

# Eastern enlargement 2.0? EU enlargement discourses in the European Parliament before and after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine

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## ABSTRACT

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, EU enlargement has gained more attention in the European Parliament (EP). To explore the change in rhetoric, the study identifies and compares EU enlargement discourses during two plenary session debates on EU enlargement in 2020 and 2024, differentiating them into normative, pragmatic, institutional and geopolitical. In theoretical terms, the study relies on discursive institutionalism which underscores actors' agency in driving institutional change. Methodologically, it is based on qualitative frame analysis. Our results demonstrate an increased salience of institutional and geopolitical discourses, specifically, the EU's integration capacity, the institutional reform of the EU and security of the European continent in light of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Overall, the study underscores the European Parliament's evolving role in the EU enlargement process.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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EU enlargement; discourse analysis; European Parliament; geopolitics

## Introduction

In 2022, the European Union underwent a significant shift in its approach to enlargement. Ukraine and Moldova were granted the candidate status, followed by Georgia in 2023, while negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia were opened after a lengthy deadlock. Anghel and Džankić (2023) compare the EU's decisions, sparked by new geopolitical imperatives amidst Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, with those made during the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s (489). They find that the enlargement policy is directed not solely to the widening of the EU but is meant to address the Union's fundamental security needs, serving as a tool for stabilization, peace-building and post-war reconstruction (Anghel and Džankić 2023, 491). This focus is reflected in the statements of EU institutions' leaders and heads of Member States, produced following the Russia's invasion. In this vein, the European Parliament (EP) called for a geopolitical awakening of the EU in its annual resolution on the implementation of the CFSP in

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2022. It stated that ‘ensuring the security, prosperity and leadership of the EU at global level is closely linked to consolidating the enlargement process, accelerating the accession of candidate and potential candidate countries ...’ (European Parliament 2023).

Notably, the role of the European Parliament in enlargement has been traditionally somewhat overlooked in scholarship, as the main actors driving the process are the European Commission with the policy initiation powers and the Council with the voting and decision-making capacities (De Angelis 2011). The granting of candidate status to Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia inevitably sparked a new wave of scholarly contributions on the process. They, however, mostly focus on the strategic significance of this process and its possible modalities, such as staged accession, rather than the roles and discourses of individual EU institutions (e.g. Anghel 2024; Jaćimović and Shaipova 2023; Karjalainen 2023)

Nonetheless, although 20 years ago during the Big Bang enlargement the EP’s influence was limited, this institution has begun to hold a more prominent position since the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009. In particular, it was the European Parliament that reignited the debate about the need to overcome the challenges of unanimity and voted to launch the process of amending the EU treaties (Anghel and Džankić 2023, 496).

Against this background, the gap in existing knowledge the article seeks to address deals with the lack of understanding of the European Parliament’s stance towards EU enlargement before and after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which served as a catalyst for accelerating the enlargement debate. Respectfully, our study aims to address this gap by classifying and comparing enlargement discourses within the EP during its ninth term (2019–2024), both before and after the full-scale invasion. It thus seeks to answer the following research question: *How have the EP enlargement discourses changed since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine as a major security crisis on the European continent?*

The focus of our study is on two plenary session debates: ‘Deepening EU integration in view of future enlargement’ on 28 February 2024, and ‘Assessment of the revised enlargement methodology proposal of the Commission’ on 10 February 2020 (European Parliament 2024, February 28; European Parliament 2020, February 10). The focus on these debates enables us to directly compare the EP’s discourses of enlargement prior to the outbreak of the war as the most acute security crisis in Europe since the World War II and thereafter.

In theoretical terms, the study relies on discursive institutionalism (DI) as framework, providing us with a robust ground conducting discourse analysis within an institutional setting. Unlike other approaches to studying institutions, DI is marked by an emphasis on the agency of sentient actors and a dynamic approach to institutional change. The reliance on this approach thus enables us to examine the discourses of Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) as integral components of larger institutional structures, such as the European Parliament and political groups. Consequently, our empirical application of the DI underscores the significance of this approach for understanding how ideas transcend institutional decision-making in turbulent geopolitical settings.

Empirically, the study is relevant, since it provides a dynamic insight into the EP’s stance towards enlargement, filling the gap originating from the predominance of sources dedicated to the European Commission and the Council in existing research. In so doing, it tests the applicability of the categorization of discourses on enlargement in

the EP, applied by Wunsch and Olszewska (2022) in the context of the 2004 ‘Big Bang’ enlargement, in the context of the rising debate on the EU’s geopolitical actorness and the geopolitical nature of the expected new wave of enlargement (e.g. Raik et al. 2024). It identifies challenges with using the framework (e.g. addresses overlaps between categories) and suggests supplementing it with the distinct category of geopolitical discourses to account for geopolitical pressures as the driving force of the new wave of enlargement.

Our findings indicate that the EP is expected to play a significant role in activating a pro-enlargement discourse post-2022, with geopolitics and external threats increasingly shaping its stance to enlargement. In 2024, we have observed an increase in discourses focused on the reform of the EU, the Union’s integration capacity, and specific policy areas such as agriculture and social policy. Furthermore, both in 2019 and 2024, the EU underscored its emphasis on the need for the candidate countries to comply with the accession criteria, excluding any prospects for ‘fast-track’ accession and concessions amidst the geopolitical imperative for EU widening. Though normative discourses remain marginal compared to other categories, in 2024, the European Parliament expressed a stronger commitment to candidate states, emphasizing value-based arguments.

### **Role of the European Parliament in the enlargement process**

The purpose of the EP is to embody the will of its voters, who hold the right to decide whether to admit new members into the Union or not. MEPs are elected through direct proportional representation, which reflects a diverse range of ideological and national perspectives in the EP (Aydın-Düzgüt 2015, 155). Respectively, as representatives of the electorate, the MEPs are obliged to fulfil the will of the constituencies (Viola 1998, 130). Studying plenary debates as a concrete record of ideas helps to obtain a comprehensive understanding of parliamentarians’ opinions on European integration (De Angelis 2011, 21, 25).

The EP also translates ‘the values, interests, policy choices of EU citizens into binding and non-binding instructions to the executive conducting European external action’ (Bajtay 2015, 10). The institution emphasizes the importance of democratic criteria and other conditionalities, addressing the issues of national minorities and democracy protection in its resolutions. For example, in 2016 and 2019, the EP voted for suspension of negotiations with Türkiye because of human rights violations, contributing to the enlargement discourse in the EU.

Officially, the EP gives its consent to the enlargement-related agreements and treaties, and delivers parliamentary reports and resolutions, contributing to the formation of the EU’s negotiation strategies. The institution also participates in the financial aspects of enlargement, namely, it co-decides with the Council on the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance and other financial instruments mentioned in 2.2 (Bajtay 2015). Another role fulfilled by the EP is monitoring during the accession process. The Committee on Foreign Affairs designates a general rapporteur and a standing rapporteur who are responsible for exchanging opinions with the European Commission (Türkeş-Kılıç 2020, 31). Thanks to the Lisbon Treaty of 2007, the influence of the EP increased, as the institution’s legislative and budgetary powers were expanded (Bajtay 2015).

