

European Union Integration and Democratic Backsliding in Central and Eastern Europe

Jaye Goodrich

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Committee:

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Joseph Jupille, Associate Professor, Department of Political Science

IAFS Honors Council Representative: Dr. Doug Snyder, Assistant Teaching Professor, Program

in International Affairs

Faculty Advisor: Dr. William Mertens, Associate Teaching Professor, Department of Economics

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I. Introduction

Historically, democratization has occurred in waves (Huntington 1991). The first wave emerged with the fall of the European monarchies and rise of the United States as a global power. After observing the initial successes of these democratic countries, the rest of Western Europe began to follow suit, beginning the second wave of democracy. After this second wave, a tension emerged with the rise of the Soviet Union, presenting Communism as an alternative governing system. The third wave of democratization occurred after the demise of the Soviet Union and governmental shift by Eastern Europe. These waves of democratization expressed the growing popularity and expansion of democracy, and capitalism as a governing system as the 20th century came to a close.

With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and dissolution of the Soviet Union, a continental shift towards unification under democracy and capitalism was anticipated. Across Eastern Europe, Communism had proven to be a system that was unsustainable. The European Union (EU) had been gaining traction and began an increase to its membership toward the former communist countries from the east of the continent. The entry requirements of a shift to a stable democracy, a functioning market economy, respect for minority rights and the rule of law, and the ability to compete in the EU marketplace proved a worthwhile cost to bear for access to the benefits of free trade. For a while, these anticipations were correct. In 2004, the largest wave of enlargement occurred, with ten new countries gaining membership status. Among these were the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovenia, and Slovakia—all major, former Eastern bloc members. Each country met the strict democratic stability benchmarks to gain membership, and therefore the anticipated democratic shift was realized.

That is, until recently. Since 2010, Poland and Hungary have begun a march back into history. National policies restricting human rights in Hungary and Poland have demonstrated a deviation from the rule of law under the supranational structure of the European Union. By failing to comply with supranational law, a backwards slide away from liberal democratic institutions has been observed. In the post-Soviet region where the anticipated trend was a shift towards stable democracy, we witnessed instead gradual democratic backsliding. The trend seen in Poland and Hungary presents a puzzle. Existing theories assume that membership in the European Union over time will yield steady democratic growth, and that Poland and Hungary were on the right trajectory, each to become a democratic steady state. Yet, contrary to existing theories, we observe these countries shifting backwards in the context of European Union membership.

A secondary puzzle also emerges from this trend. Accession to European Union membership is not a simple task. There are strict and rigorous standards that candidates for membership must meet in order to officially gain member status. There are strict caps on national debt and inflation levels, which must mirror existing trends within the monetary policy of the European Union. Additionally, a stable democracy must exist, with several criteria relating to governing institutions, free elections, and policy in place. These extensive requirements implement an advanced level of democracy and capitalism to exist within a country to attain membership.

Once a country has officially become a member state, however, there is no real institutional leverage exercised by the European Union for these countries to remain at as high a level of democratization. Besides certain financial limitations and the threat of revoked membership, no true enforcement mechanism for democracy exists in the institutional

framework of the European Union. Thus, there is no mechanism preventing the backsliding observed by Poland and Hungary.

a) *Research Question and Thesis*

It is important to note that other countries in the region have not experienced similar backsliding. This is especially true in the Baltics, where democratic institutions have experienced constant growth. So, why is it that certain European Union countries are backsliding, and some are not? *What causes the variation of democratic backsliding in Eastern Europe?* I argue that, in general, as Eastern European integration with the West increases, democratic backsliding decreases.

This project seeks to understand why the cases of Hungary and Poland differ from other European Union member states within the context of a global trend of an autocratic political shift. It also seeks to understand how variance in effective integration within the European Union—beyond the fact of membership—affects the degree to which a country will democratically backslide.

In understanding European integration as a concept, different measurable aspects must be determined and analyzed. This project focuses on economic and identity factors of integration. A consideration of the economic factors of integration focuses on a set of economic relationships that might condition the degree of democratization for a specific country. This study will focus primarily on international trade patterns and investments into national economies. An analysis of the identity factors of integration focuses on the sentiments of everyday citizens. This study will interpret general attitudes and identities of citizens. Specifically in this project, an analysis of

these factors will aid in understanding the larger picture of the cases of Hungary and Poland and why they seem contrary to existing theory.

b) Findings

An analysis of the impact that international trade and foreign direct investment statistics alongside identity polls has on democratic backsliding trends over a 20-year period yields a complicated picture. The existing theory of democratic backsliding is relatively recent and does not account for much of the complexity that this process has. An examination of economic and identity determinants of European integration on democratic backsliding provides clarity that the hypothesis of increased integration actually increases democratic backsliding, rather than diminish it.

c) Plan

This project will resolve the puzzle of Eastern European democratic backsliding through an analysis of the factors of economics and identity of integration before comparing this against relative levels of democratic backsliding. First, I will provide historical background into the significance of the trends in this region. Next, I will review the current literature for explanations of democratic backsliding. I will then advance my argument by linking it to *de facto* integration. I will next calculate economic integration based upon trade statistics within and outside of the European Union alongside the amount of inward foreign direct investment from European Union member states. Then, I will analyze identity integration concerning attitudes and culture through a standardized set of opinion polls. Next, relative degrees of democratic backsliding will be calculated based on a variety of democratic indices. Finally, these calculations will be compared

to understand how differing economic and identity factors impact the degree of democratic backsliding.

d) Implications

The implications of the present study reshape the narrative that exists surrounding democratic backsliding in policy discussions. The presumption that greater unifying initiatives by the European Union to integrate member states at a high level of liberal democracy guides much of policy making. However, the safety net of the European Union seems to enable domestic governments to slip towards illiberal democracy without much enforcement. The implication of this study suggests that new, creative policy measures must be attempted to curb democratic backsliding, and that there may be an ideal level of integration to foster a democratic government.

II. Background Information

a) Historical Context of The Region

Prior to further understanding the current issues of European integration and democratic backsliding in Eastern Europe, the historical background of the puzzle must be addressed. Specifically, greater contextualization of the waves of democratization is needed to understand the theory of steady democratization in Europe and why the backsliding of Hungary and Poland is unusual.

Since the inception of democracy, there have been three historically defined waves of democratization. These are presented in political scientist and historian Samuel Huntington's work *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (1991).

According to Huntington, the first wave of democratization occurred over the 1800s through the 1920s and included the expansion of suffrage to a larger portion of the male population and in some areas, women. During this time, 29 countries transformed into full democracies. After this time, the first reverse wave began in conjunction with the Mussolini regime in Italy, and the number of democratic countries decreased. It was at this time that most of Western Europe democratized.

The second wave of democratization occurred directly after the World Wars. A surge of new democracies ensued, with a peak in the 1960s. Due to the ongoing Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States and its allies, countries in Eastern Europe did not participate, as the Soviet authoritarian regime was the undisputed governing system. A second reverse wave then occurred in the following fifteen years, where the total number of democracies dipped again.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union signaled the beginning of the third wave of democratization. Huntington provides five factors that contributed to the beginning of the third wave. They are (1) a deepening legitimization problem of authoritarian regimes due to economic and military failure, (2) the global economic growth of the 1960s which culminated in an expanding middle class, (3) the shift of the Catholic Church as opponents to authoritarianism, (4) policy changes in external actors, including the European Community, the United States, and the Soviet Union, and (5) and a “snowballing” effect of democratization throughout the time period. With these substantial changes, the third wave was theorized to begin in the 1980s (Huntington, 1991).

This third wave is the time in which most of Eastern Europe democratized, including both Hungary and Poland. This is the region of this case study, as the post-Soviet Union area rapidly democratized during this same period. Compared to the rest of the post-Soviet space in the Caucasus and the rest of Asia, the percentage of democracies in Eastern Europe rose dramatically from just under 50% in 1991 to just shy of 100% in 2009, compared to a rise from 30% in 1991 to just above 50% in 2009 across all former Soviet states (Miller et al., 2012). These transitions may be classified as development into a full democracy in this data set, however many of these countries began acting as a “competitive authoritarian regime” (Levitsky and Way 2012) and never fully met all criteria to become a democracy.

The third wave of democratization in Eastern Europe was also accompanied by a transition from command economies to market economies. Huntington references a capitalist economy as a necessary factor for democratization, and most countries democratized at a middle level of economic transition. With the failure of the command economy established by the Soviet Union, Eastern European countries shifted to a market economy. According to World Bank data,

GDP per capita percentage growth rose from a loss of -9.5% in 1991 to a growth of 5.9% in 1995 (*GDP per Capita Growth (Annual %) - Central Europe and the Baltics* | Data, n.d.). This economic transition went in hand with the democratic transition of the region, further supporting the theory of democratization at the middle level of economic development. By 2007, these countries were considered to be at their peak of liberal democracy level.

b) *A Current Understanding of the Situation in Hungary and Poland*

In the established democratic theory of the third wave of democratization, both the economic shift to capitalism and near complete democratization of the European continent signaled a wave of triumphalism across the continent. The victory over the Soviet Union was thought to end the conflict between democracy and authoritarianism with a decisive democratic victory. The democratic system was viewed as the global inevitable as more countries shifted to capitalist systems (Fukuyama 1989).

The European Union was especially optimistic of the victory of democracy. As this wave of democratization surged, accession to membership in the EU also surged. This culminated in the largest single addition of countries to the EU in 2004, with ten countries in Eastern and Southeastern Europe attaining membership. The accession process was viewed as a process that would both consolidate and accelerate democratic transitions across Eastern Europe. And, for a time, all countries that attained European Union membership followed this prediction and began to robustly democratize.

For some Eastern European countries, however, this growth began to stagnate and later backslide. The initial unifying mechanism of the European Union did not work as effectively later in membership. The benefits of membership in the European Union were lucrative to the

rapidly developing capitalist economies in Eastern Europe. The ability to freely trade within the European Union would yield an economic advantage, as market-driven specialization, export of products in profitable industries, and the import of goods from more inefficient industries yields significant gains from trade. To be eligible for membership status, these democratizing countries had to attain a certain level of democratic and market stability. The economic advantages of membership yielded this rapid transformation with the end goal of European Union membership. Once this end goal was achieved, the next step was less clear.

The European Union has defined both testable and enforceable targets for level of democratization and market stability for countries applying for membership. However, this enforcement does not always remain once a country has the guarantee of membership. The internal mechanisms for promoting democratic stability rely on economic sanctions and the withdrawal of membership completely.

For member states, achieving European Union membership yielded an economic advantage, but there was less of a benefit to maintaining high standards of democracy once the benefits were realized. When members democratically backslide, there is an option to open Article 7 proceedings, which is an enforcement mechanism to correct the course of member states. The first step is in the use of economic sanctions causes harm to other member states who depend on backsliding countries for imports in crucial industries, making the European Union hesitant to use such measures. The alternative option would be rescinding of membership status, which would also yield harmful effects. Consider the case of the departure of the United Kingdom from the European Union in 2020. Several years of negotiation were required in order to determine various terms and conditions for all industries, with numerous issues still

unresolved. If this process were to repeat for another exiting country, it would be similarly taxing to negotiate a departure deal.

Violation of Civil Liberties

The recent violations include taking away civil liberties from citizens, most notably the rights of LGBTQ+ citizens, and violating the rule of law of the European Union. A shift towards autocracy in Eastern member states of the European Union contradicts expectations posited by the third wave of democratization and conclusion of democracy as the triumphant governing system à la "the end of history." Hungary and Poland are at the center of this shift, as the domestic governments have legislated an alarming number of restrictions on the rights of citizens, including freedom of the media and LGBTQ+. These restrictions are in direct conflict with policies put into place in the Treaty on European Union of 1992.

In Hungary, a law prohibits LGBTQ+ content from being "promoted" to individuals under the age of 18. This violates European Union rules regarding human dignity, freedom of expression and information, and non-discrimination within Articles 1, 7, 11, and 21 of the European Union Charter of Fundamental Rights. This was enacted under the guise of the protection of the minor, however there is no explanation provided for why the exposure to this type of content is damaging to minors. Additionally, as another example, a disclaimer was placed on a children's book to denote "behavior deviating from traditional gender roles." The limitation of these civil liberties constitutes a backslide towards an illiberal democracy. These are trends from a larger movement within the national government of Hungary to consolidate freedoms of the media under party-run programs. Considering these actions and the Hungarian government's failure to prove any detrimental effects this type of content has on children, the European

Commission determined that these acts constitute a violation of several European Union rules under the Charter of Fundamental Human Rights.

Similarly, in Poland, several municipalities in regions in the South and East adopted titles of “LGBT-ideology free zones.” These zones have created hostile environments for LGBT people and restricted their rights to freedom of expression and non-discrimination. After a statement by the European Commission classifying these regional moves as a violation of European Union law and a threat to withhold funding, many of these regions revoked these statuses. However, Polish authorities have not been forthcoming with information to the European Commission in the investigation of these resolutions (European Commission 2022), and therefore the rule of law and authority of the European supranational institution was undermined.

The European Commission has initiated legal proceedings against Poland and Hungary for the violation of Article 2 of the Treaty of the European Union,

“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” (Treaty on European Union, 2012).

When considering a European Union that has opened many negotiations for the accession of new Eastern European states into the European Union, these examples of noncompliance and violation of the rule of law bring into question the legitimacy of the European Union as a

democratic unifier. There is a growing trend of democratic backsliding and a shift towards an illiberal democracy and authoritarianism in this region.

Violation of the Rule of Law

The rule of law, in which institutions and officials act in accordance with the adopted law, is an important fixture of democracy. The rule of law is violated by enabling domestic law to take priority of that of the European Union's. By directly violating European Union law that predated these recent domestic policies, Hungary and Poland are exhibiting a departure from a core principle of democracy in favor of more autocratic proceedings.

The example of the violation of the rule of law in Hungary acts as more notable in the host of autocratic dealings of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. Now in his fourth consecutive term in power under the Fidesz party, Orbán's party has actively increased corruption and suppressed pluralism in the media. The Fidesz party has been accused of corruption since it attained political power in 2010 with Orbán's victory, and even the opposition party MSZP also found itself at the center of a corruption scandal. These scandals eventually led to a growth in the popularity of right-wing party Jobbik, which used an anti-corruption platform to engage more voters in the elections of the 2010s (Minkenberg, 2017). The increasing concerns of corruption yield detrimental effects on electoral systems in Hungary. As the perceptions of citizens take corruption into greater account, the more likely citizens are to abstain from voting. This undermines voting in free and fair elections as a democratic staple and signifies a shift towards autocracy and single-party rule.

The cases of Poland and Hungary have set into motion dangerous notions of the extents of democratic backsliding. Although the system of democracy may still be viewed as the

dominant system, continuous actions by leaders and parties in power over the past have undermined the democratic system by violating free, fair, and competitive elections and the broad protection of civil rights of citizens. “Authoritarian populists in Hungary and Poland are explicitly anti-liberal but not necessarily anti-democratic. They embrace the ‘form’ of democracy and claim to speak for the people themselves, but, at the same time—by undermining its liberal constitutional foundations—they erode the substance of democracy and gradually transform it into various forms of illiberal and authoritarian regimes” (Bugaric, 2019). The intent to shift away from democracy as a governing system may not exist, but the actions are present and cause real effects.

III. Approaches to Democratic Backsliding

a) *Democratic Backsliding*

Understanding the concept of democratic backsliding is crucial to recognizing why the cases of Poland and Hungary are significantly notable within the trends of a global right-wing shift.

Referencing previous research into the democratic backsliding in Poland and Hungary, a compiled definition of democratic backsliding is, “a process of deliberate, intended action designed to gradually undermine the fundamental rules of the game in an existing democracy, carried out by a democratically elected government” (Bakke & Sitter, 2022). This definition relies on four critical criteria: (1) movement away from democracy as a starting point, (2) gradual, incremental change, (3) an open-ended process that may or may not lead to regime change, and (4) an elite-driven process involving successful willful acts by elected powerholders.

This definition of democratic backsliding is critical to recognizing that the trends witnessed in Hungary and Poland are progressing further than those seen in other areas of the European Union—notably France with Marine Le Pen from the Rassemblement National party, and Italy with Giorgia Meloni from the Brothers of Italy party. Under the long-standing administrations of Orbán and Duda, President of the Republic of Poland, Hungary and Poland have experienced gradual, incremental change over a longer period. These shifts in policy have been driven by these elected powerholders, thus satisfying criteria to be classified as democratic backsliding. The second clause of gradual, incremental change is especially important in considering the right-wing trends seen across Europe. Many of these campaigns ultimately failed to install an elected power holder (Le Pen in France) and those that succeeded have not had a sufficient time frame to prove gradual and incremental change (Meloni in Italy).

With this departure from the protection of citizens' liberties in Hungary and Poland, a greater question must be asked about the desires of the citizens of these countries. If limiting these rights is what most citizens want, then democratic values are upheld through free and fair elections. Thus, a distinction between a liberal and illiberal democracy must be clarified. A liberal democracy is a democratic system that upholds certain civil liberties for citizens, including the rule of law and the protections of speech and property. By definition, a democracy should guarantee free and fair elections and political rights, more so than civil liberties. An illiberal democracy guarantees free and fair elections but has strict limitations on citizens' rights.

The model depicted by the theory of the democratizing West presents the concept of a liberal democracy as the governing system to end all governing systems. The European Union illustrates that a liberal democracy is the standard for most members, which is why the transition of laws against certain citizens' liberties is a trend that violates existing theory. The definition of democracy that I and the European Union are operating under concerns that of a liberal democracy, with the concept of an illiberal democracy as a governing system on the path of democratic backsliding.

With this definition of democratic backsliding and an illiberal democracy in mind, it is important to understand that this process still operates within a democratic system. There may be substantial shifts away from the democratic norm, however a democratic government still exists, and legitimate democratic institutions remain intact. Under this definition, Poland and Hungary are not yet classified as competitive authoritarian regimes.

