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Long-term Impact of Austro-Hungarian Historical Borders On
Contemporary Political Preferences

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Zusammenfassung

Diese Masterarbeit untersucht, ob die historische Zugehörigkeit zum Austro-Ungarischen Reich bis heute politische Präferenzen in Zentral- und Osteuropa beeinflusst. Auf Grundlage von Wahlkreisdaten auf Distriktebene analysiert die Arbeit den Zusammenhang zwischen ehemaligen imperialen Grenzen und Unterstützung proeuropäischer politischer Parteien. Die empirische Analyse basiert auf querschnittlichen OLS-Regressionen mit Länder-Fixed-Effects und kontrolliert für zentrale sozioökonomische Faktoren wie Pro-Kopf-Einkommen, Wahlbeteiligung und Bevölkerungsgröße. Die Ergebnisse zeigen eine ausgeprägte länderübergreifende Heterogenität in der Persistenz des österreichisch-ungarischen Erbes. Distrikte mit habsburgischer historischer Zugehörigkeit weisen eine signifikant geringere Unterstützung für proeuropäische Parteien auf als nicht-habsburgische Regionen. Diese Befunde deuten darauf hin, dass sich die politischen Konsequenzen historischer Institutionen nicht einheitlich über verschiedene Kontexte hinweg entfalten, sondern durch zeitgenössische politische Rahmenbedingungen und sozioökonomische Strukturen geprägt werden. Insgesamt zeigt die Analyse, dass historische Institutionen weiterhin eine Rolle für heutiges Wahlverhalten spielen, ihr Einfluss jedoch weder mechanisch noch universell vorhersehbar ist. Durch den Fokus auf Wahlergebnisse leistet die Arbeit einen Beitrag zur Literatur über historische Persistenz, indem sie die kontextabhängige Natur des langfristigen Einflusses vergangener Governance-Strukturen auf moderne politische Präferenzen hervorhebt.

Abstract

This Master's thesis examines whether historical affiliation with the Austro-Hungarian Empire continues to shape contemporary political preferences in Central and Eastern Europe. Using district-level electoral data, the study analyses the relationship between former imperial borders and support for pro-European political parties. The empirical approach relies on cross-sectional OLS regressions with country fixed effects and controls for key socioeconomic factors, including income per capita, voter turnout, and population size.

The results reveal substantial cross-country heterogeneity in the persistence of the Austro-Hungarian legacy. Districts with Habsburg historical affiliation exhibits significantly lower support for pro-European parties compared to non-Habsburg regions. These findings suggest that the political consequences of historical institutions do not translate uniformly across contexts, but are shaped by contemporary political environments and socioeconomic conditions.

Overall, the analysis demonstrates that historical institutions continue to matter for electoral behaviour, while their effects are neither mechanical or universally predictable. By focusing on voting outcomes, the thesis contributes to the literature on historical persistence by highlighting the context-dependent nature of the long-run influence of past governance structures on modern political preferences.

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1. Introduction

Historical borders have long been recognized as a powerful source of persistent regional differences in political and socioeconomic outcomes. In Central and Eastern Europe, the legacy of former empires remains particularly visible. The territories of present-day Poland, Ukraine, Slovakia, and Romania were shaped by contrasting imperial administrations, each characterized by distinct institutional architectures, legal traditions, and governance practices. Former Austro-Hungarian territories are often associated with comparatively higher bureaucratic capacity and more consistent rule-of-law traditions, in contrast to regions historically governed by the Russian or Ottoman Empires, where administrative centralization and weaker civic institutions were more prevalent (Grosfeld & Zhuravskaya, 2015). These divergent historical trajectories provide a unique opportunity to examine the long-term influence of past governance systems on contemporary political behaviour.

Understanding whether imperial legacies continue to shape political preferences today is central to broader debates in political economy and economic history. A growing literature documents the persistence of historical institutions in shaping trust, corruption, and economic outcomes. However, less is known about whether these institutional legacies are reflected in contemporary electoral behaviour, particularly with respect to support for pro-European political parties. Moreover, existing evidence provides limited insight into whether such effects are homogeneous across national contexts or conditioned by post-imperial political trajectories.

Historical legacies may influence political behaviour through several channels. The Austro-Hungarian Empire developed a professionalized bureaucracy, relatively autonomous courts, a stable civil code, and stronger mechanisms of local self-government. These institutional features are commonly linked to higher levels of institutional trust, lower tolerance for corruption, and stronger civic engagement. By contrast, regions governed by the Russian or Ottoman Empires tended to exhibit more centralized, patrimonial, and less accountable state structures, which are associated with weaker traditions of civic participation and less favourable attitudes toward democratic institutions (Becker et al., 2016). A second channel operates through historically different opportunities for political participation. In the Habsburg lands, local assemblies, cultural autonomy, and participatory forms of governance provided communities with experience in self-rule and collective decision-making. This experience may have contributed to the development of political cultures that are more supportive of democratic norms and, in some contexts, pro-European orientations. In contrast, the Russian and Ottoman administrative systems offered fewer opportunities for local participation, limiting the formation of participatory political norms (Badescu & Sum, 2015; Fouka et al., 2023).

Support for pro-European political parties provides an analytically meaningful measure of contemporary political orientations. Electoral choices are widely used in political

economy as a proxy for underlying values, institutional trust, and long-term political preferences. This approach is motivated by extensive evidence showing that voting behaviour reflects persistent cultural and institutional norms rooted in historical experiences (Guiso et al., 2016). The values commonly associated with European integration, such as respect for the rule of law, administrative professionalism, and openness to supranational institutional frameworks, are broadly consistent with the historical institutional environment of the Habsburg Empire. Consequently, variation in pro-EU electoral support offers a theoretically grounded and empirically observable indicator through which the long-run influence of historical institutions on political behaviour can be assessed.

This thesis addresses the following research questions. First, does historical affiliation with the Austro-Hungarian Empire affect the level of support for pro-European political parties in contemporary elections? Second, do the magnitude and direction of this effect differ across countries with distinct post-imperial trajectories, namely Poland, Ukraine, Romania, and Slovakia? Third, to what extent do contemporary socioeconomic factors, such as income, turnout, and population size, condition the relationship between historical affiliation and pro-European voting?

Building on the literature on institutional persistence and historical political economy, the analysis is guided by two competing hypotheses. The historical persistence hypothesis predicts higher levels of pro-European electoral support in districts formerly governed by the Austro-Hungarian Empire, reflecting enduring institutional legacies of stronger local administration and bureaucratic quality. In contrast, the historical backlash hypothesis allows for lower levels of pro-European support in former Austro-Hungarian regions. This alternative hypothesis emphasizes the role of post-imperial identity formation, uneven development trajectories, and divergent nation-building processes in shaping contemporary political preferences.

