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Summary of the PhD Thesis

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Encouragements, Criticisms, and Appreciations: The Evolution of European Officials' Discourse Towards Romania (2000–2024)

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Doctoral Field: History

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Summary of the PhD Thesis

Encouragements, Criticisms, and Appreciations: The Evolution of European Officials' Discourse Towards Romania (2000–2024)

1. The Topic of the Study and Its Importance

This study addresses a relatively unexplored niche in the specialized literature dedicated to relations between the European Union (EU) and its member states: the evolution of European officials' discourse regarding Romania over the course of a quarter century, between 2000 and 2024. The central research question is formulated as follows: how did the discourse of European officials towards Romania evolve between 2000 and 2024? The analysis focuses on three thematic domains — corruption, the economy, and the environment — selected by virtue of their decisive importance within the accession negotiations and post-accession mechanisms.

The importance of the topic is justified on several grounds. First, Romania represents a distinctive case within the EU's eastern enlargement: marked by a sultanistic communist regime under Nicolae Ceaușescu, Romania stood apart from other states in the region that benefited from negotiated transitions. Its post-communist trajectory — characterized by uneven reforms, persistent institutional vulnerabilities, and oscillations between democratic progress and regression — sets it apart and raises fundamental questions about the limits and effectiveness of European conditionality as an instrument of political transformation.

Second, although many studies have documented the difficulties of Romania's accession process and certain aspects of the post-accession period, the perspective of European institutions has remained in the shadows. The media selectively reported the statements of European officials, often according to editorial preferences or around key events, without offering a systematic and diachronic analysis of the evolution of EU rhetoric towards Romania.

Last but not least, the analysis of European discourse about Romania is relevant from a geopolitical and institutional standpoint. The period covered includes key moments such as the accession negotiations, the actual accession in 2007 with safeguard clauses, post-accession monitoring through the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism, the global financial crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, the episodes of democratic backsliding in 2012–2013

and 2017–2018, and the two referendums on the suspension of the country's President. This succession of key moments provides an ideal framework for observing the dynamics of the relationship between the EU and a member state that has been constantly under the scrutiny of supranational institutions.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of the study revolves around two complementary analytical lines: intergovernmentalist theories and neofunctionalist and multi-level governance perspectives. Intergovernmental approaches place member states and national governments at the center of the integration process, considering that supranational institutions play a secondary role and that states act primarily in defense of their own political, economic, and social interests. Neofunctionalist and multi-level governance perspectives challenge this view, arguing that national interests coexist and interact with supranational agents such as the European Commission, the European Parliament, and the Court of Justice, each pursuing its own institutional agenda.

Central to the theoretical framework of the thesis is the concept of Europeanization, understood as the top-down influence exercised by the EU on the structures, policies, and norms of member states. Europeanization is analyzed in relation to European conditionality, the mechanism by which the EU made the benefits of integration conditional on meeting governance standards, and its limitations in the post-accession phase, when external pressure instruments diminish considerably.

The study is situated within the tradition of critical theories of international relations and security studies, placing emphasis on the conceptual framework of securitization to examine the extent to which issues such as corruption, judicial reform, or budget deficits have been transformed from technical matters into existential concerns for the cohesion of the European project. This reflects an expanded understanding of security, beyond the traditional military dimension, encompassing political, economic, societal, and environmental dimensions. From this perspective, EU discourses on the rule of law, judicial independence, or environmental sustainability in Romania fall within the logic of extended security, highlighting the Union's concern about internal vulnerabilities that may undermine democracy and stability in member states. The multidisciplinary relevance of the study is further underscored by its grounding in research on the EU's normative power and the level of Europeanization,

thus positioning the analysis at the intersection of international relations, European studies, and security studies.

3. Research Methodology

From a methodological standpoint, the doctoral thesis adopts the historical case study as its primary research strategy, considered appropriate for the rigorous description and in-depth analysis of complex phenomena over an extended period. The historical case study offers several advantages relevant to the objectives of this research: it allows for in-depth investigation spanning approximately two and a half decades, facilitates detailed examination of a complex and diachronic process, draws on existing data sources, and generates both specific and generalizable knowledge. The selection of the Romanian case is motivated by three criteria: its relevance to the research objectives, its intrinsic significance, and the density of available information.

The adopted perspective is diachronic, tracing phenomena in their temporal unfolding, with an emphasis on continuity, transformation, and gradual evolution. This perspective allows for capturing shifts in tone, content, and intensity of European discourse towards Romania in response to domestic and international political contexts. The primary method of investigation is document analysis, a systematic and rigorous process of examining and interpreting documents, aimed at revealing their content, meaning, and perspectives. The documentary corpus consists of declarations and position statements made by leaders of European institutions regarding Romania throughout the analyzed period.

The research focuses on three categories of European officials, considered the most relevant by virtue of their positions: specialized commissioners, Presidents of the European Commission, and Presidents of the European Parliament. The choice to focus on the Commission and the European Parliament is justified by the fact that the longer mandates of officials in these institutions ensure analytical continuity and make a truly diachronic analysis possible, avoiding the analytical fragmentation that the Council's six-month rotating presidency would produce.

4. Main Findings

The findings of the study are structured around the three thematic domains investigated — corruption, the economy, and the environment — and are presented in chapters 5, 6, and 7

of the thesis. The introduction provides an overview of the findings on corruption, which clearly illustrates the general logic of the research. The analysis of discourses on corruption identifies three distinct successive stages. The first stage, between 2000 and 2011, was dominated by messages of encouragement, in which European officials urged Romania to persevere in its undertaken reforms and to consolidate the progress already achieved. The tone was predominantly positive and constructive, reflecting the logic of pre-accession conditionality and the support extended to a candidate state on the path to integration.

The second stage, spanning 2012 to 2019, was marked by a significant shift in tone, with discourses becoming considerably more critical, signaling slowdowns or threats to the reform process, as well as the adoption of measures that threatened the rule of law and fundamental democratic principles. This coincides with episodes of democratic backsliding in Romania and with tensions surrounding judicial independence.

The third stage, 2019–2024, was characterized by predominantly positive assessments, acknowledging the progress made by Romania in the context of post-pandemic recovery and European financial support. A notable reduction in the intensity and volume of discourses dedicated to this subject was also observed. A noteworthy element is that some discourses established an explicit link between the ineffectiveness of anti-corruption efforts and Romania's prospects for accession to the Schengen Area — a pressure instrument with concrete and tangible stakes for Romanian citizens.

These findings suggest that European discourse towards Romania has been dynamic and reactive to internal developments, rather than static or formulaic. The study thus contributes to understanding how European norms, rules, and values are transmitted, negotiated, and internalized at the national level through discursive instruments, and offers an original perspective on the relationship between the EU's normative power and its capacity to produce real transformations in member states.