Building Strong Executives and Weak Institutions: How European Integration Contributes to Democratic Backsliding

Anna M. Meyerrose.*

Abstract

Although the European Union (EU) is considered unrivaled in its democracy promoting abilities, democracy is being challenged within its borders. Since 2011, 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 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. Comparative case studies and process tracing provide support for this argument. These theoretical mechanisms make important contributions to ongoing efforts to identify sources of democratic backsliding, and have critical implications for research on the limits of EU conditionality and theories linking regional organizations and regime outcomes.

*Research Associate, Mershon Center for International Security Studies, The Ohio State University. 1501 Neil Ave., Columbus, OH 43201. Electronic address: meyerrose.2@osu.edu. I would like to thank Marcus Kurtz, William Minozzi, Irfan Nooruddin, Jan Pierskalla, Paul Poast, Amanda Robinson, Terence Teo, Alexander Thompson, Milada Vachudova, Sara Watson, and Natasha Wunsch for helpful comments. I am also grateful to audiences and participants at the 2017 Council of European Studies Conference, the 2017 Midwest Political Science Association Conference, and the Comparative Politics Workshop at the Ohio State University.

International organizations (IOs) are often at the forefront of democracy promotion, with observers finding these organizations are positive forces for democracy (Donno 2013, Genna & Hiroi 2014, Grigorescu 2003, Pevehouse 2005, Poast & Urpelainen 2018). The European Union (EU) in particular is associated with democracy promotion. In addition to being composed entirely of democratic states, the EU has adopted extensive mechanisms for promoting democracy via integration and is historically viewed as unrivaled in its ability to promote transitions to democracy and democratic consolidation in its member states (Dimitrova & Pridham 2004, Ekiert 2008, Levitz & Pop-Eleches 2010, Noutcheva 2016, Smith 2001).

Despite these purported qualifications, there has been recent evidence of democratic backsliding among third wave democracies 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. On March 30, 2020, the Hungarian parliament, citing the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, passed an emergency law giving Orbán the power to rule by decree indefinitely (Hockenos 2020).

Similarly, since coming to power in 2015, the Polish Law and Justice party has restricted the media and repeatedly attacked the judiciary. In 2018, Poland faced potential legal action from the EU for jeopardizing rule of law. Nevertheless, attacks against the judiciary continued, and by early 2020, judges that were critical of government action and ones attempting to correctly apply EU law were subject to disciplinary action. The Czech President, Miloš Zeman, who was re-elected in 2018, has joked about murdering opposition journalists, and his prime minister has expressed interest in dismantling democratic institutions (Ringen 2018). Freedom House's 2020 Nations in Transit report on 29 countries in central Europe and central Asia, recently identified a "stunning democratic breakdown" such that "there are fewer democracies in the region today than at any point since ... 1995" (Freedom House 2020, 1); this democratic decline has been the most visible in central Europe and the Balkans. What role, if any, has the EU played in these surprising instances of backsliding?

Democratic backsliding occurs when democratic institutions are weakened or eroded by elected officials, resulting in an illiberal or diminished form of democracy, rather than autocracy. In Europe specifically, cases of backsliding are characterized by populist leaders consolidating their power, dismantling courts, weakening the rule of law, encroaching on freedom of speech and the press, and limiting opposition and minority rights (Jakli & Stenberg 2020, Sitter & Bakke 2019). Research on these trends within the EU tends to focus either on the sources of backsliding in these countries, or the ways in which the EU has subsequently failed to respond. However, much less attention has been paid to the ways in which the EU itself may have contributed to the initial onset of backsliding.

On the EU side, scholars highlight the reasons why the EU has been unable to effectively respond to or halt backsliding among its member states (Sedelmeier 2017), emphasizing factors such as EU party politics, an unwillingness to infringe on national sovereignty, the role of unmonitored EU funding controlled by national executives, and open borders that allow would-be regime dissidents to simply exit the country (Kelemen 2020, Meijers & Van Der Veer 2019). Going back one step further, other research proposes a range of national (Bugaric 2015, Fomina & Kucharczyk 2016, Herman 2015, Rupnik 2016) and sub-national (Jakli & Stenberg 2020) sources of backsliding in post-communist EU member states. Backsliding in the region has also been attributed to international variables, such as the global financial crisis (Armingeon & Guthmann 2014, Morlino & Quaranta 2016).

This paper identifies an additional international source of backsliding in central and eastern Europe: the European Union. Given the instrumental role the EU played in democratization in this region, it is critical to consider the extent to which the EU itself has contributed to ongoing cases of backsliding among its member states. Although scholars have noted EU membership conditionality is only effective in the short-term (Pridham 2008, Ugur 2013), they have not explicitly linked it to the erosion of democratic institutions, nor have they considered the impact of ongoing membership conditions on democratic outcomes. I argue that through its accession process and extensive policy structure, the EU contributes to backsliding in its members. This argument builds on

existing work on the limits of Europeanization, but takes it one step further to consider the ways in which EU-level factors, which were instrumental in the democratization and institution-building process in post-communist Europe, created domestic institutions susceptible to backsliding.

Specifically, I propose two interrelated theoretical mechanisms linking the EU to backsliding. First, EU accession and membership, which are both elite-dominated processes, increase executives' relative power at the domestic level. At the same time, EU conditionality and membership 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.

To trace the proposed mechanisms linking the EU to backsliding, this paper focuses on Hungary and Poland, two states that were subject to extensive EU accession requirements, and, to date, the two most extreme cases of backsliding within the organization. I contrast these cases with Spain and Portugal, two other new democracies in the EU. Spain and Portugal joined the EU when accession requirements and membership criteria were much less invasive. Unlike Hungary and Poland, Spain and Portugal have *not* experienced backsliding.

The theoretical mechanisms proposed here have important implications for three research fields. First, these mechanisms contribute to work on democratic backsliding, which to date has been limited in scope and often lacks theoretical frameworks for explaining potential sources of this phenomenon (Waldner & Lust 2018). It also builds on research on the limits of EU conditionality, bringing these findings under a common framework and explaining theoretically the mechanisms linking expanded EU membership requirements and democratic backsliding. Finally, this argument has critical implications for theories of IOs and regime outcomes, which identify a strong positive relationship between IOs on the one hand, and democracy and even democratic consolidation on the other (Pevehouse 2005, Poast & Urpelainen 2018, Mansfield & Pevehouse 2006).

The European Union and Democratic Backsliding

When states transition to democracy, they fall along a continuum between autocracy and consolidated democracy. Over time, as democratic bodies are institutionalized, a state progresses toward consolidation. However, sometimes these transitional democracies experience setbacks without reverting to autocracy, as illustrated by Figure 1: this is democratic backsliding.

