68% of the parliamentary seats with a majority of 53% of the popular vote, thanks to the former electoral system, which disproportionately favored larger parties (Scheppelle, 2022). This two-thirds supermajority allowed Orbán and his party to govern unchallenged, despite their technical coalition with the Christian Democrats, and set the stage for his personalistic rule and democratic regression.

The first major example of this shift came just a year after Orbán's reelection, when the Fidesz-controlled parliament enacted Act CCIII of 2011, a new electoral law that reduced the number of Members of Parliament and redrew single-member constituencies (Act CCIII of 2011, Sections 3–4). Scheppelle (2022) explains that the novelty of this law lay in its use of gerrymandering to redraw constituencies in ways that favored Fidesz, as well as a new vote-

counting system that eliminated the second-round runoff¹⁰. This change made it easier for the ruling party to win and maintain supermajorities through years. Combined with the reduced size of the Parliament, this Fidesz-controlled electoral system concentrated real power firmly in the hands of the executive, enabling reforms that caused Hungary's democratic institutions to regress.

This unchecked dominance allowed Orbán's government to gain political leverage over all state institutions, enabling reforms without consent or collaboration from other branches of government, including amending the Hungarian constitution at will. By 2011, after only one year in office, Fidesz's governing coalition had amended the constitution 12 times, eventually adopting a wholly new constitution named the "Fundamental Law" (Kovács & Scheppele, 2018, p. 6). With a two-thirds majority in Parliament, Fidesz had the power to amend the constitution at will, granting Orbán practically unchecked control over the nation's constitutional mechanisms.

A major example of this unchecked power was the reform of the ordinary judiciary, which aimed to undermine judicial independence. Act CLXII of 2011 lowered the retirement age for ordinary judges from 70 to 62–65 years, forcing the en masse departure of 10–15% of all judges in the country. When the Constitutional Court declared the law unconstitutional, Orbán's supermajority responded by inserting the retirement age provision into the constitution itself under Article 26.2 of the Fundamental Law. This move was an overt attack on judicial

¹⁰ Hungary's new electoral system introduced under Orbán consolidated Fidesz's power by not only redrawing constituencies to favor the party but also switching to a single-round, first-past-the-post system. This eliminated the second-round runoff, where opposition parties had historically been able to unite against Fidesz, further entrenching their disadvantage. For a detailed analysis, see Scheppele, K. L. (2022). *How Viktor Orbán wins*. *Journal of Democracy*, 33(3), 45–61.

independence, as it allowed the government to replace experienced judges with appointees potentially aligned with its political interests (Kovács & Scheppele, 2018).

The EU's institutions quickly raised concerns about Orbán's judicial reforms. The premature and forced retirement of judges was deemed a violation of EU law on age discrimination, particularly under the Equality Framework Directive (2000/78/EC). In response, the European Commission launched an infringement procedure under the Article 258 TFEU, bringing the case C-286/12 *Commission v. Hungary* before the ECJ. The Hungarian government ultimately lost the case and had to provide compensation to affected judges, though it was unable to restore their positions (Kovács & Scheppele, 2018). This was not the only instance in which the EU raised concerns about Hungary's democratic backsliding. Over time, the erosion of democratic consolidation worsened.

After 17 years of being praised in the 2003 European Commission Report on Hungary's Progress Towards Accession, Hungary's trajectory shifted significantly. The 2020 Commission Regular Report on the Rule of Law in Hungary highlighted significant democratic backsliding under Orbán's rule. Beyond undermining judicial independence, the report noted concerning declines in media transparency and pluralism. One of the most prominent examples was the lack of independence and effectiveness of the Media Council, responsible for ensuring compliance with media laws. In practice, all five members of the council were appointed by the governing party, allowing it to favor pro-government outlets (European Commission, 2020). The situation worsened with a government decree authorizing the merger of over 470 government-aligned media outlets, which were exempted from scrutiny. This consolidation posed serious risks to media transparency and plurality, which are core elements of any democratic society founded on the rule of law.

The decay of civil rights was a natural corollary of Hungary's failing liberal democracy. A notable example was the Act LXXIX of 2021, which targeted content portraying or promoting "divergence from self-identity corresponding to sex at birth, sex change, or homosexuality" for individuals under 18. This discriminatory law led to the European Commission initiating an infringement procedure under Article 258 TFEU in 2021. The Commission not only deemed the law a violation of single market transparency but also concluded that it systematically infringed on fundamental rights, including human dignity, freedom of expression, and the right to non-discrimination as enshrined in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and Article 2 TEU (Commission, 2022).