Using district-level electoral data from Poland, Ukraine, Romania, and Slovakia, this thesis combines historical imperial boundaries with contemporary socioeconomic indicators to examine the political consequences of Austro-Hungarian legacies. The results suggest that the relationship between historical affiliation and pro-European voting is context-dependent and varies across national settings. These findings highlight the importance of accounting for post-imperial political environments when studying the persistence of historical institutions.

This study hypothesizes that regions historically governed by the Austro-Hungarian Empire exhibit systematic differences in support for pro-European political parties. This effect is expected to operate through persistent administrative practices and traditions of local self-government, which fostered higher levels of institutional trust and political engagement and ultimately translate into electoral support for parties aligned with rule-of-law norms and European integration.

2 Literature review

A substantial body of literature in political economy and economic history documents the long-term persistence of historical institutions and their enduring influence on contemporary political and socioeconomic outcomes. Rather than disappearing with formal regime change, institutional arrangements, administrative practices, and governance norms are often shown to shape regional trajectories over long periods of time. This perspective has been particularly influential in studies of Central and Eastern Europe, where historical borders of empires intersect with modern nation-states and create sharp within-country variation.

One influential strand of this literature examines the legacy of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Becker et al (2016) provide compelling evidence that former Habsburg regions display higher trust in courts and police and lower perceived corruption than neighbouring areas formerly ruled by the Russian or Ottoman Empires. Their findings suggest that comparatively stronger bureaucratic capacity, rule-of-law traditions, and local administrative autonomy under Habsburg rule generated institutional advantages that persisted well into the post-socialist period. This work establishes a clear link between imperial governance structures and contemporary institutional outcomes.

At the same time, the literature remains divided on how far such institutional advantages translate into political behaviour. While higher institutional trust and administrative quality are often assumed to foster support for democratic and integrative political projects, empirical evidence on voting outcomes is more mixed. Research on historical legacies frequently focuses on attitudes, trust, or economic performance, while electoral preferences are less commonly analysed and may respond differently to historical influences. Voting behaviour reflects not only institutional quality, but also party competition, political narratives, and country-specific cleavages that evolve.

Broader contributions to the historical political economy literature reinforce this ambiguity. Studies such as those by Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson (2001) and Nunn (2008) demonstrate that historical institutions exert long-term effects, while also emphasizing that these effects operate through specific channels and are mediated by subsequent political and economic developments. This suggests that the impact of imperial legacies is unlikely to be uniform across outcomes or contexts, and that historical advantages in governance do not automatically imply convergence in political preferences.

In the context of Central and Eastern Europe, post-imperial and post-socialist trajectories further complicate this relationship. Differences in nation-building, party system development, experiences of socialism, and EU accession paths have shaped political competition in ways that may amplify, reinterpret, or even reverse inherited institutional patterns. As a result, regions sharing a common imperial past may exhibit divergent voting behaviour once embedded in different national political environments.

Despite the richness of the existing literature, there remains a notable gap regarding the electoral implications of Austro-Hungarian legacies. While Becker et al. (2016) convincingly document institutional persistence, it is not clear whether these legacies are reflected in contemporary support for pro-European political parties, nor whether such effects are consistent across countries. In particular, little is known about whether historical affiliation with the Habsburg Empire systematically increases, decreases, or has no effect on pro-EU voting once modern socioeconomic conditions and country-specific factors are taken into account.

3 Data and Sources

The empirical analysis is based on an original district-level dataset that combines electoral, demographic, and fiscal information for four countries: Poland, Ukraine, Romania, and Slovakia. The overarching principle in assembling the data was to work at the lowest feasible level of aggregation while maintaining consistency across countries, and to align contemporary information with historically meaningful administrative units.

3.1. Electoral data

The dependent variable in all regressions is the vote share of pro-European parties in recent parliamentary elections. For each country, I classify as pro-EU those parties that explicitly support European integration and EU membership in their programmes and public positions, based on secondary literature and party documentation. The selected elections represent the most recent politically stable electoral cycles preceding major shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic or the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. Using these elections ensures that the measured political preferences reflect normal political competition rather than crisis-driven or wartime voting behaviour. Moreover, these cycles offer complete, high-quality district-level electoral data that are consistent across countries, allowing for meaningful subnational comparisons.

For Poland, electoral data are taken from the official website of the National Electoral Commission (Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza, PKW, 2019) for the 2019 Sejm election, which publishes detailed results by powiat and constituency. These data provide vote shares for each party and overall turnout. The powiat is used as the main unit of analysis because it is both administratively meaningful and closely aligned with the historical geography of the Austro-Hungarian border.

For Ukraine, electoral results from the 2019 parliamentary election are obtained from the official election portal, the H2O interface of the Central Election Commission (Diia Open Data Portal, 2019), which reports party-level vote shares for each single-mandate electoral district. Because these constituencies often group several lower-level administrative districts, additional work was required to reconstruct the mapping between electoral districts and their constituent raions. Using official descriptions of

constituency boundaries and lists of included districts, I matched each constituency to its underlying administrative units. Subsequently, I aggregated or merged demographic and fiscal variables to the constituency level.

In Slovakia, I rely on district-level information (okresy) and official electoral results available from the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic (2020), which maintains a dedicated elections portal with detailed results by district.

For Romania, parliamentary election data are drawn from official sources summarised in international repositories such as IPU Parline (2020) and the Permanent Electoral Authority (AEP, 2020), which provide vote shares and turnout by constituency for the 2020 Chamber of Deputies election. In all four countries, the electoral datasets are restricted to the most recent pre-war elections for Ukraine and politically stable elections, ensuring that the political environment reflects normal rather than crisis conditions.

Across all cases, the dependent variable is constructed as the percentage of valid votes cast for pro-European parties in each district, or constituency-equivalent. This yields a continuous measure of pro-EU support that is comparable both within and across countries.

3.2. Socioeconomic and demographic indicators

To characterise the socioeconomic environment of each district, I use three sets of controls: population size, a measure of fiscal or income capacity, and voter turnout. These variables are compiled from national statistical offices and harmonised over a common time window covering approximately 2017 to 2020. Using a short multi-year window rather than a single cross-section helps to smooth out temporary fluctuations while capturing the contemporary pre-pandemic and pre-war situation.