Additionally, the EP serves as a vehicle for consultation with third parties, providing a public venue for partner countries' representatives to exchange ideas with EU policymakers. The institution engages broadly in parliamentary diplomacy, facilitating the activities of its inter-parliamentary delegations and pre-planned and *ad hoc* missions to third countries by individual MEPs, as demonstrated by the EP's parliamentary diplomacy after the Maidan Revolution in 2014 (Bajtay 2015, 16; Goinard 2020, 116–117). Furthermore, the plenary debates and resolutions such as the yearly progress reports provide valuable insights for candidate countries that may formulate their positions vis-a-vis the EU accordingly (Goinard, 115). According to De Angelis (2011), some candidate states have explored the ideas, highlighted in these sources and utilizes them in their rhetoric, when advocating for membership (20–21).

## Theoretical framework

In our research, we use discursive institutionalism (DI), as it provides a robust framework for conducting analysis within institutional settings (Schmidt 2008, 2014). For the purposes of this article, we understand discourse as the process of conveying ideas and the interactive process of exchanging ideas in two forms: coordinative and communicative (Schmidt 2008). The EU has 'the strongest of coordinative discourses, given its highly complex, semi-pluralist processes and quasi-federal structures', therefore we focus on exploring the change within the institution (Schmidt 2008, 11).

Discourses are formed in the institutional setting, which arises from the interplay of two mechanisms: 'background ideational abilities' and 'foreground discursive abilities' (Schmidt 2008, 3). We focus on the latter which are the abilities to critically engage in discussions and speak beyond the established rules. They are essential in driving institutional change, as MEPs attempt to think beyond their institutional constraints, challenge the pre-established notions, and provide new interpretations to the policy in light of turbulent geopolitical circumstances.

Unlike three other institutionalisms (historical, rational choice and sociological), the DI better explains change and the role of ideas that transcend 'politics as usual' in institutions that are not static but are instead constraining structures and enabling constructs of meaning. In Schmidt's words, going beyond 'politics as usual' involves investigating 'the role of ideas in constituting political action, the power of persuasion in political debate, the centrality of deliberation for democratic legitimation, the (re)construction of political interests and values, or the dynamics of change in history and culture' (Schmidt 2010, 2). Our research follows a similar approach: we examine ideas that extend beyond 'politics as usual' and build ground for future research aiming to explore how the intra-EP debate on EU enlargement drives the internal change of the institution and influences decision- and policy-making of the Commission and the European Council.

## Operationalization

Our categorization framework is grounded in the work of Wunsch and Olszewska (2022), who analyze political discourses on EU enlargement within the national parliaments of France, Germany, Hungary and Poland from 2004 to 2017. This study serves as the

foundation for our research, which, *inter alia*, tests the applicability of their framework in our context.

Wunsch and Olszewska identify three key types of discourses: normative (focused on the EU's soft power and moral responsibility toward candidate countries), pragmatic (centered around conditionality and using enlargement as a stabilizing tool) and institutional (emphasizing efficiency and state capacity) (Wunsch and Olszewska 2022). However, recognizing the potential limitations of this framework, such as its inability to capture all discourses present in the European Parliament, we expand on each of these categories during the research and coding process. Additionally, we introduce a new category – geopolitical discourse – which has become increasingly significant following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

## Methodology

Discourse analysis has featured prominently in the study of EU enlargement (Wunsch and Olszewska 2022, 922–923). Significant attention has been dedicated to discursive reasoning behind the 'Big Bang' accession (Sjursen 2002), enlargement as an issue of collective European identity (Stoeva and Hoppe 2011), rhetorical action (Schimmelfennig 2001), the role of the European Commission in Europeanisation and discourse building (Jones and Clark 2008), the EP debate regarding a privileged partnership with Türkiye (Türkeş-Kılıç 2020) and studies on citizens' opinions on enlargement (Dimitrova and Kortenska 2017). When analyzing debates in the EP, Belanger and Schimmelfennig (2021) noted the diminishing salience and increasing politicization of EU enlargement, while Bélanger and Schimmelfennig (2021) in their analysis of MEPs' discursive and voting patterns on enlargement discovered that there is a radicalization in the legislative behavior of both soft and hard Eurosceptics, as well as an increasing consolidation among Eurosceptics.

In our study, we utilize frame analysis which originates from the work of Goffman (1974). The goal of frame analysis is '*understanding how certain idea elements are linked together into packages of meaning*' (Creed 2002:37 in Crespy 2015, 107). According to Crespy, this approach offers a framework to analyze how discursive elements enable actors to construct meaning articulated around a broader idea (Crespy 2015, 107). Our main goal is to explore the substance of the debates and receive a better understanding of the perception of the EU enlargement process.

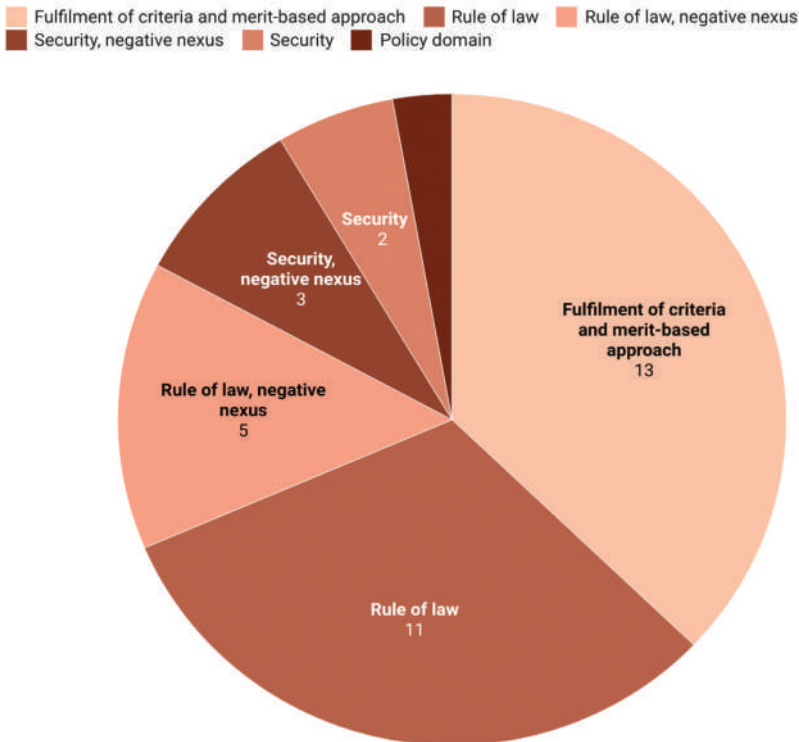
The subject of our research is two plenary session debates of the EP – before and after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. It is noteworthy that EU enlargement was discussed in EP plenary debates only three times between 2014 and 2022. In stark contrast, over 2 years, from February 2022 to February 2024, the topic was debated six times.

