



## Research Question

WHAT ROLE, IF ANY, HAS THE EUROPEAN UNION (EU) PLAYED IN CASES OF BACKSLIDING AMONG ITS NEWLY DEMOCRATIC MEMBER STATES?

- Democratic backsliding has been on the rise in a number of EU member states.
- Research on these trends focuses either on the domestic sources of backsliding, or the ways in which the EU subsequently failed to respond.
- Much less attention has been paid to how the EU itself may have created conditions conducive to backsliding.

## Background and Motivation

Research overwhelming finds IOs are positive forces for democracy that:

- Support peaceful transitions from autocracy [Nygard 2017]
- Provide election-related assistance [Johnston & Snyder 2016]
- Supply material incentives for incumbents [Donno 2013, Poast & Urpelainen 2018]
- Socialize newly democratic rulers [Genna & Hiroi 2014]
- Deter political losers from overthrowing the regime [Pevehouse 2005]

The EU in particular is associated with democracy, and 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 [Dimitrova & Pridham 2004, Ekiert 2008, Levitz & Pop-Eleches 2010, Noutcheva 2016, Smith 2001]

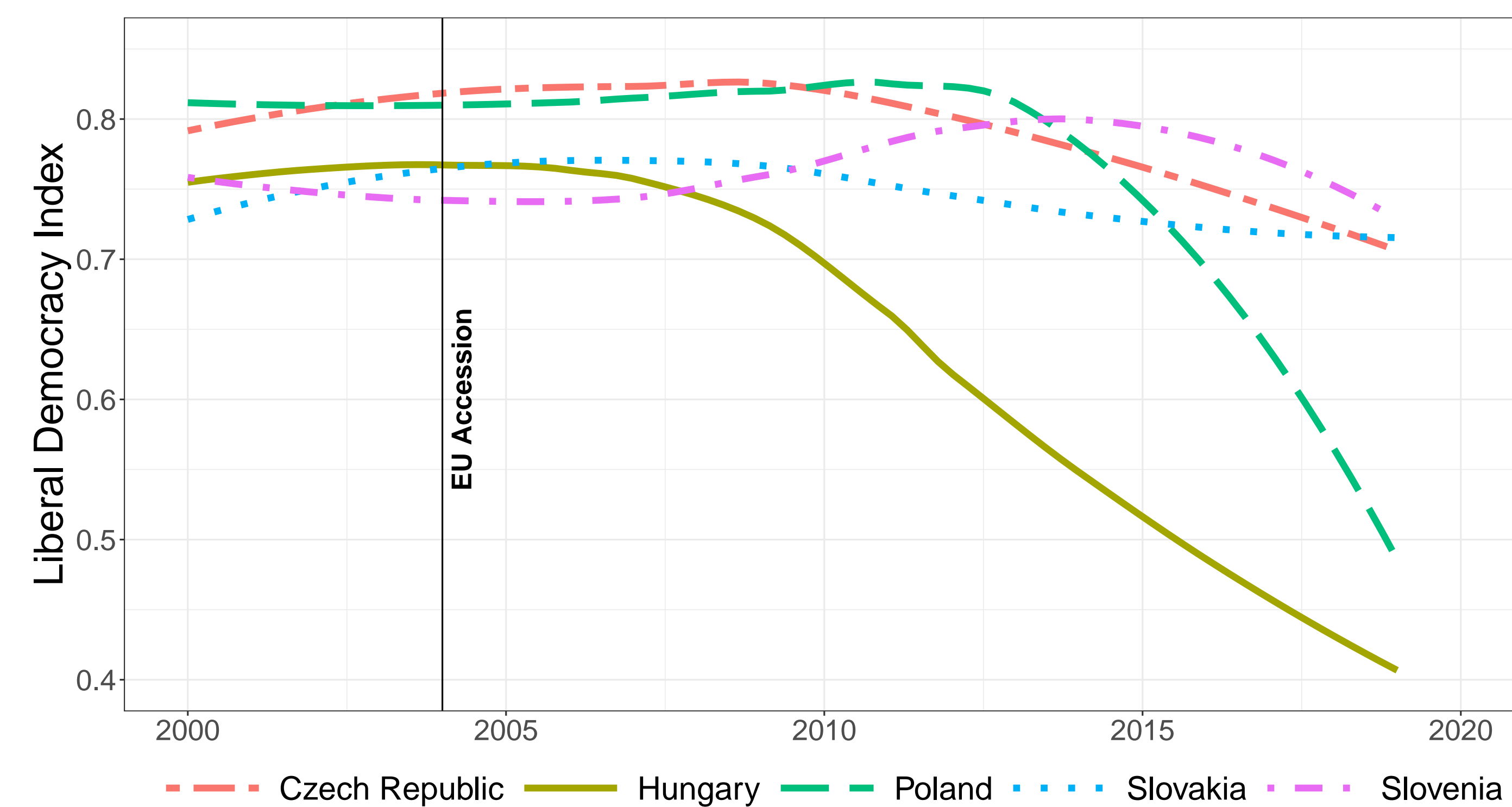


Fig. 1: Since joining the EU, liberal democracy has been on the decline to varying degrees in the Visegrad region. Data source: Coppedge et al. 2020.

