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Assessing the Effectiveness of the European Union as a Militant Democracy Agent: Promoting Democracy in the Neighbourhood

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Abstract

The thesis examines the conditions under which the European Union (EU) can act as an effective militant democracy in its external relations amid renewed, heterogeneous autocratization across Europe and its neighbourhood. It challenges linear narratives of democratic advance or uniform recession, arguing instead that democratic erosion varies in trajectory, scope, and timing, and that EU responses differ across member states, enlargement countries, and European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) partners. Building on research on democratization and autocratization, external democracy promotion, and militant democracy, the study conceptualizes and evaluates the EU's external democratic militancy ambition.

Empirically, the project asks under what conditions the EU improves democratic quality in partner countries. It tests two EU-related conditions – membership incentives and partnership investments – using fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA) for 22 country partners that meet explicit EU scope conditions on democracy, the rule of law, and human rights. The outcome, Quality of Democracy, is calibrated as directional trajectories from V-Dem indices (polyarchy, rule of law, women's empowerment). Explanatory conditions include structural factors (development, inequality, ethnolinguistic fractionalization, freedom from autocratic influence) and proximate factors (power-sharing, government effectiveness), alongside the two hypothesis conditions: EU membership and EU partnership.

Three sufficient pathways to democratic improvement emerge. First, in low- and middle-income contexts, either high levels of equality or robust EU partnership investments can offset low levels of development promoting democracy. Second, where accession prospects are credible, membership incentives, combined with limited power-sharing, are associated with gains in democratic quality. Third, positive outcomes are also visible in settings without membership prospects but with extensive power-sharing.

Within-case studies of Georgia (low development plus high EU investment) and Albania (accession-driven reforms under concentrated executive authority) were conducted to complement configurational evidence with context-sensitive analysis, probing mechanisms and scope conditions.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the European Union (EU) has encountered a shifting landscape characterized by the emergence of authoritarian dynamics both within its borders and among its external partners. These dynamics, largely absent 10 to 20 years ago, present profound challenges to the EU's established norms and policies, necessitating a reevaluation of its approaches to democratic promotion.

In the late 1990s, towards the conclusion of the post-communist decade, Central and Eastern Europe stood out widely as a success story in democracy, perceived as such by many. Scholars even argued that these countries had reached a point where "authoritarian reversal" was deemed impossible, having "passed the point of no return" (Ekiert and Kubik, 1998). However, the overly optimistic and voluntaristic viewpoints prevalent in analyses of early post-Cold War transitions led to unrealistic expectations. When these expectations were not met, they gave rise to exaggerated pessimism and gloom, contributing to the near consensus that the world has fallen into a "democratic recession." Nevertheless, despite increasingly adverse global conditions in recent years, data show that new democracies globally continue to exhibit remarkable resilience (Levitsky and Way, 2015).

The situation is slightly more nuanced when only considering the European region. While democratic decline may not have progressed as extensively as sometimes anticipated, it does not imply that there is no cause for concern. Negative trends exist and could persist or possibly escalate (Treisman, 2023).

According to the V-Dem Institute, during the period from 2010 to 2020, the EU witnessed the emergence of the two most rapidly autocratizing countries globally – Poland and Hungary (Alizada et al., 2021). To define autocratization I apply a "negative" definition, meaning "any move away from full democracy" (Lührmann and Lindberg, 2018). Additionally, two prospective EU member states – Turkey and Serbia – were among the top five countries experiencing backsliding during that decade. In its 2022 report (Boese-Schlosser et al., 2022), the V-Dem Institute identified Slovenia as one of the top 10 fastest autocratizers worldwide over the past three years, while Croatia, Czech Republic, and Greece were also noted to have joined the ranks of nations experiencing democratic backsliding (Kelemen, 2023). Despite Hungary and Poland being the frontrunners of this EU autocratization tendency, the phenomenon is much more fragmented and nuanced than often assumed. Especially when extending the lens of analysis also to EU partner countries, it is clear that there is no single pattern towards autocratization in the region. Hence, the patterns of autocratization in EU partner countries and member states, as well as EU reaction to the phenomenon, require more variegated specific explanations (Cianetti et al., 2019). This involves distinguishing stable paths from various forms of autocratization and illuminating the diversity of the processes, which vary in their trajectory, extent, and timing relative to the initial democratic transition (Wunsch & Blanchard, 2023).

The EU was founded on principles that include the promotion of democracy, the rule of law, and human rights. It defines the support of democracy as its top priority. In the historical context, the Maastricht Treaty's Article J(1), effective in 1993, bestowed significant competencies upon the Union, including the development of cohesive external policies. This provision introduced the promotion of democracy and the maintenance of peace as fundamental principles of the EU's common foreign and security policy and development cooperation. The Treaty on European Union (TEU), as amended by the Lisbon Treaty, acknowledges democracy as a fundamental value of the Union. It is recognized as both a general objective and a principle guiding EU external action, including EU enlargement policy, whose core revolves around the Copenhagen criteria set forth in 1993. These criteria impose specific political

prerequisites on candidate states, emphasizing the stability of institutions ensuring democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and the respect for and protection of minorities. Established on the eve of the first wave of post-socialist countries' accession in the 2000s, these criteria remain valid for future EU enlargements, notably pointing to the Western Balkans as potential candidates. The EU's 2017 Strategy for the Western Balkans acknowledges the necessity for the respective countries to "strengthen their democracies," highlighting that comprehensive and convincing reforms, particularly in the realm of the rule of law, are still required in crucial areas.

This ambition – both internal and external – has sparked a scholarly debate regarding whether the EU qualifies as the first transnational militant democracy. The term "militant democracy" encompasses all those practices aimed at preemptively marginalizing entities that are perceived to undermine liberal democratic institutions (Bourne & Rijpkema, 2022). Yet, the preponderance of the debate centers on the EU's role as an agent of militant democracy in response to breaches of democratic values within its own borders (Larsen, 2021; Feisel, 2022; Theuns, 2023). The existing work frequently overlooks the EU's external actions against the trend of autocratization in candidate countries and neighboring partners – whose effectiveness I intend to explore more thoroughly. Similarly, the Rule of Law Crisis – or autocracy crisis (Kelemen, 2023) – among EU member states has been intensively analyzed and has received significant attention in the academic debate (Theuns, 2022; Closa, 2021; Halmai, 2018; Kochenov, 2017; Pech & Scheppele, 2017; Müller, 2013), as has the effectiveness of the EU's Rule of Law toolbox in addressing these issues (Pech, 2020; Scheppele, Kochenov & Grabowska-Moroz, 2020; Groussot & Zemskova, 2023). The focus of my research delves into a more recent and under-explored development: the EU's efficacy in promoting democracy *beyond* its borders, including both membership candidates and states within its neighborhood policy. Recognized as a leading global advocate for democracy and the world's second-largest provider of foreign aid after the United States, the EU has seen its role as a democratic promoter evolve alongside its enlargement and neighborhood policies (Gafuri, 2021). By employing incentive-based conditionality, the EU rewards governments in targeted countries for implementing reforms that uphold democratic practices and human rights. The prospect of membership, a conditionality unique to the EU, stands out as particularly effective among its diverse instruments (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004). Nevertheless, the EU's role as a promoter of democracy extends beyond prospective member states to include countries not on the membership track, such as those in the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP).

This thesis aims to explore the implications of these developments, specifically examining the EU's response to increasing autocratization in the region, how its approach differs between Enlargement and ENP countries, and the relative effectiveness of EU tools in addressing these challenges. The puzzle I aim to address is as follows: in the last decade, novel and/or renewed authoritarian dynamics have emerged among member states and the EU's external partners, challenging the EU's ambition as a militant democracy agent and leading to ambiguous results and potential double standards issues between member states, candidate countries, and ENP countries. My objective is to evaluate the evolution and effectiveness of EU militant democracy in its external actions. As a consequence, the research question at the basis of my inquiry will be the following.

Under what conditions can the EU be an effective militant democracy agent in terms of its response to increasing autocratization among its neighborhood partner countries?

With the objective of answering this question, the thesis is organized into two main parts, preceded by this introduction and followed by a final conclusion. Part I (Chapters 1, 2, and 3) develops the theoretical and conceptual foundations of the study through a literature review structured in three

chapters. Part II (Chapters 4 and 5) turns to the empirical analysis, combining a configurational comparison based on fsQCA with in-depth case studies. This organization reflects the logic of the argument: from the broader debates on democratization and autocratization, to the EU-specific instruments and normative framework, and finally to the empirical assessment of the conditions under which the EU can act effectively as a militant democracy agent.

Part I: Literature Review

Chapter 1 navigates major explanations of democratization – modernization, social forces, international influences, and cultural foundations – and connects them to recent work on autocratization and empirical determinants. Modernization theory, rooted in Lipset's *Some Social Requisites of Democracy* (1959), associates economic development with democratic endurance through education, social complexity, and shifts in distributive conflict. Early critics challenged this linear view. Dependency theorists (Frank, 1966) emphasized structural inequalities in the world economy, while Huntington (1968) warned that rapid mobilization without institutional growth produces instability rather than democracy. "Neo-modernization" refined these claims. Przeworski and Limongi (1997) and Przeworski et al. (2000) distinguished endogenous effects (development induces transitions) from exogenous ones (wealth stabilizes democracies), finding stronger evidence for the latter. Boix and Stokes (2003) countered that development also fosters transitions, particularly when inequality and human capital are considered. Acemoglu et al. (2008, 2009) redirected attention to historical–institutional paths and critical junctures, while Acemoglu and Robinson (2005) modeled democratization as a credible-commitment solution most likely under moderate inequality. Ansell and Samuels (2015) stressed elite competition, arguing that new economic elites support democracy to shield assets from predation, with land versus income inequality shaping trajectories.

The social forces tradition (Moore, 1966; Rueschemeyer, Stephens & Stephens, 1992; Collier, 1999) highlights class configurations: capitalist development weakens landed elites and empowers workers and middle classes, but outcomes hinge on alliances, state autonomy, and timing. Working-class mobilization often drives inclusion, while bourgeois actors oscillate between resistance and concession.

International influences operate through contagion, leverage, and linkage. Boix (2011) tied the income–democracy link to international orders; Whitehead (1996) and Levitsky & Way (2005) showed how dense Western ties raise the costs of authoritarianism. The impact of aid remains contested (Carothers, 2000; Bueno de Mesquita & Smith, 2009; Altincekic & Bearce, 2014). EU accession represents the most powerful example of external conditionality shaping democratization (Vachudova, 2005).

Cultural approaches (Almond & Verba, 1963; Inglehart, 2000; Fukuyama, 2000) link value change and social trust to democratic institutions, though critics (Dalton & Shin, 2014) highlight Western bias and neglect of culture–institution feedback. Recent research on backsliding identifies a "third wave of autocratization" (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). Large-N analyses (Teorell, 2010) show modernization shields against reversal more than it triggers transitions. Protests, democratic neighbors, and regional organizations promote advances, while resources, majoritarian systems, and long-tenured executives impede them. Resistance involves institutional, political, and societal actors (Tomini, Gibril & Bochev, 2023). Overall, democratization and autocratization are multi-causal, context-dependent, and shaped by the interaction of domestic and international forces.

Chapter 2 reviews the EU's role in external democracy promotion (EDP), with a particular focus on enlargement through conditionality. Conditionality refers to making aid or benefits contingent upon compliance with specific objectives (Steunenberg & Dimitrova, 2007). Within the EU, it first appeared in 1977 (Bartels, 2005) but became central after the Cold War, when human rights clauses were systematically incorporated into agreements. The Copenhagen criteria of 1993 formalized the political requirements for accession, including democracy, rule of law, and human rights. Later enlargements introduced differentiated conditionalities, such as the post-accession Cooperation and Verification Mechanism for Bulgaria and Romania (Gateva, 2015). In the Western Balkans, ad hoc conditions addressed post-conflict reconstruction and reconciliation (Rupnik, 2011).

EU conditionality differs from that of other organizations by tying compliance to membership (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005) and encompassing wide-ranging political and institutional reforms. While official Enlargement Reports emphasize progress – judicial reforms, anti-corruption measures, and minority protections (Sedelmeier, 2008) – scholars highlight limitations. Critics note vague standards (Kochenov, 2015), superficial compliance or "dead letters" (Slapin, 2015), and competing EU objectives that reduce coherence (Anastasakis, 2008). Normative critiques (Theuns 2017; Noutcheva 2009) argue that economic priorities, such as market liberalization, often undermine democratic aims, producing strategic rather than genuine compliance. Case studies seem to underscore these shortcomings. In Bosnia & Herzegovina, conditionality proved ineffective due to ethno-national divisions and elite-driven processes (Džihić & Wieser, 2011). In Croatia, national identity constrained compliance on war crimes (Freyburg & Richter, 2010). Across the Western Balkans, conditionality has at times consolidated "stabilitocracies" (Bieber, 2018) or reinforced state capture (Richter & Wunsch 2019; Keil 2018). Beyond Europe, EU promotion in the MENA region is criticized for prioritizing stability and economic interests over democratic reforms (Direkli & Ashiekh 2022; Achrainer & Pace 2024). Scholars emphasize factors shaping effectiveness. A credible membership perspective is vital (Schimmelfennig & Scholtz, 2008), as are timing and uncertainty in accession negotiations (Steunenberg & Dimitrova 2007; Jano 2022). Domestic elites also play a decisive role, redirecting EU strategies and shaping compliance outcomes (Grimm 2019; Castaldo 2022). Reforms succeed where local accountability structures and independent institutions exist (Elbasani & Šabić, 2017).

The chapter concludes with a procedural and instrument-based overview of the enlargement and neighbourhood frameworks. For this reason, the chapter also reconstructs the accession process, monitoring architecture, country assessments, and the main financial instruments through which the EU seeks to promote democracy, rule of law, and human rights.

Chapter 3 connects naturally with the preceding one, as it investigates the role of the EU as a militant democracy agent. The concept of militant democracy, originally developed by Karl Loewenstein in response to the rise of fascism in interwar Europe, describes the use of preemptive legal and political measures to protect democratic systems from anti-democratic forces. Traditional militant democracy focuses on defensive measures within established democratic states, such as restrictions on extremist parties, limitations on hate speech, and constitutional provisions that prevent the abuse of democratic procedures to undermine democracy itself.

This thesis extends the concept of militant democracy to encompass the EU's external democracy promotion efforts, particularly its use of political conditionality in the accession process and its responses to democratic backsliding in partner countries. This extension reflects an evolving understanding of militant democracy as not only a defensive but also a proactive tool for promoting

and protecting democratic values. The EU's approach to external militant democracy involves several key elements. First, it includes the establishment of clear democratic benchmarks and standards that partner countries must meet to qualify for various forms of cooperation and assistance. Second, it involves ongoing monitoring and assessment of democratic developments in partner countries, with consequences for non-compliance. Third, it encompasses support for civil society organizations, independent media, and other actors that can serve as guardians of democratic values and practices.

The review concludes that the application of militant democracy concepts to the EU's external relations raises important questions about legitimacy, effectiveness, and potential unintended consequences. While the EU's external focus may avoid some of the internal political tensions associated with militant democracy measures within member states, it also raises concerns about sovereignty, cultural sensitivity, and the potential for backlash against external interference.

Part II: The Empirical Analysis

Against this theoretical and empirical backdrop, the thesis addresses a central question about the EU's capacity to serve as an effective militant democracy agent in its neighborhood. This overarching research question is operationalized through two specific hypotheses that focus on the role of EU partnership programs and membership prospects in enhancing democratic quality. These hypotheses reflect the core mechanisms through which the EU seeks to promote democracy in its neighborhood: financial assistance and technical support through various partnership programs, and the powerful incentive of EU membership. By testing these hypotheses empirically, the research aims to provide evidence-based insights into the conditions under which the EU's democracy promotion efforts are most likely to succeed.

Chapter 4 begins with a detailed explanation of why, to address this research question, fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA) appears to be the most advantageous option, as it is a method particularly well-suited for examining complex, multicausal phenomena such as autocratization. QCA allows for the systematic analysis of the conditions under which particular outcomes occur, identifying configurations of factors that are individually or collectively necessary and/or sufficient for the outcome of interest. Democratization and autocratization are inherently complex processes that involve the interaction of multiple factors operating at different levels of analysis. QCA's configurational approach is well-suited for capturing these complex interactions and identifying the specific combinations of conditions that lead to particular outcomes. Moreover, QCA's focus on set-theoretic relationships allows for a more nuanced understanding of causation than traditional statistical methods, particularly in cases where the relationship between causes and outcomes is non-linear or threshold-based. The choice of QCA is motivated by several considerations, which will be elaborated upon.

The chapter proceeds by specifying the units of analysis for this study, which are the EU's external partner countries that have established agreements aimed at promoting democracy, the rule of law, and human rights. This includes both "Enlargement Countries" (candidate and potential candidate countries receiving IPA assistance or having applied for EU membership) and "ENP Countries" (countries adhering to the European Neighbourhood Policy). This selection ensures a comprehensive coverage of the EU's democracy promotion efforts while maintaining analytical coherence. The empirical universe comprises 22 EU partner countries. All meet scope conditions of an EU membership perspective and/or explicit EU priorities for democracy, rule of law, and human rights.

This domain is intentionally medium-N: large enough to observe meaningful variety in configurations, yet small enough to maintain case proximity.

Measurement follows a structured calibration strategy. The outcome – overall Quality of Democracy (QOD_total) – is operationalized in line with the EU's own normative framing of "deep and sustainable democracy." Three V-Dem indices capture core dimensions: Electoral Democracy (QOD_polyarchy), Rule of Law (QOD_RoL), and Women's Political Empowerment (QOD_gender). For each country, annual deltas are computed and aggregated to reflect trajectory over time, then translated into four-value fuzzy scores using substantive thresholds (considerable recession to considerable improvement).

Explanatory conditions were selected carefully on the basis of those identified as most appropriate in the literature, seeking to cover all factors that unequivocally influence a country's level of democratization. Consequently, the conditions extracted from the literature were divided into structural and proximate sets, and calibrated and measured using transparent, theory-guided anchors with skewness checks.

From this process, four structural conditions were retained for analysis: Economic Development (DEVE); Economic Inequality (INEQ); Ethnolinguistic Fractionalization (ETHNO); and Freedom from Autocratic Influence (FfA). The proximate conditions – closer to the outcome and more agent-based – are Power-Sharing (POWERSHARING), Government Effectiveness (GOV_EFF), and, most importantly, my two hypothesis conditions: EU Membership (EU_MEM) and EU Partnership (EU_PART).

Time management balances comparability with causal plausibility. For all conditions, the value used is the mean at two case-specific points: *t-1* (year of the first formal EU agreement) and *t* (the year at the time the data were collected – present). This design isolates variation after the "EU factor" enters while preserving cross-case heterogeneity in timing. The outcome departs from this two-point rule to incorporate full trajectories via annual deltas, mitigating distortions from short-lived spikes or dips. Result presentation follows best practice across the three standard solution types – conservative, intermediate, and parsimonious – and interprets them jointly. The conservative solution restricts itself to empirically observed configurations, maximizing contextual fidelity but often at the expense of parsimony. The parsimonious solution minimizes configurations, historically criticized for relying on implausible remainders. The intermediate solution balances both, incorporating only theoretically warranted simplifying assumptions. Guided by Haesebrouck's framework, the parsimonious solution is prioritized to infer causally relevant conditions, while conservative and intermediate results delineate context-bound sufficiency. Fiss charts will visualize configurations across solution types, differentiating core (parsimonious) from contributory (intermediate/complex) conditions to aid cross-configuration comparison.

After the necessary technical explanations and justifications behind my methodological choices, the chapter presents the results of the QCA analysis, which suggest three pathways towards democratization. The first applies to low- and middle-income contexts and shows that the absence of development, when combined either with high equality or with strong EU partnership investment, can generate meaningful improvements in democratic quality. The second path highlights that in countries engaged in the EU accession process, democratic quality is enhanced when EU membership incentives coincide with limited powersharing. The third path, in contrast, emerges in states without

EU membership prospects. In these cases, extensive powersharing arrangements contribute positively to democratic quality by ensuring inclusion and stability across divided societies.

Robustness checks and regional clustering confirm the validity of these findings across the Western Balkans, Eastern Partnership, and Southern Neighbourhood, with only minor regional deviations. Further disaggregated analysis shows that EU partnership is especially significant for advancing gender equality and the rule of law, while EU membership is more strongly associated with improvements in polyarchy and governance.

Chapter 5 uses case studies to unpack the causal mechanisms that the QCA has identified only in configurational form. Following Schneider and Rohlfing's typology, I first classify all cases vis-à-vis their membership in the sufficient terms and in the outcome, and I use this mapping to guide case selection beyond the mere reporting of a solution formula. Because several deviant-in-kind and deviant-coverage cases sit on paths that do not feature my EU-related hypotheses – or lack comparable typical counterparts – I opt for a focused comparative design centred on Georgia and Albania.

Georgia is a prototypical instance on the path combining low development with high EU investment; it allows me to corroborate whether the hypothesised mechanism linking EU engagement to democratic improvement is present under conditions that are broadly representative of that configuration. Albania, by contrast, is deviant in degree on the path *powersharing*EU_membership*; it exhibits membership above the inclusion thresholds for both the relevant term and the outcome, while introducing theoretically meaningful variation in the EU linkage (membership progress rather than investment intensity) and in executive concentration.

The chapter proceeds in two parts. The first reconstructs Georgia's post-Soviet trajectory, specifies the timing and content of EU instruments (AA/DCFTA, conditionality, capacity-building), and assesses how these interventions interacted with structural constraints to produce observed gains in democratic quality. The second examines Albania's accession track and the political economy of concentrated executive power, asking whether centralized coordination operates as a compliance device that accelerates acquis transposition and justice-sector reform, and with what implications for accountability.

Across both cases I combine within-case analysis with targeted cross-case contrasts on the EU-related conditions featured in the solution, mobilizing public documents, secondary scholarship, and indicators used in the QCA. The aim is not to generalize beyond the solution space, but to test the plausibility of the mechanism, identify scope conditions, and adjudicate among competing interpretations (e.g., EU leverage versus domestic leadership effects). In doing so, the chapter strengthens the inferential bridge from configurational sufficiency to explanatory narrative.

PART I: LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review is organized to address a central research question:

Under what conditions can the European Union (EU) be an effective militant democracy agent in terms of its response to increasing autocratization among its neighborhood partner countries?

To thoroughly investigate this inquiry, the review is structured around three core concepts derived from unpacking the research question above: (1) Democratization and its Determinants, (2) The EU and External Democracy Promotion, and (3) EU Militant Democracy. Each of these concepts plays a crucial role in understanding how the EU navigates the tension between promoting democracy and responding to autocratic threats in its neighborhood. By examining the existing literature on these topics, this review will establish a solid foundation for exploring how and when the EU can effectively act as a militant democracy agent.

The literature review is divided into three chapters, each of which directly relates to the core concepts essential to addressing the research question. The structure reflects a logical progression of theoretical and practical concerns: starting with the determinants of democratization, moving to the EU's role in promoting democracy, and concluding with a normative assessment of its use of militant democracy tools. This organization creates a coherent flow from understanding the EU's normative commitments to democracy, through its capacity to defend democratic principles, to the conditions that affect regime change in its neighboring regions.

Democratization and its Determinants examines key theoretical frameworks, empirical studies, and critiques surrounding the process of democratization. It begins by discussing modernization theory and its critiques, before moving on to neo-modernization theory, particularly survival theory, and alternative perspectives that emphasize income equality and institutional factors in fostering democratic transitions. Historical comparative analyses further explore class dynamics in democratization, with a focus on the roles of the working class and bourgeoisie in pushing for democratic reforms. The review also underscores the impact of international factors on democratization, including foreign aid, global power dynamics, and EU enlargement, noting their varying effects on domestic political transitions. Moreover, cultural factors – such as civic culture, social values, and institutional performance – are examined for their roles in shaping democratic outcomes. Finally, the chapter addresses more recent literature on autocratization, discussing how democracies regress through subtle, legal means, driven by electoral manipulation and the erosion of accountability. The review highlights the importance of integrating multiple theoretical frameworks – modernization, social forces, international influences, and cultural factors – into a comprehensive understanding of democratization, emphasizing that these processes are highly context-dependent and non-linear.

The EU and External Democracy Promotion focuses on the role of conditionalities in the EU's enlargement strategy, particularly regarding its effectiveness in promoting democratic governance. It begins by explaining the evolution of EU conditionality, emphasizing its political, legal, and institutional dimensions. It then moves on to the effectiveness of EU conditionality, highlighting both positive and skeptical assessments. While the EU has successfully promoted democratic reforms through pre-accession conditionalities, critics argue that compliance often wanes post-accession, and that some reforms lead to superficial rather than substantive changes. Moreover, the review reveals

how domestic conditions – including political elites and national identity – play a significant, and often underrated, role in the success or failure of EU interventions. The review also critiques the ambiguities and inconsistencies in the EU's strategy, particularly the tension between promoting democracy and prioritizing security or economic interests, which often undermines its democratization goals.

EU Militant Democracy Beyond Member States: A Normative Overview explores the application of the concept of militant democracy within the EU. It begins by defining militant democracy, which originates from Karl Loewenstein's idea that democracies must take preemptive legal actions to protect themselves from anti-democratic forces. The chapter delves into the normative paradoxes of militant democracy, such as the tension between protecting democratic values and potentially undermining them through restrictive measures, reflecting on whether militant democracy risks becoming illiberal in its efforts to defend democratic systems. The discussion then shifts to the EU as a transnational militant democracy, highlighting the challenges of enforcing militant democracy across member states, and – most importantly – by extending the concept of militant democracy to the EU's external relations, especially regarding candidate countries for EU membership. It argues that political conditionality in the accession process serves as a preventive measure to safeguard liberal democratic values. The chapter concludes by emphasizing the complexities and contradictions inherent in the EU's approach to militant democracy, balancing the need for preemptive measures against internal and external threats while grappling with issues of legitimacy and democratic integrity.

CHAPTER 1
Democratization and its Determinants

1.1 Introduction

This chapter comprehensively examines theoretical and empirical studies on democratization, with a particular focus on modernization theory and its critiques. It begins with Seymour Martin Lipset's seminal work, which laid the foundation for understanding the positive correlation between economic development and democratic stability. The review explores the core arguments of modernization theorists, who contend that socio-economic advancements lead to the adoption and maintenance of democratic systems.

Critiques and revisions of modernization theory are then discussed, highlighting the complex and context-dependent nature of the relationship between economic development and democracy. Alternative perspectives provided by dependency theory and the social sources tradition are also considered.

The review addresses the significant role of international factors in democratization, including the impact of foreign aid, international norms, and the influence of global powers. This chapter underscores how external pressures and international linkages can facilitate or hinder democratic transitions.

Finally, the chapter places particular emphasis on contemporary analyses of democratization determinants, focusing on socio-economic, political-institutional, and cultural factors to provide a detailed and nuanced understanding of the multiple dimensions influencing democratization.

1.2 The Modernization Theory Paradigm

In his seminal 1959 work, "Some Social Requisites of Democracy," Seymour Martin Lipset established the foundation for what would evolve into modernization theory, a key paradigm in explaining the relationship between economic development and democratic stability. Lipset's central argument, echoing ideas traceable to Aristotle, is that there is a positive correlation between socio-economic development and democracy. He asserted that wealthier nations are more likely to sustain democratic governance, i.e. countries are more likely to adopt and maintain democratic systems as they achieve economic development. This premise, supported by extensive empirical analysis utilizing increasingly larger data sets and more sophisticated methods, remains a cornerstone in the study of democratization, as evidenced by its over 12,000 Google Scholar citations.

Modernization theorists argue that all societies pass through the same historical stages of economic development. As they transition from immature to modern, increasing in complexity, they require a shift to more suitable forms of governance. As nations develop, their social structures become more intricate, new social groups form and organize, and labor processes demand greater collaboration. Consequently, command-based systems become ineffective. The complexity of society, coupled with technological advancements that provide individuals with autonomy and information, fosters the rise of civil society and diminishes the effectiveness of dictatorial control. This leads various groups, including the bourgeoisie, workers, and broader civil society, to challenge and ultimately overthrow dictatorial regimes. While dictatorships may thrive in traditional societies, they struggle to maintain control as

these societies advance economically (Przeworski et al., 2000). Among the several mechanisms highlighted by Lipset through which economic development fosters democracy, the rise in education levels that typically accompanies increased prosperity is paramount. It is key in fostering social and political tolerance while diminishing the spread of misinformation and myths. Additionally, greater prosperity transforms class struggle from a zero-sum to a positive-sum game, incentivizing the working classes to abandon revolutionary ambitions in favor of gradualist approaches (Møller & Skaaning, 2023).

Building on modernization theory, a substantial body of literature over the following decades has consistently shown that higher levels of development, typically measured by per capita income, increase the likelihood of democratic transitions, the stability of democracies, or both (Barro 1999; Przeworski and Limongi 1997; Boix and Stokes 2003; Diamond 1992; Epstein et al. 2006; Wucherpfennig & Deutsch 2009; Boix 2011; Inglehart and Welzel 2005). Despite its prominence and after 65 years of extensive scholarly attention, modernization theory has been reinterpreted, re-evaluated, and – in some cases – subjected to harsh criticism, which warrants a brief overview.

Early Critics

Revisionists in the 1960s argued against the simplistic division between modern and traditional societies. They pointed out that economic development often bolsters traditional institutions rather than dismantles them, as evidenced by persistent tribal, ethnic, and patron-client systems. Historical events like the Russian and Iranian Revolutions demonstrated that modernization could prompt the revival of traditional or revolutionary institutions (Randall & Theobald, 1998). Dependency theorists provided a radical critique by focusing on the exploitative nature of the international economic system, arguing that global economic inequalities are perpetuated by the processes that modernization theory praises. They asserted that the economic development of Western countries depends on the systematic underdevelopment of other regions. This underdevelopment is a deliberate result of historical processes such as colonialism and imperialism, where colonies supplied raw materials for Western industrialization while their own economies stagnated (Frank, 1966). Dependency theory highlights that the global economic system continues to exploit developing countries through mechanisms like unequal trade terms and the influence of transnational corporations and international financial institutions, which prioritize the interests of wealthy nations. This creates a dependency that prevents developing countries from achieving significant progress, trapping them in a cycle of underdevelopment. Thus, dependency theory challenges the notion that all countries can follow the same path to development, arguing that the international economic system inherently benefits developed countries at the expense of developing ones (Matunhu, 2011).

Another early critique of modernization theory came from Samuel Huntington's work "Political Order in Changing Societies" (1968), which centers on the necessity of political stability as the primary goal of any government. Huntington argues that stability is determined by the balance between the rate of social mobilization and the rate of institutional and organizational growth. He contends that development with stability is achievable only if institutional growth matches the demands of social mobilization. If social mobilization outpaces institutional development, it leads to political decay, marked by socio-political unrest and ineffective governance. Conversely, if institutional development lags, modernization is slow, and traditional power structures resist change. Huntington emphasizes that strong political institutions, particularly political parties, are essential for managing social mobilization and ensuring stability. He critiques modernization theory's assumption that development naturally leads

to stable democracies, suggesting instead that any form of government that achieves stability, including authoritarian regimes, may be acceptable.

Neo Modernization Theory and Critics

The survival theory, first proposed by Adam Przeworski and his collaborators in the 1990s, sought to clarify the nuances of modernization theory. Their seminal work, "Democracy and Development: Political Institutions and Well-Being in the World, 1950–1990" (2000), posited two primary hypotheses regarding the relationship between economic development and democracy. The first hypothesis, the endogenous theory, suggests that economic development increases the likelihood of democratic transitions. This theory argues that economic development leads to complex social structures and demands for political inclusion, ultimately resulting in democratization. The second hypothesis, the exogenous theory, posits that while economic development does not directly cause democratization, it significantly enhances the stability of existing democracies. Essentially, while democracies can emerge independently of economic development, they are more likely to survive in wealthier nations.

Przeworski et al.'s findings primarily supported the exogenous theory, aligning with Lipset's original formulation that wealthier nations are more likely to sustain democracy. Their statistical tests revealed that economic development does not decisively trigger democratization, which can occur due to various factors like popular uprisings, elite negotiations, or conflicts. However, once established, democracies are more likely to endure in wealthier nations, whereas poorer democracies are more prone to collapse.

Earlier, Przeworski and Limongi's work in 1997 had already critiqued the deterministic view of modernization theory, emphasizing that economic development alone does not spawn democracies. They argued that the emergence of democracy is significantly influenced by political actors' strategic decisions and historical contexts. Their analysis demonstrated that poor democracies are vulnerable to economic crises, which can lead to regime changes, while wealthy democracies show resilience against economic downturns. They advocated for a nuanced understanding of the relationship between economic development and political regimes, highlighting that political actions and strategic decisions are paramount in establishing democracies, while economic factors primarily influence their durability.

Boix and Stokes (2003) challenge Przeworski and Limongi's survival theory by arguing that economic development, particularly through increasing income equality, is a crucial driver of democratization, not just the stability of existing democracies. They propose that the mechanisms through which development influences democratization have been underestimated. Their critique is both theoretical and empirical. Firstly, Boix and Stokes dispute the conceptual distinction between endogenous and exogenous democratization presented by Przeworski and Limongi. They argue that Przeworski and Limongi fail to provide a compelling theory explaining why economic development would sustain democracy in already democratic countries but not induce democratic transitions in authoritarian regimes. According to Boix and Stokes, development should theoretically encourage both the emergence and sustainability of democracy. Empirically, Boix and Stokes re-examine Przeworski and Limongi's data and methodology. They find that development, particularly when measured through income equality, has a significant impact on democratization, showing that economic development increases the likelihood of democratic transitions even in authoritarian regimes. They argue that Przeworski and Limongi's analysis, which suggests a negligible endogenous effect, is limited by its focus on post-1950 data and by not adequately accounting for earlier waves of democratization in Western Europe. By extending their analysis to a broader historical dataset starting from the mid-19th century, Boix and Stokes uncover a substantial endogenous effect of development on democratization.

This broader analysis reveals that development historically played a significant role in democratic transitions. Incorporating additional controls for human capital and economic structure, Boix and Stokes demonstrate that the positive impact of development on democratization remains significant. They argue that factors like human capital and occupational diversification, correlated with income, are critical in explaining democratization. Boix and Stokes conclude that economic development fosters democratization by promoting income equality and reducing the costs of democratic transitions for the wealthy. Their analysis supports the view that development not only stabilizes existing democracies but also facilitates democratic transitions. This challenges the exogenous-only perspective of Przeworski and Limongi and emphasizes the importance of a broader set of variables in understanding the relationship between development and democracy.

The reevaluation of the role of income per se in the development of democracy, and the omission of key variables, must include the significant contributions of Daron Acemoglu in reassessing the modernization hypothesis (Acemoglu et al., 2008; 2009). Acemoglu's work challenges the traditional view by highlighting the importance of considering omitted variables, particularly historical factors, which play a crucial role in shaping the political and economic trajectories of countries. By incorporating more sophisticated econometric techniques, such as country fixed effects and parameterized random effects models, Acemoglu demonstrates that the apparent correlation between income and democracy weakens when these factors are accounted for. His analysis suggests that historical events at critical junctures are pivotal in determining the divergent development paths of nations, leading some to achieve prosperity and democracy, while others remain in poverty and autocracy. This perspective shifts the focus from a simplistic income-based explanation to a more nuanced understanding that emphasizes the influence of historical and institutional factors.

Acemoglu's main contribution, coauthored with Robinson, "Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy," (2005) offers a comprehensive framework for analyzing the consolidation of democracy, emphasizing the role of economic interests and power dynamics between social groups. They posit that when inequality is low, there is little impetus for democracy, and when inequality is high, elites have substantial interests at risk and therefore prefer repression, making democracy improbable in both scenarios. Consequently, the likelihood of democratization is greatest at moderate levels of inequality, describing an inverted U-shaped relationship between inequality and democracy. They argue that different social groups prefer different political institutions based on how these institutions distribute political power and resources. While the majority of citizens typically favor democracy for its redistributive benefits, elites often oppose it to maintain their economic advantages. However, dictatorship becomes unstable when citizens can credibly threaten social disorder and revolution. When repression becomes too costly and promises of concessions by elites are not credible, elites may be compelled to democratize as a way to credibly transfer political power to the citizens, thereby ensuring social stability. The consolidation of democracy hinges on the absence of strong incentives for elites to overthrow it. The processes of democratization and consolidation are influenced by several factors, including the strength of civil society, the structure of political institutions, economic and political crises, the level of economic inequality, the structure of the economy, and the extent of globalization. The authors highlight the commitment problem faced by elites: promises to adopt pro-majority policies are often not credible in the long term. Therefore, democratization acts as a credible commitment mechanism. They also categorize countries into different paths of political development and argue that the relationship between inequality and democratization is complex, with both very high and very low levels of inequality discouraging democratization. Additionally, globalization can influence democratization through its impact on elites' preferences and inequality levels.

A more recent work on the effects of inequality and the role of elites in democratization was published in 2015 by Ben Ansell and David Samuels. They argue that economic growth can increase inequality by creating new economic elites who drive democratization to protect their interests from state predation. Their elite-competition model posits that regime change is driven by conflicts within the elite rather than threats from the poorer majority. This contrasts with traditional redistributive theories, suggesting that democratization efforts are more likely to be led by relatively wealthy but politically excluded groups seeking to safeguard their economic interests. The authors highlight that the impact of inequality on democratization varies. Land inequality has a stronger effect in lower-income autocracies where landed elites are powerful, while income inequality is more significant in higher-income regimes with prominent urban elites. Their empirical analysis, using historical and quantitative data, shows that demands for political change under autocracy often come from relatively wealthy out-groups rather than the poorest segments of society. This finding contradicts the Meltzer-Richard model, which posits that demand for redistribution increases as individual income declines. Instead, Ansell and Samuels find that as inequality rises, the demand for redistribution declines, and wealthier individuals are more likely to support democratization. Finally, they also note that international factors can diminish the importance of domestic socio-economic factors, particularly during periods like the Cold War.

Conclusion on Modernization Theory

The link between socio-economic development and democracy has been a long-established principle, with few exceptions challenging the idea that modernization underpins democratic stability. Despite the established correlation, after decades of rigorous testing, the empirical support for modernization theory remains equivocal. While there is evidence to suggest that economic development can foster democratic tendencies, this relationship is neither universal nor automatic. The theory's explanatory power is often contingent on specific historical, cultural, and institutional contexts. Moreover, the literature has not settled on which specific aspect of economic development is most crucial for democracy. Most studies rely on income level measures like GDP per capita adjusted for purchasing power parities to test modernization theory. However, income may serve as a proxy for other factors driving democratization, such as education, urbanization, social interaction patterns, or specific values. Meanwhile, modernization theory remains the frame of reference for other approaches which, despite sometimes harshly criticizing it, use modernization as a direct or indirect background variable in their analyses.

An attempt to synthesize the conclusions regarding modernization theory, which I found particularly compelling, was made in 2018 in *The Annals of Comparative Democratization* of the American Political Science Association, edited by Staffan I. Lindberg. This symposium critically examines current insights by soliciting the perspectives of six experts on the merits of modernization theory, aiming to address the central question: "Should Modernization Theory Survive?" Unsurprisingly, upon conducting a brief analysis of the six contributions, it is evident that there was no consensus, and the question remains effectively open.

Dahlum finds that while economic development impacts societal aspects like education and income, its direct influence on democratization is debated. She highlights the variations in empirical contributions and model specifications among scholars, emphasizing the need for further discussion on modernization theory. Knutsen and collaborators conclude that economic development creates favorable conditions for democracy but does not guarantee it. They stress the importance of local institutions and international systems in determining democratic outcomes, advocating for a nuanced understanding beyond deterministic views. Boix argues that economic development supports democratic transitions and stabilization, particularly in industrialized countries. However, he notes that this effect is conditional on local institutions and international structures, calling for deeper exploration of the

mechanisms linking development and democracy. Welzel posits that modernization fosters democracy through the development of emancipative values, which promote self-expression and autonomy. He emphasizes the cultural and value shifts over traditional economic perspectives in understanding democratization. Acemoglu and Robinson argue that economic development alone does not lead to democratization. They find that the relationship between income and democracy is influenced by political and institutional contexts, advocating for a broader range of variables in democratization studies. Treisman emphasizes the conditional nature of the modernization-democracy relationship, suggesting that economic development increases democratization likelihood under specific conditions like economic crises or leadership changes, rather than being a direct cause. Finally, Munck critiques modernization theory, arguing it has failed both theoretically and empirically. He suggests that the theory has not consistently explained democratization and calls for exploring alternative frameworks to better account for political development complexities.

In the hazardous attempt to draw conclusions from this protracted debate, two key insights seem to emerge. On the one hand, it appears untenable to completely dismiss the explanatory power of certain facets of modernization theory, whose validity remains empirically and theoretically substantiated. On the other hand, it is equally evident that modernization theory alone, regardless of its variant, lacks the requisite robustness to be considered a singularly sufficient explanation for democratization processes. This insufficiency necessitates the integration of additional theoretical frameworks to comprehensively account for the complex and multifaceted nature of democratization. Consequently, modernization theory should be viewed as a significant, yet not exclusive, component of a broader explanatory paradigm.

1.3 The Social Forces Tradition: Historical Comparative Analyses

Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens (1992) explore the complex relationship between capitalism and democracy, emphasizing the pivotal role of class dynamics. Their central thesis is that capitalist development transforms class structures, empowering the working and middle classes while diminishing the power of the landed upper class, thus facilitating democracy. Contrary to traditional Marxist and liberal views that position the bourgeoisie as the primary force for democracy, the authors find that the working class is the most consistent proponent of democratic reforms due to its interest in political inclusion and organizational capacity. The landed upper classes, reliant on labor-repressive agricultural systems, are identified as the main opponents of democracy. The authors also consider the state's role and transnational power relations, arguing that democracy's emergence and stability depend on the balance of power among social classes, the autonomy and strength of state institutions, and the impact of international influences. A vibrant civil society supports democracy, but it is insufficient without favorable class structures and state configurations.

The emphasis on social class struggle can be traced back to Barrington Moore Jr.'s influential work, "Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy" (1966). Moore argued that modernization follows multiple trajectories, each determined by class dynamics. He identified three primary paths: bourgeois revolutions leading to democracy, such as the English Civil War and the French Revolution; top-down modernization resulting in fascism, as in Germany and Italy; and peasant revolutions leading to communism, exemplified by Russia and China. Moore's analysis highlights the crucial role of the bourgeoisie in democratization, summarized by his well-known phrase, "No bourgeois, no democracy."

This perspective was critically revisited by Göran Therborn (1977), who argued that the democratization process is a result of the dynamic struggle between the working class – pushing for greater inclusion and rights as the true democratizing driver – and the bourgeoisie – making concessions

to maintain control and prevent more radical upheavals. The article highlights that major democratic advances often followed periods of social upheaval, wars, and economic crises, where the working class played a pivotal role as the primary driver of democratization through their persistent struggles for inclusion and rights, while the bourgeoisie had to adapt to preserve their overarching control. A similar emphasis on the working class can be found in Stephens' (1989) contribution.

Ruth B. Collier (1999) explores democratization in Western Europe and South America, emphasizing the role of various social classes and elite strategies. The working class, often organized through unions and labor-based parties, is depicted as a pivotal force in advocating for and achieving democratic reforms, particularly during earlier periods of democratization. However, Collier also highlights that the effectiveness and impact of working-class movements varied significantly across different historical and national contexts. In contrast, the bourgeoisie's actions are portrayed as instrumental in shaping democratic institutions through negotiation and elite strategic interactions, rather than through mass mobilization. The analysis further suggests that while the working class was crucial in some democratization episodes, particularly in earlier historical contexts, its role was less pronounced in later democratizations, which tended to be more elite-driven. This juxtaposition of working-class and bourgeois roles provides a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted nature of democratization processes, emphasizing the interplay between class-based actions and elite strategies.

Overall, these comparative historical analyses provide a more nuanced understanding of democratization, emphasizing the mutual influence between economic development, class structures, and political dynamics. They collectively emphasize that while capitalist development alters class structures in ways that can facilitate democracy, the primary drivers of democratic change are often found in the working class, which consistently pushes for political inclusion and reforms. The bourgeoisie, traditionally viewed as the main force for democracy, is reinterpreted as both a participant and resistor, making strategic concessions to maintain control. This tradition highlights the interrelation between various social classes and state structures, arguing that the balance of power among classes, the autonomy of state institutions, and transnational influences are critical for the emergence and stability of democracy. The nuanced analyses of these scholars reveal that democratization is not a linear process but a multifaceted struggle influenced by historical and contextual factors, where both the working class and the bourgeoisie play pivotal yet evolving roles.

1.4 International Factors

International factors are highlighted by other authors as driving forces in the democratization process. Boix (2011) examines how the international environment affects the likelihood of democratic consolidation. He reexamines the relationship between economic development and democracy, proposing a "conditional modernization" theory. This theory suggests that the impact of income on democratization and democratic consolidation varies depending on income levels and historical periods, influenced significantly by the structure of the international system. Boix presents evidence that higher income levels positively influence the likelihood of democratic transitions and the stability of democracies. However, this effect shows a declining marginal impact: in wealthy and already democratized countries, additional income growth stabilizes existing democracies but does not significantly increase the likelihood of transitioning to democracy. The structure of the international system is crucial in shaping political outcomes. He identifies different orders that shape the global political environment and affect democratization. The first type is the antidemocratic international order, where there is at least one authoritarian power that dominates and aligns based on ideology. These regimes actively block democratization efforts, with examples like the Holy Alliance, Nazi Germany, and the Cold War. In this order, authoritarian hegemony has a stronger negative impact on democracy

than polarized systems, where both authoritarian and democratic powers coexist. The second type is the neutral or cross-cutting order, where authoritarian and democratic powers form alliances for practical reasons, disregarding ideological differences. In this context, neither side promotes their form of governance, and democratization is not prioritized. This system was prevalent from 1849 to 1918. The third is the democratic order, where all great powers are democratic and refrain from supporting authoritarian regimes. This international order encourages democratization globally, as seen after World War I and again after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Boix's analysis demonstrates that the relationship between income and democracy is historically contingent. The effect of income on democratization was stronger in earlier periods and has been notably weaker in the post-World War II era. This variability is due to the shifting influence of international powers and geopolitical dynamics.

Similarly, Whitehead (1996) emphasizes the significant role that international factors play in the establishment and consolidation of democratic regimes. He categorizes these influences into three main dimensions: contagion, control, and consent. Contagion explores the diffusion of democratic norms and practices across borders, often unintentionally. Whitehead argues that the demonstration effect, where democratic transitions in one country inspire similar changes in neighboring states, has been a recurring theme throughout history. Examples include the democratization waves following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the influence of European integration on Eastern European countries. Control highlights the deliberate efforts by dominant powers to promote democracy in other countries through policies backed by incentives or sanctions. Whitehead notes that around two-thirds of the currently democratic states have experienced some form of external influence aimed at promoting democratic governance. This includes military interventions, diplomatic pressures, and economic incentives used by powerful nations to foster democratic transitions. Consent refers to the generation of domestic support for democracy, which involves an intricate interaction between international influences and internal dynamics. Whitehead discusses how international support can help build democratic norms and institutions from the ground up, providing examples such as the EU's role in supporting democratic reforms in candidate countries. He also notes that the decline of authoritarian support from global powers, like the Soviet Union's collapse, creates opportunities for democratization. Whitehead underscores the importance of considering these international dimensions alongside domestic factors to fully understand the democratization process. He argues that while internal political commitment is crucial, external contexts and influences significantly shape the pathways and success of democratic transitions.

Levitsky and Way's theoretical framework of "linkage" and "leverage" (2005) presents a similar argument, exploring the impact of international factors on the democratization process, particularly in the post-Cold War era. They argue that the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent decline of support for authoritarian regimes from both Soviet and U.S. allies created strong incentives for elites in developing countries to adopt democratic institutions. However, the outcomes varied significantly, leading to the emergence of "competitive authoritarian" regimes where democratic institutions existed but were manipulated to maintain authoritarian rule. Levitsky and Way introduce two key dimensions to understand these variations: leverage and linkage. Leverage refers to the vulnerability of authoritarian regimes to external pressures such as diplomatic pressure, economic sanctions, and military interventions. They argue that leverage alone is often insufficient to enforce democratization without sustained and consistent pressure. The level of leverage is influenced by factors such as a country's economic and military strength, competing Western interests, and support from alternative regional powers. Linkage, on the other hand, is defined by the density of a country's ties to Western nations and institutions, encompassing economic, geopolitical, social, communication, and transnational civil society linkages. Higher linkage increases the cost of maintaining authoritarianism by amplifying

international scrutiny, increasing the likelihood of an international response, creating domestic stakeholders in democracy, and reshaping the domestic balance of power. Countries with extensive linkage to the West, such as those in Central Europe and the Americas, experienced more consistent democratizing pressure and were more likely to democratize. Conversely, in regions with low linkage, such as sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, and parts of the former Soviet Union, international pressures were weaker, and competitive authoritarian regimes were more likely to persist. The authors argue that leverage, or external pressure, is not effective in isolation - it must be combined with internal support to foster democratization. For leverage to translate into real power, it must be backed by substantial linkages, or connections, between the countries. These linkages ensure that the target state perceives non-compliance with external demands as costly. Thus, leverage's effectiveness is directly related to the strength of these linkages.

Taking into consideration the international context, particularly the role of Western influence, it is essential to discuss the literature debate over the role of foreign aid in democratization. Schmitz and Sell (1999) argue that democratization is not an isolated national phenomenon but is deeply embedded in the global context, highlighting the need for a comprehensive theoretical integration of international factors. The authors critique both modernization and agency theories for their inadequate attention to the international dimension, proposing a model that incorporates international factors at all stages of democratization: liberalization, transition, and consolidation. In the liberalization phase, international norms and values diffuse into domestic contexts, influencing the redefinition of political rights and the expansion of political spaces. During the transition phase, the adoption of specific institutional models from the international arena becomes crucial as countries establish new political frameworks. In the consolidation phase, global support for democracy and membership in international organizations reinforce democratic institutions and practices. Schmitz and Sell identify three primary modes of international influence: socialization, adaptation, and pressure. Socialization involves the diffusion of democratic norms and values, shaping domestic actors' preferences and behaviors. Adaptation refers to the voluntary adoption of international political and economic models, which help standardize democratic practices. Pressure encompasses the coercive aspects of international influence, such as economic dependencies and political conditionalities imposed by powerful global actors and institutions.

However, scholars remain divided on the impact of foreign aid on democratic processes. One perspective in this debate characterizes foreign aid as a "political aid curse" (Bueno de Mesquita & Smith, 2009), positing that foreign aid, similar to oil, natural resources, or other forms of unearned income, impedes democratic development. This viewpoint suggests that such aid creates dependency and entrenches authoritarian regimes by providing them with resources that bolster their hold on power without needing to rely on domestic support. On the other hand, some scholars offer more nuanced views, arguing that foreign aid can positively influence democratization under certain conditions (Altincekic & Bearce, 2014). They propose that the effectiveness of foreign aid in promoting democracy depends on factors such as the type of aid provided, the conditions attached to it, and the existing political and institutional framework within recipient countries. Specifically, foreign aid will foster democratization under three conditions: the recipient country must be dependent on the aid, the donor must be committed to encouraging democratic reforms in the recipient country, and the donor must have the ability to credibly threaten to withdraw the aid if the recipient country fails to meet the reform demands (Clark, Golder, & Golder, 2013).

Thomas Carothers (2000) also identifies several conditions under which foreign aid is most effective in promoting democratization. First, the recipient country must already be experiencing some level of

political transition towards democracy. In such contexts, aid can significantly accelerate these processes by providing essential resources and expertise. Second, the aid must be comprehensive, simultaneously addressing multiple aspects of the political system, such as elections, state institutions, and civil society. This holistic approach ensures that progress in one area reinforces advancements in others. Additionally, the presence of local reformers dedicated to democratization is crucial, as these individuals drive change and ensure that the aid results in substantial political reforms. Finally, the size of the country is an important factor; smaller countries tend to benefit more from democracy aid because resources are more concentrated, enhancing the impact.

To conclude this overview on foreign aid, it is pertinent to briefly mention the actor that will be the focal point of the next chapter of the literature review: the EU. The EU accession process has played a pivotal role in guiding East-Central European countries towards democracy. The EU's leverage is unique because it impacts civil, political, and social dimensions simultaneously, fostering not just minimalist democracy but authentic liberal democracy. However, the favorable internal conditions in East-Central Europe were also crucial for this transformation. Research by Kitschelt et al. (1999) and Møller & Skaaning (2009) showed that most of the countries joining the EU in 2004 were relatively modernized, had historical experiences with rule of law and democracy, and maintained close ties to Western Europe. These internal factors played a vital role in the democratization processes of the early 1990s.

Vachudova (2005) identifies three key reasons for the EU's effective influence. First, there was a fundamental asymmetry in the relationship between applicant countries and the EU. East-Central and Eastern European countries were eager to join, while existing members faced little loss if enlargement failed, allowing the EU to impose unprecedented demands. Second, Brussels bureaucrats were capable of enforcing these requirements. Third, the EU used transparent assessments, rewarding progress with merit-based pluses regardless of a country's size or political significance, lending credibility to the accession process.

Unlike Western interventions in other parts of the world, the EU's conditionality appears to have successfully guided ten formerly communist countries towards liberal democracy. The EU accession negotiations serve as a unique example of external pressure fostering deep democratization, thanks to the EU's unparalleled ability to influence these countries through voluntary compliance (Møller & Skaaning, 2023).

Finally, a growing body of literature on international determinants of regime trajectories has increasingly emphasized not only the positive effects of democratic diffusion, but also the constraining role of external authoritarian influence. While classical contributions on democratization highlighted mechanisms such as diffusion, linkage, and leverage – through which democratic norms spread and external actors promote institutional reforms (Whitehead, 1996; Levitsky & Way, 2005) – more recent scholarship has shifted attention to the ways in which authoritarian powers actively shape political outcomes beyond their borders.

In this perspective, democratization cannot be understood solely as a function of domestic structures or Western influence, but must also account for the presence of competing external actors that provide alternative sources of support to incumbent regimes. Levitsky and Way (2010) argue that high levels of linkage to the West increase the cost of authoritarian governance by exposing regimes to external pressure, monitoring, and normative expectations. However, where such linkage is weak – or counterbalanced by ties to authoritarian powers – these pressures are significantly reduced.

Authoritarian incumbents can rely on external allies to access financial resources, diplomatic backing, and security cooperation, thereby reducing their vulnerability to both domestic opposition and international conditionality.

This insight is further developed in the literature on authoritarian diffusion and external autocratic support. Tansey (2016) demonstrates that authoritarian regimes frequently depend on "external patrons" that help them survive political crises by providing economic aid, electoral assistance, or even coercive support. These relationships are not merely passive; rather, they constitute structured networks of regime support that actively reinforce authoritarian resilience. Similarly, Ambrosio (2010) and Burnell and Schlumberger (2010) highlight how authoritarian states promote governance models that prioritize regime stability, sovereignty, and elite control, offering ideological and institutional alternatives to liberal democratic norms.

More recent work has conceptualized these dynamics as part of a broader process of "autocracy promotion" or "authoritarian internationalism" (Diamond, 2008; Tolstrup, 2015). In contrast to earlier assumptions that democracy had a universalizing trajectory, these contributions underline the emergence of a competitive international environment in which democratic and authoritarian norms coexist and compete. Authoritarian powers may deliberately undermine democratic conditionality by offering "no-strings-attached" economic cooperation, shielding regimes from sanctions, or supporting illiberal institutional reforms. As a result, the international environment becomes a key arena in which regime trajectories are shaped.

This dimension is particularly relevant in the European neighbourhood. Several studies have shown that the effectiveness of EU democracy promotion is highly contingent on the broader geopolitical context. Where EU leverage is uncontested – especially in the context of credible membership prospects – conditionality can induce substantial democratic reforms (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005; Vachudova, 2005). However, in settings characterized by competing external influences, such as those exerted by Russia or other non-democratic actors, EU incentives may be weakened or strategically bypassed (Tolstrup, 2015; Delcour & Wolczuk, 2015). These alternative partnerships provide governments with exit options that reduce their dependence on the EU, thereby undermining the credibility and effectiveness of conditionality mechanisms.

Moreover, authoritarian influence does not operate solely through material means. It also affects the normative environment in which domestic actors operate. By legitimizing illiberal governance practices and promoting narratives of sovereignty, stability, and resistance to Western interference, external autocratic actors can reshape domestic political discourse and reduce the appeal of democratic reforms (Ambrosio, 2010). This normative dimension reinforces the resilience of hybrid regimes and contributes to processes of gradual autocratization.

Taken together, this literature suggests that the absence of external authoritarian influence constitutes a facilitating condition for democratization. Where countries are relatively insulated from autocratic leverage, democratic actors face fewer constraints, and external democracy promotion – such as that pursued by the EU – can operate more effectively. Conversely, the presence of strong authoritarian linkages may enable regimes to resist reforms, engage in selective or superficial compliance, or even reverse democratic gains.

1.5 The Cultural Foundations of Democracy

The relationship between culture and democracy is a complex and highly debated topic in political science. Central to this discourse is the question of whether democracy requires a specific democratic culture and whether certain cultures are inherently incompatible with democratic governance.

Many scholars argue that cultural values play a fundamental role in shaping political and institutional outcomes, with the emergence of a "civic culture" often seen as essential for the establishment and sustainability of democratic institutions (Almond & Verba, 1963; Moisés, 2011). The broader debate on the cultural foundations of democracy is divided into two main theoretical perspectives: primordialism and constructivism. Primordialists argue that culture is deeply rooted and largely immutable, suggesting that certain cultures are inherently incompatible with democracy due to unchangeable factors such as religion, language, or ethnicity. In contrast, constructivists view culture as fluid and evolving, shaped by political and economic interactions (Clark, Golder, & Golder, 2013).

Scholars such as Schwartz (2009), Inglehart (2000), and Harrison (2000) highlight the central role of cultural values – such as autonomy, egalitarianism, and trust – in fostering democratic governance. Schwartz argues that cultures emphasizing autonomy and intellectual freedom are more conducive to democratization, while those prioritizing hierarchy and collective identity tend to sustain authoritarian systems. Similarly, Inglehart emphasizes the enduring influence of cultural traditions shaped by historical and religious factors, noting that trust and tolerance – essential to democratic institutions – are deeply embedded in these traditions. Harrison further supports this view, contending that culture, rather than colonialism or dependency, is the primary factor driving democratization. He underscores the importance of values such as trust and meritocracy in fostering democratic institutions.