As for the debate after the full-scale invasion, we have decided to analyze the most recent one at the time of conducting research on 28 February 2024 — 'Deepening EU integration in view of future enlargement' (European Parliament 2024, February 28), in which the European Parliament expressed an interest to be more involved in enlargement matters. To zoom in on the discourses before the full-scale invasion, we chose the last plenary session before 24 February 2022 on 'Assessment of the revised enlargement methodology proposal of the Commission', which took place on 10 February 2020 and was conducted as a reaction to the new enlargement methodology adopted by the European Commission (European

Parliament 2020, February 10). We analyzed this specific plenary session as the previous one on enlargement was conducted in 2018 and dedicated exclusively to the question of the Western Balkans, while we in our analysis focus on enlargement policy as a whole.

To understand how enlargement discourses evolved, we categorized them into four main types. First, we translated the speeches into English with the help of the neural machine translation service DeepL Translator. Then, we coded the discourses into one of the four categories: normative, pragmatic, institutional and geopolitical. Then, we inductively sorted the data into units of meaning, identified patterns and devised frames for each category. We then coded the discourses using these frames with NVivo software. Furthermore, we coded language under specific categories and frames when MEPs explicitly addressed the issues. We did not code subtle hints, as the meaning could have been lost in the peculiarities of the language. Throughout the process, we continuously adapted our frame structure, enhancing the interpretative nature of our research. Refer to Annex 1 to see the Codebook. We have incorporated the geopolitical discourse and developed subcategories that add nuance to earlier conceptualization and operationalization efforts in EU enlargement research.

### Pragmatic Discourses 2020



**Pie chart 1.** The share of subcategories of pragmatic discourses in 2020.

## Discussion

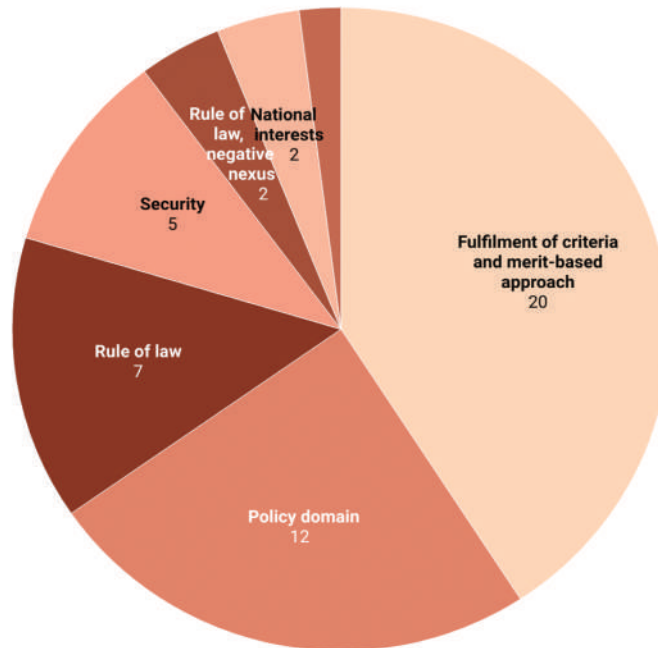
### Pragmatic discourses

Pragmatic discourses dominated the debates in 2020 and 2024 (see pie charts 1 and 2 below). According to Economides (2020), the status quo in 2020 was largely shaped to the phenomenon of ‘enlargement resistance’ which replaced ‘enlargement fatigue’ (3). This phenomenon can be, *inter alia*, attributed to Europe’s high levels of disintegration and fragmentation caused by the global financial crisis, the eurozone crisis and the refugee crisis (*ibid*). Such an unfavorable dynamic fueled the rise of right-wing and left-wing populism, leading to anti-elite rhetoric and undermining the EU’s legitimacy. These developments have been captured in the 2016 EU Global Strategy (EUGS), using the concept of ‘principled pragmatism’ to point the need for the EU to find balance between pragmatic and normative considerations in its foreign policy (Economides 2020, 3; European Union External Action Service 2016).

In 2024, although the candidate status was granted to Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia largely because of geopolitical considerations (Raik et al. 2024), the focus has nevertheless remained on the candidate states’ achievements and adherence to the Copenhagen criteria, alongside other EU requirements. Upon opening the negotiations with Ukraine, Hadja Lahbib, Minister of Foreign and European Affairs of Belgium, stated, ‘Ukraine’s determination to undertake the necessary reforms has been truly impressive’ (European Council 2024).

### Pragmatic Discourses 2024

Fulfilment of criteria and merit-based approach
  Policy domain
  Rule of law
  Security
   
 Rule of law, negative nexus
  National interests
  Security, negative nexus



Pie chart 2. The share of subcategories of pragmatic discourses in 2024.

We divided pragmatic discourses into the following sub-categories: fulfilment of criteria and merit-based approach, the rule of law, security, policy domains and national interests. A comparative overview of pragmatic discourses is presented in [Table 1](#):

### *Merit-based approach and the fulfillment of Copenhagen criteria*

Merit-based criteria rely on the premise that the countries are assessed according to their own merit and progress which are determined by the country's fulfilment of the objective conditionality ([European Commission, 2018](#); [European Commission 2020](#)). Focusing on 'concrete steps' and 'no major concessions' was broadly supported by MEPs in 2020: 'We must remain consistent in insisting that the criteria are met and that one set of rules applies to all' ([Tomašić 2020](#)). Similarly, according to [Auštrevičius \(2020\)](#) from Renew: 'The candidate countries should reach the membership league with their hard work and no major concessions', underlining the importance of the process being contingent on the actual reforms in candidate states.

In 2024, the focus on the merit-based approach remained consistent in the debates of the MEPs. Despite concerns about possible concessions for Ukraine, the idea of the 'fast-track accession' was instantly buried and not supported by MEPs ([Van Overstraeten, Strupczewski, and Blenkinsop 2022](#)). [López Aguilar \(2024\)](#) from S&D argued that 'there can be no room for maneuver for newcomers in terms of variations, breakdowns or breaks regarding the European idea of democracy and a liberal drift', while [Millán Mon \(2024\)](#) from PPE claimed that 'the accession criteria must be met, without shortcuts'.

### *The rule of law*

In 2020, the Commission reiterated the focus on fundamentals and the rule of law and adopted a renewed methodology for enlargement. The Commission called for a more credible process with a stronger focus on fundamental reforms in the fields of rule of law, public administration, economy and strengthening of the democratic institutions ([European Commission \(2020\)](#), which is reflected in the debates of 2020. [Ramona Strugariu \(2020\)](#), Renew, was 'pleased that the new methodology gives a central place to the rule of law and fundamental rights' and [Tineke Strik \(2020\)](#), the Verts affirmed that '(such) flexibility ... enables the EU to more effectively support the candidate countries'.