Population size is obtained from official demographic statistics produced by national offices such as Statistics Poland (GUS, Local Data Bank, 2020), the State Statistics Service of Ukraine (Derzhstat, Population Statistics, 2019), the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic (ŠÚSR, Regional Statistics Database, 2020) and the National Institute of Statistics of Romania (INSSE, TEMPO Online Database, 2020). Where necessary, population counts for subdistricts were aggregated to match the electoral unit, for example, when several districts are combined into a single Ukrainian constituency.

The second key control is per capita revenue capacity, measured in euros. Conceptually, this variable captures the ability of local governments to raise fiscal resources and serves as a proxy for local economic development and state capacity. Standard macroeconomic indicators, such as GDP per capita, are rarely available at a fine-grained subnational level and are often inconsistent across different administrative systems. By contrast, measures of local revenue capacity, even if constructed differently across countries, are closely tied to the functioning of local administrations and the tax base of each unit. For Poland, revenue data are taken from GUS Local Government Finance

Statistics (2019); for Ukraine, from the Ministry of Finance Local Budget Statistics (2019); for Slovakia, from the ŠÚSR Public Finance Database (2020); and for Romania, from the INSSE Local Public Finance Series (2020). Using revenue per capita, therefore, allows me to approximate local prosperity and the quality of local public finances in a way that aligns with the institutional focus of the thesis.

Turnout is measured as the percentage of eligible voters who participated in the relevant election. In most cases, this information is directly available in the electoral datasets. Including turnout as a control is important for at least two reasons. First, it captures variation in political mobilisation and civic engagement across districts, which may correlate with both historical legacies and contemporary political preferences. Second, higher turnout can indicate stronger democratic participation, potentially affecting the relative success of pro-European versus anti-European parties.

3.3. Historical mapping of Austro-Hungarian affiliation

The central explanatory variable is a binary indicator that captures whether a modern district historically belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Constructing this variable required combining digitised historical maps of imperial borders with detailed information on historical administrative units. For each of the four countries, I used historical atlases and secondary sources on imperial administration (Magocsi, 2010; Euratlas, 2019; Judson, 2016; Ingrao, 2000; Kann, 1974) to determine which modern districts fall fully or predominantly within former Habsburg territories.

The mapping proceeded in two steps. First, historical borders of the Austro-Hungarian Empire as of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were georeferenced and overlaid on modern administrative maps, following established methodological approaches used in the persistence literature (Becker et al., 2011; Grosfeld & Zhuravskaya, 2015; Cornetti et al., 2022). Second, using historical administrative lists and concordance tables linking past and present territorial units (Atlas of East-Central Europe, 1992; Ukrainian Historical Atlas, 2008), each modern district was classified as Austro-Hungarian (AH = 1) or non-AH (AH = 0), based on the territory's dominant and historically recognised imperial affiliation. In cases where historical and modern borders do not fully coincide, classification is based on the historically documented administrative unit rather than contemporary lines. In Slovakia, all present-day districts are coded as AH because the country historically belonged to the Habsburg Empire.

In the Ukrainian case, the construction of the AH indicator required identifying which modern constituencies correspond to historically Habsburg regions such as Galicia and Bukovina and which correspond to territories historically administered by the Russian Empire. Each constituency was coded according to its documented historical region using established scholarly sources (Kravtsiv, 1994; Himka, 1999; Martynov, 2017;

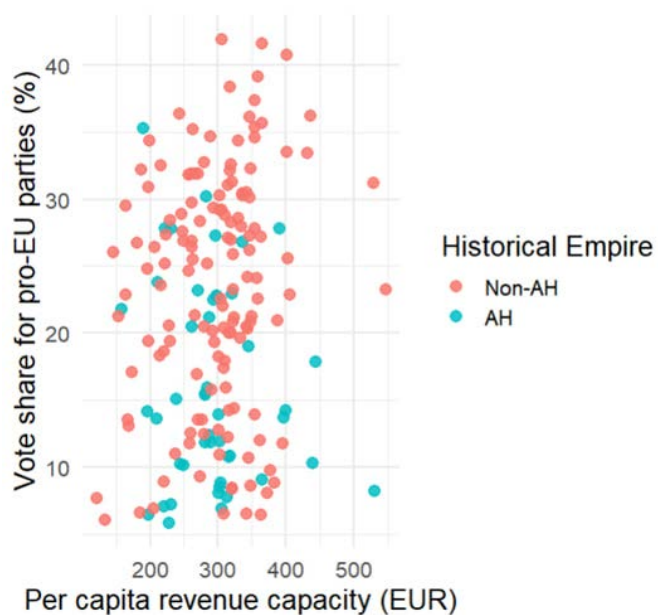
Wittenberg, 2015). Constituencies associated with Habsburg regions were coded as AH = 1, while those

located within historically Russian-controlled lands were coded as AH = 0. This ensures a consistent and historically grounded classification for all units in the dataset.

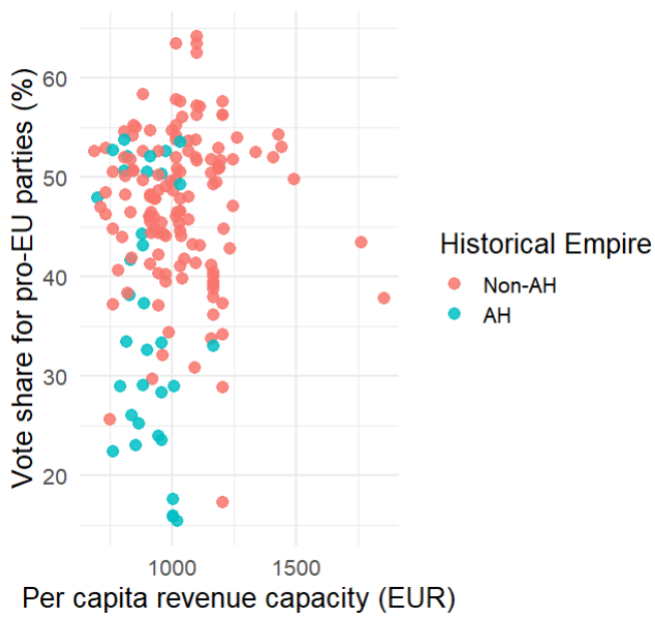
3.4. Descriptive Evidence: Income and Pro-EU Voting

Before turning to regression analysis, it is useful to examine how income is associated with support for pro-EU parties across districts. Figure 1 displays the relationship between per-capita revenue capacity and the pro-EU vote share in Poland, distinguishing between historically Austro-Hungarian and non-AH districts.

