

## Abstract

Accession negotiations to the EU since 2004 brought significant changes to European enlargement customary law and exacerbated the reliance of the Commission on conditionality to impose its leverage on present and prospective member states. The subsequent development of European norms in the pre-accession phase was transposed onto current member states and led to the edification of a Normative Empire. This research reformulated the concept of Normative Empire while resting on factual and contemporary evidence. It investigated why the increasingly significant role in conditionality of the principle of independence of the judiciary contributed to the metamorphosis of the EU into a Normative Empire. The argumentation of this research rested on the study of Bulgaria, Croatia and Romania. In addition to their geographical kinship, these three cases share issues of rampant corruption, notably in the political and judicial structures, which remain the main obstacles to their accession or full membership. The analysis of the Commission's influence in judicial reforms during the pre and post-accession phases was supported by a thorough study of the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism and the progress reports from 2004 till present. In conclusion, the Commission's post-accession monitoring in Bulgaria and Romania and the accession negotiations in Croatia led to a redefinition of the European norms and strengthened the Commission's authority on normative matters. Moreover, the CVM assumes the possible establishment of an obligatory passage through a transitory phase for the future acceding members until recognised full compatibility with the European norms. The expansion of the EU's normative platform increased the potential for intervention of the Commission in state governance. The case of transposition of the principle of independence of the judiciary onto Bulgaria and Romania demonstrated the aspirations of the Commission to enlarge and administer the EU through the systematic use of norms.