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DISCOURSES IN THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT BEFORE AND AFTER
RUSSIA'S FULL-SCALE INVASION OF UKRAINE»**

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	3
CHAPTER 1. THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL BACKGROUND OF DISCOURSE ANALYSIS IN STUDYING INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE	6
1.1 Theoretical framework for studying enlargement discourses in the European Parliament	6
1.2 Methodology of discourse analysis for investigating enlargement debates in the European Parliament	8
1.2.1 Foundations of discourse analysis and its use in European studies	9
1.2.2 The connection between discursive institutionalism and discourse analysis	10
1.2.3 Categorisation of discourses and frame analysis	12
CHAPTER 2. EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT’S ROLE IN EU ENLARGEMENT	18
2.1 Enlargement as a foreign policy	18
2.2 History of the European Parliament	19
2.3 Role of the European Parliament in EU enlargement	22
2.3.1 Hard powers of the European Parliament in EU enlargement	23
2.3.2 Soft powers of the EP and the rationale for its study	24
CHAPTER 3. EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS OF EU ENLARGEMENT DISCOURSES IN THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT	28
3.1 Comparison of pragmatic discourses of 2020 and 2024	29
3.2 Comparison of normative discourses of 2020 and 2024	40
3.3 Comparison of institutional discourses of 2020 and 2024	44
3.4 Geopolitical discourses of 2024	49
CONCLUSION	51
ANNEXES	55
REFERENCES	59
ABSTRACT	77

INTRODUCTION

In 2022, the European Union underwent a significant shift in its approach to enlargement. Ukraine and Moldova were given the candidate status, followed by Georgia in 2023, while negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia were finally opened. Anghel & Džankić (2023) compare the EU's decisions, sparked by renewed interest, with those made during the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s (489). In their opinion, enlargement is used to address the Union's fundamental security needs, serving as a tool for stabilisation, peace-building and post-war reconstruction (Anghel & Džankić, 2023, 491). Such a change was reflected in the statements of EU institutions' leaders and heads of Member States following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The European Parliament (EP) called for a geopolitical awakening of the EU in its annual resolution on the implementation of the CFSP in 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).

The role of the European Parliament in enlargement has been severely neglected in scholarship, as the main actors driving the process are considered to be the European Commission with the policy initiation powers and the Council with the voting and decision-making capacities (De Angelis, 2011). Nonetheless, although 20 years ago during the Big Bang enlargement the European Parliament's influence was limited, this institution has begun to hold a more prominent position since the adoption of the Lisbon Agreement. 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 & Džankić, 2023, 496).

Despite numerous studies on the shift in enlargement policy after February 2022, there has been little focus on the European Parliament's role. It remains unclear how the full-scale invasion was reflected in the MEP's discourses and what is their attitude towards the policy. Therefore, **our study aims to classify and compare enlargement discourses within the European Parliament before and after the full-scale invasion.**

The study has the following **research question**: What discourses on enlargement exist in the European Parliament and how do they differ from those observed before Russia's full-scale invasion?

To accomplish the goal mentioned above, the research aims to fulfil the following **tasks**:

- investigate how the discourse analysis has been utilised in European studies;
- map the role of the European Parliament in EU enlargement policy;
- categorise the enlargement discourses before and after Russia's full-scale invasion;
- determine how enlargement has been framed following the full-scale invasion;
- compare and contrast EU enlargement discourses before and after Russia's full-scale invasion.

The **object** of the study is the EU enlargement policy.

The **subject** of this research is EU enlargement discourses within the European Parliament during two plenary session debates on EU enlargement before and after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

The **relevance** of this study is the following. Theoretically, the study gives an understanding of the EP's stance toward enlargement, filling the gap originating from the predominance of sources dedicated to the European Commission and the Council in the existing research. Furthermore, we consider the EU in the context of the EU emerging geopolitical actorness and the connection between the debate about democracy and the geopolitical role of the EU. Practically, the study facilitates advocacy in the European Union, allowing policymakers to identify core patterns in the debates and tailor messages accordingly. This research is relevant for Ukraine and other candidate countries, as after

completing the membership negotiations, the European Parliament gives its consent to the accession of new countries.

The **literature** used in the research covers theoretical works pertaining to conceptualisations of discourse and discourse analysis. We focus on studies examining the role of discourses in EU enlargement (Bélanger & Schimmelfennig (2021); (Schimmelfennig 2009), institutional change theories (Schmidt 2008), (Schmidt 2010), geopolitical factors influencing enlargement decisions (Anghel & Džankić, 2023) and evolving nature of the European Parliament role in enlargement both in formal and non-formal settings (Goinard, 2020; Bajtay, 2015). Additionally, we have utilised the work of Wunsch & Olzhewska (2020) to categorise the variance of discourses, mainly — pragmatic, normative and institutional along with the work of Anghel & Džankić (2023) to add up the fourth category of the discourse — geopolitical.

The research methods employed in the study is discourse analysis, specifically — qualitative frame analysis and content analysis.

CHAPTER 1. THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL BACKGROUND OF DISCOURSE ANALYSIS IN STUDYING INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

This chapter is aimed at delivering an explanation of the theoretical basis and methodology this study builds upon.

1.1. Theoretical framework for studying enlargement discourses in the European Parliament

In this subsection, we explore a theoretical framework that underpins our examination of discourses concerning enlargement within the European Parliament. In our opinion, the best possible lens through which we can look at the discourses in the EP is discursive institutionalism (DI). Before delving into the explanation of the theory, we provide the definition of a discourse.

Discourse is a way of speaking or writing that is used in a particular social context or within a specific community or group. It relates to a broad framework of ideas, assumptions, meanings and beliefs that shape communication. Discourse analysis helps to explore how people see the world through categories and representations — sets of statements and practices through which language becomes institutionalised and “normalised” over time (Neuman, 2008, 61). Moreover, certain discourses entail a degree of regularity in the social system, which creates certain preconditions for actions (Neuman, 2008, 62). Therefore, scholars are interested in employing this particular methodology for a variety of reasons, among which is uncovering actors’ motivation or exploring the dynamics of a particular event.

According to Schmidt (2008), discourse is the process of conveying ideas and the interactive process of exchanging ideas in two forms. The first one is the „coordinative“ discourse among policy actors that effectively collaborate on the creation of the policy, and the second is the „communicative“ discourse through which the actors communicate their ideas to the wider public.

The author contends that discursive institutionalism is not only about studying the ideas or texts but also about the institutions within which the discourses are formed and discussed. (Schmidt, 2010, 4) According to discourse institutionalism, institutional change arises from the interplay of two mechanisms: “background ideational abilities” and “foreground discursive abilities” (Schmidt, 2008, 3). “Background ideational abilities” are dispositions and values acquired by actors through their lives which enable them “to act in any given meaning”, and “foreground discursive abilities” are the abilities to critically engage in discussions and speak beyond the established rules.

To better explain discursive institutionalism, Schmidt (2008) contrasts it with other three forms of institutionalism: historical, institutional and sociological where the logic revolves around historical path dependencies, rational interests and cultural norms respectfully. In those three forms of institutionalism, institutions are the external rule-following structures that serve as constraints to the actors. On the contrary, institutions in DI act not only as structures that constrain actors but also as constructs that are created and changed by those actors. This supports the notion that institutional change is dynamic and is attributed to the actors’ opinions and discourses.