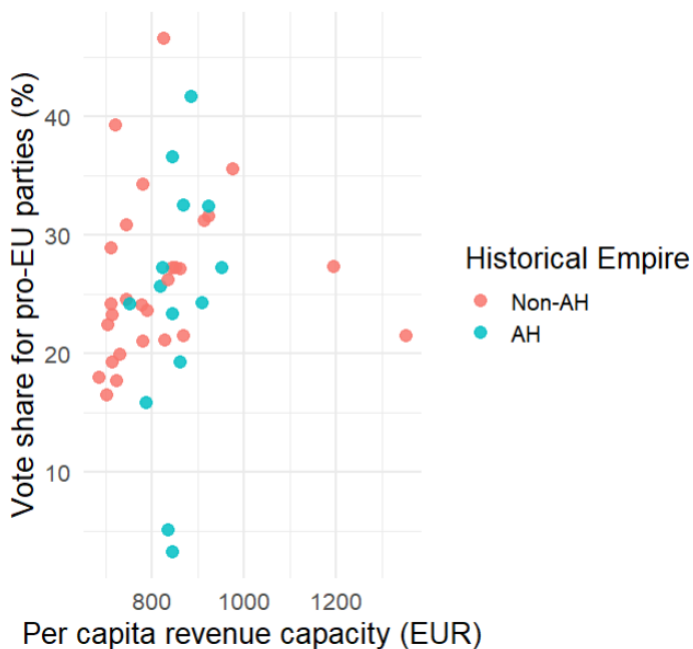
Graph 1. Income and Support for Pro-EU Parties Across Polish Districts



Graph 2. Income and Support for Pro-EU Parties Across Ukrainian Districts



Graph 3. Income and Support for Pro-EU Parties Across Romanian Districts



To provide an initial descriptive overview of the relationship between local economic conditions and pro-EU voting, Figures 1–3 plot district-level support for pro-European parties against per capita revenue capacity for Poland, Ukraine, and Romania. In all

three cases, the points are coloured according to historical imperial affiliation, allowing a preliminary comparison of patterns across Austro-Hungarian and non-Austro-Hungarian areas.

In Poland, districts exhibit considerable variation in both income and pro-EU vote shares, with support ranging from approximately 10 to over 40 percent. Per capita revenue capacity is concentrated between approximately EUR 200 and 500. The two historical groups overlap substantially along both dimensions, and there is no visible clustering that would clearly distinguish Austro-Hungarian from non-Austro-Hungarian districts. Overall, the Polish scatterplot suggests substantial internal heterogeneity and no simple bivariate association between income and pro-EU support.

The Ukrainian districts show much higher average support for pro-EU parties, often reaching 40–60 percent, alongside wider variation in income levels. Compared to Poland, the distribution of points is more dispersed, and there is somewhat more visible grouping among Austro-Hungarian districts, which tend to cluster toward the middle and upper part of the distribution. However, the overlap between historical categories remains considerable, and the relationship between income and vote shares does not appear linear or systematic.

Romania exhibits the narrowest variation in both variables, with most districts falling within a compact income range and showing vote shares between roughly 15 and 40 percent. The two historical groups again overlap almost entirely, and no clear visual differentiation emerges. The Romanian pattern is the most homogeneous among the three, with little evidence of distinct clusters associated with historical affiliation.

Taken together, these descriptive patterns highlight that income and pro-EU vote shares vary across countries, and that historical categories do not produce visible separation in the raw data. The plots illustrate the degree of heterogeneity within each context and motivate the need for a multivariate empirical strategy capable of isolating historical effects from contemporary socioeconomic influences.

3.5. Rationale for the choice of control variables

The selection of population, revenue capacity, and turnout as control variables is guided by theoretical considerations and data availability. These three variables capture the core structural dimensions along which districts differ today: economic development, urbanisation, and political mobilisation, which are widely recognised as key determinants of regional political behaviour (Gennaioli et al., 2014; Rodden, 2010; Blais, 2006). By controlling for these factors, the analysis helps isolate the effect of historical Austro-Hungarian affiliation from contemporary socioeconomic influences.

Local income or fiscal capacity is a standard control in the literature on historical legacies and political preferences. Regions with higher levels of economic development tend to exhibit different patterns of political behaviour, including stronger support for

pro-market and pro-integration parties. Economic development is itself partially shaped by historical institutions, which raises the concern that omitting it could bias estimates of the Austro-Hungarian effect. Including local revenue per capita thus helps to separate the direct legacy of imperial institutions from the indirect legacy that operates through long-run economic development (Gennaioli et al., 2014).

Voter turnout is an important proxy for civic engagement and political mobilisation. Districts with high turnout may have stronger civic norms, more active parties, and denser associational life. These features are often linked to historical patterns of local self-government and civil society, and they may independently affect the success of pro-European parties. Controlling for turnout reduces the risk that the estimated AH effect reflects differences in political participation rather than differences in preferences (Blais, 2006).

Population size is included to account for scale effects and patterns of urbanisation. Larger districts often contain urban centres with more diversified economies, higher education levels, and more competitive media environments. These factors can shape political preferences, and extensive evidence shows that urban and rural areas differ systematically in electoral behaviour (Rodden, 2010). At the same time, population is a relatively neutral control that guards against spurious correlations arising from differences between small rural areas and large metropolitan districts.

Other potential controls, such as education levels or unemployment, were excluded due to inconsistencies in data availability and comparability across countries. Many of these variables are highly correlated with revenue capacity, which increases the risk of multicollinearity without providing substantial additional explanatory power. Given the limited sample size at the district level, the parsimonious specification with three core controls captures key socioeconomic differences while preserving the degrees of freedom needed for reliable inference.

4. Methodology

4.1 Identification Strategy and Conceptual Framework

The empirical strategy of this study is designed to examine whether historical exposure to Austro-Hungarian institutions is associated with contemporary support for pro-European political parties at the district level. The analysis exploits subnational variation in historical imperial affiliation within countries, relying on the fact that districts located on different sides of former imperial borders were subsequently incorporated into the same modern nation-states and are now governed by identical national political institutions, electoral rules, and macroeconomic environments.

This within-country comparison is central to the identification strategy. By conditioning on country fixed effects, the analysis differences out all time-invariant national characteristics that could otherwise confound the relationship between historical affiliation and voting behaviour. These include differences in political systems, electoral rules, ideological party landscapes, administrative capacity, average levels of economic development, and shared national historical narratives. As a result, identification is driven exclusively by variation across districts within the same country that differ in historical institutional exposure.