It is not surprising, then, that Hungary's Freedom House scores have declined, now falling below pre-accession levels, as shown in the empirical analysis. In its 2020 Nations in Transit Report, Freedom House reclassified Hungary as a "hybrid regime," marking a significant decline in democratic standards (Freedom House, 2020). The antidemocratic tendencies of Orbán's second premiership, including attacks on judicial independence, weakened rule of law, restricted media freedom, and deteriorated civil rights, have transformed Hungary into what many describe as an "illiberal democracy" within the EU, a union of liberal democracies. While liberalism and democracy have historically been viewed as synonymous, the rise of populism after the financial crisis and anti-globalization movements has led some governments to exploit anti-establishment rhetoric to undermine the liberal principles underpinning democracy (Mudde, n.d.). Hungary's case raises questions about whether illiberal democracy represents a flawed form of democracy or merely a façade for authoritarianism.

As will be further explored in the conclusion, the prevalence of illiberal democracies highlights the EU's struggle to maintain democratization initially fostered by conditionality

during accession. Until recently, Romania seemed to sustain an enduring democratization trend under the EU's guidance and the post-accession conditionality mechanisms of the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM). However, the recent developments surrounding the annulment of elections due to alleged Russian meddling are alarming for the rule of law in the state (Reuters, 2024). As *Politico* noted, TikTok played a significant role in spreading misinformation during the Romanian election, exacerbating public distrust in the electoral process (Stothard, 2024). While these challenges are more attributable to current geopolitical tensions with Russia at the time of writing, rather than to shortcomings of the EU itself, they underscore the fragility of democratic institutions even within the Union.

Role of the EU Today: Insights from Public Opinion Polls

Shedding light on the contemporary role of the EU, this section examines how the Union seeks to safeguard democracy and the rule of law post-accession, focusing on the mechanisms discussed earlier, such as infringement procedures and the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM). Building on this comparison, the role of public perceptions becomes increasingly important in understanding the effectiveness of these tools. Eurobarometer surveys, such as the State of Democracy and Rule of Law polls, will be explored later to assess how citizens in Hungary and Romania view the EU's capacity to uphold democratic standards. These insights will provide a bridge between the institutional analysis in this chapter and the broader conclusions of this thesis.

In analyzing the current role of the European Union in fostering and maintaining the democratization process, it is reasonable to argue that the Copenhagen criteria should not only be

applicable at the accession of a new Member State but must also be enforced consistently after accession. This enforcement is essential to ensure a union of states founded on the rule of law.

Within the context of Romania's democratization, we have already explored the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM), which was designed to address procedural and structural challenges related to judicial reforms and anti-corruption measures in Romania and Bulgaria (Martin-Russu, 2022). As previously assessed, the CVM was relatively successful in maintaining democratization several years after Romania's accession, as supported by the empirical analysis. However, the CVM is far from being considered an entirely effective tool for sustaining democratization. It was specifically designed to address challenges unique to Romania and Bulgaria, limiting its broader applicability. Moreover, scholarly articles emphasize that the CVM lacks robust enforceability mechanisms to ensure the rule of law is upheld uniformly across Member States (Reconnect Europe, n.d.). This has raised questions about the long-term effectiveness of these preventive measures and whether more punitive or stringent mechanisms may be necessary, placing the role of European institutions directly at the center of maintaining democratic resilience.

As we will explore in more detail in the conclusion of the thesis, this section briefly introduces some of the most commonly used tools by the EU to enforce legislation, including respect for democracy and the rule of law. Among these, enforcement actions, whose procedural regime is outlined in Article 258 TFEU, stand out. Acting "in the general interest of the Union," the European Commission can address violations of EU law committed by Member States. If the Member State fails to comply with the Commission's reasoned opinion, the Commission may bring the matter before the ECJ (Schütze, 2018, p. 381). Additionally, the Commission is empowered to impose financial sanctions on recalcitrant Member States pursuant to Article 260

TFEU (Schütze, 2018). While enforcement actions are effective in ensuring compliance in certain areas of EU law, their effectiveness in promoting democracy through conditionality is debatable and will be further analyzed in the conclusions of this thesis. Notably, in contrast to Romania, where tools like the CVM were used as preventive measures to foster democratization post-accession, enforcement tools such as infringement procedures have been employed primarily against Hungary following its democratic backsliding after 2010. For instance, as previously analyzed, the European Commission launched infringement procedures in 2012 and in 2021, addressing, respectively, Hungarian discriminatory measures like the premature retirement of judges and restrictions of contents based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

What is crucial in this section, however, is to focus on public perceptions of the EU's role in safeguarding democracy in the post-accession period. This includes evaluating whether the tools discussed, particularly those rooted in conditionality, align with citizens' views on the Union's capacity to uphold democratic values. Insights from Eurobarometer surveys are particularly useful for capturing these public perspectives for longitudinal analyses across the 27 EU member states, occasionally including third countries such as EEA members¹¹ or candidate countries¹², depending on the specific survey.