Discourse, as an interactive process, may also have an impact on other actors and persuade them of the “necessity and/or appropriateness of a given course of action”. This occurs through discussion and deliberation (Schmidt, 2008, 8, 10). For example, during the plenary debates of the European Parliament, representatives from all seven political groups engage in discussions, presenting their ideas and attempting to persuade each other to support specific policy directions.

Another important feature of discursive institutionalism is the notion that interests are of a subjective nature. Schmidt (2008) argues that, unlike in rational institutionalism, interests are neither objective, nor material, and this is the researchers’s task to uncover the subjective nature of interests (15-17). An illustrative example of this is Turkiye. The decision to open accession negotiations with this candidate country was not primarily driven by material interests but rather by the need to uphold past promises and be seen as a credible actor. After Turkiye fulfilled two major demands in the fields of human and minority rights, the EU opened the negotiations following an intense debate.

Consequently, by making the candidate country's path conditional on its compliance with these rights, the EU trapped itself in its own rhetoric, as the so-called objective criteria were not fixed and relied on the particular discourse within the EU (Schimmelfennig, 2009, 424).

We believe that discursive institutionalism serves as the best theoretical framework for our study, given its focus on both ideas and institutions. Unlike three other institutionalisms, which primarily explain continuity, 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). In our research, we are doing the same — we explore the ideas that extend beyond "politics as usual" within the institutional setting.

1.2. Methodology of discourse analysis for investigating enlargement debates in the European Parliament

In this study, we have posed a goal to comprehensively analyse the substance of EU enlargement discourses in the European Parliament and to identify new patterns that have emerged following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. To achieve this, the study utilises inductive approach. The "umbrella" research method is discourse analysis, which encompasses specialised tools such as qualitative frame analysis and content analysis.

In the following section, we provide the general background of discourse analysis and its benefits, illustrate how it has been used in European studies, and demonstrate how scholars have applied this methodology within the framework of discursive institutionalism.

1.2.1. Foundations of discourse analysis and its use in European studies

Various types of discourse analysis can serve numerous purposes. First, discourse analysis is useful to understand diverse perspectives or interpretations of policies. It can also provide researchers with the insights into the possible policymaking pathways. What is more, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) explores the role of language in constituting social reality, and examines power relations, processes of exclusion and inequality (Aydın-Düzgit, 157-159, 2015). For example, Aydın-Düzgit (2015) uses discourse historical analysis, a branch of CDA, to explain the meaning of cultural identity in right-wing parties' discourses regarding Türkiye's enlargement. Furthermore, Dimitrova et al highlight the significance of exploring discourses "as means of policy legitimation and further deliberation" (28).

Diez (2001) metaphorically describes Europe as a discursive battleground, showing how discourse analysis is used in European integration studies. He claims that European governance can be conceptualized through language interaction and that the main struggle is between competing discourses of European governance rather than national or economic interests (Diez, 2001, 6). Policy, he argues, is part of the discourse, not merely its consequence; thus, each policy articulation is both enabled by and reproduces a larger discursive structure. Diez introduces the concept of discursive nodal points (DNPs) — concepts in the political debate around which meaning is stabilised — to reconstruct the conceptualisation of European governance and show how they contribute to the articulation of certain policies (16-17). In the author's opinion, discourse analysis further explores the productive effects of articulation, such as what is constructed and how it shapes the debate. Unlike historical analysis, which looks at causes and motivations, discourse analysis does not aim to explain European policies but rather to critically understand them (30).

Wunsch and Olszewska (2022) note that discourse analysis has featured prominently in the study of EU enlargement (922-923). For example, A significant amount of attention has been dedicated to discursive reasoning used to explain the accession of the ten Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries (Sjursen, 2002). In that regard, Stoeva and Hoppe (2011) argue that CEE accession-seeking countries

referred to the enlargement as an issue of collective European identity, using the *raison d'être* of the community to impose a moral obligation of the EU states to accept them as members of the Union (56). Schimmelfennig (2001) explains that the proponents of CEE enlargement used rhetorical action, framing the matter as an issue of identity and norms, opposing to which would be seen as betrayal of the community's principles. Similarly, other studies explore discourses on European identity and borders concerning the European Neighbourhood Policy, examine the role of the European Commission in Europeanisation and discourse building (Jones & Clark, 2008), and attempt to untangle the meaning behind the debates in the EP regarding a privileged partnership with Türkiye (Turkes-Kilic, 2020).

Additional examples include studies on citizens' opinions on enlargement (Dimitrova & Korstenska, 2017), the rising significance in security concerns in enlargement discourses (Gora, 2021) and identity-related arguments (Terzi, 2021) (Wunsch & Olszewska, 2022, 922-923). Belanger and Schimmelfennig (2021) analyse debates in the European Parliament and national parliaments, aiming to discern whether discussions concerning EU enlargement have undergone heightened politicization and rebordering. They highlight the evolving landscape of EU enlargement within the European Parliament, noting its diminishing salience and increasing politicisation. Correspondingly, Belanger and Schimmelfennig (2023) observe in their analysis of MEPs' discursive and voting patterns on enlargement that there is a radicalization in the legislative behavior of both soft and hard Eurosceptics, as well as an increasing consolidation among Eurosceptics.

1.2.2. The connection between discursive institutionalism and discourse analysis

Discursive institutionalism (DI) emphasizes the agency of sentient actors and a dynamic approach to institutional change, providing a robust framework for conducting discourse analysis within institutional settings (Schmidt, 2008). Rather than examining the discourses of MEPs in isolation, we analyse them as integral components of larger institutional structures, such as the European Parliament. Schmidt (2008) contends that

studying the interactive process of institutions is essential for understanding the change within, which is beneficial for our research, given the ongoing debate in the European Parliament regarding whether EU enlargement should be contingent on institutional reform, a topic that garners considerable attention among politicians.

As mentioned above, according to DI, institutional change is made possible through the combination of two mechanisms: ‘background ideational abilities’ and ‘foreground discursive abilities’ (Schmidt, 2008, 3). The focus of this study is on exploring “foreground discursive abilities”. According to Schmidt (2010), they “refer to peoples’ ability to think outside the institutions in which they continue to act, to talk about such institutions in a critical way, to communicate and deliberate about them, to persuade themselves as well as others to change their minds about their institutions, and then to take action to change them, whether by building “discursive coalitions’ for reform against entrenched interests in the coordinative policy sphere of informing and orienting the public in the communicative political sphere” (16). This understanding of “foreground discursive abilities” aligns with our academic investigation, as MEPs attempt to think beyond their institutional constraints, challenge the pre-established notions, and provide new interpretations to the policy in light of current circumstances.

Discursive institutionalist analysis has been employed to unpack the EU leaders’ ideas about the EU’s Sovereign Debt Crisis (Schmidt, 2014). In this work, the author described various methodological approaches within the framework of discursive institutionalism that have been used by various scholars to study discourses. For instance, frames provide “snapshots” of rival ideas, narratives and stories shape understanding of the events over longer periods, collective memories frame action and contribute to the discourse formation, programmatic ideas analyse discourse at an intermediate level that may possibly involve incremental change, and policy ideas cover the most recent ideas of EU leaders (Schmidt, 2014, 191-192, 205).

Discursive institutionalism analysis has also been used to explain Brexit and Trump’s rise to power (Schmidt, 2017). By utilising content analysis of agents’ ideas, Schmidt explored the causes of public discontent and political mistrust in both countries. Specifically, through the investigation of rhetorical strategies in the dynamics of

persuasion (emotions, hyperboles) and agents and the interactive dynamics of discourse, Schmidt (2017) demonstrated how ideational agents were able to wield power through ideas.

