



Building strong executives and weak institutions: How European integration contributes to democratic backsliding

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Accepted: 23 August 2023

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Abstract

Although the European Union (EU) is considered unrivaled in its democracy promoting abilities, democracy is being challenged within its borders. Over the last decade, Hungary's ruling party has debilitated or eliminated liberal democratic institutions; similar trends have emerged in Poland and other new democracies in the EU. What explains these surprising cases of democratic backsliding? Researchers have identified the limits of conditionality and the EU's inability to counteract backsliding. However, given the EU's extensive role in democracy building in its member states, it is critical to also consider the EU as an initial source of backsliding. This paper argues that the EU's post-Maastricht policy structure, accession process, and membership requirements have made democratic backsliding more likely in new democracies by simultaneously increasing executive power and limiting states' domestic policy space, which stunts institutional development. This combination of factors creates opportunities for executives to manipulate already weak institutions to increase their power, and democratic backsliding becomes more likely. A comparative analysis that combines typical and control cases provides support for this argument. These findings extend beyond the EU to contribute to emerging research on the limits of international democracy promotion and the related long-term effects that international organizations have on domestic democratic institutional development.

Keywords European Union · Democratic backsliding · Democracy promotion · New democracies · Executive power · Domestic policy space

JEL Classification F53 · P5

Responsible editor: Axel Dreher

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1 Introduction

International organizations (IOs) are often at the forefront of democracy promotion, with observers finding these organizations are positive forces for democracy (Pevehouse, 2005; Donno, 2013; Genna and Hiroi, 2014; Poast and Urpelainen, 2018). The European Union (EU) in particular is associated with democracy promotion. In addition to being composed entirely of democracies, the EU has adopted extensive mechanisms for democracy promotion via integration and is historically viewed as unrivaled in its ability to promote transitions to democracy and democratic consolidation in its member states (Smith, 2001; Dimitrova and Pridham, 2004; Ekiert, 2008; Levitz and Pop-Eleches, 2010; Noutcheva, 2016).

Despite these qualifications, there has been growing evidence of democratic backsliding within the EU. Beginning in 2011, Hungary's Fidesz party, led by Viktor Orbán, eliminated constitutional checks on executive power, curtailed the judiciary, limited media pluralism, and modified the electoral system to increase their power. In 2020, citing the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, the Hungarian parliament passed an emergency law giving Orbán the power to rule by decree indefinitely. Similarly, since coming to power in 2015, the Polish Law and Justice party has repeatedly attacked the judiciary and restricted the media, while a populist who jokes about murdering opposition journalists was recently re-elected president of the Czech Republic. These cases reflect larger EU trends. According to the Varieties of Democracy Institute's 2022 annual report, Greece, Croatia, Slovenia, Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic all constitute cases of autocratization—or, democratic backsliding—so that today 20% of EU members are moving away from liberal democracy (Alizada et al., 2022). What role, if any, has the EU played in these surprising instances of backsliding?

Democratic backsliding occurs when elected officials intentionally and deliberately choose to undermine democratic institutions (Bermeo, 2016; Sitter and Bakke, 2019). Scholars have studied these developments within the EU by specifying the nature of backsliding (Dawson and Hanley, 2016; Bustikova and Guasti, 2017; Hanley and Vachudova, 2018; Gora and de Wilde, 2020; Bernhard, 2021) and proposing domestic (Greskovits, 2015; Sadurski, 2019; Grzymala-Busse, 2019a; Surowiec and Štětka, 2020; Sata and Karolewski, 2020) and EU-level explanations. On the EU side, scholars initially emphasized the EU's loss of leverage post-accession (Pridham, 2007; Vachudova, 2008; Ugur, 2013; Grabbe, 2014; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2020) and failure or inability to respond to illiberal shifts (Closa, 2019; Sitter and Bakke, 2019). Scholars have also identified a more direct role for EU membership, which can undermine the rule of law in new democracies (Slapin, 2015), increase citizens' dissatisfaction with domestic institutions (Berman, 2019), and even sustain these backsliding regimes (Kelemen, 2020).

Recent research on IOs and democracy promotion suggests a related yet distinct way in which the EU may contribute to the initial onset of backsliding in its member states. A growing body of work finds that international democracy advocates can have limited or even adverse effects on domestic democratic institutions (Bush, 2015; Carnegie and Marniov, 2017). According to Meyerrose (2020), IOs such as the EU that support and promote democracy can unintentionally make democratic backsliding more likely in new democracies by simultaneously increasing executive power and

limiting these states' domestic policy options, thereby stunting the development of vital domestic institutions. The resulting combination of factors—strong executives surrounded by institutions too underdeveloped to act as a check on their power—makes democratic backsliding more likely (Meyerrose, 2020). This paper applies the same theoretical framework to the case of European integration, arguing that through its accession process and extensive policy structure, the EU contributes to backsliding in its newly democratic members.

The EU's accession and membership requirements grew substantially in 1992 with the Maastricht Treaty, which significantly expanded the extent of both economic and political integration among EU members. Furthermore, in 1993 the EU introduced the Copenhagen Criteria, which outlined democratic conditions for membership, and the *acquis communautaire*, an extensive list of policy requirements that candidate states must meet in order to join the EU. Drawing on Meyerrose (2020), I explore two interrelated mechanisms linking accession to and membership in a post-Maastricht EU to democratic backsliding in new democracies. First, EU accession and membership, which are both elite-dominated processes, increase executives' relative domestic power. At the same time, EU conditionality and membership requirements constrain states' domestic policy space, which stunts the development of institutions of horizontal accountability, such as political parties and legislatures. By simultaneously empowering executives and weakening institutional checks on their power, the EU makes backsliding more likely in new democracies. The application of this argument to the EU context brings together work on the EU's role in shifting the domestic balance of power in favor of executives (Moravcsik, 1994) with more recent research on the unintended consequences of EU membership for domestic institutions and democratic responsiveness (Slapin, 2015; Berman, 2019; Grzymala-Busse, 2019b). However, rather than focusing exclusively on current dynamics, this paper also incorporates the impact of EU democracy promotion and related pre-accession conditionality.

Empirically, I leverage a comparative analysis that combines typical and control cases. The primary empirical analysis focuses on testing the theoretical mechanisms in the cases of Hungary and Poland, two new democracies that were subject to extensive EU accession and membership requirements, and, to date, the two most extreme cases of backsliding within the organization. I contrast these cases with Spain and Portugal, two relatively successful new democracies that also joined the EU early in their democratization processes, but at a time when EU accession requirements and membership criteria were far less demanding.

One critical implication of these findings is to show that the very process and criteria the EU imposes on aspiring member states to guarantee their democratization impedes their prospects of sustaining democracy. This paper complements recent work highlighting the limits of democracy promotion by IOs and other international democracy advocates (Bush, 2015; Meyerrose, 2020), with implications more broadly for theories of IOs and regime outcomes. While research has identified a positive relationship between IOs and democracy (Pevehouse, 2005; Mansfield and Pevehouse, 2006; Poast and Urpelainen, 2018), we know far less about how these organizations impact domestic democratic institutions that influence a state's quality of democracy in the long-term. The findings presented here also contribute to emerging theories of democratic backsliding which, to date, have overwhelmingly focused on domestic-level

factors (Bermeo, 2016; Waldner and Lust, 2018; Haggard and Kaufman, 2021). Given that many of the states backsliding today are new democracies that received significant international support during their initial transitions to democracy, our understanding of backsliding is incomplete if we fail to consider the largely overlooked ways in which transnational support for democracy might also create conditions conducive to backsliding (Hyde, 2020).

2 The European Union and democratic backsliding

When states transition to democracy, they fall somewhere along the continuum between closed autocracy and consolidated democracy. Over time, as democratic bodies are institutionalized, a state progresses toward consolidation. However, the path from authoritarianism to democratic consolidation is not always smooth or monotonic. Sometimes, democracies experience setbacks that undermine consolidation; this is democratic backsliding.

Democratic backsliding is a state- and often executive-led process whereby democratically elected governments make *legal yet intentional* institutional changes that weaken checks on their power and erode the strength of the opposition (Maeda, 2010; Bermeo, 2016; Haggard and Kaufman, 2021). In this way, democratic backsliding is a top-down process characterized by both executive aggrandizement (Bermeo, 2016) and institutional change (Ding and Slater, 2021). Specifically, in cases of backsliding, elected officials target one or more of the following: institutions that ensure free and fair elections; intra-governmental institutions that provide checks and balances; and institutions that protect and promote civil and political liberties. The exact democratic institution or set of institutions that are targeted, however, can vary from one case of backsliding to the next.

International organizations (IOs), including the EU, have been linked to democratic success in new democracies. Scholars find IOs support these democracies in part by altering elite incentives, in several ways. IOs increase the costs of anti-democratic behavior via economic sanctions and by withholding economic assistance, and they gradually socialize rulers into accepting democracy (Genna and Hiroi, 2014). IOs also influence leaders' international standing, either by helping them build a democratic reputation (Poast and Urpelainen, 2018) or by shaming those who violate electoral norms (Donno, 2013). Finally, IOs serve as commitment devices, helping democratizing leaders gain the support of domestic elites and deterring those in opposition from overthrowing the new regime (Pevehouse, 2005). In addition, IOs support democracy through electoral assistance (Schedler, 2002; Howard and Roessler, 2006; Hadenius and Teorell, 2007).

Although elections and elite compliance are critical minimal requirements for democracy (Dahl, 1971), they are insufficient to guarantee continued democratic success. The limitations of election monitoring have been identified (Simpser and Donno, 2012), elections are insufficient to promote ongoing democratic progress (Flores and Nooruddin, 2016; Meyerrose, Flores and Nooruddin, 2019), and even committed autocrats allow elections (Hyde, 2011). Organizations for managing mass participation, representing citizens' interests, and ensuring horizontal accountability, such as

political parties, legislatures, and independent judiciaries, are also critical for democracy (Almond and Verba, 1963; Huntington, 1968; O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1986; Carothers, 2006; Grzymala-Busse, 2007; Gibler and Randazzo, 2011; Herman, 2015; Graham, Miller and Strøm, 2017).