Historical affiliation with the Austro-Hungarian Empire enters the analysis as a binary indicator capturing long-run exposure to Habsburg administrative, legal, and governance institutions. This variable is treated as predetermined with respect to contemporary political outcomes, as imperial borders were established long before the emergence of modern electoral competition and contemporary political parties. The conceptual framework follows the literature on institutional persistence, which emphasises that historical governance structures can shape political norms, administrative practices, and patterns of political participation over long horizons, even after formal institutions have disappeared.

The identifying assumption is that, conditional on country fixed effects and a limited set of observable district-level characteristics, historical Austro-Hungarian affiliation is orthogonal to unobserved contemporary determinants of pro-European voting. In other words, once national contexts and key contemporary structural differences are accounted for, remaining variation in electoral outcomes reflects long-run institutional legacies rather than contemporaneous confounders. While this assumption cannot be tested directly in a cross-sectional setting, it is supported by the historical stability of imperial borders and by the fact that these borders predate modern mass politics and European integration.

Importantly, the empirical strategy does not claim causal identification in the experimental sense. Instead, it aims to document robust and systematic historical associations between past institutional exposure and present-day political preferences, consistent with theories of long-run institutional persistence in political economy.

4.2 Econometric Specification and Estimation

The empirical analysis employs cross-sectional ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions with country fixed effects to estimate the relationship between historical Austro-Hungarian affiliation and district-level support for pro-European political parties. The use of a fixed-effects framework ensures that estimation relies exclusively on within-country variation and abstracts from cross-country differences in political and institutional environments.

The model is:

$$y_i = \alpha_c + \beta_1 AH_i + \beta_2 Pop_i + \beta_3 Rev_i + \beta_4 Turnout_i + \varepsilon_i$$

where:

- y_i is the pro-EU vote share in district i ,
- AH_i is a binary indicator of Austro-Hungarian historical affiliation,
- Pop_i is the population size,
- Rev_i is per capita revenue capacity,
- $Turnout_i$ is electoral turnout,
- α_c is the country fixed effect,
- ε_i is the error term.

The coefficient of primary interest is β_1 . It measures the average within-country difference in pro-European vote shares between districts with and without Austro-Hungarian historical affiliation, conditional on the included covariates. Because the specification includes country fixed effects, this coefficient is identified solely from subnational variation and is not driven by differences across countries.

All models are estimated using ordinary least squares. Given the cross-sectional nature of the data and the presence of heteroskedasticity across districts and national samples, inference is based on heteroskedasticity-robust HC1 standard errors. This correction accounts for non-constant error variance that may differ across countries and improves the reliability of statistical inference.

Because the primary objective of the analysis is to isolate the historical association between Austro-Hungarian affiliation and contemporary political preferences, the set of control variables is intentionally kept parsimonious. This approach minimises the risk of overfitting while capturing key contemporary socioeconomic dimensions that may confound the relationship between historical institutional exposure and voting outcomes.

To assess the robustness of the results, additional specifications are estimated. These include consistency checks under alternative baseline country definitions, as well as the inclusion of interaction terms between historical affiliation and country indicators to test for heterogeneity in the estimated historical effect across national contexts. Together, these procedures help ensure that the reported results are not driven by specific modelling choices.

4.3 Interpretation and Limitations

Identification in this study relies on a combination of historical, institutional, and econometric sources of variation that together allow the analysis to isolate the association between past imperial affiliation and contemporary political preferences. The first and most central source of identification is within-country historical variation in Austro-Hungarian affiliation. In Poland, Ukraine, and Romania, historical imperial borders divide present-day national territories into districts that share the same contemporary political, legal, and economic environment but differ in their long-run exposure to imperial institutions. This variation enables comparisons across districts that are otherwise subject to identical national frameworks, thereby reducing concerns that estimated effects reflect country-level confounders rather than historical institutional legacies.

A second source of identification arises from the inclusion of country fixed effects. These fixed effects absorb all time-invariant national characteristics that could influence political preferences, including political institutions, party systems, administrative capacity, average levels of economic development, and shared historical narratives. By conditioning on country fixed effects, the analysis ensures that identification does not rely on cross-country comparisons, which would be vulnerable to a wide range of confounding factors, but instead exploits subnational contrasts within countries.

A third source of identification is provided by interaction terms between historical Austro-Hungarian affiliation and country indicators. These interactions allow the estimated historical effect to vary across national contexts and capture heterogeneity in post-imperial trajectories, state-building processes, and political development. Rather than imposing a single homogeneous effect of historical affiliation, this approach recognises that the persistence of imperial legacies may depend on how historical institutions interacted with subsequent national policies, reforms, and political shocks.

The estimated coefficient on historical Austro-Hungarian affiliation is interpreted as a reduced-form historical association. It captures the combined influence of multiple long-run channels through which historical institutions may shape contemporary political preferences. These channels may include differences in administrative practices, legal traditions, patterns of political socialisation, historical experiences with local self-government, and the long-run development of institutional trust. The empirical strategy does not attempt to disentangle or separately identify these mechanisms. Instead, it assesses whether the overall imprint of historical institutional exposure remains detectable in present-day electoral outcomes.

Several assumptions underlie this interpretation. Historical imperial borders are assumed to be exogenous with respect to contemporary political preferences, conditional on country fixed effects and observable district characteristics. Given that these borders were established long before the emergence of modern mass politics, electoral competition, and European integration, this assumption is plausible but cannot

be tested directly. The analysis further assumes that unobserved district-level factors influencing contemporary voting behaviour are not systematically correlated with historical imperial affiliation once national contexts are accounted for.

Despite these strengths, the empirical approach has important limitations. Unobserved factors such as cultural norms, informal institutions, historical migration patterns, or region-specific identities may continue to influence political preferences and are difficult to measure directly at the district level. In addition, the cross-sectional nature of the data precludes the analysis of dynamic adjustment processes or the evolution of political preferences over time. As a result, the estimated relationships should not be interpreted as definitive causal effects but rather as robust historical correlations consistent with theories of long-run institutional persistence.

Taken together, the identification strategy combines historically grounded variation, institutional controls through fixed effects, and flexible specifications that allow for cross-country heterogeneity. This integrated approach provides a coherent framework for assessing whether historical imperial legacies remain relevant for contemporary political alignment, while remaining transparent about the assumptions and limitations inherent in observational analyses of historical persistence.

