

# Hungary's Slide toward Autocracy: Domestic and External Impediments to Locking In Democratic Reforms

DAVID G. HAGLUND  
JENNIE L. SCHULZE  
OGNEN VANGELOV

IT WAS NOT DIFFICULT, in the comforting glow of the “post–Cold War” dawn, to imagine that liberal democracy worldwide had a bright future ahead of it, and nowhere more so than in the postcommunist states of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). There, countries such as Poland, Hungary, and then Czechoslovakia were expected to benefit from their impending accession to two Western institutions—the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) —and to become liberal democracies. For scholars and policymakers alike, hopes were pinned on the phenomenon of “conditionality,” through

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DAVID G. HAGLUND is a professor of political studies at Queen's University in Canada, where he specializes in American foreign policy and transatlantic security. His latest book is *Sister Republics: Security Relations Between America and France* (Louisiana State University Press, 2023). JENNIE L. SCHULZE is an associate professor of political science at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, whose research focuses on the influence of European institutions and kin states on minority policies and minority integration in Central and Eastern Europe. She is the author of *Strategic Frames: Europe, Russia and Minority Inclusion in Estonia and Latvia* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2018). OGNEN VANGELOV is an assistant professor of political science at University American College Skopje. He specializes in issues of de

which membership in the pair of Brussels based institutions was to be made conditional upon the CEE states' embrace of democratic reforms. In this way, the West would "go east" and, in doing so, usher in a new era of regional security.

NATO may have been quicker to expand eastward than the EU, for reasons related both to the security challenges stemming from the breakup of Yugoslavia (and the related prospect that what happened there might happen elsewhere in Europe) and to the debate ongoing among the Europeans throughout the 1990s over whether their union first needed to be "deepened" prior to its being "widened."<sup>1</sup> And NATO did for a time market, not without some success, its own brand of conditionality, eventually packaged under the rubric of "security sector reform."<sup>2</sup> But it was really the EU, once it embraced the expansion project, that would come to be seen as providing the most effective institutional means for promoting liberal democracy's spread within CEE. Accordingly, this article concentrates mainly on the EU experience, with a particular focus on Hungary.

Because the EU required deeper political and economic reforms from candidate countries, it was held to have greater potential than NATO to transform the political architecture of the region. For a time, that potential looked capable of being reached. Today, however, the transformative optimism that once dominated scholarship surrounding the EU's initial eastward enlargement has given way to skepticism and disappointment in the wake of post accession democratic backsliding and the poor implementation of "conditional" reforms in most CEE countries.<sup>3</sup> Nowhere has that turn toward

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<sup>1</sup>On that debate, see Françoise de la Serre and Christian Lequesne, eds., *Quelle Union pour quelle Europe? L'après traité d'Amsterdam* (Brussels: Éditions Complexe, 1998).

<sup>2</sup>See David G. Haglund, "From USSR to SSR: The Rise and (Partial) Demise of NATO in Security Sector Reform," in David M. Law, ed., *Intergovernmental Organisations and Security Sector Reform* (Zurich: Lit Verlag/Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces, 2007), 103-121. On those early success stories, see Rachel A. Epstein, "NATO Enlargement and the Spread of Democracy: Evidence and Expectations," *Security Studies* 14 (January-March 2005): 63-105; and Islam Yusu, "Security Governance: Security Sector Reform in Southeast Europe" (IPF Research Report, Center for Policy Studies, Budapest, 2003), accessed at <http://www.policy.hu/yusu/researchreport.pdf>, 19 September 2022.

<sup>3</sup>Examples of critical literature on the effectiveness of EU conditionality include Malte Brosig, ed., *Human Rights in Europe: A Fragmented Regime?* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2006); Bernd Rechel, ed., *Minority Rights in Central and Eastern Europe* (London: Routledge, 2009); Gwendolyn Sasse, "The Politics of EU Conditionality: The Norm of Minority Protection during and beyond EU Accession," *Journal of European Public Policy* 15 (September 2008): 842-860; Jennie L. Schulze, "Estonia Caught between East and West: EU Conditionality, Russia's Activism, and Minority Integration," *Nationalities Papers* 38 (May 2010): 361-392; Milada A. Vachudova, "Tempered by the EU? Political Parties and Party Systems before and after Accession," *Journal of European Public Policy* 15 (September 2008): 861-879; and Peter Vermeersch, "Minority Policy in Central Europe: Exploring the Impact of the EU's Enlargement Strategy," *Global Review of Ethnopolitics* 3 (January 2004): 3-19.