1.2.3. Categorisation of discourses and frame analysis

In our study, we utilise frame analysis. The goal of frame analysis is “understanding how certain idea elements are linked together into packages of meaning” (Creed et al., 2002:37 in Crespy, 2020, 107). According to Crespy, this approach offers a framework to analyse how discursive elements enable actors to construct meaning articulated around a broader idea (Crespy, 2020, 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. It is important to highlight that unlike in the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), we aim to neither explain the motivation behind the discourses, nor study the relations between discourse and social and cultural developments.

Schmidt (2008) argues that discourse comes in two forms: coordinative and communicative. Coordinative discourse encompasses the wide range of policy actors that are involved in policy construction, while communicative discourse deals with deliberation and presenting the results to the wider public. While studying a combination of both types of discourses may yield immense results, we focus on exploring the coordinative discourse inside the European Parliament at the stage of policymaking.

The subject of our research is two plenary session debates of the European Parliament — before and after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. As for the debate after the full-scale invasion, we have decided to analyse the most recent one on February 28th, 2024 — “Deepening EU integration in view of future enlargement”. (European Parliament, 2024, February 28). To analyse the discourses before the full-scale invasion, we chose the last plenary session before February 24th 2022 on “Assessment of the revised enlargement methodology proposal of the Commission”, which took place on February 10th, 2020 (European Parliament, 2020, February 10). We analysed this specific plenary session as the previous one on enlargement was conducted in 2018 and dedicated exclusively to the question of Western Balkans. While recognising that since Russia’s

full-scale invasion of Ukraine, considerable attention has been paid to the enlargement of Eastern European countries such as Ukraine and Moldova, we focus on enlargement policy as a whole.

To understand how enlargement discourses evolved, we categorised them into four main types. First, we translated the speeches into English with the help of neural machine translation services. Then, we coded the discourses into one of four categories: normative, pragmatic, institutional, and geopolitical. Utilising inductive research methods, we 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.

Scholars approached discourse categorisation in various ways. To begin with, it is pertinent to highlight that according to Schmidt, successful discourses ‘must be both convincing in cognitive terms (justifiable) and persuasive in normative terms (appropriate and/or legitimate)’ (Schmidt, 2008, 11). In our interpretation, this means that enlargement has to bring some benefits to Member States to be justifiable and also must align with the EU democratic values. Similarly, Herranz-Surrallés distinguishes between utilitarian and normative arguments when analysing the substance of discourse to identify the type of justification given for enlargement in his article on a discursive institutionalist analysis of the elites-public gap over the European Union Enlargement (2012, 389). Three main groups of utilitarian arguments are the following: the economic and social benefits from enlargement for existing EU Member States; the costs of non-enlargement; and the EU’s increased economic and political influence in the world. Among the normative arguments, the following groups were identified: solidarity towards candidates; responsibility for peace and democracy in Europe; and the European-ness of the candidates (Herranz-Surrallés, 2012, 389). The scholar shows which frames and notions were utilised to justify three rounds of enlargement.

Another way of discourse categorisation was suggested by Sjørnsen (2006). According to her, there are three conceptions of the EU: EU as a problem-solving identity, a value-driven identity and a rights-based post-nation union. Consequently, she identifies three types of discourses with three indicators: pragmatic (utility), ethnical-political (values) and moral (rights). Sjørnsen (2006) claims that all those discourses aligns with the framework of Habermas' rationality: logic of consequentiality, logic of appropriateness and logic of justification respectfully.

Our categorisation framework is built upon the foundation laid by Wunsch and Olszewska's research (2022), which examines political discourses on enlargement within the national parliaments of France, Germany, Hungary, and Poland spanning the years 2004 to 2017. The authors discern three types of discourses: normative (EU's soft power and its moral obligation towards candidate countries), pragmatic (conditionality and employing enlargement as a stabilisation tool); and institutional (efficiency and state capacity). Because of the potential limitations of this approach such as its inability to encompass all discourses in the European Parliament, we expand upon each of the aforementioned categories throughout the research and coding process, and add our own set of sub-categories. We also add geopolitical discourse which gained prominence right after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Wunsch and Olszewska (2022) describe normative discourses as those relating to the external projection of EU values in democracy promotion (924). Enlargement has surpassed merely rational debates, and according to Economides et al (2023) it has been placed within the broader cleavage of EU integration regarding identity issues which are inextricably connected with the EU's values and norms (2). One of the examples of normative discourses is the dominant idea around the EU's transformative power which occurred amidst the 2004 enlargement. It is about the Union's ability to transform accession countries into modern liberal democracies (Wunsch & Olszewska, 2022). To provide a more up-to-date illustration, Charles Michelle as the head of the European Council appealed to the need to protect the European values as a need to intensify efforts regarding the enlargement process (Michelle 2024).

Institutional discourses focus on the EU's capacity to enlarge and revolve around the need to protect the Union from possible threats that may arise from the accession of the candidate states. (Wunsch & Olszewska, 2022). Among the issues raised during debates have been the widening-deepening dilemma, the EU's integration capacity, and the reform of the unanimity rule. Some of the most common issues raised within the institutional discourse concern the question of whether the Union has the capacity to accept nine candidate countries under current procedures and whether the enlargement process should be connected to the reform of the Union's decision-making processes.

Pragmatic element during the plenary sessions underscores the significance of conditionality and a merit-based approach, with each country being evaluated independently and individually based on its own advancements. (Wunsch & Olszewska, 2022, 929). The focus of this discourse is to strategically bolster the rule of law and democratic standards in the candidate states, aiming to mitigate potential risks that the region could otherwise pose to the EU. Besides, the authors elaborate on one more dimension of this type of discourse which views enlargement as a tool to promote national interests. They provide the example of the Hungarian context, where debates emphasise the vitality of comprehensive minority rights protection for ethnic Hungarians inhabiting Serbia ((Wunsch & Olszewska, 2022, 930). In a similar way, there is a clear emphasis on the protection of the Hungarian minority in Ukraine.

Geopolitical discourses gained prominence after the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, but they appeared earlier at least before the mid-2010s. In 2016, the "European Union Global Strategy" introduced the idea of "principled pragmatism", which made the case for the pursuit of geopolitical goals, according to Economides (2020, 16). In 2019, upon taking the office, Ursula von der Leyen declared that she would lead the "geopolitical" Commission and called for a comprehensive approach to security and defence, which was supported by the European Parliament's resolution of 2020 (European Parliament briefing, 2020; European Parliament, 2020). Although there was no use of the term "geopolitics" in documents on EU enlargement, the language implied that the significance of the Western Balkans for the EU and its security increased: "This firm, merit-based prospect of full EU membership for the Western Balkans is in the

Union's very own political, security and economic interest... it remains more than ever a geostrategic investment in a stable, strong and united Europe” (Economides, 2020, 17; European Commission 2020).