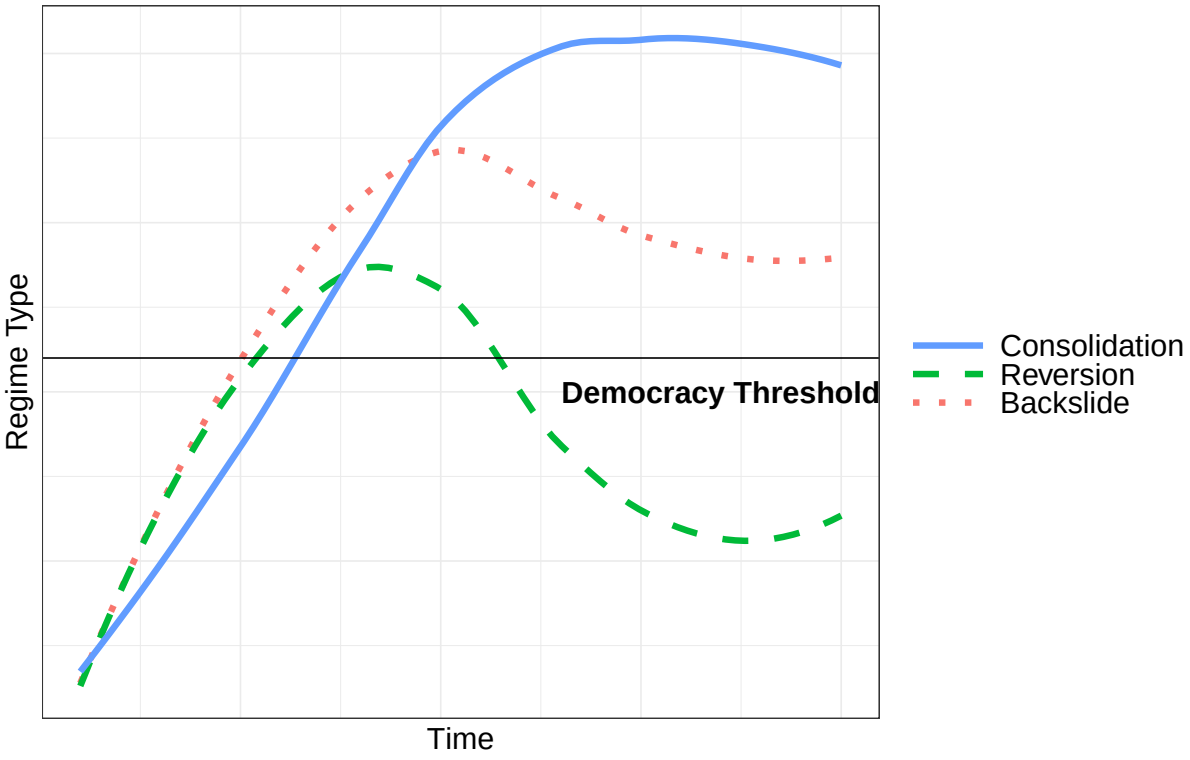

Figure 1: Democratic backsliding occurs when a state becomes less democratic without reverting to autocracy.

Democratic backsliding is a *state-led* process whereby elected officials undermine democratic institutions (Bermeo 2016), including: the constitution; the rule of law; judicial and media freedom; and the separation of power within government (Maeda 2010). The total dismantling of minimalist aspects of democracy—in particular, open, free, and fair elections (Schumpeter 1950)—is beyond the scope of backsliding; this would constitute autocratic reversion. Thus, backsliding is a within-regime process (Waldner & Lust 2018) that results in an illiberal or diminished democracy.

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. IOs increase the costs of anti-democratic behavior via economic sanctions and withholding economic assistance, and they gradually socialize rulers into accepting democracy (Genna & Hiroi 2014). IOs also influence leaders' international standing, either by helping them build a democratic reputation (Poast & Urpelainen 2018) or 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 opposition elites from overthrowing the new regime (Pevehouse 2005). In addition, IOs support democracy by promoting elections (Hadenius & Teorell 2007, Howard & Roessler 2006, Schedler 2002). Indeed, electoral assistance is the most common type of democracy assistance from IOs (Johnstone & Snyder 2016).

Although elections and elite compliance are critical minimal requirements for democracy (Dahl 1971, Huntington 1991, Przeworski et al. 2000), they are insufficient to guarantee continued democratic success. The limitations of election monitoring have been identified (Hyde 2011, Simpser & Donno 2012), elections are insufficient to promote ongoing democratic progress (Flores & Nooruddin 2016), 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 & Verba 1963, Carothers 2006, Gibler & Randazzo 2011, Graham et al. 2017, Grzymala-Busse 2007, Herman 2015, Huntington 1968, Mainwaring 1999, O'Donnell & Schmitter 1986).

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, with a particular emphasis on its role in Spain, Portugal, and Greece (Smith 2001) and post-communist Europe (Dimitrova & Pridham 2004, Ekiert 2008, Levitz & 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 (Grabbe 2014, Pridham 2008, Rupnik

2007, Ugur 2013). In the following sections, I take these findings further, arguing that the EU's extensive accession process and policy structure unintentionally impede institutional development and increase executive power. This combination of factors makes backsliding more likely.

The EU and Executive Power

The first way in which the EU unintentionally contributes to backsliding in its member states is linked to the fact that the EU creates power asymmetries between the executive and other branches of government by increasing relative executive power. During the accession process, which favors executives over other government bodies (Grabbe 2001, Follesdal & Hix 2006), institutions are created from above without support from political groups or civil society (Bugaric 2015). Instead, Euro-experts and other bureaucrats charged with preparing a state for accession are housed within the executive branch, thereby giving executives access to additional information and the power to influence domestic institutional formation. The 2004 and 2007 accessions in particular were elite-led, dominated by foreign policy officials, and devoid of public debate (Grabbe 2014, Pridham 2007).

The EU's strategies for democracy promotion further increase executive power. Democracy promotion is often not undertaken with the sole purpose of building democracy but is also driven by a desire to promote economic and regional stability. Reflecting these additional considerations, in post-communist Europe more attention went to economic transformation and stability—which involves the construction of regulatory, economic, and other bureaucratic offices—than to support for democratic institutions (Smith 2001).