Another significant theme in this debate is the link between cultural values and institutional performance, particularly how cultural traits influence governance and institutional integrity. Both Tabellini (2008) and Fukuyama (2000) examine how cultural values directly affect institutional outcomes. Tabellini emphasizes the distinction between "generalized" and "limited" morality, arguing that societies with generalized morality – where norms are applied universally – tend to have stronger institutional performance. This argument complements Fukuyama's discussion of social capital, in which norms of cooperation and trust play a vital role in governance. Fukuyama adds that while social capital can facilitate democratic development, it can also be detrimental in cases where internal trust undermines broader societal cooperation, as seen in exclusive groups. Both scholars stress that cultural norms profoundly shape institutional integrity and political participation, ultimately influencing governance structures.

Finally, the role of historical and religious traditions in shaping political and cultural behaviors is a key theme addressed by Inglehart and Fukuyama. Both argue that religious and historical factors create enduring cultural frameworks that significantly influence democratic development. Inglehart asserts that Protestant, Islamic, and Confucian cultural zones possess distinct value systems that deeply affect political behavior and democratization. Similarly, Fukuyama links Protestant values to broader social trust, suggesting that societies with these cultural foundations are more likely to develop democratic institutions. Together, these perspectives underscore the enduring influence of cultural traditions in shaping governance and democratization pathways.

However, the Civic Culture model is not without significant criticism. Dalton and Shin (2014) argue that it no longer reflects contemporary democratic realities for several reasons. First, the model is based on data from a limited number of Western democracies, primarily concerned with stability rather than

democratic transitions or consolidation. The model assumes that institutional allegiance is key to democracy, thus underemphasizing the importance of political competition and citizen dissent. Recent evidence, however, suggests that critical attitudes toward institutions, rather than mere allegiance, are crucial for democratic development. Additionally, the model overlooks the growing incongruence between democratic demands and institutional capacity, a gap that can drive democratization. Lastly, it fails to account for the reciprocal relationship between culture and democracy, particularly in new democracies where institutional trust tends to erode after transitions.

1.6 Autocratization Patterns and Determinants of Democratization

In the first part of this chapter, I have briefly outlined the most significant and influential theoretical traditions in the study of democratization. Specifically, I have examined the various factors, conditions, and priorities that each approach highlights in explaining these processes, which are inherently complex, multi-layered, and pervasive across political, social, and economic domains. These theoretical frameworks do not offer simple, linear explanations but rather emphasize the configurational nature of democratization, recognizing the interactions among multiple variables and the diverse pathways that different countries may follow.

Given the intrinsically interdisciplinary nature of democratization – and its counterpart, autocratization – the second half of this chapter shifts toward a critical review of recent empirical research. This review highlights the evolving empirical methods used to investigate these phenomena. As will become evident throughout the discussion, in its empirical applications, the study of democratization and autocratization rarely unfolds within neatly defined theoretical boundaries. Scholars do not rigidly adhere to one approach or another, treating them as mutually exclusive or exhaustive. Instead, the boundaries between theoretical traditions are fluid, with scholars frequently drawing from multiple frameworks to construct nuanced, context-specific analyses.

What emerges from this empirical literature is a recognition that theoretical traditions are not isolated silos, but rather provide a set of analytical tools and perspectives that can be adapted to specific cases. Scholars, therefore, tend to adopt an inductive approach, selecting the empirical strategies they deem most appropriate for the particular cases under study. This pragmatic blending of theoretical insights allows for a more flexible and comprehensive understanding of democratization and autocratization processes, acknowledging the complex, contingent, and context-dependent nature of political transitions. Consequently, rather than endorsing a single, all-encompassing framework, this body of research points to the importance of a pluralistic approach that is attentive to the unique features of individual cases while still grounded in broader theoretical debates.

1.7 Empirical Perspectives on Democratization and Autocratization: Beyond Theoretical Approaches

The empirical literature on democratization and autocratization has developed significantly beyond purely theoretical approaches, increasingly relying on systematic comparative analyses and empirically grounded research designs. While the previous section outlined the main theoretical perspectives, this section aims to situate the dissertation within the empirical debate by reviewing key contributions, identifying their limitations, and clarifying how they can be integrated.

To guide the reader through this complex body of literature, the discussion proceeds in a structured manner. It begins by revisiting general empirical frameworks that systematize the determinants of democratization and democratic backsliding. It then turns to more recent contributions that emphasize transnational dynamics, including diffusion and contagion. This first part establishes the broader analytical context before moving, in the following sections, to more specific debates on democratic quality and autocratization.

A useful point of departure is the framework developed by Waldner and Lust (2018), who classify the literature on democratization and democratic backsliding into six broad families of theories. This typology is particularly valuable because it highlights both the diversity of approaches and their respective limitations, thereby clarifying the need for integrative empirical analyses.

The first family, agency-based theories, attributes regime transitions to the strategic decisions of political actors operating under relatively unconstrained conditions. These approaches are especially useful in explaining moments of transition, elite bargaining, and contingent political outcomes. However, they often lack a systematic analytical framework and tend to overlook the structural constraints that shape and limit actors' choices. As a result, while they capture short-term dynamics effectively, they are less suited to explaining longer-term patterns of democratization and backsliding.

The second family, political culture theories, emphasizes the role of deeply embedded societal values and norms, which are transmitted across generations and shape political behavior. These approaches highlight the importance of legitimacy, trust, and civic engagement. However, because cultural factors tend to change slowly over time, they are generally considered less effective in explaining rapid processes of democratic backsliding or sudden regime transformations.

A third group of explanations focuses on political institutions, which are understood as both constraints on and outcomes of political action. Institutions structure political competition, define rules of the game, and shape incentives for political actors. At the same time, they are themselves the product of political struggles and historical trajectories, which creates significant endogeneity problems. This dual nature complicates efforts to identify clear causal relationships between institutional design and democratic outcomes.

The fourth family, political economy theories, links economic conditions – such as levels of development, inequality, and macroeconomic performance – to democratization processes. While this literature has produced important insights, particularly regarding the role of modernization, the relationship between economic variables and regime outcomes remains complex and mediated by a range of intervening factors. Economic growth, for instance, may stabilize regimes in some contexts while generating pressures for change in others.

Theories of social structure and political coalitions, the fifth family, emphasize the role of class relations, social cleavages, and coalition-building processes. These approaches are particularly useful in explaining how alliances among social groups shape political trajectories. However, they often rely on case-specific analyses and face challenges in generalizing their findings across different contexts.

Finally, international factors – including diffusion, external pressure, and the influence of international organizations – constitute the sixth family. While increasingly recognized as crucial, these factors are often treated as secondary to domestic variables. Waldner and Lust suggest that their explanatory power is best understood in interaction with internal dynamics, rather than as independent causal forces.

Taken together, these six families of theories highlight the fragmented nature of the literature. Each captures an important dimension of democratization and backsliding, but none provides a

comprehensive explanation on its own. This fragmentation points to the need for empirical approaches that integrate multiple levels of analysis and combine structural, institutional, and actor-centered perspectives.

Building on this pluralist framework, Teorell's (2010) work represents one of the most systematic empirical investigations into the determinants of democratization. His study combines large-scale statistical analysis with detailed case studies, covering the period from 1972 to 2006, and introduces a graded measure of democracy based on a combination of Polity and Freedom House indices. This approach allows for a more nuanced analysis of regime change by capturing variations in democratic quality rather than relying on binary classifications.

A key contribution of Teorell's work lies in the distinction between short-term and long-term effects. Long-term structural factors include socioeconomic modernization, which encompasses industrialization, urbanization, increased levels of education, improvements in living standards, and the expansion of media. These processes contribute to the development of more complex and pluralistic societies, which in turn create conditions that are less conducive to authoritarian rule.

Importantly, Teorell finds that modernization does not directly trigger democratization. Instead, it acts as a deterrent to democratic backsliding, making democratic regimes more resilient once established. This finding challenges earlier modernization theories that posited a direct causal link between economic development and democratization.

Short-term factors, by contrast, play a crucial role in triggering regime change. Economic crises, in particular, can destabilize existing regimes by generating internal divisions among elites and increasing public dissatisfaction. These conditions create windows of opportunity for political transformation. Peaceful protests and mass mobilization are also identified as significant drivers of democratization, as they can exert pressure on ruling elites and signal widespread demand for change.

Teorell's analysis also highlights the importance of international and regional influences, including diffusion from neighboring countries and the presence of democratic regional organizations. However, while these factors are included in the analysis, the mechanisms through which they operate are not fully specified. This represents a key limitation of his framework and points to the need for a more detailed understanding of transnational dynamics.

Equally important are Teorell's non-findings, which challenge widely held assumptions in the literature. His study does not find robust evidence linking democratization to factors such as social heterogeneity, natural resources, economic inequality, or armed domestic conflict. These results underscore the complexity of democratization processes and caution against overly simplistic explanations.

The limitations identified in Teorell's framework have been addressed by a growing body of literature that focuses explicitly on diffusion, democratic contagion, and transnational interdependence. This strand of research shifts the analytical focus from purely domestic determinants to the broader international context in which regime change occurs.

Gunitsky (2018) offers a particularly influential contribution by reconceptualizing democratic waves as the result of systemic disruptions in the international order. Rather than viewing democratization as a series of independent national processes, he argues that global shifts in the distribution of power – such as hegemonic decline or major geopolitical crises – create opportunities for new regime models to emerge and spread. This perspective emphasizes the importance of timing and context, suggesting that diffusion is not constant but occurs in distinct waves linked to broader structural transformations.

At a more micro-level, Knutsen et al. (2019; 2020) provide robust empirical evidence that regional democratic environments significantly influence regime trajectories. Countries that are embedded in democratic neighborhoods – especially those with strong economic, political, and communicative ties – are more likely to democratize and less likely to experience democratic breakdown. These effects operate through mechanisms such as policy learning, elite socialization, and reputational pressures, which collectively reduce the costs of adopting democratic institutions.

Similarly, Gerring et al. (2020) highlight the cumulative effects of historical and spatial diffusion. Their work shows that prolonged exposure to democratic institutions – whether through colonial legacies, geographic proximity, or sustained international engagement – creates path-dependent effects that enhance democratic resilience. This perspective underscores that democratization is not a one-off event but a long-term process shaped by historical trajectories.

Recent research further refines the concept of diffusion by distinguishing between different types of mechanisms. Passive diffusion refers to processes such as emulation, social learning, and normative convergence, where countries adopt institutional models observed elsewhere. Active diffusion, by contrast, involves deliberate efforts by external actors to promote or impose specific forms of governance.

In this context, international organizations and global governance structures play a central role. Cooley and Nexon (2020) argue that these structures facilitate not only the spread of democratic norms but also the diffusion of alternative, often illiberal, governance models. This duality highlights that diffusion is not inherently democratizing but reflects a competitive international environment.

Indeed, a growing body of literature documents processes of authoritarian diffusion and "authoritarian learning," whereby regimes adopt strategies of repression, institutional manipulation, and legalistic control from one another (Ambrosio, 2010; Bank et al., 2014; Hall & Ambrosio, 2017). These include practices such as media capture, judicial politicization, and electoral engineering. Such dynamics reinforce the argument that diffusion processes are bidirectional and must be analyzed in terms of competing influences.

Within this broader framework, the concept of democratic contagion becomes particularly relevant. It refers to the increased likelihood of democratization resulting from exposure to democratic norms, successful transitions, and institutional models in other countries. This effect operates through mechanisms such as demonstration, signaling, and network effects, and is often mediated by geographic proximity, cultural ties, and institutional linkages.

These insights are especially important when considering the role of the European Union as a promoter of democracy. The EU represents one of the most advanced cases of intentional democratic diffusion, combining conditionality, socialization, and integration mechanisms. Enlargement policy has been particularly effective in promoting democratic reforms, as candidate countries adopt institutional changes to meet accession criteria. However, beyond enlargement, the effectiveness of EU-driven diffusion is more limited and depends on factors such as credibility, consistency, and domestic political conditions.

Democratic Quality, Crisis, and Measurement Frameworks

Building on the structural and transnational perspectives discussed above, a second crucial strand of empirical literature focuses on the measurement and evaluation of democratic quality. While earlier approaches tended to conceptualize democracy in dichotomous terms – distinguishing simply between democratic and non-democratic regimes – more recent contributions emphasize that democracy is a

multidimensional phenomenon that varies in degree as well as in kind. This shift is particularly important for understanding contemporary processes of democratic erosion, which often occur within formally democratic systems rather than through abrupt regime breakdowns.

Among the most influential contributions in this field is the framework developed by Morlino and Diamond (2004, later updated in 2012), which conceptualizes democratic quality as a composite of eight interrelated dimensions: the rule of law, participation, competition, vertical accountability, horizontal accountability, civil and political freedoms, political equality, and responsiveness. This approach is particularly valuable because it moves beyond procedural definitions of democracy and provides a more comprehensive understanding of how democratic systems function in practice.

The rule of law constitutes a foundational dimension, ensuring that all individuals are subject to the same legal framework and that public authorities are constrained by independent judicial institutions. This dimension is essential for preventing abuses of power and for guaranteeing predictability and fairness in political processes. Participation, by contrast, emphasizes the active involvement of citizens in political life, not only through elections but also through broader forms of civic engagement. High levels of participation are indicative of a vibrant democratic culture and contribute to the legitimacy of political institutions.

Competition represents another key dimension, referring to the extent to which political actors can freely contest power. This includes the presence of genuine electoral alternatives and the possibility for incumbents to be replaced through fair and open competition. Vertical accountability captures the mechanisms through which elected officials are held responsible by citizens, primarily through elections, while horizontal accountability refers to the system of checks and balances among state institutions, including judicial oversight and legislative control.

Civil and political freedoms encompass rights such as freedom of expression, assembly, and association, which are necessary for meaningful political participation. Political equality ensures that all citizens have equal access to political processes and that no group is systematically excluded or disadvantaged. Finally, responsiveness measures the extent to which governments align their policies with the preferences and needs of the population, reflecting the substantive dimension of democratic governance.

A key strength of this framework lies in its recognition that these dimensions are deeply interconnected. Improvements in one area may reinforce others – for instance, stronger rule of law can enhance accountability – while trade-offs may also arise, making it difficult to maximize all dimensions simultaneously. This multidimensional perspective is particularly useful for identifying partial or uneven forms of democratization, as well as for analyzing processes of democratic backsliding that affect specific components rather than the system as a whole.

Complementing this approach, Schneider and Schmitter (2004) conceptualize democratization as a process that unfolds through three distinct but interconnected phases: liberalization, transition, and consolidation. Liberalization involves the expansion of rights and protections that limit arbitrary state power, including the introduction of civil liberties, political pluralism, and legal safeguards. This phase creates the conditions under which democratic change becomes possible, but it does not in itself guarantee a successful transition.

The transition phase refers to the process through which a political system moves from authoritarian rule to democratic governance. This phase is often characterized by uncertainty and contestation, as the outcome is not predetermined and depends on the interactions between political elites, social

movements, and external actors. Factors such as elite bargaining, institutional design, and the role of civil society are particularly important during this stage.

Consolidation, finally, refers to the stabilization and institutionalization of democratic practices. A consolidated democracy is one in which democratic rules are widely accepted as the only legitimate framework for political competition. This involves not only the formal establishment of institutions but also the internalization of democratic norms by political actors and citizens. Key indicators of consolidation include the regular conduct of free and fair elections, the development of a robust civil society, and the existence of effective mechanisms for accountability and transparency.

Closely related to these frameworks is the concept of defective democracies, developed by Merkel and Croissant (2004), which identifies structural weaknesses that undermine democratic performance. They highlight four common features: the stability of the electoral regime as a necessary but insufficient condition for democracy; deficiencies in the rule of law and horizontal accountability, often manifested in corruption and abuse of power; the domination of specific political actors over certain domains, which limits genuine competition; and low-intensity citizenship, characterized by weak state capacity and limited civic engagement. This framework is particularly useful for understanding hybrid regimes that combine democratic and authoritarian elements.

Building on these multidimensional approaches, Kriesi (2020) proposes a framework for evaluating democratic performance based on five core dimensions: the electoral regime, political participation rights, civil liberties, horizontal accountability, and the effective power to govern. His analysis is notable for combining objective indicators – such as legal frameworks and institutional arrangements – with subjective measures, including citizen satisfaction and trust in political institutions. This dual approach allows for a more comprehensive assessment of democratic functioning, capturing both formal structures and lived experiences.

The electoral regime is assessed in terms of fairness, competitiveness, and inclusiveness, including universal suffrage and electoral integrity. Political participation rights are evaluated based on the extent to which citizens are able to engage in political activities, such as voting, joining parties, and participating in public debate. Civil liberties focus on the protection of individual rights, including freedom of speech, assembly, and religion.

Horizontal accountability examines the extent to which different branches of government can effectively check and balance one another, ensuring that power is not concentrated in a single institution. Finally, effective governance refers to the capacity of democratically elected representatives to implement policies and exercise authority in practice, rather than merely in formal terms. This dimension is particularly important in contexts where formal democratic institutions exist but are undermined by informal practices or external constraints.

A complementary perspective is offered by Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018), who identify five distinct conceptions of democracy: participatory, deliberative, egalitarian, majoritarian, and liberal. Each of these conceptions emphasizes different aspects of democratic practice and is associated with specific determinants and vulnerabilities. The participatory conception focuses on the extent of citizen engagement in political processes, including voter turnout and activism. The deliberative conception emphasizes the quality of public discourse and the extent to which political decisions are based on reasoned debate.

The egalitarian conception highlights the importance of equal political influence, examining whether all citizens have similar opportunities to participate and shape political outcomes. The majoritarian

conception focuses on the responsiveness of government to the preferences of the majority, while the liberal conception emphasizes the protection of individual rights and the role of checks and balances in limiting majority power. Together, these conceptions provide a nuanced understanding of democracy that goes beyond simple institutional definitions.

The literature on democratic crisis builds on these frameworks by identifying structural pressures that challenge contemporary democracies. Merkel (2018) provides a particularly comprehensive analysis, identifying several key indicators of democratic crisis. One of the most significant is rising socioeconomic inequality, which undermines the principle of political equality and can lead to unequal representation and participation.

Another important factor is the decline of political parties, particularly the erosion of traditional party structures and their connections to society. This weakens the representative function of democracy and reduces the capacity of parties to aggregate interests and provide stable governance. Deregulated capitalism also poses challenges by shifting decision-making power away from democratic institutions and toward market actors and supranational entities.

Globalization further complicates democratic governance by limiting the ability of national governments to control economic and political processes. At the same time, tensions between security and liberty – particularly in the context of counterterrorism – can lead to the expansion of executive power and the restriction of civil rights. The erosion of civil liberties, including restrictions on freedom of religion and the independence of the judiciary, represents another key indicator of democratic decline.

Finally, Merkel highlights the disembedding effects of neoliberal capitalism, which detach economic processes from social and democratic constraints, thereby weakening democratic institutions. These various factors interact in complex ways, producing both latent and acute crises. In some cases, democratic erosion occurs gradually over time, while in others it manifests as sudden institutional breakdown.

Importantly, these structural pressures do not operate in isolation but interact with the behavior of political actors. Elite decisions can either mitigate or exacerbate these challenges, highlighting the continued relevance of agency alongside structural factors. This interaction between structure and agency is a recurring theme across the literature and underscores the need for integrated analytical frameworks.

Taken together, the contributions discussed in this section provide a rich and multidimensional understanding of democratic quality and crisis. However, they also reveal important limitations. While these frameworks offer detailed tools for assessing democratic performance, they are often less effective in explaining how and why democracies deteriorate over time. In particular, they tend to focus on static measurements rather than dynamic processes, and they do not always fully account for the interaction between domestic and international factors.

These limitations point to the importance of engaging with the growing literature on autocratization, which explicitly focuses on processes of democratic decline and institutional erosion. The next section builds on the frameworks discussed here by examining how these dynamics unfold in practice, with particular attention to the mechanisms, trajectories, and actors involved in autocratization.

Autocratization, Mechanisms, Trajectories and Resistance

Building on the frameworks discussed above, recent scholarship has increasingly shifted its focus from democratization to autocratization, reflecting broader global trends characterized by the gradual erosion of democratic institutions. While earlier literature primarily emphasized transitions toward democracy, contemporary research highlights processes of democratic decline occurring within formally democratic regimes. This shift requires not only new empirical tools but also a reorganization of existing knowledge to better capture the dynamics of backsliding.

A key contribution in this regard is provided by Cassani and Tomini (2020), who offer a systematic empirical analysis of autocratization patterns in the twenty-first century. Their work represents a crucial starting point because it explicitly focuses on trajectories rather than static regime categories. They distinguish between liberal democracies, defective democracies, and closed autocracies, thereby introducing a nuanced typology that captures intermediate and hybrid forms.

Liberal democracies are characterized by limited executive power, strong protection of civil liberties, and robust accountability mechanisms. At the opposite end of the spectrum, closed autocracies are defined by minimal citizen participation and highly centralized authority. Between these two poles lie defective democracies, which retain electoral competition but exhibit significant institutional weaknesses, particularly in terms of executive constraints and rule of law.

Cassani and Tomini's central finding is that autocratization most frequently occurs within defective democracies, rather than through abrupt transitions from full democracies to outright authoritarian regimes. This process is typically gradual and driven by mechanisms such as electoral manipulation, the weakening of horizontal accountability, and the expansion of executive power. Their empirical evidence, covering the period from 2000 to 2018, demonstrates that democratic erosion often unfolds incrementally, making it more difficult to detect and counteract.

This gradualist understanding of regime change aligns with what has been conceptualized as the "third wave of autocratization." Lührmann and Lindberg (2019) provide one of the most influential empirical contributions to this debate by developing a sensitive operationalization of autocratization based on the V-Dem dataset. Their approach captures both sudden and gradual changes in regime characteristics, allowing for a more precise identification of backsliding episodes.

Their findings show that the third wave of autocratization, which began after 1993, differs from previous waves in several important respects. First, it primarily affects democracies rather than authoritarian regimes. Second, it occurs at a time when global levels of democracy are relatively high, suggesting that democratic gains are being reversed rather than expanded. Third, it is characterized by incremental institutional changes that often take place within the legal framework, rather than through overt violations.

Complementing this macro-level perspective, Wunsch and Blanchard (2023) provide a more fine-grained analysis of how democratic safeguards erode over time. Using the V-Dem dataset, they focus on key dimensions such as electoral integrity, competitive politics, and institutional checks on executive power. Their findings demonstrate that democratic backsliding is not a single event but a process involving the progressive weakening of multiple institutional components. This reinforces the idea that autocratization is best understood as a dynamic and multidimensional phenomenon.

At the meso-level of political strategies, Pirro and Stanley (2022) introduce the concept of the "Illiberal Playbook," which offers a detailed framework for analyzing how governments pursue illiberal agendas. They distinguish between three types of institutional change: forging, bending, and breaking. Forging

refers to policy changes that are fully consistent with both the letter and the spirit of the law, often in areas where there is limited political contestation. Bending involves manipulating the interpretation of legal norms, adhering to their formal requirements while violating their underlying principles. Breaking, finally, entails clear violations of both domestic and international law, representing the most extreme form of institutional erosion.

This framework is particularly useful because it highlights the strategic and incremental nature of autocratization. Governments often begin with forging and bending before resorting to more overt violations, thereby maintaining a façade of legality while gradually undermining democratic institutions. As such, the Illiberal Playbook provides a bridge between macro-level patterns of autocratization and micro-level political strategies.

Further advancing the empirical analysis of democratic decline, Tomini and Wagemann (2018) employ fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) to distinguish between democratic breakdown and democratic regression. Their approach is particularly valuable because it allows for the identification of multiple causal pathways, rather than assuming a single explanatory model. By differentiating between remote conditions – such as economic development, inequality, and party system characteristics – and proximate conditions – such as executive power concentration and party system volatility – they provide a nuanced understanding of the complex causality underlying regime change.

Their findings underscore that democratic regression does not necessarily lead to full breakdown, and that different combinations of conditions can produce similar outcomes. This reinforces the need for analytical frameworks that can accommodate complexity and variation across cases.

While these contributions significantly advance our understanding of autocratization processes, they primarily focus on mechanisms and trajectories of decline. A further dimension that has received increasing attention concerns resistance to autocratization, that is, the actors and strategies that can halt or reverse democratic erosion.

Tomini, Gibril, and Bochev (2023) provide a systematic analysis of resistance actors, identifying three main categories: institutional resisters, political resisters, and social resisters. Institutional resisters include actors such as judges and constitutional courts, which can use formal mechanisms to constrain executive power. Political resisters encompass opposition parties and political leaders who challenge authoritarian tendencies within institutional frameworks. Social resisters, finally, include civil society organizations and grassroots movements that mobilize public support and engage in contentious politics.

Their analysis shows that the effectiveness of resistance varies significantly across regime types. In liberal democracies, institutional and political actors play a central role, often relying on legal and parliamentary mechanisms. In electoral democracies, opposition actors may combine institutional strategies with extra-parliamentary mobilization. In authoritarian regimes, resistance tends to shift toward social actors and external institutions, as domestic institutional channels become increasingly constrained.

This perspective is crucial because it shifts the focus from processes of decline to the conditions under which democratic erosion can be contained or reversed. It also highlights the importance of considering both internal and external actors in the analysis of regime trajectories.

Complementing this line of research, Rød et al. (2020) provide a comprehensive classification of the determinants of democratization, identifying eighteen distinct categories across socio-economic, political-institutional, and cultural dimensions. Their sensitivity analysis reveals that broad

developmental processes – rather than income alone – play a key role in sustaining democracy. At the same time, factors such as political protests, democratic neighboring countries, and global democratic trends positively influence democratization, while natural resources, majoritarian electoral systems, and long-term incumbency tend to hinder it.

Importantly, their findings reinforce the relevance of diffusion mechanisms discussed earlier, showing that domestic and international factors are deeply intertwined. This further supports the argument that regime change cannot be understood solely through internal dynamics.

1.8 Area-Based Perspectives and the Limits of Universalist Models

A recurrent limitation in comparative analyses of democratization and political transformation lies in the tendency to assess trajectories of change primarily against models derived from Western European experiences. Such approaches risk interpreting late-developing or post-socialist countries as delayed or deficient cases, rather than as trajectories shaped by context-specific dynamics. In this sense, dominant theories of democratization – while analytically powerful – often embed implicit assumptions of linearity, convergence, and institutional uniformity. This limitation is closely connected to broader epistemological biases identified in the International Relations (IR) literature, particularly Eurocentrism and the search for universal "covering laws" derived from a narrow set of historical experiences. As highlighted in recent debates on Global IR, mainstream theoretical frameworks have often universalized Western historical trajectories and institutional forms, marginalizing alternative pathways and local knowledge traditions (D'Amato et al., 2023).

To address these limitations, this study incorporates an area studies perspective as a complementary analytical lens. Rather than rejecting general theories, this perspective seeks to contextualize them by embedding political and economic outcomes within longer-term regional trajectories, historical constraints, and socially embedded institutional configurations (Gerschenkron, 1962; Stark & Bruszt, 1998; Bohle & Greskovits, 2012). At the same time, it aligns with recent calls to bridge IR and Area Studies by combining context-sensitive analysis with comparative ambitions, thereby overcoming the traditional divide between universalism and particularism (D'Amato et al., 2023). Within this framework, Gerschenkron's theory of late development provides a key point of departure. By introducing the concept of the "advantages of backwardness," Gerschenkron (1962) challenges linear models of development, arguing that economically late-developing countries do not simply replicate the trajectories of early industrializers. Instead, they adopt distinct institutional arrangements that compensate for missing preconditions, often relying on state intervention, external support, or alternative institutional mechanisms to accelerate development. In post-socialist contexts, this has resulted in compressed and hybrid trajectories of transformation, where advanced and underdeveloped sectors coexist and institutional forms emerge through processes of selective adaptation rather than straightforward convergence.

This insight is particularly relevant when analyzing the EU's role in external democracy promotion. EU rules, norms, and policy frameworks are not merely "transplanted" into partner countries, but are reshaped through domestic power structures, institutional capacities, and inherited socio-economic configurations. As highlighted in the literature on norm diffusion and localisation, externally promoted models are constantly negotiated, contested, and reinterpreted within local contexts, producing outcomes that reflect both international pressures and domestic agency (D'Amato et al., 2023). Consequently, compliance with EU conditionality often results in hybrid institutional configurations,

where formal alignment coexists with informal practices, uneven implementation, and selective adaptation.

A complementary perspective is provided by Dahl's multidimensional conception of democracy, which shifts the focus from binary classifications to a continuum based on the interaction between political competition and participation (Dahl, 1971). This approach is especially useful in post-socialist and late-developing contexts, where electoral competition may coexist with weak accountability, limited inclusion, and constrained institutional effectiveness. From an area studies perspective, such configurations should not be interpreted as incomplete versions of a democratic ideal, but as context-specific forms of political organization shaped by historical trajectories and structural constraints.

Historical-sociological approaches further reinforce this argument by highlighting the enduring impact of long-term structural legacies. Chirot's work on Eastern Europe emphasizes the role of agrarian structures, dependency relations, and elite configurations in shaping development trajectories (Chirot, 1989). These factors often persist through periods of institutional reform, resulting in processes of transformation that are cumulative rather than disruptive. This perspective aligns with broader theories of path dependency, which stress how early institutional arrangements constrain subsequent reform trajectories and contribute to divergent outcomes across similar reform contexts (Pierson, 2004; Thelen, 2004).

Finally, insights from the study of informal institutions and deep social structures underscore the importance of culturally and socially embedded patterns of behavior. Todd's work on family systems (1985), alongside contributions by Helmke and Levitsky (2004) and North (1990), suggests that informal norms, social hierarchies, and culturally embedded expectations play a crucial role in shaping political behavior and institutional effectiveness. In many EU partner countries, these informal dynamics coexist with formal democratic institutions, influencing levels of trust, compliance, and accountability in ways that cannot be fully captured by institutional or policy-based analyses alone.

Taken together, these contributions highlight the importance of integrating area-based perspectives into the study of democratization and external democracy promotion. They also resonate with broader efforts to "decentre" and "provincialise" dominant theoretical frameworks, emphasizing that knowledge production in international politics is inherently situated and shaped by power relations and epistemic hierarchies (D'Amato et al., 2023).

While this study does not seek to fully adopt an area studies approach as an alternative to existing theoretical frameworks, it remains attentive to these debates and their implications. In particular, the analysis is informed by the awareness that processes of democratization and institutional change are embedded in historically specific trajectories and shaped by contextual factors that may not be fully captured by universalist models. This awareness informs the interpretation of both structural conditions and EU-driven mechanisms, suggesting that similar external interventions – such as conditionality or partnership – may produce differentiated outcomes depending on domestic configurations, historical legacies, and institutional contexts. In this sense, the study engages with area-based insights as a way to qualify and contextualize broader theoretical expectations, rather than to replace them. More broadly, this perspective encourages a cautious interpretation of Europeanisation processes, particularly when observed "from the outside." Rather than assuming linear convergence toward a predefined model, it highlights how EU norms and policies are locally interpreted, contested, and adapted within specific socio-political environments.

In methodological terms, this sensitivity to context complements the comparative logic of the QCA approach adopted in this study. While QCA allows for the identification of recurring configurations across cases, the incorporation of area-based insights helps to interpret these configurations in light of contextual variation, historical legacies, and institutional hybridity, without assuming uniform causal pathways across the European neighbourhood.

1.9 Conclusions

This brief overview of the debates surrounding democratization highlights significant theoretical insights into the erosion of democratic norms. The literature underscores that while economic development is crucial in fostering democratic tendencies, it is neither a universal nor an automatic pathway to democracy. Instead, the interplay of historical, cultural, and institutional contexts significantly influences democratization. Modernization theory, despite its critiques, remains a valuable framework for understanding democratization, yet it should be integrated with other theoretical perspectives to provide a more comprehensive and robust explanation of the democratization process. This integration is essential for capturing the complex and multifaceted nature of democratic transitions and consolidations.

The literature review identifies a critical research gap: the need for more detailed empirical studies that directly link broad theoretical frameworks to the specific dynamics of political manipulation by illiberal actors. This gap is particularly pertinent in the context of the EU's enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), which aim to foster democratic governance in neighboring regions. While the existing literature provides a robust foundation for understanding regime changes, it often lacks a direct connection to the micro-level actions within political institutions that are critical for assessing the effectiveness of EU initiatives. For instance, the ENP seeks to promote political stability and democratic reforms, but understanding the specific ways in which political actors in these regions might resist or undermine these efforts is crucial. By addressing this research gap, future studies can offer deeper insights into the mechanisms of political manipulation and resistance, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of policies aimed at promoting democratization and preventing the erosion of democratic norms.

At the same time, these analytical challenges also reflect broader epistemological debates concerning the limits of universalist models and the importance of context-sensitive approaches. In this respect, the present study remains attentive to the insights of area-based perspectives, which highlight how processes of democratization and institutional change are embedded in historically specific trajectories and shaped by local configurations. While not replacing general theoretical frameworks, this awareness informs the interpretation of empirical findings and cautions against overly linear or teleological readings of political transformation.

Finally, as highlighted in the section "Autocratization Patterns and Determinants of Democratization," autocratization processes are characterized by dynamic and evolving outcomes, making them inherently difficult to predict or fully comprehend. The complexity of these processes defies any effort to establish a clear or definitive trajectory. A significant analytical challenge lies in the tendency to construct linear narratives with predetermined conclusions, when it is essential to recognize that regime changes are driven not by straightforward narratives, but by complex, often opaque, and multifaceted dynamics.

A key factor to consider is the ambiguity of political actors, who cannot be easily categorized as heroes or villains. Many civil servants, for instance, operate within a complex web of personal and institutional interests, frequently prioritizing these over ideological alignment. This ambiguity becomes particularly pronounced in regime transformations, especially when regional and international organizations act – or aspire to act – as major forces in shaping these outcomes.

Rather than predicting outcomes, my objective is to uncover the underlying dynamics driving these transformations. Isolating autocratization from broader socio-economic changes risks overlooking critical components of the process. By resisting the inclination to portray autocratization as a linear or conclusive process, I aim to embrace the inherent open-endedness and ambiguity of these phenomena. This approach emphasizes the complex interaction of social, historical, political, and economic factors, offering a more nuanced understanding of regime change by focusing on the driving forces rather than on predetermined outcomes. In other words, this work is fully conscious of operating on "thin ice," acknowledging the complexity of recent, ongoing events and the need for considerable caution. Although certain parameters have been developed to interpret and understand what may be occurring within a country, regime changes remain open-ended, with many outcomes still uncertain, making it often premature to draw definitive conclusions.

CHAPTER 2
The EU and External Democracy Promotion (EDP)

2.1 Enlargement Through Conditionalities

Conditionality, within the realm of development assistance provided by international organizations, refers to the practice of allocating aid resources contingent upon the recipient's adherence to a set of pre-agreed objectives (Steunenberg & Dimitrova, 2007). This mechanism ensures that aid is utilized in alignment with specific goals and priorities. Should the recipient country fail to meet these stipulated objectives or associated conditions, the donor reserves the right to discontinue the aid flow.

Within the EU, conditionality has evolved significantly. It initially emerged as a minor policy instrument in agreements with third countries, first utilized in 1977 when the then European Community responded to a massacre in Uganda by suspending promised aid funds (Bartels, 2005). At the end of the Cold War, the EU systematically began to integrate human rights conditionality clauses into its association agreements (Bartels, 2005), as well as other international trade and cooperation agreements within the framework of development cooperation (Portela, 2012). This approach has since become the cornerstone of EU enlargement governance (Berkowitz et al., 2017), as during the accession negotiations, the EU strategically links the initiation or provisional closure of various negotiation chapters to specific conditionalities (Becker, 2024).

EU conditionality presents indeed unique features that distinguish it from the conditionalities imposed by other international and regional organizations, which are primarily financial. The EU's conditionality offers benefits intricately linked to the prospects of EU membership, providing a considerably powerful incentive for compliance (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005). EU conditionality is also unique in terms of its broad objectives and outcomes, which differ from those of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. While the latter primarily focus on economic reforms and financial stability, EU conditionality encompasses a wider spectrum of political, legal, and institutional reforms. This comprehensive approach ensures that candidate countries not only stabilize their economies but also align their political and legal systems with those of the EU, thereby facilitating smoother integration upon membership.

It was the post-communist context of Central and Eastern Europe that prompted the EU to emphasize political criteria within its conditionality framework (Anastasakis, 2008). This shift was crystallized in the Copenhagen criteria, which outlined the essential, non-negotiable political conditions: multi-party democracy, respect for human and minority rights, rule of law, independence of civil society, freedom of expression, separation of powers, and civilian control of the military, among others. Over time, the scope of political conditionality expanded to encompass additional requirements, such as combating corruption, upholding social and cultural rights, and maintaining good neighborly relations among states. In the context of the Western Balkans enlargement, new ad hoc conditionalities were developed, previously non-existent within the traditional framework of conditionality, to adapt the process to regional specificities. Namely, these conditionalities were formulated to address the unique post-conflict challenges of the region, focusing on reconstruction, stabilization, and reform. They placed a strong emphasis on principles such as peace, justice for war crimes, reconciliation, anti-discrimination, and fostering good neighborly relations (Rupnik, 2011). As a matter of fact, since the 2004 enlargement, EU political conditionality has evolved significantly. Initially characterized by uniform conditions for

all candidate countries, the approach shifted to differentiated and targeted conditionality. Country-specific conditions became more prominent, as seen in the stricter requirements for Bulgaria and Romania, including the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM) for post-accession monitoring. The EU also began using more negative conditionality, such as threats and sanctions, in addition to positive incentives like financial aid. Monitoring mechanisms became more sophisticated, serving as instruments for political pressure and providing detailed compliance guidance (Gateva, 2015).

Svea Koch (2015) provides a detailed and comprehensive overview of the evolving landscape of political conditionality beyond traditional aid contexts. She stresses how the diversification of political conditionality is not only evident in its varying types and incentive mechanisms but also in its evolving objectives. While traditionally focused on promoting democratic development and civil rights, political conditionality now extends to include social, economic, and environmental rights. This shift reflects the increasing relevance of issues such as international labor standards and sustainable development within trade policy, demonstrating a broader scope of influence in response to globalization. Most importantly, she proposes an ideal-typical typology to capture the diversification of political conditionality, distinguishing between ex-ante and ex-post approaches as well as punitive and rewarding mechanisms, applying the typology to the EU. She highlights the EU's use of conditionality across different policy areas, from development aid to trade agreements, manifesting itself in various forms. Pre-accession conditionality and association agreements exemplify ex-ante/positive conditionality, where adherence to democratic standards is a prerequisite for membership or agreement ratification. In terms of ex-post/positive conditionality, the "more for more" approach in the Neighborhood Policy rewards countries implementing democratic reforms with increased benefits. Conversely, the EU's 2012 reformed Neighborhood Policy incorporates elements of ex-post/negative conditionality, wherein countries failing to implement reforms receive reduced benefits.

2.2 EDP Through Conditionalities: A Predominantly Skeptical Assessment

The literature on the EU's role in promoting democracy reveals an interwoven dynamics of strategies, outcomes, and evolving mechanisms.

The annual Enlargement Reports published by the European Commission often highlight both progress and areas needing improvement in key sectors such as democracy, rule of law, and minority rights. These reports celebrate the success of conditionality in fostering democratic progress in target countries, providing a comprehensive overview of the advancements made by candidate countries in aligning with EU standards. They document improvements in judicial reforms, anti-corruption measures, and the protection of minority rights, demonstrating the tangible benefits of the EU's conditionality policy. Additionally, the reports identify specific deficiencies that need to be addressed, offering a roadmap for further reforms. This dual approach of recognizing progress while pinpointing ongoing challenges underscores the effectiveness of conditionality in fostering democratic governance and institutional development in candidate countries.

Sedelmeier (2008) investigates whether the positive compliance patterns achieved by post-communist countries under EU conditionality continued after their accession to the EU. Despite expectations that compliance would decline due to a changed incentive structure post-accession, data on EU law infringements during the first four years of membership show that new member states outperformed older EU members. Sedelmeier notes that criticisms of EU conditionality often highlight its ambiguities, inconsistencies, and unintended consequences, such as strengthening the executive over parliaments

and reducing political competition on socio-economic issues. However, pre-accession conditionality was effective in aligning Central and Eastern European countries with the acquis.

Expanding the scope of analysis beyond the enlargement region, Gafuri (2022) conducts a comprehensive study of EU democracy assistance across 126 recipient countries from 2002 to 2018, isolating the influence of EU democracy assistance and using the Varieties of Democracy Electoral Index (EDI) as the primary measure of democracy. Her study identifies two key mechanisms driving the success of EU democracy assistance: political conditionality and monitoring mechanisms, incorporating controls for socioeconomic development, other types of assistance, and state capacity to account for confounding factors. The analysis shows a moderate but consistent impact of EU democracy assistance on democracy levels across developing countries from 2002 to 2018.

Despite these positive accounts, there remains widespread skepticism in the literature regarding the conventional wisdom surrounding the impact of EU membership on emerging democracies.

Under certain conditions, EU political conditionalities can actually undermine the establishment of legitimate law. While new member states may transpose EU laws, they often fail to actively enforce them, leading to a "world of dead letters". Accepting laws that a society is not prepared to implement can devalue the meaning of law and warn against overly optimistic views of EU enlargement (Slapin, 2015). According to De Ridder and Kochenov (2011), democratic conditionality in EU Enlargement had its own ambiguities during the 2004 enlargement, as the European Commission failed to clearly distinguish between democracy and the rule of law, leading to vague and inconsistent application of democratic conditionality. Despite the 1997 Opinions acknowledging most candidate countries as meeting the Copenhagen criteria, many had significant deficiencies in their democratic institutions, highlighting that readiness was more a political question than an objective assessment. The second major issue they identify is the lack of clear standards, with the Commission making ad hoc demands in the absence of any specific acquis on democracy and rule of law. This resulted in candidates being asked to comply with ambiguous criteria. Kochenov (2015) further elaborated on his critique, identifying four main ambiguity-related issues: the EU's inability to model democratic standards, weak performance in democracy-related fields, lack of coherent democratic standards, and inadequate instruments to enforce these standards. He highlights that democracy is treated more as a political value rather than a legal obligation within the EU framework, which undermines its efficacy in promoting genuine democratic governance. Anastasakis (2008) also stresses the contradictions in the EU's political conditionality approach, specifically in the Western Balkans, highlighting three main weaknesses. First, the emphasis on the process over the outcome of accession undermines the strategy's credibility. Second, the EU's mixture of normative, functional, and realist objectives obscures its intentions. While normatively promoting democracy, human rights, and minority rights, functionally ensuring efficient rule adoption and institutional capacity, and realistically prioritizing security and strategic interests, the EU's goals often conflict. Third, the inconsistency in the assessment process is evident as the EU applies rigorous compliance measures in some cases but adopts a more pragmatic approach in others.

Theuns (2017) expands these ambiguities mostly from a normative perspective, challenging political conditionalities for their inherent normative inconsistency. He argues that EDP through conditionalities conflicts with its economic goals, such as market liberalization and trade policy reforms, and that offering market integration incentives undermines democratization. Theuns finds that the EU lacks coherence in its external action because its economic agenda undermines its democracy promotion values. Moreover, he underscores how the concept of democracy in the EDP is bundled with other goals

like human rights and the rule of law, indicating a preference for liberal democracy without explicitly defining it.

Similar normative concerns were already raised in 2009 by Gergana Noutcheva, who evaluated the EU's normative influence in the Western Balkans, emphasizing the complexities of achieving real compliance with EU directives. Noutcheva argues that the EU's strategies often lack strong normative justifications, leading to superficial, incomplete, or coerced compliance from Western Balkan countries. The EU's focus primarily on strategic interests rather than genuine normative considerations influences regional leaders to prioritize national interests and internal legitimacy over adhering to EU conditions. The discussion reveals that compliance often results from imposed conditions rather than voluntary alignment with EU norms, undermining the EU's role as a transformative power in the region. These critiques suggest a need for the EU to reassess and strengthen the normative foundations of its policies to achieve more effective and sustainable outcomes in its enlargement strategy.

Besides normative critiques, political conditionalities are far from being considered a complete tool to prompt democracy. Dimitrova and Kortenska (2019) critically evaluate the EU enlargement policy as a tool of foreign policy, specifically in the Western Balkans, questioning its current effectiveness and relevance. Initially, the policy effectively promoted stability, democratic governance, and economic development in post-communist states, leveraging the prospect of EU membership to encourage comprehensive reforms. However, the authors argue that the policy's effectiveness is waning due to the diminished credibility and attractiveness of EU membership, alongside growing disenchantment within candidate countries and EU member states. This disenchantment stems from stringent accession criteria, slow negotiation processes, and challenging socio-economic conditions in the Western Balkans. Anastasakis (2008) highlights other weaknesses in the EU democratic promotion through conditionalities. He asserts that local compliance with EU political conditionality often lacks democratic dialogue within countries, especially when changes must occur rapidly. This can undermine democratization in the short term, particularly in post-conflict situations where prioritizing law and order over elections or civil society development hinders democratic progress.

Focusing on the case of Bosnia & Herzegovina (BiH), Džihić and Wieser (2011) explore the effectiveness of EU conditionality as a mechanism for promoting democratic reforms, arguing that EU conditionality has struggled to yield substantial democratic progress due to its overly formal, elite-driven nature and the complex ethno-nationalistic dynamics within BiH. They suggest that the EU's strategies, while aiming to enforce reforms, fail to engage adequately with the deep-seated ethnic divisions and political complexities that characterize BiH. This misalignment, combined with a lack of tangible incentives for local elites to advance reforms, diminishes the potential impact of EU conditionality. They suggest that for EU conditionality to be effective, it must adapt to the specific political and social contexts of candidate countries, offering more than just procedural incentives for compliance and instead supporting substantial democratic transformations.

While for BiH the key role of complex ethno-nationalistic dynamics was emphasized, Freyburg and Richter (2010) analyzed political conditionalities through the lens of national identity, focusing on the Croatian case. The authors argue that the impact of the EU's incentive-based instruments on democratization is contingent on domestic preconditions being met, particularly relating to national identity. When national identity conflicts with the democratic norms promoted by the EU, it acts as a barrier to compliance, rendering EU conditionality less effective. This is demonstrated through Croatia's struggles with the prosecution of war crimes, where national identity influenced governmental decisions, often leading to non-compliance with EU demands. The study integrates constructivist

approaches, highlighting the role of national identity as a significant filter that determines the appropriateness of government actions in response to international pressures.

Leaving behind skepticism and entering into a full critique of political conditionalities, Milenko Petrovic (2020) argues that the EU's strategy, characterized by increasingly strict accession conditions, has failed to effectively promote democratic governance or economic reform. Instead, these stringent conditions have often intensified existing political and socio-economic issues in the region. Petrovic criticizes the EU for its inconsistent standards and notes a shift in focus from encouraging actual reforms to emphasizing regional stability and security. This shift, according to the author, has resulted in only superficial adherence to EU norms in the Western Balkans, thereby diluting the transformative promise of EU enlargement.

Bieber (2018) critically evaluates the EU's role, arguing that its engagement has been insufficient in promoting sustained democratization. On the contrary, this shortfall has inadvertently supported the persistence and rise of authoritarian regimes. Initially, the EU played a transformative role in shaping democratic structures, but its later efforts have been inadequate to prevent democratic backsliding. These regimes exploit the EU's focus on stability over comprehensive democratic reforms, enabling them to maintain power by projecting external legitimacy and stability while engaging in authoritarian practices. The concept of "stabilitocracy" describes this relationship, where regimes seek validation from Western actors to internalize power and simulate stability externally.

A similarly critical account is proposed by Richter and Wunsch (2019), who identify three key linkages that connect EU conditionality to the consolidation of state capture in the Western Balkans – referring to the extensive abuse of state institutions for partisan gains, characterized by patronage and clientelism. First, market liberalization without a comprehensive legal framework allows economic elites to secure private benefits and exert political influence. Second, stringent top-down conditionality stifles domestic deliberation and weakens internal accountability mechanisms, enabling ruling elites to suppress opposition. Third, progress towards EU membership legitimizes ruling elites, leading to improved formal compliance but declining democratic performance, revealing a decoupling of compliance and democracy levels. They argue that EU conditionality inadvertently reinforces state capture by enabling corrupt elites and informal networks to consolidate power, hindering sustainable democratization. The phenomenon of state capture in post-Yugoslav countries is also addressed by Soeren Keil (2018), focusing on Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia, suggesting that the EU's integration efforts have been insufficient to prevent or reverse the rise of authoritarian regimes in these countries, where entrenched political elites manipulate democratic institutions to maintain power. The EU's strategy, initially transformative, has struggled to address these entrenched issues, often focusing on stability rather than comprehensive democratic reforms.

Direkli and Ashiekh (2022) shift the analysis to the EU's democracy promotion efforts in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. They contend that the EU's focus on security and economic interests often overshadows its commitment to democratic values, leading to policy inconsistencies. Their study identifies three main issues: the lack of comprehensive legal frameworks, which allows elites to manipulate economic reforms; the suppression of domestic accountability through top-down conditionality; and the validation of ruling elites through the EU accession process, resulting in only superficial compliance with democratic norms. The authors argue that the EU's approach has remained largely unchanged before and after the Arab uprisings, continuing to prioritize security and economic stability over genuine democratic reform. This tendency reflects the member states' emphasis on material benefits such as energy security and regional stability, often leading to alliances with

authoritarian regimes rather than support for democratic movements. Similar critical conclusions are drawn by Reynaert in his analysis of Egypt and Tunisia within the framework of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), and ENP. Reynaert critiques the EU's strategy, highlighting its predominant focus on economic liberalization and market economy development, rather than a direct promotion of democratic governance. The EU's policy framework prioritizes socio-economic factors and state administrative capacity, resulting in a superficial promotion of liberal democracy, often labeled as "good governance". Despite a renewed emphasis on democratization post-Arab Spring, the EU's approach remains largely consistent, with a strong emphasis on economic interests and regional stability. The study contrasts the EU's varying influence in Egypt and Tunisia, noting that greater economic leverage in Tunisia has led to a more comprehensive democracy promotion agenda. However, the effectiveness of these efforts is constrained by local political conditions and the EU's overarching strategic priorities. Achrainer and Pace (2024) explores why the EU repeatedly fails to learn from its ineffective attempts at promoting democratization in the Arab world. The authors argue that this failure stems from how decision-making practices are embedded within a constellation of "communities of practice", particularly within the EU. These communities develop internal learning practices that are based on pre-existing background knowledge, preventing critical reflection or adaptation to new circumstances. Consequently, the EU continually reproduces the same democracy support malpractices, prioritizing stability and security over authentic political reform. Through a case study of EU democracy support in Egypt, the article demonstrates how the EU's inability to reflect critically on its practices led to repeating similar mistakes before and after the 2011 Egyptian Revolution. The authors suggest that without breaking from entrenched communities of practice and fostering a more inclusive, critical approach, the EU will continue to struggle with promoting democracy in the region.

2.3 What Factors Influence the Effectiveness of EU Conditionalities?

As evident from the previous paragraph, it remains unclear whether the conditionalities themselves are inherently incapable of producing significant results in terms of democracy, or if the issue lies in their poor adaptability to specific contexts. This ambiguity necessitates a deeper understanding of the factors that are considered key in facilitating the effectiveness of political conditionalities.

Schimmelfennig and Scholtz (2008) examine EU democracy promotion in the European Neighbourhood, focusing on political conditionality, economic development, and transnational exchange. They argue that while EU accession conditionality has been effective in promoting democracy, its impact outside Europe has been inconsistent due to varying degrees of political conditionality. The study introduces three mechanisms of democratization: conditionality, modernization, and linkage, and operationalizes them to analyze their impact. The authors categorize conditionality into different scenarios based on the combination of incentives offered and the credibility of the threat to withhold them. This includes Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCA) with minor incentives and low credibility, Europe Agreements with increased incentives and high credibility, and Euro-Mediterranean Association Agreements with similar incentives but lower political conditionality. They also note the varying credibility of general membership perspectives offered to Central and Eastern European countries and the Western Balkans. They find that EU political conditionality is a robust correlate of democratization in the European neighbourhood, with a credible accession perspective being particularly significant. Economic development also plays a significant role, aligning with modernization theory, while linkage variables lack robustness in explaining

democratization. The study suggests that the ENP, lacking a credible membership perspective – defined by the authors as a necessary condition of successful democracy promotion – may struggle to promote democracy effectively.

The significance of a concrete membership perspective is also central in the historical institutional perspective proposed by Jano (2022), centered on the timing of accession. Namely, the importance of *timing* – when the EU enlargement process starts or occurs – *temporality* – the nature and significance of transitional measures that affect the enlargement process – and *tempo* – the duration of the association and accession process. According to the author, the Western Balkan countries represent "laggards" in EU accession due to timing, temporality, and tempo. They are seeking to join a more integrated EU while starting from a lower economic and democratic base (timing). Their accession process is open-ended with no guaranteed membership, and new transitional measures can cause delays (temporality).

A similar importance on the timing is elaborated by Steunenberg and Dimitrova (2007), who argue that conditionality has an "expiration date," as it becomes less effective once an accession date is set. The authors offer a novel game-theoretical framework to understand EU-candidate country negotiations, illustrating how candidate countries have incentives to defect if the final accession date is known. Their analysis identifies four potential negotiation outcomes and reveals a Prisoners' Dilemma dynamic that diminishes compliance incentives. Empirically, they show that EU conditionality is most effective when the final accession date is unknown, as candidate countries are incentivized to implement necessary reforms under the uncertainty of the accession timeline. Once the accession date is set, the effectiveness of conditionality diminishes sharply, leading to potential compliance issues with EU directives both before and after accession. They emphasize that the EU is aware of this limitation, as evidenced by a substantial reduction in conditions when the accession date approaches. This dynamic was exemplified in the case of the Czech Republic, where the lack of EU pressure and slow administrative reforms led to low compliance with the internal market acquis.

Despite the centrality of EU external action and membership prospects, several scholars have emphasized the need for a more detailed focus on domestic conditions. Castaldo (2022) examines the influence of domestic actors on the effectiveness of the EU's EDP, focusing on how these actors can shift Western strategies from democratization to security issues through "diversionary behaviors". He builds on Levitsky and Way's linkage and leverage theory (2006) and Tolstrup's concept of "gatekeeping elites" (2012) to argue that domestic actors are not just passive recipients of external pressures but active manipulators that can redirect EU focus. Specifically, he highlights how crisis management and the instrumentalization of relationships with counter-hegemonic powers like Russia are used by countries such as Serbia to prioritize stability over democratic reforms. This manipulation reduces the effectiveness of EDP, showcasing the crucial role of domestic conditions and elite strategies in shaping outcomes. Similarly, Grimm (2019) underscores the importance of domestic actors in EU democracy promotion, presenting it as a negotiation process influenced by local structures, diverging interests, and veto players. Her analysis points to the complex dynamics in the post-conflict Western Balkans, where ethnic tensions and institutional weaknesses complicate democratization efforts. Grimm emphasizes that domestic actors significantly shape reform agendas, often clashing with EU demands and highlighting the mismatch between EU expectations and local realities.

Elbasani and Šabić (2017) analyze the EU's variable success in promoting the rule of law in the Western Balkans, focusing on domestic conditions in Albania and Croatia. They argue that the effectiveness of EU-driven reforms in reducing political corruption is strongly linked to domestic accountability mechanisms and the mobilization of independent political constituencies. Despite similar EU

incentives, Albania and Croatia show differing outcomes in enforcing RoL reforms. Croatia's independent judiciary and active civil society facilitated meaningful reforms, while Albania's political control over judicial institutions impeded substantial progress, highlighting the importance of local political dynamics and institutional independence. Differently, Petrovic and Wilson (2021) explore the domestic complexities through the lens of bilateral disputes among Western Balkan countries on their road to EU accession. They discuss the EU's urgent mandate for candidate countries to resolve their "bilateral disputes" – a repercussion of the violent dissolution of the former Yugoslav federation. The authors point out that while Montenegro remains hopeful about resolving its longstanding maritime dispute with Croatia, Serbia and other Balkan nations face a myriad of more intricate issues that impede their path to EU integration. The paper critiques the EU's demand to settle these disputes as a prerequisite for membership – an unprecedented condition in earlier enlargement phases – which imposes a significant burden on the political leaders of these nations. Given the depth and complexity of these disputes, this requirement could potentially delay or obstruct the accession process unless it is supported by substantial EU assistance and guidance to secure mutually acceptable resolutions, highlighting the complex relationship between domestic and regional stability and the EU's enlargement strategy.

Scholars have focused specifically on the role of elites among domestic actors, particularly in post-conflict democratization, where analyzing only external actors' mission mandates may not provide a complete understanding of the process (Grimm and Weiffen, 2018). However, agency-centered and elite-focused perspectives often overlook the influence of external actors on democratization, and few studies consider the role of domestic elites in post-conflict countries under external supervision, and their interactions. Grimm and Weiffen identify elites as domestic political elites, differentiated into ruling (state) and oppositional (sub-national) groups, alongside economic elites who provide financial resources, security elites who control destabilizing forces, and civil society elites who shape public opinion and challenge incumbent political elites through advocacy. In post-conflict contexts, three crucial distinctions from traditional linkage-leverage models can be identified. First, leverage is situational, held over distinct elite groups due to external actors' direct participation in state-building. Second, leverage is bidirectional, with domestic elites influencing external actors' preferences and behavior. Third, conflicting objectives often impair democratization efforts, arising both extrinsically (security, stabilization, socio-economic development) and intrinsically (power-sharing vs. free elections). Barnett and Zürcher (2009) also combine structural and agency-based approaches by modeling the interaction between state-builders and state and sub-national elites, arguing that domestic elites prioritize self-interest, ensuring reform processes do not harm their political and economic interests or pose new security threats, resulting in constant negotiation over reform scope and scale.

2.4 EU Enlargement: A Procedural Overview

The EU's enlargement process is at a pivotal moment, shaped by recent geopolitical shifts and internal factors. Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the European Council acted decisively to enhance EU accession prospects for Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. At the same time, it revitalized the EU's enlargement efforts towards the Western Balkan countries, including Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. These strategic moves – such as extending candidate status to Georgia, opening accession negotiations with Ukraine, Moldova, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and initiating the first intergovernmental conferences with Albania and North

Macedonia, – were designed to demonstrate European unity in the face of Russian aggression. This situation has rekindled debates about Europe's future and its influence on the continent and globally. Historically, enlargement has been a key driver in integrating Central and Eastern European countries into the EU, promoting democracy, stability, and economic growth (Džankić et al., 2024). In April 2024, the approval of the Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans underscored the renewed importance of the EU's enlargement policies. This financial instrument supports the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, which was proposed by the Commission in November 2023. The Growth Plan aims to expedite the Western Balkans' preparations for EU membership by offering certain benefits ahead of actual accession, with the goal of significantly accelerating both the enlargement process and the economic growth of the region.