However, a smaller part of MEPs referred to the state of the rule of law in candidate countries as a reason to exercise caution regarding enlargement. Some suggested a period of reflection because 'these rules are bent regularly by some countries' ([Daly 2020](#), the Left). Representatives of the ID group demonstrated their dissatisfaction with a mere presence of enlargement debate and refer to 'unbridgeable gaps' in the Western Balkan countries ([Anna Bonfrisco 2020](#), ID).

In 2024, there used to be less emphasis on the rule of law as a core criterion, in comparison with 2020. Nonetheless, there was still a broad understanding that EU enlargement policy is a powerful tool to promote democracy and the rule of law: 'the candidate countries really have to make the reforms to meet the Copenhagen criteria, in particular, respect for the fundamental values and ... the rule of law' ([Pereira 2024](#), S&D).

What is more, criticism of the rule of law in the 2024 debates was voiced to advocate for establishing clearer conditionalities and assisting candidate countries and not to halt the enlargement, as it was in 2020. [Katalin Cseh \(2024\)](#), Renew, said, 'The enforcement of the rule of law reforms have not been adequate ... So, we need transparent and firm criteria on the rule of law front'.

**Table 1.** Comparative overview of pragmatic discourses.

Sub-category	2020	2024
Fulfilment of criteria and merit-based approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-objective criteria</li> <li>-concrete steps of the candidate states</li> <li>-hard work and no major concessions;</li> <li>-funding conditional on concrete steps towards reform.</li> <li>-'brings us together'</li> <li>-central place of methodology is given to rule of law</li> <li>-the irreversibility of the rule of law as the cornerstone of the process</li> <li>-rule of law as a motivation to exercise caution</li> <li>-'unbridgeable gaps'</li> <li>-security of the continent is at stake</li> <li>-the level of security is unsatisfactory</li> <li>-no clusters dealing with terrorism or other internal security issues</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-no 'fast-track accession'</li> <li>-negotiations progress depends on the reforms, merit</li> <li>-accession criteria must be met</li> <li>-each country is treated according to its progress, 'without shortcuts'</li> <li>-rule of law as advocacy for clearer conditionalities</li> </ul>
Rule of law		
Rule of law, negative nexus		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-inadequate enforcement of rule of law reforms</li> </ul>
Security		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-enlargement is an investment in stability and security of the EU</li> <li>-security of the Western Balkans</li> <li>-the Eastern Partnership countries are linked to the stability and security of the EU</li> <li>-compromising European security</li> <li>-agriculture</li> <li>-social policy</li> <li>-financial programming and monitoring</li> <li>-rights of national minorities in the North Macedonia</li> </ul>
Policy domains		
National interests	-	

Source: authors' own elaboration.

## **Security**

In 2020, EP's enlargement discourse contained both positive and negative assessments of the relationship between enlargement and security. On the one hand, two representatives from PPE and Renew claimed that Western Balkans accession is crucial for the security of the European continent. For example, Kinga Gál (2020) PPE suggested that 'any action . . . to promote successful enlargement is essential because the future of the Western Balkans, the security of our continent and the credibility of the EU are at stake'. On the other hand, three representatives from the ID group argued that the level of security in the candidate countries is below the EU security level and needs more discussion: 'there are no clusters dealing with issues such as security, terrorism, illegal immigration and posted workers' (Jérôme Rivièrè 2020, ID).

The issue of security and stability of the Union was mentioned more frequently in 2024 than in 2020. The majority of MEPs highlighted a positive role of enlargement policy in fostering security in the Union: 'The stability, security . . . of the countries of the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership and neighbourhood are inextricably linked to the stability and security of our Union' (Vladimír Bilčík 2024, the PPE). There was only one negative security-related reference, which represented rather as an exception than the rule, in comparison with 2020 debates. Jean-Lin Lacapelle (2024), ID stated that enlargements 'compromise the security of our nations and compatriots'.

## **Policy domains**

In 2020, there was only one reference to a policy domain. Ilhan Kyuchyuk (2020), Renew, expressed the willingness to integrate candidate states at earlier stages in key policies, like 'the Green Deal, digital policies and connectivity'. In 2024, the MEPs referred more to specific policy domains, such as agriculture, social policy, financial policies and monitoring. The MEPs raised their concerns regarding the impact of enlargement on European farmers and the Cohesion Policy (Emmanuel Maurel 2024, the Left), emphasized the importance of compliance with the Union's social standards and raised concerns regarding possible social and wage dumping (Gabriele Bischoff 2024, S&D). Jarosław Duda (2024), PPE, called for financial support for reforms ' . . . (which) requires such programming . . . that it is impossible to waste, corrupt or misuse these funds'.

## **National interests**

Another sub-category that catches attention is the presence of national interests during the plenary debates in 2024, which was not present in 2020. We coded statements under national interests when the MEPs explicitly referred to the issues from their country's national perspectives. The claims were addressed by two Bulgarian MEPs concerning the Bulgarian minority living in North Macedonia, who advocated for 'the protection of the rights and legitimate interests of the local Macedonian citizens with Bulgarian national identity' (Dzhambazki 2024, ECR).

## **Normative discourses**



Economides (2020) argues that in 2020, there was a shift away from 'normative' and 'transformative power' towards more pragmatic goals (see pie charts 3 and 4 below). The 2016 foreign policy concept of 'principled pragmatism' underscored the equal

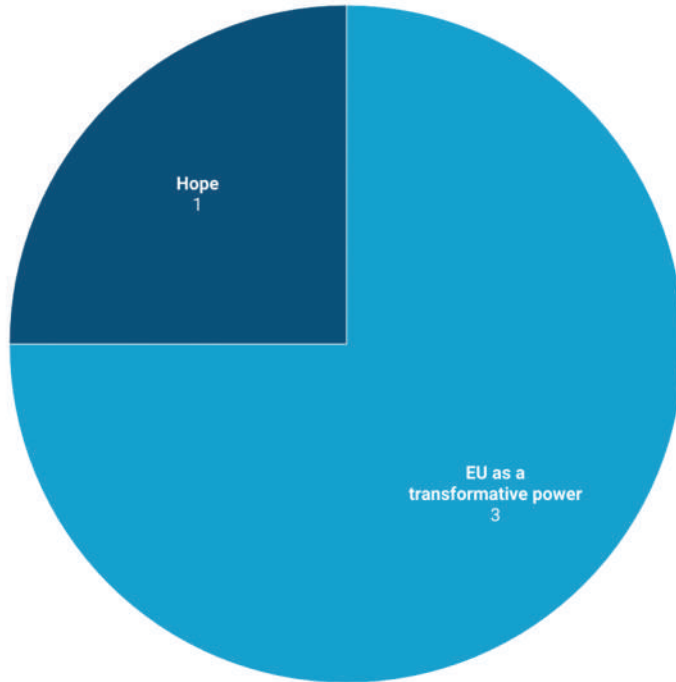
**Table 2.** Comparative overview of normative discourses.