When democracy is defined in reference to elections and elite compliance, the EU has indeed been successful at promoting democracy. The EU is often cited as the IO with the greatest ability to influence regime outcomes by providing incentives for institutional reform (Schimmelfennig, 2005; Vachudova, 2005), with a particular emphasis on its role in Spain, Portugal, and Greece (Smith, 2001) and post-communist Europe (Ekiert, 2008; Levitz and Pop-Eleches, 2010; Noutcheva, 2016). Nevertheless, some argue the EU's role in promoting democracy in post-communist countries was limited to pre-accession institution building; following accession, the EU lost the leverage needed to continue to influence domestic politics (Pridham, 2007; Vachudova, 2008; Ugur, 2013; Grabbe, 2014).

Going beyond this loss of leverage, scholars have grown increasingly critical of the EU's more direct impacts on institutional and even regime outcomes. On the one hand, EU membership requirements can undermine the rule of law in new democracies by requiring them to adopt and implement an extensive list of illegitimate laws (Slapin, 2015). Others argue the extent to which the EU has taken policy-making options away from democratically elected national governments has fueled citizen dissatisfaction with democracy and contributed to the recent rise of populism across Europe (Berman, 2019; Grzymala-Busse, 2019b). EU membership itself is also found to more directly sustain these backsliding regimes through a combination of European-level party politics and coalition patterns that shield emerging autocrats, EU cohesion funds that finance them, and the relative ease with which disaffected citizens can emigrate (Batory, 2016; Bozóki and Hegedűs, 2018; Kelemen, 2020; Holesch and Kyriazi, 2022). I build on and extend this work to argue that the EU can also contribute to the initial onset of democratic backsliding through its accession process and policy structure by simultaneously increasing executive power and limiting the domestic policy space, which stunts institutional development in new democracies.

2.1 The EU and executive power

The first way in which the post-Maastricht EU unintentionally contributes to democratic backsliding in its member states is by creating power asymmetries between the executive and other branches of government; this occurs both during pre-membership preparations, which include efforts at democracy promotion, but also continues once states become members of the organization.

The EU's strategies for democracy promotion increase executive power in several ways. The conventional template for democratization argues for the construction of a strong, effective state with a powerful executive; only then can the focus shift to building a robust civil society, a system of institutional checks and balances, and representative institutions (O'Donnell, 1993; Linz and Stepan, 1996; Kaufman, 1999; Tilly, 2007). While strong states with powerful executives served as a stable foundation for further democratization and liberalization over long time frames in historic

waves of democratization, theories of democracy emphasize that organizations for managing mass participation, representing citizens' interests, and ensuring horizontal accountability —such as political parties and legislatures— are also critical for long-term democratic survival (Huntington, 1968; Carothers, 2006; Gibler and Randazzo, 2011; Graham, Miller and Strøm, 2017). Furthermore, contemporary transitions to democracy occur over the course of years, rather than decades, as was the case in earlier waves of democracy. As such, over-emphasizing a strong state without equal and early attention to those other critical democratic institutions may no longer be sufficient.¹ The EU's approach to democracy promotion reflects this traditional view of state-building as democracy-building, and was first systematically applied to the 2004 enlargement group, which included eight post-communist new democracies. Since the 2004 enlargement, the EU has adhered even more closely to the state-building-centered model of democracy promotion (Richter and Wunsch, 2020).

The motivation for the EU's approach is in part a result of the fact that democracy promotion is often not undertaken with the sole purpose of building democracy but is also driven by a desire to facilitate economic and regional stability. Reflecting these considerations, the EU has placed more attention on economic transformation and stability —which involve the construction of regulatory, economic, and other bureaucratic offices— than on support for democratic institutions in post-communist Europe (Smith, 2001). Indeed, the 2004 and 2007 accessions in particular were elite-led, dominated by foreign policy officials, largely devoid of public debate, and left little room for democratic politics (Pridham, 2007; Grabbe, 2014).

This bureaucratic, executive-dominated approach is also an artifact of the technocratic nature of the organization itself and is linked to the EU's post-Maastricht conditions for membership and its onerous accession process. During the pre-accession phase, bureaucracies are created to facilitate the implementation of the EU's extensive membership requirements, as outlined in the *acquis communautaire*, and also to ensure states will comply with EU policies after accession. Euro-experts and other bureaucrats charged with preparing a state for accession are housed within the domestic executive branch, thereby giving these leaders access to additional information and the power to influence subsequent domestic institutional formation. Throughout the accession process, executives work closely with these bureaucrats to implement the *acquis'* requirements (Grabbe, 2001; Follesdal and Hix, 2006), and the resulting institutions designed to fulfill these criteria are often created from above without support from political groups or civil society (Bugarcic, 2015). The disproportionate attention devoted to bureaucratic institutions has negative consequences for democracy. A strong bureaucracy, which signals high levels of state capacity, is not inherently detrimental to democracy and is even linked to democratic success (Grzymala-Busse, 2007; Fortin, 2012). However, the EU invests predominantly in the bureaucracy at the expense of institutions that both play a representative function and also act as checks on executive power. The result is a state with a relatively strong executive that controls a powerful bureaucracy.

¹ Indeed, the ongoing global democratic recession underscores the need to revise this approach as more new democracies succumb to backsliding driven by powerful elected leaders that are surrounded by institutions too weak to guard against executive aggrandizement.

Another way the EU's efforts at democracy promotion and pre-accession conditions increase executive power is by failing to adequately promote and support the development of a strong, independent judiciary. Independent judiciaries serve as a critical check on executive power (Gibler and Randazzo, 2011; Issacharoff, 2015). However, judicial independence in many central and eastern European states has from the outset been complicated by communist legacies wherein former communist judges secured positions as high-ranking judges shortly after the transition (Piana, 2009). These individuals and their positions were inadvertently reinforced by the EU in the pre-accession phase by conditions that prescribed a one-size-fits-all "Judicial Council" model of court administration (Bobek and Kosař, 2014). This model insulated high-ranking (often former communist) judges from political interference — and so on the surface seemed to promote judicial independence — but did little to support the independence or impartiality of individual judges, or to instill a culture of legal interpretation based on general principles and values that is typically associated with liberal democracy (Matczak, Bencze and Kohn, 2010). In this way, then, EU efforts at democracy promotion and the concurrent pre-accession conditions failed to adequately promote judicial independence in these states; this indirectly empowers the executive by leaving a critical check on executive power under-developed and more susceptible to future manipulation by incumbents seeking to initiate backsliding.

Membership in a highly integrated EU further increases executive power, in several ways. First, membership in the post-Maastricht EU significantly centralizes and increases executives' relative domestic power by expanding their control over domestic agendas, creating information asymmetries that favor the executive, and severely restricting the extent to which other domestic actors can participate in or oversee the policy-making process (Moravcsik, 1994). This domestic power shift results from the fact that executives serve as primary intermediaries between their state and EU institutions. Indeed, EU scholars have identified the EU's democratic deficit wherein European integration and membership result in increased power for national executives at the supranational level, with a coinciding decrease in domestic parliamentary control (Follesdal and Hix, 2006). For example, executives represent their countries in the European Council, the EU's most powerful political body (Tallberg, 2008). At the same time, increased integration has further limited domestic legislatures' control over a range of policy decisions, such as commercial negotiations, which have been monopolized by the EU Commissioner for Trade (Nanou and Dorussen, 2013).

It is important to note that, alone, strong executives are not incompatible with democracy. Indeed, a strong state with a bureaucracy that can maintain rule of law, regulate economic transactions, and protect citizens' rights is a critical prerequisite for democratic consolidation (Linz and Stepan, 1996; Fortin, 2012). Furthermore, as Moravcsik (2004) argues, the policy-making autonomy the EU accords to national executives, often in areas in which citizens have limited expertise or engagement, can be beneficial for democracy in that it insulates executives from the influence of particularist demands that are inherently unrepresentative of the interests of the majority of citizens.

However, while strong states support democracy, they are also indispensable for stable autocratic rule (Way, 2005), and therefore on their own are insufficient to guarantee long-term democratic success. Theories of democracy show these powerful states need

to be complemented by equally strong institutional checks on executive power in order for democracy to succeed (Lijphart, 1977; O'Donnell, 1993; Kapstein & Converse, 2008). To develop these critical horizontal checks on executive power, states require high levels of competition among political parties that allow them to develop the tools necessary to monitor state institutions (Grzymala-Busse, 2007) and the early establishment of strong and independent legislatures (Diamond, Plattner and Schedler, 1999; Fish, 2006; Pérez-Liñán, Schmidt and Vairo, 2019) that balance against executive power.

This leads to the second mechanism linking the EU to backsliding in new democracies. In addition to increasing executive autonomy, EU accession and membership requirements also limit members' domestic policy space. In new democracies, these policy limitations erode the space for robust competition between political parties and undermine the role of the legislature. As such, the limits the EU places on the domestic policy space stunt the development of important institutional checks on the executive in new democracies.

2.2 The EU and the domestic policy space

The domestic policy space is the universe of policy alternatives political actors can feasibly debate, adopt varying positions on, and implement. The scope of the policy space impacts institutional development in new democracies. In states with a wider range of policy options, political actors can distinguish themselves from one another based on substantive ideological differences; this, in turn, leads to stronger representative institutions that can also check executive power. However, when a state's domestic policy space is more limited, politics occurs in a relative ideological void and core institutions remain under-developed.

EU membership conditionality expanded significantly with the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, the implementation of the Copenhagen Criteria and the *acquis communautaire* in 1993, and the EU's use of active leverage over candidate states beginning in 1997. As a result, beginning with the 2004 enlargement group, EU accession requirements stipulated extensive democratic, regulatory, and institutional policies and standards for candidate states to adopt, thereby leaving little room for domestic ideological debates (Grzymala-Busse, 2019a). The *acquis'* policy requirements continue into the membership phase wherein member states are required conform to EU-wide policies. As a primarily economic organization with a single market, common currency, and shared budget, these accession and membership requirements have resulted in particular in neoliberal economic and fiscal policy convergence across the EU (Cao, 2009; Grabbe, 2014).