The rule of law is undoubtedly the essence of liberal democracy. Its binding nature ensures that democracy operates within the framework of good governance, holding all actors, including governments, accountable under the law. This principle reinforces the core principle that no one is above the law (Dennett, 2024). The rule of law serves as a measure for critical

¹¹ The European Economic Area (EEA) includes all 27 EU member states, along with three of the four European Free Trade Association (EFTA) countries: Iceland, Liechtenstein, and Norway. Switzerland, while an EFTA member, is not part of the EEA (European Commission, n.d.).

¹² As of December 2024, the EU has granted candidate status to several countries, including Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Turkey, and Ukraine (European Commission, n.d.).

democratic indicators such as judicial independence, government transparency, media pluralism, and respect for civil rights, liberties, and human rights, which provide the cornerstones of every democratic society.

The 2024 Special Eurobarometer 553 survey highlights widespread support for the rule of law as essential for maintaining democracy. 72% of Europeans believe the EU plays an important role in upholding the rule of law in their countries, while 89% emphasize the importance of respecting the EU's core values, including democracy, fundamental rights, and the rule of law, in all Member States (European Commission, 2024). These findings reveal the solidarity and unity that European citizens feel regarding the Union's shared values, highlighting the EU's central role in promoting democracy from its core to its periphery, namely the Member States.

In Hungary, the survey reveals significant public concern about the erosion of democratic principles. Only 14% of respondents reported improvements in judicial independence, while 82% believe it has failed to improve or worsened over the past five years. Similarly, 16% observed progress in reducing favoritism in public decision-making, while 82% reported no improvement or decline in transparency related to public officials' accountability. Concerns about media pluralism and freedom are equally troubling, with over 80% of respondents noting no progress or a decline in media diversity and independence (European Commission, 2024). Despite these challenges, according to the same Eurobarometer survey (2024) 76% of Hungarian respondents agree that the EU is essential in upholding the rule of law, exceeding the EU average. This contrast between public opinion and government actions underscores the EU's vital role as a democratic agent, even when it involves enforcement accountability measures like infringement procedures.

To address the challenges of enforcing EU values post-accession, the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) establishes practical mechanisms, including infringement procedures outlined in Articles 258 and 260 TFEU. Acting to uphold the “general interests of the Union,” the European Commission is empowered to address breaches of EU law by Member States. Under Article 258 TFEU, if a Member State fails to comply with the Commission’s formal opinion, the case can be referred to the European Court of Justice (ECJ) for adjudication (Schütze, 2018). Additionally, Article 260 TFEU grants the Commission authority to impose financial penalties on Member States that do not implement ECJ rulings, thereby strengthening enforcement (Schütze, 2018).

However, these mechanisms face notable limitations, particularly in upholding democratic values and the rule of law. While the ECJ can declare national laws incompatible with EU law, it lacks the power to nullify them because the ultimate responsibility to rectify incompatibilities rests with the Member State. This reliance on national compliance raises concerns about enforceability, particularly in addressing systemic violations. Moreover, while financial sanctions under Article 260 TFEU can compel compliance in specific cases, they often fall short in addressing broader rule-of-law challenges. For instance, the 2012 infringement procedure against Hungary for the mandatory retirement age of judges resulted in penalties but failed to resolve the underlying issue of judicial independence (Kovács & Scheppele, 2018). Repeated violations by Member States can undermine the effectiveness of these sanctions, revealing the procedural and structural limitations of the EU’s enforcement framework.

As will be discussed in the conclusion, Beyond procedural weaknesses, the EU’s constitutional structure poses additional challenges. Unlike a federal system, where a central authority can nullify conflicting national laws, the EU relies on Member States for enforcement

of its legal supremacy. This dependence diminishes the practical enforceability of EU values, underscoring the limitations of the Union's capacity to unilaterally uphold the rule of law.