Sub-category	2020	2024
Hope	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-hopes of the young people</li> <li>-delivery on European aspirations</li> <li>-EU promotes democracy, the rule of law, peace and prosperity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-political hope</li> <li>-hope for many</li> <li>-EU brings peace and democracy</li> <li>-EU brings economic development and prosperity</li> <li>-live up to the promise of Europe</li> <li>-stay united</li> <li>-not letting the citizens down</li> <li>-enlargement is the right of the people</li> </ul>
EU as a transformative power		
EU as a strong partner	-	




Source: authors' own elaboration

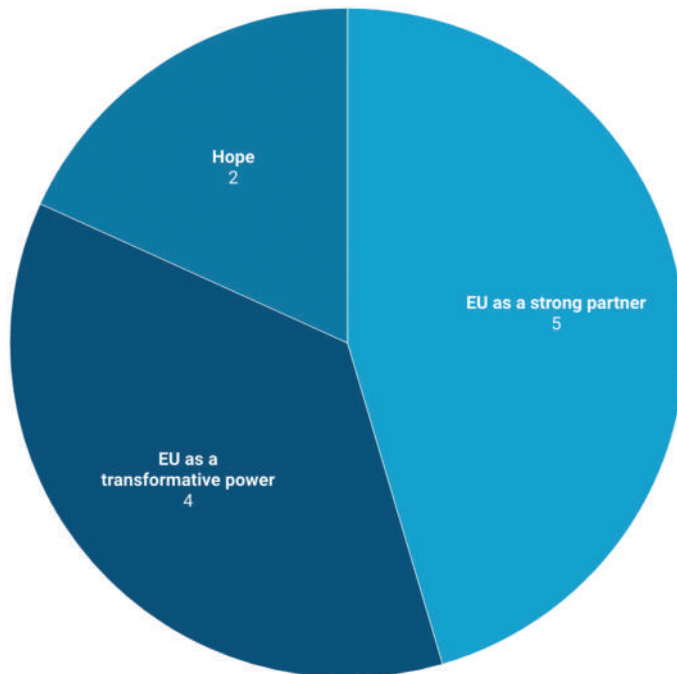
### Normative Discourses 2020

 EU as a transformative power  Hope



### Normative Discourses 2024

 EU as a strong partner  EU as a transformative power  Hope



**Pie chart 3.** The share of subcategories of normative discourses in 2020.

importance of interests and values for the EU, allowing for a reintroduction of ‘transformative power’ discourse in a practical context (European Union External Action Service 2016). Similarly to Economides, we observe that normative discourses were the least referenced in the 2020 debate.

In 2024, there was a renewed embrace of normative discourses within the EU. Charles Michel, as the head of the European Council, highlighted that the ‘big-bang enlargement’ *‘has given us more impact in promoting our democratic values and environmental standards’* (Michel 2024). For an overview of normative discourses in 2020 and 2024, please refer to [Table 2](#).

### **Hope**

In 2020, several MEPs cited the hope of the candidate countries as one of the vital reasons for enlargement. For example, when advocating for reform support, Andreas Schieder (2020) S&D mentioned the hope in Europe young people in the Balkans have. MEPs also stressed the need to involve societies of candidate countries during the enlargement negotiations, calling to ‘deliver on the European aspirations of the people of the Western Balkans’ (Ilhan Kyuchyuk 2020, Renew). By 2024, Vladimír Bilčík (2024), PPE, reaffirmed this sentiment, saying that ‘enlargement ... is also a political hope. We must succeed in Ukraine, in Moldova, in Georgia and in the Western Balkans’.

### **EU as a transformative power**

A considerable share of normative discourses in 2020 and 2024 focused on the role of the EU as a transformative power. In 2020, enlargement was seen as one of the EU’s ‘most important tools and a cornerstone in promoting democracy, the rule of law, peace and prosperity’ (Isabel Santos 2020, S&D).

Similarly, in the 2024 debates, MEPs shared the same ideas and underscored the transformative potential of the EU: ‘Enlargement is a strategy for investing in peace, democracy, the rule of law and security’ (Gwendoline Delbos-Corfield 2024, the Verts). Additionally, MEPs also stated that ‘all the countries that have integrated into the European Union have developed economically at an accelerated rate since accession’ (Dacian Cioloş 2024, Renew).

### **EU as a strong partner**

In 2024, we found it logical to classify several discourses under ‘EU as a strong partner’ subcategory. For instance, Charles Goerens (2024) from Renew urged his fellow MEPs to ‘put [themselves] in the shoes of Ukraine or Moldova ... Both candidates for EU membership know that, on their own, they are lost ... They need strong, united partners capable of taking timely decisions’. It appears that the EU in this context must act as a ‘savior’ for the countries in its neighbourhood, as they cannot ‘survive’ without the support of strong EU partners. Additionally, there were a few more new ideas that are introduced by MEPs: ‘live up to the promise of Europe’ and ‘not letting the citizens of these countries down’ (Thijs Reuten 2024, S&D Group; Andrej; Kovachev 2024, PPE). Noteworthy is the words of Paulo Rangel (2024), PPE: ‘enlargement ... is also a right ... of the peoples of these countries’. This catches particular attention, as in 2020 enlargement was not referred to as ‘a right of the peoples’. This evolution in normative discourse indicates a shift in the EP’s discussions toward a more proactive role of the EU in its neighbourhood.



**Table 3.** Comparative overview of institutional discourses.

Sub-category	2020	2024
Greater role for the European Parliament	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– more involvement of the European Parliament in the accession process</li> <li>– the acknowledgment and implementation of Parliament's resolutions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– a strong Parliament and with majority decisions and fewer decisions in the Council</li> </ul>
Integration capacity	–	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– impact on the cohesion policy and the budget</li> <li>– impact on the Common Agricultural Policy</li> </ul>
The need for the reform of the EU	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– deepening of the Union;</li> <li>– EU as a 'house of disarray' in need of the reform</li> <li>– dependency on one Member State</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– stop the 'Orbanisation' of the Union</li> <li>– efficient European institutions</li> <li>– high decision-making capacity</li> <li>– greater flexibility</li> <li>– budgetary reforms</li> <li>– bridging clauses</li> <li>– decision-making is in good condition</li> <li>– federalisation of the Union</li> <li>– jeopardy to sovereignty</li> <li>– stronger states veto dominance</li> <li>– the one process will not be hijacked by the other</li> <li>– reforms must not become a pretext for putting the brakes on enlargement</li> </ul>
Opposition to the reform		
Reform is not a precondition for enlargement		
Contingency of enlargement on the reform	– without reform of the Union, enlargement will not even make sense	– institutional reform is a precondition for enlargement

Source: authors' own elaboration

**Institutional discourses**

In 2020, MEPs advocated for an enhanced role for the European Parliament, approving of the prospects for institutional reform within the EU. Back in 2017, the EP adopted a resolution calling for a comprehensive democratic reform of the Treaties, greater parliamentary powers, including a reduction in unanimity procedures in the Council and an extension of ordinary legislative procedures in foreign and defense matters, fiscal policy and social policy for the EP (European Parliament 2017). By 2024, discussions surrounding these reforms have intensified, drawing a wider array of opinions (see pie charts 5 and 6 below)