For example, focusing on the EU's role in Estonia, Raik notes that the logic underlying this process "promoted bureaucratic, executive-dominated policy making and left little room for democratic politics" (Raik 2004, 591). This bureaucratic approach is an artifact of the technocratic nature of the organization itself and is linked the EU's conditions for membership. Bureaucracies are created during the pre-accession phase 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.

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 (Fortin 2012, Grzymala-Busse 2007). However, the EU invests predominantly in the bureaucracy at the expense of more democratic institutions. The result is a state with a strong executive that controls a powerful bureaucracy.

Membership in a highly integrated EU further increases executive power. Domestic executives serve as intermediaries between their state and EU institutions. Indeed, 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 at the supranational level, with a coinciding decrease in parliamentary control (Follesdal & Hix 2006). For example, executives represent their countries in the European Council, the EU's most powerful political body (Tallberg 2008). In addition, 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 & Dorussen 2013).

On their own, strong executives are not necessarily bad for democracy. However, when these powerful executives are surrounded by institutions that are too weak and too underdeveloped to act as a check on their power, democratic backsliding becomes more likely. This leads to the second mechanism linking the EU to democratic backsliding in its member states: the EU limits countries' domestic policy space, which stunts the development of important democratic institutions in new democracies, including those that check executive power.

The EU and the Domestic Policy Space

EU membership conditionality expanded significantly with the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, the Copenhagen Criteria in 1993, and the EU's use of active leverage over candidate states beginning in 1997. EU conditionality requires candidates to adopt extensive, non-

negotiable institutions, laws, and policies; these policy requirements continue into the membership phase. As a primarily economic organization with a single market, common currency, and shared budget, these requirements result in neoliberal economic and fiscal policy convergence across the EU (Cao 2009, Grabbe 2014). For example, the EU's direct influence over monetary policies, resulting from the founding of the European Monetary Union, gives it tremendous influence over national policies regarding budgetary policies, which are "restricted or even co-determined by the European Commission as the Stability and Growth Pact limits a country's budget deficit to 3%" (Katsanidou & Otjes 2015). Policy constraints resulting from increased European integration limit candidate and member states' domestic policy space, or the range of available policies they can adopt. This impedes party system institutionalization, especially in new democracies, by hindering parties' abilities to debate policy alternatives (Grzymalaa-Busse & Innes 2003, Vachudova 2008) and leaves the legislature underdeveloped by limiting its policy-making role.

Institutionalized parties compete in elections by situating themselves along salient, politicized societal cleavages linked to policy outcomes (Lipset & Rokkan 1967). However, EU requirements leave fewer policy alternatives, and voters know economic options are limited (Hellwig 2014). Therefore, it is difficult for parties to differentiate themselves based on economic appeals. Instead, they emphasize non-economic valence issues, or uncontroversial issues "on which all parties declare the same objective but dispute each other's competence in achieving the desired policy" (Kitschelt et al. 1999, 137), such as corruption or nationalism. This is true for both niche and mainstream parties (Ward et al. 2015). As a result, domestic party competition has been hollowed out as EU integration has progressed, and the ideological distance between mainstream parties has decreased (Mair 2007). This is particularly problematic for new democracies and 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 an important check on executive power and thus as a critical institutional safeguard against democratic backsliding.

EU policy requirements also have negative implications for the development and institutionalization of legislatures in new democracies. In addition to stunting party system development, the policy requirements detailed in the *acquis communautaire* infringe on some of the primary roles of legislatures: proposing, drafting, and implementing legislation. This marginalization of the legislature has several consequences. 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 legislature, 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 executive power (Diamond et al. 1999, Fish 2006, O'Donnell 1999).

Finally, a diminished domestic policy space alters policy debates and limits the extent to which politicians can compete for office based on ideological differences. Unable to credibly propose future changes to policies imposed by the EU, incumbents and political parties instead rely on valence 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, Bugaric 2008, Linden 2008).[1]

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 national legislatures—is a relevant factor with respect to democratic backsliding, which often involves unchecked executive powers. 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

[1]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.

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). I build on existing research 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 member states. This is especially so for new democracies, where institutional checks on the executive, such as party systems, legislatures, and judiciaries, have not had sufficient time or opportunity to develop.

Research Design

Illiberalism and backsliding have been on the rise throughout post-communist Europe (Rupnik 2016). Of the 10 post-communist countries that joined the EU in 2004 and 2007, only Estonia has improved its democracy level since accession, whereas the other nine have declined to varying degrees. These trends are perhaps unsurprising in Bulgaria and Romania, which consistently lagged behind with respect to democratization (Spendzharova & Vachudova 2012). However, backsliding has even occurred in the Visegrad countries, which were undisputed leaders during the democratization process.

Figures 2 and 3 illustrate the illiberal trends in this region, tracing the liberal democracy index for each country that acceded to the EU in 2004. 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. 2020); in other words, it captures the specific aspects of democracy where backsliding begins.

I focus on the two most extreme cases of backsliding in the EU: Hungary and Poland. It is particularly puzzling that Hungary and Poland have undergone 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), have relatively high levels of economic development (Lipset 1959), and have low levels of inequality (Boix 2003). These countries received similar amounts of aid and influence from the EU and were subject to the same accession and membership requirements (Vachudova