The domestic policy space is vital for developing representative institutions and institutional checks on executive power in new democracies, in several ways. First, a wide range of policy options are critical for party system development. In developed systems, parties compete in elections by situating themselves along salient, politicized societal cleavages linked to policy outcomes (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967). Research finds politics in contemporary western democracies takes place along two distinct ideological dimensions: the traditional economic divide, and a newer socio-cultural dimension

that focuses on cultural and identity-based issues (Kriesi et al., 2008; Alonso and Claro da Fonseca, 2012). Scholars argue that states where the economic-distributive cleavage is the primary ideological division are more likely to have strong, programmatic parties that also develop more quickly. Conversely, party systems in which competition focuses primarily on socio-cultural and other non-economic issues face a greater risk of elite- and mass-based polarization that hinders party competition (Kitschelt et al., 1999), creates openings for populists to gain voter support (Vachudova, 2021), and even makes democratic backsliding more likely (Haggard and Kaufman, 2021).²

Since EU accession and membership requirements leave few economic policy alternatives (Grzymala-Busse & Innes, 2003; Vachudova, 2008), and voters know economic options are particularly limited (Hellwig, 2014), it is difficult for parties to differentiate themselves based on economic appeals. As a result, parties in post-communist EU member states have overwhelmingly emphasized non-economic issues. These include, on the one hand, identity-based and cultural topics, such as support for nationalism, opposition to the EU and globalization, and immigration. This is true for both niche and mainstream parties (Ward et al., 2015). In addition, the EU's strong emphasis on good governance as a pre-requisite for membership has created enduring incentives for all political parties in these states to campaign on platforms related to (anti-)corruption (Engler, 2020), another non-economic issue area.

One consequence of this reliance on non-economic issues has been that strong mainstream parties with clear programmatic positions have in many cases failed to emerge in these new democracies (Mair, 2007; Grzymala-Busse, 2019a). At the same time, anti-establishment parties (Hanley and Sikk, 2016) and new parties that offer little with respect to distinct ideological alternatives beyond their “newness” (Sikk, 2012) have been able to take advantage of the constrained policy space and resultant party system instability to gain an electoral foothold. This is particularly problematic for new democracies as it impedes their continued democratic progress, which depends in part on the extent to which parties structure political conflict (Dix, 1992; Mainwaring, 1998). Furthermore, parties serve as a check on executive power and thus as a critical institutional safeguard against democratic backsliding.

In addition to stunting party system development, EU accession and membership requirements also leave the legislatures in these new democracies under-developed by limiting their role in the policy-making process. EU policy requirements infringe on some of the primary roles of legislatures: proposing, drafting, and implementing legislation. This, in turn, stunts the institutionalization of the legislature in new democracies and contributes to power asymmetries between the executive and the legislature, which further hinders democratic progress, in two ways. First, legislatures create an impetus for party system development; however, when legislatures are weak, parties lack a forum in which to develop and mature. Another consequence is that the leg-

² It is important to note that not all agree an emphasis on non-economic issues is inherently antithetical to programmatic party competition. According to Rovny (2014), ethnicity is a salient cleavage around which party competition has developed in some post-communist states. These ethnic-based parties are more likely to compete over policies related to rights and liberties. This suggests that ethnic-based parties might be one tool to overcome a limited domestic policy space in that they provide an alternative societal cleavage, outside of pure identity politics, along which to structure politics. I consider this as a source of domestic variation that might account for cases of non-backsliding among the 2004 accession states, as discussed in Section 6 below.

islature, which plays a critical role in providing horizontal accountability, is unable to check executive power. Indeed, in addition to the judiciary and opposition parties, legislatures are the primary institutional check on the executive (Diamond, Plattner and Schedler, 1999; Fish, 2006).

Finally, a diminished domestic policy space alters political debates and limits the extent to which politicians can compete for office based on ideological differences. Unable to credibly propose future changes to core economic policies imposed by the EU, incumbents and political parties instead rely on identity-based issues and populism to appeal to voters. Populism is characterized by nativist, authoritarian ideologies. Indeed, many populist parties define themselves in direct opposition to key features of liberal democracy, such as political safeguards, constitutional protection of minority rights, individualism, and the intermediary institutions of liberal democracy (Minkenberg, 2002; Mudde, 2007; Bugarcic, 2008; Linden, 2008).³

In short, heightened executive power without a proportional increase in the strength of other domestic institutions that check executive power—such as opposition parties and the national legislature—is a relevant factor with respect to democratic backsliding. I build on existing research (Meyerrose, 2020) to argue that by simultaneously increasing executive power and stunting institutional development by limiting domestic policy options, the EU creates conditions conducive to backsliding in its newly democratic member states. While accession to and membership in a post-Maastricht EU imposes similar policy limitations on all member states, these limits are particularly problematic for new democracies, who are required to adopt EU policies early in their democratization processes, before they have the opportunity to develop critical domestic institutions.

2.3 Scope conditions

I argue the EU's post-Maastricht accession conditions and ongoing membership requirements can contribute to domestic institutional power imbalances in EU member states. This implies EU membership should result in unchecked executives in *all* EU member states. However, cases such as Denmark and Sweden—which have robust parliaments with strong control over their governments despite EU membership—would seem to suggest that EU membership does not necessarily erode institutional checks on executive power.

I argue the effects of EU accession and membership are of particular concern for *new* democracies, which had a much shorter history of democratic experience and institution building prior to joining the EU and, in many cases, democratized at least in part as a consequence of EU accession conditionality. While the structure of EU membership applies equally to all member states, it is less likely to impede institutional checks and balances—and critically, checks on executive power—in the advanced

³ Since populism tends to be inherently opposed to liberal democracy, the goals of populists often involve the altering or dismantling of liberal democratic institutions; in other words, they advocate processes characteristic of democratic backsliding. As such, populism is a common characteristic of states experiencing democratic backsliding, but the presence of populist parties alone is insufficient to categorize a case as one of backsliding.

democracies in the EU, all of which had decades, if not centuries, to fully develop these institutions prior to taking on post-Maastricht EU membership requirements.

Although I focus on the 2004 accession group, the mechanisms outlined above are applicable to the subsequent 2007 and 2013 enlargements to additional new democracies, and even to the EU's current engagement with candidates in the western Balkans. Since 2004, the EU has if anything applied even more conditions to candidate states. In the western Balkans, for example, the EU has heavily emphasized governance structures more so than was the case for the 2004 accession countries. However, despite high compliance with EU accession conditions surrounding state-building and good governance, democratic performance in the region is currently in decline (Richter and Wunsch, 2020).

3 Research design

Illiberalism and backsliding have been on the rise in a number of post-communist European countries (Rupnik, 2016). These trends are perhaps unsurprising in the Balkans, which consistently lagged behind with respect to democratization (Spendzharova and Vachudova, 2012). However, backsliding has been particularly pronounced in the central European countries, which were undisputed regional leaders during the democratization process. Figure 1 illustrates these illiberal trends, tracing the liberal democracy index for each of the Visegrad countries and Slovenia.⁴ While backsliding has been the most extreme in Hungary and Poland, the 2022 Varieties of Democracy report identifies the Czech Republic and Slovenia as other instances of backsliding in central Europe (Alizada et al., 2022), and observers have warned that evidence of state capture, selective justice, and government control of the media signal the erosion of democracy in both Slovakia and the Czech Republic (Mesežnikov and Gyárfášová, 2018; Vachudova, 2020).

I argue accession preparations for and membership in the post-Maastricht EU can contribute to backsliding in new democracies by simultaneously increasing executive power and limiting domestic policy options. Below, I develop in-depth case studies of the two most extreme cases of backsliding in the EU—Hungary and Poland—to trace the proposed mechanisms. It is particularly puzzling that Hungary and Poland are backsliding since they received extensive democratization aid from the EU, were initially viewed as the two most successful cases of post-communist democratization (Varga & Freyberg-Inan, 2012) with relatively high levels of economic development (Lipset, 1959) and low levels of inequality (Boix, 2003). These countries received

⁴ The liberal democracy index measures the extent to which a country constitutionally protects individual and minority rights, exhibits strong rule of law, an independent judiciary, and checks on executive power (Coppedge et al., 2021) and is commonly used in the literature to operationalize backsliding (Jee, Lueders & Myrick, 2022).

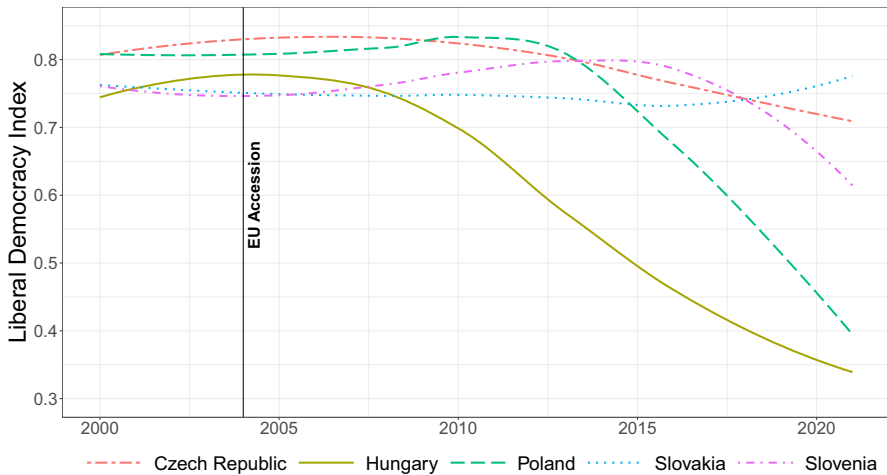


Fig. 1 Since joining the EU in 2004, liberal democracy has been on the decline to varying degrees throughout central Europe

similar amounts of support and influence from the EU and were subject to the same accession and membership requirements (Vachudova, 2005).⁵

It is important to note I do not argue these new democracies would have been more stable or successful had they never joined the EU; the EU undoubtedly provided important incentives and resources to facilitate their transitions to democracy. Rather, I argue the EU's mode of engagement contributed to institutional deficiencies within these countries that make backsliding more likely. In this way, the counterfactual to my argument is a case with less extensive EU accession and membership requirements. While all post-communist states were subject to similar accession processes and high levels of EU conditionality, EU requirements have not always been so extensive; rather, they became so with the signing of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, the introduction of the Copenhagen Criteria and the *acquis communautaire* in 1993, and the EU's use of active leverage over candidate states, which began in 1997. Therefore, studying the impact of low EU conditionality, a less intrusive accession processes, and fewer membership requirements on new democracies requires going back in time.