Geopolitics appeared in the EU officials’ statements and documents related to EU enlargement after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Anghel & Džankić (2023) argue that contemporary shifts in the EU's stance on enlargement resemble the circumstances surrounding the Big Bang enlargement of 2004, as they were both spurred by conflict. In particular, they argue that NATO and the United States exerted further pressure on the EU to prompt a political decision and expedite its enlargement agenda. (Anghel & Džankić, 2023, 489). The EU adopted a similar approach to the Russo-Ukrainian war when presented the war as the first justification for a motion for a resolution on the candidate status of Ukraine and other countries. In the motion for the resolution the European Parliament mentioned that the ‘EU must be a reliable partner and a credible geopolitical actor and that enlargement should be seen as an investment in a strong, stable and united Europe, as well as a transformative process for the countries following the EU path.’ (Anghel & Džankić, 2022, p. 490) In the same motion for a resolution, the European Parliament also highlighted that ‘past developments have shown that non-enlargement has a massive strategic cost and can undermine security and stability’ (European Parliament 2022a). This approach shows that the EU is aware of its substantive decline in influence across the Western Balkans (Panagiotou, 2021), and of the limited success of its previous strategies to revitalize the Union’s standing and transformative power in the region (Petrovic & Tzifakis, 2021).

In this chapter, we have delved into discursive institutionalism, the theoretical framework of our study, and discourse analysis, our chosen methodology. We have examined various definitions of “discourse” and elucidated the multifaceted purposes for which scholars employ discourse analysis. This includes critical understanding of the policies, providing researchers with insights into potential policymaking processes etc.

We justified our selection of discursive institutionalism as our primary theoretical framework by contrasting it with other three forms of institutionalism (historical,

sociological and rational) and illustrating its efficacy in exploring institutional change. Additionally, we acknowledged the limitations of our study clarifying that we do not aim to explain the motivation behind discourses or investigate the relationships between discourse and social and cultural developments.

Moreover, we demonstrated the application of discourse analysis in European studies and EU enlargement. Finally, we outlined our categorisation of discourses, which encompasses normative, pragmatic, institutional and geopolitical dimensions.

CHAPTER 2. EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT'S ROLE IN EU ENLARGEMENT

2.1. Enlargement as a foreign policy

Enlargement is believed to be one of the most successful instruments of the EU foreign policy. It demonstrated how a small community of nations could evolve into a formidable economic and political entity. Šuplata (2023) describes enlargement as the most remarkable *sui generis* geopolitical project that was able to unite distinct parts of Europe and secure peace on the territory of its members. Since the beginning of its creation as the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) after World War II, the European project has continuously accepted new members, transforming itself into the European Union.

In 1952 Belgium, France, Western Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands created the European Coal and Steel Community, which was based on the Schuman Declaration of 1952. In 1957, the Treaty of Rome laid the foundation of the European Economic Community (EEC). The first enlargement happened in 1973 when the UK, Ireland and Denmark joined the Union. Subsequently, one of the most notable enlargements took place in 2004 when ten Central and Eastern European nations with Cyprus and Malta joined the EU. Throughout its history, the EU has experienced multiple waves of enlargement, each driven by specific political conditions and the willingness to have stability, democracy, and prosperity in the region.

Sjursen and Smith (2018) provide three logics that legitimise EU enlargement: the logic of consequences, the logic of appropriateness and the logic of moral justification, grounded in criteria such as utility, values and rights respectively (128). The first logic posits that actors seek to maximise their rational goals and interests. The second logic suggests that actors undertake actions they perceive as appropriate within the framework of the values of a specific community. The third logic of moral justification focuses on achieving legitimacy through adherence to universally recognised moral principles and rights, specifically democracy, rule of law and human rights (Sjursen & Smith, 2018, 129-132). All three logics have been applied in justifying the enlargement.

Before 2004 enlargement, the discourse around the policy was inclusive with arguments revolving around stability, prosperity and security (Wunsch & Olszewska, 2022). However, the authors highlight that after this enlargement, there was a shift towards a more strategic perspective, with enlargement viewed as a means to address threats in the neighbouring countries. Notably, since the onset of Russia's full-scale war of Ukraine, the EU has been using enlargement as a stabilisation and security-building mechanism (Anghel & Džankić, 2023); (Jones, 2024). The EU also employed norm-based arguments. For instance, the Grenada Declaration of the European Council, adopted on October 6, 2023, framed enlargement as “a geo-strategic investment in peace, security, stability and prosperity” and “a driver for improving the economic and social conditions of European citizens”, which “must foster the values on which the Union is founded” (European Council (2023)). Consequently, the motivations behind enlargement vary according to the prevailing circumstances of different times.

2.2. History of the European Parliament

Before delving into the European Parliament's role in the enlargement process and its history, it's essential to understand the institution's functions within the EU and its operational rules. Firstly, the European Parliament doesn't hold executives accountable for policies, as observed by De Angelis (2011, 15). The powers of MEPs are different from members of national parliaments. Second, the elections to the European Parliament are second-order with lower voter turnout than in national elections (Bartles, 2023). Nevertheless, voters may use elections as a platform to express dissatisfaction with the governing parties without necessarily intending to change the overall composition of the government. In particular, second-order elections of the European Parliament are significant because they can provide insights into public opinion, political trends, and party performance. For example, early polls suggest that a more right-leaning European Parliament might emerge after the June 2024 European Parliament elections (Dennison et al, 2024).

According to the 1957 Community Treaties, the European Parliament's role in the foreign policy field was marginal, as the majority of functions were fulfilled by the

Council of Ministers, the Commission and the European Council (Viola, 1998, 127). De Angelis (2011) believes that the EP is neglected and the least studied among European institutions in the EU (16). As mentioned earlier, the functions of MEPs are not that broad as the ones of national parliamentaries, and the direct elections were introduced only in 1979. However, up until 2004, members of the European Parliament could also serve as members of the national parliaments, thus providing a link between the national politics and the European one.

Since its creation, the European Parliament was trying to define what “Europe” was, and provided the vision and ideas behind the European project. In the 1960s, the institution delineated the EU enlargement as the project only available to pluralist democracies and debated the importance to address the issue of democratic deficit in the Union such as a lack of democratic representation, accountability and popular participation in the EU (De Angelis, 2011, 19). The author believes that the European Parliament discourse constructed the idea of Europe with the following aspects: representative democracy, free and fair elections, human rights, and the rule of law. This is evident nowadays as well, as the European Parliament voted a few times to formally suspend Turkey’s EU accession talks because of its violations of human rights and political and democratic backsliding (Michalopoulos, 2021; European Parliament, 2019).

Despite its lack of powers up until the end of the 20th century, the European Parliament was determined to be heard on the European arena, and started debated the most controversial topics. In 1962 it changed its name from “European Parliamentary Assembly” to “European Parliament” to approximate itself to the “real parliament” (De Angelis, 2011, 19). In 1986, the Single European Act extended Parliament’s prerogatives by introducing the assent procedure in two areas: association agreements and agreements governing accession to the European Union (Bailer and Schneider 2000). The 1992 Treaty on European Union (TEU) reiterated the right of assent (Viola, 1998). According to De Angelis (2011), the Single European Act formalised the EP’s role within the enlargement process, although the real impact was in its rhetorical function in defining the nature of enlargement and guiding its vision along with construction the image of European integration (22).

The first time when the European Parliament resorted to its assent right was the 1995 accession round of Austria, Finland and Sweden. One of the main concerns that occurred at that time was directed towards the Council that did not provide sufficient time for thorough examination of agreements by the Parliament. While some members advocated for postponing the decision, fearing a negative interpretation by applicant countries or Euro-sceptics, others stressed the potential benefits of enlargement. (Viola, 1998, 130-131). Overall, the MEPs faced pressure from both national governments and parties, influencing their voting behavior, which underscored the complexities of European integration during this period.