EU enlargement is the process by which new countries join the EU after fulfilling a set of political and economic conditions. It is a gradual process, to be understood and analyzed not as a single event, but as the establishment of special institutional relationships through formal agreements (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2002). The TEU stipulates that any European country can apply for membership if it respects the EU's democratic values and is committed to promoting them. A European country can join the EU if it meets the Copenhagen criteria, which require stable institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and minority protection; a functioning market economy; and the capacity to implement EU laws and obligations.

The accession process involves three main steps:

Candidacy: a country submits a membership application, and the EU Council decides on granting candidate status and starting negotiations based on the European Commission's assessment.

Membership negotiations: these begin only when all EU governments agree unanimously in the EU Council on a negotiation framework with the candidate country. Negotiations take place during an intergovernmental conference, involving ministers and ambassadors from both the EU governments and the candidate country. Negotiations under each chapter (policy area) involve several steps. The Commission, along with the candidate country, conducts a thorough examination of each chapter to assess preparedness. The Commission presents its findings in a screening report to the Member States, concluding with a recommendation to either begin negotiations immediately or require the candidate to meet certain conditions (opening benchmarks) first. Before negotiations can commence, the candidate country submits its position, and the EU adopts a common position. For most chapters, the EU sets closing benchmarks that the candidate country must meet before concluding negotiations in that policy area. The speed of negotiations depends on the candidate country's reform progress and alignment with EU laws. Starting negotiations simultaneously with another country does not guarantee finishing at the same time. No individual chapter is closed until every EU government is satisfied with the candidate's progress in that policy area, as evaluated by the Commission. The entire negotiation process is only definitively concluded once all 33 chapters are closed. Following the introduction of the revised methodology for accession negotiations in 2020, negotiating chapters are now divided into six thematic clusters: Fundamentals (including Fundamental Rights, Justice, Freedom & Security, and functioning of democratic institutions); Internal Market; Competitiveness & Inclusive Growth; Green Agenda & Sustainable Connectivity; Resources, Agriculture & Cohesion; and External Relations.

Accession: upon completion of negotiations, the Commission gives its opinion on the candidate's readiness to join, and an accession treaty is prepared and ratified by all EU Member States and the candidate country. The accession treaty formalizes the country's membership in the EU, detailing the

terms and conditions of membership, including transitional arrangements, deadlines, financial arrangements, and safeguard clauses. It becomes final and binding only when it gains the support of the EU Council, the Commission, and the European Parliament; is signed by the candidate country and all existing EU countries' representatives; and is ratified by the candidate country and each EU country according to their constitutional rules. Once the treaty is signed, the candidate becomes an acceding country, expected to become a full EU member on the date specified in the treaty, provided ratification occurs. During the interim, the acceding country enjoys special arrangements, such as commenting on draft EU proposals, communications, recommendations, or initiatives, and holding "active observer status" in EU bodies and agencies (entitled to speak, but not vote).

Accession negotiations and chapters are currently underway with Montenegro, Serbia, and Turkey. Albania and North Macedonia began their accession negotiations in July 2022. In December 2022, Bosnia and Herzegovina was granted candidate country status, and Kosovo submitted its application for EU membership. In June 2022, the EU conferred candidate country status to Ukraine and Moldova. On 8 November 2023, the Commission recommended that the Council initiate accession negotiations with both Moldova and Ukraine.

The Western Balkans Approach

Twenty-one years after the Thessaloniki Summit, the Western Balkan countries – except for Croatia, which joined in 2013 – remain far from achieving full EU membership. This is despite the 2003 European Council declaration at the Thessaloniki Summit, where EU leaders asserted that the Balkans' future lay within the EU (European Council, 2003). The statement was interpreted as a strong commitment, offering the region the promise of stability and prosperity within the EU.

The EU engages with the Western Balkan countries through a specialized framework known as the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP), which has three primary objectives: stabilizing these countries politically and facilitating their transition to a market economy, promoting regional cooperation, and preparing them for eventual EU membership. Countries involved in the SAP are considered potential candidates for EU membership, meaning they will be granted official candidate status once they are ready. The SAP helps these countries build the capacity to adopt and implement EU laws, along with European and international standards, fostering a progressively closer partnership with the EU. This partnership includes various forms of support such as trade concessions (providing duty-free access to EU markets), economic and financial aid, and assistance for reconstruction, development, and stabilization. Additionally, Stabilisation and Association Agreements (SAAs) establish comprehensive contractual relationships between the EU and these countries, outlining mutual rights and obligations.

The European Commission's new Growth Plan for the Western Balkans aims to prepare these partners for accession through economic reforms and investment, bringing some benefits of EU membership to citizens in the region. Since the EU's inception by its six founding members in 1957, there have been seven enlargements, with the most recent in 2013 when Croatia joined, bringing the total to 27 member countries. Currently, there are ten aspiring members involved in the accession process, with some granted candidate status and others as potential candidates, indicating their interest in aligning national laws with EU standards. As countries meet their commitments within the SAP, they progress step by step towards EU membership. The European Commission monitors and evaluates their progress in annual reports published every autumn.

The EU Enlargement Model

The EU enlargement model delineates two types of incentives: progress-based rewards, which correspond to the candidate country's advancements in the accession process, and financial incentives. The primary progress-based rewards can be divided in the following steps (Gateva, 2015).

1. Offering a membership perspective
2. Signing an Association Agreement (AA)
3. Implementing an AA
4. Granting candidate country status
5. Initiating accession negotiations
6. Opening a specific negotiation chapter
7. Provisionally closing a chapter
8. Pledging to a credible membership perspective
9. Finalizing accession negotiations
10. Signing an accession treaty
11. Ratifying an accession treaty
12. Achieving EU membership

The current status of the first four critical steps is as follows:

Country	*SAA/DCFTA-AA*	*Membership Application*	*Candidate Status*	*Agreement to Start Negotiations*	*Start of Negotiations*
Turkey	1963	1987	1999	2004	2005
North Macedonia	2001	2004	2005	2020	2022
Albania	2006	2009	2014	2020	2022
Montenegro	2007	2008	2010	2012	2012
Serbia	2008	2009	2012	2013	2014
Bosnia & Herzegovina	2008	2016	2022	2023	2024
Ukraine	2014	2022	2022	2023	2024
Moldova	2014	2022	2022	2023	2024
Georgia	2014	2022	2023	-	-
Kosovo	2015	2022	-	-	-

Since 2019, the Commission each year releases its "Enlargement Package", a collection of documents that outlines its policy on EU enlargement. At the heart of this package is a Communication on enlargement, which reviews the progress and developments of the past year. This Communication assesses the advancements made by candidate and potential candidate countries, identifies challenges and necessary reforms, and proposes future actions. Alongside this main Communication, the package includes Reports where the Commission services provide a comprehensive annual evaluation of the reform progress in each candidate and potential candidate country. I have highlighted the key aspects from the latest reports published in November 2023, with a particular emphasis on the current status of the accession negotiations and the developments concerning Chapter 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights) (European Commission, 2023).

Furthermore, for the first time since the Commission initiated these publications, the 2024 Rule of Law Report includes specific country chapters on four enlargement countries: Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. The Rule of Law Report, which was initially directed solely at member states,

is designed to monitor significant developments pertaining to the rule of law. It concentrates on four key areas: the justice system, the anti-corruption framework, media pluralism and freedom, and other institutional issues related to checks and balances.

Following the comprehensive profiles of each candidate country – evaluating their current status and progress towards EU membership, with a particular focus on Chapter 23 (EU policies in the area of judiciary and fundamental rights) – I have included a section that specifies the recommendations, inputs, and current state of affairs as described in the 2024 Rule of Law Report.

2.5 Financing Democracy Promotion Through Enlargement: Where Do We Stand?

To clarify the role of this section within the broader structure of the dissertation, it is important to stress that the following overview is not intended as part of the analytical literature review per se, but rather as a contextual and operational mapping of the empirical domain to which the theoretical and methodological discussions refer. This section provides a structured snapshot of the state of EU enlargement in Southeastern Europe and the Eastern neighbourhood, thereby grounding the later conceptual and empirical chapters in a clearly defined institutional and political reality. The temporal scope of the analysis, which extends to the 2024 Rule of Law Report, reflects the moment at which the literature review and data collection were finalized. At that stage, 2024 constituted the most recent fully consolidated and comparable set of official EU assessments available across all cases considered. Moreover, given the iterative nature of EU reporting cycles and the need to maintain internal consistency between qualitative descriptions and the calibrated indicators used in the empirical analysis, incorporating partial or evolving 2025 data would have introduced asymmetries and potential distortions in cross-case comparability. Finally, anchoring the overview to 2024 allows the study to capture the immediate post-2022 geopolitical shift in enlargement policy – triggered by the war in Ukraine – while avoiding the noise of still-unfolding developments, thus ensuring both analytical coherence and temporal robustness. The detailed country-by-country assessments have been moved to Appendix A – Full Country Reports, together with the section "Insight from the 2024 Rule of Law Report." This allows the main text to retain its analytical focus while preserving the empirical mapping on which the subsequent discussion is based. Taken together, the country reports show a highly differentiated enlargement landscape: while some countries have advanced in judicial reform, anti-corruption policies, and formal alignment with EU standards, others continue to display persistent weaknesses in implementation, political interference, media freedom, and minority protection. This variation is analytically significant because it defines the empirical setting in which EU leverage operates and helps explain why the effects of enlargement conditionality cannot be assumed to be uniform across cases.

The Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA)

The Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA) is the EU's main financial mechanism for aiding pre-accession countries. Launched in 2007, IPA replaced earlier programs like PHARE, ISPA, SAPARD, and CARDS, streamlining assistance into a single instrument. The current beneficiaries are Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Turkey.

The financial instruments described in this section are not merely technical tools of EU external action, but constitute the core operational dimension of EU engagement with partner countries. In contrast to membership conditionality, which operates through political incentives, partnership is primarily

channelled through financial assistance, technical support, and institutional capacity-building. The IPA, therefore, represents the most direct and measurable expression of EU engagement in candidate countries. In the empirical analysis developed in Chapter II, EU partnership is operationalized through the intensity and scope of these financial and technical interventions. Consequently, understanding the structure, evolution, and allocation logic of IPA is essential to interpret how EU support may contribute to improvements in democratic quality, particularly in areas such as rule of law, governance effectiveness, and gender equality.

IPA I

The first generation (IPA I, 2007-2013, budget of €11.5 billion) had five components: transition and institution building, cross-border cooperation, regional development, human resources development, and rural development. It aimed to prepare candidate and potential candidate countries for EU membership by mirroring EU structural and cohesion funds.

The table (see Appendix B2 – IPA I) presents a summary of the allocated amounts over the seven-year period in the Justice, Home Affairs, and Fundamental Rights sector for each country, expressed in EUR million (European Commission, Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations, 2015).

IPA II

IPA II (2014-2020, budget of €12.8 billion) marked a shift towards a sectoral approach, emphasizing democracy, rule of law, competitiveness, and growth. It introduced results-based incentives, budget support, and prioritization of actions. Coordination with international financial institutions and investments along key infrastructure corridors were also integral. The shift introduced by IPA II towards a sectoral and results-based approach is particularly relevant for this research. By concentrating support on democracy, rule of law, and governance reforms, IPA II links financial assistance more closely to identifiable policy priorities, measurable institutional changes and EU's normative objectives. For this reason, the country-level allocation data are not used here merely for descriptive purposes; they also provide part of the empirical basis for operationalizing the variables employed in the subsequent analysis. The tables in Appendix B2 – IPA II present a summary of the yearly allocated amounts over the seven-year period in the *DEMOCRACY AND RULE OF LAW* sector for each country, expressed in EUR million (European Commission, n.d.).

IPA III

IPA III (2021-2027, budget of €14.162 billion) continues supporting reforms in the Western Balkans and Turkey, with a budget of EUR 14.2 billion. It is structured around five thematic windows reflecting EU enlargement policy: rule of law, fundamental rights and democracy; good governance and EU acquis alignment; green agenda and sustainable connectivity; competitiveness and inclusive growth; and territorial and cross-border cooperation. Each window focuses on specific thematic priorities tailored to the beneficiary countries' needs, ensuring comprehensive support for their path to EU membership.

The empirical detail on IPA III is provided in Appendix B3 – IPA III. It illustrates the indicative allocations for the 2021-2027 period, aimed at supporting the thematic priorities of Windows 1 programming framework (Rule of law, fundamental rights and democracy) (European Commission 2021, Tilev 2021).

2.6 Democracy Promotion Beyond Enlargement: An Overview of Existing Instruments

The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP)

The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), initiated in the early 2000s, is a foreign policy framework established to provide a coherent framework for the EU to manage its interactions with neighboring countries and to work together on key priority areas. This policy – based on the promotion of democracy, rule of law, respect for human rights and social cohesion – includes the eastern neighbors (such as Belarus, Ukraine, and Moldova, and later expanded to Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan) and the southern neighbors (including Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, the Palestinian Authority, Syria, and Tunisia).

In addition to the ENP, the EU has launched several multilateral and politically focused initiatives to enhance its neighborhood relations. Between those, two specific geographical dimensions of the ENP explicitly mention "good governance and the respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms, democratic institutions and the rule of law" between their key priorities: the Eastern Partnership (EaP) and the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership.

The Eastern Partnership (EaP)

The EaP is a collaborative initiative between the EU, its Member States, and six Eastern European countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. This initiative serves as a specific Eastern component of the broader ENP, incorporating both bilateral and multilateral engagement strategies.

The partnership – officially launched on May 7, 2009 – was designed to address the unique challenges of the Eastern neighbors and to enhance engagement through a mix of bilateral and multilateral frameworks. The EaP features intergovernmental platforms and expert panels, some of which are still being developed, such as those focusing on judicial issues.

The introduction of the Eastern Partnership was driven by dissatisfaction with the existing ENP, particularly within the region. The EaP emphasizes multilateral cooperation, acknowledging the distinct characteristics of Eastern European countries and fostering greater regional initiatives and joint ownership. The framework aims to incorporate four thematic platforms: democracy, good governance and stability; economic integration and alignment with EU policies; energy security; and people-to-people contacts. These elements are largely pending completion through Association Agreements (European Parliament, 2011). In line with the "Joint Communication on the Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020" (European Commission, 2020) and the "Joint Staff Working Document on Recovery, resilience, and reform" (European Commission, & High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2021), the EU's objectives in the Eastern neighborhood include strengthening state institutions and upholding the rule of law. This involves supporting judicial reforms, combating corruption, and addressing economic and organized crime, with progress in these areas influencing the allocation of EU assistance.

The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership

The EU's collaboration with the Southern Neighbourhood encompasses ten partner nations: Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Syria, and Tunisia.

The EU initiated its strategic partnership with the Mediterranean's Eastern and Southern shores in 1995 during the Barcelona Conference, which launched the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. This initiative aimed to foster a region characterized by peace, stability, economic growth, and the promotion of democratic values and human rights. The ENP integrated Mediterranean countries and enhanced regional prosperity, stability, and security. The Union for the Mediterranean was established in 2008 at the Paris Summit to further cooperation and development. The 2021 publication of the "Joint Communication on the renewed partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood" and the "Economic and Investment Plan for the Southern Neighbours" marked a renewed commitment to comprehensive engagement.

The EU is intensifying its dialogue and support for Southern Neighbourhood partners to better address citizens' aspirations for equitable, accountable, and democratic societies. This is reflected in the new Agenda for the Mediterranean (European Commission & High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2021) which emphasizes renewed efforts in human development, good governance, and the rule of law, among other priorities.

2.7 Financing the ENP

The European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI)

The European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI) replaced the TACIS program, which was aimed at Eastern Europe, and the MEDA program, which focused on the Mediterranean region. It introduced expanded objectives and a significantly larger budget. The ENPI was operational from January 2007 to January 2014, with an initial budget allocation of around EUR 12 billion for the 2007-2013 period. This represented a 32% real-term increase compared to the combined funding of the MEDA and TACIS programs during the 2000-2006 period.

The detailed ENPI allocations are available in Appendix C1 –ENPI, reporting the distribution of the budget by country over the seven years the instrument was active for the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and the Eastern Partnership (European Union, 2014).

While the tables provide a detailed overview of ENPI allocations across regions and sectors, their analytical relevance lies in highlighting the differentiated intensity and priorities of EU engagement in the neighbourhood. Compared to IPA, ENPI funding appears less concentrated on rule-of-law conditionality and more diversified across sectors, reflecting the absence of a membership perspective.

This distinction is crucial for the argument of this thesis. Whereas enlargement countries benefit from a structured and conditional financial framework closely tied to accession benchmarks, ENP countries receive more flexible and politically contingent support. This difference may affect the effectiveness of EU democracy promotion, as the credibility and leverage of EU intervention are weaker in the absence of membership incentives. In this sense, the ENPI represents a structurally different mode of EU engagement, one whose broader scope but potentially weaker transformative capacity will be taken into account in the comparative analysis developed later in the thesis.

The descriptive emphasis of the tables is intentional. The purpose of this overview is not to provide a case-by-case interpretation of each allocation, but rather to lay the empirical foundation for the

construction of my variables. By disaggregating EU financial instruments and tracing their evolution over time, this section captures variations in the intensity, composition, and orientation of EU engagement. These variations are subsequently incorporated into the calibration of my EU hypothesis conditions, making it possible to account systematically for fluctuations in EU support across countries and periods.

The European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) and the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI)

The European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) succeeded the ENPI in 2014, continuing to focus on both the Eastern Partnership and Southern Neighbourhood regions. Although other countries, such as the Russian Federation, are eligible to participate in ENI-funded projects, Russia has been excluded since 2014 due to EU sanctions. The effectiveness of the ENI is augmented by several key features, ensuring that assistance to neighboring countries becomes more rapid and adaptable through a streamlined programming process that maintains the relevance of the assistance. It provides incentives for high performers through a "more-for-more" strategy, enabling the EU to increase support for partners that are genuinely implementing agreed-upon measures. The assistance is increasingly policy-driven, focusing on key policy objectives established with partners, primarily outlined in the ENP bilateral action plans. This approach allows for greater differentiation, directing a larger share of funds to areas where aid can have the highest impact. Additionally, it promotes mutual accountability by emphasizing human rights, democracy, and good governance in the allocation of assistance. The ENI aims to integrate these partner countries into the EU market, foster economic development, enhance bilateral and multilateral relations, support institution and capacity building, and advance democracy, the rule of law, and human rights. These objectives are pursued through bilateral action plans that can lead to association agreements. These plans involve a mix of legal, social, and economic reforms agreed upon by both parties, with financial assistance from the ENI being conditional on progress in these areas, ensuring alignment with EU standards.

The table summarizing the amount of funds allocated per country under the ENI for the 2014-2020 period is available in the Appendix (see Appendix C2 –ENI), listing the confirmed amounts where available, and noting where specific data is missing. The program has been succeeded by the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI), which will govern the period from 2021 to 2027. The currently available data for the period, are reported in Appendix C3 – NDICI.

In the framework of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, NDICI operates within the Southern Neighbourhood through five distinct priority areas, one of which is directly related to the promotion of democracy, specifically Priority Area 1. Priority Area 1 aims to promote democracy, human rights, good governance, and transparency. Additionally, it seeks to combat gender discrimination and gender-based violence against women and girls. Encouraging active youth citizenship is another important component, as is supporting cultural initiatives, which are viewed as essential for human development and improving the quality of life.

As far as the Eap is concerned, NDICI operates through five distinct priority areas, two of which are directly related to the promotion of democracy, specifically Priority Area 2 and Priority Area 5. Priority Area 2 concentrates on enhancing accountable institutions, reinforcing the rule of law, and improving security measures. This includes promoting good governance, strengthening democratic institutions, and implementing effective anti-corruption frameworks. A crucial element is supporting judicial

reforms to improve the independence, efficiency, and transparency of the judiciary. Priority Area 5 aims to foster resilient, gender-equal, fair, and inclusive societies. It emphasizes human rights, democratization, civil society, and youth leadership. Key areas of focus include supporting children's and minority rights, combating violence against women, and enhancing inclusiveness for individuals with disabilities. The objectives also encompass advancing gender equality, modernizing health systems, and improving migration management.

The European Endowment for Democracy (EED)

The European Endowment for Democracy (EED) is an independent grant-making organization founded in 2013 by the EU and its Member States. Established as an autonomous International Trust Fund, its mission is to promote democracy in the European Neighbourhood and beyond. EED aims to provide flexible and context-based support to democracy activists, complementing other EU and Member State democracy support programs. It focuses on demand-driven assistance, fostering democracy by enabling local initiatives. EED is particularly active in environments where civil society faces administrative, legal, social, and political obstacles, accepting significant political and operational risks as part of its mandate. EED operates primarily in the European Neighbourhood (Eastern Partnership, Middle East, and North Africa), the Western Balkans, Turkey, and Eurasia, striving to maintain a balanced geographical distribution of its engagement and funding. Unlike larger financial instruments such as IPA or ENPI, the EED operates through a flexible and politically agile funding model, primarily targeting civil society actors, independent media, and grassroots democratic initiatives. Its relevance for this thesis lies in its alignment with a more proactive and preventive understanding of militant democracy, as it supports actors that can resist or counteract autocratization dynamics from within. However, the relatively limited scale of EED funding and its fragmented allocation across regions suggest that its impact is complementary rather than transformative. While it may enhance resilience and support democratic actors, it is unlikely to substitute for broader structural reforms driven by conditionality or large-scale financial assistance. This distinction reinforces the analytical differentiation between types of EU_PART: from macro-level institutional support (IPA, ENPI) to micro-level democratic reinforcement (EED).

The detailed yearly funding profile of the European Endowment for Democracy is reported in Appendix D – EED, including the Portfolio Overview entries from 2016 to 2023 and the regional distribution of approved applications.

2.8 Conclusions

The literature review recognizes the complexities of EU enlargement, highlighting the procedural intricacies and conditionalities that define the accession process. From the stringent requirements of the Copenhagen criteria to the Stabilisation and Association Process in the Western Balkans, the EU's multifaceted approach aims to foster stable, democratic institutions. However, the effectiveness of these strategies is highly contingent on local political contexts and the actions of domestic actors. As the literature reveals, while the EU's conditionality framework has the potential to foster democratic governance, its effectiveness is significantly shaped by local conditions and the actions of domestic actors, particularly in the Western Balkans, where varied political and socio-economic contexts necessitate a tailored approach to EU conditionality.

This review underscores the pivotal role of domestic elites in influencing the trajectory of democracy promotion, arguing that understanding local dynamics and elite motivations is crucial for effective EU engagement. These insights challenge traditional views of EDP as a top-down process and call for a more nuanced appreciation of the interplay between external influences and domestic political landscapes.

The critical research gap my contribution aims to fill is a more comprehensive analysis of the interactions between these two crucial elements: external actors and domestic political elites within recipient countries. While EU initiatives are often depicted as unilateral external interventions, the actual dynamics on the ground are significantly shaped by domestic elites who can either facilitate or obstruct these efforts based on their own interests and strategies. By addressing this gap, I intend to account for the dual influences of both EU policies and the internal political landscapes of target nations, achieving a holistic understanding of the mechanisms of EU democracy promotion and acknowledging the complex, bidirectional nature of influence between the EU and domestic political arenas.

Regarding the financial dimension, the comparison developed above shows that EU democracy promotion rests on different combinations of material support, monitoring, and political leverage across enlargement and neighbourhood frameworks. Enlargement links financial assistance to a structured accession path and to the prospect of membership, whereas the neighbourhood relies more heavily on differentiated funding schemes and softer political incentives. This distinction is analytically important because it foreshadows the differentiation between the two EU-related conditions that will be tested in the empirical part of the thesis.

The EU's democracy promotion efforts, particularly through its enlargement model and neighborhood policies, rely on a combination of financial and progress-based incentives, each offering distinct advantages and challenges. The EU Enlargement Model employs a step-by-step process that progresses from offering membership perspectives to full EU accession. This model aligns economic, legal, and institutional reforms with financial and technical support, such as through the IPA, which plays a critical role in preparing candidate countries for membership. Over time, the IPA has evolved to emphasize rule of law, democratic governance, and economic development, shifting from project-based funding in IPA I to a more results-oriented, sectoral approach in IPA II and III.

Beyond enlargement, the ENP and its regional initiatives, such as the EaP and the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, extend EU influence through similar mechanisms aimed at fostering democratic reforms, economic integration, and security. The ENP operates on the principle of "more-for-more," providing increased support for countries demonstrating greater progress in implementing reforms. Instruments like the ENI and its successor, the NDICI, offer targeted financial assistance, while frameworks such as the Rule of Law Report extend monitoring and evaluation of legal and institutional reforms.

Key commonalities across these instruments include their emphasis on promoting the rule of law, democracy, and human rights, alongside economic and institutional reforms. However, there are notable differences in their geographical focus and structure. The enlargement process involves more structured, membership-oriented steps, while the ENP, EaP, and other neighborhood initiatives – such as the EED – adopt a more flexible, differentiated approach based on bilateral action plans.

From an analytical perspective, the comparison between enlargement and neighbourhood instruments reveals a fundamental asymmetry in EU democracy promotion. Enlargement combines strong

conditionality with targeted financial support, generating a high degree of leverage over domestic reforms. In contrast, the neighbourhood framework relies more heavily on financial incentives without the anchoring effect of membership, resulting in a more flexible but less binding form of engagement.

This distinction is central to the research design of this thesis. It underpins the differentiation between EU_MEM and EU_PART as separate but interacting conditions, and informs the expectation that their effectiveness will vary across contexts. The chapters following the literature review will test whether, and under what conditions, financial engagement alone can compensate for the absence of membership incentives in promoting democratic quality.

CHAPTER 3
EU Militant Democracy Beyond Member States: A Normative Overview

3.1 Introduction

When analyzing and researching democratic reactions to political extremism, militant democracy is a core concept (Bourne & Casal Bértoa, 2017). Militant democracy, as originally conceptualized by Karl Loewenstein, involves implementing legal safeguards within democratic systems to protect against anti-democratic forces that might exploit democratic freedoms to undermine those very systems. This concept is particularly relevant within the European Union (EU), which has emerged as the first transnational militant democracy, employing legal and institutional mechanisms to protect fundamental democratic values like the rule of law, freedom of expression, and minority rights. The recent rise of far-right and populist parties across Europe has highlighted the necessity of such measures, sparking renewed interest in militant democracy as a theoretical and practical approach.

This chapter aims to provide a comprehensive overview of militant democracy within the EU, exploring its origins, key features, and contemporary applications. It will examine how the EU employs militant democracy through various strategies, balancing the need to prevent anti-democratic abuses with the preservation of democratic norms. The analysis will address both the feasibility and legitimacy of these practices, focusing on ongoing debates around their proportionality, impact on civil liberties, and effectiveness in combating extremism.

Most of the academic debate about EU militant democracy centers on the efficacy and legitimacy of practices designed to respond to internal transgressions, such as episodes of autocratization among member states. This analysis is explored in depth by researchers such as Müller (2013), Closa and Kochenov (2016), Scheppele et al. (2021), and Olsen (2019), who examine the application and implications of these militant democracy measures within the EU framework. Nevertheless, exploring how militant democracy develops at the EU level and understanding its translation to supranational contexts remains an understudied and evolving area of inquiry (Capoccia, 2013). I aim to integrate this still underexplored field by including in the arsenal of EU militant democracy practices those actions targeting not only member states but also candidate countries and external partners, highlighting potential advantages of this approach and proposing a normative assessment.

The chapter will be structured as follows.

The first section delves into the theoretical underpinnings of militant democracy, tracing its roots and evolution from the interwar period to contemporary challenges. It discusses how post-war European democracies, shaped by the need to prevent a resurgence of totalitarianism, embraced constitutional safeguards that limited popular sovereignty, creating “constrained democracies” (Müller, 2017). This section sets the stage for understanding the enduring relevance of militant democracy in addressing modern threats such as populism and authoritarianism.

The second section explores the paradoxes and normative dilemmas inherent in militant democracy, particularly the tension between protecting democratic values and potentially undermining them

through restrictive measures. It critically examines the concept of militant democracy as a "necessary evil," balancing the need to protect democracy from internal enemies against the risk of eroding democratic legitimacy.

The third section shifts focus to the EU as a unique transnational militant democracy, analyzing the specific challenges and contradictions it faces in implementing militant democracy measures. It discusses the EU's reliance on member states for enforcement, the principle of subsidiarity, and the performative contradictions that arise from collective sanctions targeting value offenders. This section also explores the EU's strategies to navigate these challenges, including the European Parliament (EP)'s efforts to limit the influence of illiberal parties.

The fourth section investigates the EU's militant democracy actions beyond its borders, particularly in the context of candidate countries for EU membership. It argues that the hybrid nature of candidate countries challenges traditional distinctions between internal and external threats and highlights the preventive aspect of militant democracy. This section emphasizes the importance of political conditionality in accession processes as a tool to preemptively safeguard liberal democracy, offering a novel perspective on EU militant democracy that extends beyond its immediate borders.

3.2 Militant Democracy: Emerging Challenges and Diverse Perspectives

Militant democracy is a complex and interdisciplinary concept that functions as both a normative political theory and a legal-constitutional approach. As a legal doctrine, it includes specific constitutional measures and judicial practices aimed at protecting liberal-democratic orders worldwide, often overlapping with court rulings but extending beyond them. The term was introduced by German political theorist Karl Loewenstein, who, during his exile in the United States, authored two influential articles in The American Political Science Review in 1937, analyzing the collapse or resilience of European democracies in the interwar period (Loewenstein, 1937). In light of the experiences with fascism and Nazism, Loewenstein vehemently criticized democratic fundamentalism, rigid legalism, and an overly strict interpretation of the rule of law, arguing that these traits were ineffective in safeguarding democracies against the rise of fascist movements. He believed that democracies should not tolerate the infiltration of "Trojan horses" that exploit the electoral process to undermine core democratic principles (Loewenstein, 1937).

Loewenstein argued that democracies capable of defending themselves against totalitarianism enacted stringent laws that curtailed rights such as freedom of assembly, association, and expression, which were decisively enforced by political elites. In contrast, he condemned the Weimar Republic's legal formalism, which prioritized political rights over assessing the real democratic commitment of actors like the Nazis. As Joseph Goebbels, Hitler's propaganda minister, sarcastically remarked, it "will always remain one of the best jokes of democracy, that it gave its deadly enemies the means by which it was destroyed" (Müller, 2016). Loewenstein (1937b, 656) advocated that democracies must adopt a militant stance ("fire is fought with fire"), employing restrictive measures such as banning parties and curbing the freedoms of anti-democratic forces to ensure their survival.

Loewenstein supported the concept of militant democracy based on the belief that the moral foundations of democracy are absolute and must be protected at any cost. However, he did not provide a detailed explanation of what it means for democratic values to be considered absolute. As I will explain later, the legitimization of militant democracy practices largely depends on how one interprets the absoluteness and boundaries of these moral foundations of democracy.

Although he never explicitly used the term "militant democracy" – which is why the concept is generally primarily attributed to Loewenstein – Carl Schmitt, even before Loewenstein, had foreseen the Weimar Republic's self-destructive trajectory. Schmitt critiqued the Republic for granting constitutional rights and liberties to non-democratic forces openly hostile to the constitution. Before aligning with the Nazis, Schmitt argued that both the National Socialist German Workers' Party and the Communist Party should be banned to preserve democracy in the Weimar Republic. Advocating for a "constrained democracy" – a concept that would later be key in the evolution of militant democracy within the EU – Schmitt decried the weaknesses of the liberal representative system, which he believed was vulnerable to infiltration by its internal enemies. He emphasized the need for constitutional mechanisms to limit the ability of democratically elected parties to legally dismantle liberal constitutionalism. Schmitt viewed the constitution not merely as a collection of formal legal norms, but as an embodiment of a unified substantive essence, which he called a "constitutional identity" (Schmitt at. at., 2008). This concern was fueled by the fact that the Weimar Constitution could be formally amended relatively easily, requiring only a two-thirds majority, which rendered the system highly susceptible to attacks. It was vulnerable even regarding its most fundamental provisions, including the substantive elements of the "absolute constitution". Despite this, the normative core of what had to be protected according to Schmitt, remained, if not outright worrisome, at least ambiguous.[1] The question of "What Is to Be Protected" remains open at this stage and will be further explored in the fourth section.

After World War II, the construction of democratic regimes in Europe was marked by significant constraints, often imposed by unelected institutions like constitutional courts. These democracies embraced a constitutional ethos that was openly critical of the notion of unlimited popular sovereignty. The fear arising from the experience of 20th-century totalitarianism, which – in the case of Germany – led to the Nazi regime through ordinary and fair democratic procedures, had a significant impact on a different evaluation of the risks inherent in popular will, which until then had been the foundational value of democracy. Consequently, the aftermath of World War II in Western Europe witnessed a unique focus on establishing an order primarily aimed at preventing a resurgence of totalitarianism. This led to constitutional orders based on the fragmentation of political power, the introduction of checks and balances, and the empowerment of unelected institutions or institutions beyond electoral accountability, such as constitutional courts. The high degree of suspicion toward the ideal of popular sovereignty contributed to the weakening of parliamentary bodies in postwar Europe, moving toward what Jan-Werner Müller also defined as "constrained democracies" (Müller, 2017).

According to the order arising from these developments, post-totalitarian militant democracy can be understood as a form of liberal democratic system that utilizes legal means to safeguard the regime from threats to its survival. It involves the restriction of the rights of individuals or groups suspected of seeking to undermine democracy through democratic processes, as well as institutional measures that enable preemptive actions against internal enemies of democracy. The idea is that rather than waiting to see what actions intolerant forces might take once they are in power, militant democracy proactively limits their ability to take action.

The order emerging from Loewenstein's conception of militant democracy – based on a rethinking of democracy moving away from a politics of broad mass participation and towards the limitations of parliamentary assemblies – seems to be based on a strongly elitist and fundamentally anti-participatory

[1] For a more in-depth analysis on this, see Wilkinson's examination of Schmitt's Absolute Constitution in relation to Authoritarian Liberalism in Late Weimar, in Michael A. Wilkinson, *Authoritarian Liberalism and the Transformation of Modern Europe* (First edition, Oxford University Press 2021), pp. 51-54.

underlying logic (Malkopoulou & Kirshner, 2019; Rummens, 2019). Loewenstein, in his critique of anti-democrats, relied on an elitist perspective that depicted the people as easily manipulated by emotional appeals and incapable of engaging in critical democratic politics; he essentially considered the political participation of the masses as a problem rather than a solution. This inherent distrust towards people's accountability likely contributed to the rise of more recent challenges to the idea of liberal militant democracy.

The political discourse of populist parties is precisely based on the idea of positioning the ordinary people as the true source of political legitimacy (Urbinati, 2019), directly challenging the constrained democracies that opposed such views. Populist leaders frequently claim to give voice to the will and desires of the people, positioning themselves as representatives of the popular majority. They often criticize established elites, accusing them of being disconnected from the concerns and aspirations of the people, which were – according to Loewenstein – necessary conditions to preserve liberal democracy from the tyranny of the majority.

It is then not surprising that – after half a century of impasse – the concept of militant democracy experienced a resurgence due to two key factors: counterterrorism efforts and the emergence of populist parties and illiberal challengers. In this chapter, I will focus on the second challenge, which led to a rapid diversification of the field, with new research aiming to explore the variations in militant democratic practices within different legal systems, as well as in the European and international contexts. In contemporary politics, populist and illiberal parties have gained enough support to hold substantial governing positions. They have managed to enter into coalitions as junior partners or even rule the government. The question of whether populists pose a "threat" or serve as a "corrective" to democracy remains a subject of debate (Laclau, 2005). However, there is no doubt that populist actors embrace a majoritarian view of democracy which is, at the very least, at odds with liberal democracy (Müller, 2017). This perspective tends to radically diminish the importance of liberal institutions, such as courts, and fosters a general skepticism towards institutionalized opposition. Particularly concerning – in terms of militant democracy – is their stance on policies that target minority rights, pluralism, and the rule of law.

Even more alarming, the inclusion of populist and illiberal parties in government poses a challenge to the implementation of the primary tools of militant democracy, which were traditionally pre-emptive. Once extremist opposition parties obtain governmental power, the whole militant democracy arsenal is de facto nullified. As a result, the emergence of these new challengers tested both the theory and implementation of militant democracy, necessitating a re-emergence of militant democracy referred to as neo-militant democracy. This new understanding of the concept has gained prominence as a normative framework for countering the rise of extremist political movements within liberal democracies.

Unlike the views of earlier proponents like Loewenstein, contemporary advocates of militant democracy exhibit less pronounced distrust of the people's capacity for self-governance. The significance of emotional appeals in stirring up crowds has considerably diminished in contemporary discussions, and the recent surge of illiberal political tendencies led to newfound and unprecedented general support for militant measures. This found validation in real-world scenarios, as evidenced by the growing calls for legal sanctions, such as the 2017 attempt to ban the National Democratic Party of Germany or the EU's decision to initiate the process of sanctioning the governments of Poland and Hungary in 2017 and 2018, respectively. Nevertheless, among contemporary advocates, there is a

notable concern that militant democracy itself can be seen as an arguably illiberal and anti-democratic approach (Invernizzi Accetti & Zuckerman, 2017).

3.3 The Paradoxes of Democratic Self-Harm: Between Self-Destruction and Self-Injury

"If democracy believes in the superiority of its absolute values over the opportunistic platitudes of fascism, it must live up to the demands of the hour, and every possible effort must be made to rescue it, even at the risk and cost of violating fundamental principles" (Loewenstein, 1937: 432)

Loewenstein's view of militant democracy, often expressed through contradictory phrases like "authoritarian democracy," poses a deep normative question. It raises the doubt that perhaps, in the end, democracy is essentially obliged to tolerate anti-democratic actors. The pivotal paradox of militant democracy is then rooted in understanding whether suppressing anti-democratic movements violates the principles of tolerance at the core of the democratic ideal, while, on the other hand, tolerating them may end up jeopardizing the actual survival of the very system that upholds the principle of tolerance. This dilemma echoes Loewenstein's strong assumption: the idea that democracy relies on specific moral truths and absolute values that serve as legitimate justifications for militant democracy practices.

This notion of an inherent and ever-valid legitimization source, guaranteed by the absolute value of democracy, sounds overly simplistic. It may have been a persuasive argument when militant democracy practices were explicitly targeted against neo-Nazi, openly fascist, or reactionary political movements that clearly advocated against democracy as a political system. However, after the end of the Cold War, the political landscape has become far more fragmented and nuanced than the post-World War II order. Illiberal and populist parties do not directly express opposition to liberal democracy; instead, they propose alternative interpretations of democracy that diverge from some of its liberal elements. Therefore, they cannot simply be labeled as "enemies of democracy" and targeted for radical militant democracy actions without a more substantial rationale.

The peculiarity of democratic systems lies in the concession they make to their internal adversaries, granting them the procedural means to dismantle the very foundation upon which the system is built. This uniqueness is absent in authoritarian regimes, which – by contrast – use all available resources to suppress their political enemies. This substantial difference is referred to as the paradox of democratic self-destruction. Evidence of this paradox is clearly visible in contemporary cases of populists in power, such as Viktor Orbán's Hungary and, until 2023, Jarosław Kaczyński's Poland. Once in power, they orchestrated significant constitutional reforms, granting them control over crucial institutions, regardless of future electoral results.

While allowing illiberal parties to enter the democratic game may lead to irreparable damage to democratic institutions, measures to safeguard democracy against its internal adversaries are not without consequences. The paradox of democratic self-injury refers to the risks associated with attempts to eliminate threats to democracy – by eradicating internal enemies – which may ultimately result in the loss of the democratic nature of the regime, thereby jeopardizing its own legitimacy by assuming illiberal traits. The strategy of giving illiberal actors a taste of their own medicine may undermine the authority of democracy itself.

The paradox of democratic self-injury arises from its institutional closure, suggesting that a political system cannot sustain itself if it includes its antithesis. This concept parallels Karl Popper's "paradox of tolerance," which argues that tolerance should not be extended to the intolerant, as doing so would render tolerance meaningless (Popper, 1945). True tolerance involves actively opposing intolerance rather than accepting everything, including that which undermines tolerance itself. In this sense, tolerance is not indifference but a commitment to uphold reciprocal principles. Thus, defending democracy against its enemies is essential to preserve its legitimacy and maintain its status as the only justified form of government.

As Ulrich Wagrandl (2018) points out, the paradox seems to dissolve when we recognize that democracy must respect "every human being, but not every political belief those human beings might entertain." He argues that democracy's adversaries are not villainous outsiders but citizens with equal rights. Militant democracy intervenes only when these individuals exploit their rights to dismantle the system they inhabit. This distinction highlights that openness as equal recognition of individuals does not automatically extend to openness in institutional terms.

Admitted and granted that what is at stake is liberal democracy – a point I will further explore in the context of liberal democracy within the EU – it is not merely about defending a formal procedural aspect of governance, but a fundamental component of the system's identity. As an opponent to any conflicting systems, the defense of liberal democracy is not only justified but inevitable. This form of "othering" seems to be unavoidable, as every identity partly defines itself by what it is not, and no identity is all-inclusive (Berlin, 2013). I find the parallel between militant democracy and legitimate defense, insightfully drawn by lawyer and political theorist Peter Verpoorten, particularly compelling. He compares militant democracy to the concept of self-defense in criminal law, where actions ordinarily deemed unlawful, such as the use of force, are justified under threat when they are necessary and proportionate. This illustrates the broader principle of "value congruence," where actions that might normally contradict democratic norms are permitted to protect the system's foundational values. Militant democracy involves measures that, although seemingly undemocratic, are essential to defend liberal democracy against existential threats, aligning more closely with democratic values than passive inaction.

The paradox of democratic self-injury is closely intertwined with two inherent risks that arise from the complex relationship between liberal democracy and populism within the context of neo-militant democracy.

3.4 The Risks of Militant Democracy

The first risk involves the substantial costs that militant democracy incurs when confronting populist forces. These costs are particularly significant when dealing with populist actors due to their ambiguous relationship with the democratic system. Populist parties may not overtly express anti-democratic sentiments, making it difficult to justify their outright prohibition. Instead, their disagreements often center on certain principles of liberal democracy rather than outright opposition to democracy itself. This can lead to a boomerang effect, wherein militant democratic measures against populism provoke a backlash, posing a significant threat to the authority and legitimacy of the liberal democratic model. Such measures expose democratic institutions to classic demagogic elements of populist discourse, including accusations that unelected and unaccountable actors are censoring parties that represent the "true people." This exclusionary dynamic – pitting "good democrats" against "evil illiberal populists"

– can inadvertently strengthen populist forces by reinforcing their narrative of an arrogant establishment (or elite) that disregards the popular will.

The second risk relates to the foundational assumption of militant democracy: the existence of a broad societal consensus on the substantial definition of democracy and the constituents of the demos. However, the existence of such a consensus is highly questionable. The rise of populist movements indicates that citizens hold radically diverse views on what democracy means and how it should function. As this crucial assumption weakens, as it is currently, the legitimacy of militant democracy significantly diminishes. Without a clear and broadly accepted understanding of what liberal democracy entails within European political systems and society, the task of militant democrats becomes increasingly challenging. This issue will be further explored in the next section.

3.5 Militant Democracy in the EU: What Is to Be Defended?

Scholars of militant democracy tend to associate the concept with the protection of a specific interpretation of democracy, namely liberal democracy (Wagrandl 2018; Norman 2017; Tyulkina 2019; Urbinati 2019; Sajó 2019; Rummens 2019). While aligning with Loewenstein's foundational definition, liberalism remains a somewhat ambiguous label with nuanced and poorly defined boundaries, making it challenging to identify the legitimate scope of application for militant democracy. Liberalism, often seen as the foundation of individual freedom, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, is a complex and evolving tradition marked by contradictions and internal debates. Highlighting the heterogeneity and fragmented nature of liberalism, Abbey defines it as an "essentially contested concept" (2005). This complexity makes the task of classifying militant democracy's actions as consistent with any specific model of liberal democracy nearly impossible.

Focusing on a normative analysis of militant democracy within the EU context renders this task significantly more concrete and feasible. The EU itself offers a specific interpretation of liberal democracy, which can serve as a benchmark and guideline for assessing the legitimacy of its militant democracy actions, effectively addressing the question: what is to be defended?

The EU frequently positions itself as the leading defender of liberal democracy, asserting its commitment to protecting and promoting equal dignity and freedom for all citizens through human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. This stance reflects the EU's implicit interpretation of liberalism as synonymous with liberal democracy, a narrative prominently highlighted in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union.[2] This article represents the substantial core of the EU's identity as a polity – arguably the closest equivalent to what Schmitt defined as "constitutional identity" in the absence of a formal EU constitution. It has been suggested that the EU should adopt a specific theoretical interpretation of its values to implement morally permissible militant democracy actions (Olsen, 2022). However, I contend that a thorough consideration of Article 2 already demonstrates that the EU's actions are rooted in the principles of political liberalism, offering a sufficiently structured interpretation to establish a unified understanding of EU values and, consequently, to guide normatively coherent militant democracy strategies.

[2] The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail.

Having established what the EU aims to defend, we now turn to a more empirical analysis of how the arsenal of internal militant democracy has developed among member states, and examine the specific challenges and paradoxes faced by the EU as a transnational militant democracy.

3.6 Challenges and Paradoxes in the EU Militant Democracy

When analyzing EU militant democracy, one must consider a persistent tension in the background: a conflict between the EU's nature as a political entity and the dynamics of militant democracy. While the EU can indeed be defined as the first transnational militant democracy, contradictory aspects of the EU undermine its militant democracy ambitions. These conflicting characteristics pose significant challenges to the effective implementation of militant democracy measures. The EU's constrained enforcement capabilities and its reliance on member states for law enforcement and political authority have fostered a culture centered around compromise and consensus rather than the confrontational politics typically associated with militant democracy.

Before examining the actual militant democracy practices that the EU has developed to counter democratic backsliding within its member states, it is crucial to understand why violations of member states' values are a serious problem. First, as Closa (2016) points out, avoiding value breaches is essential to maintain credibility in EU external relations. Second, to ensure a reliable mechanism of mutual recognition of legal decisions, it is necessary for both countries and citizens to be confident that individual rights and the rule of law are protected in all member states. Finally, it is crucial to respond to rogue states to prevent a domino effect that could lead to widespread non-compliance with liberal democracy, ultimately compromising the civil and political rights of citizens. Accepting non-liberal democratic governments and policies within the EU could jeopardize the very status of European citizens, which is based on equal democratic co-ruling in shared policy fields. Breaches of EU values result in the exclusion, either partially or completely, of groups of citizens. Thus, within the EU context, militant democracy actions seem justified.

However, reactions to rogue states – such as sanctions and exclusionary mechanisms – can also result in the partial or complete exclusion of other citizens. This presents the unique paradox of EU militant democracy, as the first model of transnational militant democracy, and is particularly evident when examining the main instruments the EU has developed to sanction value offenders (Olsen, 2019).

The Amsterdam Treaty of 1999 introduced a sanction mechanism for EU values offenders, allowing the Council to suspend basic rights, such as voting rights, for member states that seriously and persistently breached EU principles of liberty, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. The conditions required for the Council's intervention were the seriousness and persistence of these breaches. One limitation of this newly adopted sanction mechanism was the requirement of a "serious and persistent" breach before EU institutions could intervene.

In the same year, the so-called Haider Affair – Austria's inclusion of the far-right Freedom Party in its government – shocked other European countries. Several EU governments imposed unilateral sanctions, but the formal EU sanction mechanism (Article 7) was not activated. The mechanism required a "serious and persistent breach" of EU principles, which was not evident in this case. The Haider Affair led to an amendment in the Treaty of Nice (Article 7), which introduced a "preventive

stage" before applying sanctions for breaches of EU values. A clear risk of a serious breach by a Member State could trigger this stage, allowing the Council to issue recommendations. The EP gained the right to initiate the preventive mechanism, and unanimity was no longer required for Council intervention. The European Commission further clarified the concept of a "clear risk," and once identified, the Member State came under constant EU surveillance to prevent the risk from escalating.

The Lisbon Treaty later reformed Article 7 without changing its substance, maintaining two stages: the preventive-warning stage (7.1) and the penalty-sanctioning stage (7.2). The European Commission, EP, and one-third of Member States can activate 7.1, while the European Council determines the risk with a four-fifths majority and the EP's consent. The second stage (7.2) requires unanimity from the European Council. Sanctions, such as voting rights suspension, can be imposed by a qualified majority.

The Article 7 procedure represents the quintessential EU militant democracy practice. However, it has faced criticism. Tom Theuns (2022) argues that Article 7 cannot be justified by the concept of militant democracy because disenfranchisement in the Council contradicts EU fundamental values. He identifies a performative contradiction – where the content of a statement contradicts its utterance – in the procedure. According to Theuns, depriving a Member State that is in serious and persistent breach of EU fundamental values of its right to vote in the Council undermines the EU values of democracy and equality.

Another critique of Article 7, and of collective sanctions more broadly, concerns the concept of collective responsibility, which affects all citizens, including those from democratic minorities who may have no involvement in their government's violations of liberal democratic values. These measures, therefore, can appear illegitimate. From this perspective, EU militant democracy again seems to fall into a performative contradiction: applying collective sanctions that impact democratic minorities would contradict the very values these sanctions aim to protect (Olsen, 2022).

These risks of falling into performative contradictions are common in most EU mechanisms for preserving the rule of law, including infringement procedures and fund withdrawals. Furthermore, these procedures share a second common feature: they all act reactively or ex post rather than preemptively, which is crucial for militant democracy to be truly effective. What appears to mitigate these risks – and provide new legitimacy to the EU as a transnational militant democracy – are the actions developed by the EP, especially its ability to limit the influence of illiberal parties and, most importantly, to oppose the appointment of MEPs with attitudes that contradict liberal democracy to positions of responsibility.

The EP employs several strategies to underrepresent populist political groups within its arena. It can use its agenda-setting power to apply a *cordon sanitaire* to these groups in the composition of committees, allocation of EP Committee Chairs, Vice-Chairs, EP Vice-Presidents, and Quaestors, and in influencing appointments beyond the EP, such as Commissioners (Brack 2013, Brack & Costa 2018, Ripoll Servent 2019). Additionally, in an even more preventive measure, the European Parties Regulation allows for the refusal of a party's registration and the possibility of de-registration, akin to a party ban – a prototype tool of national militant democracy. Notably, with only one exception, all de-registered and non-registered parties have belonged to the political far-right.

As evident, acting on political parties instead of sanctioning the member state as a single and homogeneous entity, does not create contradictions in terms of minorities, allowing more precisely targeted sanction, avoiding then performative contradiction and illegitimacy accusations.

3.7 EU Militant Democracy Beyond Member States

Notwithstanding the above, the legitimacy of the EU as a transnational militant democracy agent encounters several challenges, both in terms of practical efficiency and normative coherence. However, when examined through the lens of the subsidiarity principle, the EU's actions as a transnational militant democracy appear less contradictory than they are often portrayed (Wagrandl, 2018). As all Member States are bound by Article 2 of the TEU to uphold liberal democratic values, they are primarily responsible for maintaining these standards internally. The EU intervenes only when a Member State fails in this duty, acting in full accordance with the subsidiarity principle that regulates the EU's exercise of its competences.[3]

These legitimacy challenges are further compounded when assessing the EU's role in promoting its liberal democratic principles beyond its borders, particularly in actions targeting candidate countries for EU membership, which – based on compliance with EU conditionalities – depends on the candidate country's ability to fulfill a set of political and economic conditions. Financial instruments such as the IPA and the EED primarily aim to promote the rule of law, fundamental rights, and democracy, as well as alignment with the EU acquis, in full accordance with the values articulated in Article 2. Moreover, Chapter 23 of the acquis – whose closure is crucial for a credible membership perspective – focuses specifically on the judiciary and fundamental rights, requiring impartiality, integrity, and high standards of adjudication to uphold the rule of law.

Despite frequent references to the Copenhagen Criteria – the benchmark for EU accession closely linked to the values enshrined in Article 2 – and suggestions such as Müller's (2015) proposal for a "Copenhagen Commission" to safeguard EU democracy, accession procedures are largely ignored in EU militant democracy literature. This exclusion is primarily due to the fact that accession procedures target countries outside the EU, while militant democracy is fundamentally based on self-defense against internal threats. I contend that the hybrid status of candidate countries in the context of EU enlargement challenges the notion that they should be excluded from discussions on militant democracy merely due to their technical classification as external actors. The unique and ambiguous positioning of candidate countries within the conventional external-internal enemy dichotomy renders this distinction both outdated and inadequate. Therefore, when debating the legitimacy of EU militant democracy measures targeting external actors, it may be more appropriate to use another fundamental feature of militant democracy as a normative benchmark – its inherently preventive nature – which has been integral to its framework since its earliest conceptualizations (Müller, 2012; Wagrandl, 2018; Malkopoulou & Norman, 2018).

Instances of "militant democracy gone transnational," as highlighted by Wagrandl (2018), have already emerged in the European context. During Turkey's 2017 constitutional referendum campaign, Turkish officials attempted to hold rallies in Germany, Austria, and The Netherlands, which triggered significant backlash. German authorities were the first to consider banning these events, arguing that those eroding democracy in their own country should not be allowed to exploit democratic freedoms abroad. In

[3] The principle of subsidiarity is defined in Article 5(3) of the Treaty on European Union. It aims to ensure that decisions are taken at the closest possible level to the citizen and that constant checks are made to verify that *action* at the European Union (EU) level is justified in light of the possibilities available at the national, regional or local level. Specifically, it is the principle whereby the EU does not take *action* (except in the areas that fall within its exclusive jurisdiction), unless it is more effective than *action* taken at the national, regional or local level.

Austria, the Assembly Act was swiftly amended to grant police the authority to prohibit assemblies involving third-country nationals if they contravened international principles, Austria's international obligations, democratic values, or foreign policy interests. In The Netherlands, a Turkish minister was detained and escorted out by police. These measures restricted rights not to safeguard the democracies of the sanctioning countries, but rather to protect an external democracy – specifically, Turkey's.

In this specific case, however, the actions of transnational militant democracy were undertaken by individual countries, each acting independently despite being EU members. I argue that incorporating political conditionalities directed at candidate countries into the framework of EU militant democracy provides at least three interrelated benefits, enhancing both the theoretical and practical understanding of militant democracy in the EU.

Firstly, examining the development of political conditionality reveals that the EU's increased stringency on democracy and rule of law standards is correlated to the autocratization trends observed in countries that joined in 2004, such as Poland and Hungary. This growing strictness toward candidate nations and general reticence towards further enlargement appears linked to the emergence of rapid autocratization among EU members. As the Rule of Law Toolbox proves inadequate in effectively countering major instances of EU autocratization, the focus of EU militant democracy appears to be shifting towards potential candidates to prevent similar situations in the future.

Secondly, the preemptive nature inherent in the accession procedure makes political conditionality the only militant democracy tool that does not operate in an ex-post manner. The concept of preemptiveness is central to militant democracy actions, although its definition remains somewhat vague in scholarly literature. It generally suggests taking action "before it's too late." However, there is no theoretical consensus on when this critical point is reached, necessitating a case-by-case approach in practical applications (Feisel, 2022). Recognizing the blurriness surrounding the preemptive nature of militant democracy, I argue that incorporating the accession procedure for potential candidate countries does not stretch the concept. Instead, it enriches and complements the field of militant democracy inquiry.

Finally, including accession conditionality into the EU's militant democracy toolkit offers two benefits in terms of normative and perceived legitimacy. First, targeting countries that are not yet members of the Union resolves the performative contradiction typical of most militant democracy actions based on collective responsibilities. Second, applying democratic conditionality to countries outside the EU is more easily justifiable by EU institutions in public discourse. While responses to breaches of EU values within member states are often perceived – and portrayed by the leaders of the sanctioned countries – as EU interference in member states' affairs, thus challenging the legitimacy of EU militant democracy, targeting external countries may not trigger the same negative reaction in terms of public support for the EU's actions against autocratization.

3.8 Conclusions

This section has examined the concept of militant democracy within the EU, exploring its theoretical foundations, contemporary applications, and inherent paradoxes. As the first transnational militant democracy, the EU employs a range of legal and institutional mechanisms to safeguard liberal democratic values both internally among its member states and externally in candidate countries. Through this analysis, it is evident that while militant democracy offers a compelling framework for protecting democracies from their internal adversaries, it also presents significant normative and

practical challenges, particularly in balancing the protection of democratic values against the risk of undermining those very values.

The EU's implementation of militant democracy reveals a tangled interaction between the need to prevent anti-democratic abuses and the imperative to uphold democratic norms. Internally, the EU's tools, such as Article 7 procedures, highlight the contradictions inherent in enforcing democratic values at a supranational level, where collective sanctions can inadvertently undermine the legitimacy of the measures taken. These contradictions underscore a broader tension within militant democracy: the risk of democratic self-injury, where attempts to defend democracy may inadvertently erode its legitimacy by adopting illiberal practices.

The external dimension of the EU's militant democracy, particularly through political conditionality in the accession process, expands the concept beyond its traditional boundaries. This extension highlights the EU's strategic use of preemptive measures to promote democratic standards in candidate countries, thus addressing the shortcomings of reactive militant democracy practices within the Union. By conditioning accession on the adherence to democratic norms, the EU seeks to prevent future democratic backsliding among new members, reflecting an evolving understanding of militant democracy as not only a defensive but also a proactive tool.

However, the EU's militant democracy remains fraught with challenges. The legitimacy of its actions is often questioned, both by member states and external observers, due to the perceived intrusion into national sovereignty and the complexities of enforcing a unified definition of liberal democracy. Moreover, the rise of populist and illiberal forces within the EU poses a significant threat to the efficacy of militant democracy measures, as these actors often exploit the very democratic freedoms that militant democracy seeks to protect.

In conclusion, the EU's approach to militant democracy exemplifies both the potential and the pitfalls of this concept in a transnational context. While the EU's efforts to defend liberal democratic values are necessary and – I argue – often justified, they also reveal the inherent dilemmas of militant democracy, where the pursuit of security and stability must be carefully weighed against the preservation of democratic integrity.

Conclusion

This concluding section integrates the main insights from Part I of the thesis, drawing together findings from democratization theory, EU external democracy promotion, and militant democracy. It highlights key common themes and identifies existing research gaps, providing a comprehensive assessment of the EU's strengths and limitations in safeguarding democratic principles beyond its borders.