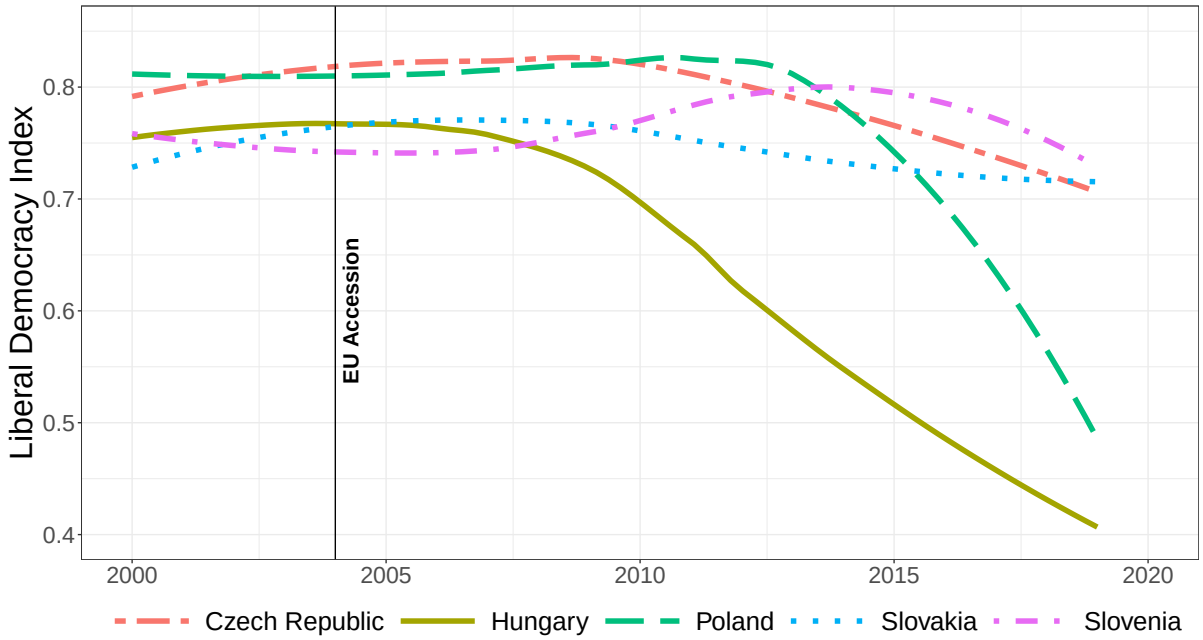

Figure 2: Since joining the EU in 2004, liberal democracy has been on the decline to varying degrees in all Visegrad countries.

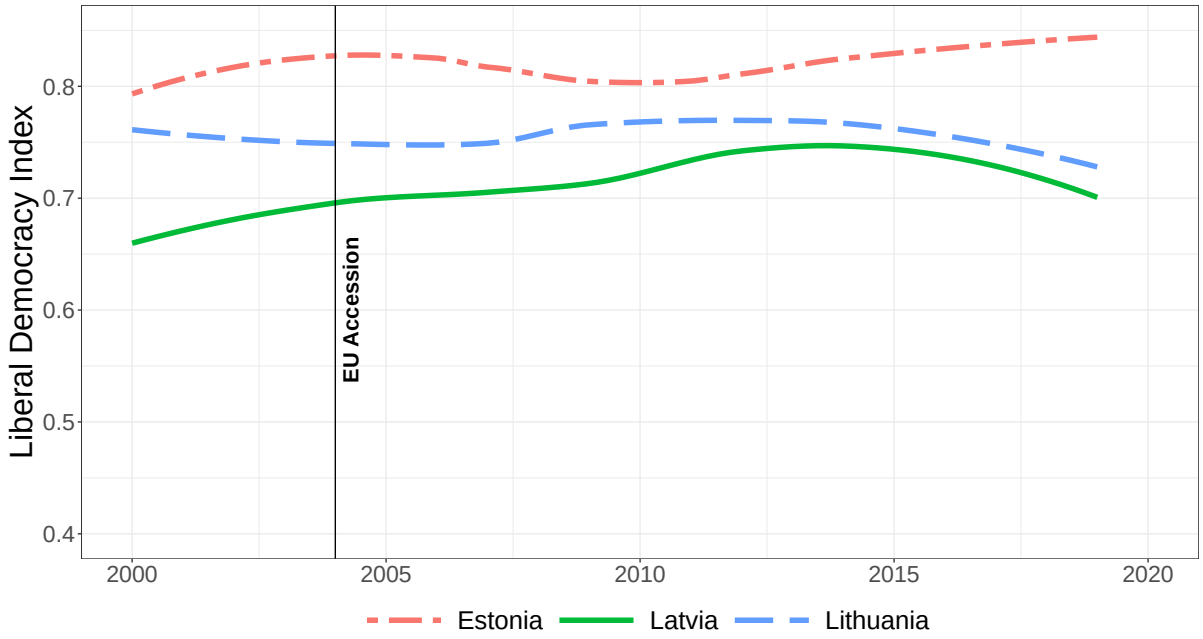

Figure 3: Since joining the EU in 2004, liberal democracy has been on the decline to varying degrees in all Visegrad countries.

2005).

This paper uses a multi-method approach to link the EU's extensive accession and membership criteria, which became particularly onerous beginning with the eastern enlargement of the EU, to democratic backsliding in new democracies. I do this, first, by considering how the EU's requirements, and thus its effect on new democracies, have changed over time. As shown in Figures 2 and 3, backsliding and rising illiberalism have emerged throughout post-communist Europe, all of which was subject to similar accession processes and high levels of conditionality. In other words, there is limited variation on the independent and dependent variables in this region. However, the EU accession process has not always been so extensive; rather, it became so with the signing of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, the introduction of the Copenhagen Criteria 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 and less intrusive accession processes 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, Portugal, and Greece in the 1980s. One result of the higher levels of integration that followed was the creation of a significantly longer list of requirements that subsequent entrants were required to accept (Pahre 1995). 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 to date, with two canonical third wave democracies that joined the EU prior to increased integration: Spain and Portugal. As Figure 4 illustrates, unlike Hungary and Poland, Spain's and Portugal's levels of democracy continued to improve and then remained stable for between 15 and 20 years after joining the EU.

In contrast to Hungary and Poland, membership conditionality for Spain and Portugal was much less extensive, occurred on much more of an *ad hoc* basis, and required the adoption of significantly fewer domestic policies than was the case for Hungary and Poland. I argue that these differences in the accession processes, all of which occurred