autocracy been more evident than in Hungary. Paul Lendvai was hardly exaggerating when he gloomily asserted of Hungary three years ago that “[s]ince the end of Soviet domination in 1989, never has the future for the liberal values of the Enlightenment seemed so bleak: for tolerance, respect for the importance of fair debate, checked and balanced government, and objectivity and impartiality in media.”<sup>4</sup>

Hungary, of course, is not the only case of retrenchment from democratic commitments in the CEE region; nor is CEE the only region where liberal democracy has become imperiled.<sup>5</sup> Nativist populism and economic protectionism have returned elsewhere in the transatlantic world—including in some long established Western democracies.<sup>6</sup> However, Hungary is a powerful example that democratic breakdowns can occur even in countries previously hailed as high achievers in meeting accession criteria, and therefore unlikely to backslide. Throughout the EU accession process, European institutions judged Hungary to be making satisfactory progress in each of the three areas of what were termed the Copenhagen criteria for EU accession. Scholars agreed that Hungary had gotten its liberal democratic house in order and that it represented one of the prime examples of successful democratic consolidation in postcommunist Europe.<sup>7</sup> So what went wrong? How can we explain the failure of political conditionality to lock in democratic reforms in Hungary?

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<sup>4</sup>Paul Lendvai, “The Transformer: Orban’s Evolution and Hungary’s Demise,” *Foreign Affairs* 98 (September/October 2019): 44–54, at 54.

<sup>5</sup>See Henrik B.L. Larsen, *NATO’s Democratic Retrenchment: Hegemony after the Return of History* (London: Routledge, 2019); Stanley R. Sloan, *Transatlantic Traumas: Has Illiberalism Brought the West to the Brink of Collapse?* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018); and especially Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes, *The Light That Failed: A Reckoning* (London: Penguin, 2022).



funding and the weakness of postaccession sanctioning mechanisms, can and does create permissive conditions for democratic backsliding and autocratization in member states. In Hungary, a combination of economic and political crises encouraged elites to take advantage of that permissive environment and move toward autocratization. The exogenous shock of the 2008 global financial crisis heightened political competition from the far right and deepened the nationalist turn in Hungarian politics. Orbán's political party, Fidesz, found itself in a position to capitalize on the domestic base of support it had begun cultivating prior to EU accession, largely with the assistance of EU funding. In an effort to hold on to power, the Fidesz government violated democratic norms, such as rule of law and freedom of expression, and used primordial nationalist narratives to justify its actions and to retain a base of support. However, unlike other post accession backsliders in the region that have used the accession process to justify not addressing further recommendations for reform, Orbán's government instead went on the offensive against Brussels in order to discredit European criticisms of its post accession backslide.<sup>2</sup> The absence of effective postaccession sanctioning mechanisms has meant that the EU does not possess the leverage needed to encourage Hungary to correct its course.

Our focus on the interaction between domestic and international variables in the following sections not only provides a fresh look at Hungary's transition from democratic success story to democratic defector, but offers a useful framework for understanding similar cases of democratic backsliding in the region. We problematize the interaction between both endogenous and exogenous variables through detailed process tracing that utilizes EU progress reports, legislative reforms, democracy watchdog reports, and the media, as well as recent scholarship on Hungary's democratic backsliding. In doing so, we explain the conditions that led to

leanings but not all variables are present—at least not yet—for auto-cratization to fully materialize. In each of these cases, self-interested elites have been able to leverage transnational politics to strengthen their domestic hold on power.

#### EU CONDITIONALITY AND POST-ACCESSION SANCTIONS: A PERMISSIVE CONTEXT FOR ILLIBERALISM

After the collapse of communism, CEE countries were eager to return to Europe by joining Western democratic institutions. These included such political and security organizations as the Council of Europe, the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the EU, and, of course, NATO. While most states in the region became members of both the OSCE and the Council of Europe shortly after the collapse of communism, gaining membership in NATO and the EU proved to be more challenging, as a result of the political conditions the latter two institutions imposed.

Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic constituted the first eastern enlargement of NATO in 1999. For this round of candidates, joining the alliance required them to signal their democratic bona fides by vesting control of their military establishments in reliable civilian hands, while at the same time fostering greater cooperation with NATO militaries. In later rounds of enlargement, NATO security guarantees provided additional leverage for European institutions to pressure CEE countries into making political reforms, as was the case with Estonia and Latvia.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, NATO conditionality was, and remained, a far more modest enterprise than EU conditionality, and CEE states did not have much difficulty meeting the political conditions for NATO membership.

accession.<sup>16</sup> However, the ability of the EU accession process to lock in liberal norms in candidate countries has been called into question by the lack of policy implementation, as well as by the considerable post

norm internalization, the ineffectiveness of postaccession sanctioning mechanisms, and internal divisions between member states (all of which will be discussed later).

### *The Allocation of Membership Conditionality*

Hungary, along with other Western oriented postcommunist governments, began pursuing EU accession in the early 1990s as a means of enhancing economic development and prosperity, while at the same time restoring political sovereignty. In late 1989, the European Community created the Poland and Hungary: Assistance for Restructuring their Economies (PHARE) program as a financial support for Hungary's and Poland's transformations toward functioning market economies and liberal democracies. It is not a coincidence that the initial economic aid was designed to assist these two countries, as they were seen as the countries most likely to speedily Westernize and become liberal democracies.<sup>19</sup> Ironically, these two countries became something else within the span of three decades—leaders of democratic backsliding and illiberalism. The distribution of EU funds, which took place through government agencies, fueled the rise of political parties that ultimately led these countries down an autocratic path.<sup>20</sup>

The protection of human rights and democratic principles had been included in various declarations as conditions for aid, but it was not until June 1993 that standards for EU accession were explicitly articulated by the European Council. According to these "Copenhagen criteria," candidate states were required to demonstrate the stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, and human rights, including respect for and protection of minorities, as well as a functioning market economy that could deal with market competition and pressures. In addition, all candidate countries were required to demonstrate the ad





structuralist lines.<sup>27</sup> Material reinforcement relies on tangible incentives such as financial, technical, economic, and military assistance along with the benefits of membership, which include decisionmaking rights, military protection, and subsidies. During the accession process, institutional ties in the form of association agreements and financial assistance, as well as the prospect of opening accession negotiations, become linked to the fulfillment of the democratic criteria.<sup>28</sup> The EU deploys social reinforcement alongside material reinforcement, which involves international praise for democratic reform along with shaming and shunning for nondemocratic behavior. Here, changes in behavior result from the gains or losses that flow from that recognition.<sup>29</sup> European institutions transmit recommendations for reforms to candidate countries through intergovernmental channels and through meetings with societal groups and organizations.

other organizations, such as international financial institutions, or even



keep their clients satisfied and to strengthen their grip on the Hungarian economy and state.<sup>40</sup>

We are not suggesting that the EU at the time of Hungary's accession could have reasonably foreseen the economic and political crises that would combine to move Hungary toward authoritarianism. However, as we demonstrate here, there did exist evidence of an antiliberal primordial nationalist agenda prior to Hungary's accession that might have rung some warning bells. In light of the subsequent democratic backsliding in Hungary and other EU member states, it is worth considering how existing mechanisms might have fostered a permissive environment for retrenchment—a consideration especially pertinent today, as the bloc considers anew the admission of membership candidates displaying antiliberal proclivities. This is simply to say that deeper forms of compliance, such as behavioral compliance or norm internalization, are more likely to produce the type of lock-in effects that would make it more difficult for domestic actors to reverse course after accession.

Some analysts have rather cynically explained post-accession backsliding as the result of a lack of commitment to the liberal democratic project among CEE elites from the outset and to resentment over the double standards imposed on the candidacies of their countries.<sup>41</sup> In this more cynical view, CEE elites never did desire to implement liberal reforms, and they were more than content to hide behind the accession process as “proof” that they had indeed met democratic criteria for membership; this generated “negative lock-in effects” that would make implementation of reforms and further liberalization extremely difficult, once membership had been achieved.<sup>42</sup> There is indeed evidence of these dynamics across the CEE landscape, even in countries considered by some to be success stories of EU conditionality, such as the Baltic states.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>Steven Erlanger and Benjamin Novak, “How the E.U. Allowed Hungary to Become an Illiberal Model,” *New York Times*, 3 January 2022, accessed at <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/03/world/europe/hungary-european-union.html?referringSource=articleShare>, 6 January 2022. See also Scheiring, *The Retreat of Liberal Democracy*.