Despite these structural challenges, public opinion within Member States provides insight into perceptions of the EU's role in safeguarding democratic values. For instance, even if Romania has one of the lowest percentages of respondents in the EU (65%) agreeing that the Union is crucial in upholding the rule of law, the Special Eurobarometer 553 survey presents a more optimistic scenario for Romania compared to Hungary. This optimism pertains to judicial independence, transparency of public officials, and progress in media pluralism and freedom. These findings suggest that Romania's more linear democratic trajectory, as assessed in the thesis' empirical analysis, has positively influenced citizens' public perceptions of Romanian democracy under EU conditionality. In particular, 21% of respondents in Romania believe judicial independence from political and economic interests has improved over the last five years, a figure higher than both Hungary and the overall EU average. Although 72% of Romanian respondents remain skeptical about the transparency and ethical integrity of decision-making by politicians and public officials, in line with the EU average, 20% see progress in reducing favoritism and preferential treatment, compared to only 16% in Hungary.

Despite this being a very recent survey, dated to the years 2023–2024, it does not account for the recent decline in political trust that may have been exacerbated by the news of Russian meddling and the annulment of Romania's latest political elections in December 2024, at the time of writing (Reuters, 2024).

Nonetheless, 23% of Romanians feel media freedom has improved, surpassing the 13% in Hungary and the 16% EU average (European Commission, 2024). This comparison highlights

the distinct challenges faced by Hungary and Romania, with Romania showing slightly better public perceptions of rule-of-law indicators.

Confirming these findings, the 2023 Standard Eurobarometer 100 on the State of Democracy reveals that 47% of EU citizens are either “very satisfied” or “somewhat satisfied” with how democracy works in their country. In line with the Special Eurobarometer 522, the Standard Eurobarometer 100 highlights Hungary’s significantly lower satisfaction with democracy, with only 29% expressing satisfaction, compared to the EU average of 47% (European Commission, 2023). Similarly, the Standard Eurobarometer 100 supports the findings of the Flash Eurobarometer 522, showing that 38% of Romanians are satisfied with how democracy functions in their country. While this is slightly below the EU average, it remains significantly higher than the figures reported for Hungary.

Indeed, the figures provided by the Eurobarometer 100 survey raise concerns about public perceptions of the state of democracy in Hungary compared to Romania. While Romania consistently performs at or slightly above the EU average in key categories of the state of democracy, Hungary remains significantly below average and ranks either second-to-last or last in the Union. For instance, Hungary ranks second-to-last in overall satisfaction with democracy, with only 29% of respondents expressing satisfaction, compared to the EU average of 47% and 38% in Romania (European Commission, 2023). Notably, Romania performs better in areas related to media freedom and democratic expression. For example, 77% of Romanians believe their country ensures media freedom, surpassing the EU average of 72%, and 80% of respondents feel they can access accurate information from multiple media sources, compared to the EU average of 68%. In contrast, Hungary ranks last in both categories. More than 56% of Hungarian respondents believe free access to multiple media sources is not possible, compared to

43% across the EU, and over 61% believe citizens cannot express their political opinions without fearing negative consequences, compared to the EU average of 37% (European Commission, 2023). This stark contrast between Hungary and Romania reflects the broader democratic challenges Hungary faces, evidenced by its consistently poor public perceptions in key areas of democratic governance.

The stark contrast between Hungary and Romania, as supported by the empirical analysis, reflects broader patterns of democratic trajectories under EU conditionality. The statistical analysis and contextualization of the outcomes in Chapter 5 align with the findings of the Eurobarometer surveys, reinforcing the thesis' argument. These public perceptions underscore the effectiveness, or at times the shortcomings, of EU mechanisms in safeguarding democracy. While the accession process fostered democratization through conditionality, the post-accession period reveals varying outcomes depending on the strategic behavior of national institutions, as exemplified by Hungary's democratic backsliding.

Despite these challenges, public support for the EU remains remarkably strong, even in countries like Hungary that face democratic regression. This demonstrates a significant gap between the objectives of governments and those of their citizens, who continue to see the EU as a vital force for democracy. Unlike in many authoritarian regimes where citizens are often turned against democratic principles, labeling them as "Western decadence," the EU's liberal democratic framework ensures that Member States remain integrated into a broader bloc of liberal democracies. The EU single market ensuring freedom of movement of persons and traded goods and services contribute to maintaining the integration of European nations, preventing isolation and reinforcing democratic norms, despite illiberal tendencies.