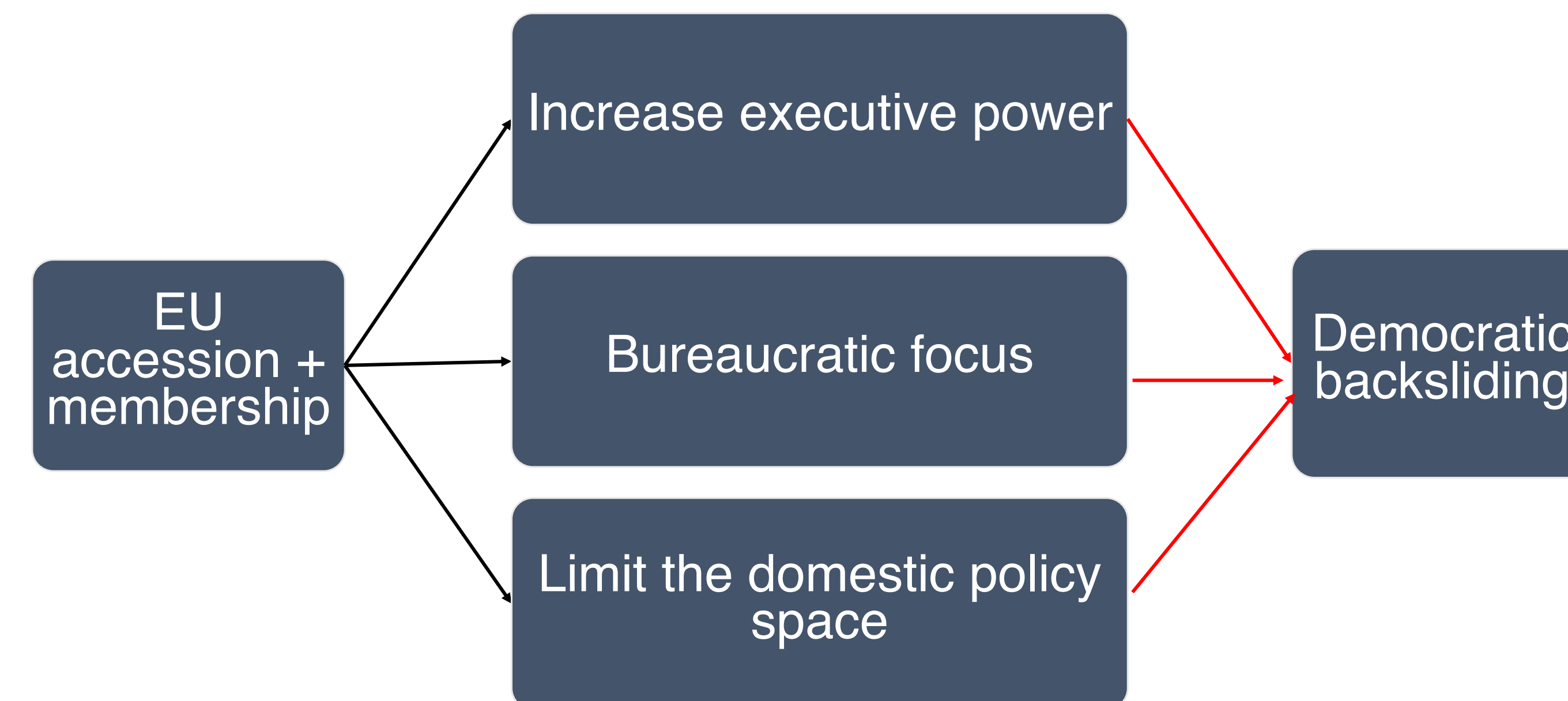
- EU scholars explore why the EU has failed to halt backsliding and identify a range of national and sub-national sources of backsliding in post-communist countries [Kelemen 2020, Meijers & van der Veer 2019, Sedelmeier 2017, Bugarcic 2015, Herman 2015, Rupnik 2016, Jakli & Stenberg 2020].
- This paper explores the extent to which the EU itself may contribute to backsliding.