Competitive authoritarianism is a type of regime that operates as a hybrid between a democratic and authoritarian government, with characteristics from both. Using a midrange definition of democracy from Levistky and Way as having (1) free, fair, and competitive

elections, (2) full adult suffrage, (3) broad protection of civil liberties, including freedom of speech, press, and association, and (4) the absence of nonelected “tutelary” authorities that limit elected officials’ power to govern, a fifth attribute was proposed by Steven Levitsky and Lucan Ahmad Way as “the existence of a reasonably level playing field between incumbents and opposition” (Levitsky and Way 2012), to classify a regime as democratic. In a competitive authoritarian regime, constitutional channels for opposing parties to gain legitimate political control could exist, but one of these five defining characteristics of a complete democracy would be violated.

Comparing this regime definition against the definition of democracy provided by Elisabeth Bakke and Nick Sitter, backsliding in the cases of Hungary and Poland, the third characteristic—a broad protection of civil liberties—is in question. Democratic backsliding exists as the process leading to the slide away from total democracy to an illiberal democracy or competitive authoritarian regime. The key determinant between a liberal democracy versus an illiberal democracy and competitive authoritarian regime here lies in the authority of the European Union and its ability to still protect these liberties. Democratic backsliding exists because of the ongoing processes to facilitate the third characteristic—a broad protection of civil liberties—but not the total violation or absence of it. If these states were to leave the European Union and continue to enact anti-LGBT policies, a case could be made for the supremacy of a competitive authoritarian regime over democracy.

Through the processes of accession, in which candidates for membership apply for EU membership, European Union member states in Central and Eastern Europe are in various stages of progress toward European integration. There is a baseline of requirements a European state must achieve in order to be considered for membership. These include the Copenhagen criteria

(*EUROPEAN COUNCIL IN COPENHAGEN*, 1993). Having met these requirements, a prospective member state then faces various negotiations to ensure the adoption of all current European Union ‘*acquis*,’ or the body of law.

This process of accession supposedly ensures that all member states are similarly democratic and can integrate under the supranational rule of law. However, a variance of democracy exists amongst Central and Eastern European member states.

In understanding why there are varying degrees to democratic backsliding, there are two foci under which theories of European integration are categorized. In light of this conceptualization, explanations of the occurrence of backsliding have tended to focus on either domestic (internal) factors or on external ones.

b) *Internal Determinants of Integration*

Internal factors are movements within a state that influence the sentiments of the domestic government and the public. These factors focus on the dynamics within the domestic party system, mass attitudes of the public, and the structure and impacts of domestic institutions, especially those enacted through the electoral system.

Upon attaining membership in the European Union, domestic governments in Central and Eastern European countries were predicted to continue to shift closer to liberal democracy. The collapse of the Soviet Union and shift towards European integration was labeled as a “critical juncture” in the history of Central and Eastern Europe. The territorial proximity alongside political tradition and the success of the economic transition away from communism were predicted to aid the political shift of formerly authoritarian countries (Hlousek and Petr 2020).

Considering the sentiments of the national population, an initial trend of pro-Europeanization was popular around the time of accession of Hungary and Poland. This was due, in part, to the general concept that more mainstream parties were more likely to gravitate towards pro-EU positions than those that fell more towards the extremes of the electoral spectrum (Spanihelova and Zicha 2012). The perceived benefits of membership in the European Union were enticing to the public.

However, after the initial period of democratization post-accession, a shift occurred across the agenda of domestic political parties. The GAL-TAN scale is a measurement of cultural dimension in a country, focusing on noneconomic issues. The GAL (Green, Alternative, Liberal) parties focus on policies that align with greater civil liberties, whereas the TAN (Traditional, Authoritarian, Nationalism) parties have a high focus on law and order, and a shift away from expanded personal civil liberties. Previously, dominant political parties had shifted towards GAL on the GAL-TAN scale, signifying a decrease in the state's role in the economy and a greater protection right. However, during the span of European Union membership, dominant Eastern European parties began to shift towards the TAN portions of the scale—notably Poland and Slovakia (Vachudova 2011). With this shift in the party systems, greater state economic oversight and fewer citizens' rights were prioritized within domestic governments. The latter especially conflicted with the agenda of the European Union, signaling contention between both levels of governance.

The initial periods of accession in Hungary and Poland were not as welcomed by the dominant political parties at the time. The years with the strongest integration effects were seen just after the turn of the century, before either Hungary or Poland attained European Union membership. In Hungary, pro-EU party MSZP was dominant as they used Fidesz's nationalistic

agenda as a deterrent for voters in a country bound towards European Union membership (Mikulova 2013). The sway of the potential of the European Union secured voters for the mainstream pro-EU parties.

The domestic party systems in Hungary and Poland operate with relative stability during elections. In Hungary, the Fidesz party has retained political power through Orbán since 2010 and there has been little challenge to this authority in elections since. The crisis brought by the coronavirus pandemic only brought greater strength to Hungary's executive branch, as executive powers were expanded due to the state of emergency (Bolleyer and Salát 2021). Given the stability and emergency-driven expansion of the relative dominance of this party, the policies of Fidesz have been accepted as a standard by Hungarian citizens, and therefore the policies the party has towards European integration are normalized to the Hungarian public. The PiS party in Poland has experienced a similar trend to that of Fidesz, however a dominance in elections and the executive branch has been less outright. The party has had political control since just 2015, although experiencing a recent the loss of the majority in the Senate.

In understanding how party systems affect the degree of domestic European integration, there has been a noted voter shift away from previously mainstream pro-EU parties towards nationalistic, relatively more extreme parties. The dominance of these parties has encouraged anti-integration sentiments within national governments and a stable fixture of the growth of illiberal democracy. The anti-European parties existed prior to European accession, thus understanding the national voter attitudes that sparked a shift from mainstream to extreme is far more important in understanding the developing trend of democratic backsliding.

When considering the mass attitudes of citizens of these countries, strong anti-integration sentiments exist. How citizens feel about cosmopolitanism versus nationalistic tendencies is a

pivotal fixture in the outcomes of free and fair elections. If citizens tend to cling to a Hungarian or Polish identity stronger than that of a European identity, they will vote in accordance with policies and public officials that also reflect that.

Much of European integration theory has been analyzed using this lens. The trends within domestic parties yield an understanding of the type of representation a member state will provide to the European Union, and what issues a particular administration might leverage at the supranational level, or if this engagement even exists at all.

c) *External Determinants of Integration*

Moving to a different lens of examination, external integration factors widen the focus to interpret influences outside of the state, in this case being the European Union. These factors move beyond the politics of the domestic government and instead focus on the direct impact the European Union has on the governance and the citizens of member states. Rather than viewing the relationship as how the domestic government influences the member state's citizens in their process of European integration, these factors focus solely on the relationship between the European Union on a member state, and how this impacts the policies of the domestic administration.

In an investigation into forms of backsliding, Nancy Bermeo outlines the strategic manipulation of elections through international observers. The impact of international observation on fair election results dissuades blatant forms of election fraud. Strategic manipulation of elections includes limiting media access, changing laws to favor incumbents, and restricting voter registration. International election monitoring has risen in recent years and has forced political leaders to stray away from blatant forms of election fraud. This lends to a

more incremental change in the democratic nature of free and fair elections and slows the process of democratic backsliding.

Additionally in this same study, the idea of rational responses to international events has spurred backsliding. Current trends of backsliding are not isolated to specific countries but are instead reactions to local and international incentives. Previously levied sanctions against democratically elected governments have limited coups, but new political figures rise to domestic power by framing themselves as escaping international sanctions (Bermeo 2016).

The introduction of international organizations as promoters of democracy has yielded an unintended consequence of further democratic backsliding. International organizations are ill-equipped to promote ongoing democratic process. They shift the balance of power in a domestic government in favor of executives and impede the development of critical institutions. The outcome of backsliding from international organizations in the medium term is a shift to an illiberal democracy (Meyerrose 2020). This process has occurred within the European Union, however the funding and targeted programming towards integration, including the 2021-2027 Action Plan on European Integration, creates an unexplored area of research. This explores the efficacy of the integration programs implemented by the European Union as a well-equipped international organization to promote democracy amongst its member states.

Both domestic and external integration factors are vital in understanding European integration. Understanding these factors as having separate but interacting impacts on backsliding creates a research frontier. Understanding the relationship between international and domestic factors of integration allows for a deeper understanding of the ramifications of backsliding.

IV. Theory and Hypothesis

a) Concepts, Variables, and Indicators

The trajectory of democratization has occurred in three stages in Eastern Europe. The first stage was of significant transition and growth directly after the Cold War. In order to apply for membership in the European Union and reap the benefits, candidate countries needed to attain a certain level of democratization and meet the ascension criteria. This period occurred from the 1990s through 2004. Once these countries gained European Union membership status, a period of stability occurred. The level of democracy remained relatively stable and consistently high. This period lasted until 2015-2016 for Hungary and Poland. With the benefits of European Union membership acquired, there was no incentive for growth. This is where backsliding occurred. This theory is of growth pushing high levels of democratization, with stability ultimately leading to the exploitation of reaped benefits and beginning of backsliding.

This study will ultimately understand impacts on democratic backsliding that stem from varying degrees of European integration. With European integration set as an independent variable, it will be measured in two manners—economic indicators and identity indicators. European integration is inherently relational between these two indicators. The variables of economics and identity as aspects of European Integration come from a 2005 study, *Calculation, Community and Cues*, as “Economic interests and communal identities do not speak with a single voice across the European Union but interact with national institutions and elites” (Hooghe & Marks, 2005). Due to the interactive nature of these indicators, they can also be viewed as relational to the internal and external approaches to democratic backsliding mentioned earlier.

Economic Indicators as Aspects of European Integration

To further understand the significance of economic indicators as aspects of European integration, a deconstruction of these factors into observable variables is crucial. In this study, the factors to be analyzed are international trade between the European Union member states, foreign direct investments (FDI) into domestic markets, and a comparison against GDP as a deflator. These indicators were selected as they are easily measurable and provide a standardizable perspective into international economic relationships.

Participation in the European Union includes significant economic integration through trade liberalization and factor mobility. International trade and foreign direct investment statistics present easily measurable trends on the status of a country's foreign relationships. Especially when considering the proportion of trade or inward FDI from specific countries, we can see indicators of changing dynamics.

With the immense economic benefit of international trade to industries, understanding trade flows within and outside of member states can illustrate a certain degree of economic integration within Europe. Partnerships in key industries with various global partners suggest where important economic relationships lie, and whether significant extra-European partnerships exists.

Another factor to consider when understanding economic integration in the European Union is that of foreign direct investment (FDI). FDI provides a perspective into the viability of a domestic market to international investors. This investment creates a greater relationship and degree of integration between market participants from separate countries. By understanding what these values are proportionally between the European Union and the rest of the world and

how they have changed during this period of democratic backsliding in Hungary and Poland is another way to understand the degree of economic integration or disintegration.

By interpreting these factors of economic integration, an image of the degree of dependence of member states on the free trade zone and funding from the European Union will then be compared against the degree of democratic backsliding. This will be tested through the hypothesis that as economic European integration increases, democratic backsliding decreases.

Identity Indicators as Aspects of European Integration

The other part of European integration that needs to be examined is that of identity. This encapsulates the social attitudes of the citizens of member states and accounts for culture. More specifically, this indicator interprets the degree to which a national population aligns with a cosmopolitan vision of the European Union, or whether a more nationalistic viewpoint occurs.

When identity impacts on integration are also considered, social identity theory focuses on what groups a person identifies with and how that allows them to develop. In Central and Eastern Europe in particular, these shaping groups are generally territorial, nationalistic identities. These strong nationalistic views clash with the European Union model of cosmopolitanism and coexistence. Those who have the strongest territorial identities reject European integration in favor of nationalist sentiment. When considering that the democratic backsliding shifts in Hungary and Poland are led by right-leaning political elites, this territorial identity yields a strong negative sentiment towards integration.

This project seeks to quantify the existence of these social groups within member states. National identities are important factors of European integration and can yield greater insight into democratic backsliding beyond purely economic results. Culture and the identity of a

community has a great sway as a force of integration, and is referenced by Hooghe and Marks as, “National attachment appears to be a more powerful influence than conventional economic factors” (Hooghe & Marks, 2005). The importance of culture cannot be overstated in this case.

b) Hypothesis

With the current state of the field in mind, I reiterate the question, *what causes the variation of democratic backsliding in Eastern Europe?* Through this understanding of the specific economic and identity factors that comprise the external factors of integration, I seek to apply them to the case study of Eastern Europe. Economic and identity factors of integration will be compared alongside trends in democratic backsliding in order to understand whether these critical measures of European integration are significant enough to prevent disintegration of democracy. These factors will be tested to determine whether they prevent a descent into a hybrid or competitive authoritarian regime.

V. Evidence

a) Research Design

I will empirically assess the foregoing hypotheses using quantitative data. The data for the present study will focus on the period from 2003 through 2021. May of 2004 is the year that both Hungary and Poland attained European Union Member State status. Data prior to 2003 is inconsistent and not often published for public use. Therefore, this is where the variables concerning democratic backsliding and economic European integration will begin to be measured. Concerning identity integration, standardized publicly available data exists from 2010 onwards, so the period of study will differ from the other variables. Some limitations exist in the reporting of certain data in the most recent years of this period, as they have not been published or are preliminary. Data for the years of 2021 and 2022 are still preliminary for international trade and foreign direct investment statistics. Given that this is an evolving issue, the most recently provided years will be utilized as often as possible in this study.

The countries analyzed for this study are Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia. Hungary and Poland are the specific countries of note, due to the previously specified trends of democratic backsliding. The Czech Republic and Slovakia were selected due to historical and regional similarities. They will serve as control cases in this study.

b) Measurement and Operationalization

Measurement of Democratic Backsliding

To measure democratic backsliding, I will use data from Freedom House. Their annual Freedom in World report provides an aggregated score for both political rights and civil liberties. Within the category of political rights, individual scores are calculated for the electoral process,

political pluralism and participation, and the functioning of government. The higher these scores, the observed country is more democratic than authoritarian. Within the category of civil liberties, individual scores are calculated for the freedom of expression and belief, associational and organizational rights, rule of law, and personal autonomy and individual rights. The higher these scores, the more liberally democratic an observed country is, as opposed to illiberally democratic. Both categories are then aggregated, and each country receives a score out of 100—the higher being a greater degree of liberal democracy. These scores are measured and reported annually.

The Freedom House data set was specifically chosen, as it considers both political rights and civil liberties. In examining both, this study can capture important separate elements of backsliding. The political rights scale creates a distinction between democracy and autocracy as separate governing systems. Interpreting changes to civil rights is important considering the previously established definition of democratic backsliding away from liberal democracy, rather than away from democracy and only towards autocracy. As previously mentioned, the measurement of specific civil liberties is not a feature of the governing system of democracy but is an important distinction between a liberal and illiberal democracy. Other data sets that standardize scores for level of democracy or autocracy are operating under the latter definition and do not cover the entirety of the scope for this project. This is the reasoning for not using the popular V-DEM dataset, as it only considers trends that fall under political rights and not civil liberties.

Measurement of Economic Determinants of Integration

Multiple sets of data and statistics will be utilized to calculate the degree of economic integration in each country in the study. As mentioned previously, a view of economic integration will stem from trade patterns and foreign direct investment patterns.

To calculate trade statistics, this study will use the International Monetary Fund's Direction of Trade Statistics. For each country, both import (CIF) and export (FOB) data will be utilized, on an annual basis. The data also includes trade with the European Union as a separately calculated category. The data are calculated using value, in millions of US dollars, inflation-adjusted, instead of quantity, as that figure would be difficult to standardized across all goods.

In understanding the proportion to which trade occurs with the European Union as compared to the world, for each year a comparison will be made. The value of imports and exports with the European Union will be divided by the value of imports and exports with the world. This will yield a standardized score between 0 and 1 to calculate trade integration, i.e., trade with the EU as a fraction of all trade. Yielding a value closer to 1 indicates a higher proportion of trade with the European Union compared with the rest of the world.

By standardizing this measure of trade, this study can focus on changes in trade over time. Due to both physical proximity and history, the countries in the present study will naturally have a high degree of trade with the rest of the European Union. Using raw values will indicate a rapidly increasing amount of trade over time with the European Union, but also with countries outside of the European Union. By using a proportional score for comparison, we can better see changing trade patterns with the European Union specifically.

The next measure of economic integration will be calculated using foreign direct investment statistics reported directly from a national bank or department of statistics from each

country. For Hungary, this data will come from the Hungarian Central Statistical Office in the reported FDI by countries and groups of countries by origin. For Poland, statistics will come from net capital inflows into Poland within the International Investment Position data from Statistics Poland. For the Czech Republic, figures will be drawn from the annual reports of foreign direct investment from the Czech National Bank. Lastly, Slovakia has reported data from the National Bank of Slovakia, under inward FDI financial flows by partner country.

It should be noted that the globally standardized mechanism implemented to measure foreign direct investment changed in 2013. There was a methodology shift from the BPM5 to the BPM6. Different measures were introduced to various categories included in foreign direct investment. This included a move from the concept of “directional principle” to that of assets and liabilities. Rather than measure a one-way macroeconomic movement of funds, the assets and liabilities model reflects the vulnerability of a certain industry to external market conditions (OECD 2014). While the present study does take the macroeconomic view of the movement of funds by partner country, comparisons between the BPM5 and BPM6 are not accurate due to this methodology change affecting how direct investment is measured. Therefore, most international organization publications on foreign direct investment would not suffice for a time-series comparison.

To circumvent this methodology change, data stemming directly from each country’s national statistics department will be sourced. These individual data sets provide far more annual information than international publications and allow for a direct comparison of pre-2013 and post-2013 data. Since 2013 falls directly in the middle of the period studied, time-series comparison of this data is crucial to understanding economic integration through foreign direct investment.

To measure foreign direct investment, a similar comparison to that of the analysis of trade statistics occurs. I focus on inward FDI. The total amount of foreign direct investment received from European Union member states, converted into real US dollars, is divided by the total received from the world. With this calculation, a standardized score is created to measure the patterns of intra-EU versus extra-EU foreign direct investment.

In the measurement of both foreign direct investment and international trade statistics, the specific countries used in the European Union measurement reflects the organizational makeup in each year. For example, prior to 2013, any trade with or foreign direct investment from Croatia was considered as part of that from the rest of the world, rather than the European Union. This also reflects the accession of Bulgaria and Romania in 2007, prior to which these two countries are considered as the rest of the world.