5 Estimation Results

Table 1. Effect of Austro-Hungarian Legacy on Pro-EU Voting (Baseline: Poland)

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-value	p-value
Austro-Hungarian (AH)	-7.844	1.245	-6.300	0.000 ***
Romania (dummy)	+12.998	4.002	3.247	0.001 **
Slovakia (dummy)	+15.372	1.658	9.295	0.000 ***
Ukraine (dummy)	-1.546	4.279	-0.361	0.718 (ns)
AH × Romania	+5.859	3.232	1.812	0.070 *
AH × Ukraine	-2.710	2.687	-1.008	0.314 (ns)
Population	0.000000032	0.000000009	0.972	0.333
Income per capita	0.002816	0.001283	2.393	0.025 **
Turnout	9.405	3.681	2.691	0.008 ***

Model Summary Statistic

Observations	483
R ²	0.642

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

Table 2. Effect of Austro-Hungarian Legacy on Pro-EU Voting (No Country Interactions)

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-value	p-value
Austro-Hungarian (AH)	-7.610	1.210	-6.290	0.000 ***
Romania (dummy)	+13.020	3.970	3.280	0.001 **
Slovakia (dummy)	+15.410	1.640	9.390	0.000 ***
Ukraine (dummy)	-2.732	4.216	-0.648	0.517 (ns)
Population	-0.000002	0.000004	-0.577	0.564 (ns)
Income per capita	+0.009600	0.003700	2.626	0.009 **
Turnout	+0.486	0.087	5.587	0.000 ***
Model Summary Statistic				
Observations		483		
R ²		0.637		

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

Using Poland as the base category serves purely as a normalisation choice that facilitates the interpretation of cross-country coefficients. In this specification, country dummy variables measure the average difference in pro-EU vote shares relative to a consistent reference point, while the Austro-Hungarian (AH) coefficient captures within-country historical differences net of broader cross-national variation. This setup ensures that comparisons across countries remain interpretable without implying that Poland represents a substantive benchmark.

The estimated coefficient on the Austro-Hungarian indicator is negative, precisely estimated, and highly statistically significant. Specifically, the coefficient of -7.844 ($p < 0.01$) implies that, within Poland, districts that historically belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire exhibit, on average, a 7.8 percentage point lower vote share for pro-European parties compared to non-AH districts, holding population size, income per capita, and turnout constant. Given typical district-level pro-EU vote shares, this represents a substantively large effect, indicating that historical institutional affiliation remains politically meaningful even after controlling for contemporary socioeconomic conditions.

The country dummy coefficients indicate substantial differences in baseline levels of pro-European support across national contexts. Relative to Poland, districts in Romania

display a 12.998 percentage point higher pro-EU vote share ($p = 0.001$), while districts in Slovakia exhibit an even larger difference of 15.372 percentage points ($p < 0.01$). These large and statistically robust coefficients reflect broad country-level differences in political environments, party systems, and integration trajectories, rather than the effect of historical Austro-Hungarian affiliation itself. By contrast, the coefficient for Ukraine is negative (-1.546) and statistically insignificant ($p = 0.718$), suggesting that average pro-EU support in Ukrainian districts does not differ systematically from the Polish reference category once other covariates are taken into account.

Interaction terms reveal important heterogeneity in the historical Austro-Hungarian effect across countries. The interaction between AH affiliation and Romania is positive ($+5.859$) and marginally statistically significant ($p = 0.070$), indicating that the negative AH effect observed in Poland is substantially attenuated in the Romanian context. In substantive terms, this suggests that while Austro-Hungarian affiliation is associated with lower pro-EU support in Poland, the same historical affiliation does not translate into lower support in Romania and may even be associated with comparatively higher pro-European voting. In contrast, the interaction between AH affiliation and Ukraine is negative (-2.710) and statistically insignificant ($p = 0.314$), indicating that the historical divide between AH and non-AH districts operates similarly to the Polish baseline in Ukraine.

Turning to the control variables, income per capita exhibits a positive and statistically significant coefficient of 0.002816 ($p = 0.025$), indicating that economically more prosperous districts tend to display higher support for pro-European parties. Although modest in magnitude, this effect is consistent with theoretical expectations linking economic development to openness and support for European integration. Electoral turnout shows a large and highly significant positive coefficient of 9.405 ($p < 0.01$), implying that districts with higher political participation systematically exhibit substantially stronger pro-EU voting outcomes. Population size, by contrast, has a very small and statistically insignificant coefficient, suggesting that differences in district scale do not independently drive pro-European support once economic conditions and mobilisation are accounted for.

Taken together, the baseline model with Poland as the reference category provides a coherent comparative framework for interpreting historical and contemporary influences on pro-EU voting across multiple countries. The results highlight (i) a large and robust negative historical effect within the Polish context, (ii) pronounced cross-country differences in baseline levels of pro-European support, and (iii) meaningful heterogeneity in how the Austro-Hungarian legacy manifests across national political environments.

6 Robustness check

Table 3. Effect of Austro-Hungarian Legacy on Pro-EU Voting – Country-Specific Models

Panel A. Regression coefficients

Variable	Poland (1)	Ukraine (2)	Romania (3)
Austro-Hungarian (AH)	-8.352*** (1.247)	-11.662*** (2.320)	-2.199 (3.104)
Population	0.000024*** (0.000005)	-0.000009* (0.000005)	-0.000007 (0.000005)
Income per capita	0.00839 (0.00915)	-0.00177 (0.00343)	0.0180** (0.00723)
Turnout	0.282** (0.123)	-0.013 (0.088)	0.084** (0.034)
Constant	2.502 (6.790)	48.932 (8.631)	-10.650 (12.307)

Panel B. Model fit

Statistic	Poland (1)	Ukraine (2)	Romania (3)
R ²	0.217	0.222	0.128
Adj. R ²	0.200	0.204	0.034
Observations	187	175	42

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

To assess the robustness of the Austro-Hungarian (AH) legacy across national contexts, separate country-specific regressions are estimated for Poland, Ukraine, and Romania. Slovakia is excluded from this exercise because all Slovak districts historically belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, leaving no within-country variation in historical affiliation. Estimating country-specific models allows the AH effect to vary freely across institutional environments and avoids imposing homogeneity across countries.

Table 2 reports the estimated coefficients and standard errors for each country, together with model fit statistics.

In Poland, the coefficient on the Austro-Hungarian indicator is -8.352 and statistically significant at the 1% level ($p < 0.001$). This estimate implies that, holding population size, income per capita, and turnout constant, districts with Austro-Hungarian heritage exhibit on average 8.35 percentage points lower support for pro-European parties compared to non-AH districts. The magnitude of the coefficient is very similar to that obtained in the pooled baseline specification, suggesting that the negative AH effect in Poland is driven by within-country historical variation rather than cross-country differences. Among the control variables, turnout shows a positive and statistically significant association with pro-EU voting (coefficient 0.282 , $p < 0.05$), while income per capita and population are not statistically significant. The model explains around 21.7% of the cross-district variation in pro-EU vote shares ($R^2 = 0.217$).