## Empirical Approach

- Universe of cases: Third-wave democracies that are members of the EU.
- Comparative case studies: Spain and Portugal.
- In-depth case studies of Hungary and Poland to trace the proposed mechanisms.

## Theory

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.



## Domestic Policy Space in Hungary and Poland

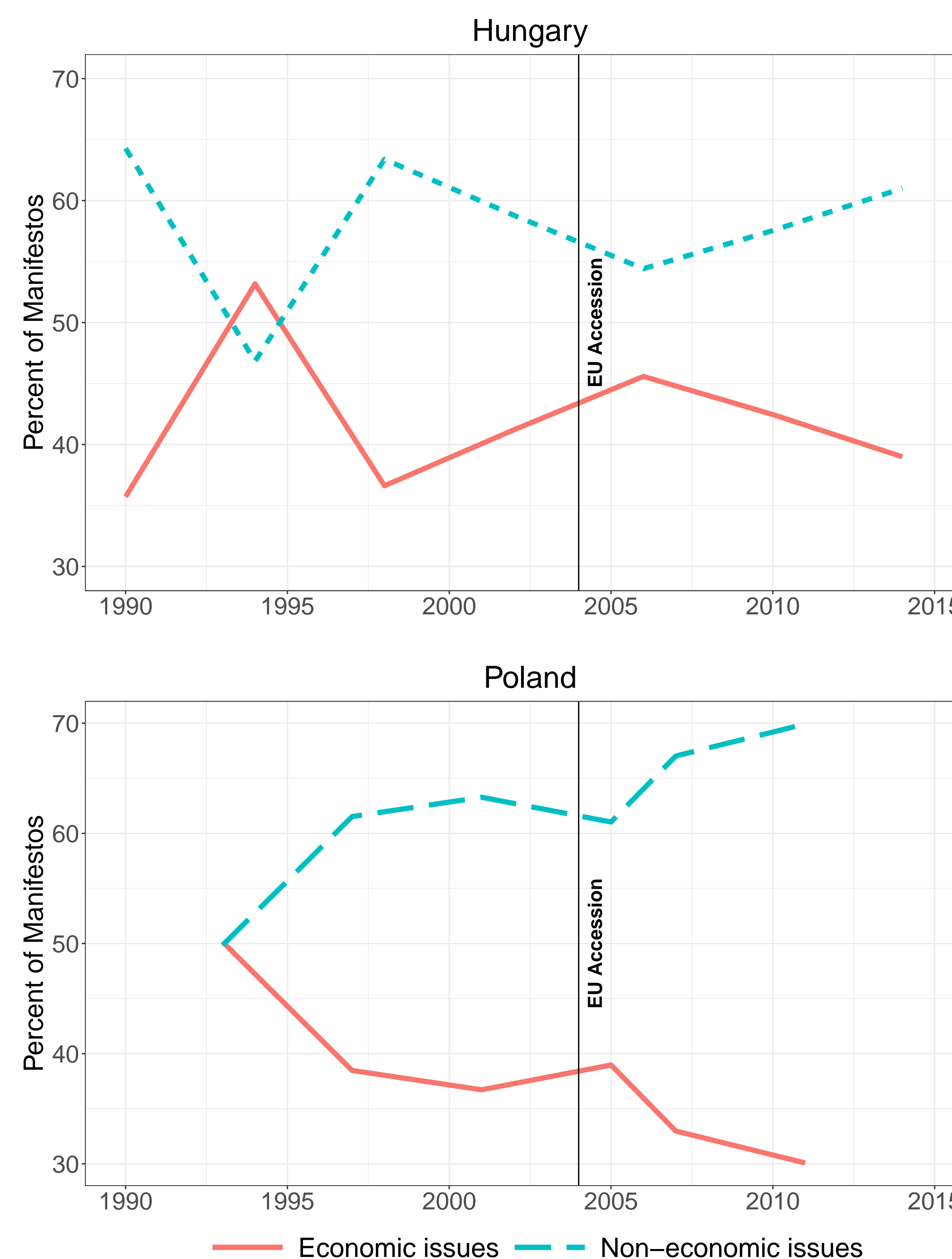


Fig. 4: Economic issues are less prominent than non-economic ones in Hungarian and Polish party manifestos. The emphasis on non-economic issues became particularly strong following EU accession.