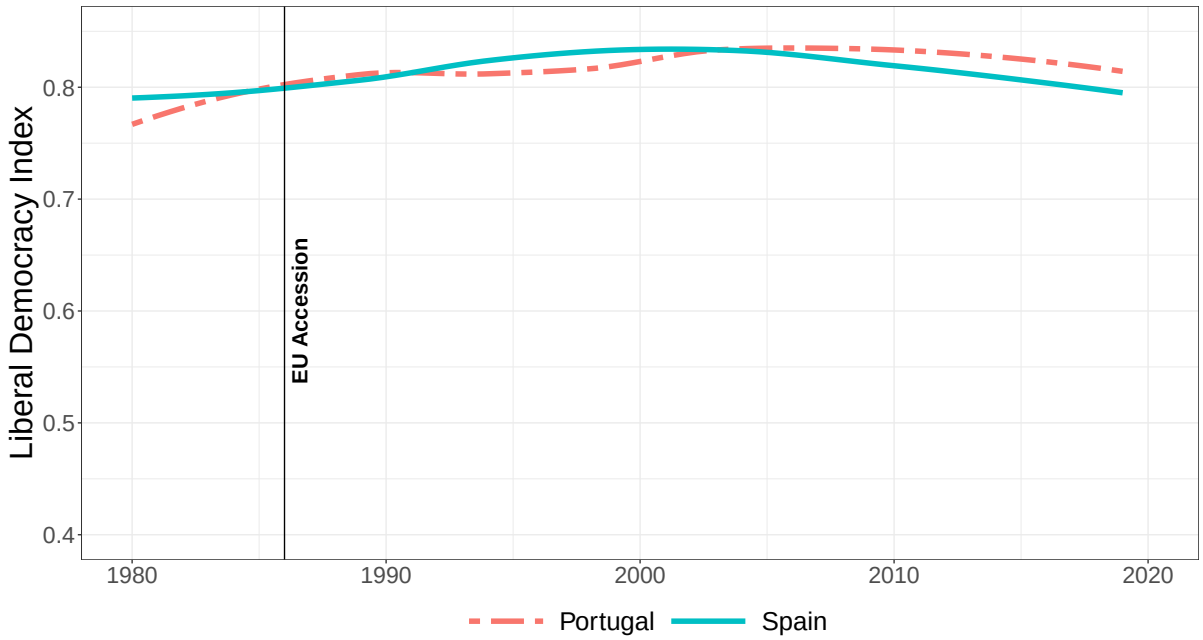

Figure 4: Since joining the EU in 1986, Spain and Portugal's levels of democracy have remained stable (Coppedge et al. 2020).

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. Of course, Hungary and Poland are not directly comparable to Spain and Portugal: there are important differences due to the legacies of communism as well as the differences in the international system at their times of democratization. Nevertheless, all of these states were third wave democracies that experienced different degrees of international influence when transitioning to democracy; therefore, the comparison provides 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 Accession Process in Spain and Portugal

Spain and Portugal were among the first third wave democracies to join the EU. These countries joined the EU in 1986, prior to the signing of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, which significantly increased levels of integration among EU member states. When Spain and Portugal became members, the EU was a primarily 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 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's 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 1993 Copenhagen Criteria, and it began actively monitoring and evaluating compliance with these conditions in 1997 (Vachudova 2005).

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, 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 international influence during their early years as democracies, allowing political parties and other representative institutions 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).

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 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 an 80,000-page non-negotiable document outlining the laws, norms, and regulations in force in EU member states. In 1994, the EU Agreements went into force, 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. Under Orbán and Fidesz, the Hungarian government has become increasingly illiberal. After gaining a two-thirds majority in the 2010 elections, Fidesz limited the jurisdiction of the constitutional court, curtailed election-monitoring mechanisms, eliminated checks on presidential power, and enacted a new constitution to consolidate

the party's power (Bánkuti et al. 2012, Muller 2013).

Similarly, in Poland in 2015, the Law and Justice party (PiS)—another right-wing populist party, led by Jarosław Kaczyński—won the presidency and secured a parliamentary majority. Since then, the Polish government has aggressively embraced majoritarianism and attempted to eliminate government checks and balances by attacking the high court, the prosecutor's office, the media, and the civil service (Fomina & Kucharczyk 2016). Continued attempts by the ruling party to delegitimize the judiciary have raised concerns about the future of rule of law in Poland (Nalepa 2017) and of democracy more generally (Kelemen & Orenstein 2016).

Researchers have explained these cases of backsliding by focusing on domestic-level factors such as economic recession and stagnation (Hernandez & Kriesi 2016), corruption (Hanley & Sikk 2016), the migrant crisis (Krastev 2016, Rupnik 2016), and weak and discredited center-left opposition parties (Berman 2016). However, a brief comparison suggests these domestic-level explanations alone are insufficient. The 2015 ascent of Poland's PiS has been likened to Fidesz's 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 & Kucharczyk 2016). Despite these contrasting domestic situations, the outcomes in Hungary and Poland have been remarkably similar. This suggests that domestic explanations alone are insufficient.

Executive Power

The first way I argue the EU has contributed to backsliding in Hungary and Poland is by increasing relative executive power. 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 & 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 are now taken almost exclusively at the EU level. Similarly, the EU has monopolized control of commercial negotiations, with the EU Commissioner for Trade acting on behalf of all member states (Nanou & 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 that EU membership contributes to executive power aggrandizement is through transnational party politics, which can provide state executives with transnational 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.[2] One proposed explanation for this lack of action on the part of the EU is related to party politics at the supranational level. 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 et al. 2007). 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 that the EU has on governmental balance of power in new democracies. Figure 5 compares four measures of executive constraints in 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. 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

[2]Although the European Parliament voted in 2018 to sanction Hungary for its undemocratic turn, it is not yet clear if this vote will translate into any substantial action.

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. 2018). Overall, intra-governmental power relations favor the executive to a greater extent in Hungary and Poland than in western Europe.

The EU also increases executive power via 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 European 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 aimed 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, which began in 2000: SAPARD and IPSA. SAPARD provided aid for agricultural and rural development, while IPSA funds were targeted toward environmental and trans-