The analysis underscores the complexity of democratization processes and the highly context-dependent nature of democratic transitions. While classic modernization theory, which links economic development to democratization, continues to be influential, its limitations are widely acknowledged. More recent approaches highlight the critical roles of social structures, class dynamics, and institutional factors in advancing or obstructing democratic progress. The literature suggests that while economic development can facilitate democratization under specific conditions, political transitions are often shaped by a broader range of variables, including historical legacies, cultural influences, and the impact of international actors such as the EU. This non-linear and multifaceted nature of democratization processes necessitates a more nuanced approach, integrating diverse theoretical frameworks. A comprehensive examination of theoretical frameworks, complemented by empirical studies, identifies a set of conditions that are particularly decisive in explaining variations in democracy within countries. Among these, the most frequently cited and well-established in the literature are economic development; the role of actors resisting autocratization (Przeworski et al., 2000; Tomini, Gibril, and Bochev, 2023; Rød et al., 2020; Teorell, 2010); income equality (Boix and Stokes, 2003; Acemoglu and Robinson, 2005; Rød et al., 2020; Merkel, 2018); historical context (Przeworski and Limongi, 1997; Acemoglu et al., 2008, 2009); the strength of civil society (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2005; Levitsky & Ziblatt); international factors (Knutsen, et. al., 2018; Boix, 2011, 2018; Levitsky & Way, 2010; Whitehead, 1996; Schmitz and Sell, 1999); and the design of local institutions and political systems (Grimm, 2019; Dahlum, 2018; Acemoglu & Robinson, 2018; Rød et al., 2020; Wunsch and Blanchard, 2023; Tomini and Wagemann, 2018).

A key theme emerging from the review is the influence of external actors, particularly the EU, on democratization efforts in its neighboring regions. The EU has played a prominent role in promoting democracy through its enlargement policy and the application of political conditionalities, whereby candidate countries must meet democratic governance benchmarks as part of the accession process. This strategy has proven effective in fostering reforms in several Central and Eastern European countries, particularly during pre-accession periods. However, post-accession autocratization – where countries regress on democratic reforms after joining the EU – highlights the limitations of conditionality-based approaches. The weakening of external pressure once a country gains membership underscores the need for stronger mechanisms to ensure the sustainability of democratic reforms over the long term. The review also emphasizes the domestic factors that influence the success or failure of EU democracy promotion efforts. While external conditionality can incentivize reforms, domestic political elites, societal actors, and national identity often play decisive roles in shaping democratic outcomes. Elites in some countries strategically comply with EU demands to secure the benefits of membership without fully committing to substantive democratic reforms. This creates a façade of compliance, where superficial legal changes mask deeper institutional resistance to democratic transformation. This dynamic underscores the importance of understanding how local political actors engage with external democracy promotion strategies, pointing to a significant research gap: the need for more detailed empirical studies that examine the micro-level interactions between domestic and international forces during democratization processes.

The EU's approach to democracy promotion is further complicated by its competing strategic interests, particularly in its neighborhood regions. The tension between normative commitments to democracy and other priorities, such as security and economic stability, often undermines the EU's efforts to promote democratic governance. In some instances, the EU has been criticized for prioritizing stability over democracy, especially in regions where autocratic regimes offer short-term benefits in terms of regional security or economic cooperation. This tension highlights a critical challenge for the EU: how to reconcile its long-standing commitment to democratic values with the pragmatic realities of international politics. The literature points to the need for more coherent and consistent policies that better align the EU's normative and strategic goals.

In addressing this paradox, a normative evaluation of the EU's militant democracy agenda seemed essential, as the final chapter of this literature review aimed to explore its theoretical foundations, current applications, and inherent contradictions. As the EU continues to evolve into a transnational entity committed to protecting democratic values, it increasingly employs militant democracy tools to counter both internal and external threats. This represents an emerging area of inquiry, challenging the EU's capacity to respond to the regional rise of autocratization, wherein regimes manipulate democratic institutions to subvert democracy from within. This trend poses a particular challenge for the EU, which has traditionally promoted democracy through institutional and legal measures. As democratically elected leaders increasingly use legal frameworks to undermine democratic norms, the EU must adapt its strategies to counter these more subtle forms of autocratic behavior. Internally, mechanisms like Article 7 illustrate the EU's efforts to combat democratic backsliding among member states. However, such actions are fraught with difficulties, particularly regarding the legitimacy of enforcing democratic standards in diverse political environments. The tension between defending democracy and inadvertently undermining its principles underscores the risk of "democratic self-injury," where militant democracy measures may adopt illiberal practices in the name of protecting democracy.

The EU's extension of militant democracy into its external relations, particularly through political conditionality in the accession process, marks a significant broadening of the concept. This external application, focused on candidate countries, reveals the EU's proactive stance in preventing future autocratization among potential members. By conditioning accession on strict adherence to democratic values, the EU seeks to address the limitations of its more reactive measures within the Union. This approach emphasizes the preventive nature of militant democracy and enhances its legitimacy by targeting non-member states, thereby sidestepping some of the internal backlash that often accompanies sanctions against existing members. Understanding these dynamics, I argue, will be crucial for refining the EU's militant democracy strategy, ensuring it remains both effective and legitimate.

Finally, this literature review provides a comprehensive assessment of the EU's role as a promoter and defender of democracy, highlighting both its achievements and the significant challenges it faces. The review underscores the complexity of democratization processes and the limits of external democracy promotion strategies, particularly when domestic factors and strategic interests come into play. It also draws attention to the normative and practical challenges of applying militant democracy on a transnational level, pointing to the need for more empirical research into how the EU can balance its role as an efficient militant democracy agent with respect for national sovereignty and democratic legitimacy, as it continues to navigate the tensions between promoting democracy and addressing autocratic threats in its neighborhood.

PART II: Empirical Analysis

Part II translates the theoretical and conceptual arguments developed in the literature review into an empirical assessment of the European Union's capacity to act as an effective militant democracy agent in its neighbourhood. While Part I reconstructed the main debates on democratization, autocratization, external democracy promotion, and militant democracy, the objective of the second part is to test whether these insights can be operationalized in a way that allows for a systematic comparison across cases. More specifically, this part examines the conditions under which the EU contributes to improvements in democratic quality among its partner countries, focusing in particular on the role of membership incentives and partnership-based engagement.

The empirical strategy unfolds in two complementary steps. First, Chapter 4 develops a fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA) in order to identify the configurations of structural, domestic, and EU-related conditions associated with positive democratic outcomes. This chapter explains the methodological choice, defines the universe of cases, presents the calibration strategy, and discusses the resulting solution terms. Second, Chapter 5 complements the configurational analysis through a closer examination of two selected cases, Georgia and Albania, with the aim of exploring the mechanisms that underpin the patterns identified by the QCA.

CHAPTER 4
THE QCA ANALYSIS

This chapter aims to determine the conditions under which the EU has been and remains an effective actor in promoting democracy among its neighboring partner countries.
The primary research question is developed as follows:

RQ1: ***Under what conditions can the EU be an effective militant democracy agent in terms of its response to increasing autocracy among its neighborhood partner countries?***

The literature review highlights several key insights that guide the formulation of the empirical expectations tested in this study. First, democratization and autocratization are increasingly understood not as linear or mutually exclusive processes, but as multidimensional trajectories shaped by the interaction of structural, domestic, and international factors. Contemporary scholarship emphasizes that democratic erosion often occurs gradually through institutional weakening rather than abrupt regime breakdown, and that the resilience of democratic institutions depends on both domestic configurations and external influences.

Second, the literature on EU external democracy promotion identifies conditionality and financial engagement as the two main mechanisms through which the EU seeks to influence political developments in partner countries. The prospect of EU membership has been widely recognized as the Union's most powerful instrument of leverage, as it creates strong incentives for governments to adopt democratic reforms. At the same time, research on the European Neighbourhood Policy and other partnership frameworks suggests that financial assistance, institutional cooperation, and capacity-building initiatives can also shape governance outcomes, although often with more limited leverage than accession conditionality.

Third, the literature on autocratization and militant democracy stresses that defending democratic institutions does not necessarily coincide with actively expanding democracy. Measures aimed at resisting democratic erosion – such as strengthening rule-of-law institutions, enhancing accountability, or supporting inclusive political arrangements – may stabilize existing democratic standards without necessarily generating full democratic consolidation.

These insights have important implications for the empirical focus of this study. Rather than examining democracy promotion in a broad sense, the analysis concentrates on the EU's capacity to counter or mitigate autocratizing tendencies by improving the quality of democracy in partner countries. In other words, the outcome of interest is not simply the creation of democratic institutions, but the trajectory of democratic quality over time, understood as a proxy for the capacity of political systems to resist or reverse autocratization.

Building on this conceptual framework, the empirical analysis focuses on two EU-related mechanisms identified in the literature: partnership engagement (**H1**) and membership incentives (**H2**). These mechanisms represent distinct channels through which the EU may influence democratic trajectories in neighboring states.

Consequently, I will put forward the following hypothesis:

H1*: Being the beneficiary of consistent shares of ENP programs constitutes a sufficient condition for achieving an enhanced level of democracy quality, thus making the EU an effective agent in counteracting autocratization.* (***EU_partnership → QOD_total***)

H2: *Being in an advanced stage of the process towards the obtainiment of EU membership constitutes a sufficient condition for achieving an enhanced level of democracy quality, thus making the EU an effective agent in counteracting autocratization.* (***EU_membership → QOD_total***)

Methods

Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA)

To assess the EU's effectiveness in tackling authoritarian challenges in the EU neighbourhood, it is essential to recognize that autocratization (as democratization) is a complex process influenced by multiple factors, including political institutions, social dynamics, economic conditions, and historical legacies. The EU's conditionality and accession process represents just one among various factors that could contribute to an increased level of democracy within a country. To integrate the established conditions from existing literature, which are deemed responsible for the democratization process, with the focus of my research – specifically, the effectiveness of EU instruments in promoting democracy – into a cohesive analytical framework, I find that fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) is well-suited for exploring my research question. Whereas regression excels at estimating "the effect of a cause," QCA is tailored to uncovering "the causes of an effect" (Katz et al. 2005) and therefore suits research agendas – such as democratization – which delve into understanding why specific phenomena occur. Besides, QCA does not assist in isolating the magnitude of the effect of individual factors. Its primary objective lies in comprehensively considering the intricate interactions among various factors that contribute to the desired outcome, examining how variables are embedded within causal contexts, considering whether they act as individually or collectively necessary and/or sufficient conditions (Ragin, 1987). A condition is deemed necessary when the set of observed outcomes is entirely contained within the set where the condition occurs; that is, the outcome cannot manifest in the absence of this condition. In such cases, the fuzzy-set membership score of the outcome (Y) should be less than or equal to the membership score of the necessary condition (X), ensuring that $Y \leq X$. Conversely, a condition is considered sufficient if its presence invariably leads to the outcome, meaning that the set defined by the condition is fully subsumed within the outcome set – there are no instances where the condition is observed without the corresponding outcome. For fuzzy-set membership scores, this implies that the membership score of the condition must be less than or equal to that of the outcome ($X \leq Y$).

QCA facilitates the identification of patterns of conditions that are either jointly sufficient or necessary for the occurrence of democratization, thereby aiding in delineating the role of the EU. At the same time, adopting a set-theoretic approach to analyze democratization involves recognizing the existence of equifinality, where diverse factors can result in the same outcome. It also encompasses conjunctural causation, where individual conditions may not independently manifest their effects but rather in conjunction with others, highlighting the asymmetry inherent in concepts and causal relations

(Schneider & Wagemann, 2012). A significant advantage of set-theoretical approaches is their capacity to evaluate complex models while addressing a fundamental challenge in social science research, that is, the rarity of scenarios where one or multiple factors can independently elucidate the research question (Rizova, 2006). QCA now includes specialised variants that alleviate key constraints of conventional crisp- and fuzzy-set approaches. Two-step QCA distinguishes remote, context-shaping conditions from proximate, actor-centred ones. Step 1 evaluates the necessity of remote factors; Step 2 tests sufficiency by combining surviving remote elements with proximate factors under stricter thresholds, thereby curbing limited diversity and avoiding arbitrary variable aggregation when case numbers are small. Multivalue QCA (mvQCA) permits each condition to assume several categorical values, eliminating forced dichotomisation and capturing empirical nuance, though at the cost of larger truth tables and more intricate Boolean minimisation. Temporal QCA (tQCA) incorporates sequencing, coding whether one condition precedes another to reveal path-dependent causal patterns. Although current implementations remain limited to relatively simple sequences and often overlook meaningful absences, they nonetheless extend QCA beyond static cross-sectional analysis.

QCA is also well aligned with the ontological assumptions underlying contemporary comparative politics research. Increasingly, scholars recognise that political outcomes are rarely the product of discrete, context-invariant variables acting independently. Instead, they emerge from complex, conjunctural, and often asymmetric causal processes unfolding within specific institutional and historical contexts (Hall, 2003). QCA's set-theoretic logic reflects precisely this understanding: rather than decomposing reality into additive statistical effects, it conceptualises outcomes as configurations of conditions and evaluates whether particular combinations are jointly sufficient, individually necessary, both, or neither (Ragin 2000; 2008).

This configurational ontology has deep roots in scholarly debate. It resonates with John Stuart Mill's classical methods of agreement and difference and, subsequently, with Max Weber's typological comparisons. (Møller & Skaaning, 2018). Weber's construction of ideal-type combinations of structural and agential forces to explain Western modernity – including democracy, albeit peripherally – already treated causal conditions as sets whose intersections carried greater explanatory weight than their isolated magnitudes. Stein Rokkan extended this lineage by mapping Europe's territorial cleavages and employing configurations of state formation, nation-building, and mass incorporation to account for democratic stability in the inter-war period. Ragin's earliest illustration of QCA explicitly repurposed Rokkan's schema to demonstrate that Boolean algebra – the mathematical framework of logic and sets – could formalise such configurational insights. Employing QCA for EU democracy-promotion research therefore does not simply introduce a novel tool, but it reconnects contemporary analysis to a longstanding typological framework tradition that has shaped the study of democratisation (Moore, 1966; Luebbert, 1991; Downing, 1992; Ertman, 1997).

Turning to the specific empirical puzzle of this thesis, the explanatory focus lies on the EU's democracy-promotion repertoire and its interaction with domestic conditions. The effectiveness of EU incentives depends on how they combine with factors such as state capacity, socio-economic development, and historical institutional legacies, as well as with the credibility and timing of EU engagement through instruments such as accession negotiations, Association Agreements, and neighbourhood policies (Schneider & Wagemann, 2012). A regression design that assumes unit homogeneity and covariate independence would tend to obscure these interactions, while purely qualitative case studies, although rich in contextual detail, would struggle to identify patterns that extend beyond individual cases. FsQCA offers an intermediate solution by enabling systematic cross-case comparison while maintaining a close connection to individual cases. Through the construction of a truth table that records all empirically

observed combinations of conditions and outcomes, Boolean minimisation can identify the smallest set of logically consistent configurations – or causal "recipes" –associated with improvements in democratic quality.

Empirically, the universe of cases examined in this study constitutes a typical medium-N domain, consisting of 22 observational units – i.e. 22 EU partner countries. This number is too small to allow for high-powered statistical analysis yet too large for purely qualitative comparative methods based on exhaustive process tracing. QCA was specifically developed to address this intermediate analytical terrain (Ragin, 1987). In set-theoretic analysis, issues such as multicollinearity or limited diversity of observed combinations are not merely statistical problems but potentially meaningful empirical signals. Strong correlations between conditions may indicate substantive clusters of factors that jointly shape outcomes, while logically possible but empirically unobserved combinations – so-called logical remainders – encourage analysts to refine their theoretical scope conditions.

This practice has already produced refined insights in democratization and EU studies. A particularly compelling example is Jano (2010), who applied QCA to examine patterns of EU enlargement in the Western Balkans. In that study, enlargement outcomes were explained through configurations of factors such *as* domestic political commitment to reform, the strength and credibility of EU conditionality, levels of economic integration with the EU, and the legacy of historical statehood. Rather than identifying a single dominant determinant of successful integration, Jano *demonstrated* that multiple combinations of these conditions could lead to progress in the accession process. This configurational perspective highlighted the importance of equifinality: countries could follow different pathways toward the same outcome depending on how domestic and external factors interacted in each context. The study also illustrated how EU influence operates not *as* an isolated driver of change but *as* a factor whose effectiveness depends heavily on domestic political willingness and institutional capacity.

The present analysis builds directly on this insight while extending it in several important ways. Similar to Jano's work, the study adopts a configurational perspective and uses QCA to explore how combinations of conditions shape political outcomes. Both approaches emphasise that EU-related incentives do not operate uniformly across countries and that domestic political conditions play a crucial mediating role in determining their effectiveness. In this sense, the present study shares with Jano the underlying theoretical assumption that EU influence is conditional and context-dependent, and that understanding political change requires analysing how multiple factors jointly produce outcomes rather than isolating single causal variables.

However, the two analyses differ in their empirical focus and analytical scope. Jano's research is primarily concerned with explaining variation in EU accession trajectories within the Western Balkans during the enlargement process. Its outcome of interest is therefore closely tied to progress toward EU membership and the conditions under which candidate countries advance along the accession path. By contrast, the present study focuses more broadly on changes in democratic quality in the EU neighbourhood, including countries that are not necessarily on a formal accession track. This shift in focus allows the analysis to examine EU democracy promotion beyond the enlargement framework and to explore whether similar configurational dynamics operate in a wider set of political contexts.

A further difference concerns the role attributed to EU instruments themselves. While Jano emphasises structural and historical conditions – such as historical statehood and levels of economic integration – alongside political commitment and conditionality, the present analysis places greater emphasis on the interaction between specific EU policy instruments and domestic institutional environments. In other

words, whereas Jano's study highlights the structural foundations that enable or constrain enlargement trajectories, the current analysis seeks to understand how EU engagement interacts with domestic political and institutional conditions to produce varying degrees of democratic improvement.

Finally, QCA has often been described as bridging the traditional divide between qualitative and quantitative research (Jano 2014; Thomann & Maggetti 2017). While it shares with quantitative approaches an interest in identifying systematic patterns across cases, it also retains the qualitative commitment to treating cases *as* contextually embedded wholes. This dual orientation is particularly valuable in the study of EU enlargement and neighbourhood policies, where analysts must simultaneously account for country-specific historical trajectories and identify broader patterns in EU democracy promotion.

In summary, fsQCA's configurational logic, its capacity to capture equifinality and conjunctural causation, its suitability for medium-N research designs, and its compatibility with case-oriented analysis make it an appropriate methodological choice for examining how EU instruments interact with domestic conditions to shape democratic trajectories in the EU neighbourhood. Rather than replacing existing quantitative approaches, the method complements them by illuminating the multiple causal pathways through which EU engagement may contribute to improvements in democratic quality.

The Solution Formulas: How to Present the Results

I present the results of the QCA by examining the parsimonious, conservative, and intermediate solutions both individually and collectively, thereby ensuring a comprehensive exploration of the underlying causal structures. Among these, the intermediate solution has emerged *as* the predominant outcome employed in empirical QCA applications. Nevertheless, it is only the parsimonious solution that identifies conditions meeting the criteria for causal relevance *as* specified by regularity theories of causation (Thiem 2019; Baumgartner 2015; Baumgartner & Thiem 2020). In interpreting the parsimonious solution formula, the assumption of causal homogeneity permits the identification of contextually generalizable sufficient conditions – configurations that consistently co-occur with the outcome in the observed data and are expected to do so across all cases characterized by an equivalent causal context. This assumption facilitates a bounded form of generalization, limited to instances where the constellation of confounding factors replicates that found in the analyzed cases. In the absence of this assumption, however, generalizing sufficiency beyond the empirical cases becomes problematic, as it remains analytically intractable to determine all elements necessary for constructing a sufficient configuration.

Each solution type offers distinct epistemological and methodological insights. The conservative solution identifies sufficient configurations exclusively grounded in empirically observed cases, excluding all logical remainders from the minimization process. This approach ensures that identified configurations are strictly evidence-based and include only those conditions that have demonstrated causal efficacy within specific contextual settings. Its main strength lies in its ability to filter out contextually irrelevant conditions, thereby enhancing the contextual appropriateness of the findings. However, this solution often results in overly complex configurations due to the inclusion of numerous conditions that may not be relevant across all cases. Consequently, while empirically robust, the conservative solution may compromise parsimony and analytical clarity, thereby limiting its ability to isolate the core causal mechanisms.

In contrast, the parsimonious solution is designed to identify the minimal set of causal conditions necessary to produce a given outcome, thereby maximizing theoretical parsimony. It achieves this by incorporating logical remainders into the minimization process to derive the most reduced configuration. Although Schneider and Wagemann (2012) critique the parsimonious solution for relying on potentially implausible simplifying assumptions, recent methodological advancements challenge this critique. As Dusa (2018) demonstrates, contemporary implementations of QCA – such as those embedded in the R QCA package used in this study – no longer rely on classical Quine-McCluskey (QMC) algorithms. Instead, they employ pseudo-counterfactual techniques that attain parsimony without explicitly invoking problematic remainders. This advancement enhances the solution's capacity to reveal core causal patterns otherwise obscured in more complex configurations. Nonetheless, because it is based on assumptions concerning unobserved cases, the parsimonious solution may fail to account for context-specific relevance, thereby overlooking important empirical nuances.

The intermediate solution represents a methodological compromise between the conservative and parsimonious approaches. It selectively incorporates only those simplifying assumptions that are theoretically justified, drawing upon the researcher's a priori expectations about the causal relevance of specific conditions. This allows for the inclusion of "easy" counterfactuals – assumptions grounded in theory or common sense – while excluding "difficult" counterfactuals, which lack such justification. Positioned logically as a subset of the parsimonious solution and a superset of the conservative solution, the intermediate solution maintains a degree of parsimony without relying on implausible assumptions (Schneider and Wagemann, 2012). A key limitation, however, lies in the difficulty of distinguishing between empirically supported and unsupported components within the solution itself, which may obscure the causal status of individual conditions.

Following Haesebrouck's (2023) framework for interpreting solution formulas, the parsimonious solution is most effective in isolating conditions that likely exert causal influence on the outcome, aligning with QCA's primary objective: to identify the simplest combination of conditions sufficient to produce the outcome (Dusa 2019). In contrast, the conservative and intermediate solutions prioritize the exclusion of conditions empirically shown to lack explanatory power – at least within cases sharing specific contextual features – and seek to identify contextually bound, yet potentially transferable, sufficient configurations. By presenting all three solution types, I aim to clarify the role of each condition – whether causally significant, context-dependent, or inconclusive – thereby offering a transparent and analytically nuanced interpretation. This integrated approach contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the causal dynamics at play and addresses the challenges of generalization beyond the analyzed cases.

For the sake of analytical completeness, I also incorporate insights derived from the conservative and intermediate solutions, *as* these provide complementary information. To this end, I employ Fiss charts to represent the solution formulas. Initially proposed by Ragin and Fiss (2008) and further developed by Fiss (2011), these charts are designed to facilitate cross-configuration comparisons and are especially effective when multiple configurations are involved. A key advantage of Fiss charts lies in their ability to visually differentiate the roles of causal conditions. Using standardized graphical symbols – filled circles for condition presence, crossed circles for absence, and empty cells for irrelevance – they replicate the structure of a truth table while enhancing interpretability. Importantly, Fiss charts distinguish between "core" and "contributory" conditions: core conditions, derived from the parsimonious solution and essential to the configuration, are represented with larger symbols; contributory conditions, typically drawn from the intermediate or complex solutions, are indicated with smaller symbols. This visual differentiation is particularly valuable in QCA, where solution sets often

consist of multiple, hierarchically nested configurations. The simultaneous display of these solution types, as enabled by Fiss charts, facilitates a nuanced understanding of both causal and contextual complexity (Rubinson 2019).

After the Analytic Moment: SMMR

QCA allows generating theoretical insights without disregarding the context-specific nuances of the cases being analyzed (Ragin, 2008). Due to its case-oriented approach, QCA systematically aligns causal configurations with empirical instances, thereby providing insightful guidance for subsequent case selection (Schneider and Wagemann, 2012).

The empirical results and solution formulas generated with QCA, will allow me to compare previously formulated theoretical expectations with empirical QCA findings, i.e. whether EU Partnership and Membership Proximity had an impact in achieving an enhanced level of democracy quality among selected cases. When theoretical expectations (T) and empirical results (S) are expressed in Boolean terms, four logical scenarios emerge. These scenarios are the intersections of T (expectations), S (findings), ∼T (unexpected), and ∼S (unfound). Firstly, the intersection T ∗ S represents the aspects of the expectations that are supported by the results. Secondly, the intersection T ∗ ∼S represents the aspects of my expectations not supported by the results. Thirdly, the intersection ∼T ∗ S covers findings that were not anticipated. Lastly, the intersection ∼T ∗ ∼S represents what was neither expected nor found (Oana et al., 2021).

According to the results, through Set-Theoretic Multimethod Research - SMMR (Schneider and Rohlfing, 2019; Beach and Rohlfing, 2018) I will bring cases back into the picture after the QCA. The core objective of SMMR is to investigate the causal mechanisms linking sufficient conditions to the outcome. This approach enables the identification of cases that illustrate sufficient terms, those that potentially contradict claims of sufficiency, and those that remain unexplained by the solution. By integrating cross-case findings derived from QCA with within-case evidence, the inferential strength of the analysis is substantially enhanced.

Based on the QCA results, cases will be categorized as typical, deviant, or individually irrelevant to examine whether a sufficient term not only impacts the outcome of interest but also influences a within-case causal mechanism. Depending on the case selection – resulting from the QCA solution formulas – the within-case will rely on analysis of various secondary literature from international organisations, local media, and civil society groups, including academic studies, information from news media, and NGOs and EU reports.

Model specification

Case selection

My units of analysis are the EU's external partner countries. From this comprehensive set of relevant cases – each theoretically relevant given my research interest – I have applied specific criteria and scope conditions to define the subset included in my analysis. I will include all those external partner countries with which the EU has established agreements aimed at promoting democracy, the rule of law, and respect for human rights. The selected scope conditions are as follows: (1) a prospect of EU membership; (2) an expressed EU interest in prioritizing, among other objectives, good governance, democracy, the rule of law, and human rights.

Given those scope conditions, two subsets of countries result relevant to my analysis, summarized in the following table.

<table>
<tr><td rowspan="2">Enlargement Countries</td><td colspan="2">ENP Countries</td></tr>
<tr><td>Southern Partners</td><td>Eastern Partners</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Turkey, Kosovo, Georgia*, Ukraine* and Moldova*</td><td>Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine[4], Syria and Tunisia</td><td>Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia*, Moldova* and Ukraine*</td></tr>
</table>

The first subgroup – *Enlargement Countries* – includes countries that are at various stages in the EU membership application process, encompassing both candidate and potential candidate countries. This group comprises nations that have either received assistance through the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA), which primarily focuses on the rule of law, fundamental rights, and democracy, or have formally submitted applications for EU membership.

The second subgroup – *ENP Countries* – includes nations that adhere to the European Neighbourhood Policy. Within the framework of the ENP, which is based on the values of democracy, the rule of law, and respect for human rights, the EU collaborates with its counterparts to foster the creation of societies that are democratic, socially fair, and inclusive (European Commission & HR-CFSP, 2015). This involves providing economic integration, extending financial aid, and offering technical cooperation to align with EU standards.

[4] After several attempts to find alternative solutions, Palestine was excluded from the case selection due to the impossibility of accessing reliable data for the measurement and calibration of the conditions.
* Countries falling in both categories

Measurement and Calibration

I employ fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (software: R packages QCA and SetMethods) which unfolds through a structured series of analytical procedures.

The initial task involves assigning degrees of membership to each empirical case within the sets defined by the outcome and explanatory conditions – a process known as *calibration*. This step determines how closely each case aligns with the conceptual categories relevant to the analysis. For each outcome and condition, the necessary calibration diagnostics are conducted – specifically, the skewness check and the verification of cases at crossover points. The skewness diagnostic ensures that both conditions and outcomes adequately reflect the diversity and heterogeneity of the cases. The aim is to avoid calibrating sets that are excessively skewed, which could lead to analytical pitfalls in later stages. To this end, a common rule of thumb is to avoid having fewer than 20 percent of cases more in than out of the set, or fewer than 20 percent more out than in (Oana et al., 2021).

Outcome: *QOD_total*

In this study, the outcome will be *Quality of Democrac*y. Since the late 20th century, the EU's approach to promoting democracy has evolved beyond mere procedural benchmarks, exhibiting a shift towards a more substantive understanding of democracy (Dimitrova & Pridham, 2004). Initially, the Copenhagen political criteria emphasized the stability of democratic institutions, human rights, and minority rights. Over time, however, the EU's framework has expanded to include state capacity, judicial independence, anti-corruption measures, and a broadened scope of human and minority rights, covering civil, political, economic, social, and cultural dimensions. This methodological framework assesses the EU's success – or limitations – in promoting democracy through an analytical lens aligned with the EU's own conceptualization of democracy, adopting an immanent critique approach (Theus, 2017; Nicolaïdis, 2012). Immanent critique, rooted in critical theory, assesses a system or practice from within its own normative standards rather than through externally imposed metrics. Accordingly, this study utilizes the EU's interpretation of democracy as outlined in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) to operationalize the quality of democracy and evaluate the EU's role as a militant democracy agent committed to upholding democratic norms.

"The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail."

To operationalize the outcome *QOD_total*, I adopted an approach based on the EU's conceptualization of democracy promotion, which, since the late 1900s, has evolved from a mere checklist to reflect a shift toward substantive democracy (Dimitrova & Pridham, 2004). Operationalizing democracy according to EU standards involves translating its principles into measurable dimensions aligned with its democratic vision. While the EU does not provide a rigid or universal definition of democracy, it emphasizes adaptability, allowing its principles to be applied across diverse contexts.

The EU's most recent effort to articulate a precise interpretation of democracy occurred in 2021, spearheaded by the European Parliamentary Research Service. This initiative addressed the question: *What is the EU's conception of democracy?* It drew on two key documents: the *Council Conclusions on Democracy Support in the EU's External Relations* (2009) and the *Joint Communication of the*

Commission and the High Representative, A New Response to a Changing Neighbourhood (2011). My operationalization also incorporates insights from EU programmatic documents on democracy, governance, and human rights, particularly the analysis by Todd Landman and Marco Larizza in their work *Policy Discourse on Democracy, Governance, and Human Rights*. Collectively, these analyses provide a coherent – if not explicitly defined – EU conceptualization of democracy, forming the basis of my operationalization.

The EU frames democracy as a system where rulers are accountable for their actions and derive legitimacy through the fulfillment of fundamental rights and public needs. This accountability-centered perspective places performance and legitimacy at the core of democratic governance. Following the Arab Spring in 2011, the EU refined its framework by introducing the concept of "deep and sustainable democracy," emphasizing that "democracy is about more than elections" (Munck, 2014). This approach identifies specific, measurable dimensions essential for building and sustaining democracy, offering a basis for operationalization that extends beyond minimal, election-focused definitions.

Building on this theoretical foundation, I identified three core dimensions – along with three corresponding V-Dem indexes – derived from the aforementioned documents to measure democratic quality, reflecting the EU's key aspects of democracy in its external promotion:

1. Electoral Democracy Index (*QOD_polyarchy*): the Electoral Democracy Index measures the extent to which electoral democracy is realized, focusing on government responsiveness achieved through competitive, free, and fair elections under broad suffrage, alongside freedoms of expression and association and an independent media. It conceptualizes electoral democracy as a foundational component of all representative democratic models. The index is scaled from 0 to 1 and draws on several indicators, including freedom of expression, association, suffrage, election fairness, and the role of elections in selecting the executive (Teorell et al., 2017).

2. Rule of Law Index (*QOD_RoL*): the Rule of Law Index assesses the extent to which laws are enforced transparently, independently, impartially, predictably, and equally, and whether government officials act within legal constraints. Scaled from 0 to 1, the index is based on indicators related to judicial independence and accountability, executive compliance with constitutional norms, public sector corruption and theft, access to justice, and the transparency and enforcement of laws (Pemstein et al., 2023).

3. Women Political Empowerment Index (*QOD_gender*): the Women's Political Empowerment Index measures the extent to which women are politically empowered, defined as the process through which women gain greater agency, choice, and participation in political and societal decision-making. The index comprises three equally weighted dimensions: women's fundamental civil liberties, their participation in civil society and public political discourse, and their descriptive representation in formal political institutions. It is scaled from 0 to 1 and is calculated as the average of three component indices: women's civil liberties, civil society participation, and political participation (Wang et al., 2017).

These dimensions align with the EU's vision of democracy as a system where rulers are accountable and derive legitimacy through the fulfillment of citizens' rights and needs. Using data from the V-Dem dataset, I filtered observations for my units of analysis, calculating annual deltas for each dimension at the country level to measure year-on-year changes in democratic quality. The cumulative deltas for each

dimension were aggregated and averaged to compute *QOD_total*, an overall indicator of democratic trends for each country.

QOD_total, as well as the three disaggregated dimensions (*QOD_polyarchy*, *QOD_RoL*, *QOD_gender*), were then calibrated into four-level fuzzy sets based on substantive thresholds: countries with declines of more than 0.2 points were classified as experiencing *considerable recession* (0), while those with improvements exceeding 0.2 units were categorized as experiencing *considerable improvement* (1). Intermediate changes were classified as *moderate recession/stagnation* (0.33) or *moderate improvement* (0.67).

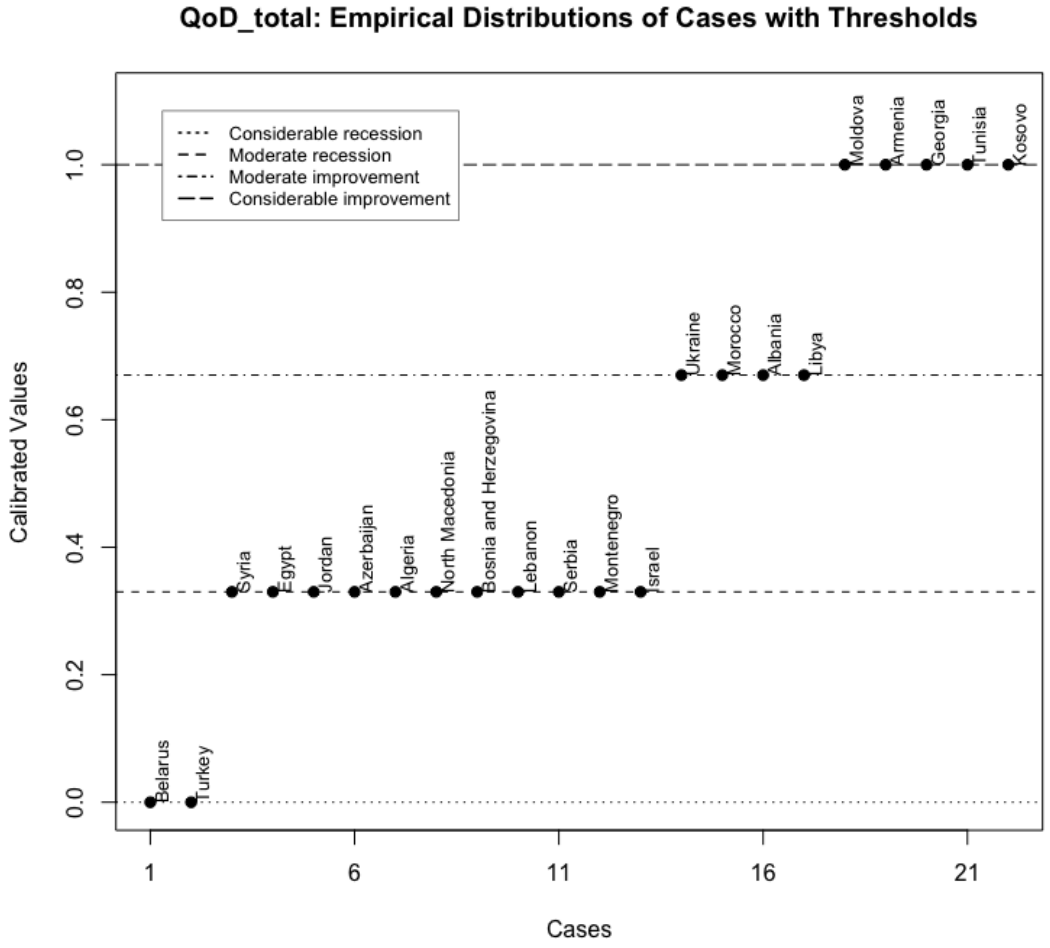
To sum up, the outcome condition captures the trajectory of democratic quality over time rather than a static level of democracy. It is constructed using three V-Dem indices – Electoral Democracy (Polyarchy), Rule of Law, and Women's Political Empowerment – which together approximate the EU's notion of "deep and sustainable democracy".

For each country, the outcome is computed as a directional trajectory across the entire observation window, beginning in the year of the first formal agreement with the European Union (t-1) and ending in the most recent year available in the dataset (t). Within this time span, I calculate year-to-year deltas (Δ) for each index. These yearly changes capture whether democratic quality improved, stagnated, or declined between consecutive years.

To obtain the overall trajectory, the annual deltas are aggregated across the full time period by computing the mean cumulative directional change for each dimension and then combining them into a composite score (QOD_total). This approach captures the net direction of democratic development over time rather than isolated fluctuations.

Importantly, several countries exhibit non-linear trajectories, including phases of autocratization followed by democratization (e.g., Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia) or the reverse. In these cases, the aggregation method incorporates both positive and negative yearly deltas, allowing improvements in some periods to offset declines in others. The resulting score therefore represents the overall balance of democratic change across the observation window, rather than assuming a monotonic trajectory.

Finally, the aggregated trajectory is calibrated into a four-value fuzzy set, distinguishing between considerable democratic recession, moderate decline/stagnation, moderate improvement, and considerable democratic improvement. The calibration thresholds are defined using substantively meaningful breakpoints in the distribution of aggregated deltas.



Skewness checks: *Cases > 0.5 / Total number of cases: 9 / 22 = 40.91 %*
Cases on crossover point: *no cases with fuzzy−set scores of 0.5.*

Tunisia's democratic trajectory warrants particular attention, because calibrating outcomes by the annual delta places the country among virtuous cases of democratization – an assessment that, looking at the country's trajectory over the past fifteen years, is difficult to sustain. The delta is indeed positive, but it obscures several pronounced spikes that should not be overlooked; nor should the fact that Tunisian democracy indisputably deteriorated in recent years (V-Dem Institute, 2024a; V-Dem Institute, 2024b).

The baseline for my observation window is the period under Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali, who ousted the aging Habib Bourguiba in a largely bloodless 1987 takeover and presided over an authoritarian order that combined economic opening with systematic repression. At the same time, Tunisia deepened legal ties with Europe through the 1995 EU–Tunisia Association Agreement embedded in the Barcelona Process (European Commission, 2019; UNCTAD, 1995/1998).

The 2011 revolution – sparked in the country's most impoverished and marginalised southern and interior regions – marked a sharp upward break. A pluralist transition, the 2014 Constitution, and international recognition of civil society's mediation (a process culminated with the Nobel Prize conferred to National Dialogue Quartet in 2015) briefly made Tunisia the only "Free" country in the

Arab world according to Freedom House (Freedom House, 2015; Nobel Prize, 2015). In data terms, V-Dem's Polyarchy/Electoral Democracy index rose by more than 0.5 in a single year, materially boosting my delta. Yet the institutional architecture remained fragile: a fragmented party system and persistent parliamentary stalemate prevented establishment of the Constitutional Court envisaged in 2014, removing a key arbiter during crises (Yerkes, 2018). Between 2011 and 2019 – the year of Kais Saied's election – the country experienced two presidencies and a succession of short-lived governments. After the first fully competitive parliamentary elections in 2014, confrontation between Islamist and secularist blocs produced chronic legislative gridlock, including the prolonged failure to appoint both the Constitutional Court and the Supreme Judicial Council. In parallel, European engagement reached a peak – focused on migration management, security cooperation, and extensive partnerships with a flourishing civil society – accompanied by substantial financial flows that made Tunisia the leading per-capita recipient of EU official development assistance.

Exogenous shocks reinforced this fragility. Average GDP growth slowed from roughly 4–5% in the 2000s to about 1–2% in 2011–2019, while the 2015 Bardo and Sousse attacks devastated tourism – the main economic sector in the country together with export – and shifted policy back toward securitization (Reuters, 2015). In 2019, amid economic malaise and legislative gridlock, voters turned to an outsider, law professor Kais Saied, who won a landslide in the presidential runoff (Reuters, 2019).
The major negative deltas map onto the sequence of authoritarian reversals that followed: on 25 July 2021 Kais Saied – locked in a protracted confrontation with the parliamentary speaker, the Islamist leader Rached Ghannouchi – capitalised on protests against the legislature and dissatisfaction with the management of the COVID-19 crisis to dismiss the government, freeze parliament, and assume full powers, before announcing rule by decree (Reuters, 2021a, 2021b). A cascade of authoritarian measures followed: the further expansion of the Interior and Defence ministries' reach; the co-optation and reshaping of the judiciary, enabling arbitrary charges and politicised trials against opposition figures, journalists, lawyers, and NGOs; and the installation of a new, weakened legislature elected in early 2023 with roughly 11 per cent turnout, which has largely ratified presidential decrees and contains neither organised parties nor an institutionalised opposition (Reuters, 2023). In 2022, a hyper-presidential constitution – adopted via low-turnout referendum – formalised these changes, entrenching an executive-dominant system with minimal checks and balances (Reuters, 2022a, 2022b). After rivals were sidelined during the campaign, Saied secured a second term in October 2024 with over 90 per cent of the vote on participation below 30 per cent (Reuters, 2024). The major negative deltas in my data series map onto this sequence: each step reduced horizontal accountability and electoral competitiveness, consistent with the post-2012 downward slope and the post-2021 plunges captured in the V-Dem indices (V-Dem Institute, 2024a, 2024b).

Notably, these reversals occurred despite sustained European engagement: Tunisia received among the highest levels of EU support per capita after 2011, the EU and Tunisia signed a "comprehensive partnership" memorandum in 2023, and the EU disbursed €150 million in budget support in *March* 2024 – illustrating that substantial external assistance can coincide with domestic autocratization (Carnegie Endowment, 2021; European Parliament Research Service, 2023; Reuters, 2024; ECFR, 2023).

For these reasons, characterizing Tunisia as a successful case of democratization – and especially attributing that success, already flattered by delta-based calibration, to the EU – is difficult. Despite the positive delta, the path since 2012 – and especially since 2021 – has been monotonically downward, with negative peaks that align with executive aggrandizement and institutional unravelling following a decade of real but fragile pluralism (Freedom House, 2015; V-Dem Institute, 2024a, 2024b).

Conditions

The literature review reveals a broad array of empirical studies and theoretical approaches addressing democratization and autocratization processes, which are diverse and, at times, competing. The variables – or conditions – identified reflect the complexity of these phenomena, encompassing a range of factors informed by distinct theoretical frameworks as well as multiple layers of analysis. Given this diversity of explanations, selecting the most relevant conditions is a challenging process of elimination. I have undertaken this selection through an iterative approach, both deductive – applying theoretical insights – and inductive, incorporating empirical evidence. This aligns with Schneider and Wagemann's (2003) argument that neither purely deductive nor purely inductive methods are generally sufficient to address research puzzles in the social sciences, whereas a combination of both provides a stronger foundation for causal inference.

The identified conditions are divided into two categories: proximate conditions, which are closer to the outcome, more agency-oriented, and more malleable AND structural conditions – contextual factors that are more challenging to influence and, in some cases, endogenous. Within this framework, my two hypothesis conditions – *EU_Membership* and *EU_Partnership* – which are central to the research design and to the subsequent QCA analysis, are presented at the beginning of the section.

Proximate Conditions

EUMEM

As highlighted in the literature, EU accession negotiations represent a distinctive case in which external pressure fosters substantial democratization, enabled by the EU's unique capacity to guide these countries through voluntary compliance (Møller & Skaaning 2023; Kitschelt et al. 1999; Vachudova 2005). Accordingly, "EU Membership" is the first of two critical conditions in this analysis, each corresponding to a hypothesis aimed at examining the EU's role in counteracting autocratization. This condition is based on the proximity of a candidate country to achieving EU membership. To assess a country's progress in EU accession, I begin with the structured model comprising 12 stages, reflecting the phases of EU enlargement as defined by Gadeva (2015). This model delineates the progressive steps a candidate country must complete, starting from the initial indication of potential EU membership to the attainment of full membership. Each stage is defined by specific agreements, commitments, and procedural benchmarks that collectively track the candidate's gradual integration into the EU framework.

I adapted Gadeva's model into a 10-step process towards EU membership, better aligning with the advancement levels of my units of analysis. The process begins with the EU offering a membership perspective (Step 1), signaling that the country has the potential for integration. This is followed by the signing of an Association Agreement or a Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (Step 2), which serves as a formal framework for guiding reforms. Step 3 involves identification as a potential candidate, followed by the EU granting official candidate status in Step 4, formally recognizing the country as a contender for membership. This status allows the initiation of accession negotiations (Step 5), typically marked by the first intergovernmental conference (Step 6). Negotiations then break down into chapters, each covering specific policy areas, followed by the screening process (Steps 7 and 8).

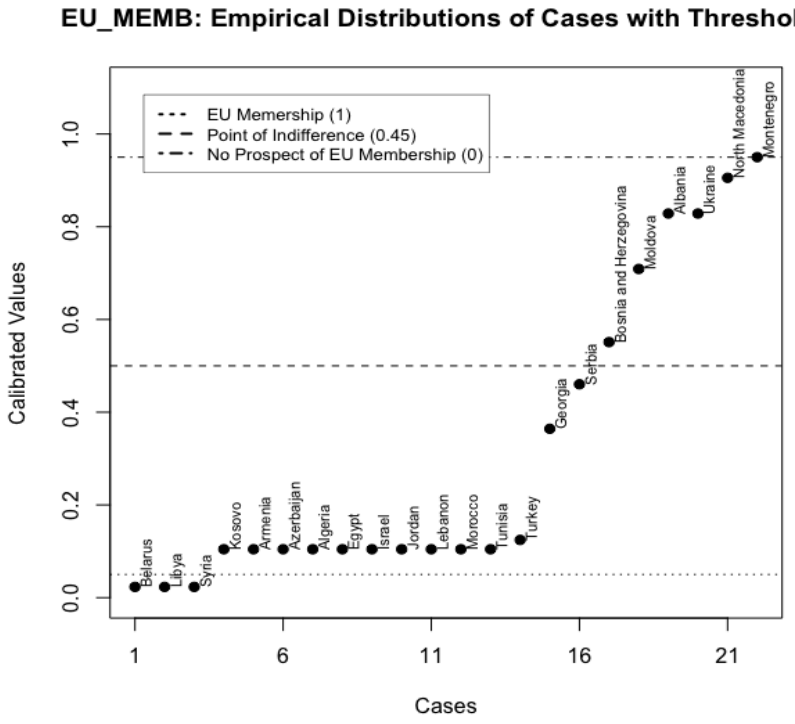
When both parties are satisfied with the progress in each area, they provisionally close that chapter (Step 9), marking a step forward in alignment. At this stage, the candidate reaffirms its commitment through a credible membership pledge, signaling readiness for final negotiations. Finally, the EU and the candidate finalize the accession terms, culminating in the signing of an accession treaty (Step 10), which defines the terms of membership.

Calibration Strategy

Applying this 10-step model, the condition *EU Membership* is calibrated to measure a country's position within the set of candidates with a credible prospect of EU accession. A score of 0 represents exclusion from the European integration process, while a score of 1 indicates the closest proximity to obtaining membership. Clearly, a country's mere placement along the path toward EU accession is not fully indicative of its actual closeness to membership. Not only are the steps completed critical for this condition, but also the dynamics of the process, which serve to distinguish between countries progressing steadily and those experiencing stagnation. In the latter case, even the attainment of an advanced step may not imply an imminent membership perspective, thus requiring a proportional adjustment of the membership score. To account for the effect of time and the fluidity of the process, for countries that have reached the crossover point, the index has been adjusted according to the following considerations:

- If a country has remained at the last step reached on the scale, without achieving new key milestones as identified in the 10-steps process, for at least 3 years (as of 2025), its final score will be reduced by 50%
- If a country has remained at the last step reached on the scale, without achieving new key milestones as identified in the 10-steps process, for at least 9 years (as of 2025), its final score will be reduced by 75%

Following Schwarz's approach (2016), and in order to avoid cases falling precisely at the point of maximum ambiguity, the crossover point was set at 0.45 – between the granting of candidate country status (Step 4) and the start of accession negotiations (Step 5) – signifying "a very public act of commitment" to comprehensive institutional reforms that closely align the candidate with EU norms and standards (Mattli & Plümper, 2002).



Skewness checks: Cases > 0.5 / Total number of cases: 6 / 22 = 27.27 %
Cases on crossover point: no cases with fuzzy−set scores of 0.5.

EUPART

The condition *EU Partnership* seeks to encompass the European Union's investments – both economic and social – in partner countries. I created an index reflecting the distribution of EU investments across neighboring countries, specifically through programs that aim to promote democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. These programs, detailed in the literature review's procedural section, are intended to foster political stability while aligning neighboring regions more closely with EU standards and values. Key financial instruments supporting these objectives include the various phases of the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA I, II, and III), the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI), the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI), and the Neighbourhood, Development, and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI), which together address Euro-Mediterranean and Eastern European partnership needs. Additionally, the European Endowment for Democracy (EED) provides targeted support for civil society and democratic initiatives in these regions and the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) promotes democracy, human rights, and the rule of law globally.

Calibration Strategy

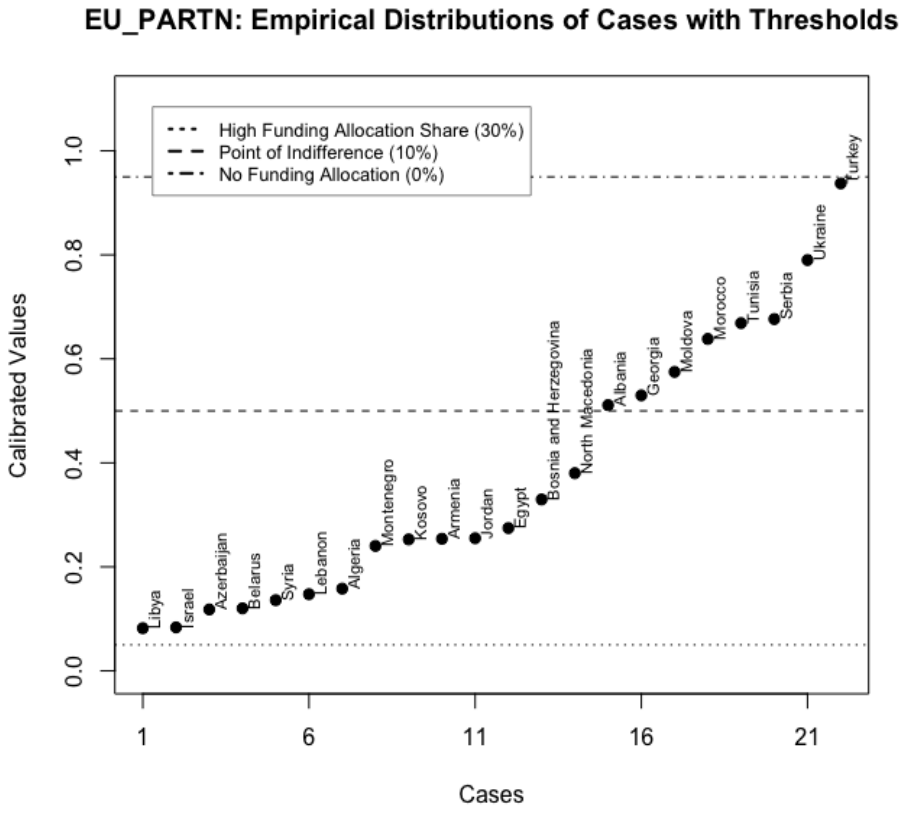
I considered the share of aid allocated to each investment program, in proportion to the total EU contribution for that program. This approach will ensure that the investment share directed to each country is represented as a percentage of the EU's overall package. In other works, EU financial aid has been calibrated as a percentage of the recipient countries' GDP (Cernat 2006; Jano 2010). However, for

this analysis – given the focus on assessing the EU's impact on democratization – I find more appropriate to adopt the perspective of EU programs, aiming to identify which target countries received the largest share of funds (as a percentage of each program) to assess whether this targeting has a measurable impact on democratic quality in the countries which were mostly prioritized in terms of funds allocation. While working on the index with actual data, I also decided to take into account the different monetary impacts of each program, as they varied significantly in absolute values. I found it reasonable to reflect the difference in weight of the various programs in the percentage division. To do this – while maintaining the European perspective as the main ration behind the index construction, associating the percentage of each program with each country – the total percentage of funds allocated to each program was calculated using a weighted average with a weight of 25%, based on the absolute values of each program. In this way, while the perspective remains focused on the EU distribution of each program to each country, there is a partial weighting that also takes into account the difference in the programs in terms of absolute values, ensuring a more accurate representation of the actual distribution of funds across the neighboring countries.

Cases	**IPA I**	**IPA II**	**IPA III**	**ENPI**	**ENI**	**NDICI**	**EIDHR**	**EED**	**mean**	**weighted mean**
Albania	7.42%	5.39%	19,58%				1.69%	6,62%	8,14	10.3
BiH	7.98%	5.39%	10,64%				3.92%	6,62%	6,91	7.59
Montenegro	2.58%	3.63%	8,97%				2.92%	6,62%	4,94	6.09
North Macedonia	4.92%	6.34%	13,78%				1.25%	6,62%	6,58	8.34
Serbia	15.65%	23.47%	16,66%				8.54%	6,62%	14,19	15,01
Turkey	53.15%	48.52%	22,98%				17.96%	6,62%	29,85	28,38
Kosovo	8.15%	8.92%	7,39%				3.74%	2,31%	6,1	6,32
Ukraine				39.61%	13.77%	58.03%	4.77%	2,31%	23,7	19
Georgia				17.82%	30.16%	13.21%	3.92%	2,31%	13,48	10,81
Moldova				22.07%	30.16%	11.79%	6.29%	2,31%	14,52	12,05
Armenia				11.08%	12.55%	8.16%	5.46%	2,31%	7,91	6,34
Azerbaijan				5.64%	6.92%	2.33%	2.54%	2,31%	3,95	3,17
Belarus				3.71%	6.48%	6.48%	1.21%	2,31%	4,04	3,24
Algeria				7.31%	4.18%	11.28%	1.75%	2,31%	5,37	4,32
Egypt				20.10%	13.38%	3.15%	2.61%	2,31%	8,31	6,7
Israel				0.26%	0.26%	0.26%	7.32%	3,53%	2,33	1,87
Jordan				11.76%	13.38%	5.97%	4.79%	3,53%	7,89	6,36
Lebanon				7.74%	7.74%	3.48%	2.60%	3,53%	5,02	4,04
Libya				1.66%	1.74%	4.26%	0	3,53%	2,24	1,8
Morocco				28.56%	24.79%	24.79%	4.18%	3,53%	17,17	13,86
Syria				7.15%	6.19%	6.19%	0	3,53%	4,61	3,72
Tunisia				15.47%	28.18%	40.66%	3.92%	3,53%	18,35	14,77

The choice of anchors – set at 0, 10 and 30 – is justified by the empirical distribution of the cases: the highest value for recipients is Turkey (28.38%). The point of indifference was set at 10%, considering the 11 programs (11, as the ENPI, ENI, and NDICI programs are effectively "doubled," with funds allocated separately for the EaP and MENA regions) and the fact that they are divided among different numbers of recipients, amounting to a total of 110 fund dislocations, distributed across 11 programs.

The result is that, if each country received an equal percentage of the total funding distribution, each would receive 10% of the total dislocations.



Skewness checks: Cases > 0.5 / Total number of cases: 8 / 22 = 36.36 %
Cases on crossover point: no cases with fuzzy−set scores of 0.5.

POWERSHARING

Despite a few notable exceptions (Tóka, 1997; Markowski, 2001), the strength and configuration of domestic Institutional settings are widely recognized as critical determinants of democratization, as they shape the distribution and exercise of power within political systems (Fish, 2006; Carothers, 2006; Mainwaring et al., 2005). Dahlum (2018) argues that while economic development can foster democratization, its impact is mediated by the strength and nature of domestic institutions. In line with this, Acemoglu and Robinson (2006) contend that institutional structures, rather than economic factors alone, play a decisive role in managing elite-citizen relations and determining whether democratization or repression prevails. Wunsch and Blanchard (2023) highlight the importance of electoral integrity, competitive politics, and institutional checks on executive power in safeguarding democratic systems. Similarly, Rød et al. (2020) demonstrate that political systems concentrating power in the executive are more vulnerable to autocratization. The structure, functioning, and degree of polarization within party systems are also essential variables in explaining democratic resilience, particularly in young democracies (Passarelli, 2022). A recurring theme in the literature is that political systems that concentrate power in the executive branch are a significant predictor of autocratization. As Fich (2002) notes, “the best predictor of democratic backsliding is a political system that concentrates power in the

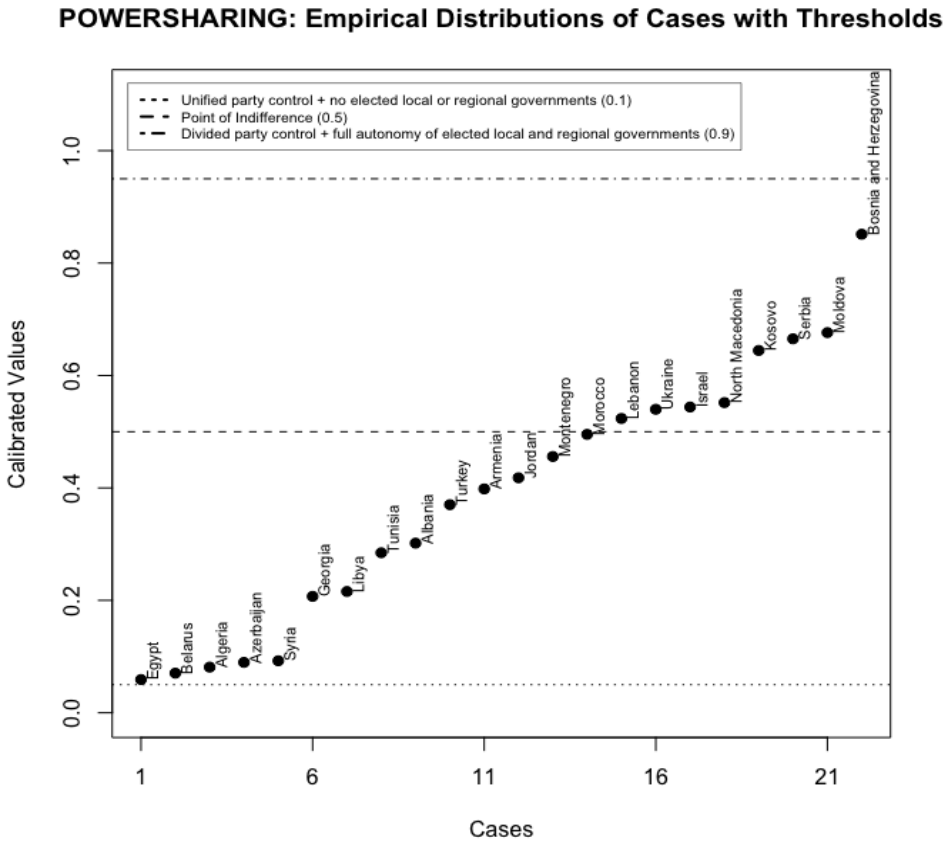
chief executive," suggesting that fragmented or imbalanced party systems often precede autocratization, while the dispersion of political power fosters democratic stability and state governability (Anderson et al., 2002; Roeder, 2002; Mainwaring & Scully, 1995; Enyedi, 2016).