This integration provides legitimacy to EU tools aimed at maintaining democracy, such as infringement procedures and other post-accession conditionality mechanisms. These measures, while sometimes punitive, are supported by the public opinion, which perceives the EU as a guardian of democratic values. In fact, despite rising populism and challenges like Brexit, public trust in the EU and its democratic mission remains robust across Member States. This enduring legitimacy underscores the potential of the EU to safeguard democracy, even in the face of internal and external pressures.

6. Conclusions

Discussions and Limitations of Research

Several methodological challenges emerge from the research analysis, particularly in terms of statistical design. The reliance on Freedom House Scores as a primary measure introduces a level of oversimplification, as these scores may not capture the full complexity of democratic reforms and governance. Additionally, using years as the independent variable to represent EU conditionality limits the analysis by assuming a uniform influence of conditionality over time, which may not reflect the varied intensity and focus of EU mechanisms across different periods. These choices may introduce biases and reduce the ability to isolate the specific effects of EU conditionality on democratization. Additionally, the scatterplots, particularly those representing the correlation values for Romania and Hungary, reveal data points that are distant from the line of best fit. This dispersion suggests a weak correlation, indicating that the independent variable, namely EU conditionality, can only partially explain the observed outcomes. This observation also highlights the importance of context. In political science, weak correlations are often expected due to the inherently complex and multi-causal nature of political processes, such as democratization.

Combined with such methodological challenges, these limitations of research highlight the need to account for external factors beyond EU conditionality that may have shaped the democratization process. Historical legacies, such as the influence of communist regimes, have played a key role in shaping institutional development and may have limited the resilience of democratic governance in both countries. In Hungary, the aftermath of the 1956 revolution saw a

harsh crackdown on dissent, which was a critical factor in shaping historical memory. This repression created an environment where democratic ideals could not flourish, as the state sought to control the narrative surrounding the revolution. (Gábor, 2006). Similarly, in Romania, the regime led by Nicolae Ceaușescu was marked by severe oppression and control, leaving deep scars on Romanian society. This historical context created a challenging environment for democratization efforts post-revolution, with the burdens of the past complicating the transition to democracy (Nelson, 2019). Despite these historical legacies that severely undermined a peaceful and stable transition to democracy, Romania's more linear democratic trajectory, as highlighted by the thesis' analysis, suggests that EU conditionality has been more effective in this context than in Hungary. The comparative analysis underscores that while historical burdens have influenced both countries, the EU's role in guiding Romania's democratization appears to have had a more pronounced and enduring impact.

Geopolitical factors, such as NATO membership, have also played a significant role in reinforcing democratic principles. Hungary joined the military alliance in 1999, followed by Romania in 2004, with both countries becoming NATO members before joining the EU. NATO's commitment to supporting democracy in Eastern Europe has been a central part of its broader strategy to promote democratic and Western values in the region, particularly in the post-Cold War era (Larsen, 2019). Therefore, democratization in Eastern Europe was not solely the result of EU conditionality but also stemmed from strategic geopolitical interests. In this context, democratic values were indirectly reinforced through alignment with Western norms, as both Western Europe and the United States contributed significantly to the dissemination of these ideals. This dual alignment underscores how democracy promotion has been shaped not

only by EU mechanisms but also by transatlantic strategies aimed at stabilizing and integrating the strategic region of Eastern Europe for military and defensive goals.