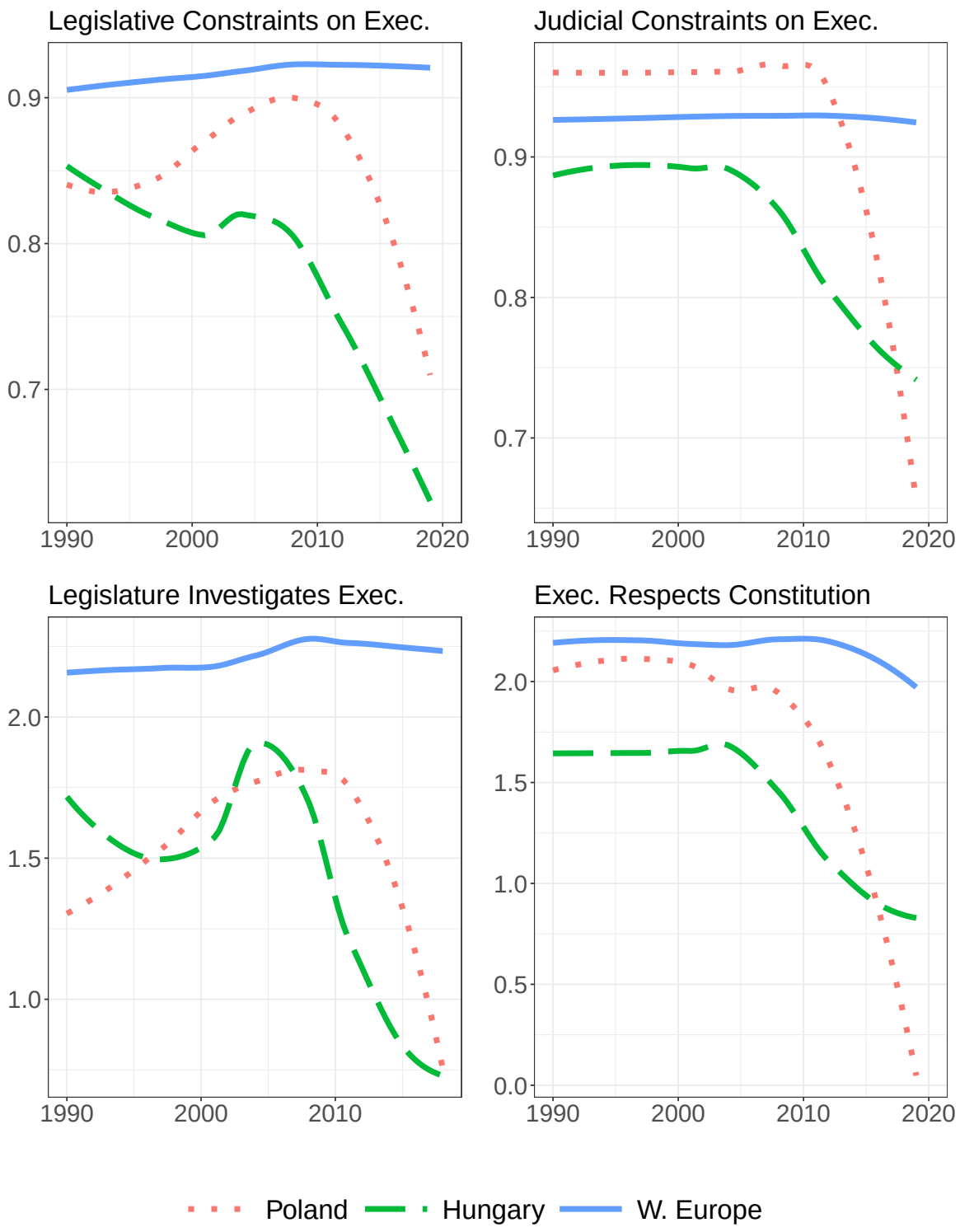

Figure 5: On average, western European legislatures and judiciaries have more control over their executives, and executives in the West adhere to the constitution more closely than their counterparts in Hungary and Poland.

portation 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 given to truly democratic institutions.

The primary mechanism that 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 undergirded by the assumption that institutions can be set up in a top-down manner rather than being gradually learned (Bailey & 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 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 2002*a*,*b*).

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	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓			

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 less funds available to offer these countries for implementing these requirements (Bailey & de Propris 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 & Hix 2006). This technocratic aspect of the Union is passed along to candidate states.

The EU's bureaucratic orientation, and corresponding inability to promote truly democratic institutions, is reflected in its response to democratic backsliding. Thus far, the EU's response to increasing illiberalism in Hungary and Poland has been fragmented. In addition to the barriers posted by supranational party politics, part of the problem lies in the fact that the EU has a limited toolkit at its disposal for punishing member states, especially when it comes to political non-compliance with EU democratic standards. Prior to granting membership, the EU is able to use the carrot of membership to

incentivize states to uphold democratic conditions. However, after accession, the EU's leverage diminishes, in large part due to the fact that there are no mechanisms by which membership can be revoked and also because the sanctions available to the EU for political violations are relatively weak (Jenne & Mudde 2012). The one exception is Article 7 of the Treaty of the European Union, which gives the European Commission the power to revoke certain membership privileges, such as voting rights in the European Council, for "serious and persistent breaches of democratic principles" (Sedelmeier 2014, 106). Although in 2018 the European Parliament did finally vote to invoke Article 7 against Hungary, any action would require an unanimous vote within the European Commission. This is quite unlikely, given that Poland also has a representative in the Commission.

Domestic Policy Space

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 institutional development, including institutions 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 constrained 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" (Grzymalaa-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 policies were dictated directly by the EU, policy debates in these states were and continue to be largely based on valence issues and secondary policy concerns, with parties distinguishing themselves from one another merely by disputing each other's managerial competence in implementing EU-prescribed policies rather than

debating substantive program alternatives or ideological issues.[3]

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 & Dorussen 2013). To illustrate, today, none of the leading parties from the 1990 Hungarian election are electorally competitive at the national level. The year 1998 was the last time that any parties in Hungary that had competed in the first democratic election won more than 10% of the national vote. 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. Since 2007, Poland's party system has been dominated by PiS (conservative) and Civic Platform (liberal). Many of the earlier Polish parties were social democratic parties, yet none of these has surpassed 10% since 2005. Several agrarian parties were also prominent early on; these too have been largely absent.

The topics included in parties' manifestos illustrate the limits the EU places on domestic policy. Party systems in mature democracies form when parties compete along salient socio-political cleavages based on economic, social, and nation-based issues (Lipset & Rokkan 1967). Parties in less developed party systems, however, compete primarily on valence 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 percentage 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

[3]Vachudova 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 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 characterized by parties that campaign on valence issues. Indeed, Vachudova finds that, when the parameters for party competition broadened following accession, more parties began adopting nationalistic and other culturally conservative policies (Vachudova 2008).

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 a state's domestic policy space and the extent to which parties appeal to voters based on substantive policy issues.

The CMP data identify 56 categories of manifesto topics. To measure the extent to which parties in Hungary and Poland debate substantive policies, I isolate the 22 topics that are directly related to economics, government intervention in the economy, or social issues defined in economic terms (Ward et al. 2015). Specifically, 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 and less policy-relevant; 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 6 traces the extent to which parties in Hungary and Poland, on average over time, reference substantive economic and non-economic policies.[4] Overall, economic issues have been less prominent than non-economic issues in each election since Hungary and Poland transitioned to democracy. The emphasis on non-economic issues grew following EU accession. In the last Hungarian election for which manifesto data are available (2014), the average emphasis on non-economic issues was 61% compared to only 39% for economic ones; similarly, in Poland in 2011, 70% of manifestos were devoted to non-economic issues, while only 30% discussed economic ones.

These trends are in stark contrast to parties in mature democracies. Figure 7 compares the extent to which parties in Hungary, Poland, and western Europe include mentions of economic and non-economic issues. The lines for Hungary and Poland are the same as those in Figure 6; for the western Europe lines, I average across party manifestos from

[4]To draw the lines for the plots in Figure 6, I find the percent that each party in a given country devotes to the economic and non-economic topic in their manifesto in any given year. I then calculate the average percentage for all parties in a country for that year; this value is the point plotted on the graph. Finally, I use lines of best fit, one for Hungary and one for Poland, to show changes over time.