As of 1995, forty years since its establishment, the European Parliament has undergone significant transformations. The changes were seen in the EP's working methods, internal structure, and coherence. From its mere deliberative function, the European Parliament has assumed the role of a co-legislator, with the elections of its members serving as a direct source of legitimacy for the European Union. (Neunreither, 1995).

In 1997, the Luxembourg Council launched a new phase of enlargement process, establishing a framework for the ten Central and East European countries and Cyprus. This decision is believed to have been made under pressure from the European Parliament, which pursued a more inclusive approach than that of the European Commission (Bailer & Schneider, 2000, 32). The Foreign Affairs Committee of the European Parliament held an opinion that the accession condition should be based more on the political performance of the countries, rather than economic. (Bailer & Schneider, 2000, 28).

Consequently, the European Parliament reached an agreement featuring a formula in which it requested the European Council to commence the enlargement process with a common act for all eleven countries, initiating an intensified enlargement process with "10+1" countries but confining intensive intergovernmental negotiations to "5+1" countries (Bailer & Schneider, 2000, 28). This formula was outlined in the Oostlander/Baron Crespo report, which received 369 votes in favour, 2 against and 58 abstentions, signalling a unified approach of the European Parliament.

Bailer and Schneider (2000) argue that the European Parliament could influence the decision of Luxembourg Council due to the consensus-building process within and between the groups, as only 6% of the actors voted against. They also highlight the substantial influence of socialisation in the Parliament's decision-making, citing a respondent who stated, "lots of MEPs, very many here, look at things from quite a European attitude," (Bailer & Schneider, 2000, 38). As a result, the European Parliament was able to influence decisions without formal agenda-setting power, speaking with one voice and using its informal bargaining power.

The Lisbon Agreement expanded the prerogatives of the European Parliament significantly, enhancing its role as an EU foreign policy actor (Goinard, 2020). Now, all international agreements, except those related exclusively to the common foreign and security policy, require Parliament's consent before conclusion by the Council (Article 218, TFEU); (Bajtay, 2015). Additionally, the European Parliament gained additional legislative and budgetary powers. Its legislative authority was extended to over 40 domains, and it obtained the power to approve the EU budget along the Council of the European Union (Pavy, 2023).

Moreover, the codecision procedure was expanded. Beyond co-decision on the Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI), the Parliament now co-decides with the Council on other external financial instruments such as Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance, Instrument for European Neighbourhood Policy Initiative, Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace, Partnership Instrument and European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (Bajtay, 2015, 12). Furthermore, the European Parliament was granted the power to elect the President of the Commission.

In summary, the Lisbon Treaty marked a significant milestone in expanding the powers of the European Parliament. However, the majority of powers related to the CFSP reside with the European Council (Bajtay, 2015, 10).

2.3. Role of the European Parliament in EU enlargement

In the next section we are going to explain what the European Parliament's role in enlargement is. First, we outline the official powers, enshrined in the treaties, then non-formal powers along with our explanation of the importance of studying the institution for better understanding of the EU enlargement.

The Lisbon Treaty provided the European Parliament with more legislative and budgetary powers. While not all of them are directly related to enlargement, they nevertheless enhanced the overall parliamentary legitimacy and oversight, reflecting a growing demand of EU citizens to be included in the decision-making. Nowadays, the European Parliament envisions its role beyond acting as a mere rubber-stamp of EU laws. It is willing to influence the negotiations with the ex ante control (Rossi, 2011:102 in Bajtay, 11).

2.3.1. Hard powers of the European Parliament in EU enlargement

Officially, the European Parliament gives its consent to the enlargement-related agreements and treaties, delivers parliamentary reports and resolutions, contributing to the formation of the EU's negotiation strategies. (Senem Turkes-Kilic, 2015, 155). 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 European Parliament 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. (Turkes-Kilic, 2018, 31). Thanks to the Lisbon Treaty of 2007, the influence of the European Parliament increased, as the institution's legislative and budgetary powers have been expanded. Table 2.1 provides a summary of the evolution of the European Parliament's legislative and budgetary powers from 1986 Single European Act to 2007 Lisbon Treaty.

Table 2.1 Evolution of the European Parliament's Legislative and Budgetary Powers (1986-2007)	
Name of the	Description of core changes (non-exhaustive)

Treaty & Year of Signature	
Single European Act (SEA), 1986	creation of the cooperation and assent procedures in two areas (association agreements and agreements governing accession to the European Union)
Treaty of Maastricht, 1993	first introduction of the codecision procedure (ordinary legislative procedure)
Treaty of Amsterdam, 1997	the reform and expansion of the codecision procedure
Treaty of Nice, 2001	increase of the EP's role in the selection process of the Commission and Commission President (all candidates have to be approved by the EP); expansion of the codecision procedure
Treaty of Lisbon, 2007	expansion of the codecision procedure (external financial instruments); expansion of the Article 30 of SEA. Parliament "...shall be immediately and fully informed at all stages of the procedure" (Article 218(10) TFEU); expansion of budgetary powers (the Parliament approves the EU's seven-year budget under the Multiannual Financial Framework).

Source: Kreppel, 2003 and Bajtay, 2015

2.3.2. Soft powers of the EP and the rationale for its study

The purpose of the European Parliament is to embody the will of its voters, who hold the right to decide whether to admit new members into the Union or not. As representatives of the electorate, the MEPs are obliged to fulfil the will of the constituencies (Viola, 1998, 130) and to translate "the values, interests, policy choices of EU citizens into binding and non-binding instructions to the executive conducting European external action" (Bajtay, 2015, 10). In that regard, it is beneficial to study the European Parliament, as the institution represents the views of the entire European Union

community. MEPs are elected through direct proportional representation, which reflects a diverse range of ideological and national perspectives in the European Parliament. (Aydin-Duzgit, 2015, 155).

The European Parliament is the body that upholds European values more than any other institution in the EU. According to De Angelis (2011), the European Parliament's discourse constructed an idea of Europe that encompasses political aspects such as representative democracy, free and fair elections, human rights, the rule of law ..." (20). It also reminds about the importance of democratic criteria and other conditionalities, addressing the issues of national minorities and democracy protection in its resolutions (Viola, 1998, 133). To demonstrate, in 2016, the European Parliament voted to suspend accession negotiations with Turkey because of concerns about human rights and rule of law.

Studying the European Parliament is beneficial as its plenary debates provide a concrete record of ideas exchanged among representatives with diverse political and national backgrounds (De Angelis, 2011, 21, 25). Thanks to that, one can scrutinise the way the ideas evolve within the institution and obtain a comprehensive understanding of parliamentarians' opinions on European integration. 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). De Angelis (2011) contends that some candidate states have explored the ideas brought forward in this discourse and utilised them within their own rhetoric when advocating for the membership" (20-21).

The European Parliament 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 (Bajtay, 2015, 16). The EP's parliamentary diplomacy was singled out by the HR/VP Josep Borrell in relation to Ukraine (Goinard 2020, 116-117).

The EP's engagement with Ukraine started in 2004 with the Orange Revolution and intensified in the aftermath of the Maidan Revolution of 2013-2014 as support for Ukraine's reform process (Goinard, 2020). For example, EP Committees engaged at the stage of decision-making, preparing for the Association Agreement's consent, legislation on waiving the visa requirements for Ukrainian citizens and oversight of Macro-Financial Assistance programs from 2014 to 2017. Additionally, the EP voiced political support against Russian aggression through plenary resolutions and awarded the Sakharov Prize to Oleh Sentsov. At the same time, the EP strengthened political dialogue with the Ukrainian parliament by establishing the Parliamentary Association Committee (PAC) in 2015, which enabled cooperation between the MEPs and Ukrainian MPs in the fields of formal democracy development and drafting laws (Goinard, 2020, 117).