In Ukraine, the estimated AH coefficient is even larger in absolute terms, equal to -11.662 , and is also statistically significant at the 1% level ($p < 0.001$). This indicates that historically Austro-Hungarian districts in Ukraine are associated with, on average, 11.7 percentage points lower pro-EU support relative to non-AH districts, conditional on district characteristics. Although the political and institutional context differs substantially from Poland, the persistence of a negative and sizeable AH coefficient suggests that historical affiliation continues to be associated with electoral behaviour. Population size enters with a small negative coefficient that is marginally significant at the 10% level, while income per capita and turnout are statistically insignificant. The explanatory power of the model ($R^2 = 0.222$) is comparable to that of the Polish specification.

In Romania, by contrast, the Austro-Hungarian coefficient is -2.199 and statistically insignificant ($p > 0.1$), indicating no systematic difference in pro-EU voting between AH and non-AH districts. Instead, contemporary factors appear more relevant: income per capita is positively and significantly associated with pro-EU support (coefficient 0.018 , $p < 0.05$), and turnout also exhibits a positive and statistically significant relationship (coefficient 0.084 , $p < 0.05$). The lower explanatory power of the Romanian model ($R^2 = 0.128$) should be interpreted with caution, given the very small sample size for Romania (only 42 districts), which limits statistical power and the precision of the estimated coefficients.

Taken together, the country-specific regressions confirm that the Austro-Hungarian legacy is robust but highly heterogeneous across countries. The negative and statistically significant coefficients in Poland and Ukraine provide consistent evidence that historical affiliation remains associated with contemporary electoral behaviour within these countries. In Romania, however, the absence of a significant AH effect should be interpreted cautiously in light of the limited number of observations. These findings reinforce the conclusion that historical institutional legacies do not operate uniformly across national contexts but interact with country-specific political and economic trajectories.

7 Discussion

This thesis aimed to assess whether historical affiliation with the Austro-Hungarian Empire is associated with contemporary support for pro-European political parties and whether this relationship is consistent across different national contexts. The empirical results provide a clear but non-trivial answer to this research question. Historical Austro-Hungarian affiliation is indeed related to electoral behaviour; however, the direction and significance of this effect vary substantially across countries and, in the key case of Poland, are negative.

In the baseline specification, where Poland serves as the reference country, the coefficient on the Austro-Hungarian indicator is negative and statistically significant. This implies that, within Poland, districts historically governed by the Habsburg Empire exhibit lower levels of support for pro-European parties compared to non-Habsburg districts. This result remains robust after controlling for income per capita, voter turnout, and population size, indicating that the observed association cannot be explained solely by contemporary socioeconomic differences or variation in political mobilisation.

This finding directly addresses the core research question. It simultaneously challenges a simplified expectation derived from the existing literature, according to which institutional advantages associated with Austro-Hungarian rule should mechanically translate into stronger pro-European orientations. Previous studies, most notably Becker et al. (2016), document that former Habsburg regions display higher institutional trust and stronger local governance. The results of this thesis demonstrate, however, that electoral behaviour represents a more indirect and context-dependent outcome. While historical institutional differences may persist, they do not necessarily manifest themselves in higher electoral support for pro-European parties, nor do they do so in a uniform direction.

The cross-country analysis further reinforces this interpretation. The interaction terms indicate that the negative Austro-Hungarian effect observed in Poland is substantially

weaker in Romania and does not appear in Ukraine. This heterogeneity suggests that the political expression of historical legacies is mediated by national political environments, party systems, and the framing of European integration within each country.

Consequently, Austro-Hungarian affiliation does not generate a universal electoral pattern; instead, its effect depends on how historical institutions have been reinterpreted and embedded within post-imperial political trajectories.

At the same time, the negative sign of the Austro-Hungarian effect in Poland raises an important question regarding the mechanisms through which historical legacies translate into contemporary electoral outcomes. One potential explanation lies in the distinction between institutional attitudes and electoral behaviour. While previous research shows that former Habsburg regions tend to display higher institutional trust, voting for explicitly pro-European parties depends not only on abstract preferences for institutional quality, but also on how European integration is framed within domestic political competition. In the Polish context, pro-European parties are often associated with specific political elites, urban constituencies, or contested reform agendas, which may limit their appeal in historically distinct regions despite relatively high levels of institutional trust.

A second potential mechanism relates to post-imperial nation-building and regional identity formation. Former Austro-Hungarian territories were incorporated into the Polish state alongside regions shaped by different imperial legacies. The political integration of these regions involved deliberate state-building efforts that may have reshaped local political identities. As a result, historical distinctiveness may persist in forms that do not align straightforwardly with contemporary pro-European party platforms, even if underlying institutional norms remain relatively strong.

Third, the results are consistent with the possibility that regions with historically stronger local governance traditions respond differently to European integration. Rather than uniformly supporting supranational political integration, such regions may be more sensitive to perceived centralisation or loss of local autonomy, leading to more sceptical electoral responses when European integration is framed as transferring authority away from local or national institutions.

Finally, the findings suggest that historical institutional legacies interact with contemporary political narratives, rather than mechanically determining electoral outcomes. Where European integration is framed as a continuation of democratic reform and institutional strengthening, historical legacies may reinforce pro-European support. Where integration is politicised along lines of elite conflict, sovereignty concerns, or cultural identity, the same historical legacies may generate different, or even opposite, electoral responses.

The behaviour of the control variables supports this interpretation. Income per capita and voter turnout are both positively and significantly associated with support for pro-European parties, in line with established arguments linking economic development and

civic engagement to pro-integration political preferences. The persistence of the negative Austro-Hungarian coefficient after accounting for these factors indicates that the historical effect is not simply a proxy for economic conditions or political participation, but reflects deeper differences in political orientation shaped by historical experience.