Measurement of Identity Determinants

Shifting to the measurement of the degree of identity integration, the best data source is found through the Standard Eurobarometer published twice a year by the European Commission. The Standard Eurobarometer is a public opinion poll with standardized questions asked to citizens across all European Union member states. The best time-series publication ranges from the Spring of 2010 through the Winter of 2021/2022. This period does not cover as wide a range as that of the economic determinants, however it still yields important data before and during the years of observed backsliding.

There will be two specific standardized questions that this study will analyze. The first is the degree to which citizens from different European Union Member States feel “European.” There are five possible responses, those being “yes, definitely,” “yes, to some extent,” “no, not

really,” “no, definitely not,” and “don’t know.” These results are also broken into broader categories of “total ‘yes’” and “total ‘no’” responses.

The second question to be analyzed is the sense of identity European Union citizens have as European compared to their own nationality. The applicable responses are “(Nationality) only,” (Nationality) and European,” “European and (Nationality),” “European only,” and “None/refusal/don’t know.” Through this question, the specific distinction between feeling “European” compared to their nationality may be analyzed. Additionally, in the case of an individual identifying as both European and their nationality, their primary and secondary identities are compared.

In addition to the data from the four countries included in the case study, the European Union average will also be analyzed as a control indicator to understand how the responses from the citizens of each country compare to the larger European identification.

c) *Model Specification*

The specific econometric model utilized to analyze the data will follow a bivariate regression. This is a common econometric technique wherein a regression model is estimated to illustrate the linear relationship between two variables. Additionally, a polynomial regression model will be used to analyze one trend in the data. This model proved to furnish a better fit for the relationship between variables than the linear regression.

In an alternative specification, I deflate trade by annual GDP. The results were relatively similar but provide interesting implications. This measure of economic integration deflates intra-EU trade and inward FDI with national GDP. In comparing international trade value and foreign direct investment with GDP, the degree to which the European Union is a key contributor to the

national economy is measured. The measure of GDP is sourced from the World Bank in current US dollars. Concerning foreign direct investment, the comparison to GDP falls into the category of private investments. For each country, the value of inward foreign direct investment will be divided by the GDP. This will create another standardized score to compare against.

d) *Empirical Analysis and Discussion*

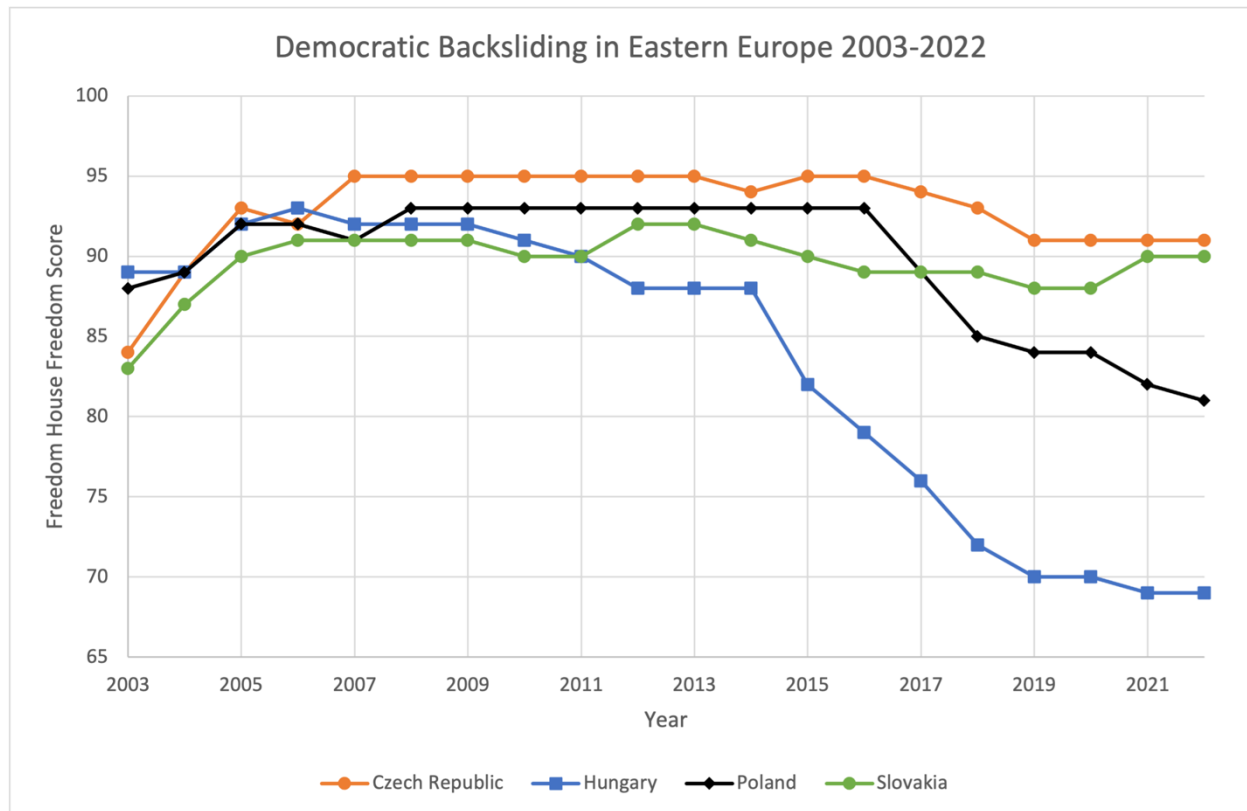
Understanding the Change in Democratic Backsliding in the Region

In a time-series analysis on the change in democratic freedom in the four countries of the case study, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia, there are three identifiable time categories. These are integration into the EU at the beginning, which then grew into relative cohesion and stability, and then a descent into the disintegration of Hungary and Poland.

Examination of the simple time series trend in democracy measures provides initial confirmation that backsliding follows the patterned lifecycle. From 2007-2013, there is a relative cohesion in Freedom Score amongst these countries. From 2003-2007 all experienced a rise in score as they first entered the European Union and became settled. A period of relative democratic stability then occurred from 2007-2015, with scores that ranged between 90 and 95. The Czech Republic and Slovakia remained relatively stable around a score of 90 through the most recent publication of Freedom Scores in 2022.

Hungary experienced a downward shift in Freedom Score from 2006-2012 comparatively, however a significant deviation from the other scores was not apparent until 2015. From 2015 through 2022, Hungary's Freedom Score changed from 87 to 69. An almost 20-point shift over 8 years signifies a shift away from liberal democracy on all measurements. This is also a decrease of 21% in 8 years. Subsequently, Poland then began experiencing a

downward trend in 2015 and had a similar trajectory to that of Hungary. In 2016 it began the shift with a score of 93 and ended 2022 with a score of 81. This is a 13% decrease in Freedom Score over 7 years.



The political rights and civil liberties subsections yield further information in understanding these score shifts in Hungary and Poland. For Hungary, there was a steep decline in scores across both the civil liberties and political rights categories. The electoral process subcategory of political rights saw an especially large decrease, with a single year change in 2014-2015 from 12 to 9. Hungary also yielded a steep decline in freedom of expression and belief between 2015-2019. In Poland, the shifts in scores for civil liberties accounted for a majority of the negative shift. The political rights subcategory remained relatively consistent, with a slight overall decrease.

After analysis of the time series trends of democratic backsliding in these four countries, the central question of what drives this temporal pattern is crucial to answer. How does this observed pattern reflect underlying levels of economic and social integration?

The Economic Determinants of Integration on Democratic Backsliding

In analyzing the economic determinants of integration on democratic backsliding, four trends are analyzed on a time-series basis. The calculated international trade coefficient of intra-EU imports and exports relative to global imports and exports will be compared against the Freedom Score. Then, the reported intra-EU FDI will be normalized to global streams of FDI and this standardized value will be compared against the Freedom Score. Lastly, both the intra-EU trade values and FDI will be compared against reported GDP as another measure of standardization.

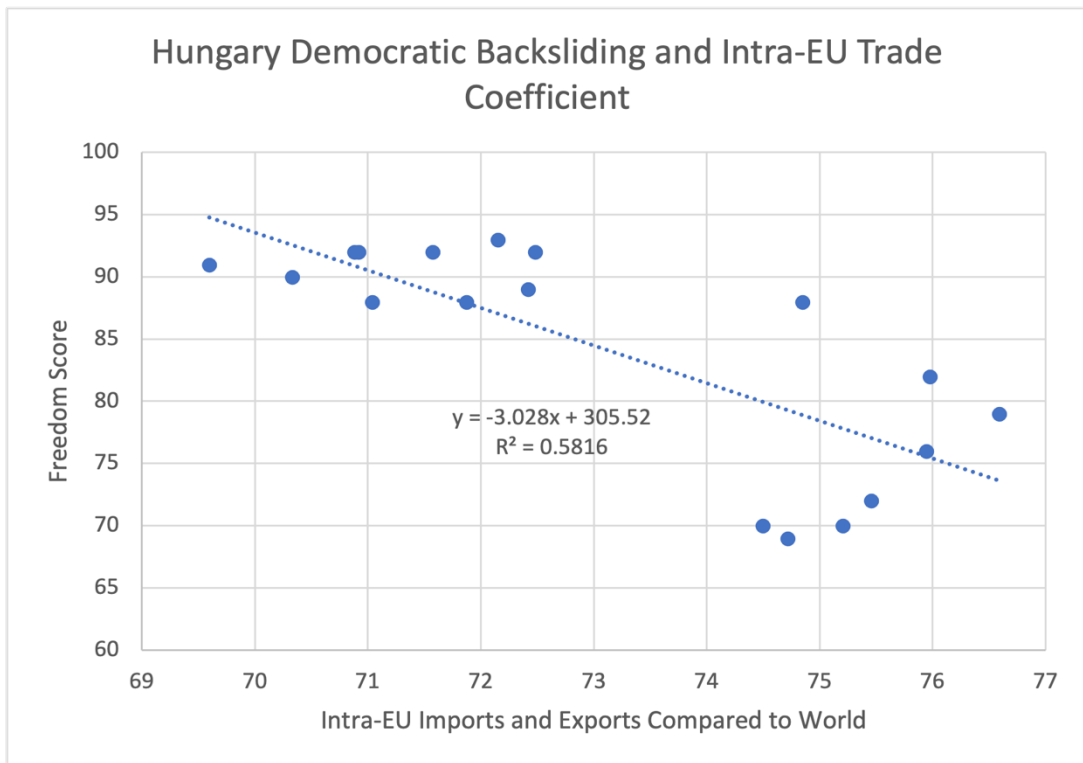
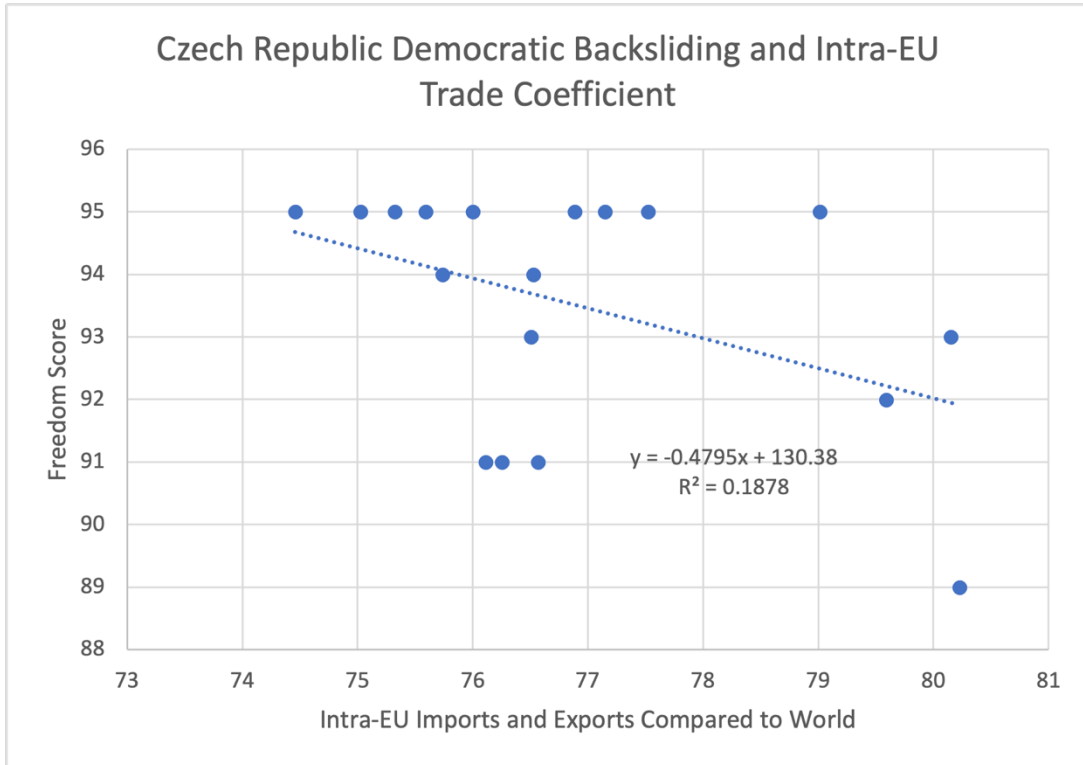
International Trade

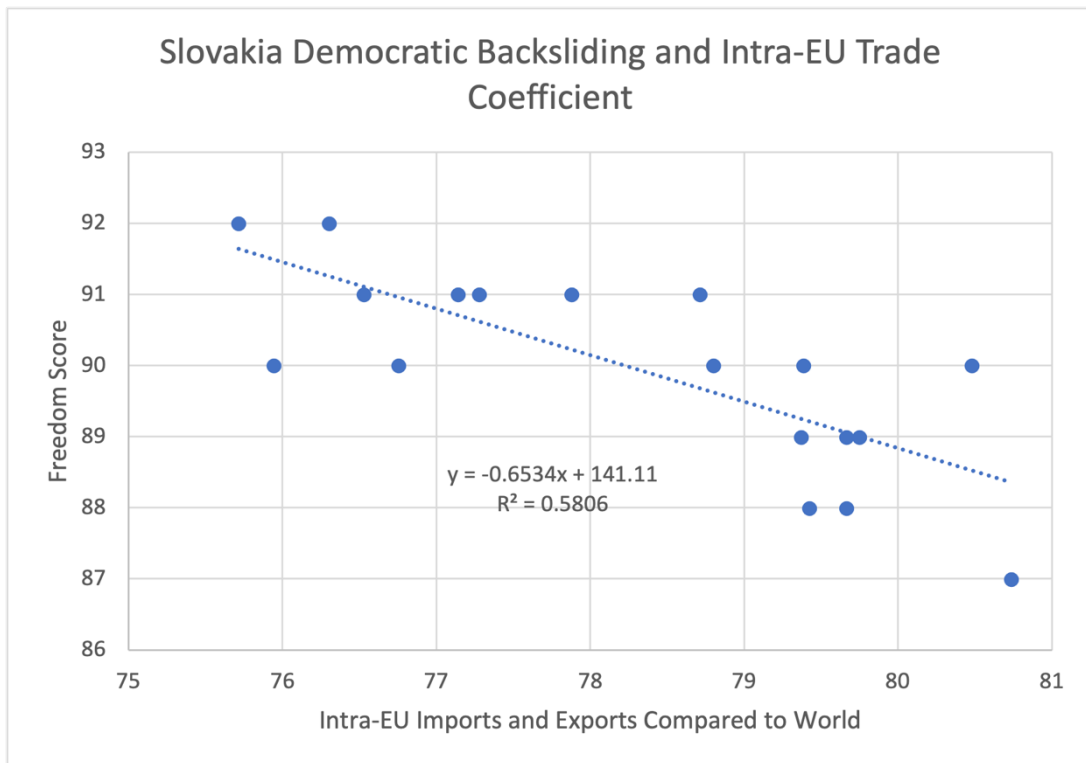
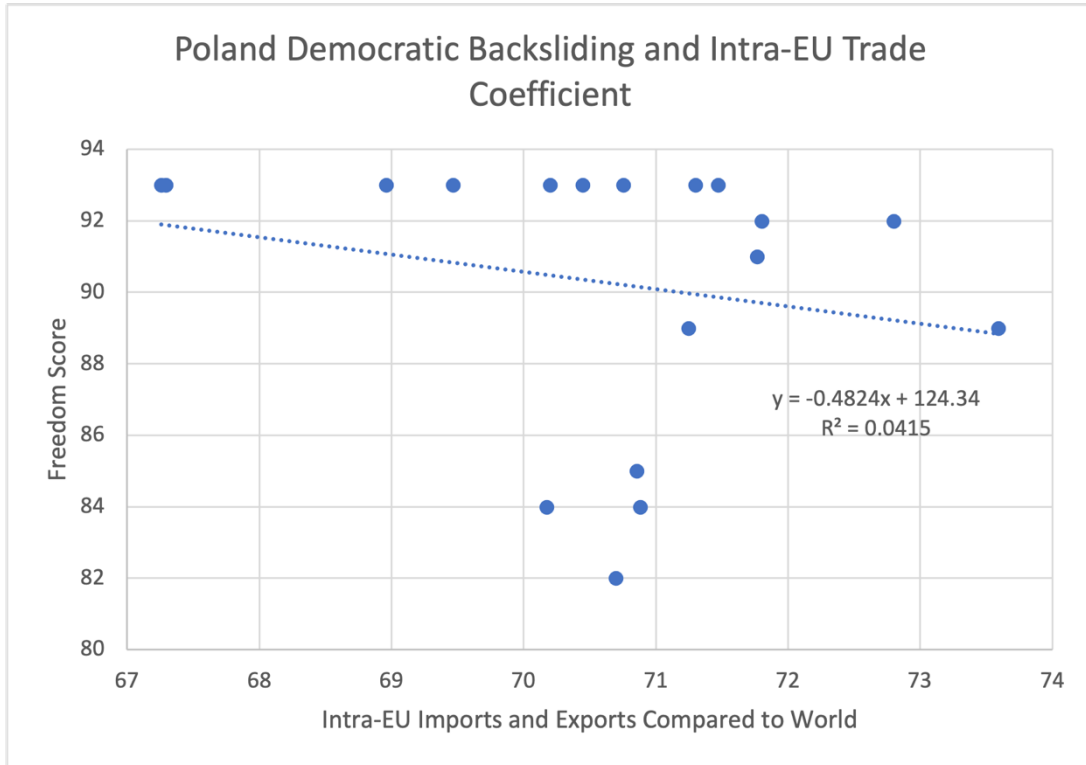
The relationship that intra-EU trade as an economic indicator of integration has with democratic backsliding yielded similar trends across each of the studied countries. Each country yielded negative relationships between freedom score and the trade coefficient. That is, as the ratio of intra-EU trade increased, the reported Freedom score declined. This suggests a contradictory relationship between trade and democratic backsliding than previously hypothesized. Increasing trade with the European Union seems to result in a greater departure from liberal democracy.