Each time the EU admits additional members, the optimal level of integration for existing members increases; this happened following the accession of Spain and Portugal, two canonical third wave democracies that joined the EU shortly after transitioning to democracy. One result of the higher levels of integration that followed

⁵ Cianetti, Dawson, and Hanley (2018) and other EU scholars have called for researchers to look beyond Hungary and Poland to understand regime trajectories in post-communist Europe, arguing these two cases are not representative of the post-communist democratic experience, which is perhaps better characterized by instances of relatively stable but low-quality democracy. While this point is well taken, Hungary and Poland are quintessential examples of the ongoing global trend of democratic backsliding (e.g., Luhrmann and Lindberg, 2019; Haggard and Kaufman, 2021). Since this paper is focused on exploring the extent to which democracy promotion by IOs makes backsliding more likely (Meyerrose, 2020) in a specific context—the EU—rather than explaining democratic outcomes in post-communist states specifically, focusing on these two cases provides important generalizable leverage.

was the creation of a significantly longer list of requirements that subsequent entrants were required to accept (Pahre, 1995; Schneider, 2008). Drawing on the fact that EU accession and policy requirements have become more extensive over time, I contrast Hungary and Poland, the two most extreme cases of backsliding in the EU, with two third wave democracies that joined the EU prior to increased integration: Spain and Portugal. As Fig. 2 illustrates, unlike the central European countries in Fig. 1, Spain and Portugal's levels of democracy continued to improve and then remained stable for over three decades after joining the EU.

In contrast to Hungary and Poland, membership conditionality for Spain and Portugal was less extensive, occurred on much more of an *ad hoc* basis, and required the adoption of significantly fewer domestic policies. I argue these differences in the accession processes, all of which occurred shortly after these four states' respective transitions to democracy, in part account for the relative success of democracy in Spain and Portugal when compared to Hungary and Poland.

Early after the 1989 revolutions, analysts were eager to draw parallels between the transition experiences of southern and post-communist Europe, but skeptics argued the democratic experiences of states in these two regions were fundamentally different. While these differences make it difficult to generate broad generalizations about third wave transitions, they do provide the opportunity to draw meaningful inferences about divergent outcomes (Bunce, 1995). Variations in the length and nature of the transitions in these two regions, as well as the level and mode of international involvement, should in part help us understand the varying democratic outcomes in Spain and Portugal when compared to Hungary and Poland.

When considering the value of these comparisons, we would ideally have cases with similar starting points—with respect to the type of regime from which they were transitioning—yet different experiences with democratization that might account for varying levels of democratic success in the long-term. While the southern European countries are certainly not comparable to all 27 post-communist states, and there are

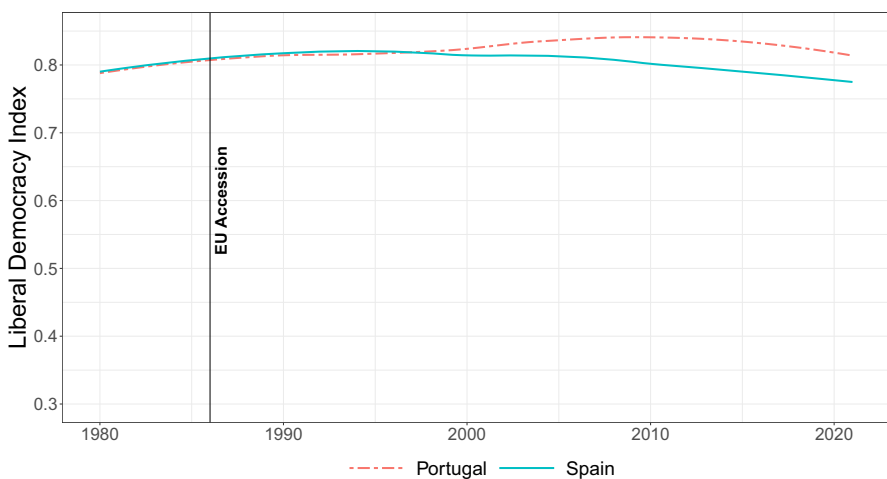


Fig. 2 Since joining the EU, Spain and Portugal's levels of liberal democracy have remained stable

important differences due to the legacies of communism, they share more similarities with certain cases, such as Hungary and Poland, than they do with others, such as Moldova or Russia. Indeed, Spain and Portugal are arguably “particularly comparable with the Hungarian case. All three countries had started from an authoritarian regime, which was ‘soft-fascist’ in the case of Spain and Portugal, or ‘soft-communist’ in the case of Hungary” (Bozóki and Lomax 1995, 194). The transitions themselves, however, were quite different. For Spain and Portugal, the transitions occurred over a much longer time span, starting as early as the 1950s and 1960s when social structures in these states started to change, civil society began to develop, and both countries slowly integrated themselves into the western capitalist economy. While economic and social transformations preceded political ones in Spain and Portugal, the transitions in Hungary and Poland were “expected to take place not only coterminously with political transition, but also within an almost impossible timescale ... as a pre-condition of aid from the Western liberal democracies” (Heywood, 1995 146).

In short, all four of these states are new democracies that experienced different degrees of EU influence and requirements when transitioning to democracy; therefore, the comparison can provide insight into the effects of varying levels of EU accession criteria. After outlining Spain and Portugal as comparison cases, the following sections trace the proposed mechanisms linking the EU to backsliding in Hungary and Poland. The empirical section concludes with a brief discussion of alternative explanations.

4 The accession process in Spain and Portugal

Spain and Portugal were among the first third wave democracies to join the EU. These countries acceded to the organization in 1986, prior to the signing of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, which significantly increased levels of integration among EU member states and also resulted in much more extensive requirements that states were required to fulfill in order to become members. When Spain and Portugal joined, the EU was primarily an economic organization with a common market and customs union. The original common market was a free trade area that eliminated quotas and tariffs and provided for the free movement of capital, services, and workers yet maintained non-tariff barriers to trade. The post-Maastricht single market that Hungary and Poland joined, on the other hand, eliminated all existing trade barriers by imposing EU-wide regulations designed to create a level playing field. This required the harmonization of national rules governing products and goods at the EU level (Dinan, 2005).

Spain and Portugal also spent a longer time at the Association Agreement stage of negotiations with the EU than Hungary and Poland. During this stage, the EU negotiated bilateral free trade agreements with both Spain and Portugal and gave them extended time tables for dismantling tariffs to comply with common market requirements (Preston, 1995). In contrast, formal negotiations for membership did not begin for Hungary and Poland until 1997, giving these states far less time to undertake significantly more extensive policy reforms prior to their 2004 accessions. This, combined with the single market, severely limited Hungary and Poland’s domestic policy spaces and stunted democratic institutional development.

Furthermore, when Spain and Portugal were candidates, political and especially democratic membership criteria were largely *ad hoc*. This was the first time the EU needed to consider political conditions for membership. In response to their initial applications for membership, the EU issued the 1962 Birkelbach report, which stated that only liberal democracies would be admitted (Whitehead, 1991; Powell, 1996; Magone, 2004). This served as a critical incentive for Spain and Portugal to democratize; however, the EU's actual involvement in their democratic transitions was largely symbolic and passive. In contrast, the EU had extensive political conditions for membership for Hungary and Poland, as outlined in the Copenhagen Criteria, and it began actively monitoring and evaluating compliance with these conditions in 1997 (Vachudova, 2005).

As discussed in Section 2, I argue executive control over the implementation of membership requirements outlined in the *acquis communautaire*, along with membership in a highly integrated, post-Maastricht EU combine to increase executive power and, as a consequence, create power asymmetries between the executive and other domestic institutions in new democracies. Therefore, while my theory predicts accession to a post-Maastricht EU will lead to an increase in relative levels of executive power at the domestic level, joining the EU's less integrated predecessor should have no such impact.

To explore this, Fig. 3 traces four measures of executive power in Spain and Portugal prior to and following their 1986 accession. The legislative constraints variable measures the extent to which legislatures and other government agencies are capable of executive oversight. The legislature investigates executive measure traces the degree to which, in practice, legislatures investigate unconstitutional or illegal activities by the executive. The judicial constraints variable takes into account the extent to which executives respect the constitution and judicial independence. Finally, the fourth plot measures executive respect for the constitution (Coppedge et al., 2021). I compare Spain and Portugal's scores along these indicators to those of other western European countries. The solid line in Fig. 3 represents annual averages of these variables for the 13 western European countries that were members of the EU prior to 1986, while the dotted and dashed lines trace the indices over time in Spain and Portugal.⁶ Overall, intra-governmental power relations remained stable in Spain and Portugal after their accession to the EU, and for the most part mirrored trends and were at levels comparable to those of advanced western European democracies during this same time period.⁷

In addition to having no impact on the domestic institutional balance of power, accession to a pre-Maastricht EU that entailed significantly fewer policy requirements and constraints for both candidate and member states should also not influence a state's domestic policy space. To explore the extent to which this is the case for Spain and

⁶ These plots start in 1975, which roughly corresponds to Spain and Portugal's transitions to democracy, and end in 2003, which marks 17 years after these states' accession to the EU. I use this 17-year cutoff for the sake of consistency: these same variables, plotted again for Hungary and Poland below, are available through 2021 at the time of writing, which is 17 years after Hungary and Poland joined the EU.

⁷ Although Spain's indicator for "legislature investigates executive" is relatively low, it does nevertheless increase following accession, which suggests that factors other than EU accession and membership may account for its overall levels along this particular measure of executive power.