From a broader perspective, these findings contribute to the literature on historical persistence by showing that well-documented institutional legacies do not necessarily produce straightforward or predictable political outcomes. Electoral support for pro-European parties is sensitive not only to inherited institutional structures, but also to contemporary political narratives and national contexts. The results therefore highlight the importance of distinguishing between institutional attitudes and electoral behaviour when assessing the political consequences of historical legacies.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the binary classification of Austro-Hungarian affiliation does not capture variation in the intensity or duration of imperial rule. Second, the use of aggregated electoral data prevents direct observation of individual-level attitudes and mechanisms. Third, the analysis focuses on a single electoral period, which limits insight into the dynamics of historical effects over time. Future research could address these limitations by combining historical indicators with individual-level survey data or by extending the analysis to multiple electoral cycles to better understand how historical institutions continue to shape political behaviour.

An important insight emerging from the results is the distinction between institutional attitudes and electoral behaviour, which is central for interpreting the observed negative Austro-Hungarian effect in some contexts. Much of the existing literature on historical persistence focuses on outcomes such as trust in public institutions, quality of local governance, or support for democratic norms. These dimensions capture relatively abstract and general orientations toward the state and political order. Electoral outcomes, by contrast, represent a more indirect and mediated expression of political preferences.

Support for European integration at the level of attitudes does not automatically translate into electoral support for pro-European political parties. Voting behaviour is shaped not only by underlying preferences but also by party competition, political narratives, strategic considerations, and the symbolic meanings attached to political labels. In this sense, voting for a pro-European party reflects a joint outcome of institutional attitudes and the structure of domestic political competition.

This distinction is particularly relevant in politically polarised environments. In such contexts, pro-European parties may be associated with specific political elites, reform agendas, or social groups, rather than with European integration as a broad institutional project. As a result, voters who hold relatively positive views toward institutions or governance quality may still refrain from supporting explicitly pro-European parties if

these parties are perceived as representing contested elites, urban interests, or polarising political positions.

Moreover, European integration itself can be framed in multiple and sometimes conflicting ways within domestic political discourse. The European Union may be perceived as an economic opportunity, a guarantor of institutional standards, or a source of external constraints on national sovereignty. In some political environments, it may also become an instrument in internal political conflicts, where support for or opposition to the EU serves as a proxy for broader ideological or identity-based divisions. These competing frames shape how institutional preferences are translated into electoral choices.

From this perspective, the negative Austro-Hungarian effect observed in Poland does not necessarily contradict evidence of stronger institutional legacies in former Habsburg regions. Instead, it suggests that historical institutional advantages may persist at the level of norms and governance practices without producing uniformly positive electoral support for pro-European parties. Electoral behaviour reflects how historical legacies interact with contemporary political narratives, party systems, and the framing of European integration within each national context.

Recognising the distinction between institutional attitudes and electoral outcomes, therefore, helps reconcile the findings of this thesis with the broader literature on historical persistence. It underscores that historical institutions do not mechanically determine voting behaviour, but rather shape the conditions under which political preferences are expressed through electoral competition.

8 Conclusion

This thesis examined whether historical affiliation with the Austro-Hungarian Empire is associated with contemporary support for pro-European political parties. Using district-level electoral data from Poland, Ukraine, Romania, and Slovakia, combined with historical administrative boundaries and a consistent set of socioeconomic controls, the analysis aimed to assess the political relevance of imperial legacies in modern Central and Eastern Europe. By focusing on electoral outcomes, the study extends existing work on historical persistence to a political domain that is highly salient yet inherently context-dependent.

The results provide a clear and substantive answer to the research question. Historical Austro-Hungarian affiliation is related to present-day electoral behaviour, but this relationship is heterogeneous across countries and, in the key case of Poland, negative. Within Poland, districts with Austro-Hungarian heritage exhibit significantly lower support for pro-European parties compared to non-Habsburg regions, even after controlling for income per capita, voter turnout, and population size. In Romania, the

estimated effect is considerably weaker, while in Ukraine it is not statistically detectable. These findings underscore that historical legacies do not produce uniform political outcomes, even when similar imperial boundaries are considered.

A central implication of the analysis is that electoral support for pro-European parties should not be interpreted as a direct or mechanical reflection of inherited institutional quality. While prior research documents persistent advantages of former Habsburg regions in terms of trust and governance, this thesis demonstrates that such institutional legacies can translate into political preferences in complex and sometimes unexpected ways. Electoral behaviour appears to be shaped not only by long-run institutional structures, but also by how these structures interact with contemporary party systems, political narratives, and national trajectories of European integration.

The cross-country comparison highlights the importance of national context in mediating historical effects. The fact that a negative Austro-Hungarian association emerges in Poland but not in Ukraine or Romania suggests that historical institutions are filtered through distinct post-imperial experiences. This reinforces the broader insight that historical legacies persist not as fixed determinants, but as background conditions whose political relevance depends on subsequent institutional development and political competition.

Beyond its substantive findings, the thesis contributes methodologically by demonstrating the value of combining historical boundary data with fine-grained electoral information across multiple countries. This approach allows for within-country comparisons that reduce the risk of conflating historical effects with national-level differences, while also highlighting the limits of cross-country generalisation. The results illustrate both the potential and the constraints of using historical borders as explanatory variables in contemporary political analysis.

Overall, the findings emphasize that historical institutions continue to matter for political behaviour in Europe, but that their influence is conditional, heterogeneous, and mediated by modern political environments. Rather than reinforcing a simple narrative in which Habsburg legacies uniformly foster pro-European orientations, the analysis shows that the political consequences of historical rule are more ambiguous and context-specific. This perspective advances a more nuanced understanding of historical persistence and underscores the importance of carefully distinguishing between institutional attitudes and electoral outcomes when evaluating the long-run effects of historical governance.

The findings of this thesis point to two particularly promising directions for future research that would substantially deepen our understanding of how historical institutional legacies translate into contemporary political behaviour.

The first direction concerns the identification of micro-level mechanisms underlying the observed historical associations. While this thesis relies on aggregated district-level electoral data, future research could combine historical exposure indicators with

individual-level survey data to distinguish more clearly between institutional attitudes, political values, and electoral choices. Such an approach would make it possible to assess whether voters in historically Austro-Hungarian regions differ in their trust in institutions, perceptions of European integration, or evaluations of political parties, and to examine how these attitudes are translated into voting behaviour. This would help clarify whether the observed electoral patterns reflect differences in underlying preferences or differences in how political preferences are expressed through party competition.

The second key direction involves extending the analysis to multiple electoral cycles in order to study the temporal dynamics of historical effects. While the present study focuses on a single, politically stable electoral period in each country, analysing repeated elections over time would allow researchers to assess whether the political relevance of historical legacies is stable, weakening, or changing as party systems evolve and European integration becomes more or less politicised. A dynamic perspective could also shed light on whether historical effects intensify during periods of political polarisation or diminish as new political cleavages emerge.

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