<sup>41</sup>Mead, “End of the Wilsonian Era,” 133.

<sup>42</sup>Timofey Agarin and Ada Charlotte Regelmann, “Which Is the Only Game in Town? Minority Rights Issues in Estonia and Slovakia,” *Perspectives on European Politics and Society* 3 (December 2012): 443–461; Corina Lacatus, “Explaining Institutional Strength: The Case of National Human Rights Institutions in Europe and Its Neighborhood,” *Journal of European Public Policy* 26 (November 2019): 1657–1677; Sasse, “The Politics of EU Conditionality”; Schulze, “Estonia Caught between East and West” and Steen, “National Elites and the Russian Minority.”

<sup>43</sup>Sasse, “The Politics of Conditionality”; and Schulze, *Strategic Frames*

Other explanations for why EU conditionality did not have a more enduring transformative effect on countries in the region focus on the deficiencies at the European level and genuine confusion in candidate states over standards that were not only unclear, but applied unevenly across states.<sup>44</sup> All explanations, however, hinge upon the interaction of international and domestic level factors. As will be discussed in greater detail later, domestic level variables are essential for understanding the influence of Europeanization upon the political trajectories of CEE states, especially Hungary's post accession slide toward autocratization. After all, external pressures, including political conditionality and post accession accountability mechanisms, are always filtered through domestic institutions and processes. However, the influence of membership conditionality on Hungary's political trajectory prior to accession, and the of of

*The Problem with Proactive Safety*  
Ensuring compliance with “conditional”

for addressing violations of liberal democracy. It enables the EU to suspend the membership of a country found to be in continuous violation of the liberal democratic principles enshrined in Article 2 of the TEU. The use of Article 7 could carry penalties such as the suspension of voting rights and the withholding of EU funds. While such sanctions are significant, and therefore might be seen to constitute a powerful mechanism to induce reform in target states, Article 7 has never been applied, because of a combination of member state preferences and the difficult voting rules attached to the mechanism.<sup>49</sup>

The implied threat of punishment seems clear enough, but, as usual, the devil resides in the details. Applying Article 7 requires agreement among member states on the existence of a breach of liberal values, as well as agreement on how to sanction the backslider. The former requires unanimity (minus one) in the European Council, as well as a two-thirds majority in the European Parliament. Because this is extremely difficult to obtain, there may be a reluctance even to present proposals aimed at employing Article 7, out of a fear that defeat could be interpreted as confirmation that there had been no breach of democratic principles in the first place. In addition to the exacting nature of Article 7, the strong preference of member states is to maintain national sovereignty. This, combined with the presence of two very illiberal governments ensconced in the European Council (Hungary and Poland), succeeds to make the use of Article 7 problematic, given that Budapest and Warsaw may continue to support each other in the European Council, notwithstanding the breach that developed between them in early 2022 over Russia's attack on Ukraine, with Poland's vehement denunciations of Moscow's aggression standing in diametric opposition to Hungary's indifference to, if not acquiescence in, Vladimir Putin's war.

Disagreement and divisions between member states and across EU institutions have always been part of the politics of EU decisionmaking. Party alliances within the European Parliament can also make states reluctant to discipline members of their coalition out of concern for eroding their political power within decision making structures. As Daniel Kelemen contends, the "EU has become trapped in an authoritarian equilibrium," hallmarks of which have been the EU's "half-baked system of party politics" and its "fBrd [(EU)-423(has) Tf wT118wS08 Tf w]TJ -I Putist



coalition of conservative and Christian Democratic parties—and the  
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framework” and the European Council’s “rule of law dialogue” as two mechanisms the EU can use to persuade states to make changes. The former allows the European Commission to enter into a dialogue with the member state and to make recommendations in order to resolve illiberal practices. The threat (such as it is) of using Article 7, should the target state not implement recommendations, hangs over the process. Since 2013, the European Commission has also annually published the “EU Justice Scoreboard”, which presents data on the independence, quality, and efficiency of national courts.<sup>55</sup> This mechanism aids member states in addressing the challenges in their judicial systems and creates a basis for dialogue on solutions. In 2014, the European Council established an annual “rule of law dialogue” to promote and safeguard the rule of law in member states. There have been recent discussions about strengthening this mechanism to include a peerreview process that would allow monitoring of how rule of law is implemented by member states. Article 7 could, in principle if not in practice, be utilized in the case of severe breach of the rule of law. The consistent use of these mecha-

the effectiveness of European socialization mechanisms, and thus ultimately help to explain political trajectories across the region.<sup>58</sup>