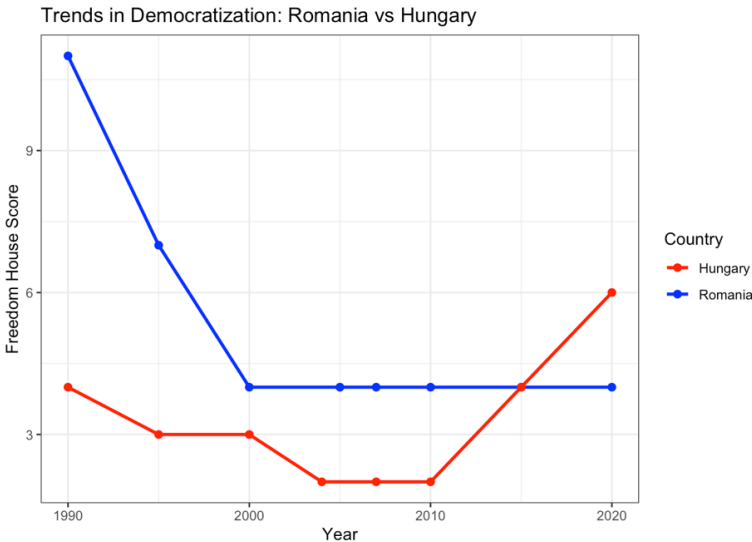
Furthermore, membership in broader international organizations such as the United Nations, or economic institutions like the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), has significantly contributed to the democratization process in Romania, Hungary, and the broader Eastern European region. In particular, IMF conditionality, as outlined in its framework, grants loans to countries to resolve balance-of-payment problems in exchange for adjusting their economic policies (IMF, 2023). Similar to EU conditionality, IMF conditionality exerts substantial influence on a state's economic policies, which may, in turn, impact negatively or positively on democratization. For instance, Kovács and Scheppele (2018) argue that the IMF's radical austerity program contributed to Viktor Orbán's victory in Hungary's 2010 national parliamentary elections. Following the global financial crisis, Hungary, like many EU countries, was severely affected and sought financial assistance from the IMF in 2008. The resulting austerity measures, imposed under the socialist government at the time, led to widespread public discontent. This dissatisfaction not only contributed to the victory of Fidesz but also underscored its role as the primary opposition party and an anti-establishment force during that period, with Orbán capitalizing on public frustration to secure a decisive win. In this context, international organizations, particularly economic ones like the IMF, can significantly influence the political and economic policies of member states. While their conditionality frameworks aim to stabilize economies, they can also indirectly shape the democratic trajectories of nations, for better or worse.

In conclusion, determining the appropriate variables and metrics to fully capture the impact of conditionality remains a significant challenge. This involves understanding how EU

conditionality interacts with domestic factors and isolating its influence amidst overlapping external pressures. As previously emphasized, the aim of this thesis is not to provide an exhaustive account of all the factors that contributed to democratization in Eastern Europe. Instead, it offers a focused perspective on EU conditionality, analyzing its role in fostering democracy and evaluating its efficiency during both the pre- and post-accession periods limited to Eastern European enlargement, drawing from the case studies of Romania and Hungary.

The empirical analysis conducted in this thesis has demonstrated the divergent democratic trajectories of the two countries, exemplifying the varying outcomes that EU conditionality can produce. The fostering role of the EU in promoting democracy is particularly evident during the pre-accession period for both Romania and Hungary. However, the post-accession period reveals notable challenges, especially in Hungary, where a mixed and increasingly problematic democratization trajectory has emerged. The graph below illustrates the combined time-series democratization trends of Romania and Hungary, providing a more accurate comparative outlook and enabling a nuanced analysis of the findings.

Figure 5: Combined Time-Series Democratization Trends in Romania and Hungary (1990-2020)



As illustrated in the graph, Hungary consistently performed better than Romania in terms of democratization during the pre-accession years, according to Freedom House scores. Even in the years immediately following EU accession—Hungary in 2004 and Romania in 2007—Hungary continued to outperform Romania. Both Hungary and Romania reached their respective lowest Freedom House scores—indicating peak democratization performance—during the years following these invitations and the implementation of pre-accession EU conditionality pursuant to the 1997 Luxembourg and the 1999 Helsinki Councils (Andrews, 2000). This period saw significant improvements in political rights and civil liberties in both countries, as reflected in Freedom House indicators.

However, this trajectory changed notably in 2010. From that year onward, Hungary's Freedom House scores began to increase steadily, signaling a concerning decline in democratization. By contrast, Romania's scores remained stable, even years after accession, maintaining its level of democratic governance. Certainly, this analysis does not account for the recent electoral scandal in Romania, referenced multiple times, as the empirical analysis is limited to the period from 1990 to 2020. However, this development appears to be more closely tied to geopolitical tensions with Russia rather than a fundamental weakness of the EU itself, which has been widely perceived as a strong guardian of the rule of law, as reflected in Eurobarometer findings.

On the other hand, Hungary had consistently outperformed Romania in democratic governance during the pre-accession period, the roles reversed after 2010. By 2020, Hungary's scores had regressed to levels worse than its pre-accession period, underscoring significant democratic backsliding. This decline is starkly emphasized in Freedom House's 2020 *Nations in Transit* report, which reclassified Hungary from a consolidated democracy to a hybrid regime.