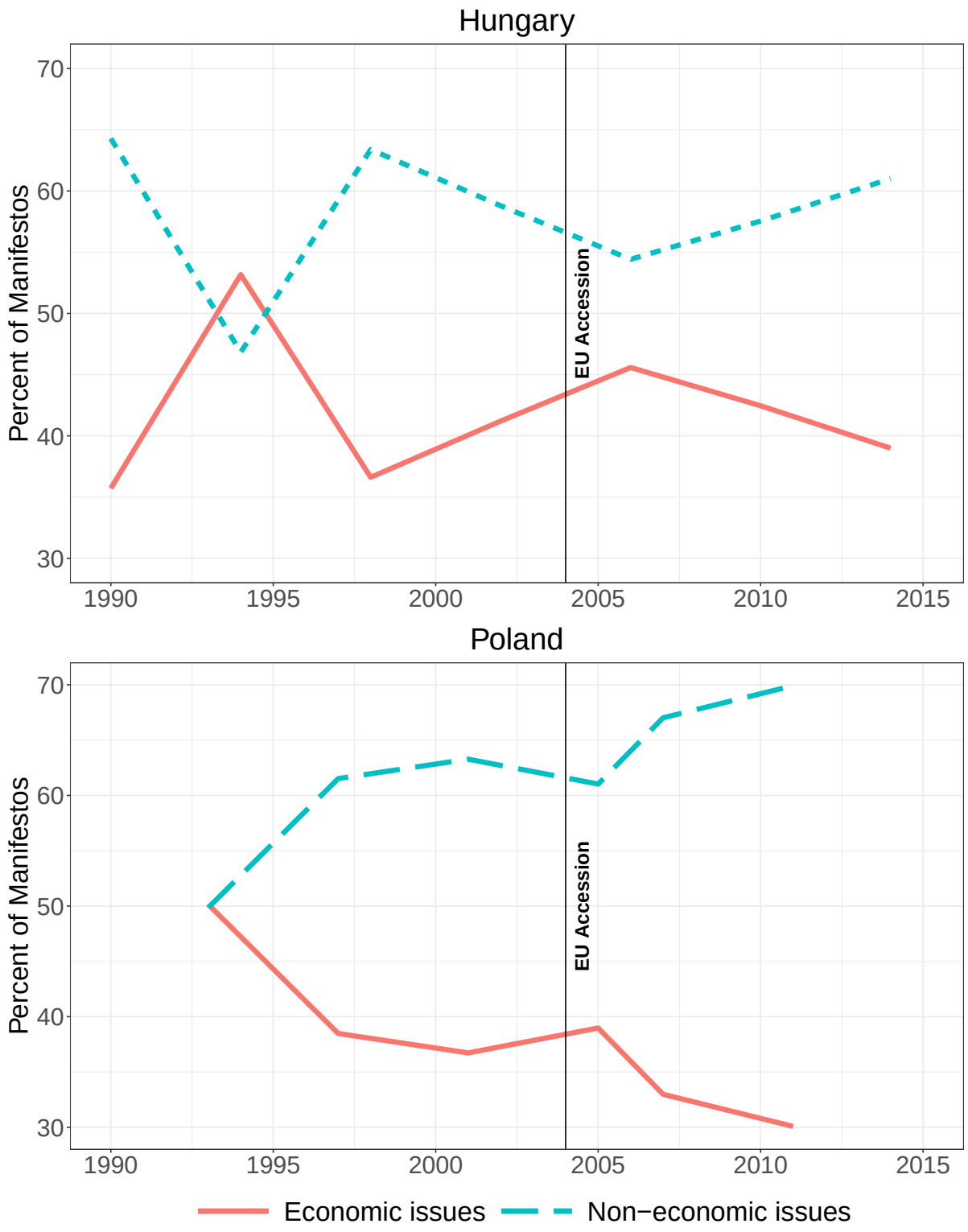

Figure 6: Economic issues are less prominent than non-economic ones in Hungarian and Polish party manifestos. The emphasis on non-economic issues became particularly strong following EU accession.

the 15 countries that were EU members prior to 2004. During this time period, mentions of economic issues have declined in Hungary and Poland, while non-economic discussions have increased. In western Europe, the opposite is true.

Comparing parties in Hungary and Poland to those in western Europe both today and in the past shows that Hungarian and Polish parties on average focus much more on valence issues in their party platforms than parties in western Europe do today or ever did. One defining characteristic of underdeveloped party systems is parties that compete primarily based on valence issues (Kitschelt et al. 1999). This provides preliminary evidence that the EU's reduction of the domestic policy space in Hungary and Poland stunted party system development.

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 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