In understanding this data further, we see that Poland has a low R-squared value of 0.19. This suggests a weaker correlation between trade and democracy scores within Poland, and that other factors are better able to describe the departure from liberal democracy. This trend in

Poland should be analyzed further, as there is a separation between yearly scores. The calculated values for 2017-2021 cluster together further from the rest of the data, and skew the trendline away from a less steep negative relationship with a higher R-squared correlational value. This indicates a departure from a previously established trend in the years prior. The yearly range of this data correlates closely with Poland's initial departure in freedom score from a liberal democracy, which occurred in 2016.

Both Hungary and Slovakia exhibit strong negative correlations of -3 and -0.7 between intra-EU trade and freedom score. Additionally, they both produce an R-squared value of 0.58, signaling a high portion of the variance in democratic backsliding as explained by intra-EU trade.





Foreign Direct Investment

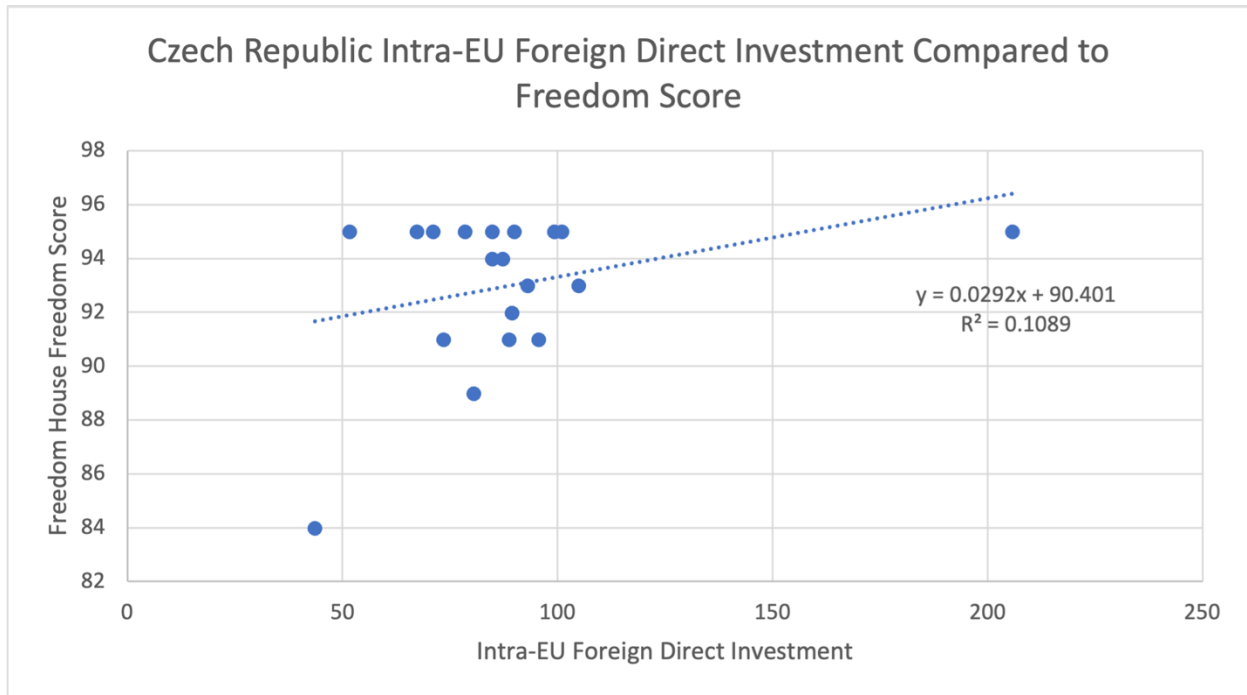
The effect of foreign direct investment upon democratic backsliding did not yield similarly strong results. The findings were generally inconclusive, with low R-squared correlational values, ranging between 0.03 and 0.1.

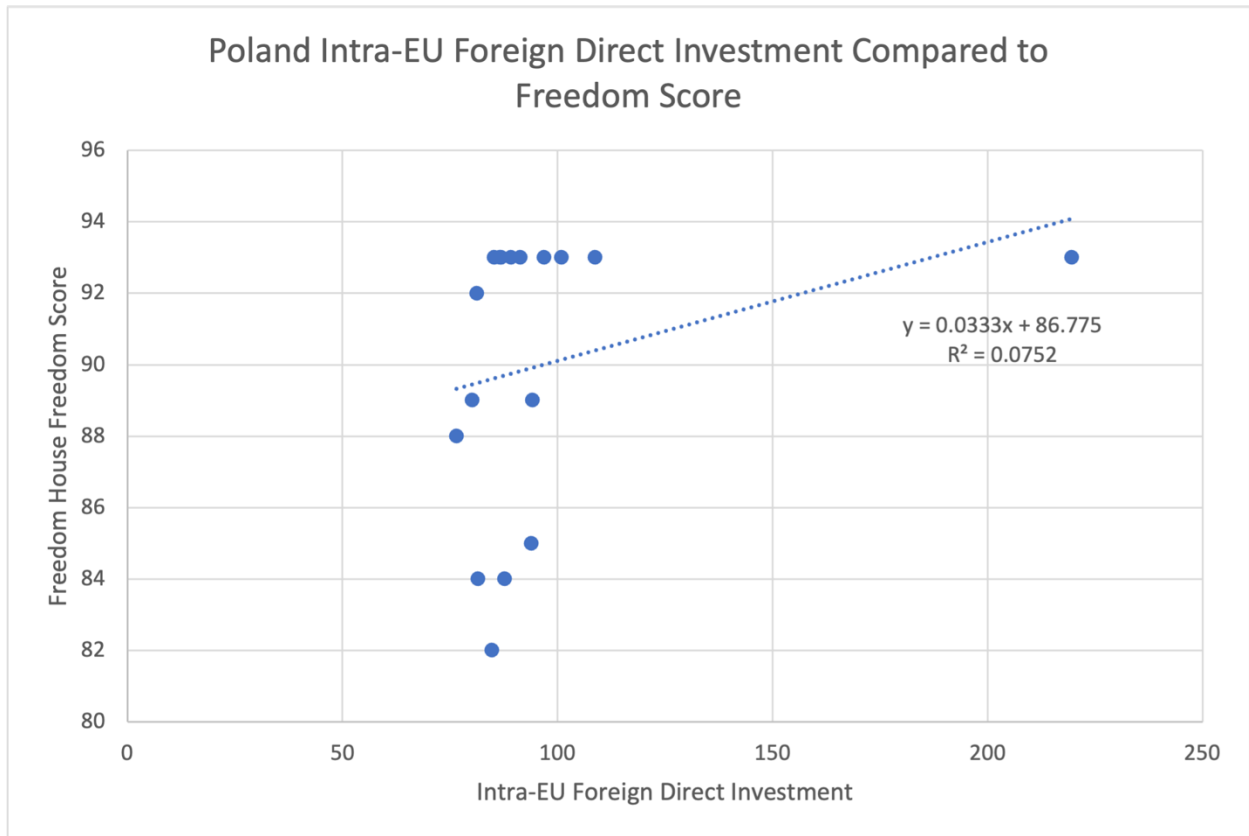
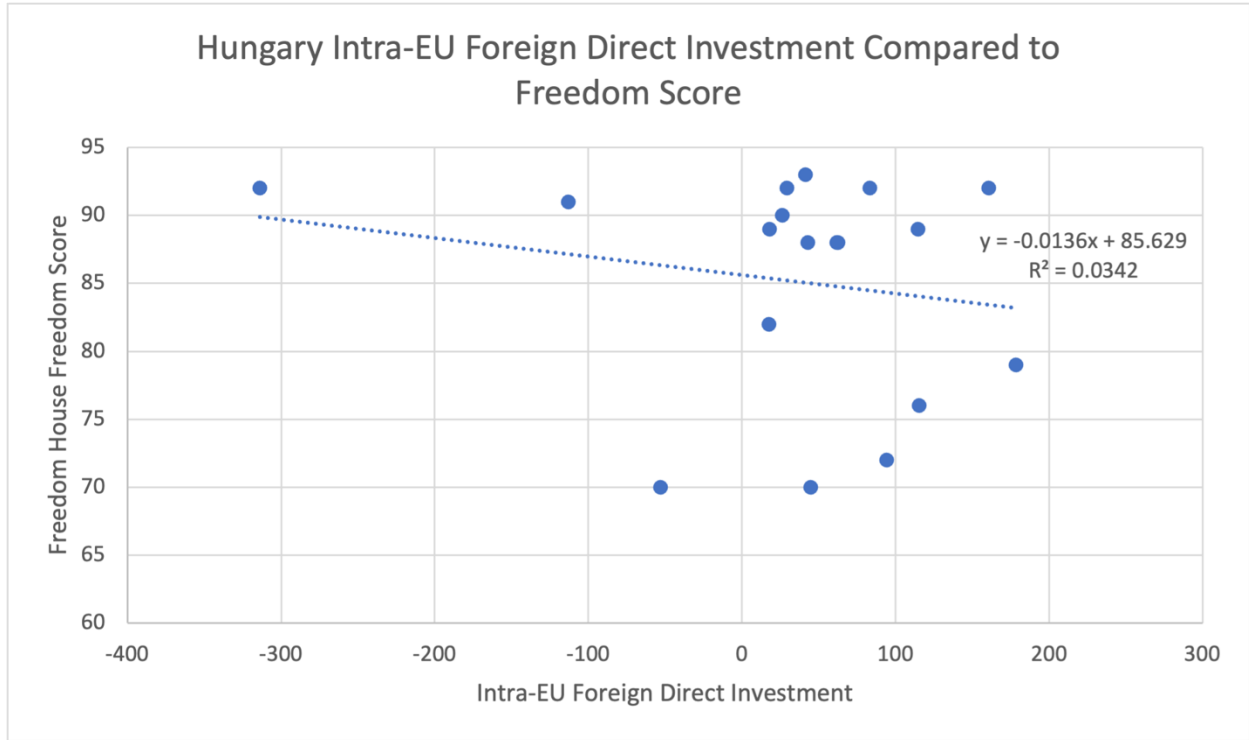
Generally, Poland and Czech Republic show a positive relationship between foreign direct investment and democratic backsliding. This would indicate that as foreign direct investment from European Union member states increased, the freedom score would also increase. This signifies a negative correlation against democratic backsliding, where greater financial flows from the European Union were linked to a stronger liberal democracy.

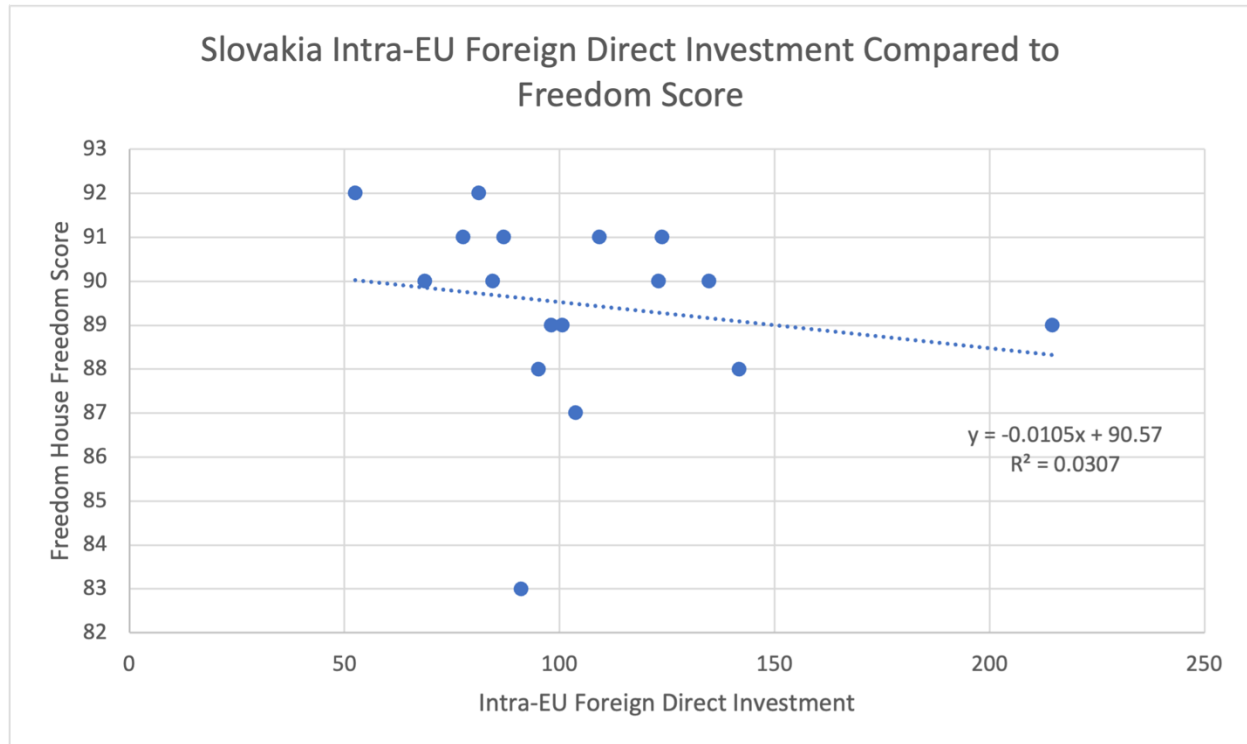
Hungary and Slovakia yield a negative relationship between foreign direct investment and democratic backsliding. This indicates an opposite situation, that as foreign direct investment from European Union member states increased, freedom score decreased. This signifies an opposing trend—that greater financial flows from the European Union is correlated with a shift away from liberal democracy.

However, these results are weak, as there is low correlation through low R-squared values. These range between 0.03 and 0.1. In the visualization of the data, much of the trendline is dictated by outlier values, the rest of the data tends to cluster around a similar range of values, with no identifying trend.

Ultimately, there is no correlation between intra-EU foreign direct investment and democratic backsliding, therefore no relationship seems to exist between the two.







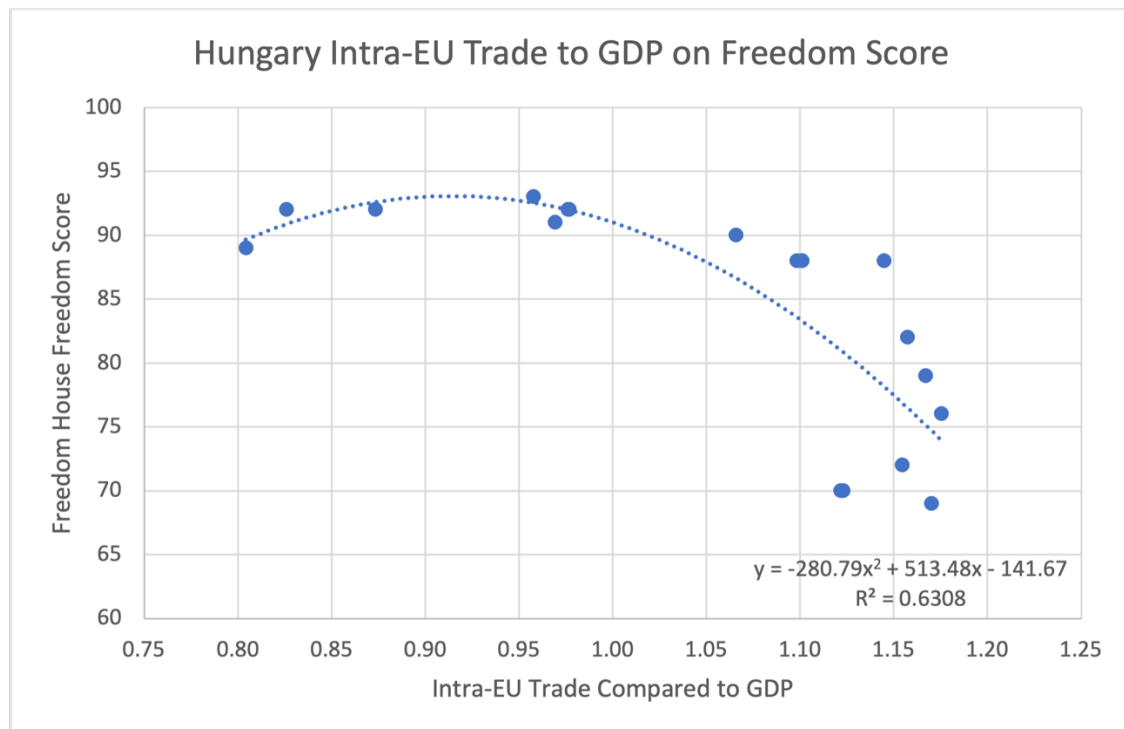
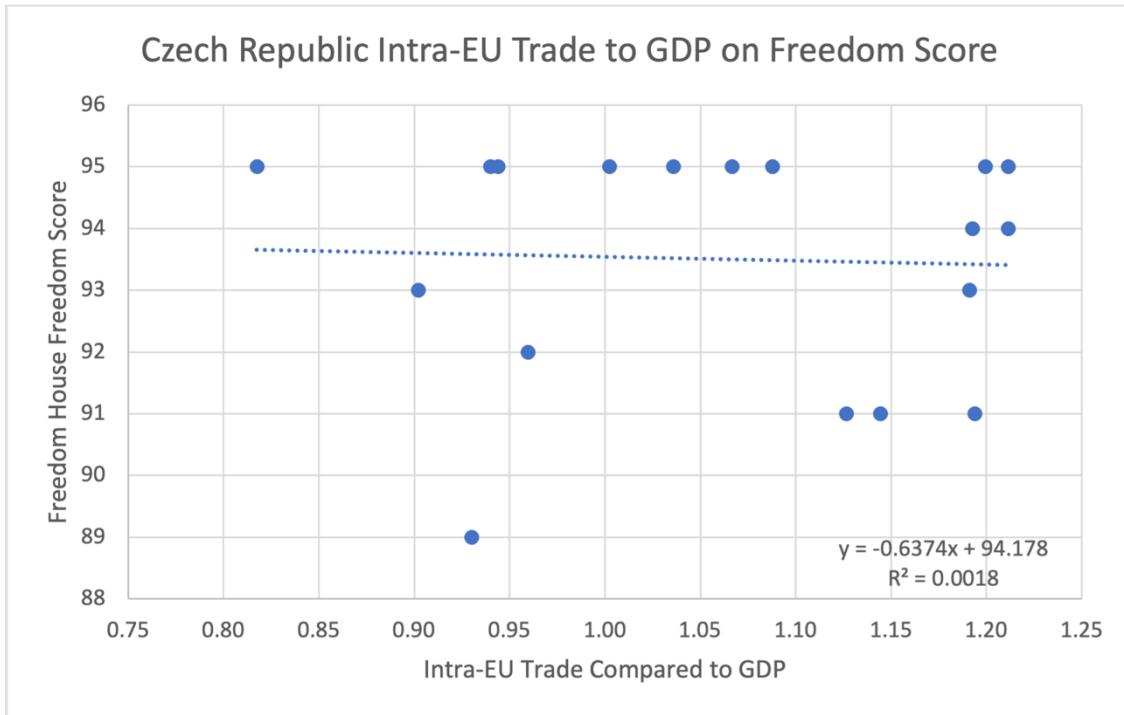
Comparison with Gross Domestic Product