It is important to emphasize that most of the literature examined on the significance of political systems primarily focuses on Central and Eastern Europe and Latin America. This underscores the valuable and innovative contribution that incorporating this condition into comparative studies of ENP countries could offer to the field.

Calibration Strategy

Data Source: Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project

The Powerharing condition, calibrated based on the Divided Party Control Index (v2x_divparctrl) and the Division of Power Index (v2x_feduni), effectively captures key elements of power-sharing systems in democratic governance. These indices are built on and provide a valuable alternative to Arend Lijphart's two dimensions of consensus versus majoritarian democracy. While these new indices are conceptually narrower and not direct substitutes for Lijphart's original concepts, they serve an important function in measuring the distribution of power. The Divided Party Control Index measures the extent to which the executive and legislative branches are controlled by different political parties. Higher values indicate greater division of power, where multiple political forces must collaborate and compromise to govern. This ensures that no single party can dominate, fostering negotiation and inclusivity. The Division of Power Index, in contrast, evaluates decentralization by assessing the autonomy of local and regional governments. Higher scores indicate that these governments can operate without undue interference from unelected bodies. Together, these two indicators allow *C3_powersharing* to capture both horizontal power-sharing among political parties and vertical power-sharing across different levels of government, providing a practical means of evaluating how power is distributed and shared in my units of analysis. The two indicators were indexed through simple mean into a single value, and the direct method of calibration was applied, with the following anchors: full membership > 0.9 (indicating divided party control and full autonomy of elected local and regional governments); point of indifference = 0.5; and full non-membership < 0.1 (indicating unified party control and no elected local or regional governments or complete subordination to unelected bodies).



Skewness checks: *Cases > 0.5 / Total number of cases: 8 / 22 = 36.36 %"*
Cases on crossover point: *no cases with fuzzy−set scores of 0.5.*

GOVERNMENTAL EFFECTIVENESS

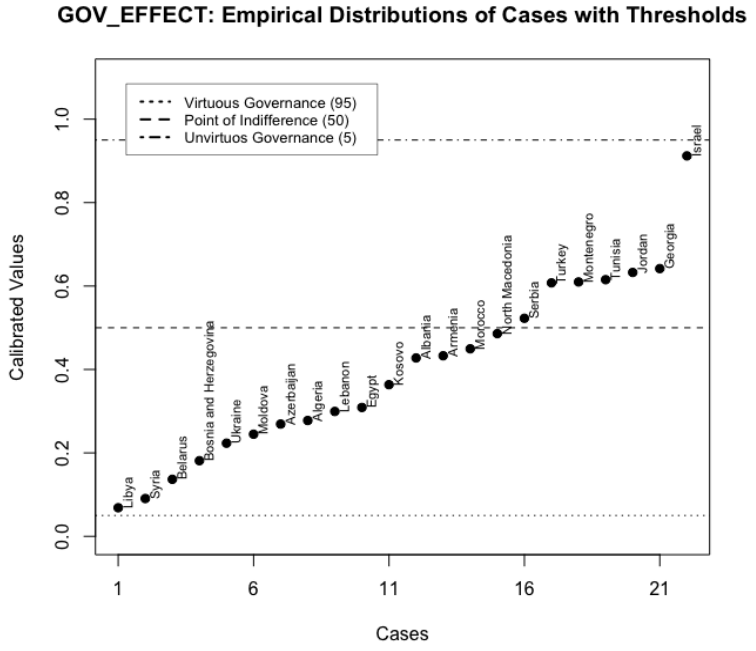
As highlighted in the literature review (Ansell and Samuels, 2015; Collier, 1999; Džihić and Wieser, 2011; Keil, 2018; Direkli and Ashiekh, 2022), government effectiveness – serving as a proxy for both good practices and elite quality – is a crucial factor in democratization studies, particularly within the ENP regions, where elites dominate the domestic political landscape and negotiate the scope of reforms with the EU. Specifically, the success of democratization in post-conflict and transitional regions largely depends on how ruling elites engage with external actors. These elites may manipulate reforms to preserve their power, selectively adopting democratic norms to satisfy international donors without implementing genuine institutional change. This elite-driven approach underscores that, in the absence of high-quality elites – those committed to political accountability and institutional independence – democratic reforms are likely to remain superficial (Grimm and Weiffen, 2018; Barnett and Zürcher, 2009). Furthermore, acknowledging the importance of elite quality helps address a critical gap in the literature: the need for a more nuanced analysis of the interaction between external actors and domestic elites in recipient countries. While EU initiatives are often perceived as unilateral interventions, the reality on the ground is profoundly shaped by the constellation of preferences among domestic actors.

Calibration Strategy

Data Source: Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI)

The condition is operationalized using the Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) Government Effectiveness index. Following Richter and Wunsch (2019, p. 53), this indicator is used as a proxy for elite quality and state capacity, particularly in contexts characterized by state capture and stabilitocratic tendencies. It aggregates perceptions of: (i) the quality and efficiency of public services; (ii) the professionalism and autonomy of the civil service from political pressures; (iii) the capacity of governments to formulate and implement sound policies; and (iv) the credibility of the state's commitment to those policies over time. As such, it should be interpreted as a measure of bureaucratic and administrative capacity, rather than of regime type or democratic performance. This distinction is crucial to understanding why countries with very different political regimes or democratic trajectories – such as Israel, Tunisia, or Georgia – may fall into similar categories in the analysis. The WGI indicator captures how effectively governments operate, not how democratically they are structured. For instance, a country may display relatively high administrative capacity (e.g., efficient public services, coherent policy implementation) despite experiencing democratic erosion or institutional contestation, while another may be formally democratic but characterized by weak state capacity and fragmented governance. In other words, the indicator abstracts from regime characteristics and focuses instead on state performance and policy delivery.

Within the context of this study, governmental effectiveness is therefore used as a proxy for elite quality and state capacity, which are theorized to shape how domestic actors interact with EU conditionality. High effectiveness suggests the presence of administrative structures capable of absorbing, coordinating, and implementing reforms promoted by the EU, whereas low effectiveness signals a greater likelihood of selective compliance, reform capture, or implementation gaps. This helps explain why the variable is analytically relevant even when countries with different political profiles appear grouped together: what matters here is not their level of democracy, but their capacity to translate external incentives into concrete policy outcomes. The calibration of the Government Effectiveness Indicator was performed using the direct method, with thresholds set at 5, 50, and 95.



Skewness checks: Cases > 0.5 / Total number of cases: 7 / 22 = 31.82 %
Cases on crossover point: no cases with fuzzy−set scores of 0.5.

Structural Conditions

DEVE

The literature review highlights that, despite critiques, modernization theory remains a leading approach in democratization studies (Przeworski et al., 2000; Rød et al., 2020; Teorell, 2010; Huntington, 1991; O'Donnell, 1973). *Economic Development* – measured using the World Bank's GDP per capita adjusted for purchasing power parity – is a key condition for explaining democratic advancement, as it shapes the socio-political landscape essential for democratic transitions and resilience against autocratization. As initially proposed by Lipset (1959), modernization theory posits that economic development fosters democratic stability by building social structures and civic institutions that support participatory governance (Przeworski et al., 2000). Economic prosperity elevates education levels, reduces poverty, and strengthens civil society, enhancing citizens' autonomy and political engagement while lowering the risks of political disenfranchisement and instability.

Calibration Strategy

Data Source: World Bank (GNI per capita)

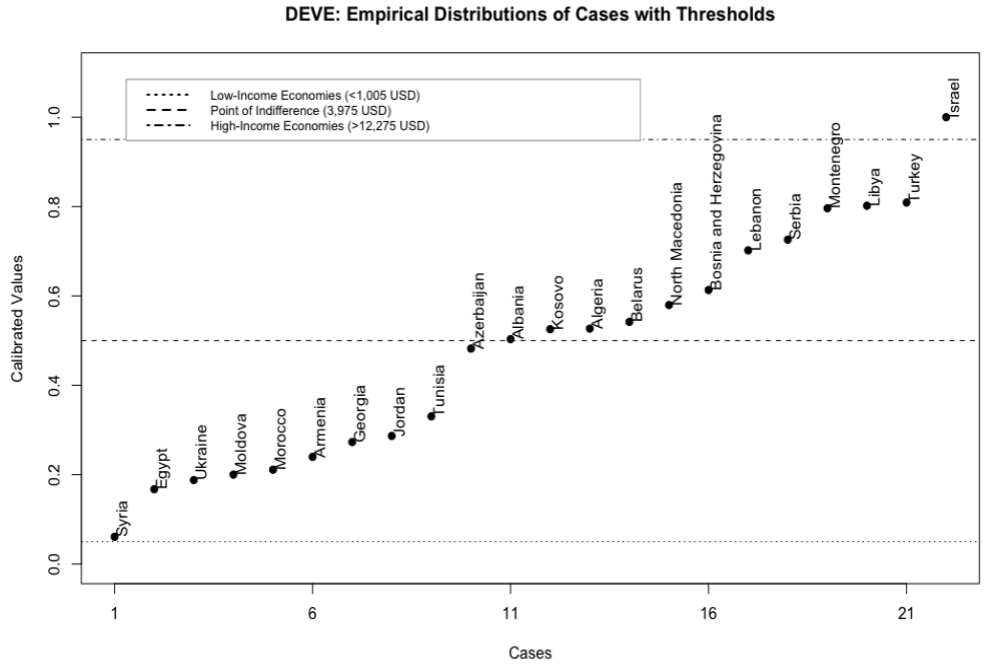
The calibration for the economic development condition (C1_deve) is performed using the World Bank's gross national income (GNI) per capita data – the total income earned by residents of a country, including income earned abroad, adjusted for inflation and differences in living costs between countries and divided by population. The direct method of calibration is applied, defining three key thresholds for economic development based on the World Bank's country classifications by income level. These classifications rely on Atlas GNI per capita and are widely used in comparative political economy as a standardized proxy for economic capacity and structural development.

Rather than calibrating the condition using the empirical distribution of the cases in the dataset, the calibration relies on externally defined thresholds. This choice is motivated by the need to anchor set membership in substantively meaningful benchmarks rather than sample-specific distributions, which may vary depending on the selection of countries and years included in the analysis. Using the World Bank's global classifications ensures greater comparability across cases and avoids calibration results that would be sensitive to the particular composition of the sample. While this approach may group countries with different political or regional characteristics within the same income category, the classification reflects comparable levels of structural economic capacity, which is the theoretical dimension captured by the modernization argument.

The thresholds set by the World Bank vary slightly from year to year. I have chosen the criteria established by the World Bank in 2010/2011, as this period lies at the center of the time frame of my analysis. Considering that the GNI value was calculated based on an average for each year, using the WB's 2011 classification for my analysis period allows me to obtain a more credible picture of the country classifications over a time span of more than 20 years.

- *Full Membership*: Countries with a GDP per capita greater than 12,275 USD are considered to have full membership in this condition. These are high-income economies.
- *Point of Indifference*: The threshold between full membership and full non-membership is set at 3,975 USD. This is the point of maximum ambiguity, distinguishing between lower middle-income and upper middle-income economies.
- *Full Non-Membership*: Countries with a GDP per capita less than 1,005 USD are considered fully non-members, reflecting low-income economies.

The calibration process transforms these raw GDP per capita values into fuzzy set membership scores, with 0 representing full non-membership (low-income) and 1 representing full membership (high-income).



Skewness checks: Cases > 0.5 / Total number of cases: 12 / 22 = 54.55 %
Cases on crossover point: no cases with fuzzy−set scores of 0.5.

EQUALITY

Similarly, *Economic Equality* – measured through income distribution via the GINI index – emerges as a crucial structural factor influencing democratization quality (Boix & Stokes, 2003; Acemoglu & Robinson, 2005; Rød et al., 2020; Merkel, 2018; Stephens & Stephens, 1992). High inequality tends to impede democratization, as elites resist redistributive pressures to maintain their positions, blocking reforms that could empower lower socio-economic groups. In contrast, moderate inequality can fuel democratic movements by enabling marginalized groups to mobilize and demand political inclusion. Inequality shapes democratization by influencing elite incentives to either resist or embrace democratic concessions: under extreme inequality, elites often prefer repression over democratization to protect their substantial interests.

Integrating economic development with lower levels of inequality (i.e., more equal resource distribution) as core conditions for democratization bolsters democratic stability and mitigates

autocratic pressures by aligning the interests of diverse social groups in support of inclusive governance. This socio-economic balance is essential for building resilient democratization processes that can withstand autocratic threats, reducing elite capture and supporting the collective actions necessary for democratic consolidation.

Calibration Strategy

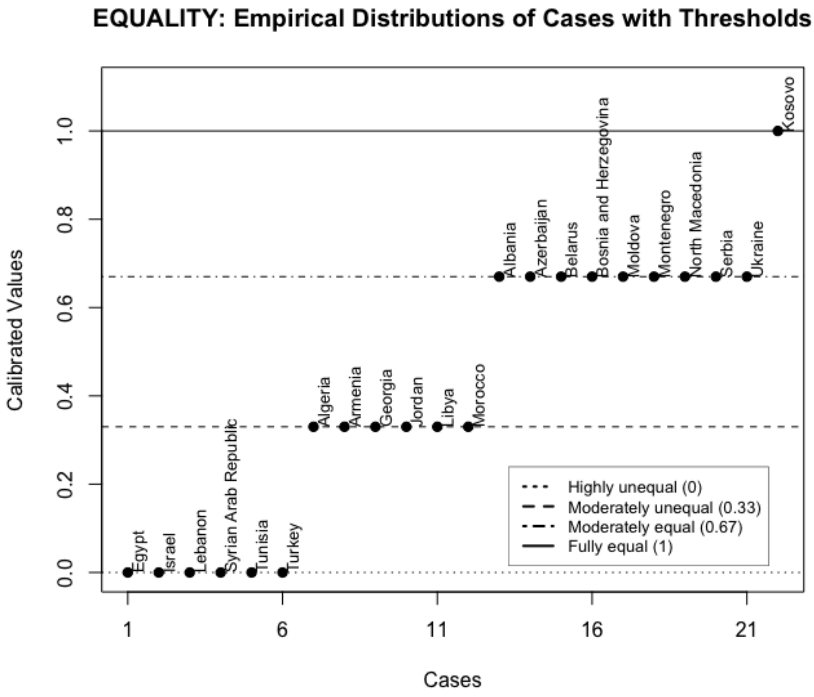
Data Source: World Inequality Database (WID)

The calibration of the economic inequality condition is grounded in the distribution of wealth and income within a society, with particular emphasis on the concentration of wealth among the top deciles, and is conducted using theoretical criteria. The threshold for high inequality is informed by Thomas Piketty's definition of societies with extreme wealth concentration, where the top 10% of wealth holders control 60–70% or more of a country's total wealth. Similarly, high inequality is identified when the richest 10% control over 50% of total income, and the top 1% account for more than 20% of income. Building on this framework – and considering existing disparities in the distribution of cases – the calibration process categorizes countries based on their income and wealth distribution, with a specific focus on the income share of the top 10% (P90), the top 1% (P99), and the wealth share of the top 10% (P90 of wealth).

Based on these criteria, the fuzzy set INEQ is calibrated such that higher membership scores indicate lower levels of inequality (i.e., more equal societies), according to the following thresholds:

- *Highly Unequal*: Countries exhibiting extreme inequality, where either the top 10% (P90) controls more than 50% of the income and the top 1% (P99) controls more than 20% of the income, or the top 10% (P90 of wealth) holds more than 64% of the wealth. These conditions indicate significant concentration of wealth and income, representing the highest level of inequality. Membership score: 0.
- *Moderately Unequal*: Countries with intermediate levels of inequality, where the top 10% (P90) controls between 40-50% of the income, or the top 10% (P90 of wealth) holds between 60-64% of the wealth. These cases show considerable inequality but are not at the extreme level. Membership score: 0.33.
- *Moderately Equal*: Countries where inequality is relatively low, with the top 10% (P90) controlling between 35-40% of the income, or the top 10% of wealth holders controlling between 50-60% of the wealth. These societies exhibit a fairer distribution of wealth and income, though some degree of inequality persists. Membership threshold: 0.66.
- *Equal*: Countries that exhibit low inequality, where the top 10% (P90) controls less than 35% of the income, the top 1% (P99) controls less than 15% of the income, and the top 10% (P90 of wealth) holds less than 40% of the wealth. These countries show a more equitable distribution of resources, with relatively little concentration of wealth or income among the elite. Membership score: 1.

The fuzzy set values for these categories are calculated based on the aforementioned income and wealth share thresholds, with countries assigned a membership score between 0 (high inequality) and 1 (low inequality). Intermediate values are assigned to reflect countries with moderate inequality levels.



Skewness checks: Cases > 0.5 / Total number of cases: 10 / 22 = 45.45 %
Cases on crossover point: no cases with fuzzy-set scores of 0.5.

ETHNO

Ethnically diverse societies are often considered less conducive to long-term democratization than more homogeneous ones (Fish, 2002; Horowitz, 1985). Diskin et al. (2005) find that countries with deep or parallel social cleavages – or both – are more prone to democratic collapse than those with low or cross-cutting cleavages. Similarly, Rabushka and Shepsle (1972) argue that in ethnically diverse, or "plural," societies, democratic stability is undermined as political competition frequently hinges on ethnic loyalties. This focus fosters factionalism, political outbidding, and exclusionary practices that erode democratic norms. Such intense ethnic rivalry complicates coalition-building, rendering democratic governance fragile and susceptible to authoritarian interventions. Consequently, social and ethno-linguistic divisions, alongside complex ethno-nationalistic dynamics within democracies, emerge as critical factors in political instability and social conflict, explaining significant variations in democratic performance across societies (Džihić & Wieser, 2011; Freyburg & Richter, 2010).

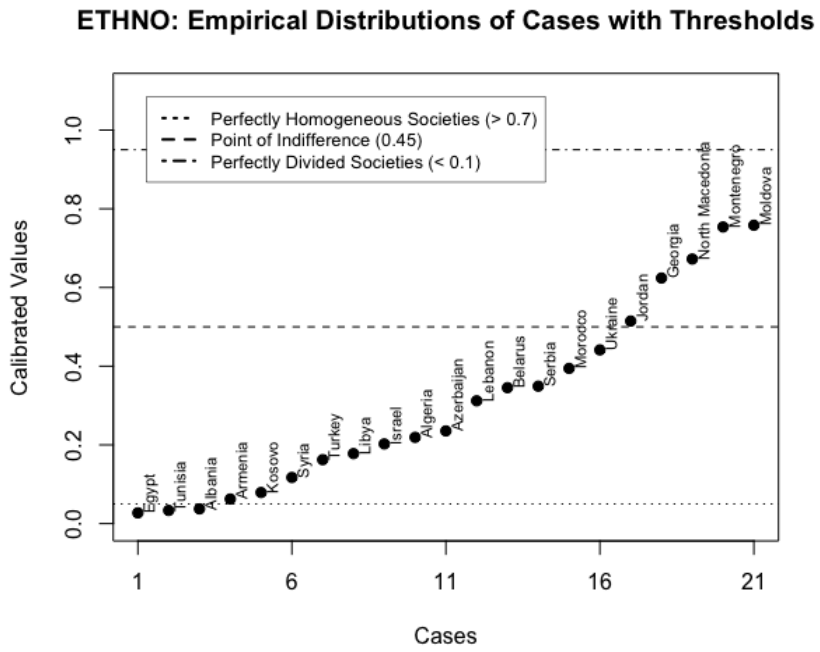
Calibration Strategy

Data Source: Ethnolinguistic Fractionalization (ELF) Index

The calibration of ethnolinguistic fractionalization in this study follows the direct method of calibration, based on the ELF Index, by Roeder (2001) through the Taylor and Hudson formula, ranging from 0 to 1, where 0 signifies a perfectly homogeneous society and 1 represents a perfectly divided society. This approach is designed to measure the probability of two randomly selected people not belonging to the same ethnolinguistic group, quantifying the degree of ethnic and linguistic heterogeneity within a given society between 1965 and 1988, fitting well with the structural nature of this condition in my study.

Regarding the missing data for Serbia, Kosovo, and Montenegro in the dataset publicly available, the necessary information was obtained directly through correspondence with Philip G. Roeder. The missing ELF data were derived from the census data of the respective constituent republics within Yugoslavia. The variation in the ELF index over time for Montenegro is primarily attributed to the decreasing proportion of individuals identifying *as* Montenegrins and the concurrent rise in the proportions identifying as Serbs or Yugoslavs. The reasons for these shifts – whether due to migration patterns or changing patterns of self-identification in response to census-taking – remain unclear.

The direct method of calibration was used, with the following anchors, based on significant gaps in the distribution of cases: full membership > 0.7 (indicating perfectly homogeneous societies); point of indifference = 0.45; and full non-membership < 0.1 (indicating perfectly divided societies).



Skewness checks: Cases > 0.5 / Total number of cases: 6 / 22 = 27.27%
Cases on crossover point: no cases with fuzzy−set scores of 0.5.

FREEDOM FROM AUTOCRATS

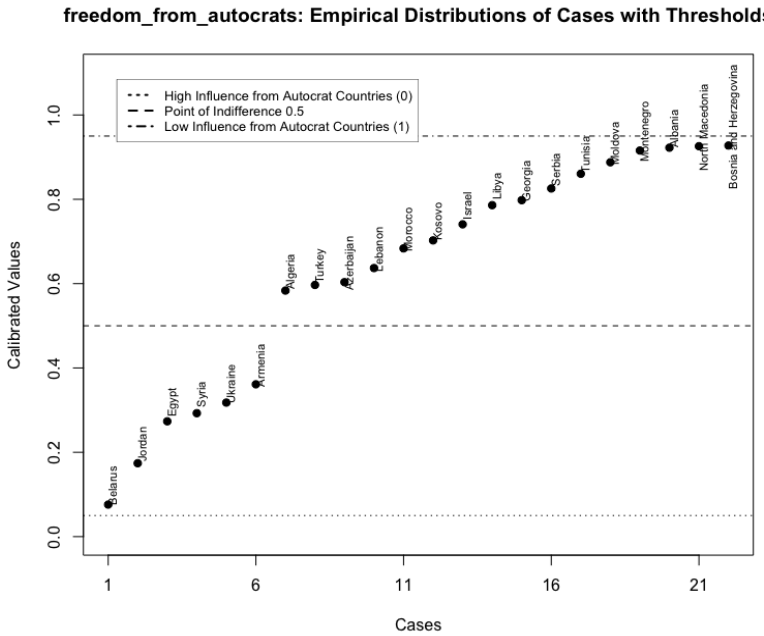
Incorporating International Influence as a factor in democratization is crucial. The specific structure of the international system and the strategies employed by great powers in relation to smaller countries play a key role in either promoting or hindering democratic transitions (Boix, 2011). Great powers can deliberately promote democracy and help foster domestic consent for it (Whitehead, 1996; Schmitz & Sell, 1999; Rueschemeyer et al., 1992). International influences manifest in distinct and varied forms of support for democratic development and serve as an explanatory condition, especially during the consolidation phase (Schmitz & Sell, 1999), particularly in post-conflict scenarios (Grimm & Weiffen, 2018). Power dynamics, however, appear to exert effective pressure on democratization when accompanied by a high density of linkages to the hegemon in one or more of the five dimensions of linkage identified by Levitsky and Way: economic, geopolitical, social, communication, and transnational civil society linkages (2005). The ways in which the influence of great powers has been operationalized in the literature vary greatly, presenting a range of institutional factors spanning from

informal channels of information exchange to more comprehensive frameworks of cooperation, including foreign aid (Bueno de Mesquita & Smith, 2009; Carothers, 2000).

Calibration Strategy

Data Source: The Formal Bilateral Influence Capacity Index (FBIC)

The condition *freedom_from_autocrats* was constructed based on the FBIC Index, which measures the capacity of one country to influence another based on two main factors. First, it considers the level of interaction between the two countries across key areas such as economic, political, and security dimensions. This interaction provides opportunities for influence to take place. Second, the index assesses the degree to which one country depends on the other for important aspects of prosperity or security. The more reliant a country is on another, the more likely the dominant country is able to influence its decisions (Moyer et al., 2024). The FBIC Index ranges from 0 to 1, where 0 indicates no influence and 1 indicates the maximum possible influence observed between two countries since 1960. The dataset was filtered to focus on two groups of countries: *countrya* (the influence "senders"), which includes countries classified as electoral or closed autocracies according to the categorization from V-DEM's *Regimes of the World Index* (Lührmann, Tannenberg, & Lindberg, 2018), and *countryb*, comprising the units of analysis (the "receivers" of influence). The mean of the index was calculated for each combination of countries in *countrya* and *countryb*, and summed for each *countryb*, creating a new variable representing the level of influence that autocratic countries exert on the countries in *countryb*. Finally, the values were inverted to create the *freedom_from_autocrats* condition, where higher values indicate less influence from autocracies. This transformation assigns a value of 1 to countries with no autocratic influence and values closer to 0 for those heavily influenced by autocratic powers. *freedom_from_autocrats* was then calibrated using the direct method of calibration, with thresholds set at 0, 0.5, and 1, reflecting varying degrees of freedom from autocratic influence.



Skewness checks: Cases > 0.5 / Total number of cases: 16/22 = 72.73%
Cases on crossover point: no cases with fuzzy−set scores of 0.5.

The Time Management

The time variation is a crucial aspect of this QCA research design, particularly in my case, given the numerous conditions under consideration, the very different qualities they aim to measure, and the study's focus on testing a hypothesis regarding the relationship between two specific conditions – *EU_Membership* and *EU_Partnership* – and the outcome. A carefully selected temporal framework enables a more refined attempt to isolate, within the limits of QCA, the effects of these two focal conditions. This does not imply a higher causal relevance of these conditions but rather allows for maximizing the discernible impact they may exert on the outcome.

For this purpose, the measurement of all conditions and sub-dimensions of the outcome is anchored to two distinct points in time: *t-1* and *t*. The point *t-1* is defined *as* the year in which each country enters a formalized relationship with the European Union that includes explicit commitments on democracy, the rule of law, and human rights – such as Stabilisation and Association Agreements, Association Agreements, or accession-related frameworks. This definition applies to both enlargement countries and ENP countries, thereby ensuring comparability across cases regardless of the presence or absence of a membership perspective. The point *t* corresponds to the most recent year available at the time of data collection (2024). By examining the variation across these points, this approach aims to provide a temporally contextualized understanding of the effect of the two key conditions within the broader set, isolating the analysis of my cases from the moment the "EU factor" comes into play. This temporal selection enhances the rigor of causal interpretations related to the hypothesis while acknowledging the contextual factors that may influence generalization across cases. This means that all conditions were calibrated as the mean value of interest at *t-1* and *t* – thus varying on a case-by-case basis – to capture the specific period during which the country first came into contact with the EU.

The only exception pertains to the outcome, which followed a more specific process to capture the nuanced and fluctuating nature of democratic quality variation over time. This approach aimed to take into consideration any potential peaks and troughs within the considered time frame, thereby offering a more comprehensive view of the country's democratic trajectory throughout the analysis period, rather than focusing solely on the beginning and ending years. This method was employed to avoid ambiguous cases of quality enhancement that could result by ignoring internal fluctuations within the time frame, potentially leading to biased final deltas. To address this issue, I calculated the yearly deltas – for both the overall outcome of the Quality of Democracy and its three sub-dimensions (*Polyarchy*, *Rule of Law*, and *Gender*). These deltas were computed year by year for each index and country. They were then summed to indicate the overall trend, accounting for fluctuations in each individual year, including both peaks and declines, to provide an approximation of the overall trend in the resulting values.

The Analysis

Once completed the calibration phase, the analysis proceeds by evaluating whether any single condition consistently appears whenever the outcome is observed, thus indicating necessity. In set-theoretic terms, a condition qualifies as necessary if its membership values are always equal to or exceed those of the outcome across all cases. The next phase assesses sufficiency: whether specific configurations of conditions reliably produce the outcome. A condition or combination thereof is deemed sufficient when its membership score does not surpass that of the outcome for any case under review.

To facilitate this assessment, the calibrated data are transformed into a truth table – an instrument that systematically records all logically possible combinations of causal conditions. Unlike conventional data matrices, the rows in this table represent theoretical configurations rather than empirical cases. The number of potential configurations equals 2 raised to the number of conditions under study. Logical minimization of the truth table follows, allowing for the identification and exclusion of redundant or irrelevant factors.

The result of this process is a simplified solution formula (or set of formulas) representing causal pathways linked to the outcome. These results are then evaluated in terms of their empirical robustness using two key metrics: *consistency*, which reflects the extent to which the identified conditions meet the criteria of necessity or sufficiency, and *coverage*, which measures the explanatory power of the solution in relation to the observed outcome.

Based on the literature on democratization and EU external democracy promotion, the directional expectations guiding this QCA assume that EU membership incentives (EU_MEM) and EU partnership investments (EU_PART) are positively associated with improvements in democratic quality. The expectations for the remaining conditions – extensively discussed in Chapter I – are less deterministic and are treated as context-dependent, as their effect is expected to vary depending on the specific configurations in which they appear alongside other factors. Accordingly, no directional expectations are imposed on these conditions in the construction of the intermediate solution.

I initially intended to conduct a two-step QCA, which I believed was well aligned with the objectives of my research and with my preferred research design. Following the updated two-step QCA protocol (Schneider 2019), I therefore began – after completing the calibration step – with an analysis of necessity. This phase sought to identify individually necessary conditions or disjunctions (conditions linked by a logical OR) of SUIN conditions – that is, sufficient but unnecessary parts of a factor that is insufficient yet necessary for the outcome – in order to single out remote conditions for the second step. I then proceeded to analyse the SUIN conditions. In this phase I identified a SUIN superset that met the established thresholds for consistency and non-triviality, namely *~deve + equality + gov_effectiveness* with 0.910 (inclN), 0.624 (RoN) and 0.756 (covN). Despite satisfying these technical criteria, the disjunction lacked substantive significance because its individual components could not be interpreted as functional equivalents of a higher-order necessary condition (Oana et al. 2021). This requirement – the presence of an overarching concept that serves as an umbrella under which the conditions are interchangeable functional equivalents – is indispensable for judging a combination of SUIN conditions to be necessary. Having identified neither individually necessary conditions nor combinations of SUIN conditions that were both non-trivial and substantively meaningful, I was compelled to abandon my initial plan of employing a two-step QCA and instead adopted a traditional QCA.

The Analysis of Sufficiency

The main rationale behind my initial decision to pursue a two-step QCA was the possibility of including a higher number of conditions. In a standard QCA, a large number of conditions can lead to a high number of logical remainders - truth table rows without corresponding empirical evidence - since each additional condition expands the truth table, thereby reducing the number of empirical cases per row and resulting in fewer populated rows. This, in turn, creates problems of limited diversity (Mello, 2021). For this reason, the number of conditions must be proportionate to the number of cases. In my case - based on 22 cases - the ideal number of conditions is five, with the possibility of extending to six, though this would risk encountering problems of limited diversity (Marx and Dusa, 2011).

In selecting the appropriate combination of conditions for the outcome variable *Quality of Democracy*, I was required to make a number of methodological choices. Foremost among these was the necessity of including the two EU-related conditions – *EU_partnership* and *EU_membership* – as these are central to my two research hypotheses. Consequently, these two conditions were treated as fixed elements in all configurations.

With these two conditions held constant, I systematically generated all possible combinations comprising either five or six total conditions. This entailed rotating the remaining six available conditions into the remaining three or four slots, depending on whether the combination in question included five or six total conditions. Through this process, I examined a total of 35 distinct combinations of conditions: 20 combinations involved analyses with five conditions, and 15 involved analyses with six.

To clarify the rationale behind this selection process, it is important to briefly recall the conceptual basis of a sufficiency analysis within the framework of set-theoretic methods. A condition is considered sufficient for an outcome when all cases displaying that condition also display the outcome; that is, there must be no empirical instance in which the condition is present but the outcome is absent. The objective of a sufficiency analysis is to identify the minimal configurations of conditions that are sufficient to produce a given outcome (Dusa, 2019). These configurations consist of what are known as INUS conditions, i.e. conditions that are insufficient but necessary components of a configuration that is itself unnecessary but sufficient for the outcome.

Each resulting solution formula may include both individually sufficient conditions and combinations of INUS conditions. These are represented using the logical operators AND (*) and OR (+), which denote, respectively, conjunctural and disjunctural relationships among conditions. Each solution is evaluated on two key metrics: *consistency and coverage.*

Consistency measures the degree to which the empirical evidence supports the set-theoretic assertion of sufficiency. Consistency values of 0.75 or higher are generally considered acceptable indicators of a reliable causal relationship (Schneider & Rohlfing, 2014; Ragin, 2008).

Coverage, on the other hand, refers to the empirical relevance of a given solution. It measures the proportion of cases with the outcome that are accounted for by the condition(s) in the configuration, thus reflecting the explanatory power of the solution.

Among the 35 analyses conducted, I retained only those solution formulas that met or exceeded the threshold value of 0.75 for both consistency and coverage. Additionally, I prioritized the selection of configurations based on five conditions rather than six, in order to mitigate the risk associated with

limited diversity. Finally, from among the filtered solution formulas, I selected as the final model the one that featured the presence (or absence) of my two hypothesis-driven conditions – *EU_partnership* and *EU_membership* – in the greatest number of configurations. This choice was driven by the aim of capturing the widest possible variance in my conditions of interest across different configurational spectra, in order to examine their causal relevance within a diverse range of causal pathways. The final choice fell on a relatively high inclusion threshold (incl.cut = 0.85) which – beyond the rationale discussed above – reflects a trade-off between empirical coverage and configurational consistency. While this choice may appear restrictive, and a lower threshold could indeed allow the inclusion of a broader range of conditions, the QCA literature generally recommends higher consistency thresholds to ensure that identified configurations display a strong subset relation with the outcome, thereby enhancing the reliability of sufficiency claims. Lowering the threshold would increase coverage but also risk incorporating empirically inconsistent or weakly supported configurations, ultimately weakening the interpretability of the solution. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that more restrictive thresholds may reduce diversity and raise potential concerns about omitted conditions. For this reason, the chosen threshold should be interpreted as a conservative specification, aimed at prioritizing consistency over inclusiveness, in line with the set-theoretic emphasis on identifying robust subset relations rather than estimating net effects.

The results are presented in the following tables.

Solution type[5]	*Conditions/Cases explained*	*Unexplained cases*	*Intrusive cases*	*Consistency*	*Raw and*	*Unique coverage*
conditions = c("deve", "equality", "powersharing", "eu_partn", "eu_member") *incl.cut = 0.85*		*Armenia, Libya*	*Azerbaijan, Montenegro, Israel, Lebanon, Serbia*			
Parsimonious solution	**M1:** ~deve*equality + ~deve*eu_partn + ~powersharing*eu_member + powersharing*~eu_member -> QOD_total			0.788	0.761	
1. ~deve*equality	Ukraine, Moldova		Azerbaijan	0.876	0.498	0.037
2. ~deve*eu_partn	Morocco, Georgia, Tunisia, Ukraine, Moldova			0.918	0.594	0.088
3. ~powersharing*eu_member	Albania		Montenegro	0.888	0.364	0.026
4. powersharing*~eu_member	Kosovo		Israel, Lebanon, Serbia	0.799	0.438	0.057
Intermediate solution	**M1**: ~deve*equality + ~deve*eu_partn +deve*powersharing*~eu_member + equality*~powersharing*eu_member -> QOD_total			0.793	0.744	
1. ~deve*equality	Cf. parsimonious solution n° 1			0.876	0.498	0.043
2. ~deve*eu_partn	Cf. the parsimonious solution n° 2			0.918	0.594	0.115
3. ~powersharing*eu_member***equality**	Cf. the parsimonious solution n° 3			0.909	0.318	0.026
4. powersharing*~eu_member***deve**	Cf. the parsimonious solution n° 4			0.786	0.376	0.050
Conservative solution	**M1:** deve*equality*powersharing*~eu_member + deve*equality* ~powersharing*eu_member + deve*powersharing*~eu_partn*~eu_member +~deve*~equality*~powersharing*eu_partn*~eu_member +~deve*equality *~powersharing*~eu_partn*~eu_member + ~deve*equality *powersharing *eu_partn*eu_member -> QOD_total			0.807	0.698	
1.1 ~deve*equality***powersharing*eu_partn*eu_member**	Cf. parsimonious solution n° 1		/	0.953	0.302	0.061
1.2 ~deve*equality***~powersharing*~eu_partn*~eu_mem**	/	Cf. parsimonious solution n° 1		0.851	0.327	0.037
2. ~deve*eu_partn***~equality*~powershar*~eu_memb**	Tunisia, Georgia		Morocco	0.933	0.400	0.101
3. ~powersharing*eu_member***deve*equality**	Cf. parsimonious solution n° 3			0.892	0.263	0.029
4. powersharing*~eu_member***deve*equality**	Kosovo		Serbia	0.894	0.282	0.000
5. deve*powersharing*~eu_partn*~eu_member	Kosovo		Israel, Lebanon	0.870	0.373	0.044

[5] **Bold**: *condition present in the intermediate solution but absent from the parsimonious solution.*
Bold and underlined: *condition present in the conservative solution but absent from both the parsimonious and intermediate solutions*

	1	2	3	4
	Low-income based QOD improvement		*EU accession prospect and high concentration of power driven QOD improvement*	*No EU accession prospect and high division of power driven QOD improvement*
DEVE *Development* (high-income, low-income economies)	⊗	⊗	•	•
EQUALITY *Economic Equality* (equal, moderately unequal, highly Unequal)	●	⊗	•	•
POWERSHARING *Concentration of Power* (divided party control and full autonomy of elected governments, unified party control and no elected local or regional governments)	•	⊗	⊗	●
EU_PARTN *EU Partnership* (high, low share of EU dislocation of investments)	•	●		
EU_MEMBER *EU Membership* (signing an accession treaty, offering a membership perspective)	•	⊗	●	⊗
Consistency	0.876	0.918	0.888	0.799
Raw coverage	0.498	0.594	0.364	0.438
Unique coverage	0.037	0.088	0.026	0.057
Solution consistency	0.788			
Solution coverage	0.761			

●/• Core/contributory condition present

⊗/⊗ Core/contributory condition absent

Discussion

The results of this analysis carry several insights that merit deeper examination and reflection.

Firstly, the analysis reveals that the EU's ability to shape the democratic trajectory of its neighboring countries is not monolithic but rather exhibits a variety of patterns. This diversity in outcomes suggests that there are multiple ways through which the EU can impact democracy, depending on the specific configuration of conditions within a given context. In other words, the EU's influence is not uniform but varies according to different factors, such as the political structure of the country, its economic status, and its relationship with the EU.

Secondly, the results underscore the necessity of a configurational approach to understanding the variation in the quality of democracy across different cases. No single condition derived from the existing literature emerged as individually sufficient to explain even moderate improvements in democratic quality across the 22 cases under consideration. This finding challenges some traditional views, already noted in the Literature Review, which suggest that isolated factors, such as economic development or political equality, can independently drive democratization. Instead, the analysis highlights the importance of combinations of conditions. When these factors are present together, they provide a much more compelling and sufficient explanation for the observed improvements in democratic quality. Remarkably, these combinations account for over 75% of the cases in which a positive democratic outcome was achieved, demonstrating the power of interconnected factors in shaping democratic outcomes. This is consistent with the distinct nature of fuzzy-set analysis, which, unlike statistical methods that focus on co-variation and the average net effects of individual variables, emphasizes the set-theoretic relationships of sufficiency. Rather than isolating the effects of individual explanatory conditions, fuzzy-set analysis is focused on identifying the specific causal combinations or paths that lead to the outcomes.

Finally, the results of the fuzzy-set analysis largely support my initial hypothesis, with one notable exception – which I will discuss shortly – introducing additional complexity to the ongoing discourse regarding the EU's role in fostering democracy beyond its borders.

The analysis yielded four solution formulas, which I have synthesized into three, due to the presence of two solutions that are both formed by a conjunction of two conditions and share the absence of development in common. From this convergence, I have consolidated the results into three possible paths toward Quality Enhancement, each containing the presence (or absence) of one of my two hypothesized conditions within the configurations, regarded as core contributors and therefore present in the parsimonious solution.

Path 1: Low-income based QOD improvement

This first path captures two distinct conditions: the absence of development (~DEVE) and the presence of high levels of equality (EQUALITY), or alternatively, the absence of development and high EU partnership investment (EU_PARTN). This path is then particularly relevant for low- and middle-income countries. In the context of modernization theory, economic development is considered a key driver of democratization, often equating higher levels of economic growth with democratic transitions. However, in this path, the sufficiency analysis suggests that countries with low economic development but relatively high levels of equality (moderately or highly equal societies) still manage to experience significant improvements in QOD, as seen in Ukraine and Moldova. These countries exemplify that higher levels of economic equality can offset the lack of economic development, providing a solid ground for democratic quality enhancement. This resonates with the critique of traditional modernization theory seen in the literature review, which has been challenged by scholars arguing that democracy does not necessarily follow a linear trajectory linked to economic development. Indeed, equality, especially in its social and economic forms, can play a pivotal role in fostering democratic institutions, as visible in the case of countries where social equality leads to more participatory political cultures and better governance outcomes. The importance of economic equality as a precursor to democratic stability is emphasized in the literature, where scholars have observed that societies with more equitable distribution of wealth and opportunities often experience more sustained democratic processes. This challenges the conventional wisdom of modernization theory, suggesting that equality can sometimes compensate for the lack of economic development in contributing to democratization.

The second configuration of the path, where low levels of development appear in conjunction with high levels of EU investment, holds significant importance in the literature on EU external democratization efforts. The sufficiency of this pathway suggests that even in the absence of initial economic development, high levels of EU engagement can significantly bolster democratic quality. This is evident not only in the cases of Ukraine and Moldova – which share both configurations of the path – but also in Morocco, Georgia, and Tunisia, thus broadening the geographical impact of this combination. These countries, which represent radically different socio-cultural contexts within low-income economies, demonstrate that the presence of high EU partnership investment has had a noticeable effect on improving the quality of democracy, even when these nations were not economically advanced. This aligns with the EU partnership model, which suggests that external support and integration into the EU's political and economic sphere can promote democratic consolidation even in economies that are not yet fully developed.

The implication of the EU_PARTNERSHIP condition does not necessarily undermine modernization theory. In fact, the impact of European partnership in less developed countries may provide a greater boost to democratization than in more developed nations. This differential allocation of resources could result in a redistribution of political power, leading to an initial improvement in the quality of democracy.

It is beyond the scope of this analysis to assess whether this initial boost in democratic quality will persist as these countries reach higher levels of development or if the effect will diminish over time. However, it appears that in cases where high levels of EU financial support coincide with advanced development, democratic stagnation often occurs. This suggests that while EU investments may initially stimulate democratic progress, the long-term sustainability of such gains remains uncertain, as their effect may diminish over time. This is evident in the case of Turkey, which, despite receiving significant EU investments, also exhibits high levels of development and has experienced considerable democratic recession. Similarly, albeit to a lesser extent, Serbia – an upper-middle-income country – also demonstrates moderate democratic regression, despite having one of the highest levels of EU partnership. These examples further highlight the complexity of EU external democratization efforts and underscore the potential limitations of such interventions in upper-middle- and high-income countries.

Path 2: EU accession prospect and high concentration of power driven QOD improvement

The results of the second path (~powersharing * eu_member) and of the third path (powersharing * ~eu_member), presents an interesting intersection of theoretical arguments related to democratization and powersharing. Powersharing, in the context of ethnically or politically divided societies, is often seen as a mechanism to ensure stability by fostering cooperation among different groups. However, it can also create a more fragmented and less efficient political system, which may impede the development of democratic institutions. This theoretical tension is reflected in the findings, as the absence of powersharing in this path is associated with higher democratic quality. The absence of powersharing could imply a more centralized and potentially more pragmatic form of governance, where decision-making is not dispersed across multiple political or ethnic factions. Such a configuration may allow for more coherent and decisive stances, in terms of reforms, active responses and international dialogue. This observation also aligns with the modernization theory, which posits that democratic consolidation is more likely to occur in systems where centralized governance can be achieved, as it potentially facilitates stronger institutional development and a clearer path to democratic

norms (Lipset, 1959). On the other hand, powersharing arrangements are often seen as necessary in deeply divided societies to prevent conflict and to ensure broad political participation. The positive association with EU membership, as seen in this analysis, reinforces the idea that EU conditionality and the accession process promote democratic values. The EU's role as a "normative power" is central here, as EU membership incentivizes candidate countries to undertake significant democratic reforms, particularly in governance, the rule of law, and human rights. This process, as Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2004) argue, includes the use of conditionality as a mechanism for promoting democratic change. The combination of the absence of powersharing and EU membership in the path thus suggests that the EU may have a particularly strong effect in enhancing the Quality of Democracy when it is able to work with countries that do not rely on powersharing to maintain political stability. This is perhaps indicative of the fact that the EU's enlargement policy better aligns with more centralized democratic systems, where governance is more direct and thus potentially more conducive to the implementation of EU standards. The literature also suggests that the EU's democracy promotion strategies are more successful in states with relatively strong central political institutions that can more readily implement democratic reforms (Vachudova, 2005). A paradigmatic example of this path – further examined as a case study in Chapter 5 – is Albania, where strong EU membership incentives, in conjunction with limited power-sharing, have been associated with substantive effects on the country's democratic quality. Indeed, this path's findings resonate with broader debates about the EU's effectiveness in promoting democracy in its neighborhood, particularly in the context of EU enlargement. The EU's enlargement process has long been understood as a tool of democratization, especially for post-communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe. The absence of powersharing in this context suggests that in certain cases, EU conditionality works more effectively when a country does not have to navigate the complexities of power-sharing arrangements, which can complicate or slow down the reform process.

Path 3: No EU accession prospect and high division of power driven QOD improvement

The third path (~eu_member * powersharing), which combines high levels of power-sharing with no prospects for EU membership, presents an intriguing case where, despite the absence of EU incentives, the conjunction of these conditions leads to an enhancement in the quality of democracy. This configuration challenges the findings of the second path, where the absence of power-sharing combined with EU membership was associated with improved democratic outcomes. The positive results observed in this third path suggest that, in certain contexts, power-sharing arrangements may play a crucial role in fostering democratic quality, even without the external pressures of EU membership. Power-sharing mechanisms, as the literature indicates, are often essential for the initial establishment of democratic systems, particularly in post-conflict societies or ethnically divided states. These arrangements can facilitate the peaceful coexistence of different political or ethnic groups, thus supporting the transition to a democratic regime (Hartzell & Hoddie, 2020; Lijphart, 1977; Bormann, 2014). More importantly, studies suggest that power-sharing is not just a temporary stabilizing measure but can be linked to the development of more comprehensive democratic principles, including political equality, freedom, and effective governance (Norris, 2008). In fact, power-sharing institutions, by ensuring inclusive decision-making, can enhance the quality of political representation, which is a critical component of high-quality democracy (Roberts, 2009).

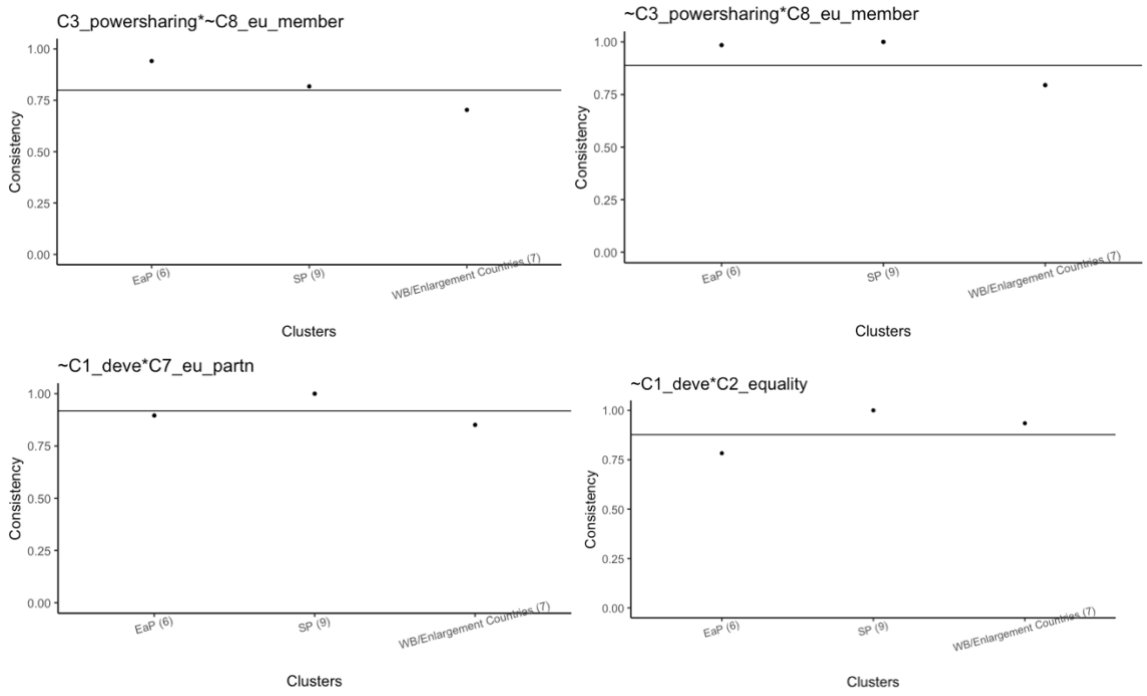
The key distinction here is that while power-sharing may initially create a more fragmented political landscape, it also enhances the legitimacy of the democratic process by involving a broader array of political actors. This, in turn, strengthens the political system's responsiveness to diverse societal needs and challenges, though it may compromise the government's ability to implement decisions effectively

–an ability that could be crucial for advancing in the EU admission process. The literature on power-sharing suggests that while these systems may present challenges in terms of efficiency, they can also promote more accountable governance by ensuring that all key groups have a stake in decision-making. Even in the absence of EU accession prospects, these arrangements can lead to substantial improvements in the quality of governance, especially if the political elites are committed to making power-sharing work as a means of fostering social cohesion and long-term democratic stability. In this sense, the third path's positive outcome reflects the idea that power-sharing can contribute to the quality of democracy not merely by fulfilling the minimum democratic standards but by enhancing democratic values such as freedom, political equality, and the capacity for effective governance (Diamond & Morlino, 2004; Lauth, 2016). Despite the absence of EU membership, which typically provides strong external incentives for democratization, the internal dynamics fostered by inclusive governance in power-sharing systems can still lead to meaningful democratic enhancement.

Robustness Check and Cluster Diagnostic

To assess the robustness of my findings, I conducted a sensitivity analysis (using the commands *rob.inclrange* and *rob.ncutrange* from the SetMethods package) to determine the range of raw consistency thresholds and frequency cutoffs for truth table rows within which the Boolean formula of the sufficient solution remains stable. The results indicate that the identified solution is somewhat sensitive to parameter changes. Specifically, the Boolean formula remains unchanged when the raw consistency threshold is set between 0.85 and 0.87, and when the frequency cutoff is fixed at two cases.

Consequently, given the high geographical variation among my 22 cases, I created a regional variable to identify potential geographic clusters. Due to pronounced geographic differences, there was a risk that my solution formula might not be representative or could be strongly clustered along geographic subgroups. To address this concern, clustering diagnostic tools are useful to verify "whether the sufficiency pattern is stable across the different clusters in the data and whether pooling the data is a sound analytical strategy" (Oana et al., 2021). I proceed creating three geographic subgroups between my countries, namely Western Balkans and other Enlargement Countries (Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Kosovo, Albania and Turkey); Eastern Partners (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine), and Southern Partners (Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Syria and Tunisia). The cluster diagnostic tool reports the *pooled* and the *between consistency*, i.e. the consistency of the solution formula and each of its terms for the entire pooled dataset and the consistency of the solution within each cluster.



The consistency distance measure ("From Between to Pooled") is relatively small, with a maximum variation of 0.14 and generally remaining within the range of ±0.1. This suggests that there are no significant deviations from the pooled solution across the regional subgroups. Examination of the plotted graphs confirms this observation, showing that, overall, the consistency values for individual regions are comparable to those of the pooled consistency. Overall, the explanatory strength of three out of four solution terms appears slightly weaker for the Western Balkans and Enlargement countries region, except for the second solution term (~DEVE*EQUALITY), which appears less representative for the Eastern Partners countries.

Finally, examining the between coverage values to assess the clustered empirical coverage of each solution term, no cluster exhibits consistently low coverage across all terms, thus indicating no cause for concern regarding geographical clustering.

EU_Partnership and EU_Membership: A Configurational Overview

After analyzing the overall outcome of the Quality of Democracy (*QOD_total*), I then examined in greater detail its three subdimensions: *QOD_polyarchy*, *QOD_gender*, and *QOD_RoL*, along with other potential solution formulas emerging from combinations of different conditions. This further analysis was primarily intended to explore how the two conditions of interest - *EU_Partnership* and *EU_Membership* - interact configurationally with both remote and proximate conditions. Additionally, the objective was to identify whether any recurrent patterns or significant differences emerged across the subdimensions in terms of these interactions.

To this end, I once again considered the full set of 35 possible combinations of conditions, conducting a separate sufficiency analysis for each individual outcome. The solution terms obtained were filtered using less stringent thresholds than those applied in the selection of the solution formula for *QOD_total*. This methodological choice was justified by the different objective pursued in this phase of the research:

rather than establishing causal inference per se, the focus here was on identifying general tendencies and recurrent configurational paths.

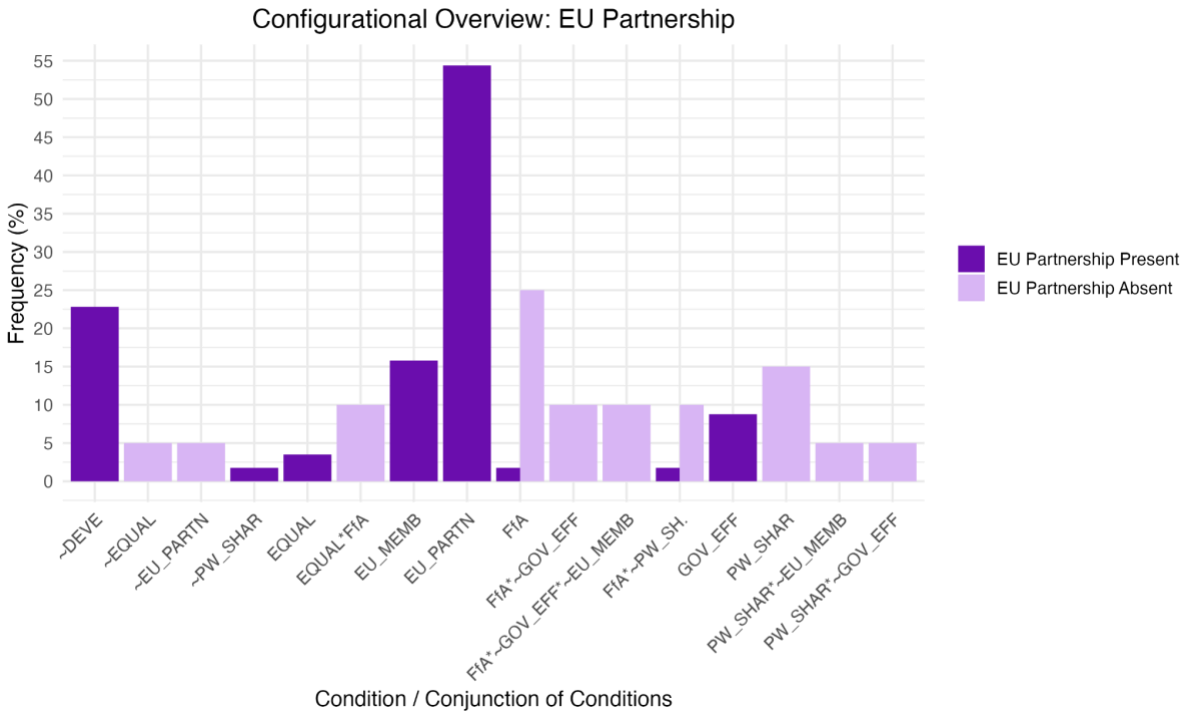
Specifically, I adopted a minimum threshold of 0.70 for both consistency and coverage as the criterion for including solution terms - slightly more permissive than the thresholds previously employed. This approach yielded approximately ninety configurations in total, roughly thirty for each subdimension of the outcome.

Beyond the general patterns concerning the frequency of individual conditions, my main interest lay in understanding how the two hypothesized conditions were configurationally arranged in relation to the other conditions, and how frequently these configurations occurred. To address this question, I disaggregated the solution formulas by separating the conjunctions connected through the logical OR operator (+). I then isolated only those solution terms that included at least one of the two conditions of interest - *EU_Partnership* or *EU_Membership* - or their negations.

Subsequently, I retained only the solution terms that featured at least one of these two conditions, whether in isolation or in combination with others. This procedure enabled me to examine the frequency with which *EU_Partnership* and *EU_Membership* appeared alone or in combination with other conditions in configurations associated with an increase in each of the three subdimensions of democratic quality. The first figure presents data across all three subdimensions together, offering a synthetic overview of the general trend.

To facilitate interpretation, it is important to clarify how the following figures should be read. Each bar represents the frequency with which a given condition appears across the configurations included in a specific solution (parsimonious, intermediate, or conservative), rather than the number of cases in which the condition is present. Frequencies are reported in relative terms, but absolute counts are also indicated where relevant to enhance transparency. These figures therefore summarize the configurational relevance of conditions, not their standalone effect. Each solution corresponds to a set of configurations identified through the fsQCA analysis; the number of configurations and the empirical cases covered by each solution are reported in the accompanying tables. The figures should thus be interpreted in conjunction with the solution formulas, as they provide a synthetic overview of how frequently specific conditions contribute to the configurations associated with the outcome.