Some scholars argue that the EU was really only successful in enforcing democratic conditionality under two conditions that are individually necessary and jointly sufficient: where the EU offered a credible membership incentive, and where incumbent governments did not consider domestic costs of compliance threatening to their hold on power.<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, social persuasion is only effective when the rules are clear, the target state identifies with the community that establishes those rules, and the rules resonate with domestic political and legal culture and practices.<sup>60</sup> Needless to say, these scope conditions are dependent to a significant degree on the ways in which politicians in target states interpret European rules and recommendations, and then strategically frame European institutions, the rules, their consequences, and their fit with the domestic environment, in a manner that satisfies domestic audiences and reduces the political costs of reform.

Such “bottom up” approaches, of which this article constitutes an example, recognize that Europeanization processes play only an indirect role in encouraging reform in target states by providing resources for domestic political action that include material resources in the form of funding,<sup>61</sup> as well as new and powerful ways for policymakers to justify policies.<sup>62</sup> We apply a similar logic to explain post accession trajectories. Given the difficulty of reversing course after policies are passed, because of path dependency, institutional inertia, and domestic audience costs, elites need to justify illiberal backsliding in ways that resonate with domestic audiences. The degree of public support for EU membership and its interventions into domestic policy affect both the range of frames available to domestic elites and the size of audience costs. As discussed in

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<sup>58</sup>Camyar, “Europeanization, Domestic Legacies and Administrative Reforms”, 139; and Geoffrey Pridham, “The EU’s Political Conditionality and Post Accession Tendencies: Comparisons from Slovakia and Latvia,” *Journal of Common Market Studies* 46 (March 2008): 365–387.

<sup>59</sup>Schimmelfennig, Engert, and Knobel, *International Socialization*, 10. See also Kelley, “Ethnic Politics in Europe”; Schimmelfennig, “The EU: Promoting Liberal Democracy”; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, *The Europeanization of Central and Eastern Europe*; and Vachudova, *Europe Undivided*.

<sup>60</sup>Geoffrey T. Checkel, “Norms, Institutions, and National Identity in Contemporary Europe,” *International Studies Quarterly* 43 (March 1999): 83–114, at 87.

<sup>61</sup>Tove Malloy, “National Minorities between Protection and Empowerment: Towards a Theory of Empowerment,” *Journal of Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe* 13, no. 2 (2014): 11–29; Sophie Jacquot and Cornelia Woll, “Using Europe: Strategic Action in Multi-level Politics,” *Comparative European Politics* 8 (April 2010): 110–126; and Claudio M. Raedaelli and Romain Pasquier, “Conceptual Issues,” in Paulo Graziano and Marteen P. Vink, eds., *Europeanization: New Research Agenda* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 35–45.

<sup>62</sup>Agarín and Regelman, “Which Is the Only Game in Town?”; and Ugur, “Europeanization, EU Conditionality, and Governance Quality,” 41.

the next section, Orbar's government has gone on the oensive in at

intimidating critical media and attempting to install his loyalists in the state run broadcaster.<sup>63</sup> However, as a result of his relatively weak position in parliament, strong Socialist opposition, and Hungary's eagerness to join the EU, Orbán's first attempts at authoritarianism and centralization were short lived, and he was defeated in the 2002 election by the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP).

Orbán's second and far more forceful ascent began in the midst of a political crisis. In the April 2006 elections, the Socialists emerged as the single largest party in the assembly, taking 186 of 386 seats. The political crisis began after the MSZP prime minister, Ferenc Gyurcsány, delivered what he thought was a confidential policy address to party colleagues—an address in which he candidly, if unwisely, admitted to having recently lied to the electorate so as to win a second consecutive term. After the leaked speech, Fidesz, the conservative opposition party, began organizing prolonged mass protests that lasted through the remaining months of 2006 and into the beginning of 2007—protests the likes of which the country had not witnessed since the 1956 revolt against the Soviets.<sup>64</sup> The political crisis was further exacerbated by the Gyurcsány government's austerity measures of 2007, implemented to reduce the public deficit from over 9 percent to 3 percent of gross domestic product, as required by the European Commission if Hungary was to qualify to join the Eurozone under the Maastricht criteria.<sup>65</sup> These measures reduced wages, increased taxes, and slowed economic growth, yet they failed to secure Hungary's entry into the Eurozone.