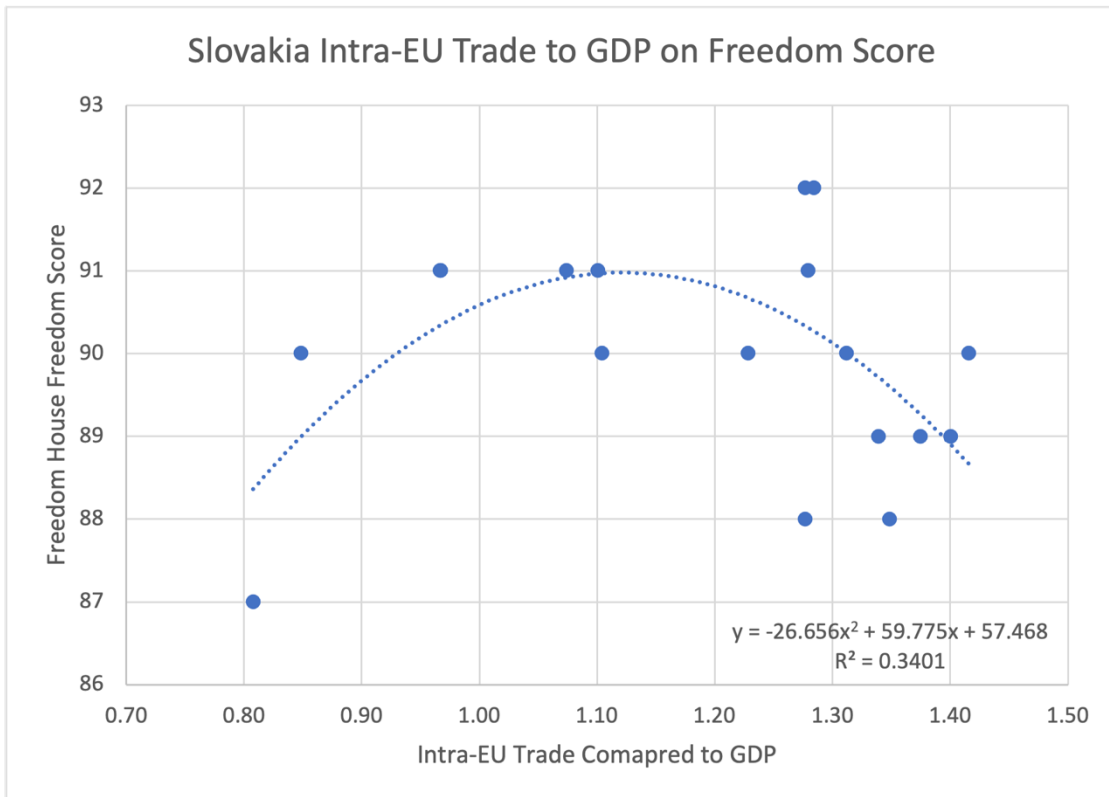
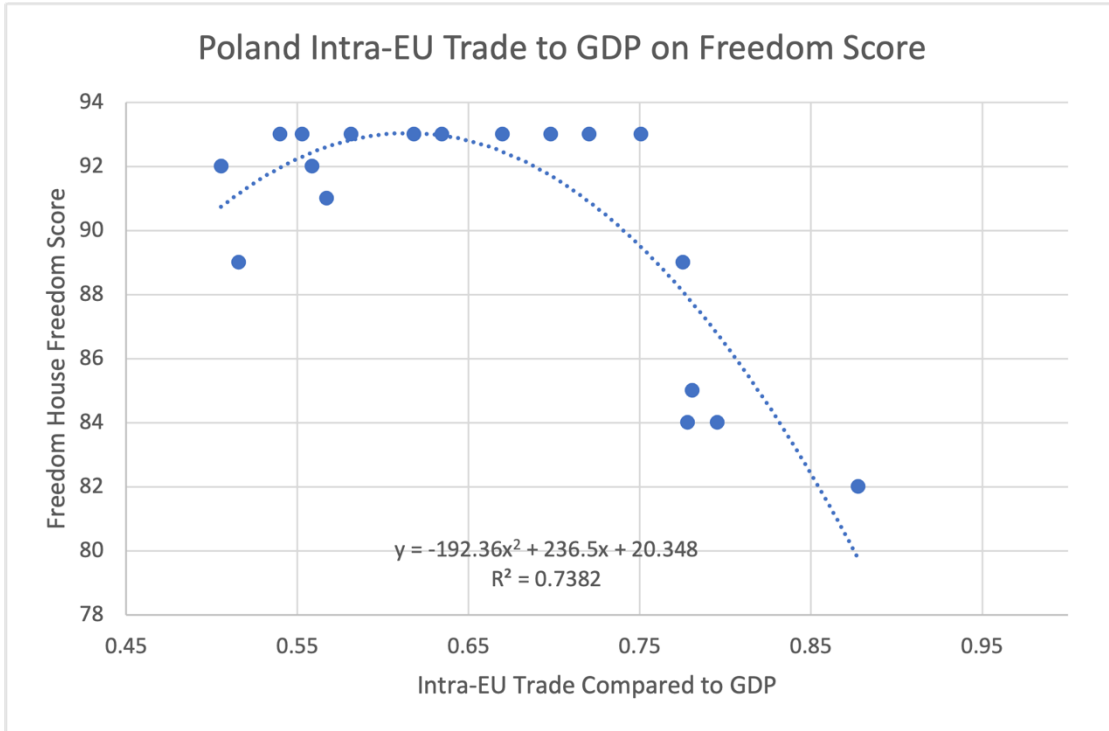
In using domestic Gross Domestic Product as another deflator, a separate trend emerges among relationships between international trade and foreign direct investment with freedom scores.

Concerning the relationship between intra-EU trade compared against GDP with reported freedom scores, visual inspection reveals a polynomial relationship for three of the countries studied. In Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia, a maximum point exists in this relationship. This maximum occurs at various levels of intra-EU trade to GDP levels. It is accompanied by stable R-squared values; 0.63 for Hungary, 0.74 for Poland, and 0.34 for Slovakia.

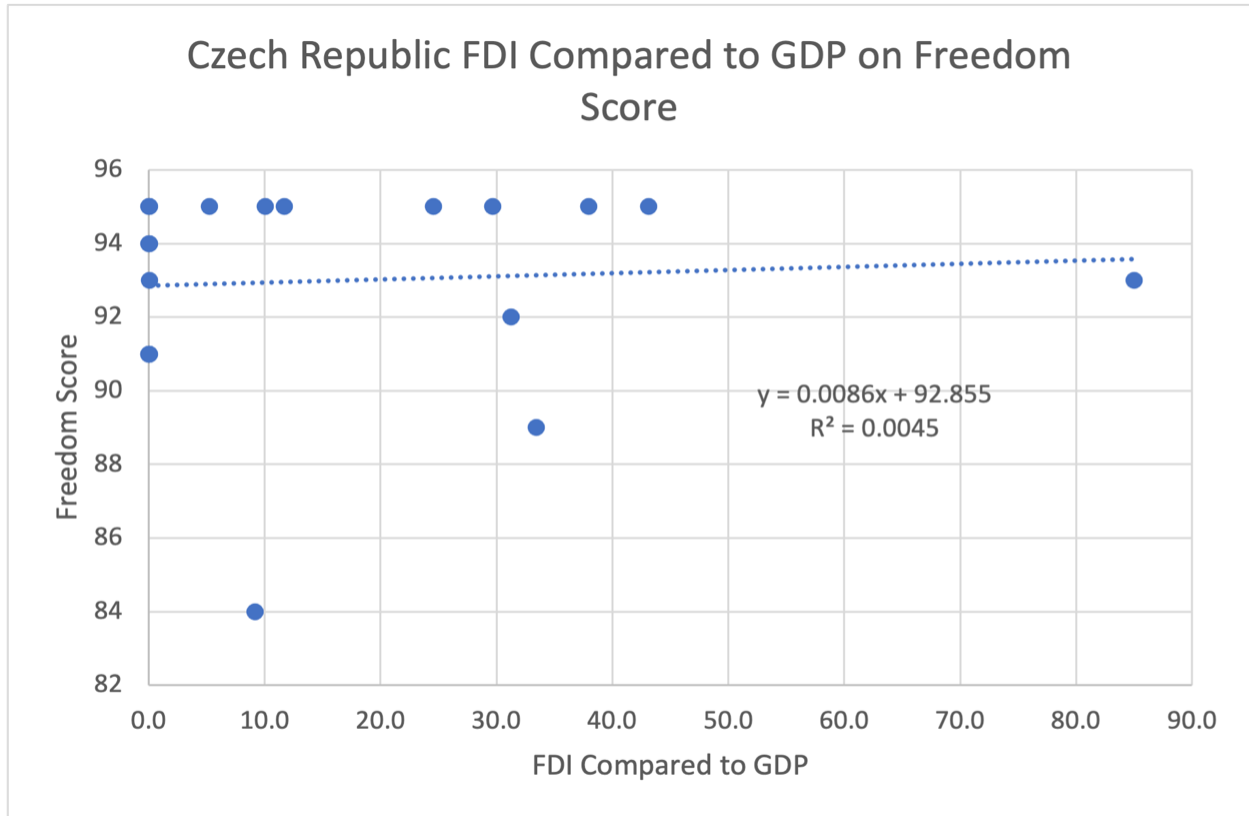
When compared against possible linear relationships, the polynomial viewpoint yielded a far higher R-squared value with a more accurate equation of best fit. This suggests a point of intra-EU trade that maximizes freedom score before it begins to decline.

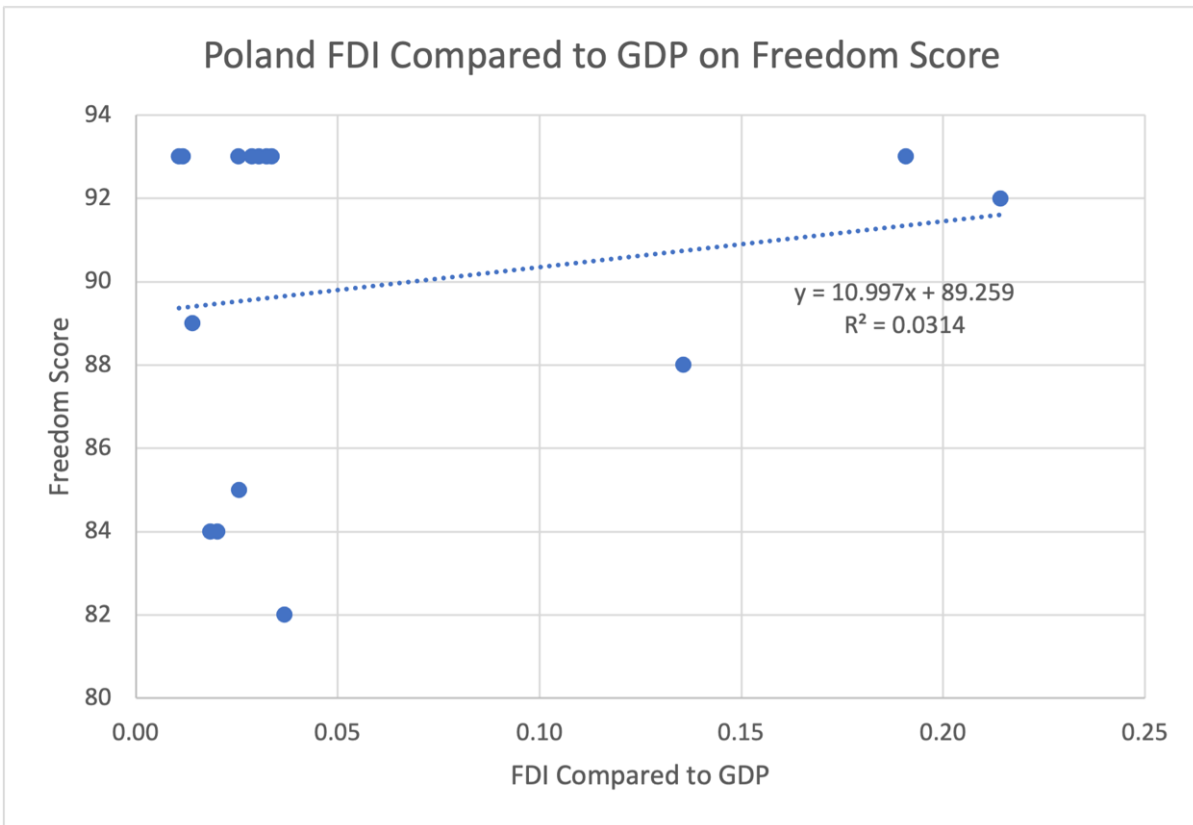
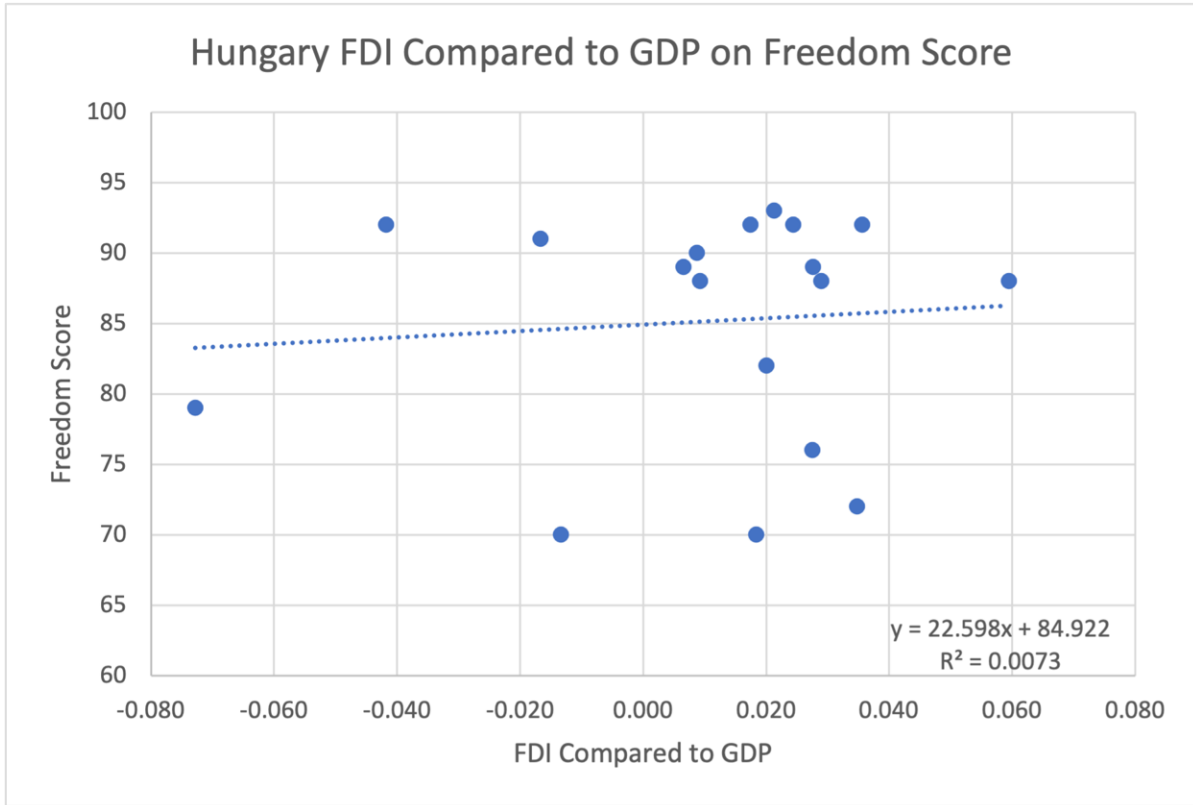
It should also be noted that this relationship for the Czech Republic is near-random, as all attempted trendlines yielded a near-zero R-squared value. This suggests no relationship between FDI and freedom score.