EU_Partnership Overview: Analysis



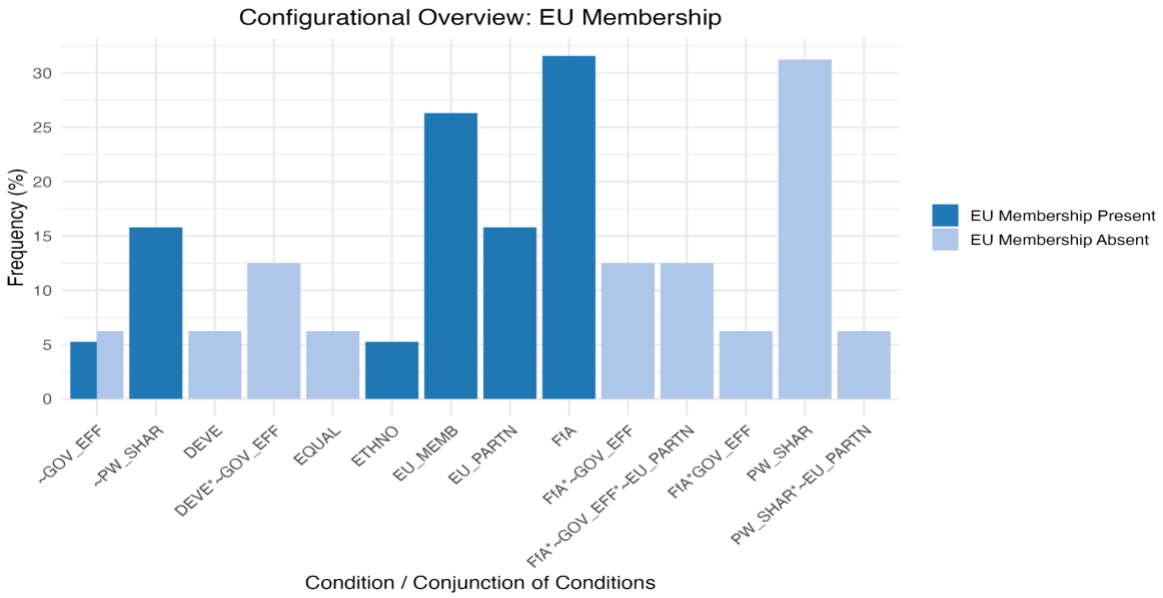
The first bar chart illustrates the interactions between the presence or absence of the EU_Partnership condition and other remote and proximate conditions, which were part of a configuration within the solution formula across all three subdimensions of democratic quality: *QOD_polyarchy***,** *QOD_gender,* and *QOD_Rule of Law.*

It is immediately evident that the presence of EU_Partnership, by itself, is sufficient to exert a positive impact on democratic quality, as it appears independently as a single term in more than 50% of the patterns examined. The most frequent configurations, however, illustrate how the presence of EU_Partnership interacts with other conditions to enhance the outcome. The absence of development (~DEVE) appears in 13 solution formulas, indicating that its interaction with EU_Partnership facilitates significantly the improvement of democratic quality. The frequent occurrence of this conjunction, along with its presence in my solution formula, may contribute to the robustness of the pattern in my analysis. Additionally, the condition of Government Effectiveness **(**GOV_EFF**)** is combined with EU_Partnership in five different configurations, while the conjunction with the other EU-related condition, EU_Membership, appears in 15% of cases. .

One noteworthy finding is the condition Freedom from Autocrats (FfA**)**, which refers to a country's degree of independence from autocratic influence. This condition appears in conjunction with both the presence and, notably, the absence of EU_Partnership (in 25% of the cases), functioning as a factor that positively impacts democratic quality. It is important to note that FfA is the only condition that shows a positive effect when combined with both the presence and absence of EU_Partnership. Furthermore, FfA holds particular significance (appearing in 10% of the cases) when combined with the absence of EU_Partnership, especially when Government Effectiveness is lacking and levels of Equality are high. The single condition that exhibits the most influence when combined with ~EU_Partnership, apart from

FfA, is Power-Sharing (PW_SHAR). It shows a positive effect on democratic quality in configurations where EU_Partnership is absent, and power-sharing mechanisms are strong in 15% of the solution formulas.

EU_Membership Overview: Analysis



The second bar chart focuses on the presence or absence of the EU_Membership condition within the resulting configurations. It is immediately apparent that EU_Membership appears with significant frequency in various configurations, especially when compared to the EU_Partnership condition. EU_Membership influences democratic quality primarily in specific conjunctions, as it appears as a sufficient term by itself in less than 20% of the cases. It contributes positively to several solution terms, particularly when combined with conditions such as FfA (over 30% of the cases), EU_Partnership, and the absence of power-sharing (over 15% each, with the second condition also present in my solution formula).

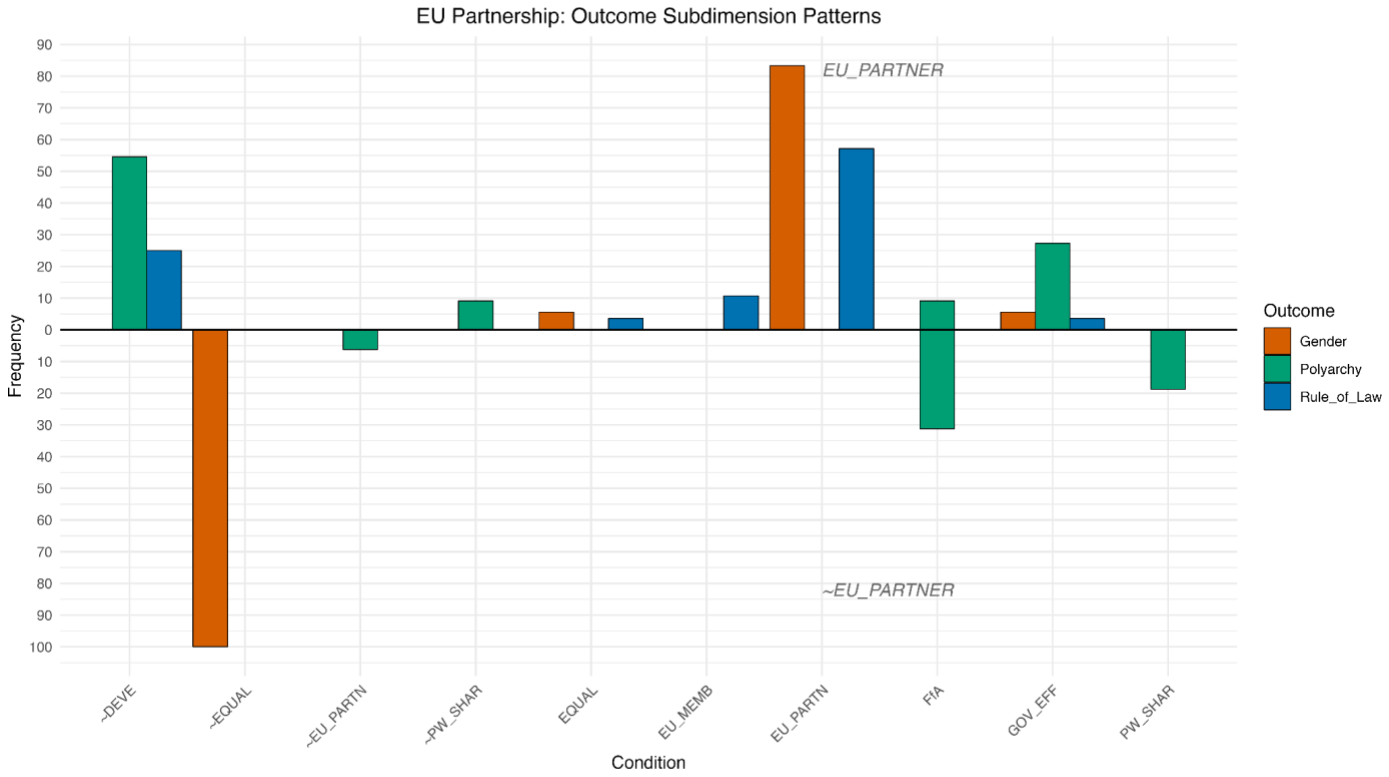
Switching focus to the absence of EU_Membership, the combination with the significantly higher frequency with ~EU_MEMB is the one with PW_SHAR (over 30%) – a combination also present in the solution formula resulting from my QOD analysis, and also present in a three-way conjunction with the absence of EU_Partnership – followed by several conjunctions with at least three conditions, which share as common terms the presence of FfA and the absence (or in one case, presence) of government effectiveness.

A broader overview of how EU_Partnership and EU_Membership interact with other conditions across a wide range of combinations reveals that my solution formula is quite representative of broader patterns, potentially reflecting how the two EU-related conditions influence the quality of democracy. In fact, my three paths are among the most frequent conjunctions and remain consistent even when varying the conditions in different combinations and adjusting the consistency thresholds. The absence of development interacts with both equality and EU_Partnership to enhance democratic quality, which is captured in the first path of my formula. Additionally, the role of the absence of power-sharing in conjunction with EU_Membership, and conversely the absence of EU_Membership combined with a

high level of power-sharing, complements the solution formula's emphasis on the nuanced role of power-sharing as a key determinant of democratic quality.

Subdimension Patterns

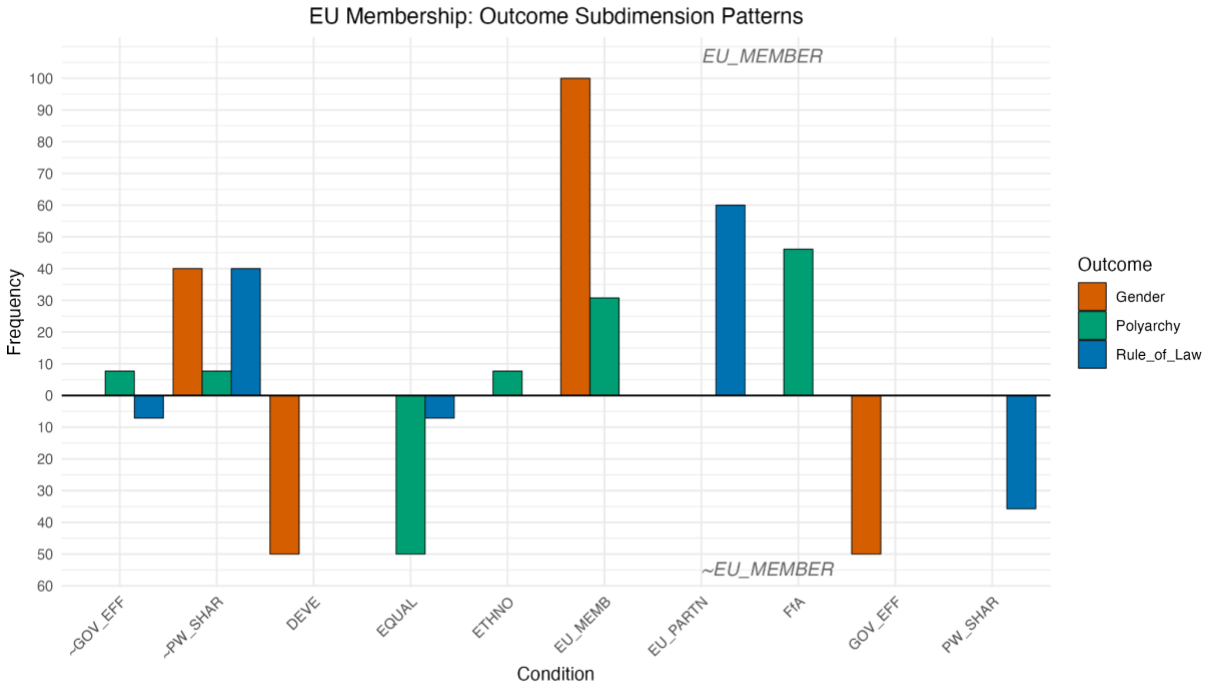
Having first analyzed the full set of configurations without distinguishing among the three subdimensions of the outcome, I subsequently focused on examining the outcome intra-subdimension differences in configurations involving *EU_Partnership* and *EU_Membership*. This step aimed to determine whether these conditions appeared in distinct configurations that were relevant to specific subdimensions. In both graphs, the bars represent the different outcome subdimensions in relation to specific conditions: bars positioned above the x-axis indicate the presence of EU-related conditions within a given configuration, whereas those below the x-axis correspond to configurations where these conditions are absent.



The configurational nature of the condition *EU_Partnership* varies across the subdimensions of the outcome. With regard to *QOD_gender*, in over 80% of cases it appears alone in the solution terms, exerting a decisive influence on this subdimension independently. This indicates that this external linkage likely plays a substantial role in fostering gender equality reforms. However, this interpretation should not be undermined by the 100% frequency of configurations where the *absence* of *EU_Partnership* also appears - when combined with high level of inequality. This figure offers no substantive insight: the high relative frequency is simply due to the fact that only one case in the dataset included the absence of *EU_Partnership* in conjunction with a positive gender equality outcome. Since the graph is based on relative frequencies, the result appears disproportionately significant but is, in fact, misleading.

In approximately 10% of cases, *EU_Partnership* also appears alone in configurations leading to enhanced *QOD_RoL*. However, this subdimension seems more frequently influenced by *EU_Partnership* when it is combined with other conditions, for instance with the *absence of development* (over 20%) and, more notably, with high levels of FfA.

EU_Partnership does not appear as a key standalone condition for *QOD_polyarchy*, suggesting that its presence is likely a less decisive factor in improving electoral competitiveness or civil liberties. It becomes relevant, however, when: (1) combined with the absence of development (over 50%); (2) associated with high levels of governance efficiency (around 30%); (3) in conjunction with FfA (including the cases in which *EU_Membership* is in fact absent); and (4) when *EU_Membership* is absent and power sharing is present at high levels.



The condition *EU_Membership* exhibits varying configurational interplay across the outcome subdimensions. For *QOD_gender*, *EU_Membership* appears as a standalone condition in all configurations where it is present, suggesting a strong and direct role of the EU in advancing gender equality reforms, even when combined with high levels of inequality (40% of cases). However, a positive impact on *QOD_gender* is not exclusive to countries pursuing EU membership, as it is also observed in cases where *EU_Membership* is absent, particularly when combined with high levels of development or governance efficiency, in equal measure. *EU_Membership* alone, and especially in combination with FfA (nearly 50% of cases), emerges as a key condition for enhanced levels of polyarchy. Notably, this outcome is also achieved in configurations where the EU condition is absent, but combined with high levels of equality. Regarding the final outcome subdimension, *QOD_rule_of_law*, *EU_Membership* appears with moderate frequency, often in conjunction with other conditions such as the absence of power sharing, and most importantly, in 60% of cases when combined with the EU-related condition, *EU_partnership*.

Conclusions

The fourth chapter implemented a QCA to model conjunctural causation and allow for equifinal pathways to improvements in democratic quality. The analysis covered the last two decades with a temporal partition that maps onto key geopolitical and institutional shifts. Conditions were calibrated as fuzzy sets, with anchors informed by theory and transparent coding rules. Structural conditions included development/inequality profiles, ethnolinguistic fragmentation, and exposure to autocratic regional influence. Proximate domestic conditions captured the institutionalization of power-sharing constraints and the effectiveness of government – proxies for the capacity of the state to implement complex rule-of-law reforms and the likelihood that watchdog institutions can resist partisan colonization. EU levers were operationalized along two dimensions: membership-anchored conditionality (EU_MEMB), which captures the advancement of a country along the EU membership path, and partnership-based conditionality (EU_PARTN), which captures the percentage of financial investments directed to a country. The outcome – improvement in democratic quality – was measured using a composite derived from established V-DEM indices. Recognizing that the presence and absence of improvement need not be mirror images, the analysis modelled both success and non-success pathways. Within the obtained solution, two EU-relevant routes are salient: one where EU involvement takes the form of membership and one where it takes the form of close partnership short of membership.

Methodologically, the QCA proceeded through calibration; construction of the truth table; extraction of complex, intermediate, and parsimonious solutions; assessment of coverage and consistency; and a suite of robustness checks, including alternative thresholds and frequency cut-offs. Cluster diagnostics probed whether solution terms disproportionately captured particular subregions, thereby helping to interpret geographical contingencies. To guard against overfitting and confirmation bias, the study pre-specified directional expectations and reported contradictory simplifying assumptions where relevant. The configurational approach cannot substitute for process tracing, but it has distinct advantages here: it identifies minimally sufficient combinations, guards against mono-causal claims, and clarifies where the EU's tools are necessary/sufficient complements rather than independent drivers of change. The exercise also clarified where the data exhibit limited diversity, and what that implies for the strength of inference attached to any given pathway.

The comparative-set results point to a clear but plural conclusion: improvements in the quality of democracy among the 22 cases are best explained not by any single determinant but by three configurational pathways that each foreground one of the EU-related conditions while interacting with domestic structures – economic development, equality, and institutional design – in distinct ways; specifically, (1) in lower-income contexts, democratic quality improves when underdevelopment (~DEVE) coexists either with relatively high equality (EQUALITY) or with high EU partnership investment (EU_PARTN); (2) where the prospect of accession is real (EU_MEMB present), gains in democratic quality are associated with a concentration of political authority (the absence of power-sharing, ~POWERSHARING); and (3) in settings without an accession prospect (~EU_MEMB), robust power-sharing institutions (POWERSHARING) can still underpin democratic gains, indicating that inclusive institutional bargains may substitute for external conditionality under certain conditions. These three paths were distilled from an initial universe of 35 model specifications (20 five-condition and 15 six-condition models) in which EU_PARTN and EU_MEMB were held fixed as hypothesis-driven anchors, and solutions were retained only when both consistency and coverage met or exceeded 0.75, ensuring that the selected models were not only logically sufficiency-consistent but also empirically meaningful in their explanatory reach. The decision to abandon a two-step QCA after the

necessity analysis – because neither an individually necessary condition nor a substantively interpretable SUIN disjunction could be identified – reinforces the centrality of sufficiency logic in this domain and cautions against over-aggregating "remote" factors without a defensible higher-order umbrella concept; that adjustment ensured that the resulting solution terms are theoretically interpretable rather than mechanically compliant with thresholds. Sensitivity checks and a cluster diagnostic further support the stability and transportability of the pooled solution: the Boolean formula remains unchanged for raw-consistency thresholds between 0.85 and 0.87 (with a frequency cut-off of two), and cross-regional inspections (Western Balkans/enlargement; Eastern partners; Southern partners) show small between-to-pooled consistency distances (max ≈ 0.14) and no systematic coverage deficits by cluster, suggesting that the three paths are not artefacts of a single geographic subgroup, even if some terms (e.g., ~DEVE*EQUALITY) travel less well to particular regions. Read against supplementary patterning across the outcome's subdimensions (polyarchy, gender, rule of law), the EU-related conditions behave in ways consistent with the pooled model's spirit: EU_PARTN often appears as a stand-alone enhancer – especially for gender equality – yet more commonly exerts influence conjuncturally (notably with ~DEVE and, at times, with Government Effectiveness), while EU_MEMB rarely suffices on its own and most often contributes within packages – frequently alongside Freedom from Autocrats (FfA) or ~POWERSHARING – underscoring how accession incentives work through domestically mediated channels rather than as a simple switch.

CHAPTER 5
CASE STUDIES

Chapter 5 uses case studies to unpack the mechanisms that the QCA has identified only in configurational form. It follows a set-theoretic multimethod research (SMMR) logic, in which the cross-case fsQCA establishes which combinations of conditions are sufficient for democratic improvement, while within-case analysis is used to assess whether the mechanisms implied by those configurations are actually present in concrete cases. Following Schneider and Rohlfing's typology, I first classify all cases vis-à-vis their membership in the sufficient terms and in the outcome, and I use this mapping to guide case selection beyond the mere reporting of a solution formula. I adopt a focused comparative design centred on Georgia and Albania.

The fsQCA identified three main sufficient pathways to democratic improvement. The two cases selected – Georgia and Albania – correspond to two distinct EU-related configurations emerging from the parsimonious solution.

Georgia belongs to the pathway characterized by low development combined with strong EU partnership engagement, formally expressed as:
~DEVE * EU_PARTN → QOD
This configuration captures contexts in which EU investment compensates for structural disadvantages, making Georgia a typical case of this trajectory.

Albania, by contrast, is associated with the pathway in which democratic improvement occurs in the presence of EU membership incentives and limited power-sharing, expressed as:
~POWERSHARING * EU_MEMBER → QOD
Albania represents a deviant-in-degree case along this path, as it displays strong membership in both the relevant sufficient term and the outcome, while introducing meaningful variation in executive concentration.

By selecting one case from each EU-related pathway, the analysis maximizes theoretical leverage: it allows the study to probe the distinct mechanisms through which EU partnership and EU membership operate in different structural contexts, thereby strengthening the inferential bridge between configurational sufficiency and within-case causal processes.

Set-Theoretic Multimethod Research (SMMR)

Due to its focus on cases and its ability to align specific causal configurations with empirical evidence, QCA serves as a useful tool for guiding case selection following the initial comparative analysis. Moreover, comprehensive knowledge of cases remains a crucial subsequent step to ensure the validity of QCA (Ragin, 1987). Merely reporting the solution formula does not suffice to explain the underlying mechanisms that connect the identified sufficient conditions to the outcome, nor does it clarify which cases support or challenge the asserted sufficiency (Oana et al., 2021).

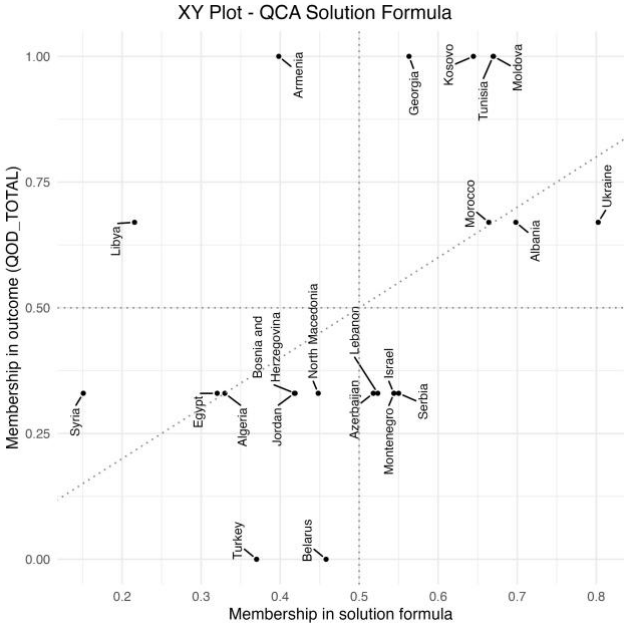
The cases identified by the solution formula can be classified into five distinct categories: Typical, Deviant consistency in degree, Deviant consistency in kind, Deviant coverage, and Individually Irrelevant (IIR) cases. The categorization of a case into one of these groups depends, for Typical, Deviant consistency in degree, and Deviant consistency in kind cases, on the case's membership in the sufficient condition and the outcome. In contrast, for Deviant coverage and IIR cases, classification is determined by the case's membership in the solution formula and the outcome.

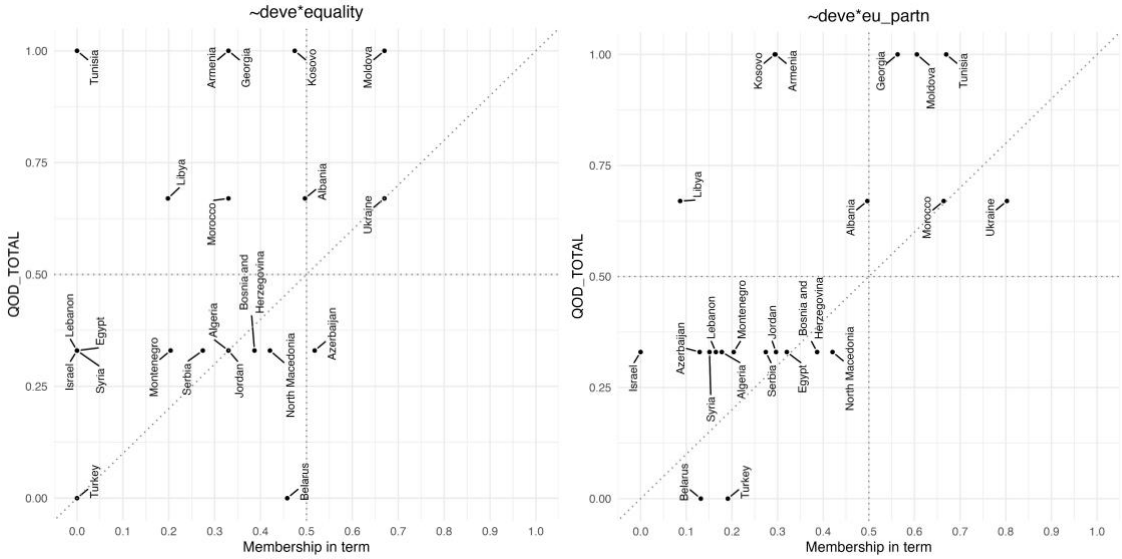
Membership in sufficient	Membership in outcome	Type of case
T > 0.5	Y ≥ T	(1) Typical
T > 0.5	Y < T	(2) Deviant consistency in degree
T > 0.5	Y < 0.5	(3) Deviant consistency in kind
S < 0.5	Y > 0.5	(4) Deviant coverage
S < 0.5	Y < 0.5	(5) Individually irrelevant (IIR)

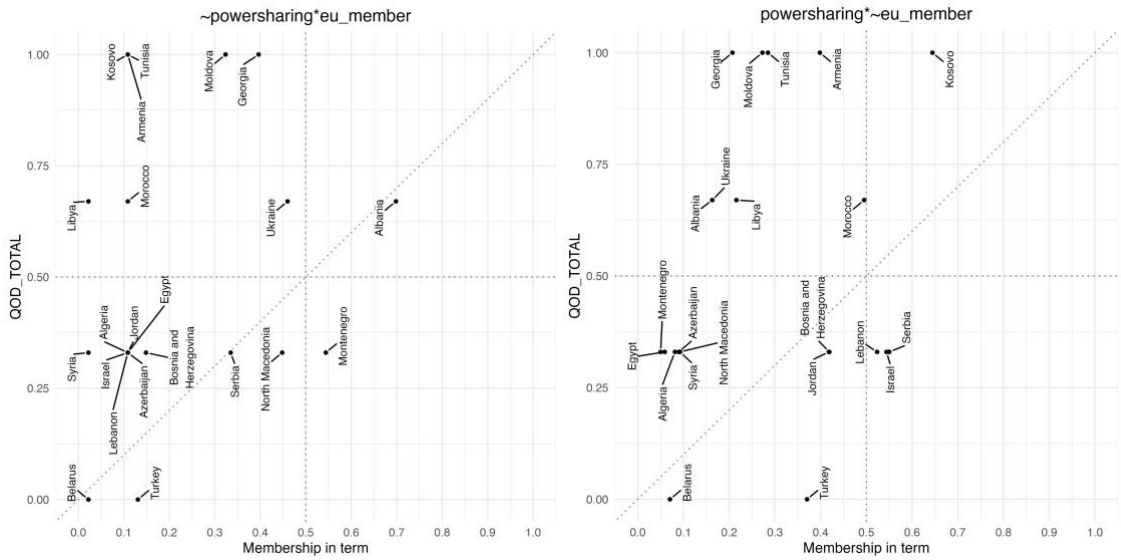
Note: S = solution; T = term; Y = outcome.

Source: Schneider and Rohlfing (2019, Table 2).

To determine the classification of cases within my solution formula, I plotted each solution path alongside the entire solution formula in relation to their membership in the outcome. The area above the diagonal in the top-right quadrant in each individual solution path denotes the typical case triangle.


XY Plot - QCA Solution Formula
Membership in outcome (QOD_TOTAL)
Membership in solution formula
Armenia
Georgia
Kosovo
Tunisia
Moldova
Ukraine
Morocco
Albania
Libya
Syria
Egypt
Algeria
Jordan
Bosnia and Herzegovina
North Macedonia
Lebanon
Azerbaijan
Israel
Montenegro
Serbia
Turkey
Belarus


~deve*equality
~deve*eu_partn
QOD_TOTAL
Membership in term


~powersharing*eu_member
powersharing*~eu_member
QOD_TOTAL
Membership in term

Accordingly, the cases can be categorized as follows:

Typical: Moldova; Ukraine; Georgia; Tunisia; Morocco
Deviant in degree: Ukraine; Albania
Deviant in kind: Azerbaijan; Montenegro; Lebanon; Serbia; Israel
Deviant in coverage: Libya; Armenia

The two cases on which I have chosen to focus are Georgia and Albania. I briefly explain the rationale for this decision.

My initial intention was to compare a typical case with a deviant-consistency case in kind – that is, cases that belong to a sufficient term but not to the outcome. However, several problems emerged. Montenegro is a deviant-consistency case in kind for the path *~powersharing*eu_member,* but that path contains no typical cases, preventing comparison. The deviant-consistency cases in kind Lebanon, Serbia, and Israel belong to a path that does not include any of my hypothesised conditions, namely *powersharing*~eu_member*. The final deviant-consistency case in kind is Azerbaijan, again for a path that omits the hypothesised conditions, namely *~deve*equality*. I therefore saw little value in comparing cases along paths that do not feature even one of the EU-related conditions in my hypothesis set.
I then considered turning to deviant-coverage cases, which display the outcome but are not explained by any of the sufficient terms in the QCA solution. Specifically, Armenia (Libya being excluded for the reasons given in the outcome-calibration paragraph) would have been my only option. I examined Armenia's scores across all conditions: not only are its memberships in the conditions of my solution formula low, they are very low across every condition considered. The highest is government effectiveness at 0.44, still below the inclusion threshold. Yet Armenia enjoys full membership in democratic improvement, as confirmed by a quick check of V-Dem's Electoral Democracy Index: it rose from 0.34 in 2015 to 0.62 in 2024, with a peak of 0.79 in 2019. This makes Armenia a peculiar and interesting case that would require a dedicated, in-depth study.

Lacking a sufficient number of cases for textbook-style comparisons, I anchored case selection in my research question and hypotheses. The Albania-Georgia dyad best satisfies the twin imperatives of theoretical relevance and methodological rigour. From a case-study perspective, each case offers distinct inferential advantages. Georgia is a prototypical instance: typical cases are recommended when the researcher seeks to corroborate – rather than falsify – the presence of a hypothesised mechanism and to verify that it operates across instances that are, *ceteris paribus*, representative of the configuration under investigation (Beach & Pedersen 2016). Albania, although not a typical case, still records membership scores above 0.5 for both the relevant solution term and the outcome.

The choice is further justified by considerations of research economy and flexibility. The QCA explains only nine cases (n = 9), nudging the design toward a classic small-N comparative analysis and thus requiring adaptable selection criteria. As the solution plot indicates, only one case – Albania – shows a positive outcome on the path ~powersharing*EU_membership. Although atypical, it must be included in a deeper analysis alongside a case that exhibits EU partnership. Because the inquiry is rooted in the EU's role, it is analytically appropriate to focus the empirical deep dive on the two paths featuring EU involvement. Assigning one case to each EU-related path maximises theoretical leverage and strikes an optimal balance: Albania and Georgia are representative enough to support the sufficiency claims generated by the QCA, yet sufficiently contrasting in their EU linkages to introduce meaningful variation in the explanatory variable of interest. Analysing them side by side enables a disciplined within-solution comparison that can confirm the operation of the proposed mechanism and delineate its

limits. It also preserves research economy in a small-N context and ensures that case knowledge can be meaningfully integrated with the configurational findings, as recommended in the QCA literature. In short, Georgia and Albania jointly provide the clearest and most efficient route to test the hypothesized EU-linked pathways while remaining faithful to the logic of set-theoretic inference.

First Case Study: Georgia

Georgia represents the typical case of the first path toward democratic enhancement, marked by the combination of substantial investment by the European Union in a domestic context characterized by limited economic development. Before addressing the two conditions of interest, I find it useful to provide a brief historical and political overview to contextualize Georgia in the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, particularly from a geopolitical perspective and in relation to its evolving relationship with the EU.

Historical Context

Georgia's declaration of independence from the Soviet Union on 9 April 1991 occurred amidst the rapid collapse of the Soviet empire and a deteriorating economic environment marked by strikes and supply-chain disruptions. President Zviad Gamsakhurdia initially benefited from broad popular support, however, his increasingly authoritarian leadership – characterized by the centralization of executive authority and the exclusion of opposition media – soon undermined the unity of the anti-Soviet coalition that had brought him to power (Jones, 2012). At the same time, previously suppressed ethnic-territorial conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia re-emerged, involving irregular militias, Russian "peacekeepers," and, eventually, elements of the Georgian National Guard in low-intensity armed confrontations. In January 1992, a coalition of field commanders and National Guard units removed Gamsakhurdia from office, leading to violent clashes in Tbilisi and the near-total breakdown of state authority. In the resulting power vacuum, criminal organisations and local warlords seized control of customs points, infrastructure, and public revenues (Jones, 2010). Eduard Shevardnadze – former Soviet foreign minister – accepted the chairmanship of the State Council later that year, but even his international standing could not prevent the catastrophic 1992-93 Abkhazia war, a refugee crisis exceeding 250,000 people, or a 70% contraction in GDP by mid-decade (Cornell, 2012). In the course of the 1990s, Shevardnadze presided over the consolidation of an electoral-authoritarian regime in which the reconstituted Soviet-era elite retained effective control over state resources and decision-making. His Citizens' Union of Georgia won comfortably in the 1995 and 1999 elections, contests characterized by low party competitiveness, extensive patronage networks, and recurrent allegations of manipulation.

The Rose Revolution of November 2003, sparked by accusations of electoral fraud and internal divisions within President Shevardnadze's security apparatus, marked a clear departure from the post-Soviet political order. Under the leadership of Mikheil Saakashvili, the United National Movement presented state-building as inseparable from Euro-Atlantic integration. This vision was pursued through assertive anti-corruption efforts – most notably, the mass dismissal of the traffic police – and institutional reforms that introduced merit-based recruitment and performance evaluations across government ministries (Sing, 2022). These reforms significantly enhanced the state's administrative capacity, which is widely considered a key condition for democratic consolidation (Dolidze & Tukvadze, 2024).

Changes to the education system and the introduction of public funding for political parties also supported the dissemination of liberal democratic values, particularly among young people. In consolidating his personal authority, Saakashvili simultaneously laid the institutional and societal foundations for democratic development. However, while his government achieved notable gains in areas such as tax collection and public service delivery, these reforms also concentrated power in the

presidency and deepened tensions with Russia. Moscow viewed NATO's 2008 Bucharest declaration – that Georgia "will become a member" – as a direct challenge to its strategic interests.

Saakashvili expanded the strength and capacity of the armed forces and internal security services, which became central to his power. At the same time, his administration curtailed the independence of the media, weakened judicial autonomy, and suppressed parliamentary opposition. Peaceful demonstrations were met with a firm response from the authorities, and trade union activity was tightly restricted (Dolidze & Tukvadze, 2024). While these measures fuelled accusations of democratic backsliding at home, the consolidation of presidential authority also enabled a more assertive foreign policy focused on restoring territorial integrity and pursuing NATO membership, which further strained relations with Russia. In this broader context of deteriorating Russian–Georgian relations and unresolved conflicts over Abkhazia and South Ossetia, tensions ultimately escalated into the August 2008 Russo–Georgian War, a five-day conflict that ended with a cease-fire brokered by France. The war concluded with the deployment of Russian forces in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and Russia's unilateral recognition of both territories as independent states (Jones, 2010; Cornell, 2012).

In the aftermath of the 2008 war, Georgia deepened its alignment with the West. Constitutional amendments adopted in 2010 and scheduled to enter into force after the 2013 presidential elections transformed Georgia's institutional architecture from a strongly presidential to a semi-presidential system, shifting core executive powers from the presidency to a prime ministerial cabinet accountable to parliament. Under the new framework, the prime minister emerged as the predominant executive actor, with extensive control over government formation and key appointments. The 2012 parliamentary elections, which international observers assessed as largely meeting democratic standards, resulted in the Georgian Dream coalition coming to power – marking the country's first peaceful transfer of power since independence. This was a significant milestone in Georgia's democratic development: for the first time in the post-Soviet period, the ruling party transitioned into the opposition without institutional collapse. The United National Movement maintained a political presence by retaining control of the influential television broadcaster Rustavi 2 and holding the presidency until the end of Saakashvili's term in 2013 (Dolidze & Tukvadze, 2024).

Led by billionaire philanthropist Bidzina Ivanishvili, the new government advanced Georgia's European integration by signing an Association Agreement (AA) and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) with the European Union in 2014. Although the government adopted a more cautious tone on NATO membership, it did not renounce the goal. A series of constitutional amendments in 2017 shifted Georgia toward a parliamentary republic, and the 2018 election of Salome Zurabishvili as the country's first female president formalised the transformation of the presidency into a largely symbolic role (Tauchelov, 2024).

Despite these institutional advances, persistent political polarisation between Georgian Dream and the now-opposition United National Movement, along with Russia's continued military presence beyond the administrative boundary lines, continues to complicate Georgia's foreign policy and strategic orientation.

Cultural identity has evolved in tandem with these political transformations. The Georgian Orthodox Church, rejuvenated after Soviet-era suppression, commands some of the highest trust ratings in society and shapes debates on education, minority rights, and EU-backed anti-discrimination statutes (Dyulgerova & Manov, 2023). Meanwhile, the unresolved status of roughly 300,000 internally displaced persons from Abkhazia and South Ossetia underscores the enduring salience of ethnicity in

state consolidation. Contemporary nation-branding initiatives – ranging from the promotion of the Kartvelian alphabet as intangible heritage to state-funded restoration of medieval monasteries – seek to reconcile a narrative of deep historical continuity with the strategic aspiration of "returning to Europe" (Cai, 2023). Together, these dynamics situate Georgia at the intersection of post-Soviet statehood, contested borders, and a culturally driven quest for European modernity.

Georgia and the EU

The relationship between the EU and Georgia is rooted in a complex interplay of historical, political, and social factors. Georgia's strategic location at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, coupled with its rich cultural heritage, has made it a focal point for EU engagement in the South Caucasus region.

The historical ties between Georgia and Europe date back centuries, with Georgia often positioning itself as a bridge between Europe and Asia. However, the modern relationship between Georgia and the EU began to take shape in the early 1990s, following Georgia's independence from the Soviet Union. The EU's initial engagement with Georgia was largely driven by geopolitical considerations, particularly the need to stabilize the post-Soviet region and counterbalance Russian influence (Dadashov, 2022). The EU's approach to Georgia has evolved significantly over the years. In the early 1990s, the EU viewed the South Caucasus, including Georgia, primarily through the prism of Moscow, considering Russia's presence in the region. However, by the 2000s, the EU's interests in the region intensified, particularly after the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, which highlighted the need for enhanced security and cooperation in the region. The EU's engagement with Georgia has been formalized through various agreements and initiatives. The Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) in 1999 marked the beginning of a structured relationship. Between 2007 and 2013, the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI), encompassing its national, regional, and interregional initiatives, served as the principal mechanism for extending assistance to Georgia. The European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) was subsequently succeeded by the ENI, which was designed for the duration of 2014 to 2020, primarily facilitating support through country-specific, regional, and multi-national Action Programs. Within this framework, the predominant sectors earmarked for EU assistance include justice reform, agricultural and rural development, as well as public sector reform, supplemented by initiatives aimed at aligning Georgia's legal framework with EU legislation across all sectors involved in the implementation of the AA/DCFTA, alongside support for organizations constituting civil society (Ilić & Markozia, 2015). These frameworks have provided a basis for cooperation in areas such as trade, energy, and political reform.

The EU has played a pivotal role in Georgia's political development, particularly in the areas of democratization and security. The EU's political conditionality has been a key driver of reforms in Georgia, with the EU providing financial and technical assistance to support the country's transition to a more democratic and rule-of-law-based system (Dudaiti et al., 2020). One of the most significant milestones in EU-Georgia relations was the signing of the already mentioned AA in 2014, which included provisions for a DCFTA. This agreement marked a significant step towards deeper integration with the EU and underscored Georgia's commitment to aligning its policies with EU standards (Dudaiti et al. 2020; Uchida 2020). The Georgian Parliament ratified it on July 2014, indicating commitment to European integration. It has been provisionally applied since 1st September 2014, with 80% of its content, including the DCFTA, in effect. Concurrently, an EU-Georgia Association Agenda was adopted, setting priorities for 2014-2016 to implement the AA/DCFTA, replacing the 2006 ENP Policy Action Plan. The EU-Georgia AA is critical for strengthening bilateral relations and provides a

comprehensive legal framework for Georgia's European integration, emphasizing democratic principles such as human rights and rule of law. Comprised of approximately 1000 pages, it is among the most extensive AAs with third countries, encompassing eight Titles addressing various cooperation areas. Additionally, the AA includes 34 Annexes detailing relevant EU legislation to be adopted by specific deadlines and three Protocols. It is imperative to ascertain the modalities through which the AA is integrated into the legal framework of the country. According to Article 4(5) of the Constitution of Georgia, domestic legal provisions are required to align with the universally acknowledged principles and standards of international law. Furthermore, international treaties that have been ratified by Georgia possess superiority over any conflicting national legislation, provided that they do not infringe upon the Constitution or the Constitutional Agreement of Georgia. Article 78 – titled "Integration into European and Euro-Atlantic Structures" – mandates that state authorities, within their designated competencies, undertake all necessary actions to facilitate Georgia's comprehensive membership in both the European Union and the NATO (Constitution of Georgia, 1995). As a result, this constitutional framework establishes the AA as the fundamental instrument directing Georgia's legal and political evolution (Nakashidze, 2021).

The EU has also been a key player in supporting Georgia's security, particularly in the context of the ongoing conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The EU's engagement has included efforts to promote peace and stability in the region, as well as providing support for Georgia's military reform and its aspirations to join NATO (Uchida 2020; Nilsson & Silander 2016).

The EU's visa liberalization policy, which came into effect in 2017, has been a significant symbol of Georgia's integration into the European community. The ability of Georgian citizens to travel visa-free to the Schengen Area has been seen as a tangible benefit of Georgia's European orientation and has reinforced the country's European identity (Loda, 2019). However, the process of Europeanization has not been without its challenges. The EU's emphasis on conditionality has sometimes led to tensions between the EU and Georgia, particularly when Georgia has been perceived as not fully meeting EU standards. Additionally, the process of Europeanization has sometimes been contested by domestic actors who view it as a threat to Georgia's national traditions and sovereignty (Javakhishvili & Butsashvili 2023; Minesashvili 2021).

Another challenge is the need for greater coherence in the EU's approach to Georgia. The EU's policies towards Georgia have sometimes been criticized for being overly focused on conditionality, with insufficient attention paid to the broader geopolitical context. This has led to calls for a more balanced approach that takes into account Georgia's specific needs and challenges (Gabelia & Grdzelidze 2023; Tsuladze et al. 2023).

~DEVE

Having now outlined Georgia's trajectory from the collapse of the Soviet Union to the present day, I turn to an analysis of the two conditions in question. I begin with the first: the absence of economic development.

First, I provide an overview of the evolution of Georgia's economy since the collapse of the USSR. Then, I analyze how the relationship with the EU has affected the country's economic development.

Economic Development of Georgia

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 precipitated a severe macro-economic shock in Georgia: real output contracted by more than two-thirds between 1990 and 1994, annual inflation exceeded 1,000 %, and household purchasing power evaporated (Gursoy & Chitadze 2012; MacFarlane 1992). Simultaneous secessionist conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia severed transport corridors, displaced roughly 280.000 people, and widened an already yawning fiscal gap (Zurabishvili & Zurabishvili, 2004). Lacking both a reliable tax base and foreign-exchange reserves, the new state could fund only rudimentary social protection, so poverty and inequality deepened (Silaev & Kovaleva, 2022). With the dissolution of the USSR, Georgia encountered significant challenges of state instability; before its democratization ambitions materialized – only with the signing of the 1999 PCA (Article 1: "[…] to support Georgia's efforts to consolidate its democracy […]") – the EU's primary emphasis was on economic transformation in the sectors of agriculture, transportation, energy, privatization, and financial markets (Bosse, 2007). Article 1(2)(c) of the AA defines its objectives as "contribut[ing] to the strengthening of democracy and to political, economic and institutional stability in Georgia." In addition, the Agreement's general principles bind both parties to uphold the rule of law and good governance; to combat corruption, transnational organized crime and terrorism; to promote sustainable development and effective multilateralism; and to prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and their delivery systems.

From 1995 to 2003 President Shevardnadze pursued orthodox "shock-therapy" reforms – price liberalisation, mass privatisation, and the dismantling of Soviet-era monopolies. A 1995 currency reform brought hyper-inflation under control and stabilized nominal variables, yet systemic corruption, weak courts, and onerous transaction costs discouraged productive investment, leaving the budget heavily donor-dependent (Tauchelov 2024; Barnovi 2005). By 2003 agriculture still generated more than one-quarter of GDP while the capital stock in manufacturing was technologically obsolete, attesting to limited structural change (Papava, 2012).

The Rose Revolution in late 2003 installed Saakashvili and relaunched the reform agenda. A streamlined tax code, the near abolition of licensing requirements, and an electronic cadaster improved transparency and curtailed rent-seeking. Georgia's position in the World Bank's *Doing Business* ranking climbed from 112th in 2004 to 9th in 2018 (Andronova et al., 2018). Foreign direct investment peaked at 13% of GDP in 2007, financing the East-West Highway and expansions of the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan and South Caucasus pipelines, thereby consolidating Georgia's role as a transit corridor between the Caspian basin and Black-Sea markets (Barnovi 2005; BTC Study Group 2004). The 2008 war with Russia and the global financial crisis interrupted growth and revealed the economy's vulnerability to external capital and demand shocks.

Average real-GDP growth reached 4.7% per year between 2013 and 2019. The 2016 DCFTA with the EU enlarged market access, and tourism became the principal export earner, accounting for almost one-fifth of GDP on the eve of the COVID-19 pandemic (World Bank, 2024). Fiscal rules kept public debt below 45%t of GDP, while the poverty headcount fell from 70.6 % in 2010 to 37.7 % in 2019 (World Bank, 2024). Regional disparities nevertheless persisted, especially in the north-east and in Samtskhe–Javakheti (Papava, 2014).

The pandemic reversed part of this progress: GDP contracted by 6.8 % in 2020, tourism receipts collapsed by 81%, and poverty rose for the first time in a decade (World Bank, 2023). Emergency wage

subsidies, state-guaranteed credit lines, and temporary utility waivers softened the blow but increased public debt to 60% of GDP by 2021 (FocusEconomics, 2024).

Rapid vaccination, the diversion of Russian tourist flows after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, and the "Remotely from Georgia" visa for digital nomads underpinned a vigorous rebound: real GDP expanded by 7.5 % in 2023 and an estimated 5.2 % in 2024 and unemployment fell to 13.9 % – the lowest rate since independence (World Bank, 2024; IMF, 2024). In December 2023 Georgia secured EU-candidate status, though the government's 2024 decision to defer formal accession talks until 2028 tempered investor optimism (World Bank, 2025).

A longitudinal reading of gross national income (GNI) per capita – the indicator I chose to calibrate the condition – corroborates and quantifies this trajectory. World Bank Atlas-method series show a plunge to roughly US $790 in the mid-1990s, a recovery to US $1.640 by 2000, and a near-monotonic rise to US $4.130 in 2010, US $5.690 in 2022, and US $6.710 in 2023 (World Bank, 2024). The pronounced V-shape in the 1990s underscores the severity of the early-transition collapse, while the sharp acceleration between 2004 and 2008 aligns with the Saakashvili-era liberalisation and FDI surge; the post-2021 out-performance of GNI over GDP reflects sizeable net factor-income inflows associated with temporary residents and digital nomads.

By 2024 services generated 62% of GDP, agriculture 8%, and manufacturing only 12%. Foreign investment remained concentrated in real estate, energy transit, and finance rather than export-oriented industry (UNCTAD, 2024). Hydropower, supplemented by an emergent wind sector, supplied more than 80% of electricity; this allowed seasonal exports but left the grid sensitive to hydrological variability (BM.ge, 2025).

Persistent obstacles endure. National poverty still affects about 35.5% of the population, with rural rates roughly double urban ones, and transfer income accounts for one-third of household resources in highland districts (World Bank, 2024). Governance has improved – Georgia's score on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index rose from 20/100 in 2003 to 57/100 in 2024 – but enforcement gaps in competition policy and procurement remain (Petrovich-Belkin et al., 2022). Net emigration and low fertility restrain labour-force growth, and shortages of information-technology, engineering, and health professionals impede diversification.

The *Georgia-2020* agenda and the subsequent *Vision 2030* strategy aim to propel the country to upper-middle-income status through export-led growth, digitalization, and renewable-energy expansion. Realizing these objectives will require deeper regulatory alignment with the European acquis, timely completion of flagship infrastructure such as the Anaklia deep-sea port and the North–South electricity interconnector, and more robust social safety nets to sustain public support. Geopolitical tension with Russia, climate-driven hydropower fluctuations, and shifts in global interest rates remain salient risks, underscoring the need for disciplined macro-fiscal management and resilient institutions.

Georgia has implemented extensive economic reforms over recent years, transitioning from a nearly failed state in 2003 to a relatively effective market economy by 2019. The nation has attained notable advancements in mitigating petty corruption, optimizing an inefficient administrative framework, abolishing superfluous licensing stipulations, enhancing the State's tax revenue collection capabilities, liberalizing its trade policies, and overall elevating Georgia's appeal in terms of the ease of conducting business (Abuseridze at. al., 2022).

Prior to the execution of the PCA, the Transport Corridor Europe–Caucasus–Asia (TRACECA) and the Interstate Oil and Gas Transport to Europe (INOGATE) initiatives constituted the primary EU-led regional initiatives within the Southern Caucasus. Initiated in 1993, the TRACECA programme was originally designed to facilitate humanitarian assistance in Georgia, where international aid constituted over 75% of state revenues in 1993, sustaining at approximately 50% of revenues in 1994. By 1996, TRACECA underwent a transformation – with the approval of Azerbaijan and Georgia – into an expansive "New Silk Road" initiative aimed at integrating Europe, the Black Sea region, the Southern Caucasus, and Central Asia for the purposes of economic, trade, and transport development, although political tensions constrained its comprehensive implementation. For Georgia, TRACECA signified a pivotal advancement towards enhanced relations with the EU (Gorshkov & Bagaturia, 2001).

Commencing in 1996, the INOGATE initiative focused on delivering technical and financial support to standardize oil and gas transportation from Central Asia to Europe under unified regulatory frameworks. Its initial effects in Georgia encompassed the restoration of energy infrastructure, particularly the development of the Supsa oil terminal. Collectively, the projects financed by TRACECA and INOGATE represented nearly the entirety of foreign investment in Georgia during the early 1990s and, in conjunction with humanitarian assistance, were vital to its sustenance as an autonomous nation-state (Gigauri, 2018). Despite the institutional and economic interactions with the EU remaining limited and intermittent from 1992 to 1999, these initiatives established the foundational framework for future political and economic collaboration.

Between the entry into force of the EU-Georgia PCA on 1 June 1999 (European Commission, 1999), Georgia's economic relations with the EU were progressively deepened through successive trade-integration measures: in December 2005 Georgia was granted GSP+ status under the EU's Generalised Scheme of Preferences, affording tariff-free access for an expanded range of exports conditional on compliance with international human-rights and environmental conventions (European Commission, 2005). On 14 November 2006 the EU-Georgia European Neighbourhood Policy Action Plan established a five-year roadmap for legislative approximation in customs, technical regulations and business-environment reforms (Council of the European Union & European Commission, 2006); on 7 May 2009 the Eastern Partnership elevated Georgia's association to a "shared ambition," explicitly preparing for an AA and DCFTA (European Council, 2009); negotiations on the DCFTA concluded on 22 July 2013 and the text was initialled at the Vilnius Eastern Partnership Summit on 29 November 2013 (European Commission, 2013); the AA was signed on 27 June 2014 (European Commission, 2014a) and its trade-liberalisation chapters entered into provisional application on 1 September 2014 (European Commission, 2014b).

The DCFTA, as a core pillar of the EU–Georgia AA, has substantially reshaped Georgia's economic landscape through progressive regulatory convergence and market access enhancements. By steadily eliminating tariffs on almost all goods and liberalizing services and capital flows, the DCFTA has opened new avenues for trade, investment, and institutional reform, yielding both immediate adjustments and prospects for sustained growth. It engenders reciprocal tariff elimination for a majority of commodities, with the objective of facilitating Georgia's integration into the EU Internal Market. In alignment with Article 1 of the AA, the objective was to facilitate the progressive economic assimilation of Georgia into the internal market of the EU, which will guarantee stable market accessibility predicated on sustainable and thorough regulatory harmonization of the rights and responsibilities emanating from World Trade Organization membership.

Agricultural Sector Harmonization and Market Diversification

Under the DCFTA, Georgia committed to transposing key elements of the EU's sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) acquis, including Regulation (EC) No 882/2004 on official controls and Regulation (EC) No 178/2002 on food safety. This process has enabled Georgian producers of wine, nuts, and stone fruits to attain EU-recognized certification, thereby improving market access and product credibility. Between 2014 and 2019, Georgian wine exports to the EU increased from approximately €55 million to over €90 million, while hazelnut shipments grew by nearly 30% (Berkum 2015; Eteria 2020). Nonetheless, full alignment remains an ongoing challenge: many small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) must still upgrade processing facilities and laboratory capacities to satisfy EU traceability and residue-monitoring requirements (Eteria 2020).

Industrial Goods and Technical Standard Approximation

The DCFTA's provisions on industrial products require Georgia to align its technical regulations, standards, and conformity assessment procedures with those of the EU New Approach Directives. This alignment has progressively reduced non-tariff barriers – for instance, by recognizing EU-accredited testing bodies and adopting CE-marking for machinery and electrical equipment. Consequently, Georgian manufacturers of building materials, automotive parts, and textiles have seen reduced certification delays and lower compliance costs. However, the requisite investments in metrology infrastructure and in upgrading national standardization bodies have been substantial, and progress has been uneven across sectors (Kawecka-Wyrzykowska 2015; Eteria 2019).

Services Liberalization: Tourism and Transit Transport

Liberalization of services under the DCFTA has been most pronounced in tourism and transport. By abolishing quotas and easing cross-border supply regulations, Georgia has attracted a growing number of EU tourists – arrivals rose from 1.2 million in 2014 to 2.3 million in 2019 – creating spillover effects for hospitality, restaurants, and cultural heritage sites (Akhvlediani & Havlik 2019). In transit transport, simplified cabotage rules and mutual recognition of driver qualification certificates have bolstered Georgia's role as a regional logistics hub linking the EU, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia. Despite this, infrastructure bottlenecks – particularly in rail gauge conversion and customs IT systems – continue to limit full utilization of transit corridors (Akhvlediani & Havlik, 2019).

Energy, Infrastructure and FDI Dynamics

As part of regulatory convergence, Georgia has aligned its energy market legislation with the EU's Third Energy Package, adopting unbundling measures for electricity transmission and retail market rules consistent with Directive 2009/72/EC. These reforms have attracted more than €500 million in EU-linked FDI toward renewable energy projects (notably wind and solar) and energy efficiency upgrades within the public sector (Abuselidze 2019). In transport infrastructure, EU assistance has co-financed key road and railway upgrades – such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars corridor – helping to lower freight costs and stimulate private investment in logistics terminals (Akhvlediani & Havlik, 2019).

Short-Term Adjustment Costs versus Early Outcomes

Immediately upon implementation in 2016, the DCFTA imposed adaptation costs on Georgian firms, especially SMEs unaccustomed to comprehensive regulatory compliance. These included facility retrofits, staff training on EU standards, and the establishment of new quality-assurance protocols

(Kawecka-Wyrzykowska 2015; Eteria 2019). Although export volumes to the EU did rise – by an average of 4% annually between 2016 and 2018 – this growth was lower than initial projections, in part due to Georgia's already liberalized baseline trade regime and the time lag inherent in regulatory approximation (Kawecka-Wyrzykowska 2015; Eteria 2020). Moreover, export concentration in agriculture and mining has limited diversification gains in the immediate term (Belkania, 2019).

Long-Term Prospects for Convergence and Diversification

Over the longer horizon, the DCFTA is expected to yield deeper integration benefits as further legal and institutional reforms take root. Continued alignment with the EU acquis will enhance the competitiveness of Georgian SMEs in higher-value manufacturing and service niches – ranging from automotive clusters to ICT services – as they attain full compliance with technical and procurement standards (Niknami 2018; Kawecka-Wyrzykowska 2015). Simultaneously, the ongoing modernization of customs procedures and digital trade facilitation is projected to lower transaction costs and diversify export markets beyond current focal sectors (Sartania 2024; Abuselidze 2019).

Fundamentally, Georgia's participation in the DCFTA reflects a broader strategy to bolster economic growth, macro-financial stability, and institutional convergence with EU norms. By improving the domestic regulatory framework and fostering an investor-friendly environment, the DCFTA underpins Georgia's ambition to become a competitive exporter of goods and services, while anchoring its development path to EU standards of good governance, rule of law, and market transparency (Veshapidze & Megreladze 2024; Niknami 2018). Continued commitment to regulatory reform, technical assistance for SMEs, and targeted infrastructure investments will be crucial for translating DCFTA provisions into tangible socio-economic benefits over the coming decade.

EU_PARTNERSHIP

The final paragraph examined the interplay between the two conditions of interest, namely how the partnership with the EU has influenced the development of Georgia's economy. This connection prepared the ground for the analysis of the second condition: the EU's high level of investment in Georgia. More specifically, it asked how these financing programs – beyond the economic sphere – have impacted the quality of democracy.

EU's Influence on Georgia's Democracy

The EU's engagement with Georgia over the past three decades has aimed not merely at strengthening bilateral ties but, crucially, at fostering democratic governance across political, judicial and societal spheres. From the earliest PCA in 1999 through to the 2014 AA the EU has consistently tied its assistance to concrete progress in democratic reform. This process has combined explicit political conditionality with sustained normative socialization, whereby Georgian institutions and actors are encouraged to internalize European standards of pluralism, rule of law and human rights (Dudaiti et al. 2020; Dadashov 2022).