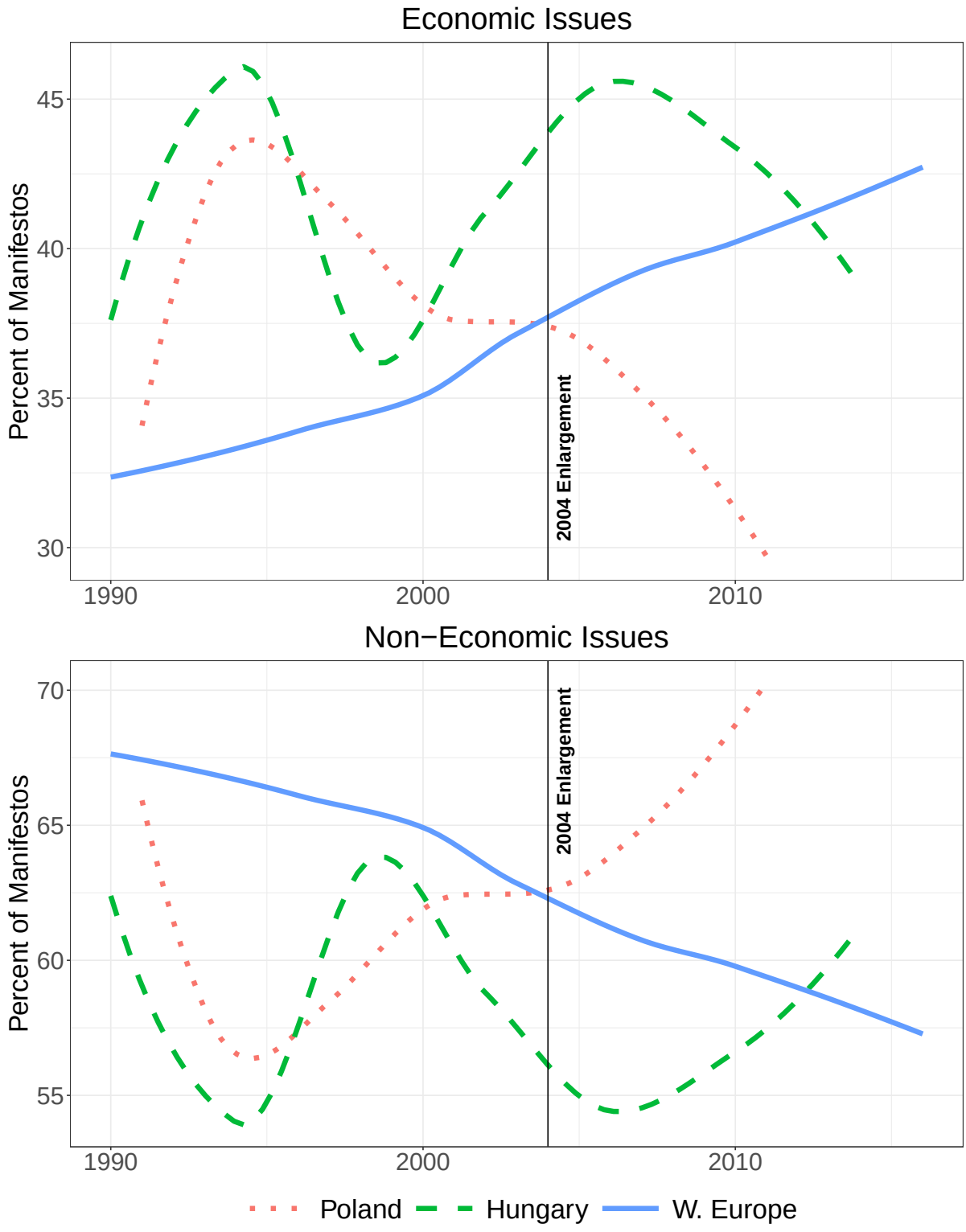

Figure 7: At the same time that mentions of economic issues have been on the decline in Hungary and Poland, western European parties on average have given increased attention to these same topics. Similarly, while mentions of non-economic issues in Hungary and Poland have steadily risen, they have been decreasing among western European parties.

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, amongst 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 valence issues.

Similar trends emerged in Poland. In party manifestos from 1991 and 1993, valence topics were less common among the parties that received over 10% of the vote. Parties discussed a wide range of economic policies, such as market regulation, 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 valence 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 valence 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.

Alternative Explanations

Above I argue that accession to and membership in a highly integrated EU contribute to backsliding in new democracies by simultaneously increasing executive power and limiting domestic policy options; I trace these mechanisms with in-depth case studies of Hungary and Poland. As shown in Figures 2 and 3, with the exception of Estonia, all of the 2004 EU accession countries have regressed to some extent in their levels of democracy since accession (Schenkkan 2017). Since this is the case, I compare Hungary and Poland to Spain and Portugal, two other new democracies that joined the EU prior to increased integration. Unlike Hungary and Poland, democracy levels in Spain and Portugal have remained consistently high.

One concern might be that I have selected on the dependent variable. In one sense, I certainly have, but I have done so because it allows me to illustrate precisely how EU membership can be linked to democratic backsliding. However, an obvious question remains: why have the trends in Hungary and Poland not emerged in *all* new democracies that have joined the EU since 2004? Although a full accounting of the necessary and sufficient conditions for the relationship between the EU and democratic backsliding to obtain are beyond the scope of this paper, several other factors likely condition or influence the extent to which the EU leads to increased executive power, stunted institutional development, and subsequent backsliding in its member states.

First, Russian influence across post-communist Europe has been cited as a pressing challenge to ongoing democratic progress in the region. Researchers find that Russia is working to discredit western liberal democratic systems in order to undermine the stability and cohesion of the EU and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). It does this primarily by interfering in states' economies, and thus its ability to erode

democratic institutions within is most potent in states subject to greater Russia economic influence (Conley et al. 2016). However, another brief comparison of Hungary and Poland suggest that Russian influence alone is insufficient to account for backsliding throughout post-communist Europe. While Hungary maintains increasingly closer ties with Moscow, Poland is committed to distancing itself from Russia, which it views as a security threat.

In addition, the extent to which the EU increases relative executive power at the domestic level likely depends on the power that national legislatures have to scrutinize EU-level policies. Scholars have found that national legislatures increasingly oversee their governments' decisions regarding EU affairs, though the extent to which these legislatures' opinions translate into action varies substantially between countries. Although the new democracies in central and eastern Europe tend to have stronger constitutional provisions for legislative involvement in EU policy-making when compared to countries such as those in southern Europe, there is still variation among these new member states as well (Auel & Christiansen 2015, Karlas 2012). For example, even where formal powers of oversight do exist, the extent to which national legislatures actively oversee executive decisions at the EU-level is contingent on the incentives and opportunities that party groups, and in particularly the opposition, face (Auel et al. 2015, Finke & Herbel 2015, Gattermann & Hefftler 2015).

Finally, a state's probability of backsliding may depend on the extent to which populist appeals, which have characterized illiberalism and backsliding in post-communist Europe in particular (Pappas 2016), are electorally viable. While this is undoubtedly relevant, I argue that populism is a consequence, rather than source of domestic institutional weaknesses. The extent to which populists are able to gain power depends on the strength of the party system as a whole, and of the opposition in particular. In states where parties are weak and underdeveloped due to a limited domestic policy space, it becomes easier for populists to gain power. Once in office, and faced with a weak and fragmented opposition, these populists are then able to manipulate institutions to increase their power, thus making backsliding more likely.

In short, although I argue that increased executive power and stunted institutional

development due to EU involvement made backsliding more likely in these new democracies, I acknowledge the EU's impacts are conditional on, or work in tandem with other international and domestic factors. Additional research is needed to more fully understand how these other variables work to dilute or amplify the unintended consequences of European integration for institutional development and democracy in EU member states.

Conclusion

This paper argues the EU's post-Maastricht policy structure, accession process, and membership requirements make democratic backsliding more likely by simultaneously limiting states' domestic policy space, which stunts institutional development, and augmenting executive power. Combining comparative case studies with careful process tracing, this paper finds 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 account for cases of non-backsliding in EU member states.

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

This argument also has implications for other IOs that limit states' domestic policy space. The World Trade Organization and the International Monetary Fund similarly constrain economic policy options and therefore may have comparably negative long-term impacts on democracy. The argument here also suggests that democracy promoting

IOs should look beyond election monitoring and elite compliance, and focus more attention and resources on developing and supporting political parties and legislatures in new democracies. Finally, the proposed theoretical mechanisms make an important contribution to nascent research on democratic backsliding.

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