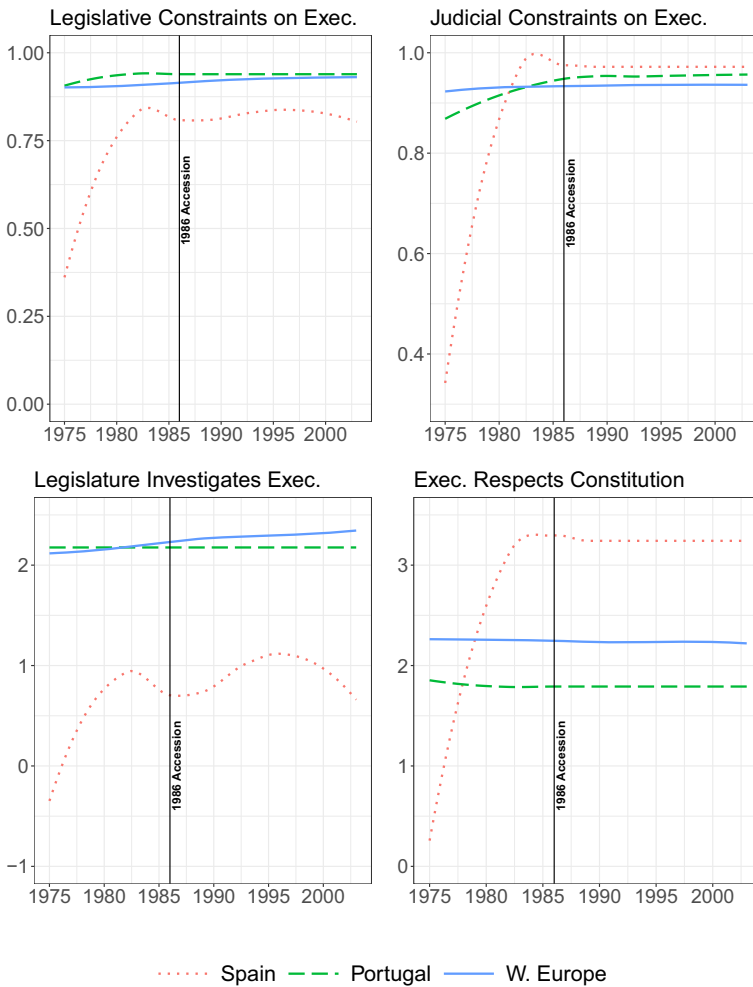


Fig. 3 On average, institutional checks on executive power were high and remained stable in Spain and Portugal following their accession to the EU in 1986

Portugal, I follow (Meyerrose, 2020) and use a variable from the Varieties of Democracy dataset (Coppedge et al., 2021) to operationalize the domestic policy space. The domestic policy space is the range of possible policies political actors can adopt and implement. While we cannot directly observe policies that are not implemented, one observable implication of a limited domestic policy space is ideological convergence across political parties that, due to policy constraints, cannot distinguish themselves from one another based on distinct policy positions. Figure 4 traces the extent to which publicly available party manifestos in Spain, Portugal, and the average across the 13 pre-1986 EU member states are distinct in terms of content or ideology, with higher values indicating more distinct party platforms and, therefore, a more expansive domestic policy space. As expected, EU accession resulted in no discernible change

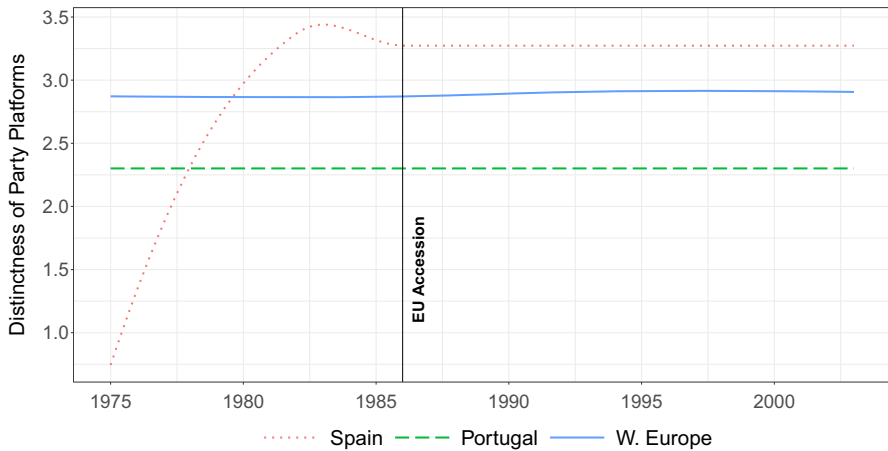


Fig. 4 Accession to a pre-Maastricht EU characterized by fewer policy requirements had no discernible impact on the domestic policy space —operationalized as the distinctness of party platforms— in Spain and Portugal

with respect to the ideological distinctness of political parties in Spain and Portugal for the 17 years following accession.⁸

Although domestic actors were heavily influenced by external rules, structures, and incentives, the less extensive accession criteria made it so that democratization in Spain and Portugal was more bottom-up and domestically driven than in post-communist Europe. These countries spent over a decade building democracy before joining the EU, and they acceded prior to Maastricht and the *acquis*, all of which greatly increased levels of integration, and thus policy linkages, between EU member states. As a result, their domestic policy spaces remained relatively independent of EU influence during their early years as democracies, allowing political parties and the legislature to develop. This is in sharp contrast to Hungary and Poland, two states that were seeking to join a “substantially more integrated [EU] following the completion of the Single European Market and the Maastricht commitments ... from a lower economic base” (Preston, 1995, 459).

5 Tracing democratic backsliding in Hungary and Poland

In 1990, Hungary and Poland identified joining the EU as a primary foreign policy objective (Vachudova, 2005). Hungary was the first post-communist country to redirect

⁸ In Figs. 3 and 4, it is important to note that the comparison between Spain and Portugal, on the one hand, and Hungary and Poland on the other, is more of a question of change, rather than levels. While we might expect Spain and Portugal to have overall better developed democratic institutions than Hungary and Poland due to the varying regime legacies and different modes of democratization, ultimately what is of interest for my argument is to determine if EU involvement led to any *changes* in the strength or quality of domestic democratic institutions. If we see declines in institutional quality in Hungary and Poland following EU accession, and no comparable declines in Spain and Portugal, this would suggest support for the argument that more extensive EU requirements impacted domestic institutional development in Hungary and Poland.

its trade to the West, import western institutions and policies, and establish official contacts with the EU. Both countries signed Europe Agreements in December 1991 (Ágh, 1999), and at the 1993 Copenhagen Summit the EU indicated promises of future eastern enlargement. The Copenhagen Criteria consist of political and economic conditions for EU membership, including “stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and respect for protection of minorities” (Rose-Ackerman, 2005, 43). Another condition for membership is adoption of the *acquis communautaire*. The *acquis* is a 100,000-page, non-negotiable document outlining the laws, norms, and regulations in force in EU member states. In 1994, the EU Agreements went into effect, and shortly thereafter Hungary and Poland became the first two post-communist states to apply for EU membership (Vachudova, 2005). Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, Hungary and Poland were leaders in pre-accession talks with the EU (Herman, 2015).

Nevertheless, Hungary and Poland represent the most severe cases of backsliding within the EU. Existing analyses of the onset of these cases of backsliding focus on domestic-level factors such as economic recession and stagnation (Hernandez and Kriesi, 2016), corruption (Hanley and Sikk, 2016), the migrant crisis (Krastev, 2016; Rupnik, 2016), and weak and discredited center-left opposition parties (Berman, 2019). However, a brief comparison suggests these domestic-level explanations alone are insufficient. The 2015 ascent of Poland’s PiS has been likened to Fidesz’ rise in Hungary. In 2010, Hungary was in the midst of a deep economic recession, the center-left party had been discredited by corruption scandals, and public support for the EU was down. In contrast, Poland was the only EU member that avoided recession after the 2008 financial crisis. In 2015, unemployment was low, corruption rankings had been continually improving, and popular support for the EU was around 80% (Fomina and Kucharczyk, 2016). Nevertheless, the outcomes in Hungary and Poland have been remarkably similar.

5.1 Executive power in Hungary and Poland

Preparations for EU accession were largely executive-dominated in these states in an effort to maintain stability and direct economic crisis management. Furthermore, Hungary and Poland each only had a small team of Euro-experts, concentrated in the executive branch. At the same time, the citizens of these states lacked the information necessary to develop their own interests regarding EU accession (Ágh, 1999). Indeed, as EU integration and democratization preceded, “a tendency towards the central role of the prime minister can be detected” (Fink-Hafner, 2007, 824).

As a result, the legislature in Hungary was rendered exceedingly weak, and little emphasis was placed on popular control and government accountability outside of elections (Rose-Ackerman, 2005; Nikolenyi, 2014). During accession preparations, it was easy for the executive to push EU legislation and policy through parliament “because of the general support for EU accession as well as low interest and expertise of the MPs” (Ágh, 1999, 844). Hungary was effective at adopting legislation but less successful in terms of implementing this legislation and garnering societal support (Ágh, 1999).

The impact of the EU on executive power is not limited to the pre-accession phase. EU scholars have identified the EU's democratic deficit, characterized in part by the fact that European integration and membership result in increased power for national executives with a coinciding decrease in parliamentary control (Follesdal and Hix, 2006). All executives of EU member states represent their countries in the European Council, the most powerful political body in the EU (Tallberg, 2008). As European integration has increased, the amount of power the supranational bodies of the EU have over legislation has taken power away from domestic legislatures, thereby further contributing to the trend that executives have more power than their legislatures (Bideleux, 2001). For example, with the implementation of the Economic and Monetary Union, monetary policy decisions and commercial negotiations related to trade were shifted and now take place almost exclusively at the EU level (Nanou and Dorussen, 2013).

Heightened executive powers without a proportional increase in national parliamentary strength is a particularly relevant factor with respect to democratic backsliding, which often occurs as a result of increased and unchecked executive powers. While in theory this and other aspects of the democratic deficit create the same challenges for all EU member states, its impact is likely greater in states where democracy is newer and thus less institutionalized. Indeed, critics argue the EU exported its democratic deficit to central and eastern Europe, producing shallow democracies, and studies have shown that the democratic deficit “has a more visible impact on late accession countries (which are required to adopt a much larger body of European laws and regulations) and on countries with less robust democratic traditions” (Ekiert, 2008, 19).

Another way EU membership contributes to executive aggrandizement is through transnational party politics, which can provide state executives with EU-level allies and thus prevent the EU as a whole from sanctioning attacks against democratic institutions. To date, the EU has been relatively unsuccessful in punishing political non-compliance, or the violation of democratic political criteria on which membership in the organization is conditioned.⁹ One proposed explanation for the EU's lack of action is related to supranational party politics. The European Parliament is composed of transnational parties, known as European party groups, which are political groups composed of representatives from a number of European countries; European party groups are ideologically organized and have become increasingly cohesive over time (Hix, Noury and Roland, 2007; Meyerrose, 2018). As their cohesion has increased, so too has the likelihood that these transnational parties will act as advocates for their own members, even those from other countries. Indeed, the European People's Party Group has effectively blocked attempts (until the vote in 2018) by the European Parliament to take action against Orbán and the Fidesz party in Hungary (Jenne & Mudde, 2012; Kelemen, 2017, 2020).