Since the implementation of the EU-Georgia AA in June 2016, Georgia has undertaken various political reforms to enhance rule of law, human rights, and democratic institutions, though progress has been

inconsistent. In anticipation of the 2016 parliamentary elections, amendments to the Election Code were made in 2015 to facilitate fairer campaigns. However, ongoing issues with campaign transparency and electoral integrity were noted. Amendments aimed at improving transparency and accountability were enacted in response to criticisms yet concerns about election administration independence and opposition party participation remained. Beginning in 2015, Georgia launched several judicial reform initiatives to improve court transparency, meritocracy, and accountability. The third wave of reforms, enacted in late 2016, introduced case allocation randomness and the mandatory publication of decisions, though the three-year probationary judge appointments faced civil society backlash. A fourth wave of reforms in December 2019 enhanced disciplinary processes and selection criteria for the judicial council, but observers indicated that true judicial independence was still lacking. In May 2017, the High Council proposed a Judiciary Strategy with a five-year action plan to depoliticize judicial selections by shifting Supreme Court appointments to parliamentary approval and establishing life tenure for justices. The early 2016 formation of a Prosecutorial Council aimed to ensure prosecutorial independence; its 2017 strategy introduced ethics codes and new disciplinary measures, although EU reports highlighted the necessity of shielding the Prosecutor General from Ministry of Justice influence. Concurrently, public administration reform was initiated with the 2015 Civil Service Law promoting neutrality, meritocracy, and transparency, further supported by a 2019-20 administrative modernization action plan. Anti-corruption efforts included a National Strategy on Combating Organised Crime (2015-18), several Anti-Corruption Action Plans, and asset-declaration monitoring for officials, pivoting focus by 2018 towards elite corruption and institutional checks. Advancements in human rights were marked by the Human Rights Action Plan (2016-17), the Equality and Integration Strategy (2015-20), and the enactment of laws such as the Juvenile Justice Code in 2016 and the Child Rights' Code in June 2020, alongside ratification of the Council of Europe Istanbul Convention in 2017 (Nakashidze, 2021).

In practice, political conditionality has meant that every tranche of EU financial and technical aid has been contingent upon measurable benchmarks: the impartiality of electoral administration, the independence of the judiciary, and the strength of anti-corruption mechanisms. These benchmarks were first set out in the ENP Action Plan (2006–2013) and later refined in the Association Agenda (2014–2017), and their fulfilment has been assessed through annual progress reports. When delays or regressions have occurred – for example, when legislative amendments threatened judicial autonomy – the EU has not hesitated to suspend budget support or re-programme assistance, thereby signalling that democratic backsliding carries tangible costs (Nilsson & Silander, 2016). Georgia's alignment with the AA and its broader European agenda has catalyzed substantial legislative and policy reforms that fortify democratic governance. These advancements exemplify how the process of Europeanisation has acted as a significant impetus for the democratisation of Georgia (Makhashvili & Avdaliani, 2023). Between 2014 and 2020, the EU played an active role in promoting, facilitating, and supporting an array of reforms and harmonisation initiatives. Notable among these were the establishment of new institutions such as the Human Rights Department, the State Inspector's Service, and the Anti-Corruption Bureau; the enactment of legislation aimed at introducing a Code of Juvenile Justice, enhancing occupational safety standards, bolstering gender protection measures, and implementing various judicial reforms; and the initiatives related to the AA that underpinned the successful execution of Georgia's Visa-Liberalization Action Plan, ultimately leading to visa-free travel to the Schengen area in 2017.

Complementing this "stick" of conditionality, the EU has offered a "carrot" of substantial grants and technical exchanges designed to build institutional capacity. Under the EIDHR and the Civil Society Facility, Georgian election commissions, prosecutors and judges have received intensive training in European best practices, while non-governmental organizations have been supported in monitoring human rights, media freedom and public procurement. Twinning and TAIEX initiatives have further

deepened these links by pairing Georgian ministries with their counterparts in EU Member States, thus fostering a familiarity with administrative procedures that underpin transparent governance (Dudaiti et al., 2020). Election observation has become a particularly visible expression of the EU's democratization role. Since the Rose Revolution in 2003, EU Election Observation Missions have deployed long-term and short-term observers to assess every parliamentary and presidential contest in Georgia. Their comprehensive reports – evaluating legal frameworks, media environments and financial transparency – have provided an authoritative yardstick against which domestic stakeholders measure the credibility of electoral processes. While not every recommendation has been fully implemented, the presence of EU observers has enhanced public confidence and helped to deter overt manipulation (Uchida 2020; Апрасидзе 2024).

In the realm of the rule of law, the EU's support has encompassed both legislative reform and practical tools. Article 4 of the AA stipulates that the Parties shall collaborate in the following domains: the development, consolidation, and enhancement of resilient, effective democratic institutions and the rule of law; the safeguarding of human rights and fundamental freedoms; judicial and legal reform aimed at ensuring judicial independence, bolstering administrative capacity, and guaranteeing the impartiality and efficacy of law enforcement; continuous public administration reform and the establishment of a civil service that is accountable, efficient, transparent, and professional; and persistent anti-corruption initiatives, with a particular emphasis on augmenting international collaboration in the fight against corruption and executing pertinent international instruments, including the 2003 United Nations Convention against Corruption (Nakashidze, 2021). Furthermore, Twinning projects have modernized court-case management systems and financed training programmes in human-rights jurisprudence. Yet questions remain over the political independence of judicial councils and the equitable enforcement of decisions, suggesting that institutional change must be underpinned by sustained domestic commitment and political will (Kardava & Chelidze, 2024). Here, the EU faces the challenge of calibrating its conditionality so that it promotes genuine reform without engendering backlash or perceptions of external overreach.

Georgia has attained significant achievements in the fight against corruption within lower tiers of public administration, surpassing various EU member nations – including Italy, Malta, Croatia, and Slovakia – on specific international metrics, such as the Corruption Perception Index. However, the phenomenon of corruption among political and economic elites continues to be a pressing issue. Civil society organizations have actively advocated for comprehensive investigations, a notion that is reiterated in the European Parliament's report from November 2018 regarding the implementation of the EU-Georgia AA, which acknowledges advancements against low- and mid-level corruption while cautioning against the persistence of entrenched elite misconduct (European Parliament, 2018).

Media freedom and pluralism have likewise been areas of intense EU involvement. Through grants to independent outlets and legal assistance on defamation and access to information laws, the EU has sought to bolster a media environment capable of holding power to account. Training for journalists in investigative techniques and ethics has been paired with support for regional broadcasters, aiming to decentralize news production and foster diversity. Nevertheless, the persistence of concentrated media ownership and political pressures on outlets underscores the limits of external assistance where domestic political structures resist openness (Javakhishvili & Butsashvili, 2023).

Georgia has instituted substantial initiatives aimed at fostering political pluralism and inclusivity, most prominently through the establishment of a compulsory gender quota. Georgia's score in the 2020 Global Gender Gap Report rose to 70.8%, an increase from 68% in 2018, thus surpassing the global

average of 68.6% for the first occasion and positioning the nation 74th out of 153 countries. Furthermore, the country has instituted gender quotas for electoral lists, mandating that a minimum of 25% of candidates on proportional party lists in the 2020 parliamentary elections be women (Bitsadze, 2022).

At the local level, the EU's Civil Society Facility has channeled significant funding into participatory governance initiatives. Grants to municipal administrations have enabled experiments in participatory budgeting and greater citizen engagement in policy-making. These efforts seek to embed democratic practices not only in Tbilisi but also across Georgia's regions, countering tendencies toward centralization and elite capture. Yet uneven administrative capacities pose a risk that rural and remote areas will lag behind the capital in democratic consolidation (Minesashvili, 2021).

Georgia has made significant strides in democratic governance across various dimensions. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the government implemented "more measured and democratic" strategies, consistently engaging with a "relatively well-established" civil society sector (Freedom House, 2021). Following the 2017 Eastern Partnership Index, which underscored the necessity for "enhanced democratic oversight mechanisms within the security sector" (Lovitt, 2018, p. 45), Tbilisi entered into bilateral agreements with France and the Czech Republic to combat crime and became an active participant in EU joint investigation teams aimed at addressing organized crime (Ministry of Finance of Georgia, 2020). The 2019 Human Development Report indicates that Georgia's Human Development Index (HDI) increased to 0.812 – representing a 17.7% augmentation since 2000. In the realm of human rights, the implementation of a new Child Rights Code, which fully came into force on 1 June 2020, alongside enhanced reporting mechanisms for gender-based violence – particularly among younger women – highlights Tbilisi's legislative advancements, despite persisting challenges in execution (Agenda.ge 2020; Emerson & Kovziridze 2018).

Despite these accomplishments, several structural and geopolitical obstacles continue to complicate the EU's democratization agenda in Georgia. The unresolved conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia have effectively frozen the extension of EU-backed reforms into large swathes of Georgian territory, denying many citizens the benefits of judicial reform and civil-society development (Nilsson & Silander, 2016). Furthermore, "conditionality fatigue" has emerged among some stakeholders who view EU requirements as excessively bureaucratic or misaligned with domestic priorities (Апрасидзе, 2024). Finally, the need to balance advancement toward EU norms with sensitivity to Russian concerns has led parts of Georgia's political elite to advocate a more cautious pace of integration (Bitsadze, 2022).

Looking ahead, the sustainability of democratization in Georgia will depend on the EU's ability to refine its tools and engage more flexibly with local realities. A differentiated approach to conditionality – tailoring benchmarks to sector-specific needs and tying further assistance to discrete, verifiable outcomes – could mitigate perceptions of bureaucratic overload while maintaining momentum for reform (Gabelia & Grdzelidze, 2023). Strengthening local governance through expanded capacity-building in municipalities would ensure that democratic practices become genuine habits at the grassroots level (Tsuladze et al., 2023). Finally, conflict-sensitive programming that involves displaced populations in Abkhazia and South Ossetia may protect human rights across Georgia's internationally recognized territory without undermining the broader peace process (Delcour & Panchulidze, 2023).

In interpreting these findings, it is essential to clarify the analytical meaning of the condition "absence of economic development" within the QCA framework. Economic development is a structural factor: it is not directly subject to short-term political choice but instead defines the broader context in which

agency operates. Structural conditions of this kind shape both the probability and the range of possible democratic trajectories. In the Georgian case, the EU has contributed to altering this structural environment through investment, trade liberalization, and institutional reforms that progressively reduced the severity of economic underdevelopment. Nevertheless, the fact remains that Georgia's democratic progress unfolded under conditions of limited economic development. The absence of this factor should not be interpreted as something that facilitated democratization, but rather as a structural constraint that made democratization less likely. The country's democratic advances thus occurred despite this absence, rather than because of it. This distinction is crucial: while agency-driven reforms and external support from the EU were able to offset certain limitations, the underlying condition of underdevelopment did not act as a favorable factor. Instead, it defined a difficult starting point against which democratization must be assessed. In this sense, the Georgian case illustrates that the absence of economic development characterizes the context without contributing positively to the outcome – highlighting the importance of distinguishing between structural preconditions and agency-driven factors when interpreting QCA results.

Second Case Study: Albania

Albania represents a deviant-consistency case for the second successful path toward democratic consolidation, characterized by a combination of limited power-sharing and substantial progress toward EU membership. I will begin my analysis with this second condition before moving on to a more theoretical discussion of the concentration of power and the role of leadership in the Albanian case.

Historical Context

Albania's political trajectory from 1943 to Edi Rama's electoral victory in 2013 represents one of Europe's most dramatic transitions from totalitarian isolation to democratic consolidation, characterized by distinct phases of authoritarian rule, chaotic post-communist transformation, and gradual institutional stabilization under European integration pressures.

The foundational period began with Enver Hoxha's ascension to power in 1944, establishing a highly centralized Stalinist regime that pursued rapid industrialization through forced collectivization while implementing severe political repression and social control mechanisms that eliminated religious practice entirely by 1967, making Albania the world's first officially atheist state (Vickers, 1999). Hoxha's foreign policy oscillations – from initial alignment with Tito's Yugoslavia, to Soviet partnership following the 1948 break, then to Maoist China after de-Stalinization, and finally to complete international isolation by the 1970s – left Albania economically stagnant and institutionally hollow when the communist system began crumbling across Eastern Europe.
The regime's paranoid character intensified during the 1980s, exemplified by the mysterious death of Mehmet Shehu in 1981, Hoxha's longtime Prime Minister and closest political ally. While officially ruled a suicide, Shehu's death reflected the deepening internal contradictions and suspicions within the Albanian leadership, as Hoxha's ultra-orthodox Stalinist vision increasingly isolated the country from any meaningful international engagement (Fischer & Schmitt, 2022). By the early 1980s, Albania had systematically severed relations with Yugoslavia (1948), the Soviet Union (late 1960s), and China (late 1970s), creating an unprecedented level of international isolation that left the population economically impoverished and politically repressed under one of Europe's most rigid totalitarian systems.

Enver Hoxha's death in 1985 brought Ramiz Alia to power, initiating a period of cautious reform that ultimately proved insufficient to contain mounting popular pressures for systemic change. The transition period under Alia (1985-1991) demonstrated the inadequacy of limited reform in preserving communist rule, as domestic protests, economic hardship, and the collapse of neighboring regimes accelerated demands for multiparty democracy (Sjöberg 1991).
The regime's vulnerability became dramatically apparent during the summer of 1990, when thousands of Albanians sought refuge in foreign embassies in Tirana, effectively "occupying" these diplomatic compounds in desperate attempts to escape the country. This unprecedented challenge to state authority marked the beginning of a decade-long exodus that would fundamentally reshape Albanian society and its relationship with the outside world. The embassy crisis exposed the regime's inability to maintain the hermetic seal that had characterized Hoxha's rule, as citizens demonstrated their willingness to risk everything for the possibility of escape from totalitarian control.
The final collapse of communist authority came with the December 1990 student protests in Tirana, which catalyzed nationwide demonstrations demanding democratic reforms and multiparty elections. These protests, unprecedented in their scale and boldness, forced the regime to concede fundamental political changes, culminating in contested elections in 1991. While the Albanian Party of Labor

(PPSH) technically won these initial elections, their victory lacked the decisive mandate necessary for continued single-party rule, setting the stage for new elections in 1992 that brought Sali Berisha's Democratic Party to power (Pano, 1997).

Berisha's first presidency (1992-1997) exemplified the contradictions of Albania's early post-communist transition, combining ambitious market-oriented reforms with increasingly authoritarian governance practices that undermined democratic institutionalization. His administration implemented rapid economic liberalization policies, including extensive privatization of state enterprises and dismantling of central planning mechanisms, which initially generated optimism among international donors and domestic reformers (Kajsiu, 2004).
However, this transition period was marked by profound economic, political, and social crises that triggered massive migration flows, primarily to Greece and Italy. The symbolic moments of March 1991 and August 1991 witnessed desperate attempts by thousands of Albanians to flee their country, often using makeshift boats and dangerous sea crossings that highlighted the depth of domestic desperation and the inadequacy of the transitional government's response to popular needs (King & Mai, 2008).
Berisha simultaneously concentrated executive power, marginalized independent institutions, and employed governance practices reminiscent of the pre-transition authoritarian legacy, creating a pattern of leader-dominated politics that would plague Albanian democracy for decades (Bogdani & Loughlin, 2007). The period witnessed growing electoral controversies and deep political polarization that eroded institutional trust, while the proliferation of unregulated pyramid investment schemes – offering impossibly high returns of 25-50% monthly – attracted massive public participation as citizens sought to capitalize on their newfound economic freedoms (Jarvis, 2000).
The catastrophic collapse of these schemes in late 1996 and early 1997 wiped out the life savings of approximately two-thirds of Albania's population, triggering nationwide protests, the looting of military arsenals, and near-complete state breakdown that required international intervention to restore basic order (Bezemer, 2001). This crisis escalated into what amounted to a civil war, resulting in thousands of deaths and generating new waves of migration, including the tragic 1997 Kater i Radës incident, which became a powerful symbol of Albanian desperation and the international community's inadequate response to the humanitarian crisis. The 1997 collapse not only delegitimized Berisha's government but also demonstrated the fragility of Albania's democratic institutions and the dangerous consequences of weak regulatory oversight in post-communist transitions (Pettifer & Vickers, 2007).

The Socialist Party's return to power under Fatos Nano's leadership (1997-2005) coincided with the Kosovo War (1998-1999), which imposed additional strains on Albania's fragile state capacity while simultaneously accelerating its integration into Western security structures. Nano's governments focused primarily on crisis management and political stabilization, working to rebuild state institutions destroyed during the 1997 collapse while managing the influx of nearly 500,000 Kosovar Albanian refugees who fled Serbian ethnic cleansing campaigns (Clunies-Ross & Sudar, 1998).
This humanitarian crisis, while straining Albania's limited resources, also strengthened its strategic relationship with NATO and the European Union, as Albania served as a crucial staging ground for international humanitarian operations and later military intervention. The Socialist administrations implemented gradual institutional reforms, adopted a new constitution in 1998 that established clearer separation of powers, and began the slow process of rebuilding public trust in democratic governance, though persistent corruption and clientelistic practices continued to undermine reform effectiveness (Pridham, 2001).
The period also witnessed significant international engagement through OSCE missions, EU stabilization programs, and NATO partnership initiatives that provided both financial assistance and

technical expertise for institutional development, establishing the framework for Albania's eventual Euro-Atlantic integration (Anastasakis, 2008). The symbolic moment came with the June 2003 Thessaloniki Declaration, which formally launched the European integration process for the Western Balkans, offering Albania and its neighbors a concrete pathway toward EU membership that would define the region's political trajectory for the following decades.

Berisha's return to power in 2005 marked a new phase characterized by accelerated European integration efforts, NATO membership achievement, and continued struggles with rule-of-law consolidation. His second tenure as Prime Minister (2005-2013) coincided with Albania's successful NATO accession in 2009, a milestone that provided crucial security guarantees and international legitimacy while demonstrating the country's commitment to Western democratic values.
The period also witnessed several major corruption scandals and growing public frustration with the slow pace of economic development and institutional modernization, setting the stage for the opposition's electoral resurgence (Kajsiu, 2010). By 2013, after eight years of Democratic Party rule, Albanian voters had grown increasingly dissatisfied with persistent governance failures, stalled EU integration progress, and the gap between reform rhetoric and actual implementation, creating favorable conditions for Edi Rama's Socialist coalition to achieve a decisive electoral victory that marked a potential turning point in Albania's democratic consolidation process.

EU_MEMBERSHIP

The first condition for an increasing level of quality democracy in Albania – as indicated by my QCA results – is the country's advanced progress toward EU membership. Not by chance, Albania is among the frontrunners among candidate countries. This paragraph outlines the key steps that have led to the current situation.

Albania's institutional engagement with the EU began in the aftermath of communism. Diplomatic relations with the European Community were established in 1991, following the collapse of Enver Hoxha's regime and the country's exit from decades of isolation. This marked the beginning of a long-term integration process, formalized through the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA), signed in 2006 and entering into force in April 2009. The SAA provided a legal and political framework for cooperation on democratic reform, market economy development, and alignment with the EU *acquis communautaire*. Albania submitted its formal application for EU membership in April 2009. In response, the European Commission issued an analytical opinion in 2010, which identified twelve key priorities for Albania to fulfill before candidate status could be granted. These included judicial independence, civil service reform, political dialogue, and the fight against organized crime and corruption. Although Albania initially struggled to meet these requirements, significant progress over the following years, particularly in judicial reform and electoral processes, led the Commission to recommend candidate status in 2013. On 24 June 2014, the Council of the European Union granted Albania candidate status, conditional upon the implementation of the required reforms. However, the pace of negotiations remained slow. In its 2018 enlargement strategy, the European Commission recommended the opening of accession negotiations, stating that Albania had made "sufficient progress" in implementing reforms, though challenges remained in the areas of the judiciary, corruption, and freedom of expression. Despite repeated recommendations from the Commission, EU member states – especially France and the Netherlands – delayed the opening of accession talks. They cited concerns about institutional capacity, state capture, and the credibility of reform efforts. The deadlock

was broken in March 2020 when the Council agreed to open negotiations, acknowledging Albania's progress while emphasizing the need for continued reform, especially within the judiciary and anti-corruption institutions. The first Intergovernmental Conference between Albania and the EU was held on 19 July 2022, formally launching the accession process. This was followed by the screening phase, which involves a detailed comparison of Albanian legislation with the EU acquis. By November 2023, Albania had completed screening for all 33 negotiation chapters. The revised EU enlargement methodology introduced in 2020 reorganized the negotiation chapters into six thematic clusters, aiming to increase the political steer and predictability of the accession process. Albania's first substantial progress came in Cluster 1: Fundamentals, which includes chapters on judiciary and fundamental rights, justice and home affairs, and public procurement. On 15 October 2024, Albania officially opened Cluster 1. The European Commission noted "clear progress" in judicial vetting and constitutional reforms. Cluster 6, focusing on External Relations, was opened on 17 December 2024, as Albania had aligned nearly fully with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy, particularly on sanctions against Russia following the Ukraine invasion. Further milestones included the opening of Cluster 2: Internal Market in April 2025 and Cluster 3: Competitiveness and Inclusive Growth in May 2025. By mid-2025, Albania had opened 24 out of the 33 total negotiation chapters, placing it ahead of other Western Balkan candidates in procedural terms. The government has articulated a goal of closing all chapters by 2027 and attaining full membership by 2030. Geopolitical developments have significantly accelerated Albania's path toward the EU. Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine prompted renewed EU interest in enlargement as a strategic counterbalance in Southeast Europe. Albania's unequivocal support for Ukraine and its full alignment with EU foreign policy demonstrated its geopolitical reliability. EU officials, including Enlargement Commissioner Marta Kos, have repeatedly praised Albania's commitment to reforms. In March 2025, Kos referred to Albania as a "champion of regional cooperation," citing its leadership in regional platforms and alignment with EU foreign and energy policies. The European Commission has allocated over €920 million to Albania under the 2021-2027 financial framework to support institutional reforms, energy transition, and digitalization. Rule of law remains at the center of EU concerns. One of the most significant efforts has been Albania's judicial vetting process, supported by EU technical assistance programs such as EURALIUS, operational between 2005 and 2021. EURALIUS aimed to increase transparency, professionalism, and independence in the justice system. Its outcomes were mixed: while the process led to the dismissal or resignation of numerous judges and prosecutors, critics argue that deeper structural change remains elusive. The European Commission's 2024 and 2025 country reports classified Albania's judicial reform as "ongoing", with "moderate progress" in key areas but persistent challenges in case backlog, legal predictability, and judicial independence. Public administration reform has similarly advanced, with civil service depoliticization and digitalization initiatives gaining ground.

Albania has emerged as a key actor in regional cooperation initiatives that support EU-oriented reforms. The Berlin Process, launched in 2014, aims to maintain the EU perspective of the Western Balkans and to promote connectivity, reconciliation, and regional economic integration. Albania has played an increasingly central role, including hosting the 2022 EU-Western Balkans Summit in Tirana, where leaders reaffirmed their commitment to enlargement and signed agreements on energy security and mobility. Another important initiative is the Common Regional Market, developed within the Berlin Process framework. It seeks to create a single economic space in the Western Balkans that mirrors the EU's four freedoms (goods, services, capital, and people). Albania has endorsed this initiative and worked closely with regional neighbors to harmonize legislation and eliminate barriers. In 2023, Albania joined the Western Balkans Quad, an intergovernmental forum aligned with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy. The move was welcomed in Brussels and viewed as a sign of Albania's increasing strategic alignment with European values and priorities. Albania is a key IPA beneficiary,

particularly in the fields of governance, energy transition, and rural development. In addition, the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans has earmarked over €9 billion in grants and up to €20 billion in loans, channeled through the Western Balkans Guarantee Facility. For Albania, investments have focused on transport infrastructure, clean energy (e.g., solar and hydro power), and digital connectivity. The European Commission has also implemented a targeted Energy Support Package, helping Albania diversify its energy mix and reduce dependence on hydropower. This has been especially urgent in the context of climate change and increased energy volatility in the region. While financial support has played a significant role in sustaining Albania's reform trajectory, implementation remains inconsistent. EU monitoring reports often stress the "limited absorption capacity" of Albanian institutions and delays in project execution. Despite considerable progress, Albania faces persistent challenges that could jeopardize its EU accession timeline. These include judicial independence and efficiency, as court backlogs and political pressure persist despite the removal of many compromised officials; corruption and governance, with Albania continuing to rank low in Transparency International's 2025 Corruption Perceptions Index; and economic convergence, as GDP per capita remains significantly below the EU average and youth unemployment remains high.

~POWERSHARING

The second condition I aim to unpack is the high level of power concentration – specifically, how the absence of power-sharing arrangements ultimately has a positive impact on Albania's democratization. I do not claim that the absence of power-sharing arrangements is normatively desirable or directly democratizing. Rather, the argument advanced here is that, under conditions of strong EU conditionality, concentrated executive power can indirectly favour democratic development by facilitating compliance with EU requirements and, in turn, reforms that enhance the quality of democracy. Before turning to the empirical analysis of the case study, it is therefore useful to first clarify, at a theoretical level, how leadership and executive power concentration shape a country's relationship with the EU. In this perspective, the impact of concentrated power on democratization is mediated by its effects on the dynamics of EU accession and the implementation of EU-driven reforms, which constitute an intermediate – and potentially consequential – step in broader processes of democratic development.

A high concentration of political power in the executive significantly facilitates EU accession by streamlining decision-making, reducing institutional friction, and enhancing policy coherence. Executive centralization – particularly in the form of strong prime-ministerial leadership or dominant single-party cabinets – has been repeatedly shown to accelerate compliance with EU accession benchmarks, especially during the pre-accession phase when EU leverage is at its peak (Kassim et al., 2000). In such configurations, the concentration of authority within the core executive reduces the number of domestic veto players, allowing for faster transposition of the acquis communautaire, more consistent negotiation strategies, and more effective agenda-setting.

Empirical analyses confirm that candidate countries with centralized core executives advanced through the accession chapters more efficiently than those with fragmented, coalition-based, or ministerially driven governance structures. In Hungary and Poland, for instance, the centralization of executive coordination enabled the rapid adoption of EU legislation and facilitated inter-ministerial harmonization before accession (Ágh, 1999). Estonia and Slovenia also demonstrated the utility of executive consolidation, as their prime ministers took a leading role in coordinating accession negotiations, often supported by unified party structures that minimized internal dissent. In 1995, Estonia distinguished itself as the inaugural post-communist state to achieve associate member status devoid of a transitional phase. Although the initial coordination was situated within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and a

Minister of European Affairs without designated portfolio was appointed, the escalating requirements for legal harmonization and institutional coordination resulted in operational inefficiencies. Subsequently, the Prime Minister undertook direct oversight of EU-related matters, encompassing the responsibilities of chief negotiator (Drechsler et al. 2003; Fink-Hafner D. 2007). These cases highlight how centralization functions as a mechanism of institutional capacity-building: it allows candidate governments to translate EU demands into domestic reforms with fewer delays and to maintain a consistent trajectory during the highly structured and conditional enlargement process. Moreover, such governance configurations tend to be particularly effective when combined with high levels of EU incentive – as seen in pre-accession periods when membership prospects exert maximum conditional leverage on domestic elites. The administration of EU accession was marked by considerable centralization, with responsibilities largely entrusted to national governments. As a consequence, these procedures and processes tended to reinforce the executive branch and facilitate countries with strong leadership, while at the same time limiting the autonomous policy-making role of parliaments (Kopecky 2004; Zubek 2008). Instances of this tendency were evident during the EU accession negotiations in Hungary, Poland, and, to a lesser extent, the Czech Republic, where governments developed strong core executives to coordinate the transposition of EU legislation. These core executive bodies – often including ministries of justice, foreign affairs, or the prime minister's office – were granted significant authority and resources to plan, monitor, and review transposition efforts (Zubek, 2010).

The development of strong core executives during the accession period is explained by the presence of high external incentives: namely, the prospect of EU membership. This incentive structure encouraged governments to centralize authority and improve coordination mechanisms in order to meet EU requirements effectively. The institutional strengthening was particularly notable in Hungary and Poland, where prime ministers had relatively strong constitutional powers or political support to centralize transposition efforts.

The theoretical implications of these patterns support a dual-logic framework that accounts for both institutional design and leadership agency. While institutionalist models emphasize the reduction of veto points and the functional efficiency of centralized cabinets in delivering policy outputs, agency-based approaches highlight the role of politically autonomous leaders in shaping accession trajectories. Prime ministers in centralized systems can often bypass legislative deadlock, override sectoral resistance, and reallocate administrative resources toward EU-related priorities. This capacity is especially salient in states with limited bureaucratic autonomy or weak inter-ministerial coordination, where executive direction compensates for institutional underdevelopment. However, the accession-phase benefits of centralization often diminish post-membership. Evidence from Hungary, Poland, and other post-2004 EU members shows that centralization frequently relaxed after accession, once the external incentives for compliance weakened and domestic political dynamics regained prominence. This suggests that while executive concentration may be instrumental in facilitating formal accession, it does not necessarily guarantee sustained compliance or democratic deepening after EU entry.

Nonetheless, the instrumental advantages of centralization must be assessed in light of their normative and institutional trade-offs. While centralized executives may be more efficient in the short term, they can also undermine democratic accountability, particularly when dominant parties erode checks and balances under the guise of EU-driven reform. Moreover, excessive reliance on prime-ministerial leadership risks generating top-down implementation without genuine bureaucratic absorption, thereby jeopardizing the quality and durability of reforms. These concerns are particularly salient in cases where accession was driven more by strategic compliance than by deep-seated institutional convergence. Therefore, theoretical frameworks examining EU accession must integrate the interaction between

institutional structure, leadership dynamics, and administrative capacity. Doing so helps explain both the temporal advantages of executive centralization during accession and its potential limitations in ensuring long-term democratic consolidation.

Concentration of Power in Albania

Given these considerations, I am now going to analyze if and how these dynamics fit the Albanian case, as the concentration of political power under Edi Rama's administration appears to have played a pivotal role in shaping and, in many ways, enhancing Albania's relationship with the EU. This centralization has enabled the executive to pursue a more coherent and uninterrupted reform trajectory that aligns with the EU's external conditionality model. The EU's enlargement framework emphasizes rigorous compliance with criteria on democratic governance, the rule of law, institutional capacity, and anti-corruption. In this context, Albania's political system, long plagued by partisan gridlock, institutional fragmentation, and polarized political contestation, has benefited – at least in the short term – from Rama's consolidation of authority, which has allowed for a more efficient implementation of reforms and a unified dialogue with EU representatives (Brennan & Gassie 2009; Bregu 2024). The capacity to make swift decisions, particularly in politically sensitive domains such as judicial reform, public administration, and electoral governance, has enhanced the credibility of Albania's accession agenda and reassured Brussels of the country's political will to engage with EU norms and standards.
Edi Rama's emergence as a widely admired leader in Western political circles and his ability to craft a compelling media image are rooted in Albania's longstanding foreign policy posture. Since the early 1990s, Albania has consistently pursued a non-interventionist regional policy, despite pressures linked to its kin-state status, particularly regarding Kosovo, Macedonia, and Montenegro. As detailed by Gjevori (2017), this strategy stems from Albania's post-communist weakness, its pro-Western orientation, and the elite consensus that aligning with Western interests was the best path to both national security and regional influence.

Rama inherited and mastered this narrative: Albania as a reliable, cooperative actor in the Balkans – a country that never threatens borders, never fuels ethnic tensions, and positions itself as a stabilising partner. This approach, rooted in pragmatism and the legacy of Albania's communist-era isolation, has earned Western trust. Rama has amplified it through astute media management and symbolic diplomacy, portraying himself as a progressive, cosmopolitan leader who represents a modern, European Albania. The result is a unique blend: a Balkan politician who markets Albania as a small state with big reliability, a partner that creates no problems – and helps solve them.

The 2008 Rama-Berisha electoral reform represents a foundational moment in the concentration of political power in Albania, particularly in the hands of Edi Rama. Although formally a bipartisan agreement, the reform served as a structural shift that significantly altered the balance of power within the Albanian political system. By replacing the mixed-member electoral system with a closed-list regional proportional model, the reform centralized control over candidate selection within party leaderships, effectively removing voter influence over individual representatives. This institutional change curtailed the role of Parliament as a check on executive authority, enabling party leaders – most notably Rama – to exercise greater control over both the legislative agenda and the composition of the legislature itself (Moniquet, 2008).

Over time, this system allowed Rama to consolidate his dominance within the Socialist Party and expand his influence across state institutions. The sidelining of smaller parties reduced political pluralism and narrowed the space for opposition both within and outside Parliament. As a result, the

reform not only reinforced the binary nature of Albanian politics but also entrenched a hierarchical party structure in which loyalty to the leader often outweighs policy debate or independent legislative initiative. In this context, the 2008 reform can be seen as a key mechanism through which Rama has accumulated and maintained power, weakening institutional balances and reinforcing executive centralization in Albania's post-communist political order.

Recent developments underscore the utility of centralized governance in driving forward the EU integration process. In October 2024, Albania opened its first negotiation cluster – Cluster 1, focused on the "fundamentals of democracy, rule of law, and public administration" – and subsequently opened Clusters 6 (External Relations), 2 (Internal Market), and 3 (Competitiveness and Inclusive Growth) by mid-2025. These milestones reflect not only administrative preparedness but also political coordination, enabled by Rama's control over legislative and executive branches. The European Commission's approval of Albania's National Reform Agenda in late 2024 further demonstrates this alignment. By April 2025, the country had received €64.5 million in pre-accession financing, with additional tranches expected, contingent on reform implementation (Friends of Europe, 2025). The capacity to mobilize and absorb EU assistance in a timely and targeted manner reflects the executive coherence that characterizes Rama's administration and the centralization of authority around reform delivery mechanisms.

This capacity for decisive governance must, however, be contextualized within Albania's historical and institutional development, which has long favored centralized authority. The legacy of authoritarian governance – tracing back to the interwar monarchy, the Stalinist communist regime, and the post-1990 hybrid regime dynamics – has created a political culture in which executive dominance is normalized and, to a degree, socially legitimized (Crowley & Blumi 1997; Kalemaj 2016; Fischer & Schmitt 2022). Rama's centralization of power is not an aberration but rather a continuation of this political lineage, albeit cloaked in the formal rhetoric of democratic transition and Europeanization. Despite three decades of electoral democracy and institutional reforms, Albania continues to exhibit characteristics of a hybrid regime, wherein formal democratic institutions coexist with informal practices of elite patronage, limited institutional autonomy, and clientelist networks (Kalemaj & Jano, 2009; Marku & Teqja, 2023). Within this framework, power is concentrated in the hands of a narrow political elite, and authority flows predominantly through executive structures, often sidelining parliamentary oversight, judicial independence, and pluralistic contestation. Rama's ability to exercise centralized control over both government and party structures must be understood as emerging from, and reinforcing, these entrenched patterns of governance.

One of the most illustrative examples of how centralized power has enabled institutional reforms is the creation and operationalization of the Special Anti-Corruption Structure (SPAK) and its investigative arm, the National Bureau of Investigation (BKH). SPAK, which became active in 2019, has emerged as a flagship institution for prosecuting high-level corruption and organized crime – core EU priorities for Albania's accession track. Launched after the country gained EU candidate status in 2014, the SPAK has been the most ambitious and consequential transformation demanded by the EU. It aimed to rebuild public trust in a judiciary long perceived as corrupt, politicized, and ineffective. Approved unanimously in July 2016, the reform introduced constitutional changes and over 25 laws. It followed a dual approach: the structural overhaul of justice institutions and a rigorous vetting process for all judges and prosecutors, focused on asset verification, professional competence, and integrity. The vetting process, monitored by international observers, led to the dismissal or resignation of numerous magistrates, revealing widespread corruption and creating a significant human resources gap. Although implementation has faced challenges – including political resistance, delays, and criticisms of bias –

public support remains strong, largely due to international oversight. The reform is widely seen as Albania's greatest achievement on its EU path, demonstrating a serious commitment to meeting European standards and marking a turning point in the country's rule of law architecture (Feta & Rrupi, 2025).

In 2025, SPAK initiated high-profile cases, including the indictment of former Prime Minister Sali Berisha for abuse of office in relation to land privatization and the arrest of Tirana's Mayor Erion Veliaj over embezzlement of €1.1 million in public funds. These proceedings were interpreted by EU monitors as signs of judicial independence and institutional maturity, though domestic observers remain divided over whether such actions reflect impartial rule of law enforcement or selective justice directed by executive influence. Similarly, the transfer of judicial vetting functions from the Independent Qualification Commission to SPAK in late 2024 marks a consolidation of oversight functions, reinforcing the perception of a state apparatus capable of delivering core reforms.

Digital transformation has also served as a key reform area tied to central planning and executive coordination. In early 2025, the EU and UNOPS launched the "EU4Digital Justice" initiative in Albania, allocating €7.5 million over four years to modernize the judiciary. The project aims to implement an integrated case-management system across prosecutorial offices, improve data analytics capabilities, and ensure interoperability between judicial bodies. These reforms would have been difficult to execute without strong executive backing, particularly in a context where Albania's judiciary has historically suffered from fragmentation, corruption, and weak inter-institutional cooperation. Rama's administration has leveraged its centralized decision-making capacity to facilitate technical alignment with EU standards and to secure necessary donor support, reinforcing Albania's reputation as a credible accession candidate.

However, while the benefits of centralized governance in facilitating EU-Albania cooperation are evident, they must be balanced against the democratic costs of such a concentration of power. Scholars have increasingly warned that this model risks reproducing authoritarian tendencies under a democratic guise (Allamani 2012; Margariti 2022). Rama's political dominance is not limited to the executive and judicial spheres but extends into electoral engineering as well. Amendments to the electoral code passed in July 2024 introduced diaspora voting by mail for the first time – a move broadly welcomed by the EU – but simultaneously reintroduced mechanisms for party leaders to control one-third of candidate placements on electoral lists. Although the reform also mandated gender parity within open-list segments, the balance of control remains skewed toward party elites, limiting electoral competition and citizen influence over representation. These mixed signals complicate the narrative of democratic deepening, revealing a model of reform that advances administrative alignment while potentially consolidating hegemonic control.

The historical and cultural foundations of Albania's political centralization also play a significant role in shaping contemporary EU-Albania dynamics. Research highlights how the persistence of cultural attitudes toward authority – such as deference to strong leadership, collective familial shame, and ethno-nationalist political identification – reinforces societal acceptance of centralized power (Nixon 2009; Idrizi 2020; Blumi 2018). These socio-cultural factors contribute to a political environment where civic engagement remains weak, institutional trust is low, and public expectations of democratic participation are limited. As a result, elite dominance faces relatively little resistance from below, and efforts at democratization remain largely elite-driven and externally prompted. While there is evidence of cultural adaptation to EU norms, traditional attitudes remain resilient, challenging the transformative potential of Europeanization (Elbasani & Puto, 2017).

Finally, Edi Rama's leadership has actively promoted Albania's international profile, using foreign policy engagement as a platform to reinforce domestic legitimacy and EU integration credentials. In May 2025, Albania hosted the sixth European Political Community Summit in Tirana, welcoming over 45 European leaders. The event underscored Albania's perceived role as a stable interlocutor in the Western Balkans, projecting an image of geopolitical reliability and reformist orientation. Similarly, the 2024 creation of KAYO Sh.a. – a state-owned defense enterprise – and its 2025 memorandum with Italy's Fincantieri to develop naval infrastructure in Durrës, reflect an executive strategy to align key sectors with EU and NATO-compatible standards, reinforcing Albania's strategic relevance within European security frameworks.

In conclusion, while the concentration of power under Edi Rama has facilitated Albania's progress toward EU accession by enabling swift and coordinated reform efforts, it also reinforces longstanding authoritarian tendencies that compromise democratic consolidation. As indicated by my findings, the current trade-off appears to favour an improvement in the quality of democracy, due to the scope of EU-driven reforms in certain key areas – reforms whose implementation is certainly facilitated by the centralization of power under Edi Rama and by his perception as a reliable partner. Moreover, while the trend of *stabilitocracy* (Bieber, 2019) is evident across the Western Balkans – where domestic elites consolidate power, weaken democratic institutions, and project an image of stability and pro-European commitment to external actors – Albania has, on balance, experienced a measurable improvement in the quality of its democracy over the past decade, which is not traceable in other countries of the region, e.g. Serbia. Nevertheless, critical issues remain evident, and it remains to be seen whether the positive trend will be sustained in the years to come. The EU's pragmatic engagement with Rama's administration reflects a tension between functional reform implementation and normative commitments to democracy and pluralism. As such, future progress in EU-Albania relations will depend not only on continued technical alignment but also on the ability to address the deeper structural and cultural barriers to democratic governance. The challenge lies in ensuring that centralized power serves as a vehicle for sustainable reform rather than a mechanism for authoritarian entrenchment. Reconciling these dual imperatives appears to be the most plausible path for Albania to achieve both EU membership and meaningful democratic consolidation.

Conclusions

The two case studies presented in this chapter serve to bridge the configurational findings of the QCA with the concrete causal mechanisms through which EU influence operates in specific domestic contexts. Rather than treating Georgia and Albania *as* merely illustrative examples, the analysis uses them to assess whether the sufficient pathways identified in the cross-case comparison are plausible when traced over time. The cases also help clarify the limits of the QCA results by showing how EU-related conditions interact with domestic reforms, institutional constraints, and alternative explanations. In this sense, the conclusions below do not simply restate the empirical findings, but evaluate how far each case corroborates, qualifies, or complicates the broader argument of the thesis.

In Georgia, the first path's logic – ~DEVE paired with EU_PARTN – finds empirical traction in a long arc that begins with severe underdevelopment and state weakness and proceeds through EU-anchored institution-building: early EU regional initiatives (TRACECA/INOGATE) and the 1999 PCA created technical and financial rails; subsequent steps – the 2006 ENP Action Plan, the Eastern Partnership, and especially the 2014 Association Agreement and its DCFTA – bound assistance to measurable rule-of-law, administrative, and rights benchmarks while progressively widening market access. The policy mix combined conditionality with capacity-building (election administration, judiciary reform, public administration, civil-society oversight) and culminated in visa liberalization in 2017, symbolically and practically knitting societal actors to European norms. This trajectory helps explain why quality-of-democracy improvements materialized in a context that still bore the structural imprint of low development: EU investment and legal approximation reduced the "frictions" of underdevelopment without reversing it outright, allowing agency-driven reforms to "work against the grain" of structure. In QCA terms, the absence of development is not a facilitator but a contextual constraint; Georgia's gains occur despite ~DEVE, and EU_PARTN functions as the compensatory driver – consistent with the observed finding that EU_PARTN frequently joins ~DEVE in sufficient packages and sometimes appears alone, particularly for gender and, less often, rule-of-law subdimensions. Within-case sequences also supply alternative or complementary explanations that coexist with the QCA's pathway: the Rose Revolution's anti-corruption blitz and administrative overhauls plausibly increased state capacity independent of EU leverage; later, constitutional reforms and a peaceful alternation in 2012 marked elite bargains supportive of democratic routines; and improvements on corruption perception and HDI may reflect domestic policy learning as much as external anchoring. Countervailing pressures, moreover, complicate any linear EU-causation story: the 2008 war, unresolved territorial conflicts, entrenched media-ownership concentration, and periodic concerns about judicial councils' political insulation all suggest that the same polity can register QCA-consistent sufficiency while harbouring pockets of stagnation or backsliding risk. This heterogeneity maps onto the subdimension analysis: partnership seems especially potent for gender and sometimes for rule of law, while polyarchy appears to depend more heavily on joint configurations (e.g., with ~DEVE, governance effectiveness, or FfA), highlighting that "EU influence" is an umbrella for targeted sectoral mechanisms rather than a monolithic force. Thus, Georgia corroborates the first path not because every democratic indicator rose uniformly, but because the time-ordered interaction of EU-financed/legal reforms with domestic administrative upgrades produced sufficient conditions for improvement even in a structurally hard place.

Albania, by contrast, illuminates the second path's intuition – EU_MEMB prospects paired with concentrated executive authority (~POWERSHARING) – while also clarifying why the case was coded

as deviant in degree rather than typical: the configuration is present with membership in the outcome, yet the intensity or breadth of improvement lags the term score, cautioning against mechanistic readings of accession conditionality. In theoretical terms, fewer domestic veto players and a strong core executive can accelerate acquis transposition and chapter coordination, which helps explain why the QCA repeatedly finds EU_MEMB operating conjuncturally with ~POWERSHARING rather than as a stand-alone driver; in practice, centralized coordination reduces drift and within-government bargaining costs during the pre-accession phase when EU leverage is sharpest. Albania's recent integration profile – hosting the 2022 EU–Western Balkans Summit, aligning via the Western Balkans Quad, tapping IPA and Economic and Investment Plan resources, and pursuing energy diversification – shows sustained engagement with the accession track and with Commission-monitored reforms. Yet the same centralization that speeds formal compliance can generate alternative explanations and limits: monitoring reports continue to flag judicial independence and efficiency problems, slow project absorption, and persistent corruption, implying that executive concentration can substitute for power-sharing in passing laws but not necessarily in deepening impartial enforcement or in distributing authority in ways that thicken accountability. These tensions help make sense of the deviant-in-degree coding: the configuration is present and linked to improvement, but performance shortfalls on implementation and integrity mute the overall gain relative to the term's predicted level. Moreover, the broader configurational scan underscores that EU_MEMB's strongest effects often appear in tandem – with FfA, with EU_PARTN, or with ~POWERSHARING – again signalling that accession incentives tend to empower pro-reform coalitions when a permissive domestic configuration exists rather than functioning as a solitary causal lever. A final set of alternative mechanisms points in the other direction: high-salience leadership politics and partisan dominance can corrode pluralism even as formal EU chapters advance; and where social equality or governmental effectiveness are weaker, EU-driven rule adoption may not translate into everyday democratic practice, a point consistent with the subdimension evidence that membership is most reliable for polyarchy when coupled with FfA and for rule of law when combined with EU_PARTN and institutional streamlining.

Stepping back, the two cases validate the QCA conclusion in complementary ways. Georgia demonstrates how, under ~DEVE, partnership-heavy Europeanization can compensate for structural deficits by building administrative capacity and legal routines that lift democratic quality in targeted domains; the fact that partnership frequently appears on its own or with ~DEVE across dozens of alternative specifications strengthens this claim's robustness beyond a single model. Albania shows that, when the membership horizon is credible, concentrated authority can be democracy-enhancing insofar as it streamlines accession-linked reforms – yet the gain is contingent on parallel advances in judicial autonomy and integrity, which, if lagging, produce the very "deviant-in-degree" profile observed in the solution plot. The robustness and clustering diagnostics support generalization: modest parameter sensitivity (constant between 0.85–0.87) and small pooled-to-between consistency distances indicate that while effect sizes vary, the sign and structure of the three paths travel across regions; the Western Balkans show slightly weaker explanatory strength for several terms, which is consistent with the Albania narrative of partial – but not uniform – translation of accession incentives into high-quality democratic practice. Finally, the subdimension breakdown provides a disciplined way to entertain alternative explanations without abandoning the configurational core: where gender equality advanced in Georgia and elsewhere, partnership frequently acted alone; where polyarchy rose with membership, FfA and institutional concentration were typical accompaniments; and where rule-of-law gains appeared, partnership and membership often reinforced each other – patterns that mirror the three consolidated paths and underline that "EU effects" work by activating specific domestic complementarities rather than by imposing a single model of change.

In sum, the analysis supports a cautious but substantively meaningful claim: the EU can help raise democratic quality, but how – and how far – depends on whether partnership resources counteract structural scarcity (~DEVE), whether accession leverage couples with concentrated authority (~POWERSHARING), or whether, in the absence of accession, inclusive institutional bargains (POWERSHARING * ~EU_MEMB) generate legitimacy and accountability from within; Georgia and Albania corroborate these logics while also reminding us – through their alternative mechanisms and shortfalls – that sufficiency is configurational, not deterministic.

CONCLUSION

Across the last decade and a half, the European Union (EU) has navigated a radically altered normative and strategic environment. The apparent certainties of the post-Cold War settlement – once thought to have consolidated liberal constitutionalism across Central and Eastern Europe and to have furnished a replicable template for democratic socialization in the neighbourhood – have eroded under the combined pressure of autocratization, democratic fatigue, crisis governance, and geopolitical contestation. Within the Union, the thickening discourse on rule-of-law backsliding, the activation of Article 7 TEU procedures, the harnessing of budgetary conditionality to protect the Union's financial interests, and the expansion of the Commission's monitoring architecture testify to an internal militant turn – understood as the pre-emptive defence of liberal-democratic baselines. Beyond the Union, in the Western Balkans and the Southern and Eastern Partnerships, domestic political settlements have evolved under external shocks – most notably Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, energy-price turbulence, pandemic management, and the proliferation of disinformation ecosystems – creating windows of vulnerability and opportunity that conditioned the returns to EU leverage. The result has been a world in which liberal norms are neither self-executing nor self-sustaining; they appear to require active guardianship and, at times, restrictive measures to prevent their erosion by actors ready to instrumentalize pluralism against itself.

This thesis set out to interpret and assess that guardianship through the analytical lens of militant democracy, translated from its classic intra-state moorings – where democracies adopt self-defensive rules to impede their own subversion – into the EU's external action repertoire. The motivating puzzle was twofold. First, can the EU, which lacks some of the traditional coercive instruments and sovereignty prerogatives of a state, operate as a militant-democracy agent toward third countries without forfeiting the liberal commitments that ground its legitimacy? Second, under what combinations of domestic structures, institutional constraints, and EU levers does such an agent achieve measurable improvements in democratic quality rather than surface compliance? Answering these questions required an analytical framework capable of addressing conjunctural causation, equifinality, and timing. The thesis therefore adopted a configurational perspective that treated EU leverage not as a single scalar "pressure" but as part of packages that vary in credibility, temporality, and density across enlargement and neighbourhood settings. The inquiry started from the intuition that effectiveness is conditional: the same EU instrument can produce different outcomes depending on how it interacts with several other conditions, including domestic veto players, the distribution of organizational capacity within the state, the degree of societal polarization, and the intensity of countervailing geopolitical pressures.

Conceptually, the project advanced three refinements. First, it distinguished membership-anchored conditionality – where the teleology of accession supplies a horizon of credible rewards and the acquis creates dense legalization – from partnership-based conditionality – where sectoral access and financial assistance substitute for the membership carrot, and where reputational stakes and legalization are typically thinner. Second, it reframed militant democracy as a spectrum of preventive-defence measures, ranging from positive incentives that harden rule-of-law guardrails early in reform cycles to targeted penalties, de-platforming, and reputational sanctions that raise the costs of non-compliance for anti-reform elites. Third, it emphasized temporal credibility: not only whether tools exist, but whether they are announced clearly, sequenced persuasively, and applied promptly, especially during "windows of receptivity" when domestic coalitions are more likely to convert external signals into institutional change. The question was not whether "sticks" replace "carrots," but how the Union sequences, calibrates, and communicates both so as to shape elite expectations and empower societal actors that

prize liberal-democratic ordering. This framing rejected a binary opposition between normative and interest-based logics: in practice, the EU's external agency is entangled with other proximate and structural conditions. The task, then, was to specify the scope conditions under which this entanglement strengthens or weakens democratic outcomes.

Set against this context, the thesis positioned the Western Balkans and the Southern and Eastern Partnerships as laboratories for theory-building. Both regions exhibit high variance in democratic trajectories, dense institutional linkages to the EU, and repeated cycles of reform momentum and stalling. Yet their interfaces with the Union differ in ways that should matter for militant agency: accession negotiations and chapter-based monitoring in the Balkans versus association agreements and sectoral integration in the East and the South; the salience of enlargement geopolitics versus the politics of proximity; and the role of acute security threats in shaping local elite incentives. These differences allowed leverage of cross-regional comparisons to identify whether and when membership carrots are uniquely capable of moving the equilibrium, or whether a well-designed partnership toolkit can approximate their function. In this broader intellectual and political landscape, the thesis was guided by the following research question: *Under what conditions can the EU be an effective militant-democracy agent in terms of its response to increasing autocratization among its neighbourhood partner countries?*

The thesis unfolded by combining conceptual clarification, cross-case configurational analysis, and nested case-study inquiry.

Part I was a structured, critical review of three literatures. The democratization literature (Chapter 1) furnished baseline controversies about modernization and its critiques, state capacity, elite settlements, and the role of inequality and polarization in shaping regime outcomes. It highlighted why external actors rarely operate as prime movers and why domestic institutions that diffuse power – independent judiciaries, plural media markets, impartial enforcement – are central in converting exogenous signals into durable change. The EU external-governance literature (Chapter 2) supplied cumulative insights about conditionality, socialization, legal approximation, and assistance allocation, while noting recurrent puzzles about inconsistency, double standards, and the attenuation of leverage absent the membership horizon. The militant-democracy literature (Chapter 3) clarified the normative and institutional dilemmas of defending liberal orders through pre-emptive constraints, focusing attention on the calibration of restrictions (e.g., party bans, media regulation, vetting) so that they remain proportionate, reversible, and anchored in due process. From these strands, the thesis distilled expectations about how EU instruments interact with domestic opportunity structures and how timing and credibility condition their efficacy.

In Part II, Chapter 4 has shown that democratic improvement across EU partner countries is best explained in configurational rather than monocausal terms. The fsQCA identifies three sufficient pathways to enhanced Quality of Democracy. First, in low- and middle-income settings, low levels of development do not preclude democratic gains when combined either with relatively high equality or with strong EU partnership investment. Second, in countries with a credible accession perspective, EU membership incentives are associated with improvements in democratic quality when combined with limited power-sharing, suggesting that more concentrated executive coordination may, under specific conditions, facilitate compliance with EU-driven reforms. Third, in the absence of membership prospects, extensive power-sharing can itself sustain democratic improvement by broadening inclusion and stabilizing divided political contexts.

Chapter 5 used a nested design that selected two cases for the EU centered hypotheses pathways – Georgia (*~DEVE*eu_partn*) and Albania (*~powersharing*eu_member*) – to probe mechanisms and refine scope conditions suggested by the QCA. Case selection was theory-guided: Georgia and Albania jointly maximize theoretical relevance to the EU-centred hypotheses while preserving methodological discipline within the QCA framework. Georgia served as a typical case for the pathway linking low development with strong EU partnership, showing how EU-backed financial support and institutional capacity-building can sustain democratic improvements even under adverse structural conditions. Albania, instead, functioned as a deviant-in-degree case for the pathway combining EU membership incentives with limited power-sharing. Its trajectory suggests that executive concentration may facilitate accession-related reforms, but does not automatically ensure deeper accountability, judicial independence, or effective implementation. Taken together, the cases refine rather than simply confirm the QCA results. They show that EU influence is conditional, sector-specific, and mediated by domestic institutions, making sufficiency configurational rather than deterministic.

In sum, the thesis neither endorses triumphalist narratives in which the EU inexorably socializes its partners nor fatalist accounts in which enlargement fatigue and great-power rivalry doom external democracy promotion. Instead, it specifies the conditional architecture within which a militant-democracy role for the EU can enhance rather than imperil liberal quality: calibrated sequencing; legalization density; watchdog-first assistance; precise, prompt, and proportionate enforcement; synchronization with domestic coalitions; and credible geopolitical shielding. These elements – designed together rather than piecemeal – maximize the probability that external pressure produces deep institutionalization rather than surface alignment and that gains, once achieved, are resilient to political turnover, fiscal shocks, and disinformation cycles.

The study's contributions should be read with commensurate caution. Methodologically, QCA provides leverage on conjunctural causation but trades off degrees of freedom against within-case nuance. Results are sensitive to calibration choices – the placement of full-membership and full-non-membership anchors, thresholds for frequency cut-offs in the truth table, and the coding of intermediate-solution expectations. Although robustness checks and cluster diagnostics were conducted, different calibrations and additional cases could shift solution coverage and consistency. Limited diversity in the data – where theoretically plausible combinations of conditions are absent or rare – constrains the extraction of decisive solutions and risks over-interpreting patterns driven by a subset of cases. Causal asymmetry complicates interpretation: the absence of improvement does not mirror the presence of decline, and mechanisms may differ even when configurations look similar. Finally, measurement error remains a non-trivial hazard: indicators for "government effectiveness," "power-sharing," or "freedom from autocrats" compress complex institutional realities and may imperfectly capture de facto autonomy and capacity.

Substantively, the two case studies cannot exhaust the repertoire of elite strategies or societal responses. The Albanian experience of judicial vetting, while instructive, may not travel to settings where legalism is weaker, where professional associations lack autonomy, or where party systems are more fractionalized. The Georgian dynamics of media capture and judicial politicization, although emblematic, may interact differently with EU signals in cases where oligarchic networks are less centralized or where civil-society watchdogs have deeper penetration in local administration. Moreover, both cases sit in a regional environment shaped by heightened security externalities after 2014 and especially after 2022; the salience of security-first trade-offs may not generalize to other temporal slices. Endogeneity and selection biases also counsel caution: the EU tends to engage more intensely where

reform potential is visible, and partners self-select into deeper agreements when domestic elites perceive benefits, which complicates causal attribution. Finally, the thesis focused on improvements in democratic quality; the dynamics of resilience under prolonged stress – how gains are maintained during economic downturns, disinformation campaigns, or leadership transitions – requires dedicated analysis.

That said, the limitations point directly to a forward research agenda.

First, micro-foundations. Field-experimental and survey-experimental designs could trace how public opinion and elite expectations respond to specific EU signals – tightening of conditionality, activation of targeted sanctions, or conditional disbursement of sectoral funds. Embedding experiments in partner-country surveys around reform windows would help identify heterogeneous treatment effects across partisan identities, socio-economic strata, and media-consumption patterns. Complementary elite-interview experiments could probe how political and bureaucratic actors update beliefs when confronted with credible threats of reputational costs or loss of access to EU markets.

Second, process tracing at scale. A larger set of nested case studies – Serbia, Montenegro, Moldova, and Ukraine – could map mechanism profiles that either unlock or block EU leverage: judicial insulation, media-market restructuring, party-finance transparency, procurement anti-capture, and civil-service professionalization. Comparative process tracing would allow identification of recurring sequences – e.g., anti-corruption scandal → public-opinion shock → EU benchmark tightening → elite defection → institutional hardening – and of conditions under which sequences stall. This work should be attentive to how informal institutions – clientelistic networks, media advertising markets, prosecutorial hierarchies –mediate the impact of EU rules.

Third, temporal dynamics. Event-history and sequence-analysis approaches could clarify when windows of receptivity open and close around elections, crises, or constitutional moments, and how the EU can time interventions accordingly. Time-sensitive modelling of compliance – tracking, for instance, the lag between benchmark announcement and legislative change, or between legal transposition and effective implementation – would help calibrate conditionality to realistic bureaucratic and political calendars. Sequence methods can also test whether early gains in judicial independence or media pluralism have threshold effects that change the slope of subsequent compliance.