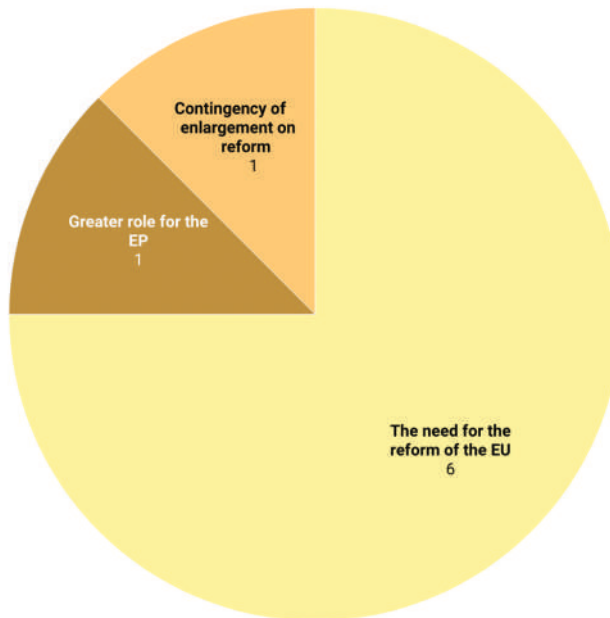
In our analysis, we identified the following subcategories: greater role of the EP, integration capacity, the need of the reform of the EU, opposition to the reform, reform is not a precondition for enlargement, and contingency of enlargement on the reform. To see the overview of institutional discourses with keywords, please refer to Table 3.

**A greater role for the EP**

One of the subcategories we identified is a greater role for the European Parliament. For instance, Željana Zovko (2020), PPE, stated that she expects ‘more involvement of the European Parliament in the accession process and the acknowledgement and implementation of Parliament’s resolutions’. Similarly, Andreas Schieder (2024), S&D claimed that effective decision-making processes in Europe with 30 or more members would be possible ‘with a strong Parliament and with majority decisions and fewer decisions in the Council’.

**Institutional Discourses 2020**

■ The need for the reform of the EU
 ■ Greater role for the EP
 ■ Contingency of enlargement on reform



**Pie chart 5.** The share of subcategories of institutional discourses in 2020.

**Reform of the EU and opposition to it**

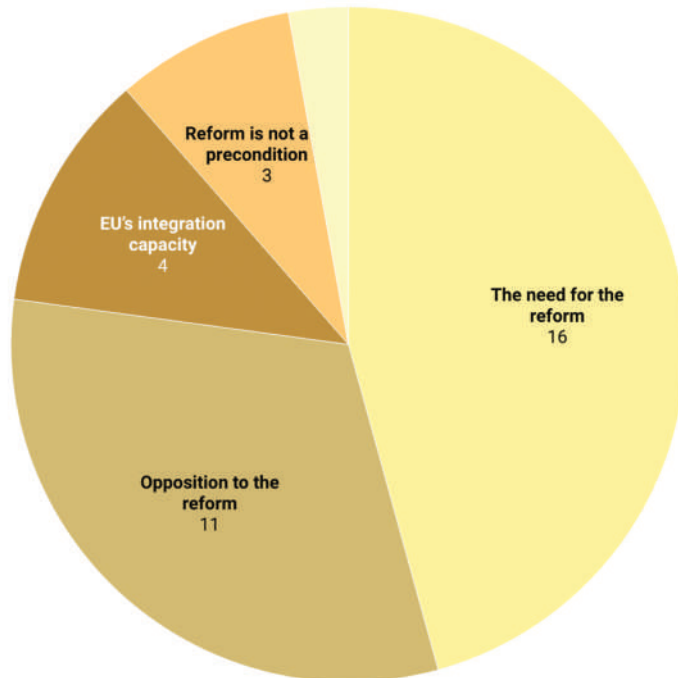
In 2020, most of the institutional discourses focused on EU reform, with widespread approval of these changes. MEPs emphasized the need to modify the unanimity rule, as this is no longer an option to ‘decide important matters, such as foreign policy’ (Domènec Ruiz Devesa 2020, S&D). Andrius Kubilius (2020), PPE, argued, ‘The whole process cannot depend on one or another EU Member State, which can block the whole enlargement process without any serious arguments’.

By 2024, the discussions on decision-making reform gained more prominence and became more diverse. Sandro Gozi (2024), Renew, believed, ‘A Union of 36, without reform, will be completely paralyzed’. Others argued that to ‘defend enlargement from “Orbanization” threats is to abandon the possibility to use the veto right during the negotiation process’ (Kubilius 2024, PPE).

Nevertheless, in 2024, more opposing arguments to the reform emerged. Some stated that reform is not essential for enlargement because “the bridging clauses exist ... [and] modification of the Treaties is not essential ... to make progress (Millán Mon 2024, PPE). Others equated reform with the federalization of the EU, raised issues of sovereignty and claimed that removing the right of veto ‘goes against universal suffrage’ (Jean-Lin Lacapelle 2024, ID). ‘The EU must be made up of independent sovereign Member States and not develop into a federation or a superpower’, said Pirkko Ruohonen-Lerner (2024),

**Institutional Discourses 2024**

■ The need for the reform   
 ■ Opposition to the reform   
 ■ EU’s integration capacity  
■ Reform is not a precondition   
 ■ Contingency of enlargement on reform



**Pie chart 6.** The share of subcategories of institutional discourses in 2024.

ECR. Other MEPs spoke about the negative consequences of the reform for smaller states such as Poland and Lithuania claiming that ‘two strongest states would retain the ability to veto’ (Krasnodębski 2024, ECR).

### ***Reform is not a precondition for enlargement***

In 2024, another subcategory of institutional discourse argues that enlargement progress should not be made contingent on institutional reform. For example, Miriam Lexmann (2024) from PPE stated, ‘I cannot agree with the one-sided narrative that assumes that future enlargement can only be successful if it is accompanied by changes to the basic treaties and the abolition of the veto in certain policies’. Similarly, Thijs Reuten (2024), representing the S&D Group suggested, ‘We have to ensure that the one process will not be hijacked by the other. We cannot have a situation where candidates have implemented all reforms, but we are not ready’. This perspective is crucial for candidate countries concerned that EU reform might be used as a pretext for delaying enlargement. Former Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba warns that such delays could lead to disillusionment among accession countries (Abramovych 2023).

### ***Contingency of enlargement on the reform***

Notwithstanding the above, some MEPs expressed a belief that the enlargement process should depend on institutional reform. This idea is, however, marginal, according to the plenary debates. This argument is raised only once during each debate. In 2020, Irena Joveva from Renew claimed, ‘It is, of course, true that without reform of the Union, enlargement will not even make sense’. Similarly, Antoni Comín i Oliveres (NI) in 2024 emphasized that ‘institutional reform of the Council’s decision-making system is a precondition for any enlargement’.