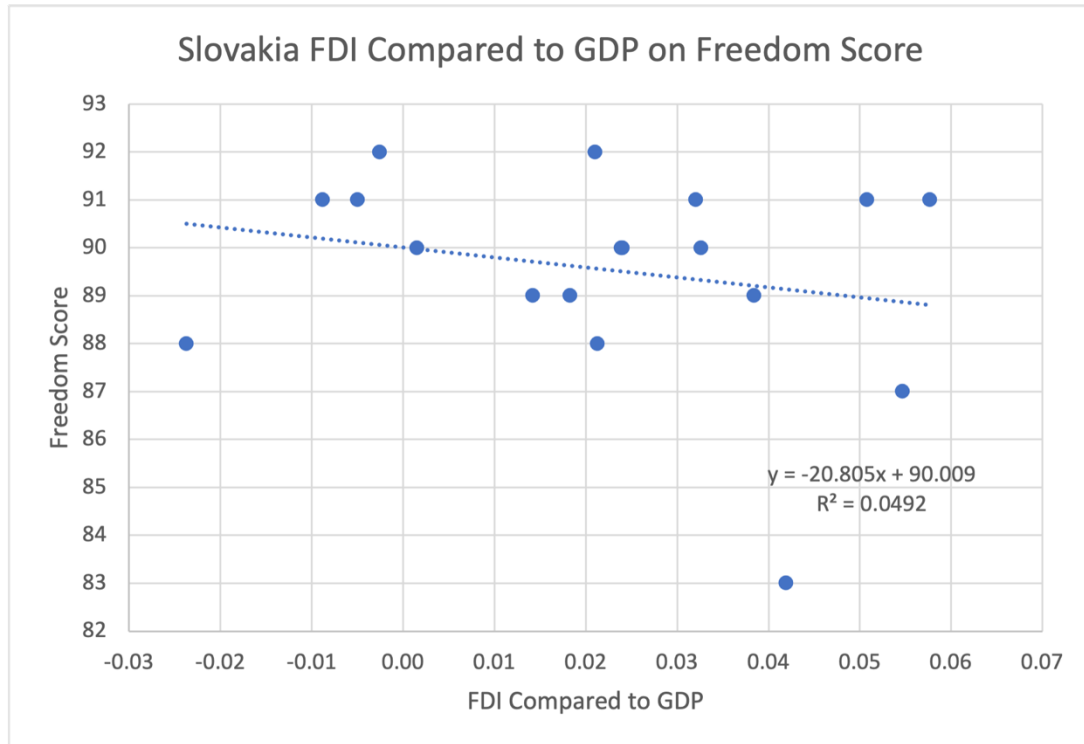




In analyzing the GDP comparison against foreign direct investment, virtually no relationship exists. The spread of the data is scattered, and the R-squared values all fall below 0.05. The spread of the data falls close to random, therefore we can conclude that the FDI compared alongside GDP does not have a correlation with freedom scores.





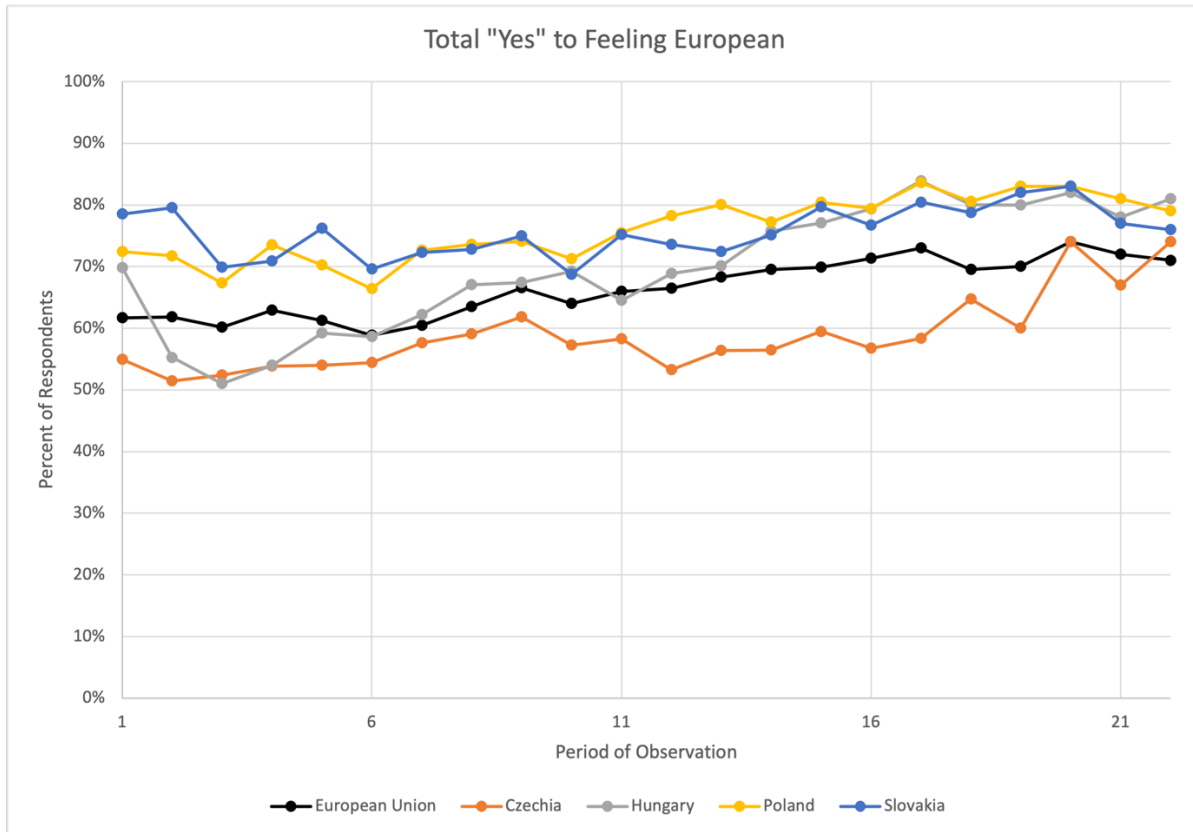


The Identity Factor of Integration on Democratic Backsliding

European Identification

In first analyzing the degree to which citizens identified as European, the total numbers of respondents that answered a general “yes” or “no” are compared. These findings depict that a majority of all citizens feel European, with an increasing trend over time. In general, a greater percentage of citizens of the four studied countries, along with the European Union average, answered in agreement with feeling European.

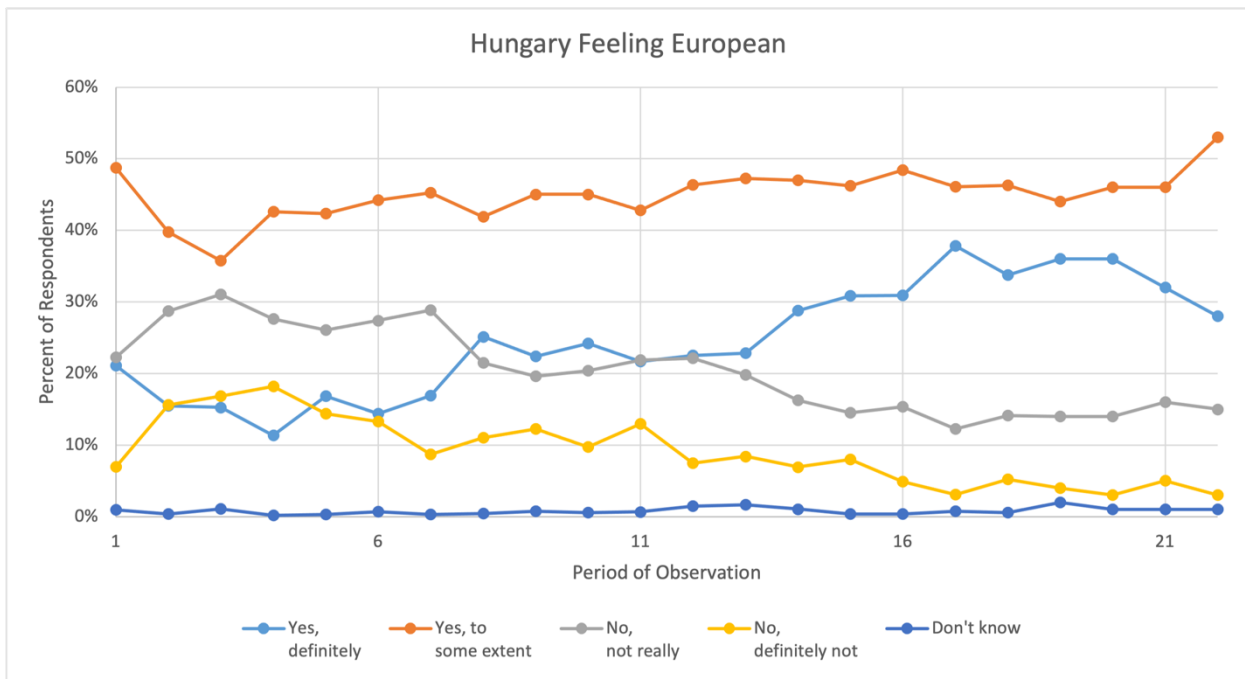
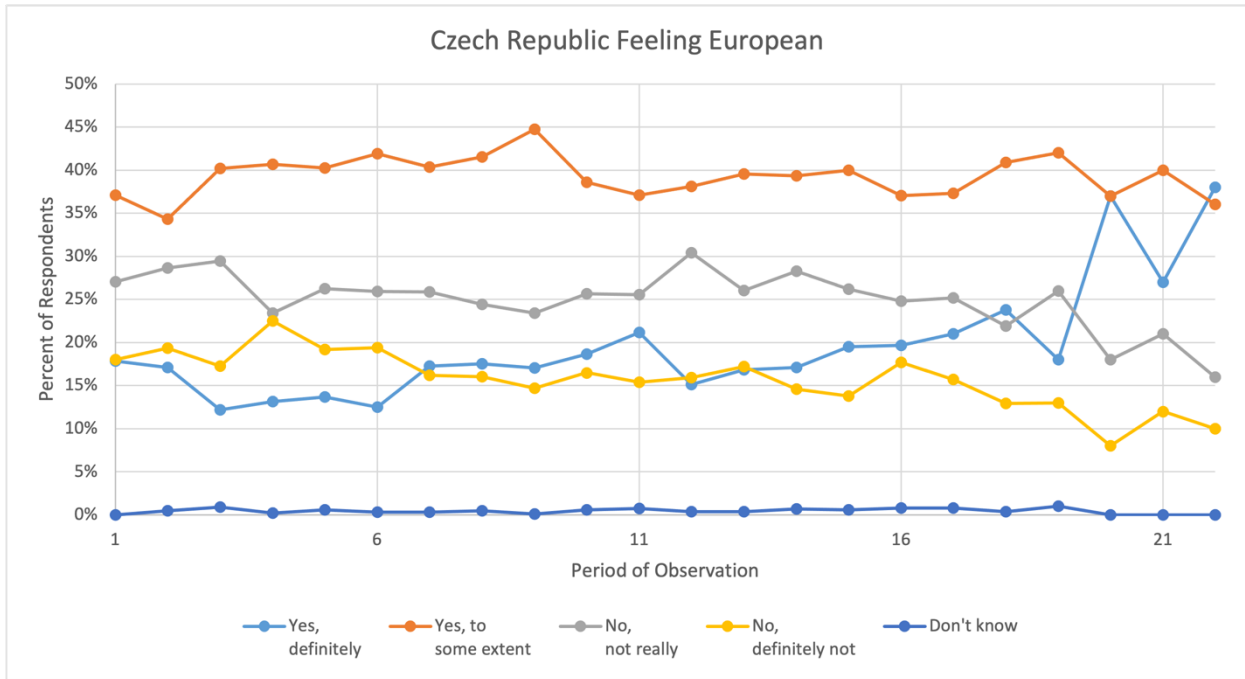
When comparatively viewing these countries, the Czech Republic has the lowest percentage of respondents feeling European. The rest of the studied countries fluctuate, but all tend to have a higher percentage of feeling European compared to the European Union average.

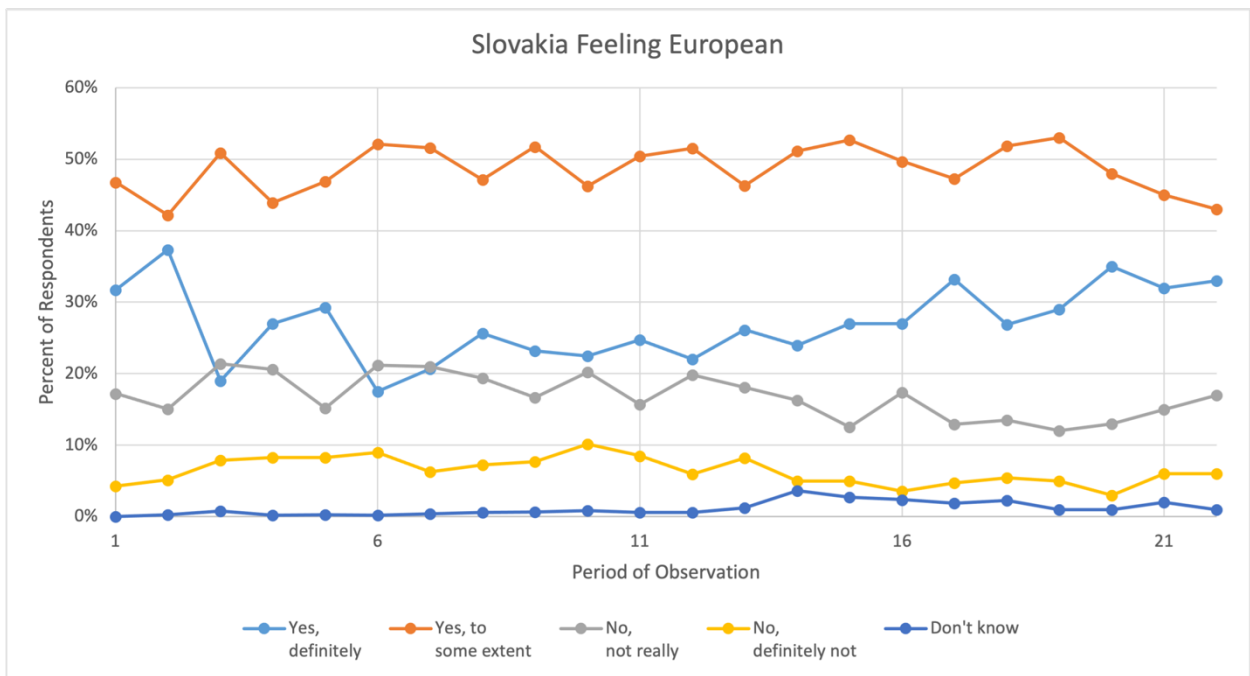
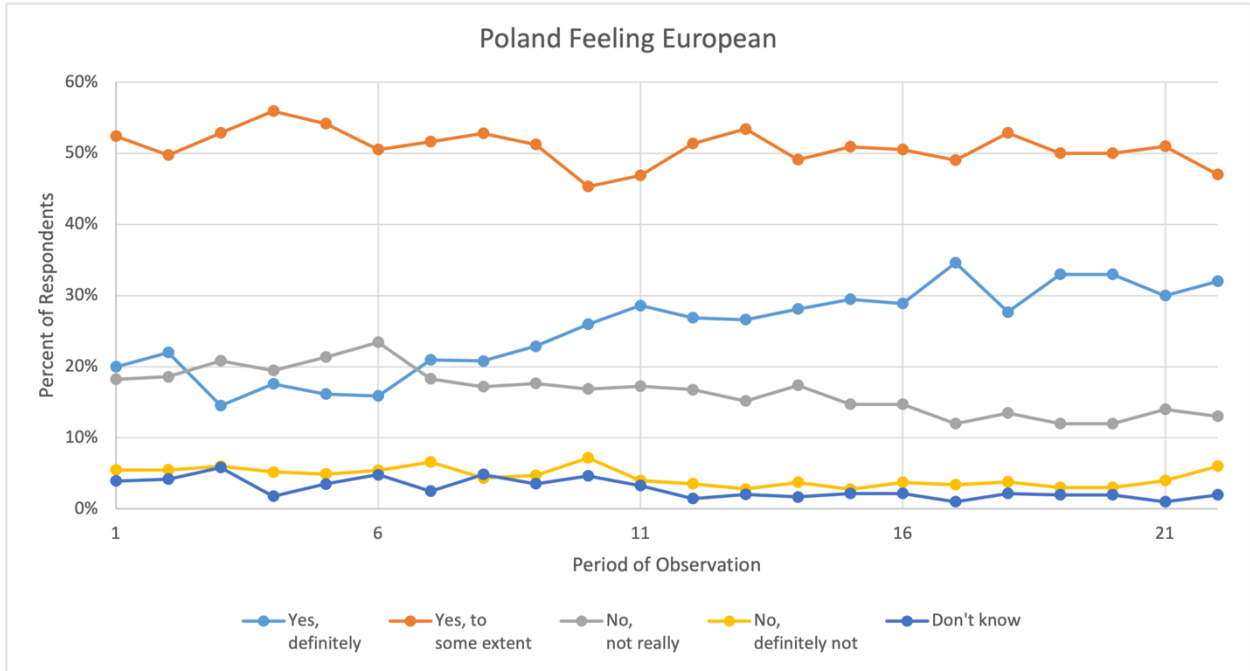


After examining this comparative picture of European identity, the specific responses for each country yield more ambiguity. In each country, the most common response was that citizens felt European, but only to some extent. This differs from the more affirmative response of “yes, definitely.” The rate of those identifying as European to some extent remains relatively constant over the period of observation, sitting within the same 10 percentile range.

The distinction between “yes, definitely,” and “no, not really” incur the greatest levels of change across the period of observation. There was a lot of fluctuation between the response rates of these answers, and they correlate to the degree of change in total “yes” to feeling European analyzed previously. All countries ended the period of observation with the answer of “yes, definitely” as the second most common.

Those answering “no, definitely not,” were relatively low in all countries except for the Czech Republic. This answer remained at a higher rate of response, fluctuating between 10 to 23 percent in respondents.