The economic downturn worsened severely in 2008 with the world financial crisis. Among the EU newcomers who had joined in May 2004, Hungary suffered the most severe economic damage because more of its debt was owned by foreign banks, resulting in the devaluation of the national currency and further economic hardship.<sup>66</sup> This prompted the government to seek a bailout plan from the International Monetary Fund, which in turn, led to even stricter austerity measures imposed upon an already “downsizing” economy.<sup>67</sup> Not surprisingly, the gloomy

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<sup>63</sup>Committee to Protect Journalists, “Attacks on the Press in 1999–Hungary,” February 2000, accessed at <https://www.refworld.org/docid/47c565acc.html>, 7 June 2021.

<sup>64</sup>Daniel McLaughlin, “150 Injured as Hungarians Riot over PM's Lies,” *The Guardian*, 19 September 2006, accessed at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/sep/19/1>, 17 November 2020.

<sup>65</sup>Freedom House, “Freedom in the World 2008: Hungary,” 2 July 2008, accessed at <https://www.refworld.org/docid/487ca2138.html>, 13 October 2020.

<sup>66</sup>Other states joining at this time were Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia.

<sup>67</sup>Zsolt Darvas, “The Rise and Fall of Hungary,” *The Guardian*, 29 October 2008, accessed at <https://www.theguardian.com/business/blog/2008/oct/29/hungary-imf>, 13 October 2020.



when Hungary was facing a deepening political and economic crisis worse than anything experienced since the fall of communism, this nationalist turn paid dividends for Fidesz, whose mass support swelled. At the same time, a political party much further to its right, Jobbik, was also rising to prominence, with a program focused on activities intended to reenergize the intense “feeling of injustice” supposedly lurking in the hearts of all Hungarians as a result of the nefarious consequences of Trianon. In addition to its revisionist rhetoric about a “greater Hungary,” Jobbik directed its activism against minorities (primarily the Roma and the Jewish communities), accused of being the authors of all of Hungary’s misfortunes.

In 2007, when anti government sentiment reached a peak, Jobbik created an organization called Magyar Garda (Hungarian Guard), whose members were sworn in during ceremonies oozing with Nazi-era symbolism and sentimentality. According to one of its most prominent adherents, Gábor Vona, the Guard had been set up in order to carry out the real change of regime (from communism) and to rescue Hungarians from the continuous injustices they had suffered since Trianon.<sup>71</sup> The Guard’s presence on the ground was meant to intimidate anyone not seen as being a deserving member of the Hungarian nation, with the Roma prominently in their crosshairs. One alarming incident in December 2007 witnessed some 300 black-uniformed Guard members tromping through a village, chanting for the punishment of what they called “Gypsy delinquency” and advocating the Roma’s segregation from society.<sup>72</sup> Fidesz took note, and it was quick to appropriate the budding primordialist nationalist narrative and to energize its grassroots architecture through its previously consolidated Civic Circles Movement in order to keep the majority of right wing voters





institutional check on legislative and executive overreach. In early 2011, Fidesz passed a new constitution and a new law on the constitutional court,<sup>78</sup> drastically narrowing the latter's competences. It abolished the

Agency as the only source of news on the market.<sup>83</sup> In so doing, Orban brought the media under his control. The country's plummeting reputation regarding freedom of the press testified to his thoroughness in muzzling the mainstream media. By 2020, the Reporters Without Borders index of world press freedom had downgraded Hungary from its former lofty ranking among the top dozen countries to a dismal 89th place.<sup>84</sup>

With respect to the economy, Orban advanced an elaborate plan to build a "national bourgeoisie," to which end he employed the ministry of national development, working in close collaboration with his old high school and university friend, the oligarch Lajos Simicska. The development ministry's top ranks were staffed with protégés of both men,<sup>85</sup> and it was given the responsibility for receiving and distributing all subsidies coming Hungary's way from EU sources. In addition to doling out EU largesse, the ministry was empowered to purchase shares of private enterprises.<sup>86</sup> One such enterprise was the Hungarian oil company, in which the government had purchased a 20 percent equity share after winning elections in 2014. Orban also extended his reach into banking, tourism, retail, agriculture, and infrastructure.<sup>87</sup> By controlling these sectors, Orban ensured his absolute dominance of the economy, "commanding heights"

and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), which he perceived to be especially dangerous to his authoritarian rule.