The findings of the empirical analysis are further supported by the results of the Eurobarometer polls analyzed earlier in this thesis. The Eurobarometer polls 100 and 553 conducted between 2023 and 2024 provide valuable insights into the state of democracy as perceived by citizens today, extending the analysis beyond the timeframe of the empirical analysis of this thesis, which concludes in 2020. These contemporary polls confirm the trends identified in the empirical analysis, reinforcing the evidence that Romania has maintained a relatively stable trajectory in democratic governance.

However, this stability is called into question by recent developments, such as the annulment of the 2024 presidential election by Romania's Constitutional Court following allegations of Russian meddling. This decision, described by a far-right candidate as "fatal for democracy," has sparked widespread political unrest and concerns over the integrity of Romania's democratic institutions (Reuters, 2024). On the other hand, Hungary faces significant challenges, with public perceptions consistently ranking it among the lowest in the EU in measures of media pluralism, judicial independence, and transparency in decision-making.

Despite the considerable challenges, these polls also reveal an optimistic perspective on the European Union's role in fostering and enhancing democracy. Indeed, the Eurobarometer surveys indicate that an increasing majority of EU citizens, including those in Romania and Hungary, believe in the Union's capacity to uphold the rule of law both in their countries and across all Member States. This finding underscores not only the enduring strength of EU conditionality but also the interplay between formal mechanisms and convergence of European democratic values.

While European values among citizens remain strong, the EU continues to struggle to update its tools and mechanisms to maintain and uphold democratic governance within Member

States. EU pre-accession conditionality played a major role in fostering democratization, driven by restructuring programs, financial incentives like Agenda 2000 and PHARE, and, most notably, the prospect of membership in one of the world's largest and most influential trading, economic, and political blocs. However, once membership was achieved, conditionality appeared to lose its tightening force, as evidenced most prominently, but not exclusively, in Hungary.

The legal framework of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) and the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) assigns the European Commission and the European Parliament the critical role of overseeing EU law and values, acting in the general interest of the Union (Schütze, 2018). These treaties empower the two supranational bodies to ensure oversight and adherence to EU rules and values through mechanisms that can be characterized as post-accession conditionality tools. Among these mechanisms is the procedure outlined in Article 7 TEU, which provides a legal basis for addressing serious breaches of the EU's foundational values as referred to in Article 2 TEU, including democracy, the rule of law, and human rights. (Schütze, 2018). The ultimate sanction under Article 7 may involve suspending certain rights granted by membership, including the Member State's voting rights in the Council.

Further post-accession conditionality mechanisms are provided by the TFEU, including infringement procedures pursuant to Articles 258 and 260, widely explained previously. In this context, acting to uphold the "general interests of the Union," the European Commission serves as the guardian of EU law, endowed with the authority to investigate and address breaches by Member States. This central role reinforces the Commission's unique position as a supranational body distinct from Member States, tasked with ensuring the uniform application of EU law across the Union (Schütze, 2018).

However, while these infringement procedures can ensure compliance in specific areas of EU law, they face significant limitations when applied to uphold democratic values and the rule of law. Beyond procedural weaknesses, the broader constitutional nature of the EU poses another challenge. Unlike a federal structure, the EU lacks an overarching authority to nullify national laws or unilaterally enforce compliance. This structural limitation not only diminishes the enforceability of EU values and legal supremacy but also makes it challenging to combat broader threats such as populism.

Future Perspectives

While this thesis emphasizes the European Union's role as a democratizing force, it also acknowledges its vulnerability to the challenges posed by populism. The EU's structural limitation, its inherent lack of federal authority, means that it cannot fully counteract populist movements or enforce compliance with its values in the same way a centralized federal system would. This leaves the Union exposed to the tactics of populist leaders who exploit these institutional gaps to undermine its authority.

Populists often thrive by portraying the EU as ineffective or disconnected from citizens, leveraging its challenges as proof of its failure. In reality, these shortcomings are not inherent weaknesses of the EU but rather reflections of its supranational framework, which relies heavily on voluntary compliance and cooperation from Member States. Paradoxically, populists benefit from sabotaging this cooperation, creating dysfunction that reinforces their political narratives. By fostering mistrust and dissatisfaction with the EU, populist leaders can position themselves as defenders of national sovereignty, even as they exacerbate the very problems they claim to oppose.