Additionally, in 2015, former EP President Pat Cox on behalf of the EP conducted a "needs assessment mission", resulting in the "Report and Roadmap on Internal Reform and Capacity-Building for the Verkhovna Rada" (European Parliament 2016). This report inspired the MEPs to establish a facilitated inter-party dialogue called "Jean-Monnet Dialogues for Peace and Democracy", which began in October 2016 and is still ongoing, as the last session took place in April 2024 (European Parliament, n.d.) Following its success in Ukraine, this model was applied in North Macedonia, with the first Jean-Monnet Dialogue held in May 2018 in Ohrid (European Parliament, 2018). Notably, the significance of the Jean Monnet Dialogue in the EU's enlargement policy was highlighted in the 2019 Strategy for the Western Balkans (European Commission, 2019).

To sum up, the EP has significant formal and informal influence on the enlargement process. This is achieved through continuous and timely communication with the Commission, sustaining contacts with the members of the candidate countries' parliaments and the adoption of resolutions and parliamentary reforms. Numerous forms of productive close-knit cooperation demonstrate the powerful role of the EP in assisting candidate states' efforts on their way to the European Union.

In this chapter, we outlined the history of EU enlargement policy and explained its rationale. Furthermore, we traced the evolution of the European Parliament's powers

regarding EU enlargement, dividing them into hard and soft powers and emphasising the pivotal impact of the Treaty of Lisbon on parliamentary engagement. Additionally, we explained how the European Parliament was able to use its informal bargaining power to influence the decision of Luxembourg Council in the absence of conditional agenda-setting power and how the European Parliament has engaged in parliamentary diplomacy with the candidate countries in the recent years.

CHAPTER 3. EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS OF EU ENLARGEMENT DISCOURSES IN THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

Before the full-scale invasion, enlargement was not perceived as a top priority in the EU. Belanger and Schimmelfennig (2021) highlight the decreasing salience of the policy and enlargement's politicization along cultural partisan lines. In October 2019, the European Council refused to open the negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania, which was described as a "historic mistake" by then-President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker (Rankin, 2019). As a result, France published a Non-Paper with the aim to launch substantial reforms in the EU enlargement methodology (Tilev, 2020, 1). On February 5th, the Commission sent a Communication with a proposal for "Enhancing the accession process — A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans" (European Commission, 2020). The keystone principles of the revised methodology were the following: credibility, stronger political steer, a more dynamic process and predictability for both sides. On February 10th, the European Parliament considered the revised methodology during its plenary session. Notably, the previous session discussing Western Balkans enlargement occurred two years earlier in 2018, the only time the matter was addressed in a plenary session during the Parliamentary term of 2014-2019. This indicates that the enlargement methodology was not high on the European agenda.

In 2023-2024 there is an increased interest in enlargement policy, which is apparent from numerous resolutions, statements and speeches (European Commission 2023; European Parliament 2023, European Council 2023). Furthermore, the issue of enlargement is debated more often after the full-scale invasion than it was before. During the two years from February 2022 to February 2024, there were seven plenary sessions dedicated to enlargement in the European Parliament. There is a broad understanding that the Member States need to act fast out of geopolitical considerations and to protect the security of the region (European Parliament, 2023). Nevertheless, there is a continuous

emphasis on the merit-based nature of the process and the vitality of the Copenhagen criteria.

In this section we are going to showcase the substance of each category of discourses and compare the findings of 2020 with those of 2024.

3.1. Comparison of pragmatic discourses of 2020 and 2024

Economides (2020) coins a new definition for describing the status quo in 2020 — “enlargement resistance” which replaces the “enlargement fatigue” (3). One of the reasons of this phenomenon is attributed to Europe’s high levels of disintegration and fragmentation caused by a strain of events such as the global financial crisis, the eurozone crisis and the refugee crisis. Such unfavourable dynamic contributed to the populism of right-wing and left-wing parties, leading to anti-elite rhetoric and the EU’s lack of legitimacy. Respectfully, the narrative of the 2020 enlargement debate became different from that of the 2000s as the space for normative discourses shrunk considerably, and the volume of pragmatic discourses has increased, taking into account a new cornerstone of the Union’s foreign policy “principled pragmatism”, introduced by the 2016 “European Union Global Strategy” (Economides, 2020, 3). To see the overview of pragmatic discourses with key words, please refer to Table 3.1.

Table 3.1 Pragmatic Discourses	
2020	2024
Fulfilment of criteria and merit-based process - objective criteria - concrete steps of the candidate states - hard work and no major concessions - funding conditional on concrete steps towards reform	Fulfilment of criteria and merit-based process - no “fast-track accession” - negotiations progress depends on the reforms and merit - accession criteria must be met - each country is treated according to its progress
Fundamentals	Specific policy domains

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Rule of law - Placing the rule of law in the centre - “brings us together” - opening first, closing last - Rule of law (negative nexus) - Reason to exercise caution - rules are bent - pressure on the EU citizens - extensive problems with corruption - the importance of the irreversibility of the process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Funding - financial support for reforms in candidate countries - monitoring of the use of money - Social Policy - migration might lead to social dumping - adoption of social acquis - Public opinion - citizens asked for reforms of the Treaties - disapproval of enlargement - Agriculture - the influence on European farmers - the impact on the cohesion policy
<p>Credibility</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - two-way process - the ability of the EU to support the applicant countries - the efforts of the applicant countries 	<p>National interests</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - protection of minority rights
<p>Security</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - security of the continent is at stake - the level of security is unsatisfactory - no clusters dealing with security, terrorism etc 	<p>Security</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - enlargement is an investment in stability and security of the EU - security of the Western Balkans the Eastern Partnership countries are linked to the stability and security of the EU - compromisation of security

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

We divide pragmatic discourses of 2020 into the following sub-categories: fundamentals and the rule of law, security, merit-based approach and credible methodology.

Merit-based process and fulfilment of criteria

To begin with, merit-based criteria rely on the premise that the countries are assessed and able to move forward on their European paths according to their own merit and progress (European Commission 2018). At the heart of the merit-based process lies conditionality, which means that conditions should be both objective and transparent from the outset, so that the candidate country is aware of what is precisely expected of it. Furthermore, framing enlargement as the merit-based process dictates that the country's progression toward EU accession is primarily determined by its fulfilment of the predefined criteria, rather than influenced by political factors (European Commission 2020).

We code the discourses as related to the “merit-based process” when MEPs refer to “objective criteria”, “concrete steps”, “no major concessions” etc, underlining the technical side of negotiations. For example, Isabel Santos (2020) from S&D argues that *“this proposal to revise the enlargement methodology represents a new moment... introducing greater predictability into it [accession process] by focusing on the definition of clear objectives, which guarantee decisions based on merit, a fundamental step towards greater confidence”*. Similarly, Ruža Tomašić (2020) from ECR believes that *“We must remain consistent in insisting that the criteria are met and that one set of rules applies to all”*. According to Petras Auštrevičius (2020), representative 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.

