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Towards a "Europe of Democracy": How the Iberian enlargement democratised European integration

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Democracy is assumed to be a foundational principle of the European Union. Yet, it was not until the Single European Act (SEA) that the word "democracy" made its way into Community law. As the academic literature notes, the absence thereof reflects how the European project was initially conceived to be an economic initiative that would have as its primary moral commitment the preservation of peace in the European continent rather than the protection of democratic rule. The signature of the SEA in 1986 coincided with the official accession of Spain and Portugal into the European Economic Community. The Iberian nations' enthusiastic embrace of the European project was driven by popular desires to transition towards democracy, viewing Europe as a symbol of unity and prosperity. In this vein, a euphoric consensus has remained omnipresent in both countries' European policy ever since. Soon after becoming member states, the Treaty of Maastricht (1992) finally institutionalised this shift, articulating democracy as a tangibly binding principle that would guide all state and European institutions.

The role of the Iberian nations in constitutionalising democracy in European treaties has been hitherto overlooked in academic and policy discussions. This paradox yields the question: to what extent did **the accession of Spain and Portugal to the European Economic Community lead to the codification of the principle of democracy in the treaties**?

One of the most enigmatic aspects of this accession is the Community's ambivalence in the years prior to the enlargement, since it was confronted with a dichotomy: condemning the Iberian autocratic forms of government or courting them as trading partners. France and Germany adopted the so-called policy of *Wandel durch Annäherung* ("change through rapprochement"), whereby it was expected that closer economic ties would soften the regimes' autocratic drive. Under the same market-centric logic, other Member States – such as Belgium – went as far as explicitly acknowledging that democracy did not constitute a criterion for accession. Both Portugal and Spain applied for membership in 1962. However, given that

their requests did not come to fruition, primarily due to the democratic concerns these applications raised, the Community had to find alternative forms of rapprochement with the Iberian nations. For Spain, a Preferential Agreement was signed in 1970 envisaging the reduction of tariffs. Conversely, Portugal already enjoyed wide economic benefits as a founding member of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA). As a result, Portuguese efforts at the end of the *Estado Novo* were oriented towards preparing for official EEC membership. This is one of the reasons why, despite Portugal's comparatively rapid and higher adaptation to accession criteria, the simultaneity of the new Iberian membership bids in 1977 delayed enlargement until 1985.

The Luso-Hispanic enlargement catalysed a normative shift that favoured the codification of democracy in the EU Treaties. The central premise is that this accession was vital in the structural transformation towards democratisation.

Firstly, the **socialisation of political elites favoured a robust ideological alignment**. Parliamentary speeches at the national level illustrate a widespread European vocation in Spanish and Portuguese political parties, transcending classical ideological and political divisions. Among political figures, Jacques Delors was one of the most prominent ones in this process of elite socialisation, not only as the President of the Commission but by virtue of his socialist political career, which fostered close alignment with Mário Soares in Portugal and Felipe González in Spain. With more than twelve visits to both countries, the presidential records also show instances of informal socialisation and meeting summaries in which **democracy and accession increasingly became synonymous**. In the European Parliament, the role of the grand coalition of pro-European moderate forces was instrumental in overcoming ideological idiosyncrasies. This spirit of consensus thrived across the political spectrum, even within groups with prominent eurosceptic traditions such as the British conservatives and the communists.

Secondly, at the ideational level, one of the primary explanations behind the codification of the principle of democracy is the framing of the **Iberian accession as a moral imperative**, which made opposition to the pro-democratic narratives discursively untenable. Jacques Delors was again one of the most influential figures in the normative dimension of democracy and shaped the ideational debate on moral responsibility towards the accession of Spain and Portugal from the very beginning. In fact, from archival records, the first mention of morality by any policy actor appears in the first interview that the President of the Commission conducted with a Spanish media outlet. Delors treated the accession as a *"historic event"* and framed it as a "*moral issue, even more than a political one*." His discourse on the principle of democracy was consistent and inherently moralising, often advocating for a *"Europe of the ideal"* beyond mere economic rationales. The Parliament was an influential policy actor too, subscribing to Delors' moralistic rhetoric and even going as far as saying that, despite not being explicitly mentioned, the foundational 1957 Treaty of Rome already induced a form of democratic conditionality to obtain Community membership.