Comparisons between western Europe and Hungary and Poland demonstrate the impact the post-Maastricht EU has on governmental balance of power in new democracies. Figure 5 compares the four measures of executive constraints from Fig. 3,

⁹ Although the European Parliament voted in 2017 and 2018 to sanction Poland and Hungary, respectively, for their undemocratic turns to date only financial sanctions have been levied against these backsliding regimes.

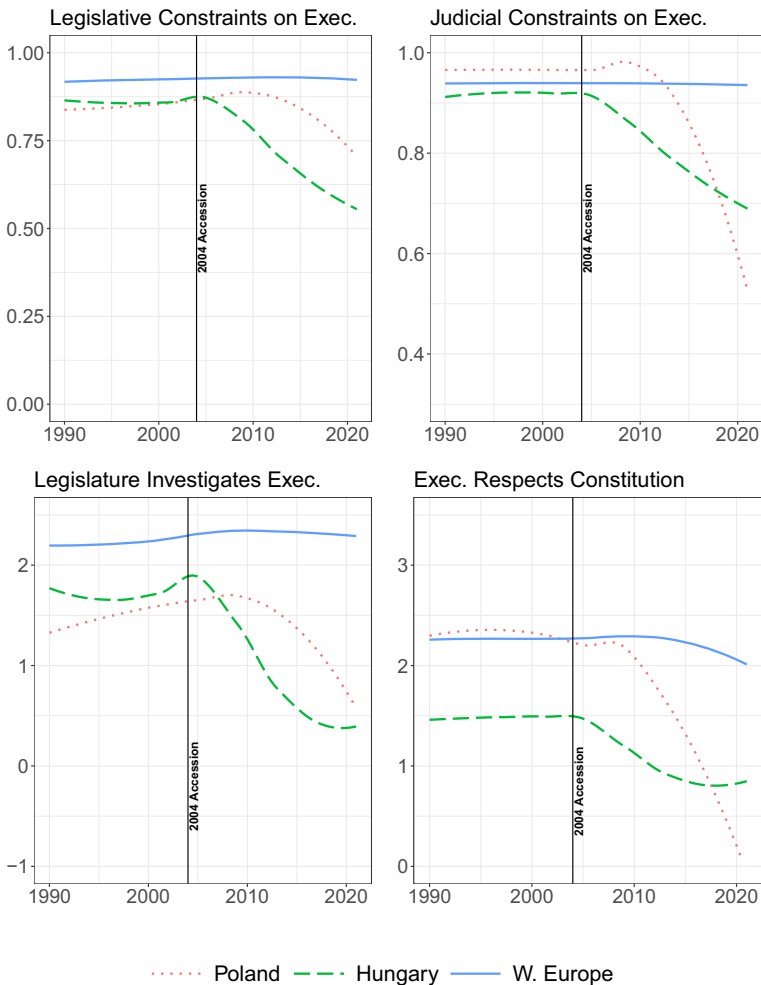


Fig. 5 Following accession to the EU in 2004, a range of institutional checks on executive power in Hungary and Poland were weakened, signaling an increase in relative executive power in these states to levels well below those of advanced democracies in western Europe

this time comparing western Europe, Hungary, and Poland. The solid line represents annual averages of these variables for the 15 western European countries that were members of the EU prior to 2004, while the dashed and dotted lines trace the indices over time in Hungary and Poland. Overall, intra-governmental power relations favor the executive to a greater extent in Hungary and Poland than in western Europe, and checks on executive power decreased substantially after Hungary and Poland joined the EU. This is in stark contrast to Fig. 3, which shows that institutional checks on executive power remained relatively stable in Spain and Portugal following their 1986 accessions.

The EU also increases executive power through its emphasis on bureaucratic, technocratic, and legal institutions, as opposed to democratic ones. In the 1990s and early 2000s, Hungary and Poland had to develop administrative structures to demonstrate their ability to function within the EU's complex multi-level governance system, and the Commission stressed a professional civil service as a key requirement for membership. As a result, although initially the focus in Hungary and Poland was on democratic institutions, by the end of the 1990s the attention had shifted to building a bureaucracy (Dimitrova, 2002).

Throughout the accession process, the EU was the largest source of aid and technical assistance for Hungary and Poland (Grabbe, 2001). *Poland and Hungary: Aid for Economic Restructuring* (Phare), the largest source of pre-accession aid, was a program created to help candidate countries fulfill the requirements of the Copenhagen Criteria and the *acquis*. On average across the region, 30% of Phare was devoted to institution building, with the goal of improving states' capacity to implement the *acquis*, while the other 70% was devoted to financial investments "to strengthen the regulatory infrastructure needed to ensure compliance with the *acquis* and to reinforce economic and social cohesion" (European Commission, 1999,7). Phare was also used in a more bottom-up manner to fund non-governmental organizations in the candidate states to bolster civil society. This bottom-up aspect of Phare produced limited success in Hungary and Poland, two states with already exceedingly weak civil societies (Rose-Ackerman, 2005).

In addition to Phare, the EU created two other aid programs for candidate countries, SAPARD and IPSA, which began in 2000. SAPARD provided aid for agricultural and rural development, while IPSA funds were targeted toward environmental and transportation infrastructure projects (European Commission, 2000). In other words, EU aid to Hungary and Poland was predominantly and almost exclusively focused on bureaucratic and administrative offices, with little or no attention paid to truly democratic institutions.

The primary mechanism Phare used for institution building and knowledge transfer was known as "twinning." Twinning was a tripartite initiative between the Commission, member states, and candidate countries that involved sending civil servants from member states' administrations to candidate countries' administrations and bureaucracies to help them with adopting the *acquis*. Reflecting the EU's bureaucratic approach to democracy promotion, the twinning project was under-girded by the assumption that institutions can be set up in a top-down manner rather than being gradually learned (Bailey and de Propris, 2004).

The heavily bureaucratic focus of the EU accession process is further highlighted by the allocation of aid given to Hungary and Poland. Between 1999 and 2002, Hungary received €379.17 million from Phare for national-level projects, while Poland received €1.3967 billion. Table 1 provides an overview of how these funds were allocated in each country. Phare funding was predominantly focused on bureaucratic projects linked to the *acquis* rather than on strengthening key democratic institutions. In particular, these resources went to the creation of institutions necessary for the EU

Table 1 Pre-Accession Aid (Phare) Allocation in Hungary and Poland, 1999–2002

	Internal Market	Admin. Capacity	Econ. Cohesion Policy	Justice, Home Affairs	Infrastructure, Transport	Agriculture	Environment	Social Programs	Political Criteria	NGOs	Minority Rights
HUN 1999		✓		✓	✓			✓			✓
HUN 2000			✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		
HUN 2001	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓			✓
HUN 2002		✓	✓					✓			
POL 1999	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
POL 2000	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	
POL 2001	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	
POL 2002	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓			

internal market, general administrative capacity, implementation of the EU's economic cohesion policy, border and migration policy (Justice and Home Affairs), infrastructure, agriculture, the environment, and social programs such as education (European Commission, 2002a, b).

Phare was not only heavily bureaucratic but also limited in its ability to provide aid. The pre-accession financial aid provided to Hungary and Poland—and to post-communist Europe as a whole—was significantly less than that provided to Spain and Portugal during their accession processes (Rose-Ackerman, 2005). This was due to the fact that there were too many post-communist states for the EU to provide adequate aid to all. Thus, while the EU had more extensive accession requirements for the post-communist states than any previous candidate states, it also had fewer funds available to offer these countries for implementing these requirements (Bailey and de Propriis, 2004).

In addition to focusing significant attention on the task of building bureaucratic institutions, the EU also heavily emphasized legal constitutionalism, which had a perverse impact on constitutional structures in the new democracies in post-communist Europe (Blokker, 2013). Constitutional democracy emerged in this region around the same time that these states were being integrated into and influenced by the EU. As a result, the constitutions that emerged were strongly influenced by external pressure. The legal constitutionalism and corresponding neutral institutions that developed emphasize the legal over the political (Rupnik, 2007) and therefore contribute to the relatively shallow nature of representative domestic institutions in these countries. The emphasis that the EU places on bureaucratic and legal, rather than democratic, institutions is closely linked to the EU's democratic deficit, another component of which is that policy making in the EU is undertaken in a largely technocratic way by an "enlightened bureaucracy," rather than by democratically elected institutions (Follesdal and Hix, 2006). This technocratic aspect of the Union is passed along to candidate states.

5.2 The domestic policy space in Hungary and Poland

In addition to increasing relative executive power, the EU further contributes to democratic backsliding in its member states by limiting the domestic policy space, which stunts the development of institutions, including those that reign in executive power. EU membership conditionality requires candidate countries to comply with the Copenhagen Criteria and the *acquis*. One side-effect of these conditions, which were exceedingly more extensive for the post-communist countries than they had been for any of the previous enlargement groups, was that they severely limited the domestic policy space; this was especially the case in Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic. Ironically, since these three states did the most "to hew to the EU line and accept EU demands, they have been least able to debate the future of their state" (Grzymala-Busse & Innes, 2003, 69). This, in turn, constrained the evolution of party competition in these countries, with most parties responding to EU leverage by advocating agendas that aligned with EU requirements. Since so many economic policies in particular were dictated directly by the EU, policy debates in these states were and continue

to be largely based on non-economic issues, with parties distinguishing themselves from one another by disputing each other's managerial competence in implementing EU-prescribed policies rather than debating substantive program alternatives or ideological issues.¹⁰

One result of further EU integration has been the reassignment of many policy competencies from the domestic to the EU level and a convergence of national party platforms in EU member states (Nanou and Dorussen, 2013). Since 2010, Hungarian politics has been dominated by Orbán's Fidesz party and the far-right, Jobbik. Limits to the domestic policy space played a role in weakening the political left, leaving Fidesz to govern unopposed. Similarly, of the parties that received at least 10% of the national vote in Poland in the first three elections, only one has surpassed this 10% threshold since 1997, and since 2005, Poland's party system has been dominated by Law and Justice (PiS) (conservative) and Civic Platform (liberal). Many of the earlier Polish parties were social democratic parties, yet only one of these has surpassed 10% since 2005. Several agrarian parties were also prominent early on; these too have been largely absent.