Fundamentals and the rule of law

The majority of subcategories within the pragmatic focus on the fundamentals, particular the rule of law. The first time when the European Commission placed a stronger emphasis on the rule of law was in 2012 upon the adoption of the new Enlargement Strategy (European Commission, 2011). This decision mandated that chapter 23 on judicial reform and fundamental rights and chapter 24 on justice, freedom and security

were to be opened at the beginning of the negotiations and closed at the end. In the Enlargement Strategy of 2012-2013, the European Commission explained the importance of the rule of law at the centre of enlargement policy, referring to the importance for the candidate countries to show their ability to realise the core EU values and strengthen the institutions necessary for democratic governance and the rule of law (European Commission, 2012). The key challenges that must be addressed in this matter deal with the judicial system, corruption, the fight against organised crime, public administration reform and civil, political, social and economic rights.

In 2020, the Commission's reiterated the 2012 approach 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 the rule of law, public administration, economy and strengthening of the democratic institutions (European Commission, 2020).

This emphasis on fundamentals and the rule of law is reflected in the discourses of the MEPs. Numerous speakers express their approval of the enlargement methodology. For instance, Ramona Strugariu (2020) from Renew states that she is "*pleased that the new methodology gives a central place to the rule of law and fundamental rights*". Similarly, Isabel Santos (2020) from S&D emphasises that "*reinforcing the importance of reforming institutions, respect for the rule of law and fundamental freedoms within ... is in line with the concerns that the Group of the Party of European Socialists and Democrats has always expressed*".

The rule of law as a core criteria is considered to be a priority for all political groups. Nathalie Loiseau (2020) from Renew argues that "*the rule of law is not a box we tick on a piece of paper we sign, it's the heart of what brings us together*". Correspondingly, Tineke Strik (2020) from the Verts affirms that "*we welcome the emphasis on rule of law, as well as the flexibility which enables the EU to more effectively support the candidate countries during the process*". There is an agreement with the Commission's policy on placing the rule of law at the centre of enlargement policy by opening the first and closing the last chapters of fundamentals.

While some MEPs mention *the rule of law as a necessary condition* for moving forward in the candidate countries' European path, others use this criterion as a *reason to exercise caution regarding enlargement*. For example, Clare Daly (2020) from GUE/NGL calls upon the MEPs to reflect on the enlargement process, noting “we’re having this conversation just a week after losing a major Member State”. She continues: “*I think a period of reflection may have been a little bit more worthy. Because, let’s face it, while we know that rule of law and fundamental rights are in the accession criteria, everybody knows that these rules are bent regularly by some countries, depending on who you are*”. Nicolas Fest (2020) from the ID group goes the extra mile and says that “*countries ... highly corrupt will be on the backs of European citizens as transfer recipients*”, demonstrating his disapproval of the mere presence of this enlargement methodology debate. Likewise, Anna Bonfrisco (2020) from ID questions: “*But is the rule of law only a yardstick or is it rather an enunciation guarantor of stability of inclusion and coexistence in an expanded system among us? Is it sufficient for Albania's particularities? At war with itself, between corruption, non-existent secularism and democratic culture, sophisticated criminal organizations, gaps that are unbridgeable today*”. Another example which is worth mentioning is the notion of reversibility of the progress in reforming rule of law institutions. Viola von Cramon-Taubadel (2020) from the Verts proposes: “*Rule of law and media pluralism have been declining since Serbia started negotiations in 2014, yet we pretend as if nothing has happened and continue the negotiations and other chapters, but without the fundamentals we cannot progress in other fields either*” .

Security

Another sub-category that we define is security, which is mentioned both negatively and positively concerning accession of the Western Balkans. On the one hand, two representatives from PPE and Renew claim that Western Balkans accession is crucial for the security of the European continent. For example, Kinga Gál (2020) PPE from the Western Balkans suggests 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, ID representatives argue that the level of security in the candidate countries is way below that of the EU and needs more discussion, which is absent in the debate. To illustrate, Jérôme Rivière (2020) raises a concern that “there are no clusters dealing with issues such as security, terrorism, illegal immigration and posted workers — all essential questions that have been relegated to the background”. Likewise, Anna Bonfrisco (2020) explains her dissatisfaction with the absence of security conditionality, stating that “*the issue of security in fact is only hinted at, in the face of a clear mandate that the citizens of Europe have given us to protect and defend this Europe.*” Negative references to security dominate positive references, which indicates the unwillingness of some party groups (in this case, ID) to move past the security agenda.

Credibility

Finally, the last category we refer to as part of the pragmatic discourses is credibility. The European Commission positioned credibility as the core principle of the renewed Enlargement Strategy 2020, stating: “*A credible accession perspective is the key incentive and driver of transformation in the region and thus enhances our collective security and prosperity*” European Commission (2020). Credibility is perceived as a collective two-way process. On the one hand, it involves the ability of the EU to support the applicant countries, and on the other, it relies on the efforts of the applicant countries to reform themselves. MEPs frequently invoke credibility when asserting that the EU needs to fulfil its promises. To illustrate, Tonino Picula (2020) from S&D says: “*The new methodology offers a sustainable model, in that it is now up to Member States to deliver on their promises and thus to restore credibility to the enlargement process as such*”. In recent years, the enlargement process has experienced stagnation, particularly with Albania and North Macedonia being overlooked. Therefore, placing greater emphasis on the EU's responsibility in the process presents an opportunity to expedite their accession. Likewise, Andrius Kubilius (2020) from PPE argues: “*Of course, credibility depends, first of all, on the efforts of applicant countries to reform themselves*”. He further

advocates for the need for the adoption of the qualified majority vote to ensure that no single Member State would be able to block the process without substantial arguments.

However, other MEPs highlight the two-way process of EU enlargement and argue that the candidate states have to comply with the democratic and economic criteria to progress, defending their pragmatic interests. Viola von Cramon-Taubadel (2020) from the Verts suggests that they as the EU will regain credibility and “*move forward when we see progress. The more ambitious countries need to be included in as many EU policies as possible*”. Similarly, Ruža Tomašić (2020) (ECR) makes credibility contingent on the ability of the candidate states to meet the criteria. “*We must remain consistent in insisting that the criteria are met and that one set of rules applies to all. Only in this way can the EU retain its credibility and remain a desirable destination for all the non-integrated countries of Europe*”. To sum up, credibility is one of the core principles of the 2020 Enlargement methodology, which has been widely referred to by the MEPs in their discourses. It depends on both the Member States and the candidate countries.

We divide the pragmatic discourses of 2024 into the following sub-categories: fulfilment of criteria and the merit-based process, security, national interests and policy domains (agriculture, social policy, funding, public opinion).

Fulfilment of criteria and merit-based progress

One of the primary sub-categories of pragmatic discourses in 2024 is the fulfilment of criteria and merit-based progress. Although the candidate status was given to Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia out of geopolitical considerations, the focus nevertheless remains on the candidate state’s achievements and adherence to the Copenhagen criteria, alongside other EU requirements..

When Ukraine applied for candidate status, many feared that granting a positive response to its application would be unfair to the Western Balkans that have been waiting for years without hope. Accordingly, there were apprehensions about allowing entry with concessions, but the idea of the “fast-track accession” was instantly buried (Reuters, 2022). Therefore, in the Parliamentary debates, the MEPs pragmatically assert that the

country's advancement in the European path should be dependent on its tangible efforts to implement reforms and meet the criteria. It is crucial to deconstruct the meaning of criteria, and to that end, we provide the definition of the Copenhagen criteria. They comprise stable political institutions and the guarantee of human rights and the rule of law; economic stability and the existence of a strong market economy and acceptance of the *acquis communautaire* (Palmowski 2008).