Thirdly, at the institutional level, **the innovations that preceded the Iberian enlargement granted greater powers to the European Parliament**, which took an active role in the codification process and exerted considerable pressure upon the other institutions. Although differing in their approach to future accession, all political parties endorsed the idea that democracy had become a *sine qua non* for membership. This phenomenon was witnessed particularly in the written questions, amendments and the Spanish Socialist Luis Planas' report that preceded the 1991 *Resolution on Community enlargement and relations with other European countries*. The latter declared democracy one of the *"fundamental pillars on which the European Community as a whole has been built"* and could be considered one of the most significant political signals before the final codification of democracy in the Maastricht Treaty. This demonstrates how the European Parliament can exert considerable influence over policymaking, provided that party groups decide to coordinate. Although parliamentary resolutions are often accused of being merely symbolic, they have been shown to carry a normative weight that may shape the behaviour of other institutions. By exerting inter-institutional pressure, the Parliament has the power to ingrain core European values into the EU policy cycle.

Overall, there was **a convergence of elite**

discourse, strong moral advocacy for democratic values and institutional pressure mechanisms that jointly shaped treaty evolution. Additionally, it demonstrates how **the figure of Jacques Delors was a fundamental element in supporting accession, steering the pro-democratic narrative and fostering socialisation and ideological alignment in political groups.**

NEW WAVE OF ENLARGEMENT AND DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE

Four decades after the signature of the accession treaties, Europe now finds itself at a critical juncture in the process of political and economic integration amidst a new wave of enlargement. First, the renewed perspective on the significance of the Iberian accession is a case from which the EU might still draw important institutional and normative lessons. It also reclaims for Spain and Portugal the central role they have played in shaping the political identity of the Union. Second, as enlargement regains momentum, the question of democratic conditionality resurfaces. Understanding the historical legacies of democracy is essential for the Union to uphold these values among future members. Third, in times of democratic backsliding and populist forces, Europe ought to reassess the resilience of democracy as a foundational principle of the Union. The formal codification in the Treaties preceded the 1993 Copenhagen criteria and, accordingly, the Iberian precedent of democratic conditionality has governed EU enlargement policy ever since.

Looking at contemporary EU governance, the Iberian case highlights the level of flexibility that the Treaties offer when political will exists. Even in moments when democratic principles – let alone European values – were not explicitly enshrined, policy actors nevertheless forged a social consensus around them. This social construction illustrates that Treaty reform is not the only route to substantive change; political determination may well be a tool for deeper integration.

Another aspect evinced in the investigation is how the European project has been driven predominantly by political elites. While this dynamic has delivered relatively efficient decision making, it risks alienating citizens and fostering euroscepticism if civil society's role remains marginal. Institutionalising mechanisms for sustained civic engagement – in enlargement and other policy fields – could counter voter apathy and inoculate the Union against populist rhetoric.

The Iberian accession has enhanced the Union's overall democratic quality despite some initial signs of reluctance to the enlargement process. This resonates with the words of a German socialist MEP, Klaus Wettig, who stated in 1985: *"It seemed as if five thousand tonnes of tomato puree [...] were more important than the historical significance of this enlargement"*. Looking ahead to the Western Balkans and the Eastern European states, upcoming investigations could apply comparative studies to draw valuable lessons that could inform and guide future accession prospects. By coupling conditionality with robust support for democratic consolidation, enlargement could continue to expand the Union's normative weight.

European integration stands at a decisive moment in its ongoing evolution, confronted with essential questions about its fundamental purpose and identity. Jacques Delors was right about the Iberian accession when he asserted that *"by enlarging Europe towards the south"*, Europe regained *"part of our soul"*. As economic insecurity, climate challenges and geopolitical instability increase, the principle of democracy must remain the ontological foundation and the *soul* of the European project.

Despite the blatant attacks it has faced in other parts of the world, the principle of democracy cannot be reduced to a dead letter for us Europeans. Europe must now strive to be **"the Europe of Democracy"**, the Europe with the *soul* that inspired the Iberian states.

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