We can see how the EU's policy constraints impacted party ideology in Hungary and Poland. Mirroring Fig. 4, Fig. 6 traces the extent to which publicly available party manifestos in Hungary, Poland, and the average across the 15 pre-2004 EU member states are distinct in terms of content or ideology, with higher values indicating more distinct party platforms and, therefore, a more expansive domestic policy space. In contrast to Fig. 4, which showed EU accession led to no discernible change with respect to the ideological distinctness of political parties in Spain and Portugal, Fig. 6 suggests the extensive policy constraints associated with a post-Maastricht EU impacted parties in Hungary and Poland; in both cases, party platforms became increasingly less ideologically distinct following accession in 2004, while in western Europe on average party platforms have continued to offer a relatively wide range of policy alternatives to voters.

The topics included in parties' manifestos further illustrate the limits the EU places on the domestic policy, and in particular on economic policy. Party systems in mature democracies form when parties compete along societal cleavages linked to substantive policy outcomes (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967). Competition based on economic issues in particular is argued to foster party system institutionalization, whereas parties in less developed party systems compete primarily on non-economic issues (Kitschelt et al., 1999).

The Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) contains data on the content of parties' manifestos for every election year in their respective country; these data measure the

¹⁰ Vachudova (2008) also finds that political parties in post-communist Europe adopted platforms aligned with EU requirements during the pre-accession phase, converging on right-leaning economic policies, such as a free market economy, and libertarian social issues, including support for human and minority rights. Vachudova (2008) views this pre-accession convergence as positive, since it disadvantaged the formation of illiberal political parties. I take her argument one step further, contending that, although EU policy mandates curtailed illiberalism in the pre-accession phase, they made illiberal policies more prevalent in the post-accession period. This is because pre-accession convergence produced underdeveloped party systems, which in turn created an opening for populist politicians and parties focused on identity-based issues to gain an electoral foothold among disaffected voters. Indeed, Vachudova (2008) finds that, when the parameters for party competition broadened following accession, more parties began adopting nationalistic and other culturally conservative policies (Vachudova, 2008).

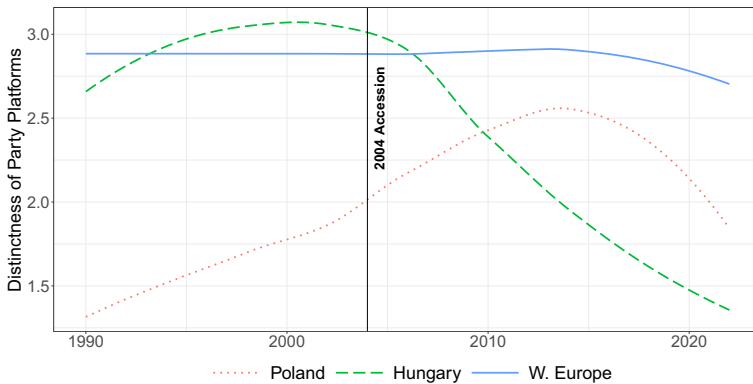


Fig. 6 Following accession to the EU and into the present, party platforms in Hungary and Poland have become increasingly less ideologically distinct from one another, signaling a diminished domestic policy space

percent of quasi-sentences of manifestos devoted to a topic (Volkens et al., 2017). The manifestos provide useful measures of the types of issues parties debate and the relative emphasis they place on different topics. Manifestos capture the extent to which an issue is salient to a party and “may actually canvass party wishes more than do activities in power, where initiatives reflect constraints and demands of coalition partners” (Burgoon, 2012, 616). As such, the CMP is a useful measure of the extent to which parties appeal to voters based on economic and non-economic policy issues.

The CMP data identify 56 categories of manifesto topics. To measure the types of issues parties in Hungary and Poland debate, I first isolate the 22 topics directly related to economics, government intervention in the economy, or social issues defined in economic terms (Ward et al., 2015). This includes all issues in Domain 4 (Economy) as well as welfare state expansion, welfare state limitation, labor groups, and agriculture and farmers (Volkens et al., 2017). The remaining 34 topics are non-economic; these include issues such as nationalism, corruption, law and order, and European integration. Using the 22 economic topics, I create two variables. The first measures the percent of manifestos devoted to economic issues and the second the percent devoted to non-economic issues.

Figure 7 traces the extent to which parties in Hungary and Poland, on average over time, reference economic and non-economic policies. Overall, in both countries economic issues are less prominent than non-economic ones in party manifestos, and the emphasis on non-economic issues grew following EU accession. In the last Hungarian election for which manifesto data are available (2018), the average emphasis on non-economic issues was 62% compared to only 38% for economic ones; similarly, in Poland in 2019, 57% of manifestos were devoted to non-economic issues, while only 43% discussed economic ones.

When Hungary and Poland began formal negotiations with the EU in 1998, the topics that dominated party manifestos shifted. EU requirements pushed parties to adopt economic policies traditionally associated with the right and social policies that align with green, alternative, and libertarian dimensions (Vachudova, 2008). One

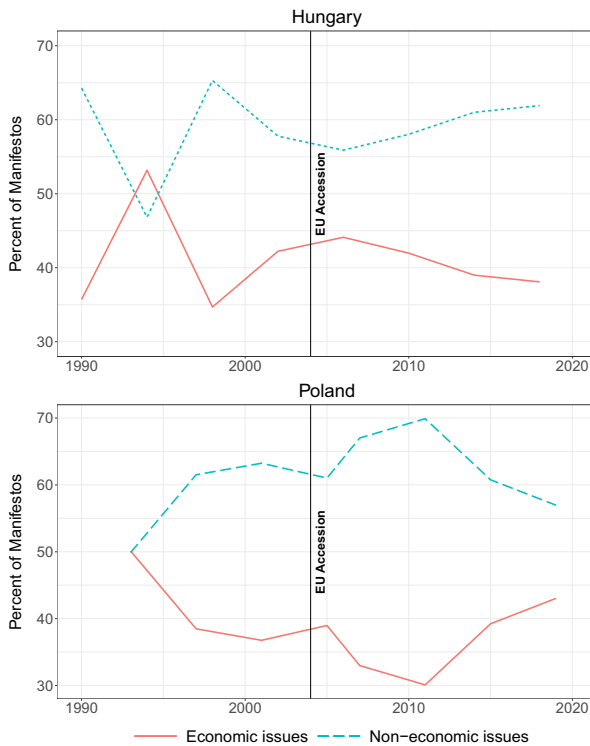


Fig. 7 Economic issues are less prominent than non-economic ones in Hungarian and Polish party manifestos. The emphasis on non-economic issues became particularly strong following EU accession and these topics continue to dominate party manifestos into the present

chapter of the *acquis* is devoted to social policy and employment, with an emphasis on social protection. In the 1998 Hungarian election, four parties surpassed 10% of the vote: the Independent Small Holders Party (agrarian), the Hungarian Democratic Forum (Christian democratic), the Hungarian Socialist Party (social democratic), and the Fidesz-Hungarian Civic Union coalition (conservative). With the exception of the Independent Small Holders Party (which, notably, has not surpassed 10% since 1998), all successful parties in 1998 devoted significant attention to welfare state expansion.

The 1998 Hungarian Democratic Forum's manifesto was the only one that devoted as much attention to welfare state *retrenchment* as it did to expansion. It seems that this divergence from EU policy was not without its problems: 1998 was the last election where the Hungarian Democratic Forum received more than 10%. Widespread support for welfare state expansion continued in the 2002 and 2006 Hungarian elections. Other prominent policy areas included in the membership *acquis* are agriculture, education, regional policy (Grabbe, 2001), and the environment. Successful Hungarian parties during this time period—namely, the Socialist party and Fidesz, following 1998—devoted significant attention to these topics.

Discussions of other economic issues were less prevalent. The EU emphasizes the free movement of goods, workers, services, and capital, which contribute to the overall

functioning of the European single market. The importance of maintaining the single market is such that “policy decisions that interfere with the free market are prohibited” (Quaglia et al., 2007, 417). For example, while in 1998 the Hungarian Socialist party and the Hungarian Democratic Forum advocated market regulation (5.3% and 6.9%, respectively, of their manifestos), by 2002 all references to regulation had disappeared. Indeed, among the parties that were competitive at the national level between 1998 and 2010, economic debates were often uncritical and focused on incentives for businesses, support for economic growth, and vague economic goals. Parties adopted few substantive economic policy positions during the accession period; instead, the focus was on non-economic issues.

Similar trends emerged in Poland. In party manifestos from 1991 and 1993, non-economic topics were less common among the parties that received over 10% of the vote. Parties discussed a wide range of economic policies, such as support for government economic policy-making, protectionism, decentralization of the state, supply- and demand-side oriented economic policies, and market regulation. The topics in successful Polish parties’ manifestos evolved as negotiations with the EU began. In the 1997 election, EU policies such as welfare state expansion, technology and infrastructure, and education expansion were prominent. Other economic issues, such as supply-side incentives, market regulation, and economic orthodoxy were also included but to a lesser extent than previously. Instead, the 1997 manifestos focus more on non-economic issues.

This trend continues and intensifies in 2001 and 2005. The economic issues discussed were uncontroversial and consisted of vague economic goals and support for economic growth. Parties in these elections that advocated more controversial economic issues, such as protectionism (Self-Defense of the Republic of Poland in 2001), market regulation (Democratic Left Alliance in 2005), and a controlled economy (Self-Defense of the Republic of Poland in 2005), have not surpassed 10% since 2005.

Indeed, the only two parties that have been above 10% since 2005 are PiS and the liberal Civic Platform party. In 2007 and 2011, these parties emphasized EU policies and non-economic issues. PiS devoted over 35% of its 2011 manifesto to discussing its ability to lead, the opposition’s inability to govern, government efficiency, culture, and law and order; only 6.5% focuses on substantive economic issues. In the same election, Civic Platform devoted almost 27% of its manifesto to government efficiency, governing capability of the party, culture, and civic mindedness, yet only 7.4% discussed economic issues outside of the expansion of the welfare state, technology, and infrastructure.

EU policy constraints may indeed have contributed to the collapse of the political left by encouraging a race to the bottom. In the early 1990s, Hungary’s liberal party, the Alliance of Free Democrats, was second only to the Christian Democratic party in terms of votes, trailing by 5%. In 1994, the Alliance of Free Democrats and the Hungarian Socialist Party were the top two parties. By 1998, an alliance between these parties resulted in the Socialist party emerging as the front-runner in terms of votes in the 1998 and 2002 elections. However, in the 2006 election, the Socialist party’s support began to wane, and its credibility was shattered by the 2008 corruption scandal (Herman, 2015). After winning only 21% in 2010, the Socialist party has since failed to garner more than 10% (Kollman et al., 2016; Volkens et al., 2017).