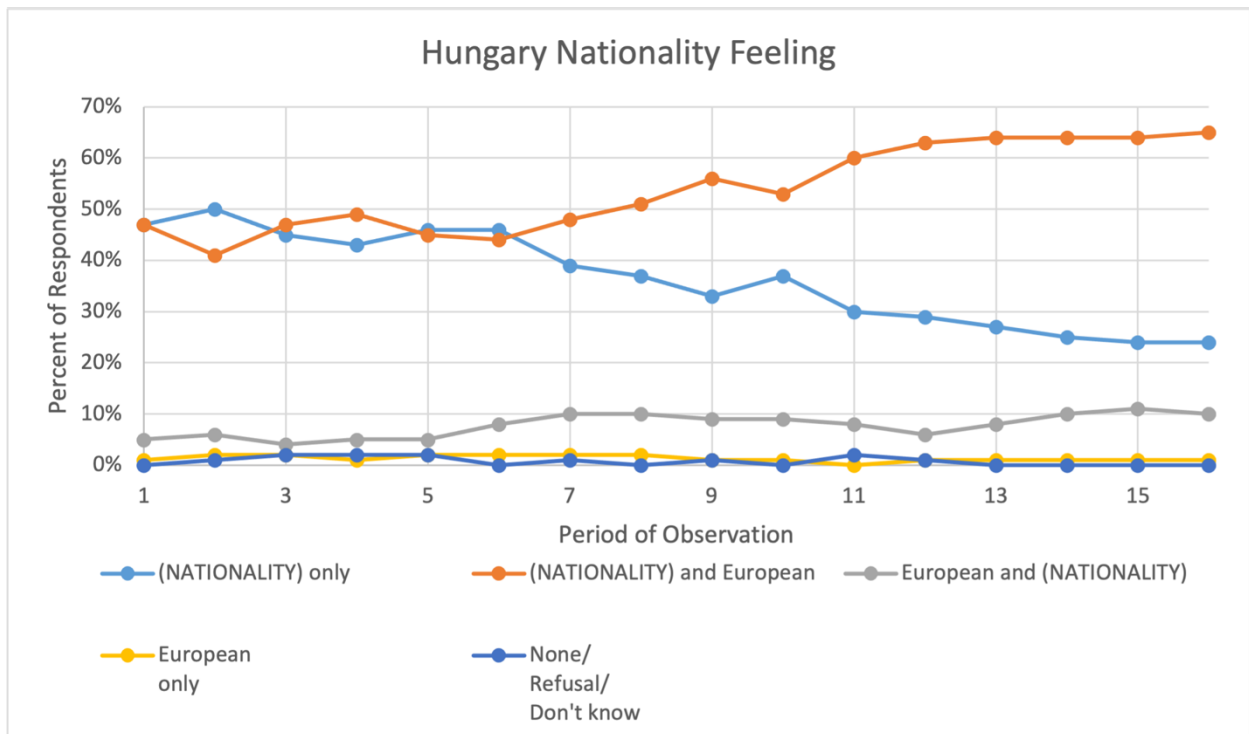
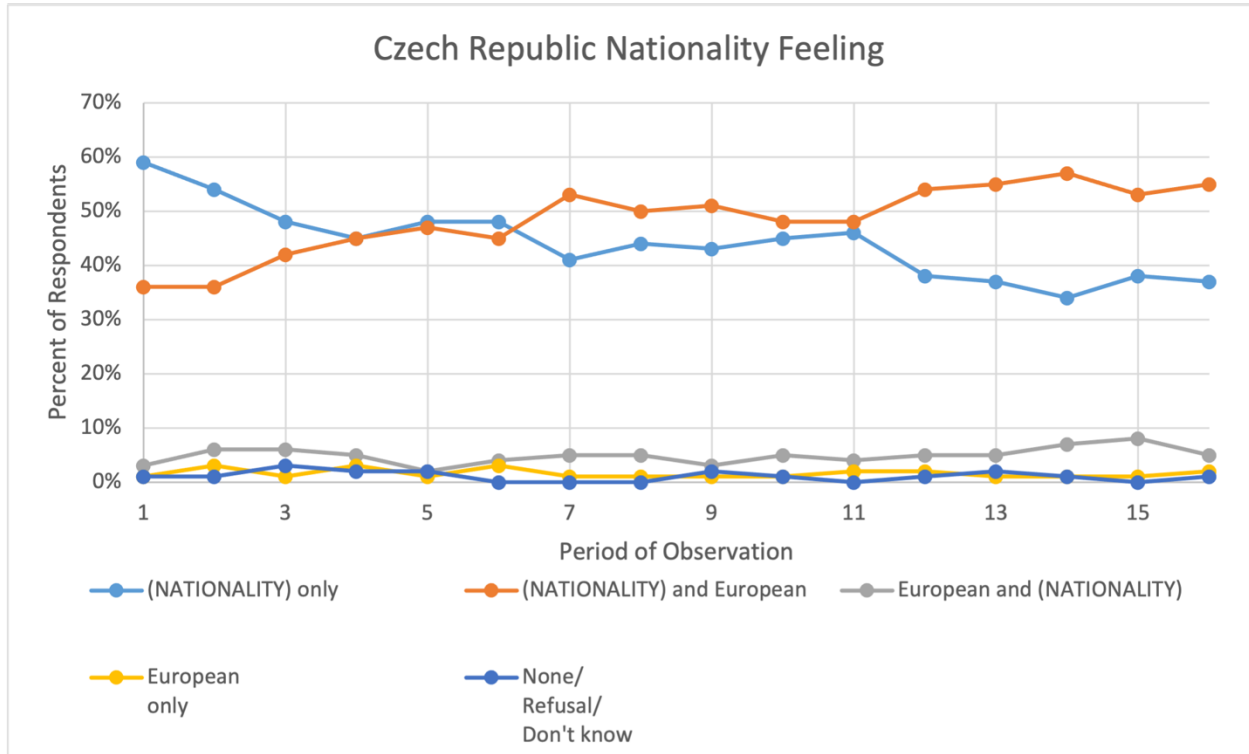


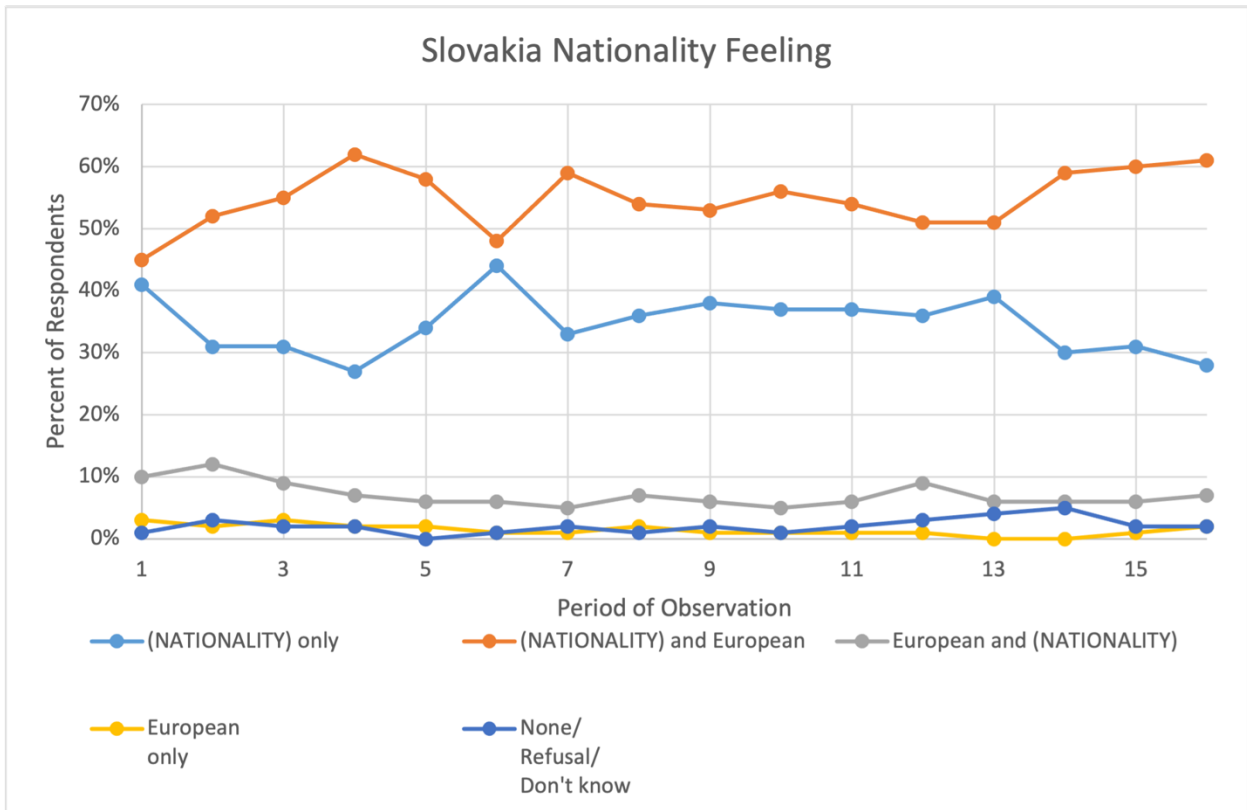
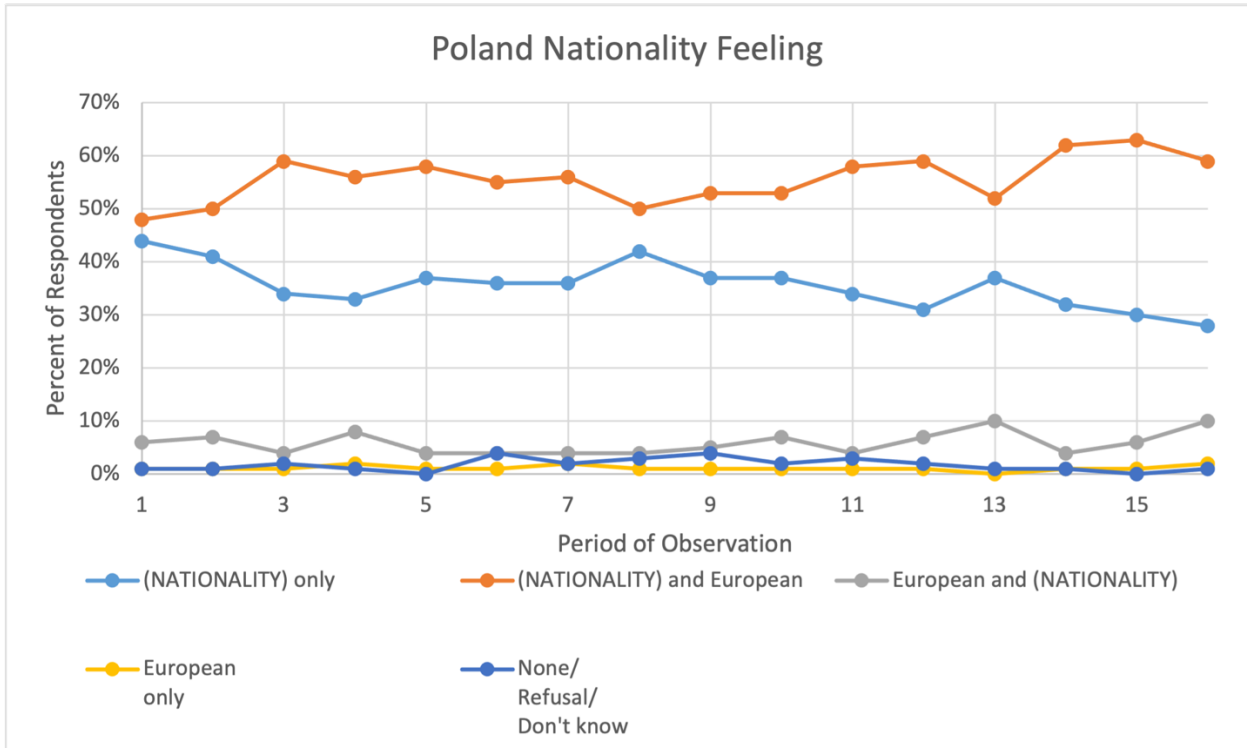
Comparison of National and European Identities

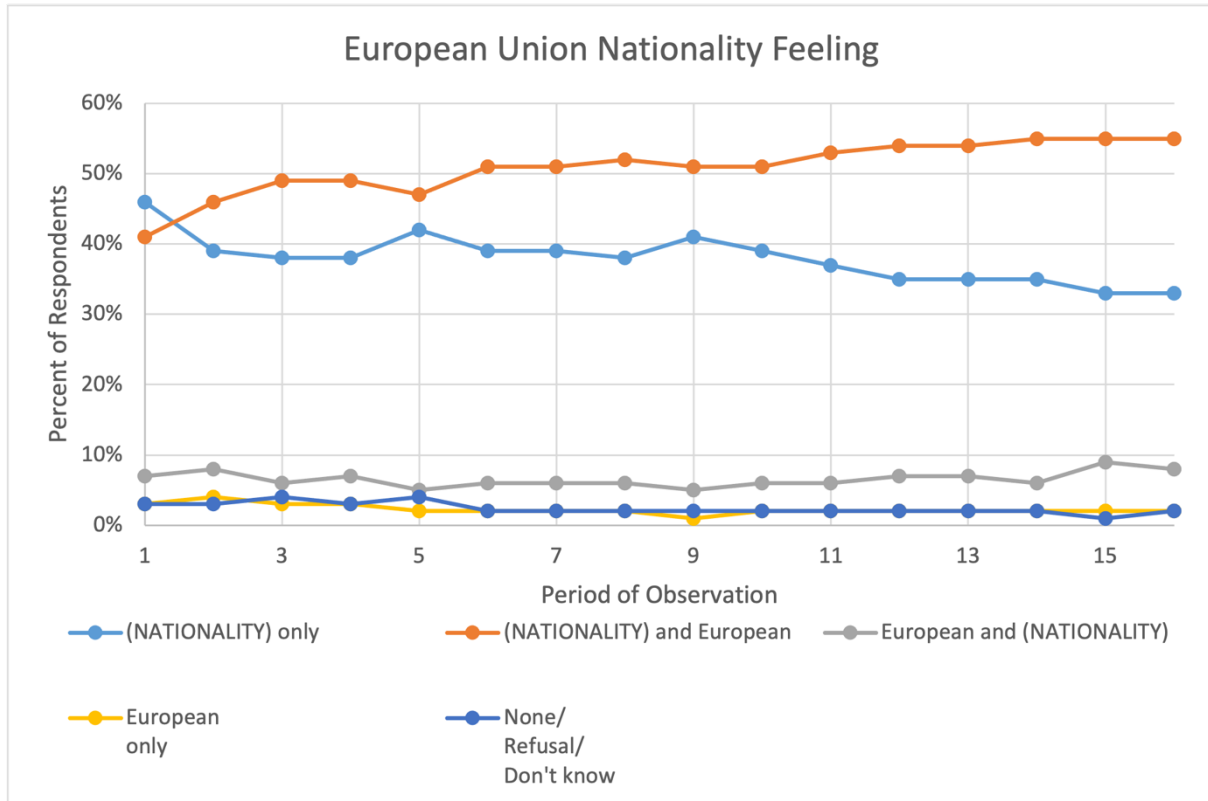
In analyzing the perception of identity compared between a nationality and European, the results across all countries were similar. The most prevalent response was that individuals identified as their nationality first, and then as European. The second-most popular answer was that individuals identified as their nationality only. There was some fluctuation between the rankings of these answers in the Czech Republic and Hungary. The response of identifying only with nationality was prevalent until the seventh period of observation, or the Fall of 2014.

The responses that indicated that citizens identified first as their nationality remained the majority opinion across the entire period of observation. The responses as feeling European and then nationality and European only all hovered around the 10% response rate or lower in all countries.

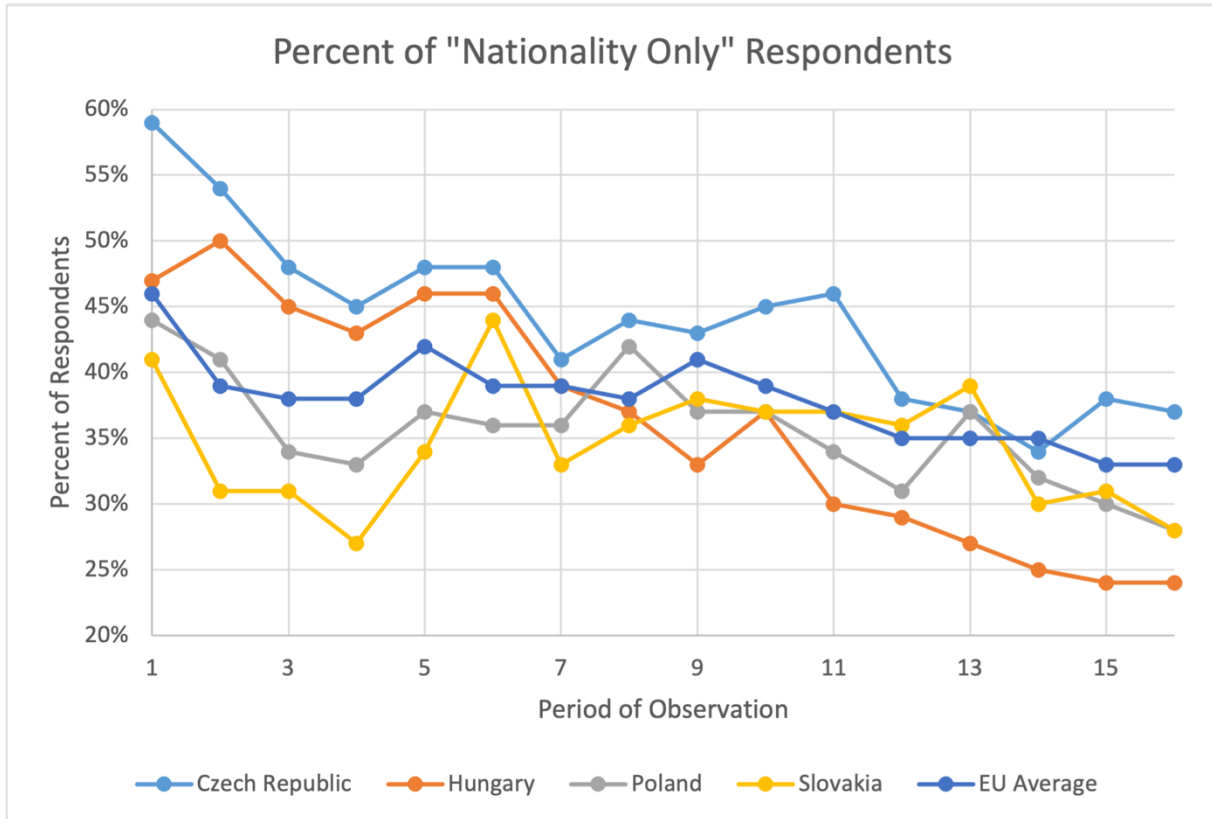
The responses from the studied countries were relatively similar compared to the European Union average responses. The only significant deviation that exists within the countries studied was that there was a greater difference between identifying with the nationality and then European compared with just identifying with nationality. This indicates that those identifying only with their nationality in the four studied countries was lower than the European average.