### ***Integration capacity of the European Union***

The last subcategory we identified in 2024 deals with the EU’s integration capacity. According to Börzel, Dimitrova, and Schimmelfennig (2017), integration capacity is ‘the ability of the EU to prepare non-members for membership ... and to preserve its functioning and cohesion once they join’ (157). Likewise, the discussions in the 2024 debates increasingly focused on enlargement’s impact on the functioning of the Union, the cohesion policy and financial aspects. There were voices suggesting, ‘There can be no enlargement without calculating its impact on the cohesion policy; on the constant budget, without own resources; on the agricultural policy’ (López Aguilar 2024, S&D).

### ***Geopolitical discourses***

Geopolitical discourses gained prominence in the EP’s rhetoric only after the start of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, although already the 2016 EU Global Strategy encouraged the pursuit of geopolitical goals by the EU, in particular through the concept of ‘principled pragmatism’ (Economides 2020, 16; European Union External Action Service 2016). In 2019, upon taking office, Ursula von der Leyen declared that she would lead the ‘geopolitical’ Commission and called for a comprehensive approach to security and defense, which was supported

by the EP's resolution of 2020 (European Parliament briefing (2020); European Parliament 2020).

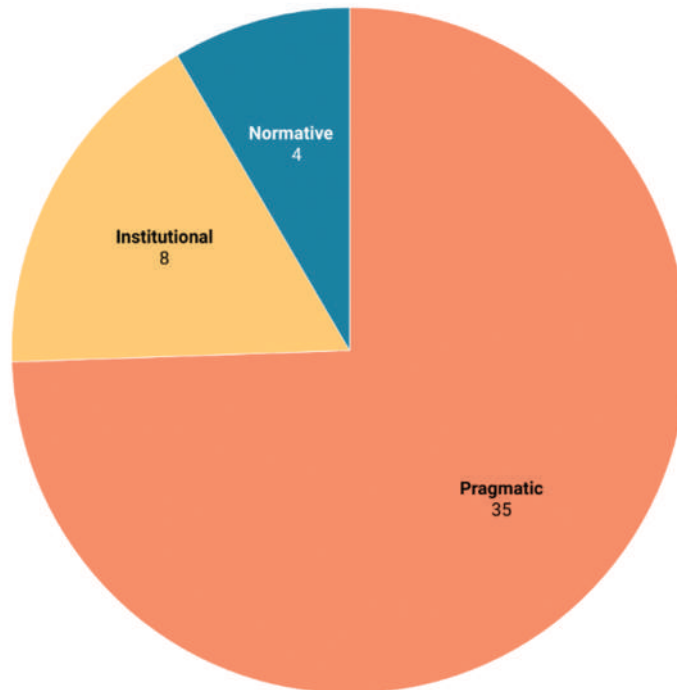
In 2022, Anghel and Džankić (2023) compared the modern enlargement policy to that of 20 years ago when it was used as a stabilization and security-building mechanism. European institutions have also repeatedly used the term 'geopolitical' in their policy documents (European Commission 2022; European Parliament 2023).

We coded references as geopolitical when they explicitly contained the words 'geopolitical', and 'geostrategic' or were connected with the references to Russia, the existential survival of the continent and the need to protect the Union against autocracy and instability. In total, we have identified 18 geopolitical references in 2024, whereas there were none in 2020. To see the overview of geopolitical discourses with keywords, please refer to Table 4.

We have found voices suggesting that the Union's security depends on how effectively the EU integrates neighbouring countries and that 'The enlargement of the Union is a geostrategic investment in stability, security ... prosperity for all of us' (Matjaž Nemeč 2024, S&D). Similarly, discourses profoundly focused on countering Russia's negative influence: 'Only by acting together ... we have a real chance to stop the imperialist, aggressive policies of Russia and Putin' as well as '[t]he call of history that came with Russia's tanks is a wake-up call across Europe' (Joachim Stanisław Brudziński 2024, ECR;

### Total Discourses 2020

 Pragmatic  Institutional  Normative



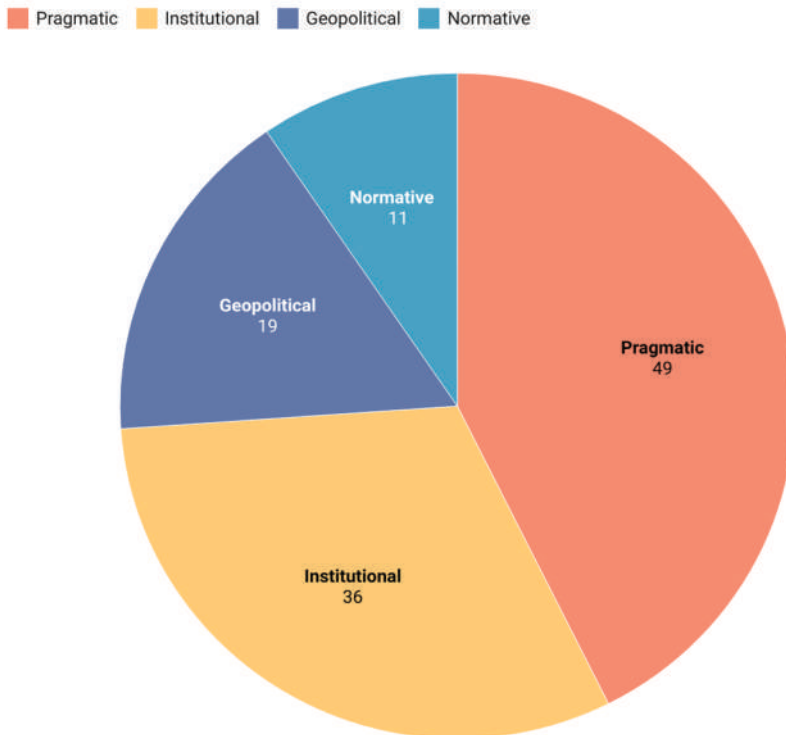
**Pie chart 7.** Total share of categories in 2020.

**Table 4.** Overview of geopolitical discourses in 2024.

Geopolitical Discourses of 2024
enlargement must become the strongest political and geopolitical instrument
the need to mitigate Russia's influence
investment in stability and security

Source: authors' own elaboration

### Discourses 2024



**Pie chart 8.** Total share of categories in 2024.

Viola 1998, the Verts). The composition of geopolitical discourses, and their share among all the EP discourses is presented in pie charts 7 and 8 below.

### Discussion

In our research, we tested the applicability of the analytical framework by Wunsch and Olszewska (2022) under geopolitical circumstances surrounding the current enlargement and identify its challenges, particularly the overlaps between categories. Some categories were excluded from the presentation of results due to the difficulty in assigning them to a specific discourse. For instance, we omitted the subcategory 'credibility', a core principle of the renewed Enlargement Strategy 2020 (European Commission (2020)). Our discussion

of the findings thus integrates thoughts and ideas regarding the framework and categories it encompasses.