*Fig. 4. The Ideology of the Hungarian National Alliance*

Despite this severe retrenchment from liberal democratic norms, Orban won a third mandate in April 2018, with a new two-thirds majority in parliament. Jobbik, the parliament's second largest party since 2014, also increased its seats from the previous election (to 26).<sup>89</sup> How did Orban sell these illiberal changes to the domestic electorate? He did so by capitalizing on the ideological architecture already in place prior to EU accession in 2004 and by running a campaign that centered on primordialist nationalist messages vowing to protect Hungary from enemies said to be interfering in its domestic affairs. His opponents, he charged, "want to take away our country," delivering it lock, stock, and barrel to pernicious foreigners.<sup>90</sup>

With its emphasis on ethnic nationhood and limitations on pluralism and individual freedoms, Orbán's primordial nationalist brand of "illiberal democracy" has generated divisions by fueling antiimmigrant sentiments, racism, and xenophobia, as well as by creating an environment hostile to gender rights and the legal protection of sexual minorities. Since 2010, and especially since the party's double electoral victory in 2014 (in both the Hungarian and the European elections), Fidesz leaders have rather consistently and openly challenged several major EU directives, especially in the domain of refugee policy. The refugee crisis, which hit Europe especially hard after 2015, when millions began risking dangerous journeys across the Mediterranean to escape violence or economic hardship, or both, in the Middle East and Africa, provided opportunities for the Orbán government to consolidate power further,421/gvea(in)]TJ T

Hungary's autocratization, therefore, has been a result of the interaction between endogenous and longstanding sociopolitical factors and a combination of endogenous and exogenous triggering factors. The endogenous factors were twofold. First, as we argued earlier, was the primordial nationalist political legacy that started to gain momentum during Orban's initial term as prime minister and continued to build during his opposition years until 2006. The second was Orban's role as an incumbent autocrat. After winning an overwhelming electoral victory in 2010 he constructed a pyramidal structure of power that subsumed the critical institutions that had once served as checks and balances on government authority, as well as business and civil society sectors that might otherwise have been auxiliary constraints on his exercise of power. The economic crisis combined with a strong challenge from the far right undermined the incentives for compliance with democratic conditions that were part of EU accession criteria, and which had not been substantially "locked in," in part because of the permissive structural environment within the EU.

The triggering factors were also twofold. First was the downfall of the incumbent Socialist prime minister after conversations within the party about deceiving the public were leaked to the public. Second was the subsequent economic crisis that hit Hungary much more profoundly than any other CEE country. These enabled Orban to capitalize on substantial anti Socialist sentiments (the party was already viewed as a legacy of communism by the conservative and rightwing voters) and to enlarge, consolidate, and solidify a voting bloc receptive to the primordial nationalist agenda with roots in anti Trianon historical revisionism predating the communist regime. These developments were facilitated by a permissive European environment, in which the accession process had shown itself insufficient for identifying worrying trends in Hungary prior to 2004, and in which post accession sanctions proved to be feckless, with a substantial portion of the electorate turning against European interventions into Hungarian politics. It is to the latter that we now turn.

### *The Failure of the European Union*

Just days after Orban's third consecutive electoral victory in 2018, the European Parliament drafted a report calling for sanctions in response to Hungary's violation of the EU's core values. The report raised concerns about the independence of the judiciary, corruption, freedom of expression, the rights of the Roma and Jewish minorities, and refugees, among other issues. As noted earlier, under Article 7 of the Lisbon

Treaty, a member state can be sanctioned for breaching the EU core

Hungary have been coordinating efforts across a broad range of issues within the EU (though it remains to be seen whether this solidarity can survive their wide differences over the Ukraine war). One striking example of coordination was their bid to frustrate legislation on gender equality, in which they were later supported by Bulgaria and Slovakia. EU diplomats have expressed concern that this joint effort by the two countries could undermine gender equality on a range of disparate issues and roll back years of substantial progress.<sup>100</sup> Meanwhile, Hungary passed a new anti LGBTQ + law in June 2021,<sup>101</sup> which prompted the European Parliament





as well as for care work, even though so many are simultaneously expected to maintain full employment. In the name of the same illiberal political ideology, sexual minority members face increasing threats.