Since 2006, the conservative Fidesz and far-right Jobbik parties have dominated Hungarian politics. In 2010, no left-of-center party received more than 10% of the vote. The situation only improved slightly in the 2016 election, where a center-left coalition of five political parties (collectively called Unity) won 26.2% (Kollman et al., 2016).

Similar patterns have emerged in Poland:

As the region-wide tax competition deepened, spurred on by the EU's crackdown on subsidies, not only did Poland's liberal left lose its margin for any credible economic policy in social justice terms, but over time they also lost the institutional requirements for more co-ordinated economic solutions, as union density fell and unions were estranged by radical liberal labour market policies. (Innes, 2014, 96)

The decline of Poland's political left is also linked to region-wide tax competition for foreign direct investment, resulting in a "race to the bottom" with respect to tax levels. This weakens the position of the parties of the left, which tend to espouse higher taxes and partially regulated markets. By limiting these parties' ability to compete in domestic politics, European economic integration weakened the left and facilitated the rise of center-right, populist parties in Hungary and Poland.

6 Alternative explanations

This paper argues accession to and membership in a post-Maastricht, highly integrated EU simultaneously increases executive power and weakens other critical democratic institutions in new democracies, thereby making democratic backsliding more likely. Although Hungary and Poland have been the two most extreme cases of backsliding within the EU, similar trends have been noted in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Slovenia (Mesežnikov and Gyárfášová, 2018; Alizada et al., 2022). However, not all new democracies that joined the EU in 2004 or after are backsliding. Most notably, as Fig. 8 illustrates, democracy in the Baltics has remained relatively stable.

Just as not all new democracies that join the post-Maastricht EU backslide, not all cases of contemporary backsliding are EU members. As such, the EU is simply one potential impetus for backsliding. Furthermore, since democratic backsliding is an *intentional* policy decision undertaken by elected democratic leaders (Sitter and Bakke, 2019), we should not expect all leaders to do so. Indeed, some scholars attribute recent backsliding in central and eastern Europe to a lack of true democratic commitment on the part of elites (Herman, 2015; Vachudova, 2019). This suggests that, although all new democracies that acceded in 2004 and after were subject to similar requirements and influence—and the resultant imbalance of domestic power that favors the executive—only some of these countries elected leaders who lack a commitment to democracy and have *chosen* to take advantage of these domestic power asymmetries to initiate backsliding. Furthermore, even among those leaders who do attempt to erode domestic democratic institutions, we should expect varying levels of success. While all 2004 and subsequent EU accession states were subject to similar

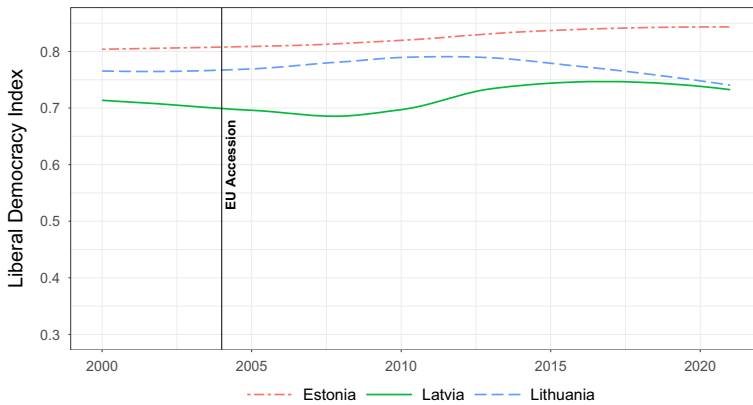


Fig. 8 Since joining the EU in 2004, liberal democracy has remained relatively stable in the Baltics

involvement from the EU, these states did not all start with the same domestic institutional structures. Indeed, there are several ways in which the Baltics are distinct from the other 2004 post-communist states that might account for their relative democratic success.

First, the Baltics had a much harsher experience with communism under direct Soviet occupation, with several implications for contemporary politics. Due to this direct occupation and ongoing security concerns regarding Russia, the Baltics' continued independence is viewed as highly dependent on maintaining the European liberal order. These historical Soviet legacies are argued "to have made the Baltics slightly more immune to the risk of democratic fatigue in that more people felt a vested interest in making liberal democracy and European integration work" (Pettai, 2019, 57-8).

These unique historical factors have also shaped contemporary party politics and political cleavages in the Baltics. Another effect of Soviet occupation is that today the Baltic states are much more ethnically diverse than their central European neighbors,¹¹ with minority Russian groups comprising close to 40% and 48% of the Estonia and Latvian populations, respectively, at the end of the Soviet era. As Rovny (2014) shows, the presence of politically significant ethnic minorities can serve as an alternative mechanism, outside economic-based contestation, to induce programmatic party competition. These ethnic divides, coupled with national security concerns, may provide alternative societal cleavages to structure politics in the Baltics in the absence of significant economic policy options resulting from EU conditionality and membership. Indeed, research suggests these divides have left less room for anti-EU, right-wing populist parties to compete with the left for the support of socially conservative voters in the ways that parties such as Fidesz and PiS have done in Hungary and Poland (Gudžinskas, 2015). Furthermore, the ethnopopulist, identity-based appeals that have accompanied recent backsliding in central Europe have been less salient and successful in the more heterogenous Baltics where ethnic minorities are relatively large and politically powerful (Vachudova, 2020).

¹¹ There are no significant ethnic minorities in Hungary, Poland, or the Czech Republic (Rovny, 2014).

The Baltics also differ from their central European neighbors with respect to governance and state capacity, two factors that have been linked to democratic success (Fortin, 2012; Fukuyama, 2013). Prior to accession, the EU made civil service professionalization a condition for membership. While all 2004 accession countries successfully initiated these reforms, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary partially or completely reversed these changes after accession. In the Baltics, in contrast, civil service reforms began early in the post-transition period, were closely linked to constitution making and state building, and have been significantly less politicized than in central Europe (Meyer-Sahling, 2011). This relative success may be a result of the Baltic states' security interests in maintaining close ties with the EU. The Baltics' ongoing commitment to good governance is reflected in the relatively high trust in elites and good governance indicators for these states when compared to other post-communist EU members (Ágh, 2017; Pettai, 2019).

The unique geopolitical incentives, societal features, and historical factors that have influenced democratization, state building, and party system development in the Baltics may in part account for the relative democratic stability in this region when compared to the other post-communist 2004 accession states. The Baltics' heavy reliance on the EU's liberal order for ongoing independence in particular suggests the illiberal, populist appeals that have been at the forefront of backsliding in other post-communist states are less likely to take hold in the Baltics.

7 Conclusion

This paper argues the EU's post-Maastricht accession process, membership requirements, and policy structure make democratic backsliding more likely in new democracies by simultaneously limiting states' domestic policy space, which stunts institutional development, and augmenting executive power. Leveraging a comparative analysis that combines typical and control cases, this paper shows evidence linking increased EU integration to backsliding. Nevertheless, additional research on this topic is undoubtedly required. In addition to more specifically identifying and theorizing how other international and domestic factors condition the impact of EU accession and membership requirements, future work is also needed to test the magnitude of the effect of the EU on states' democratic trajectories, as well as to more fully account for cases of non-backsliding in EU member states.

To date, the EU's efforts to respond to backsliding in its member states have been fraught with difficulties, with backsliding leaders and their supporters arguing Brussels' attempts to interfere in domestic politics are illegitimate (Schlippach and Treib, 2017). This paper's findings have implications for how the EU might alter its approach for engaging with new democracies —such as the current EU candidate states in the west Balkans— prior to accession to avoid the inherent complications of addressing backsliding after it has begun. Specifically, the EU and other democracy promoting IOs should look beyond election monitoring and elite compliance, and instead focus more attention and resources on developing and supporting political parties and legislatures early on in their involvement with new democracies. In the case of the EU specifically, gradually imposing policy requirements would complement efforts to promote insti-

tutional development in the early stages of the democratization process by expanding the domestic policy space. These efforts could help guard against future erosions and thereby avoid the issues that arise when trying to enforce democratic values in already backsliding member states.

While the EU is undoubtedly exceptional for its levels of integration, the argument developed here nevertheless has implications for any IO that limits its member states' domestic policy space. Following the end of the Cold War, IOs became significantly more integrated and powerful, and their policy competencies grew substantially so that, by one measure, the average state in 2015 granted roughly 205 policy competencies to regional IOs of which it was a member (Panke, 2021). Examples of IOs that, like the EU, have been granted extensive policy capabilities include the Nordic Community, the Andean Community, Mercosur, and the African Union, among others (Hooghe, Lenz and Marks, 2019). These constraints on economic and other policy options may have comparably negative long-term impacts as those discussed in this paper for democracy in member states of these other regional organizations.

The findings presented here suggest the EU's impact on representative democratic institutions, especially political parties, may be relevant to the EU's mature democracies as well. EU membership today limits all member states' domestic policy space. Although the consequences may not be as dire in democracies where parties and legislatures were institutionalized prior to increased European integration, extensive and ongoing policy restrictions may still have adverse effects. Indeed, populism and other challenges to liberal democracy have been on the rise throughout western Europe (Krajev, 2016; Pappas, 2016), leading some to predict the impending de-consolidation of long-established democracies (Foa & Mounk, 2017).

Supplementary Information The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11558-023-09507-2>.

Acknowledgements I gratefully acknowledge valuable feedback from Richard Clark, Daniela Donno, R. Daniel Kelemen, Austin Knuppe, Marcus Kurtz, Reed Kurtz, Jana Lipps, Ellen Lust, Helen Milner, William Minozzi, Irfan Nooruddin, Paul Poast, Amanda Robinson, Andrew Rosenberg, Dan Slater, Alexander Thompson, Duy Trinh, Sara Watson, Natasha Wunsch, the reviewers and editor at ROJO, contributors at PEIO, MPSA, and ISA conferences, as well as participants in workshops at the Ohio State University and Princeton University.

Data Availability Statement The datasets generated and analyzed by the author for the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Declarations

Conflicts of interest • The author has no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

- The authors has no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.
- The author certifies that they have no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.
- The author has no financial or proprietary interests in any material discussed in this article.

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