This dynamic underscores the broader issue: while the EU's tools and values have significantly shaped democratic governance, its fragmented structure remains vulnerable to manipulation by populist movements and external actors like Russia. The recent annulment of Romania's elections due to alleged Russian meddling (Reuters, 2024) exemplifies how strategic tensions can exacerbate the EU's challenges in upholding the rule of law and reinforcing its democratic values. This alarming development highlights how populism is further exacerbated by the uncontrolled and unfair use of social media, as underscored by the European Parliament's decision to summon TikTok's CEO for accountability (Stothard, 2024). Populism and foreign interference not only exploit the Union's limitations but also aim to deepen divisions within Member States and across the bloc.

Yet, as history has shown—whether during Brexit, COVID-19, or other moments of crisis—the EU's resilience often emerges as its defining strength. In such times, the Union has repeatedly demonstrated its capacity to adapt and reaffirm its identity. This thesis ultimately underscores that, despite its limitations and the significant threats posed by populism and geopolitical tensions, the EU's resilience remains its most vital asset in upholding democracy and the rule of law through mechanisms like conditionality.

Ultimately, this thesis aims to contribute to the ongoing academic debate on the EU as democratizing actor through conditionality. Since its inception, the European Union has elevated European nations to serve as a global beacon of democracy, reinforcing the Union's capacity to foster shared values across its Member States and beyond in an increasingly multipolar world. The European Union stands as a powerful testament of unity, solidarity, and democracy in shaping a more just global order, and fulfills its prophetic mission to strengthen its role as the torchbearer of democracy on the global stage.

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Appendix 1: Chapters of the Acquis Communautaire

This appendix provides a table of the chapters of the *acquis communautaire*, as referenced in this thesis. The table outlines the chapters along with brief descriptions. The information is sourced from the European Commission's official website on EU enlargement policy.

Chapter	Title	Description
1	Free Movement of Goods	Covers removal of barriers to trade in goods within the EU.
2	Freedom of Movement for Workers	Relates to people and workers' rights to move freely and work within the EU.
3	Right of Establishment and Freedom to Provide Services	Concerns the freedom to establish businesses and offer services across the EU.
4	Free Movement of Capital	Includes free capital transfers and payment services within the EU.
5	Public Procurement	Rules for awarding public contracts to ensure transparency and competition.
6	Company Law	Aligns national company laws with EU standards.
7	Intellectual Property Law	Protects intellectual property rights within the EU.
8	Competition Policy	Regulates anti-competitive behavior and state aid.

9	Financial Services	Aligns regulations on financial markets and institutions.
10	Information Society and Media	Covers digital economy and audiovisual services standards.
11	Agriculture and Rural Development	Relates to the Common Agricultural Policy and rural development.
12	Food Safety, Veterinary, and Phytosanitary Policy	Ensures safety in food production and plant/animal health.
13	Fisheries	Regulates fishing policies and sustainability measures.
14	Transport Policy	Covers EU-wide standards for transport networks and services.
15	Energy	Includes energy supply, markets, and sustainability.
16	Taxation	Aligns national tax systems with EU rules.
17	Economic and Monetary Policy	Concerns macroeconomic stability and coordination within the EU.
18	Statistics	Relates to harmonizing statistical methodologies across Member States.
19	Social Policy and Employment	Covers social protection, labor rights, and equality.
20	Enterprise and Industrial Policy	Encourages competitiveness and industrial innovation.

21	Trans-European Networks	Focuses on cross-border infrastructure for transport, energy, and communications.
22	Regional Policy and Coordination of Structural Instruments	Manages EU funds for regional development.
23	Judiciary and Fundamental Rights	Covers judicial reforms, anti-corruption, and fundamental rights.
24	Justice, Freedom, and Security	Includes migration, asylum, and border control policies.
25	Science and Research	Aligns national research programs with EU frameworks.
26	Education and Culture	Focuses on educational exchange and cultural cooperation.
27	Environment	Covers environmental protection and climate change.
28	Consumer and Health Protection	Includes consumer rights and public health standards.
29	Customs Union	Relates to the uniform application of tariffs and customs procedures.
30	External Relations	Aligns trade and diplomatic relations with EU standards.
31	Foreign, Security, and Defence Policy	Concerns EU's role in global security and foreign relations.

32	Financial Control	Covers financial auditing and control of EU funds.
33	Financial and Budgetary Provisions	Relates to EU's financial management and budgets.
34	Institutions	Deals with institutional reforms and EU decision-making processes.
35	Other Issues	Covers topics not included in the chapters.

Source: European Commission. (n.d.). *Enlargement policy: Chapters of the acquis communautaire*. https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/conditions-membership/chapters-acquis_en.