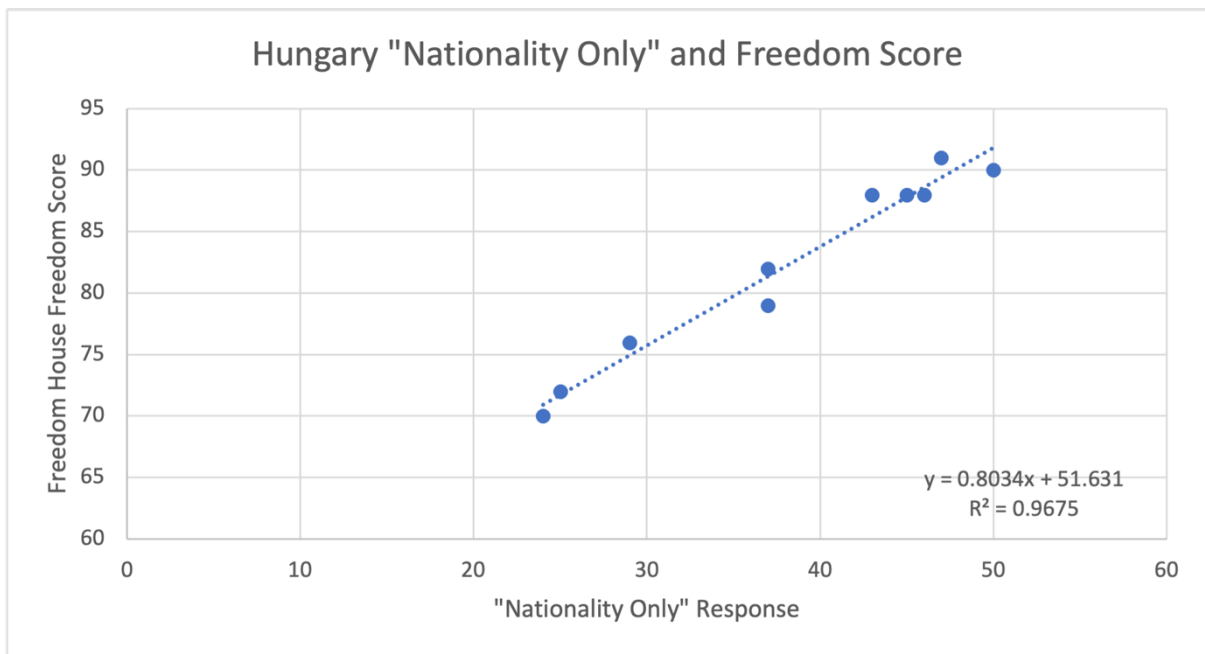
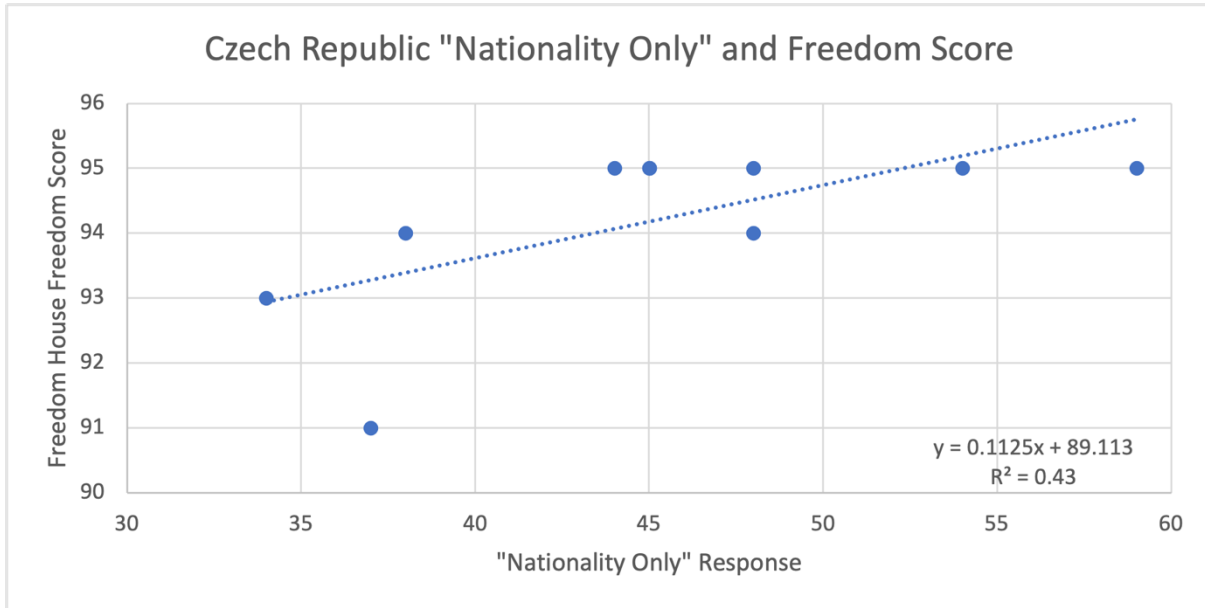


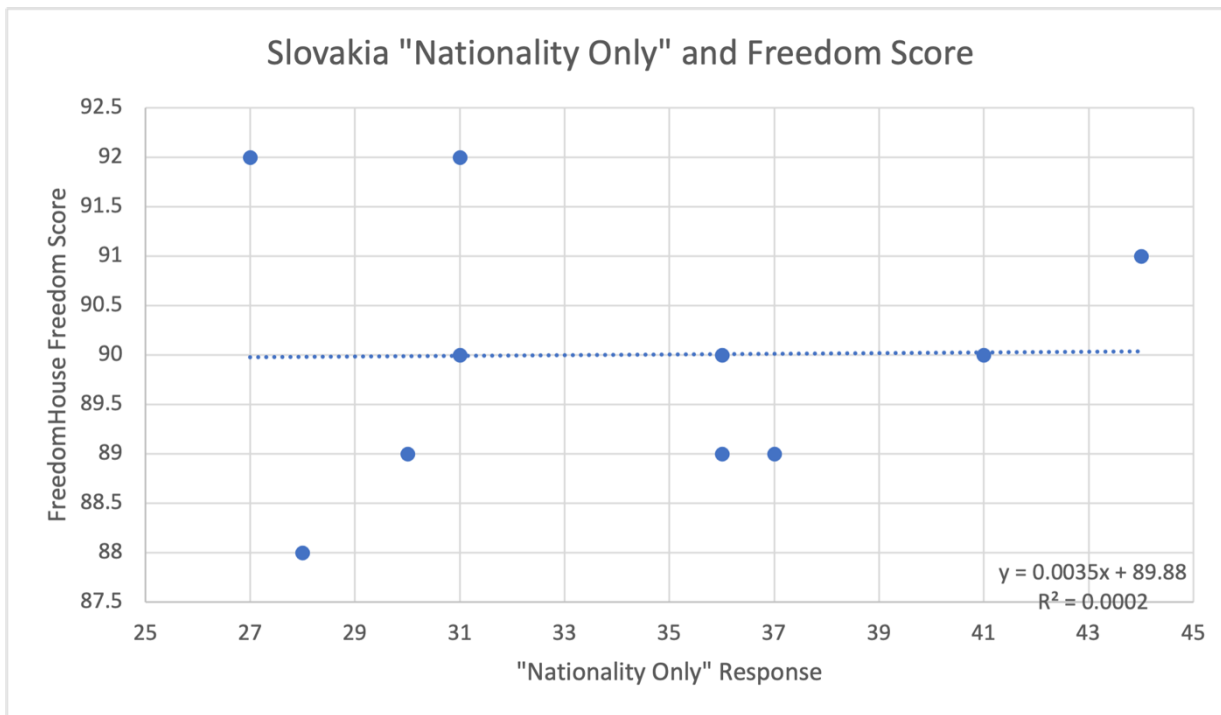
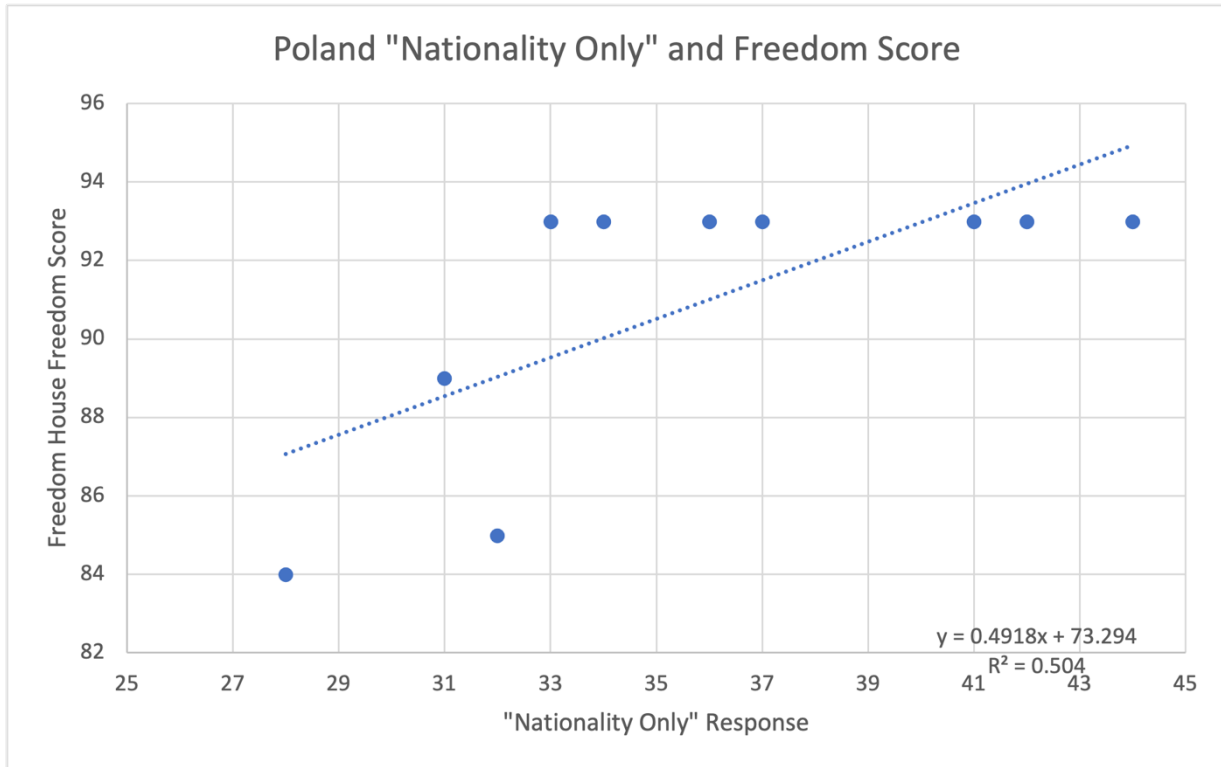


In comparing the nationality only with the nationality then European responses across all reporters, the trend of a growing feeling of European identification is seen over the observed periods. As time progressed, the percentage of those who answered as identifying only with their nationality declined. This occurs from a range of 60-40% in the Spring of 2010 to a range of 37-24% in the spring of 2019.



When further discussing these “nationality only” respondents along a direct comparison with democratic backsliding, we see a continuation of these above trends. In the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland, a positive trend between Freedom Score and “nationality only” response emerges. That is, as increased people identify only with their nationalities, the Freedom Score also increases. This indicates a negative relationship between democratic backsliding and nationality, wherein a greater identification to nationality suggests less democratic backsliding. Each of these trendlines is clearly positive. They each also have R-squared values ranging from 0.43 to 0.97, suggesting a high correlation. In Slovakia, the results are near-random, with a near-zero R-squared score.





Discussion of Empirical Results

After an empirical analysis of the bivariate regressions, a few conclusions on the hypothesis can be assumed. The hypothesis that as Eastern European integration with the West increases, democratic backsliding decreases did not hold true for all cases.

We can conclude a generally positive relationship between intra-EU trade and democratic backsliding; as intra-EU trade increased, so too did the degree of democratic backsliding. This indicates a rejection of the hypothesis.

When the intra-EU trade coefficient was deflated against GDP, a new polynomial trend occurred. For three countries, there seems to be a peak amount of intra-EU trade that can occur before freedom scores start to decrease. This suggests a new hypothesis—that there is an optimal degree of trade integration for increased democratization.

Considering the impact international trade has upon democratic backsliding, it is clear that a relationship exists, but it is far more complicated than previously theorized. A closer analysis into more detailed international trade indicators may be warranted. Further research into more specific trade partners and industries would allow a greater understanding of the varying degrees of trade organization and what industries and partners may drive or destabilize democracy.

Considering the impact foreign direct investment has on democratic backsliding, there is a confident appearance of no relationship. Even when deflated with GDP as a robustness check, the data was near-random. This suggests a conclusion that the democratic governance of these member states is not impacted by FDI, and these two processes operate independently.

In considering conclusions of identity impacts on democratic backsliding, the broad conclusion is that feelings of European identity have grown stronger over time, and therefore

there is also a positive relationship. As citizens of these member states feel more European, the greater democratic backsliding is. However, upon closer look, most of these citizens identify primarily with their nationality and as European second. The identification with just nationality has decreased in all four countries over the period of observation, but the identification as nationality first and European second has increased. A future study into the greater specifics of identity may yield different results, as ethnicity, religion, and greater cultural influences can have a great impact on overall identity.

The implication of these results is that the identities of the citizens and the policies of political leaders differ significantly. Those interviewed still have a strong identification to their nationality, which can be attributed to the dominance of these national parties, but European sentiment has risen among interviewed individuals while decreasing along party leaders. This yields an area for greater research, as a puzzle emerges between individual identities and the policies of elected leaders.

In conclusion, the hypothesis that as Eastern European integration with the West increases, democratic backsliding decreases was challenged or inconclusive on most determinants. A preliminary study from Hafner-Burton and Schneider mirrors these results that the economic and political integration of countries into the Liberal International Order increases the likelihood of democratic backsliding (Hafner-Burton and Schneider 2023). These results are counterintuitive to the presented literature of theories of democratization, and future exploration of the nuances of integration and democratic backsliding can develop a more complex theory.

VI. Conclusions

Democratic backsliding in Eastern Europe is a concept that cannot be easily addressed. To answer the question, *what causes the variation of democratic backsliding in Eastern Europe*, an analysis of economic and identity indicators signaled a challenge to existing theory of democratization and rejected the posed hypothesis that as Eastern European integration with the West increases, democratic backsliding decreases. The economic and identity determinants thought to be directly linked to maintaining high standards of democracy yielded results that were inconclusive and/or rejected the initial hypothesis.

The implications from these results pose an interesting future for European Union policy. The idea that increasing economic and identity integration to decrease backsliding has not been successful. The European Commission has repeatedly implemented integration mechanisms aimed at increasing economic cohesion and establishing a singular European identity.

To address democratic and rule of law shortcomings, the European Union has implemented Article 7 proceedings, which allows for economic sanctions and restrictions to be enforced on offending countries. These have been opened for Hungary and Poland, and the main deterrent to democratic backsliding is in the economic ramifications. As we've seen in these findings, the economic link to democratic backsliding has an opposite effect.

Article 7 proceedings also are complex in nature, as any substantial restrictions must be agreed upon by a near-unanimous group of member states. When one member state is in question, these proceedings can be easily levied, however with both Hungary and Poland in the midst of democratic backsliding, there are complications in the ability of enforcement.

Additionally, Article 7 proceedings can lead to a quick descent to expulsion from the European Union, and there is not a fine-grained set of available enforcement responses for

offending countries. Changes to these procedures would also be difficult to attain, as a unanimous decision would be required from all member states, Hungary and Poland included.

The main enforcement mechanism between apathy and expulsion lies in economic sanctions. The European Union revoking investment, or their funding of national budgets could have some sway in the de-escalation of democratic backsliding.

Alternative solutions to democratic backsliding have been proposed. Michael Blauberger and Daniel Kelemen reference the existing legal safeguards in the European Union as a limited toolkit but provide solutions through this framework. The primary means of enforcement has turned to private litigation; however, limitations exist in classifying the infringement of democracy as a violation of an individual right. There must be legal claim that can be connected to the domestic implementation of the law. Other proposals have been suggested, but most are built upon shaky legal foundations (Blauberger and Kelemen 2016).

An additional viewpoint on Article 7 proceedings is provided by Thomas Theuns. He claims that in Article 7 proceedings of rule of law enforcement, expulsion is the only solution to the illegitimacy of backsliding states while upholding values of democracy and equity. Although the cases of Hungary and Poland do not yet meet the criteria of “existential threat” that Theuns argues warrants expulsion from the European Union, they are approaching this level. Theuns suggests an exploration into alternative sanctions under Article 7, and that the only democratically viable option of expulsion is a radical conclusion.

The ultimate conclusion from this study is that far more complex research is required to understand how various determinants of integration with the European Union affect democratic backsliding. Due to the recency of the backsliding of Hungary and Poland, further data should be gathered and analyzed at a more detailed level. There are far more factors contributing to

backsliding to be interpreted. A new research frontier presents itself in the study of democratic backsliding and how preventative policy can be shaped around it.

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