## Executive Power in Hungary and Poland

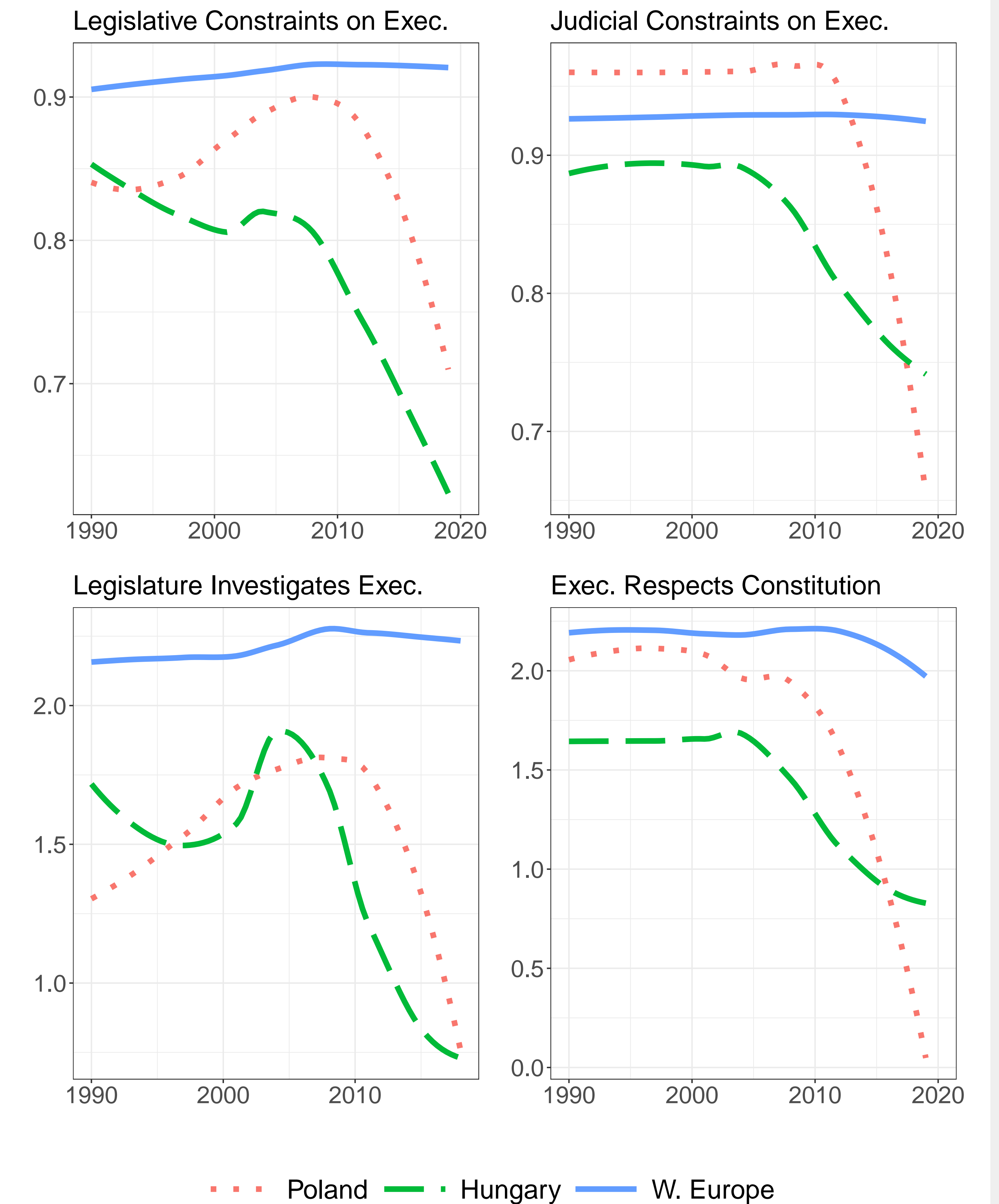


Fig. 5: On average, western European legislatures and judiciaries have more control over their executives, and executives in the West adhere to the constitution more closely than their counterparts in Hungary and Poland.

## The Accession Process in Spain and Portugal

- Spain and Portugal were among the first third wave democracies to join the EU in 1986, at a time when the EU's membership conditions were much less extensive. These countries' democracy levels remained high and stable 15-20 years following accession.
- The EU's accession process and membership conditions expanded significantly with the Maastricht Treaty (1992), the Copenhagen Criteria (1993), and the EU's active use of leverage over candidate states (1997).
- All new democracies in post-communist Europe joined the EU in 2004/2007, were subject to similar accession and membership requirements, and many have seen declines in levels of democracy since joining the EU.