Finally, a note on normative guardrails. A militant posture risks sliding into illiberalism if instruments are not proportionate, reversible, and tethered to due process. Future work should therefore integrate doctrinal and legal analysis: what safeguards ensure that party regulation, media de-platforming, or vetting mechanisms do not become tools of partisan advantage? How can the EU's external action embed rights-protective procedures while remaining nimble enough to pre-empt autocratization? What oversight architectures – judicial review, independent ombuds institutions, parliamentary scrutiny – are most effective at preventing the instrumentalization of militant tools? The answers require an interdisciplinary approach that treats law and political economy as complements. Advancing this agenda would move scholarship beyond binary verdicts on the EU's external democratic agency and toward a contingent theory of militant democracy that is both normatively defensible and operationally effective across the Union's diverse periphery.

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Appendix A – Full Country Reports

Albania

Stage of Accession Negotiations

Albania was recognized as a potential EU candidate in 2003, in 2006 the SAA and Interim Agreement was signed and the country applied for membership in 2009. Granted candidate status in 2014, it received an unconditional recommendation to start accession talks in 2018. By March 2020, the European Council endorsed opening negotiations. The screening process began in July 2022, with the European Commission submitting a report on Cluster 1 in July 2023.

Evaluation of Chapter 23

Functioning of the Judiciary

Moderate progress has been made in judiciary functioning, with significant advances in justice reform implementation and positive results from the vetting of judges and prosecutors. However, the pace of appeal proceedings needs to be accelerated to meet revised constitutional deadlines while ensuring process quality.

Fight Against Corruption
Some progress was recorded in the fight against corruption, including high-level convictions and financial investigations. However, corruption remains widespread in public and business sectors, with preventive measures showing limited impact, particularly in vulnerable areas. Despite continued efforts, corruption remains a serious concern.

Fundamental Rights
Albania's legal framework provides a strong foundation for protecting fundamental rights, but implementation efforts need to be intensified. Urgent measures are required to address personal data breaches and improve handling. Progress includes enhanced probation services, gender-responsive budgeting, and support for vulnerable groups. However, transparency in property registration and the adoption of remaining legislation for national minorities and personal data protection require significant advancement.

Freedom of Expression
The country shows moderate preparation in freedom of expression, with limited progress such as amending the Law on Audiovisual Media to align with EU standards. However, media independence is still hindered by political and business interests, lack of transparency, media ownership concentration, and ongoing intimidation of journalists.

Minority Rights
No progress was made on adopting the remaining implementing legislation for the 2017 Law on National Minorities. Key issues like self-identification and language use remain unaddressed. Effective implementation and strengthening of the State Committee on National Minorities are needed. The national census, starting in September 2023, must be conducted transparently and in line with international standards.

Overall, Albania has a positive assessment, having made moderate progress in judiciary functioning and anti-corruption efforts but still faces significant challenges, particularly in accelerating appeal proceedings and addressing widespread corruption. While the legal framework for fundamental rights and freedom of expression is in place, its implementation requires substantial improvement, with particular attention needed for minority rights.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Stage of Accession Negotiations

Bosnia and Herzegovina's EU accession journey began with the opening of Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) negotiations in November 2005. The SAA was signed in June 2008 and entered into force in July 2015. Bosnia and Herzegovina submitted its EU membership application in February 2016. The EU Council invited the Commission to provide an Opinion in September 2016, which was issued in May 2019, highlighting 14 key priorities. The EU Council endorsed this Opinion in December 2019. Following the Commission's recommendation, Bosnia and Herzegovina was granted candidate status in December 2022. The Commission recommended starting accession negotiations in November 2023, contingent upon meeting membership criteria. The European Council decided to open these negotiations in December 2023, with a progress report due by March 2024. The accession negotiation process officially began in July 2024.

Evaluation of Chapter 23

Functioning of the Judiciary

While there has been progress on Opinion key priority 6 regarding judicial functioning, the Commission signals ongoing deterioration which necessitates urgent measures to enhance integrity and restore public trust. The judiciary's poor performance continues to hinder citizens' rights and efforts against corruption.

Fight Against Corruption

The report shows that the country is at an early stage in combating corruption, with no progress on key priorities and recommendations. The absence of a draft law on conflicts of interest, inconsistent legislation, and selective prosecution hinder efforts. Corruption prevention remains weak, with minimal convictions and inadequate follow-up.

Fundamental Rights

The report shows that while the legislative and institutional framework for fundamental rights is largely established, efforts to address key priorities have been limited. Recent amendments to the Law on the Human Rights Ombudsman and setbacks such as criminal penalties for defamation and restrictions on civil society mark significant regressions. Freedom of assembly and voting rights require urgent reforms, and issues like divided education, gender-based violence, and insufficient minority protection persist. Despite adopting new action plans, previous recommendations remain unaddressed and valid.

Freedom of Expression

The report shows some level of preparation in freedom of expression but highlights significant setbacks. Backsliding on key priorities, including the protection of journalists and media freedom, is evident due to political pressure, intimidation, and inadequate institutional responses. Legislative frameworks remain unaligned with European standards, with persistent issues like the reintroduction of defamation

penalties and proposed laws threatening online freedom. Recommendations from the previous year remain unmet and are still relevant.

Minority Rights
The report shows that participation of national minorities in political and public life remains low, with no progress on a national strategy for their protection. Authorities have not addressed recommendations to condemn hate speech or promote intercultural dialogue. National minorities' councils need to be more proactive, and recent complaints to the Ombudsman highlight ongoing issues. The exclusion of minorities from presidential and House of Peoples elections, condemned by the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), underscores the urgent need for constitutional and electoral reforms to ensure equality.

Overall, Bosnia faces considerable challenges, with the judiciary's integrity declining and anti-corruption efforts lacking progress. The legal framework for fundamental rights and freedom of expression exists but is poorly implemented, marked by recent setbacks. Significant reforms are needed, particularly to address issues related to minority rights and ensure effective legal protections.

Georgia

Stage of Accession Negotiations
In June 2014, Georgia signed the Association Agreement and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), which entered into force in July 2016. The country applied for EU membership in March 2022. Following this, in June 2022, the European Council endorsed 12 key priorities, as outlined in the Commission's Opinion, which recommended granting candidate status. An analytical report by the Commission in February 2023 assessed Georgia's alignment with the EU acquis. By June 2023, the Commission provided an oral update to the Council regarding progress on the 12 key priorities. Georgia was included in the Enlargement Package reports for the first time in November 2023, during which the Commission recommended granting candidate status, contingent upon the completion of certain steps. Subsequently, in December 2023, the European Council granted candidate status to Georgia, with the expectation that the relevant steps would be undertaken.

Evaluation of Chapter 23

Functioning of the Judiciary

The report shows that Georgia has some level of preparation in aligning its judiciary with EU acquis and European standards, though overall progress has been limited. Although previous reforms have improved the legal framework and justice system organization, significant challenges remain, particularly in strengthening the integrity of high judicial bodies. Recent legislative changes have made some progress, including amendments to the Law on Common Courts and addressing some Venice Commission recommendations. However, critical reforms needed to ensure the independence, accountability, and impartiality of judicial institutions, including the High Council of Justice and the Supreme Court, remain unaddressed. Further reforms are required to align fully with European standards and Venice Commission recommendations.
Fight Against Corruption
The report shows some progress in anti-corruption efforts, with legal frameworks largely aligning with EU standards. Recent reforms include expanding asset declarations and establishing an Anti-Corruption

Bureau. However, tackling high-level corruption and vested interests remains a challenge, and a new national anti-corruption strategy is still pending.

Fundamental Rights
The report shows that the legislative and institutional framework for fundamental rights is largely established. Progress includes developing an action plan for the National Human Rights Strategy, consulting with civil society, and submitting personal data protection and investigative service laws to the Venice Commission. Priorities related to vulnerable groups, gender equality, and the ECtHR remain ongoing.

Freedom of Expression
The report shows some level of preparation on freedom of expression, with limited progress. Amendments to the Law on Broadcasting align it with EU directives, and critical media reporting is available. However, political party ownership of media outlets persists, and ownership concentration remains an issue. Progress includes electoral amendments on party financing and improved dialogue between the government and civil society.

Minority Rights
The report shows that approximately 13.1% of the population belongs to national minorities, with limited political representation and systemic educational challenges for minority groups. While the 2021-2030 state strategy aims to improve civic equality and integration, including language support, issues persist in educational outcomes and media freedom. Discrimination against religious communities also remains, with unequal privileges for the Orthodox Church compared to other religions.

Overall, Georgia has made some progress in aligning its judiciary with EU standards, but significant reforms are still needed, especially concerning the independence of high judicial bodies. Anti-corruption efforts show some advancement with new legal frameworks and institutions, though challenges with high-level corruption persist. Fundamental rights and freedom of expression are under development, but issues such as media ownership and minority rights, including educational and representation challenges, require further attention and reform.

Kosovo

Stage of Accession Negotiations

Kosovo's approach to the EU began with the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP) launched at the Zagreb Summit in November 2000. The Commission adopted a communication on "A European Future for Kosovo" in April 2005, followed by the UN Special Envoy launching status negotiations in February 2006. The Council acknowledged Kosovo's declaration of independence in February 2008 and established the EU Rule of Law mission (EULEX) the same month. Kosovo adopted its Constitution in June 2008, and EULEX became operational in December 2008. The Commission issued a communication titled "Kosovo-Fulfilling its European Perspective" in October 2009 and began a technical dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia in March 2011. The visa liberalisation dialogue started in January 2012, with a roadmap issued in June 2012. The SAA entered into force in April 2016, following initialing in July 2014. In July 2018, the Commission confirmed Kosovo met visa liberalization benchmarks, pending an EP decision. The Economic & Investment Plan for the Western

Balkans was adopted in October 2020, alongside a revised enlargement methodology presented in February 2020 to support Kosovo's EU integration.

Evaluation of Chapter 23

Functioning of the Judiciary

Kosovo is in the early stages of developing an effective judicial system. Despite some progress, such as improved court scheduling and online criminal record access, concerns persist due to inefficient human resources, recent salary reductions affecting judicial independence, and the need for comprehensive justice reforms.

Fight Against Corruption
The report shows that there is early to moderate progress in fighting corruption. New regulations on party auditing and campaign financing were adopted, but challenges persist with implementing anti-corruption laws, low asset confiscation, and enforcement of preventive measures. Corruption remains a serious concern, with a need for robust criminal justice responses.

Fundamental Rights
While the legal framework for fundamental rights aligns with European standards, additional efforts are needed for effective enforcement. Recent advancements include new laws and improved Ombudsperson recommendations, but challenges persist in coordinating human rights protections and ensuring equal access.

Freedom of Expression
Despite the media environment being vibrant and generally aligned with European standards, progress remains limited. Issues persist with physical attacks, threats, and censorship, especially in northern areas. There has been no advancement in key media laws, and financial instability and transparency concerns continue.

Minority Rights
The report highlights a robust legal framework for protecting non-majority community rights, with ongoing efforts to address key concerns such as education, employment, and cultural identity. However, the pending 2023-2027 strategy and questions about the recent appointment of a Kosovo Serb Minister for Communities and Return raise concerns about constitutional compliance.

Overall, Kosovo is making initial progress in judicial development, with improvements in court operations but facing challenges in human resources and judicial independence. Anti-corruption efforts show early to moderate progress, hindered by implementation issues and low enforcement. Fundamental rights protections are in place but require better enforcement. Freedom of expression faces issues with media attacks and lack of legal advancements. Minority rights are supported by a strong legal framework, but concerns remain over strategy implementation and constitutional compliance.

Moldova

Stage of Accession Negotiations

Moldova signed the Association Agreement and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) in June 2014, which entered into force in July 2016. In March 2022, Moldova applied for EU membership, and in June 2022, the European Council granted candidate status based on the Commission's recommendation. In February 2023, the Commission published an analytical report assessing Moldova's alignment with the EU acquis. This was followed by an oral update in June 2023 on the progress made in addressing nine specified steps. In November 2023, the Commission recommended opening accession negotiations, and in December 2023, the European Council decided to begin these negotiations. The formal start of accession negotiations was marked by the first intergovernmental conference in June 2024. Additionally, November 2023 saw Moldova included in the Enlargement Package reports for the first time.

Evaluation of Chapter 23

Fight Against Corruption
The report indicates that the country has made some progress in fighting corruption, with clarified institutional mandates and new legislation facilitating the conclusion of a high-profile case. While there has been a slight increase in high-level corruption convictions and whistle-blower law amendments, persistent obstacles to reform remain.

Fundamental Rights
The legislative and institutional framework is largely established, with a commitment to international human rights obligations. Recent efforts include implementing the Istanbul Convention, strengthening the Equality Council and the People's Advocate, and adopting gender equality and Roma support programs. However, challenges persist, including discrimination against minorities, persons with disabilities, and LGBTIQ individuals, as well as poor detention conditions.

Freedom of Expression
The report indicates a pluralistic media environment with some progress in freedom of expression. Notable advancements include legislation to prevent media ownership concentration and enhance transparency. Efforts by the Audiovisual Council to implement these rules need strengthening. The Audiovisual Media Services Code is being revised to address political bias, and steps are being taken to combat disinformation, particularly online. In December 2022, six TV stations rebroadcasting Russian content were suspended, though this decision faced legal challenges. There were reports of intimidation and harassment of journalists.

Minority Rights
The Commission highlights challenges faced by national minorities, particularly regarding language barriers that affect access to public services, including court proceedings. The Agency for Interethnic Relations, with a new director appointed in September 2022, oversees these issues. A new program for 2023-2025 was adopted to strengthen interethnic relations, in line with the 2017-2027 strategy. The country has ratified the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, and there are no restrictions on fundamental freedoms for ethnic or national minorities. Efforts are underway to enhance minority representation in politics, including increasing the participation of Roma women.

Overall, Moldova has a positive assessment. The country made progress in combating corruption with new legislation and a slight rise in high-level convictions, though reform challenges persist. The legal framework for fundamental rights is solid, with recent improvements, but issues like discrimination and poor detention conditions remain. Freedom of expression has seen advancements, but media

transparency and journalist safety need further enhancement. While there are efforts to improve minority rights, including addressing language barriers and enhancing political representation, challenges persist, especially in ensuring effective implementation and overcoming legal hurdles.

Montenegro

Stage of Accession Negotiations

Montenegro's EU accession process began with its declaration of independence in June 2006. It signed the SAA in October 2007, which entered into force in May 2010. Montenegro applied for EU membership in December 2008, and the Council confirmed its candidate status in December 2010. Accession negotiations started on June 29, 2012, following the European Council's endorsement of Montenegro's compliance with membership criteria. The negotiations saw various chapters opened over the years, including rule of law chapters 23 and 24 in December 2013. By December 2017, negotiations had progressed to several key chapters. The revised enlargement methodology was presented in February 2020, and the Economic & Investment Plan for the Western Balkans was adopted in October 2020. As of June 2024, the EU confirmed that Montenegro had met the interim benchmarks for Chapters 23 and 24, reflecting significant progress in its accession process.

Evaluation of Chapter 23

Functioning of the Judiciary

Montenegro's judicial system is moderately prepared, with limited progress on key reforms. Challenges include unfilled critical positions and interim appointments, impacting leadership and management. The Constitutional Court lacked a quorum from September 2022 to February 2023 and still has a vacant position. The independence, impartiality, and accountability of the judiciary require significant improvement. The Law on Judicial Council and judges and the Law on State Prosecution Service need amendments to meet European standards. Additionally, the efficiency of the judiciary must be enhanced through better human, financial, and ICT resources. A new strategy for judicial network rationalisation is pending, and a strong commitment from both the executive and judiciary is essential for effective reform implementation.

Fight Against Corruption

Progress remains limited. Corruption, including high-level corruption, continues to be a significant issue, with state structures heavily affected. The legislative and strategic framework for combating corruption needs upgrading to meet EU standards, including a new strategy and action plan. The Anti-Corruption Agency (ACA) has shown improved quantitative results, but its independence and effectiveness must be further ensured. Although there has been progress in investigating high-level corruption cases, the justice system must demonstrate a robust, consistent response. Improvements are needed in investigations, prosecutions, asset seizure, and overall anti-corruption measures, with a focus on sectors most vulnerable to corruption.

Fundamental Rights

The legal and institutional framework for fundamental rights is mostly in place, but significant improvements are needed for effective implementation. Legislative reforms, particularly in non-discrimination, are urgent. Vulnerable groups, such as Roma, Egyptians, people with disabilities, and LGBTIQ individuals, remain victims of widespread discrimination, hate speech, and hate crimes.

Immediate action is required to enhance access to justice and enforce rights, especially for these marginalized communities.

Freedom of Expression
The media environment is diverse and generally pluralistic, but progress on freedom of expression has been limited. Although authorities have responded promptly to new instances of violence against journalists, unresolved old cases remain without effective judicial follow-up. The government's delay in finalizing and presenting new media legislation to Parliament is concerning. Immediate action is needed to address outstanding recommendations from the commission monitoring media violence, especially concerning unresolved cases. While the national broadcaster has maintained balanced coverage, it must uphold the highest standards of media integrity. There is a pressing need to combat disinformation and online harassment while safeguarding freedom of expression. The media landscape continues to be highly politically polarized, with insufficient adherence to journalistic ethics and the lack of effective self-regulation mechanisms.

Minority Rights
The report shows progress on minority rights, with recent submissions on the European Charter and the Framework Convention. Despite adopting new action plans, issues persist, including unequal parliamentary representation and insufficient data on past strategies. Significant funds were allocated to support minority rights, though financial mismanagement investigations are underway. Recommendations for direct appointments to Minority Councils were also proposed.

Overall, Montenegro is moderately prepared in its judicial functioning, with significant challenges in leadership and efficiency, requiring urgent reforms. Anti-corruption progress is limited, with ongoing issues in high-level corruption and effectiveness of the Anti-Corruption Agency. Fundamental rights protections are in place but need stronger enforcement, especially for vulnerable groups. Freedom of expression is constrained by unresolved violence against journalists and delayed media legislation. Although there has been progress in minority rights, issues remain with representation and financial management, necessitating further action to enhance support and implementation.

North Macedonia

Stage of Accession Negotiations

North Macedonia was recognized as a potential EU candidate at the Thessaloniki summit in 2003, and its SAA has been in place since 2004. The country applied for EU membership in March 2004 and was granted candidate status in December 2005. The Commission recommended starting accession talks in October 2009, with conditions related to the Pržino agreement and reform priorities. By April 2018, the recommendation was unconditional, and it was reaffirmed in May 2019. The European Council approved negotiations in March 2020. Negotiations officially began in July 2022, with the Commission's screening process advancing and a report on Cluster 1 submitted in July 2023.

Evaluation of Chapter 23

Functioning of the Judiciary

The report indicates that the judicial system is at a moderate level of preparation, with no notable progress during the reporting period. Concerns were raised over political influence following the dismissal of the Judicial Council President. The adoption of a new judicial reform strategy is delayed, and progress on human resources and promotions remains limited. Efforts to upgrade the automated court case management system and introduce a similar system in the Public Prosecutor's Office continue.

Fight Against Corruption

The country is in a state of preparation regarding the prevention and fight against corruption, with no progress made during the reporting period. Corruption remains widespread and problematic, with delays and reversals in high-level cases leading to expirations of the statute of limitations. Recent amendments to the Criminal Code, which reduced penalties for corruption-related offenses, hinder investigations and prosecutions, raising significant concerns.

Fundamental Rights

The legal framework for protecting fundamental rights is partially aligned with EU standards, but implementation remains inconsistent. Recent amendments to the Criminal Code address gender-based violence, yet victim services and budgeting need improvement. Discrimination against persons with disabilities persists, and prison conditions are poor. Coordination between human rights bodies is formalized, but oversight mechanisms, including for police and prisons, are incomplete. Funding for minority protection and statelessness resolution shows some progress.

Freedom of Expression

North Macedonia is between some and moderate level of preparation on freedom of expression, with limited progress made. Media freedom is generally supported, and recent legal changes improved protections for journalists. However, attacks and threats against media professionals persist. Transparency in state and political advertising needs enhancement, and reforms are needed for the public service broadcaster's independence and sustainability. The appointment of key media oversight bodies remains delayed, and journalists' working conditions continue to be difficult.

Minority Rights

Efforts to protect minorities have seen partial implementation of the national strategy for a multi-ethnic society. However, more political backing, better coordination, and adequate funding are needed to foster equal opportunities and social cohesion. The Language Implementation Agency and the Agency for Community Rights Realization lack sufficient staff and funds, impacting their effectiveness. Local representation of non-majority communities remains inadequate. The country should ratify the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages and develop a new strategy for 2023-2025 centered on "one society and interculturalism".

Overall, North Macedonia shows limited preparation in aligning with EU standards, but there has been limited progress. The judiciary faces issues with independence and efficiency, requiring urgent reforms. Corruption remains pervasive, with no advancement in tackling high-level cases and problematic legislative changes. Fundamental rights protections are partially aligned with EU standards but need improved implementation, particularly for gender-based violence, disability discrimination, and prison conditions. Freedom of expression is constrained by attacks on journalists and delays in media reforms. Efforts to protect minority rights are ongoing but need enhanced political support, resources, and representation.

Serbia

Stage of Accession Negotiations

Serbia, identified as a potential EU candidate in 2003, received a European partnership in 2008 and formally applied for membership in 2009. It was granted candidate status in *March* 2012, and the SAA came into effect in September 2013. Following the European Council's decision in June 2013, negotiations formally began with the 1st Intergovernmental Conference in January 2014. As of now, Serbia has opened 22 of 35 chapters, including all from clusters 1 and 4, with two chapters provisionally closed.

Evaluation of Chapter 23

Functioning of the Judiciary

Serbia has made some progress in judicial reforms, notably with the adoption of laws implementing the 2022 constitutional amendments. However, two key laws, the Law on Judicial Academy and the Law on Seats and Territorial Jurisdiction of Courts, are still pending. While the Venice Commission positively assessed the new legislation and process, challenges remain in ensuring the judiciary's impartiality, accountability, and efficiency. Implementation delays persist, particularly in recruitment and promotion based on merit. Disciplinary bodies need strengthening, and undue political influence continues to be a concern. Serbia's commitment to investigating war crimes remains insufficient, with continued public support for convicted war criminals.

Fight Against Corruption

The report highlights that Serbia has made some strides in the fight against corruption, yet progress remains limited. While steps were taken to address recommendations from the Group of States against Corruption (GRECO), key measures, including the adoption of a national anti-corruption strategy and action plan, are still pending. The draft strategy and action plan presented to the European Commission include many relevant benchmarks but lack full implementation. Despite a slight increase in convictions for high-level corruption and new investigations, there is a decline in new indictments and no cases of asset confiscation. Corruption continues to be widespread, necessitating stronger political commitment and a more effective criminal justice response.

Fundamental Rights

Serbia's framework for fundamental rights is largely established but requires better implementation. The Ombudsman's re-election in April 2023 occurred without cross-party backing, and the office still lacks resources for new powers. Recruitment for the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and Personal Data Protection is delayed. Execution of European Court of Human Rights decisions needs clearer regulation. Implementation of new strategies on gender equality, anti-discrimination, and Roma inclusion has begun, but monitoring and *action* plan deadlines are significantly overdue. National minority councils have been reconstituted, and consultations are ongoing for a new *action* plan to protect minority rights.

Freedom of Expression

The Commission reveals that Serbia has made limited progress on freedom of expression. Despite swift responses from the police and prosecution to threats against journalists, issues like intimidation, Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs), and restrictions on reporting persist. While

amendments to media laws aim to enhance regulatory independence and transparency, challenges remain in aligning with EU standards. Political and economic pressures on media, including foreign interference, continue to be significant concerns.

Minority Rights
The legal framework for minority and cultural rights is generally in place but needs effective implementation. While the national minority councils were mostly elected, including the Albanian council, and a new census was conducted, significant challenges remain. Serbia must enhance data collection, improve inter-ethnic relations, and ensure proper functioning of minority councils. Concerns persist over police practices in South Serbia and the under-representation of minorities in public administration. Funding for minority rights remains unchanged from 2022.

Overall, Serbia has made limited progress in aligning with EU standards in judiciary and fundamental rights. While there have been steps to improve judicial independence through legislative changes, challenges in impartiality and implementation persist. Anti-corruption efforts are hindered by delays and ineffective strategies, with ongoing concerns about high-level corruption. Fundamental rights protections are in place but require better implementation, particularly for gender-based violence, minority rights, and prison conditions. Media freedom shows limited progress, with unresolved issues of journalist safety and political influence. Despite some improvements in minority representation and data collection, further efforts are needed to enhance inclusion and address concerns in South Serbia.

Turkey

Stage of Accession Negotiations
Turkey applied to join the European Economic Community in 1987 and was deemed eligible for EU membership in 1999. Its European integration journey began in 1959, with the Ankara Association Agreement in 1963 and the Customs Union established in 1995. Accession negotiations commenced in 2005, but progress is stalled as Türkiye has yet to apply the Additional Protocol of the Ankara Agreement to Cyprus, blocking eight negotiation chapters from opening or closing. As of 2018, negotiations are at a standstill due to setbacks in democratic reforms, fundamental rights, and judicial independence.

Evaluation of Chapter 23

Functioning of the Judiciary
The judicial system is in disarray, marked by serious setbacks and unaddressed structural flaws. Recent reforms failed to resolve core issues, and the refusal to enforce the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) rulings exacerbates concerns. Persistent governmental pressure undermines judicial independence, while politically motivated cases against opposition figures highlight deep systemic problems. The Commission calls for urgent and substantive reforms.

Fight Against Corruption
No progress reported. Key deficiencies persist, and there have been no preventive measures or establishment of anti-corruption bodies as per the UN Convention. The legal and institutional framework needs significant enhancement to reduce political interference, and the Group of States against Corruption (GRECO) recommendations remain unaddressed, revealing a lack of political will.

Fundamental Rights

Human rights have worsened, with no progress on previous recommendations. The legal framework remains outdated and misaligned with ECHR standards, and no reforms were made to address the 2016 emergency laws. Turkey's ongoing refusal to enforce ECtHR rulings raises concerns about judicial independence, and the 2021 HRAP failed to address critical issues, leading to continued persecution of dissenting voices.

Freedom of Expression
Similarly, severe regressions were also traced in this field. Criminal laws on national security and anti-terrorism persistently clash with ECHR standards, leading to ongoing trials and convictions of journalists, activists, and *opposition* figures. Freedom of expression is increasingly stifled, with biased media coverage undermining the 2023 elections and restricting voter choice. Previous European Commission recommendations remain ignored.

Minority Rights
Hate speech and hate crimes against ethnic and national minorities remain pervasive. Educational materials still contain discriminatory content, and minorities face significant hurdles such as the lack of legal recognition for their religious institutions, insufficient support for minority languages and education, and obstacles to property rights. Religious organizations within minority communities struggle with legal and property issues due to their lack of formal legal status. While minority-run newspapers receive minimal financial aid, there are no public funds for minority schools. In the ongoing legal battle over the 2007 murder of Armenian journalist Hrant Dink, the Court of Cassation upheld some convictions and acquittals, and new charges have been brought against some suspects.

Overall, Turkey's alignment with EU standards in judiciary and fundamental rights has deteriorated. The judiciary remains under significant political influence, with inadequate reforms despite the 2019 Judicial Reform Strategy and 2021 Human Rights Action Plan. The lack of compliance with European Court of Human Rights rulings and an ineffective anti-corruption framework, exacerbated by unimplemented GRECO recommendations, highlights a severe lack of progress. Human rights conditions have worsened, with ongoing violations and insufficient implementation of human rights reforms. Freedom of expression is severely restricted, with repressive legal measures impacting journalists and activists, and biased media coverage undermining democratic processes. Minority rights are also problematic, with persistent discrimination and inadequate legal status for minority institutions. Despite some actions, systemic issues and backsliding continue to undermine Türkiye's adherence to EU standards.

Ukraine

Stage of Accession Negotiations
In June 2017, the Visa Facilitation and Readmission Agreements entered into force, followed by the Association Agreement and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) coming into effect in September 2017.

Shortly after the beginning of Russia's war of aggression, Ukraine applied for EU membership in February 2022. By June 2022, the European Council granted Ukraine candidate status following a recommendation from the European Commission.
In February 2023, the Commission published an analytical report on Ukraine's alignment with the EU acquis. This was followed by the Commission's oral update to the Council on Ukraine's progress in the seven steps outlined for accession in June 2023. Finally, in November 2023, the Commission

recommended opening accession negotiations with Ukraine, and for the first time, Ukraine was included in the Enlargement Package reports.

Evaluation of Chapter 23

Functioning of the Judiciary

Ukraine demonstrates some progress in judicial functioning. Despite the ongoing conflict, notable advancements were made in executing the 2021 judicial reforms. The High Council of Justice (HCJ) and the High Qualification Commission of Judges (HQCJ) were reformed through a transparent, merit-based approach, facilitating the filling of over 2,000 judicial vacancies and the recommencement of judge vetting. New legislation established a transparent process for selecting Constitutional Court judges and introduced a robust disciplinary system for judges. However, the establishment of a new administrative court to handle cases involving central government bodies remains pending, following the dissolution of the Kyiv District Administrative Court.

Fight Against Corruption
The report shows some progress in fighting corruption. Notable strides include establishing a robust anti-corruption framework and making significant advances in prosecuting high-profile cases. Recent reforms, such as the adoption of a national anti-corruption strategy and improved financial transparency, are steps forward. The Specialised Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office (SAPO) and the National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine (NABU) have seen leadership changes and increased effectiveness. However, challenges remain, including ensuring long-term impact, strengthening institutional independence, and managing foreign aid transparently.

Fundamental Rights
Ukraine generally upholds international human rights standards and has made progress aligning its laws with EU norms, despite the Russian invasion. The war has led to significant rights violations and challenges in restoring freedoms under martial law. Recent updates include new media laws, ratification of the Istanbul Convention, and a national gender equality strategy.

Freedom of Expression
The report indicates a moderate level of preparation regarding freedom of expression. Despite the ongoing Russian invasion, Ukraine has made significant strides, notably with the adoption of the Law on Media and an improved global media freedom ranking from 106th to 79th. While the media environment was previously robust, current martial law has introduced some restrictions on media access and led to decreased pluralism due to reduced advertising revenue and market consolidation.

Minority Rights
The report highlights progress in respecting and protecting minority rights, despite ongoing challenges. As a party to key Council of Europe conventions, Ukraine has reformed its legal framework for national minorities since 2017, though full implementation is still pending. The Commission advises finalizing this reform and adopting effective implementation mechanisms. While Ukraine upholds minority rights generally, Russian disinformation efforts politicize the issue of the Russian minority, adding complexity. Civil society and international organizations are concerned about this politicization and its impact on minorities' daily lives, including in education, language use, media, and civic participation.

Ukraine demonstrates notable progress in aligning with EU standards for the judiciary, anti-corruption, and fundamental rights, despite the severe impact of Russia's war of aggression. The judiciary has seen advances, including the re-establishment of key bodies and the implementation of merit-based selection processes, though challenges remain, such as filling judicial vacancies and setting up new courts. Corruption efforts have strengthened with the adoption of new strategies and improvements in anti-corruption institutions, yet ensuring long-term effectiveness and transparency, especially in managing foreign aid, remains critical. Fundamental rights protection has advanced with new laws and ratifications, although the ongoing conflict has significantly impacted human rights conditions. Freedom of expression has improved with new media laws and better global rankings, though martial law has led to media restrictions and reduced pluralism. The situation for minorities remains complex, with ongoing efforts needed to fully implement legal frameworks and address the impacts of the conflict.

Insight from the 2024 Rule of Law Report

Albania

In Albania, significant efforts have been made to enhance the independence and efficiency of the judiciary. Accountability has been bolstered through the vetting of all judges and prosecutors, although issues remain with the appointment of non-magistrate members of the High Judicial Council and the High Prosecutorial Council. The length of judicial proceedings continues to be a challenge, impacting the overall quality of justice due to resource shortages within the system. Anti-corruption efforts are progressing, with an increase in the number of investigations, prosecutions, and convictions for corruption. However, the recent amnesty law raises concerns about its potential impact on anti-corruption efforts. The media landscape faces challenges regarding transparency of ownership and political influence, with ongoing issues in the distribution system for state advertising. Additionally, the legislative process is hindered by deep political polarization, which affects the efficiency and transparency of law-making.

Montenegro

Montenegro has revised its legal framework to strengthen the independence and impartiality of its judicial system. However, significant delays in judicial appointments, including the Supreme Court President, have adversely affected the system. The country's anti-corruption strategy has been adopted, but the track record for high-level corruption cases remains stable without significant trials or final decisions, leading to perceptions of impunity. The media regulator in Montenegro has been equipped with comprehensive sanctioning instruments, but issues regarding the transparency of media ownership and political influence persist. Efforts to safeguard media from undue influence are ongoing, with new laws expected to improve governance and funding. The Ombudsperson's Office has enhanced its capacity, yet the lack of systematic follow-up on its recommendations undermines its effectiveness. Additionally, the legislative process faces challenges with inadequate public consultation, despite an established inclusive framework.

North Macedonia

In North Macedonia, concerns persist regarding the functioning and independence of the Judicial Council. The length of judicial proceedings remains a challenge, and the country faces criticism for its judicial appointment decisions. The implementation of the anti-corruption strategy is slow, indicating a lack of political commitment. Recent amendments to the criminal code have weakened the legal framework for prosecuting corruption, especially high-level cases. Media ownership transparency is

mandated by law, but self-regulation governs digital media ownership. The legislative process is impacted by political polarization, causing delays and inappropriate use of accelerated procedures. Despite having a national electronic consultation system, not all draft laws are published for public consultation. Civil society organizations operate in an overall enabling environment but face challenges in ensuring sustainable engagement in policymaking.

Serbia

Serbia has undertaken constitutional amendments to strengthen judicial independence, establishing the High Judicial Council and the High Prosecutorial Council in their new composition. Despite positive trends in reducing the length of civil, commercial, and criminal cases, vacancies for judges and prosecutors remain an issue. The country is finalizing its anti-corruption strategy, with improvements needed in establishing a solid track record of high-level corruption convictions. The media regulator's effectiveness and independence are questionable, and measures to increase media ownership transparency are not fully implemented. The legislative process in Serbia suffers from issues of effectiveness, autonomy, and transparency, with the Parliament's ability to provide checks and balances being constrained. While the Constitutional Court is active, several vacancies need to be filled. Civil society organizations in Serbia face a hostile environment, with frequent smear campaigns and challenges in establishment, operations, and financing.

Appendix B – IPA

Appendix B1 – IPA I

Source: financial allocation tables in this subsection are author's elaboration based on IPA I legal and programming documents (Council of the European Union, 2006; European Commission, 2006).

ALBANIA	92.16
BOSNIA	99.72
NORTH MACEDONIA	60.96
KOSOVO	101.85
MONTENEGRO	32.47
SERBIA	194.08
TURKEY	659.40

Appendix B2 – IPA II

Source: financial allocation tables in this subsection are author's elaboration based on IPA II legal and programming documents (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2014a; European Commission, 2014a).

ALBANIA

Category	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	Total 2018-2020
DEMOCRACY AND RULE OF LAW	68.7	61.9	32.7	19.6	69.4	29.0	61.2	159.6
Democracy and governance	64.7	48.9	10.2	19.6	10.4	16.4	38.5	65.3
Rule of law and fundamental rights	4.0	13.0	22.5	0.0	59.0	12.6	22.7	94.3

BOSNIA

Category	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	Total 2018-2020
DEMOCRACY AND RULE OF LAW	9.7	39.7	21.9	44.8	22.4	39.3	45.4	107.1
Democracy and governance	7.9	17.2	18.9	15.3	47.3			47.3
Rule of law and fundamental rights	1.8	22.5	3.0	29.5	59.8			59.8

KOSOVO

Category	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	Total 2014-2020
DEMOCRACY AND RULE OF LAW	38.60	35.10	46.86	47.96	24.20	29.90	40.90	263.52
Democracy and governance	18.00	12.10	38.86	44.96	8.20	24.40	22.90	169.42
Rule of law and fundamental rights	20.60	23.00	8.00	3.00	16.00	5.50	18.00	94.10

MONTENEGRO

Category	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	Total 2014-2020
DEMOCRACY AND RULE OF LAW	23.2	26.4	2.5	20.4	21.3	6.4	7.5	107.7
Democracy and governance	16.7	5.4	2.5	20.4	6.5	6.4	7.5	65.4
Rule of law and fundamental rights	6.5	21.0	0.0	0.0	14.8	0.0	0.0	42.3

NORTH MACEDONIA

Category	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	Total 2014-2020
DEMOCRACY AND RULE OF LAW	39.7	15.8	24.4	24.6	37.9	5.8	39.6	187.8
Democracy and governance	19.7	15.8	9.8	24.6	36.5	4.4	20.2	130.9
Rule of law and fundamental rights	20.0	0.0	14.6	0.0	1.4	1.4	19.5	56.9

SERBIA

Category	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	Total 2014-2020
DEMOCRACY AND RULE OF LAW	80.4	143.3	106.7	109	96.5	78.6	78.1	692.6
Democracy and governance	52.9	115.7	60.3	36.8	67.8	78.6	34.4	446.4
Rule of law and fundamental rights	27.5	27.6	46.4	72.2	173.7	28.7	0.0	246.2

TURKEY

Category	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	Total 2014-2020
DEMOCRACY AND RULE OF LAW	350	197	234	123	97	220	210	1,431
Democracy and governance	238	29	115	110	87	173	163	916
Rule of law and fundamental rights	112	167	119	13	10	47	47	515

Appendix B3 – IPA III

Source: financial allocation tables in this subsection are author's elaboration based on IPA III legal and programming documents (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2021a; European Commission, 2021a).

Albania	*Bosnia*	*Kosovo*	*Montenegro*	*North Macedonia*	*Serbia*	*Türkiye*	**Total**
67,535,714	36,689,984	25,485,714	30,935,714	47,535,714	57,435,714	79,235,714	**344,854,268**

More specifically, the following table express the 2021-2023 decided amounts under Window 1:

	%	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027	Total
Window 1: Rule of law, fundamental rights and democracy	15,13%	281	287	292	298	304	310	317	2,089

Appendix C – ENP

Appendix C1 –ENPI

Source: country tables in this subsection are author's elaboration based on ENPI national indicative programmes and Commission implementation data (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2006; European Commission, 2007).

Euro-Mediterranean Partnership

Algeria

National Indicative Programme (NIP) Algeria 2007-2010	**Programmed**	**Committed**
Reform of Justice	7.7%	9.2%
Economic growth and employment	51.4%	54.6%
Reinforcement of basic public services	40.9%	36.1%
Total NIP 2007-2010	**EUR 220 M**	**EUR 184.1 M**
National Indicative Programme (NIP) Algeria and SPRING 2011-2013		
Sustainable development and culture	43.0%	47.0%
Economic growth and development	57.0%	47.5%
SPRING - Democratic transformation and institution building	n/a	5.5%
Total NIP 2011-2013	**EUR 172 M**	**EUR 172 M**
SPRING	**n/a**	**EUR 10 M**
Grand total Algeria 2007-2013	**EUR 392 M**	**EUR 366.1 M**

Egypt

National Indicative Programme (NIP) Egypt 2007-2010	**Programmed**	**Committed**
Support for reform in democracy, human rights and justice	7.2%	6.3%
Developing competitiveness and productivity of the Egyptian economy	39.4%	44.8%
Ensuring sustainability of the development process with better management of human and natural resources	53.4%	48.9%
Total NIP 2007-2010	**EUR 558 M**	**EUR 618 M**
National Indicative Programme (NIP) Algeria and SPRING 2011-2013		
Support for reform in democracy, human rights and justice	11.1%	0%
Developing competitiveness and productivity of the Egyptian economy	42.1%	33.2%
Ensuring sustainability of the development process with better management of human and natural resources	46.8%	43.6%
SPRING - Democratic transformation and institution building	n/a	2.6%

SPRING - Sustainable and inclusive growth and economic development	n/a	20.6%
Total NIP 2011-2013	**EUR 449 M**	**EUR 299 M**
SPRING	**n/a**	**EUR 90M**
Grand total Egypt 2007-2013	**EUR 1,007 M**	**EUR 1,007 M**

Israel

Priority (NIP 2007-2010)	**Programmed**	**Committed**
Support to the implementation of the joint priorities agreed in the EU-Israel Action Plan	100%	100%
Total NIP 2007-2010	**EUR 8 M**	**EUR 7.5 M**
Priority (NIP 2011-2013)	**Programmed**	**Committed**
Support to the implementation of the joint priorities agreed in the EU-Israel Action Plan	100%	100%
Total NIP 2007-2010	**EUR 6 M**	**EUR 6 M**
Grand total Egypt 2007-2013	**EUR 14 M**	**EUR 13.5 M**

Jordan

National Indicative Programme (NIP) Jordan 2007-2010	**Programmed**	**Committed**
Political reform, democracy, human rights, good governance, justice and cooperation in the fight against extremism	6.4%	6.4%
Trade and investment development	29.4%	23.7%
Sustainability of the development process	23.8%	20.8%
Institution building, financial stability and support for regulatory approximation	40.4%	49.1%
Total NIP 2007-2010	**EUR 265 M**	**EUR 265 M**
National Indicative Programme (NIP) Jordan and SPRING 2011-2013	**Programmed**	**Committed**
Supporting Jordan's reform in the areas of democracy, human rights, media and justice	20.2%	13.9%
Trade, enterprise and investment development	17.9%	15.7%
Sustainability of the growth process	41.7%	31.5%
Support to the implementation of the Action Plan (SAPP)	20.2%	7.7%
SPRING - Democratic transformation and institution building	n/a	11.6%
SPRING - Sustainable and inclusive growth and economic development	n/a	19.6%
Total NIP 2011-2013	**EUR 223 M**	**EUR 223 M**
SPRING	**n/a**	**EUR 101 M**
Grand total Jordan 2007-2013	**EUR 488 M**	**EUR 589 M**

Lebanon

National Indicative Programme (NIP) Lebanon 2007-2010	**Programmed**	**Committed**
Support for political reform	11.8%	19.8%
Support for social and economic reform	46.0%	42.8%
Support to reconstruction and recovery	42.2%	37.4%
Total NIP 2007-2010	**EUR 187 M**	**EUR 179 M**
Special measures 2007-2010	**n/a**	**EUR 8 M**
National Indicative Programme (NIP) Lebanon, SPRING & special measures 2011-2013	**Programmed**	**Committed**
Support to political reform	16.6%	12.5%
Support to social and economic reform	60.7%	13.9%
Support to recovery and reinvigoration of the country	22.7%	48.3%
SPRING - Democratic transformation and institution building	n/a	11.9%
SPRING - Sustainable and inclusive growth and economic development	n/a	13.4%
Total NIP 2011-2013	**EUR 150 M**	**EUR 117 M**
Special measures (from reoriented NIP funds)	**n/a**	**EUR 33 M**
SPRING	**n/a**	**EUR 51 M**
Grand total Lebanon 2007-2013	**EUR 337 M**	**EUR 388 M**

Libya

Special measures 2007-2010	**Programmed**	**Committed**
Special measure - Benghazi Action Plan	100%	44.4%
Special measure - Migration	n/a	55.6%
Total special measures 2007-2010	**EUR 8 M**	**EUR 18 M**
National Indicative Programme (NIP) Libya and SPRING 2011-2013	**Programmed**	**Committed**
Support to the transition process	37.6%	34.7%
Improving the quality of human capital	29.0%	26.8%
Increasing the sustainability of economic and social development	16.7%	15.4%
Addressing jointly the challenge of managing migration	16.7%	15.4%
SPRING - Democratic transformation and institution building	n/a	7.7%
Total NIP 2011-2013	**EUR 60 M**	**EUR 60 M**
SPRING	**n/a**	**EUR 5 M**
Grand total Libya 2007-2013	**EUR 68 M**	**EUR 83 M**

Morocco

National Indicative Programme (NIP) Morocco 2007-2010	**Programmed**	**Committed**
Social sector	45.3%	42.9%
Governance and human rights	4.3%	1.1%
Institutional support	6.1%	12.9%
Economic sector	36.7%	36.2%
Environment	7.6%	6.9%
Total NIP 2007-2010	**EUR 654 M**	**EUR 722.6 M**
National Indicative Programme (NIP) Morocco, SPRING & special measures 2011-2013	**Programmed**	**Committed**
Social sector	20.0%	26.2%
Economic sector	10.0%	8.5%
Institutional support	40.0%	35.6%
Governance and human rights	15.0%	6.4%
Environment	15.0%	5.2%
SPRING - Democratic transformation and institution building	n/a	2.1%
SPRING - Partnership with people	n/a	1.4%
SPRING - Sustainable and inclusive growth and economic development	n/a	14.6%
Total NIP 2011-2013	**EUR 580.5 M**	**EUR 555.5 M**
Special measures	**n/a**	**EUR 25 M**
SPRING	**n/a**	**EUR 128 M**
Total Morocco 2007-2013	**EUR 1,234.5 M**	**EUR 1,431.1 M**

Palestine

Special measures 2007-2010	**Programmed**	**Committed**
Direct & Indirect Financial Support for the Palestinian Authority	n/a	68.4%
East Jerusalem Initiatives	n/a	0.9%
Institution-building	n/a	4.0%
Infrastructure Development	n/a	4.9%
Private Sector Development	n/a	2.1%
Support to UNRWA	n/a	19.7%
Total Special measures 2007-2010	**n/a**	**EUR 1,550.2 M**
Special measures 2011-2013	**Programmed**	**Committed**
Direct & Indirect Financial Support for the Palestinian Authority	n/a	51.8%
East Jerusalem Initiatives	n/a	2.5%

Institution-building	n/a	7.1%
Infrastructure Development	n/a	5.6%
Private Sector Development	n/a	4.4%
Support to UNRWA	n/a	28.6%
Total Special measures 2011-2013	**n/a**	**EUR 951.5 M**
Total Palestine 2007-2013	**n/a**	**EUR 2,501.7 M**

Syria

National Indicative Programme (NIP) Syria 2007-2010	**Programmed**	**Committed**
Support for political and administrative reform	23.1%	23.1%
Support for economic reform	46.1%	38.4%
Support for social reform	23.1%	30.8%
Environment/Sustainable energy	7.7%	7.7%
Total NIP 2007-2010	**EUR 130 M**	**EUR 130 M**
National Indicative Programme (NIP) Syria and special measures 2011-2013	**Programmed**	**Committed**
Support for political and administrative reform	19.4%	n/a
Support for economic reform	36.4%	n/a
Support for social reform	44.2%	n/a
Special measures - Response to the Syrian crisis - Syrian population	n/a	32.2%
Special measures - Response to the Syrian crisis - Syrian refugees and host communities in Jordan	n/a	31.8%
Special measures - Response to the Syrian crisis - Syrian refugees and host communities in Lebanon	n/a	36.0%
Total NIP 2011-2013	**EUR 129 M**	**n/a**
Special measures	**n/a**	**EUR 228 M**
Grand total Syria 2007-2013	**EUR 259 M**	**EUR 358 M**

Tunisia

Tunisia and special measures 2007-2010	**Programmed**	**Committed**
Economic governance, competitiveness and convergence with the EU	60.0%	46.4%
Improved graduate employability	21.7%	19.7%
Sustainable development	18.3%	33.9%
Total NIP 2007-2010	**EUR 300 M**	**EUR 300 M**
Special measures	**n/a**	**EUR 30 M**

National Indicative Programme (NIP) Tunisia, SPRING & special measures 2011-2013	Programmed	Committed
Employment and Social Protection	23.3%	9.4%
Integration support programme II	36.3%	0%
Business competitiveness (industry and services)	33.3%	55.8%
Governance and Justice	7.1%	0%
SPRING - Democratic transformation and institution building	n/a	7.2%
SPRING - Sustainable and inclusive growth and economic development	n/a	27.6%
Total NIP 2011-2013	**EUR 240 M**	**EUR 255 M**
Special measures	**n/a**	**EUR 35 M**
SPRING	**n/a**	**EUR 155 M**
Grand total Tunisia 2007-2013	**EUR 540 M**	**EUR 775 M**

The Eastern Partnership (EaP)

Armenia

National Indicative Programme (NIP) Armenia 2007-2010	Programmed	Committed
Support for strengthening of democratic structures and good governance	30%	30%
Support for regulatory reform and administrative capacity building	30%	34%
Support for poverty reduction efforts	40%	36%
Total NIP 2007-2010	**EUR 98.4M**	**EUR 97.4M**
National Indicative Programme (NIP) Armenia 2011-2013	**Programmed**	**Committed**
Democratic structures and good governance	30-35%	37%
Trade and investment regulatory alignment and reform	20-25%	39%
Socio-economic reform and sustainable development	40-45%	24%
Total NIP 2011-2013	**EUR 157.3M**	**EUR 144.1M**
Grand total Armenia 2007-2013	**EUR 255.7M**	**EUR 281.5M**

Azerbaijan

National Indicative Programme (NIP) Azerbaijan 2007-2010	Programmed	Committed
Support for democratic development and good governance	33%	43%
Support for socio-economic reform, fight against poverty and administrative capacity building	34%	29%

Support for legislative and economic reforms in the transport, energy and environment sectors	33%	28%
Total NIP 2007-2010	**EUR 92M**	**EUR 68M**
National Indicative Programme (NIP) Azerbaijan 2011-2013	**Programmed**	**Committed**
Democratic structures and good governance	25-30%	9%
Socio-economic reform and sustainable development, trade and investment, regulatory approximation and reform	35-40%	57%
PCA and ENP AP implementation, including energy security, mobility and security	30-35%	34%
Total NIP 2011-2013	**EUR 122.5M**	**EUR 75.5M**
Grand total Azerbaijan 2007-2013	**EUR 214.5M**	**EUR 143.5M**

Belarus

National Indicative Programme (NIP) Belarus 2007-2011	**Programmed**	**Committed**
Social and economic development	70%	78%
Democratic development and good governance	30%	22%
Total NIP 2007-2011	**EUR 46.1M**	**EUR 43.1M**
Special Measures 2007-2011	**n/a**	**EUR 5M**
National Indicative Programme (NIP) Belarus 2012-2013	**Programmed**	**Committed**
Good governance and people-to-people contacts	50%	18%
Economic modernisation	50%	82%
Total NIP 2012-2013	**EUR 56.7M**	**EUR 28.6M**
Special Measures 2012-2013	**n/a**	**EUR 17.5M**
Grand total Belarus 2007-2013	**EUR 102.8M**	**EUR 94.2M**

Georgia

National Indicative Programme (NIP) Georgia 2007-2010	**Programmed**	**Committed**
Support for democratic development, rule of law and governance	26%	37%
Support for economic development and ENP Action Plan implementation	26%	26%
Poverty reduction and social reforms	32%	29%
Support for peaceful settlement of Georgia's internal conflicts	16%	8%
Total NIP 2007-2010	**EUR 120.4M**	**EUR 117.4M**
Special measures for IDPs 2008-2009	**n/a**	**EUR 105M**
National Indicative Programme (NIP) Georgia 2011-2013	**Programmed**	**Committed**

Support for democratic development, rule of law, good governance	25-35%	22%
Support for trade and investment, regulatory alignment and reform	15-25%	27%
Support for regional development, sustainable economic and social development, poverty reduction	35-45%	49%
Support for peaceful settlement of conflicts	5-10%	2%
Total NIP 2011-2013	**EUR 180.3M**	**EUR 180.7M**
EaPIC 2012-2013	**Programmed**	**Committed**
EaPIC Georgia	**n/a**	**EUR 49M**
Grand total Georgia 2007-2013	**EUR 300.7M**	**EUR 452.1M**

Moldova

National Indicative Programme (NIP) Moldova 2007-2010	**Programmed**	**Committed**
Support for democratic development and good governance	25-35%	26.0%
Support for regulatory reform and administrative capacity building	15-20%	18.5%
Support for poverty reduction and economic growth	40-60%	55.5%
Total NIP 2007-2010	**EUR 209.7M**	**EUR 225.3M**
National Indicative Programme (NIP) Moldova 2011-2013	**Programmed**	**Committed**
Good governance, rule of law and fundamental freedoms	35-40%	39.6%
Social and human development	25-30%	16.5%
Trade and sustainable development	35-40%	43.9%
Total NIP 2011-2013	**EUR 273.1M**	**EUR 272.6M**
EaPIC 2012-2013	**n/a**	**EUR 63M**
EaPIC Moldova	**Programmed**	**Committed**
Grand total Moldova 2007-2013	**EUR 482.8M**	**EUR 560.9M**

Ukraine

National Indicative Programme (NIP) Ukraine 2007-2010	**Programmed**	**Committed**
Support for democratic development and good governance	30%	7%
Support for regulatory reform and administrative capacity building	30%	42%
Support for infrastructure development	40%	51%
Total NIP 2007-2010	**EUR 494M**	**EUR 522.6M**
National Indicative Programme (NIP) Ukraine 2011-2013	**Programmed**	**Committed**
Good governance and the rule of law	20-30%	20%
Facilitation of the entry into force of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement (including a DCFTA)	25-35%	28%
Sustainable development	45-55%	52%
Total NIP 2011-2013	**EUR 470M**	**EUR 483M**
Grand total Ukraine 2007-2013	**EUR 964M**	**EUR 1,005.6M**

Appendix C2 –ENI

Source: country tables in this subsection are author's elaboration based on ENI programming documents and Commission financial allocations (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2014b; European Commission, 2014b).

Euro-Mediterranean Partnership

Country	**Total Funds Allocated (2014-2020)**
Algeria	€236 million
Egypt	€756 million
Israel	n.a
Jordan	€765 million
Lebanon	n.a
Libya	€98 million
Morocco	€1.4 billion
Palestine	€1.28 billion (2017-2020)
Syria	€349.4 million
Tunisia	€1,591.9 million

The Eastern Partnership (EaP)

There is no publicly available specific data regarding the distribution of funds dedicated to the EaP between 2014 and 2020. It is likely that the COVID-19 crisis has made reporting more difficult. Here is an indication of the minimum and maximum amounts allocated per country between 2014 and 2017 (Sandu & Dragan, 2016).

Country	**Indicative ENI Allocation for 2014-2017**		**Allocation of funds**
	Min. Amount (€ million)	Max. Amount (€ million)	
Armenia	140	170	Private sector development 35% Public administration reform 25% Justice reform 20% Complementary support for capacity development and civil society 20%

Azerbaijan	77	94	Regional and rural development 40% Justice reform 20% Education and skills development 20% Complementary support for capacity development and civil society 20%
Belarus	71	89	Social inclusion 30% Environment 30% Local and regional economic development 30% Complementary support for civil society 10%
Georgia	335	410	Agriculture and rural development 30% Public administration reform 25% Justice reform 25% Complementary support for capacity development and civil society 20%
Moldova	335	410	Agriculture and rural development rala 30% Public administration reform 30% Policy reform and border management 20% Complementary support for capacity development and civil society 20%
Ukraine	140	200	Private sector development 40% Energy sector 40% Complementary support for capacity development and civil society 20%

Appendix C3 – NDICI

Source: country tables in this subsection are author's elaboration based on NDICI/Global Europe multiannual indicative programmes (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2021b; European Commission, 2021b).

Euro-Mediterranean Partnership

NDICI Multiannual Indicative Programs 2021-24	*Priority Area 1: Good governance and reforms*
Lebanon	EUR 53 million (25%)
Palestine	n.a
Algeria	n.a
Egypt	EUR 48 million (20%)
Jordan	EUR 91 million (25%)
Libya	EUR 65 million (FOR ALL PRIORITIES)
Tunisia	EUR 620 million (FOR ALL PRIORITIES)
Morocco	n.a
Syria	n.a
Israel	n.a

The Eastern Partnership (EaP)

NDICI Multiannual Indicative Programmes 2021-24	*Priority area 2: Accountable institutions, rule of law and security*	*Priority area 5: Resilient, gender-equal, fair and inclusive society*
Armenia	EUR 36 million (20%)	EUR 27 million (15%)
Azerbaijan	EUR 9 million (15 %)	EUR 9 million (15 %)
Georgia	EUR 51 million (15%)	EUR 51 million (15%)
Ukraine	EUR 128 million (20%)	EUR 96 million (15%)
Moldova	EUR 39 million (15%)	EUR 52 million (20%)
Belarus	EUR 140 million (TOTAL FOR ALL PRIORITIES)	

Appendix D – EED

Targets
European Neighbourhood (Eastern Partnership – EaP – and Middle East and North Africa – MENA), the Western Balkans, Turkey

Funding Review
Portfolio Overview (2023) (European Endowment for Democracy, 2023).
Budget: approximately €50 million
Applications Approved by Region:
- Eastern Partnership (EaP): 35%
- Middle East and North Africa: 18%
- Western Balkans and Turkey: 35%
- Eurasia: 12%

Portfolio Overview (2022) (European Endowment for Democracy, 2022).
Budget: approximately €45 million
Applications Approved by Region:
- Eastern Partnership (EaP): 31%
- Middle East and North Africa: 20%
- Western Balkans and Turkey: 34%
- Eurasia: 15%

Portfolio Overview (2021) (European Endowment for Democracy, 2021).
Budget: approximately €25 million
Applications Approved by Region:
- Eastern Partnership (EaP): 35%
- Middle East and North Africa: 17%
- Western Balkans and Turkey: 29%
- Eurasia: 9%

Portfolio Overview (2020) (European Endowment for Democracy, 2020).
Budget: approximately €28 million
Applications Approved by Region:
- Eastern Partnership (EaP): 33%
- Middle East and North Africa: 16%
- Western Balkans and Turkey: 37%
- Eurasia: 13%

Portfolio Overview (2019) (European Endowment for Democracy, 2019).
Budget: approximately €19 million
Applications Approved by Region:
- Eastern Partnership (EaP): 37%
- Middle East and North Africa: 24%
- Western Balkans and Turkey: 21%
- Eurasia: 15%

2018 Portfolio Overview (European Endowment for Democracy, 2018).
Budget: approximately €9 million
Applications Approved by Region:

- Eastern Partnership (EaP): 40%
- Middle East and North Africa: 23%
- Western Balkans and Turkey: 14%
- Eurasia: N/A

2017 Portfolio Overview (European Endowment for Democracy, 2017).
Budget: approximately €9 million
Applications Approved by Region:

- Eastern Partnership (EaP): 54%
- Middle East and North Africa: 25%
- Western Balkans and Turkey: N/A
- Eurasia: N/A

2016 Portfolio Overview (European Endowment for Democracy, 2016).
Budget: N/A
Applications Approved by Region:

- Eastern Partnership (EaP): 53%
- Middle East and North Africa: 24%
- Western Balkans and Turkey: N/A
- Eurasia: N/A

Before 2016, no reports from the EED were available. During the period from 2013 to 2015, the EED received a total of EUR 6 million in funding from the European Commission.