Orban's government has successfully framed liberal human rights issues (for example, accepting migrants, promoting the work of such civil

izations did not contribute to solving Hungary's problems.<sup>116</sup> Public opinion polls such as these demonstrate how Hungarian elites can stræ

Budapest, which has a high concentration of theaters and other cultural institutions, and where the opposition won the mayoral election earlier that year.<sup>120</sup> The fact that the opposition has been able to win the local elections in the capital, a first serious blow to Orban's Fidesz after nearly a decade of authoritarian rule both nationally and locally, shows that there is important civic resilience to authoritarianism in Hungary. However, at the national, not the municipal level, Orban's rule has been so deeply institutionally entrenched through the series of autocratizing mechanisms detailed above, that any prodemocratic opposition faces numerous obstacles.

## CONCLUSION

After years of democratic degradation in Hungary and the effective establishment of authoritarian governance, the EU has been reduced to merely standing by while the former poster child for liberal democracy in CEE has busily transformed itself into the region's champion of autocracy. While EU conditionality, and to a lesser extent NATO membership, no doubt reinforced the allure of "returning" to Europe and even, for a time, consolidated a liberal democratic trend throughout the 1990s, the formal policy reforms required of the conditionality process proved insufficient for long term socialization and for preventing the rise of an illiberal right wing populist leader. Conditionality may not have failed everywhere in the CEE, but it certainly did not lock in any liberal democratic trajectory in Hungary, nor did it expose nationalist primordialist tendencies that were afoot even prior to Hungary's accession.

For Hungary, joining the EU has been a clear benefit, and there is no apparent interest among the major Hungarian political actors to reverse its European integration. The Orban government's actions since 2010, while taking full advantage of the benefits of membership, have re-

exogenous shocks of the economic crisis, migrant crisis, and pandemic, along with an increase in political competition and support for primordial nationalism, help us understand how “illiberal democracy” was able to manifest so well in one of the region’s erstwhile democratic front runners.

Though Hungary has been the starkest example of a once-promising liberal democracy veering off in an authoritarian direction, it is not the only case. There have been various primordial nationalist political movements across Europe in recent years, both within the EU and out-

The most recent example of democratic backsliding mirroring Orbán's model of governance and its underlying ideology within the EU is Slovenia, a country that, like Hungary, had also been heralded as an early

independence; Vucic also has created a pyramidal power structure resembling Hungary's.<sup>125</sup>

Given the "lessons learned" from previous rounds of EU enlargement, Serbia will be a critical test of the Union's political will to ensure that conditionality promotes liberal democratic values. The picture is not a bright one. Should it accede to membership, we might expect to see even more post accession backsliding on Serbia's part than has been evident elsewhere in CEE lands, including Hungary. This will be due to Serbia's possessing alternatives to EU support, namely from Russia and China, virtually ensuring that Belgrade suffers minimal if any audience costs as it whittles away the country's remaining stock of liberal democratic practices. While the Serbian public has been more or less evenly split on the question of whether they would support the country's EU membership, most respondents view Russia and China far more positively than the EU.<sup>126</sup>

Complex party politics and the increasing influence of primordial nationalist agendas across many EU countries, combined with the weakness of current European level mechanisms to address breaches to EU democratic norms and values, mean that it will be difficult to bring post accession backsliders (and even some aspirant countries like Serbia) back into the liberal democratic fold. However, liberal democracies could reinforce socialization processes by supporting civil society organizations, including the media, as well as politicians supporting a return to liberal democratic principles, through funding as well as through a mixture of public narratives that name and shame illiberal behavior. The lessons of the Hungarian case should also serve as a warning that the politics of conditionality has its limits. Absent significant internalization of liberal democratic norms by the political elite and the majority of the public, illiberal post accession backsliding will remain Europe's Achilles heel. The Hungarian case should therefore inform future decisions about enlargement to the southern Balkans, where liberal norms have yet to be internalized, and skepticism over the benefits of EU membership are deeper. Failure to ensure that states will uphold liberal democratic

principles once admitted, will erode European soft power, thereby ensuring that Europe will continue to punch below its weight on foreign policy issues. If this is so, then it would mean that conditionality has back red, making an enlarging Europe an entity that, in foreign policy, is considerably less than the sum of its parts.