The comparison of *pragmatic discourses* in 2020 and 2024 revealed a consistent emphasis on merit-based processes. In 2024, we found less critical opinions concerning the rule of law in Member States. At the same time, MEPs were supportive of clearer conditionalities and increased support for candidate countries. Unlike in 2020, when the majority of security-related discourses referred to threats such as terrorism and organized crime, the 2024 debate indicated the inclusion of Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and the Western Balkans as indispensable for the security of the continent vis-à-vis external threats. Additionally, pragmatic discourses in 2024 evolved to address more specific policy domains, such as agriculture, social policy and monitoring of funds, as well as included references to national interests of specific countries.

In line with the 2016 concept of ‘principled pragmatism’, the number of *normative discourses* diminished in 2020. In contrast, in 2024 we observed an increasing salience of normative discourses around the frames of the EU as a strong partner and a transformative power. MEPs argued that candidate countries need the EU, asserting that enlargement benefits their citizens and that the Union cannot let them down.

Notably, we initially considered placing ‘credibility’ within the normative discourse category, as MEP often emphasized the EU’s responsibility to fulfil its commitments, reflecting a moral obligation and the desire of the EU to project its soft power: ‘[I]t is now up to Member States to deliver on their promises and thus to restore credibility to the enlargement process as such’ (Tonino Picula 2020, S& D). However, ‘credibility’ defined as the ‘the quality of being believed or accepted as true, real, or honest’ also entails that candidate countries must implement reforms and progress on their European path, aligning with a pragmatic discourse (Encyclopedia Britannica n.d.). According to Andrius Kubilius (2020), PPE: ‘Of course, credibility depends, first of all, on the efforts of applicant countries to reform themselves’. Similarly, while we categorized the subcategory ‘EU as a strong partner’ under the normative category, highlighting the EU’s responsibility to drive change and project soft power, it could also fall under the pragmatic or even the geopolitical category. For example, the EU can be seen as acting as a strong partner to take a more proactive role in light of Russia’s full-scale invasion to protect its borders or strengthen its geopolitical influence (in line with the geopolitical discourse” category we supplemented the framework with, discussed below).

More easily distinguishable under the framework by Wunsch and Olszewska (2022), *institutional discourses* in 2024 indicate greater support for the reform of the decision-making process, rather than the opposition to it and involve more discussions about integration capacity compared to 2020. The arguments of the proponents of the reform revolved around efficient institutions, higher decision-making capacity and greater flexibility. Despite the bigger share of supporting comments, opposition in 2024 has become more vocal. There are more dissenting voices appealing to violation of countries’ sovereignty, federalization of the Union and even violation of universal suffrage. There have also emerged new notions of institutional discourse, such as the claim that the decision-making reform should not impede enlargement.

Finally, to account for the current geopolitical context and its significance for the enlargement debate, we supplemented the original framework with the category of *geopolitical discourses*. Such discourses were triggered by Russia’s full-scale invasion of

Ukraine, whereby enlargement started to be viewed as a means to strengthen the EU's position internationally and regionally. Nowadays, the EU enlargement resembles that of 20 years ago when it was used as a stabilization and security-building mechanism after the Yugoslav wars. More and more MEPs use the term 'geopolitical' in their speeches, highlighting the importance of countering Russia's influence in the regions. What is more, there is a tacit agreement that enlargement is also a tool that serves the interests of the EU's citizens.

The evolution of enlargement discourses between 2020 and 2024 thus signifies increasingly complex interplay of pragmatic, normative, institutional and geopolitical factors, shaping MEPs' stances towards enlargement and, subsequently, impacting the EP's stance on enlargement. In analytical terms, this interplay complicates the task of drawing clear distinctions between different categories of discourses, as attempted by Wunsch and Olszewska (2022) and in this contribution. This highlights the need for greater attention to overlapping categories and the potential tacit connections between ideas and discourses.

## Conclusion

This article expands the understanding of the EP and its position towards EU enlargement both before and after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The EP has expressed willingness to adopt a more proactive role in enlargement after 2022, advocating for more responsibilities within the process. The external threat posed by Russia, coupled with a shift toward geopolitical discourses and a diversification of institutional narratives, shifted the focus from *whether* to *how* to integrate new candidate states such as Moldova and Ukraine. The increasing prominence of enlargement in the debates has replaced the trend of its diminishing salience that existed until 2021 (Bélangier and Schimmelfennig 2021).

The European Parliament contributes to shaping EU enlargement policy through 'coordinative discourse', articulating its positions and seeking to build consensus among key stakeholders. Although the scope of our research does not allow for an assessment of the Parliament's direct impact on policy formulation, its discourses often align with and influence broader institutional discourse within the EU. For example, Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Olivér Várhelyi described enlargement as 'a geostrategic investment in peace, stability, [and] security ... of our European continent', which is a sentiment that echoes the European Parliament's focus on the strategic importance of enlargement (European Commission 2024).

The discourses within the institution have the potential to shape the dynamic within the EU in several ways. First, calls to reform of the unanimity rule could intensify debates among Member States, potentially undermining the EU's internal cohesion. Moreover, there is a risk of heightened politicization, as some MEPs argue that abolishing unanimity could disproportionately empower larger Member States, such as Germany and France.

Second, debates on institutional reform provide opportunities for candidate states to contribute their perspectives and be included in shaping the reform process. We assume that it would be in their interests to advocate for the abolition of the unanimity rule, as

this would prevent any single Member State from wielding veto as a tool to advance its foreign policy objectives.

Third, the interplay between geopolitical and normative discourses on EU enlargement raises important questions about the Union's identity and aspirations. Both roles as a normative power and geopolitical actor that prioritize security entail trade-offs and might risk diluting normative commitments. Nevertheless, these roles are not inherently incompatible. For example, MEPs often rely on arguments of democracy promotion and the concept of the 'EU as a transformative power' to justify the need to maintain security and protect borders, therefore bridging these discourses and creating benefits both for the EU and candidate states.

Finally, there is a broad consensus that the EU needs make a concerted effort to reinvigorate the policy in the regions and not lose momentum. Apart from security considerations, there is a strong emphasis on maintaining a merit-based process and adhering to the Copenhagen criteria with the impossibility of any 'fast-track' accession options. Furthermore, after the full-scale invasion, the institutional reform of the EU has also become a more prominent subject, with diverse opinions on its necessity. Increased complexity of the problématique, surrounding the EU enlargement policy, points to the need for the development of new analytical tools, enabling stronger attention to be paid to the interplay between different ideas and concerns within the EP debate and the EP's communications with other EU institutions.

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## Author contributions

CRedit: **Kateryna Korpalo**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Visualization, Writing – original draft; **Maryna Rabinovych**: Conceptualization, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

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## Data availability statement

There is no data set associated with this submission.

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