



## **Assessing the EU's Role in the Democratization of Montenegro: A Success of EU Conditionality?**

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### Abstract

Although the literature confirms that candidate countries for EU accession can successfully democratize through the Europeanization process, democracy in the Western Balkans has not solidified, bringing the question of the effectiveness of the EU's enlargement conditionality to the centre of political and academic attention. While the EU advances a democratization agenda, other international actors such as Russia have undermined its efforts, which has made the Western Balkans a contesting ground for political influence. Therefore, to assess the extent of the EU's contribution to the democratization of the countries in the region, one has to consider the possible effects of cross-conditionality from Russia.

This Master's thesis focuses on the case of Montenegro, arguing that that the country has anchored its transition towards democracy to the perspective of EU membership, which has allowed the EU to exercise its conditionality and foster democratization. Although not having experienced ethnic conflicts during the collapse of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Montenegro has faced internal challenges in the form of ethnonational cleavages that have impacted its democratization process. Despite being called the leader in the accession negotiations, Montenegro's success has been questioned after some democracy indexes, such as Freedom House, reported a regression in democratization.

The research empirically studies the EU's impact on democratization in religious freedoms and the fight against corruption, intentionally combining these areas where the EU has developed its conditionality to different degrees. Cross-conditionality from Russia is also taken into account. The findings indicate that the EU has fostered democratization in these two areas, but to different degrees. Moreover, despite significant internal challenges, the most powerful incentive has been the strong credibility of the EU membership perspective, which has encouraged Montenegro to implement democratic reforms and move forward in its accession negotiations and democratization. On the other hand, it has also built strong resilience to cross-conditionality from Russia, despite its attempts to undermine the democratization process. Therefore, when the credibility of the EU's promise of membership is weaker, more space is created within the enlargement equation for other factors such as the domestic veto players and third country's influence.