To illustrate this notion, Andreas Schieder (2024) from S&D states that *“each country is treated according to the progress it has made, according to the necessary reforms that have been made”*. Similarly, Matjaž Nemec (2024) from S&D argues that *“The effectiveness of accession negotiations must always be based on the achievements of each candidate, progress in reforms and fulfilment of the Copenhagen criteria”*.

As mentioned earlier, MEPs are highly critical of any fast-track options for enlargement. Juan Fernando López Aguilar (2024) (S&D) argues that *“there can be no room for manoeuvre for newcomers in terms of variations, breakdowns or breaks regarding the European idea of democracy and a liberal drift”*, while Francisco José Millán Mon (2024) from PPE claims that if they want enlargement to remain one of the Union's most successful policies, *“the accession criteria must be met, without shortcuts”*.

Some MEPs express criticism of the rule of law conditions in candidate states, but in comparison with the 2020 plenary debates, there are fewer of them. Tonino Picula (2024) from S&D argues: *“Every candidate country should be judged on their own merit. Our fundamental values, such as the rule of law and democratic standards, must be a pillar of our assessment if the country is ready to join the European Union”*. Instead of using the candidate countries' rule of law problems to halt enlargement, as it was in some cases in the 2020 debates, MEPs advocate for having clearer conditionalities. For example, Katalin Cseh (2024) from Renew says: *“the enforcement of the rule of law reforms have not been adequate in the enlargement countries. Just take the example of Serbia, when it was the Commission that watered down the standards. So, we need transparent and firm criteria on the rule of law front”*.

To sum up, the MEPs call the EU institutions to remain firm in their demands towards the fulfilment of the Copenhagen criteria and other reforms, as well as evaluate

the candidate countries based on their progress and achievements. The parliamentarians emphasise the importance of the merit-based criteria and the impossibility of making concessions to its fundamental components such as the rule of law.

National interests

Another sub-category that catches the attention is the presence of national interests during the plenary debates. The claims are addressed by two Bulgarian MEPs concerning the Bulgarian minority living in North Macedonia. For example, Angel Dzhambazki (2024) from the ECR says that *“this report is provoked primarily by the position of the Bulgarian government regarding the protection of the rights and legitimate interests of the local Macedonian citizens with Bulgarian national identity”*. Andrey Kovachev (2024) from PPE argues that the states need to *“continue the courageous reforms to break with the legacy of communism in the former Yugoslavia and the negative effects of this difficult period on education and tolerance towards all citizens ... towards the largest historical ethnic community of the geographical region of Macedonia - the Macedonian Bulgarians”*.

Security and stability

The issue of security and stability of the Union is referred to more frequently than during the 2020 debates. Generally, there are eight mentions of security without a reference to geopolitics, and only one of them is negative. Jean-Lin Lacapelle (2024) from the ID speaks critically of security, arguing that enlargements *‘compromise the security of our nations and compatriots. How can we be reassured by integrating into Europe Albania and its Mafia, Kosovo and its Islamist majority, Ukraine in the midst of war, whose accession would mean the death of our French farmers, or Turkey which, with its 85 million inhabitants, would become the most populous country in Europe and threaten the balance of our civilization?’* However, such discourse is the exception rather than the rule. The majority of MEPs refer to enlargement as an investment in the stability and security of the continent. For example, Vladimír Bilčík (2024) from the PPE says the following: *“The stability, security and democratic resilience of the countries of the*

Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership and neighbourhood are inextricably linked to the stability and security of our Union”.

Policy domains

In 2024 discourses, more attention is devoted to specific policy domains, and the discussions delve deeper into their intricacies. We identify the following fields: agriculture, public opinion, funding, social policy and migration.

When speaking about **agriculture**, Emmanuel Maurel (2024) from the Left voices the concerns of his constituencies, asking: *“How will our farmers, who are already suffering from the abolition of customs duties on poultry and cereals, cope?”* As for the **social policies**, Gabriele Bischoff (2024) (S&D) underlines the importance of compliance with the Union’s social standards, *“otherwise it will lead to social and wage dumping on a massive scale, and the consequences will be borne by EU citizens, but also by the employees who come here and work for starvation wages and without security”*. Furthermore, Emmanuel Maurel (2024) from the Left goes the extra mile and criticises the whole concept of enlargement, as *“from a social point of view: integrating countries with such low wages can only exacerbate social dumping within Europe”*.

There are also more conversations regarding the **financing** of reforms necessary for enlargement and monitoring. For example, Jarosław Duda (2024) from PPE argues that *“Financial support for reforms in candidate countries is an essential element of integration, but it requires such programming, supervision and evaluation of results that it is impossible to waste, corrupt or misuse these funds. Funds to support reforms should be differentiated on a country-by-country basis and allocated based on the principle of “more for more”*”. He also underlines the importance of a good accession methodology with *“clearly defined indicators of integration progress, very good monitoring, adequate procedures for responding to both achievements and lack thereof”*. Monitoring is also highlighted by Gwendoline Delbos-Corfield (2024) from the Verts who addresses the issue concerning funds funnelling into the possession of a governing elite. Therefore, she claims that *“We need better monitoring of the use of money, reinforced evaluation by the*

Commission, and perhaps we should go so far as to introduce conditionality for the accession countries too”.

The final sub-category in pragmatic discourses is **the public opinion** of the EU citizens. However, it is referred to in two completely different contexts. On the one hand, some MEPs imply that the European society disapproves of enlargement. For example, Emmanuel Maurel (2024) from the Left asks: *“What will public opinion think of this rush to adapt Europe to the accession of eight new countries with a population of 60 million?”* On the other hand, others suggest that European citizens seek comprehensive changes. To demonstrate, Markéta Gregorová (2024) from the Verts claims that both the European Parliament and the citizens of the EU have repeatedly asked: *“for an opening up of the founding Treaties, for fundamental reforms in the veto, in how we decide who represents which countries, how we elect Commissioners”.*

When comparing the pragmatic discourses of both the 2020 and 2024 debates, it is highly imperative to consider the contexts in which those debates took place. In 2020, the discourses surrounding enlargement policy were influenced by "enlargement resistance,"

In 2024 the MEPs started addressing more specific policy domains. The parliamentarians accepted the fact that the enlargement is approaching them, and if they want to protect the EU, they need to act fast. MEPs addressed concerns about the impact of enlargement on agriculture, social standards, and public opinion, advocating for clear criteria, differentiated financial support, and better monitoring of funds.

The issue of security gained more attention in 2024, and most of them recognised the positive role of candidate countries' accession in ensuring the stability and security of the Union. During the 2020 debates, the majority of security-related speeches addressed the absence of security chapters in the renewed methodology, and resorted to the threats of terrorism and organised crimes, thereby opposing the enlargement policy. It is worth mentioning that during the 2020 debates, the security was exclusively mentioned only

about the Western Balkans, while in 2024, the security of the continent implied the inclusion of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia along with the Western Balkans. Furthermore, in 2024, more speeches were devoted to the national interests as well.

The emphasis on merit-based process and fulfilment of Copenhagen and other accession criteria remained consistent across both periods. It is worth mentioning that during the 2024 debates, the MEPs were very strict about the accession criteria, underlining the predominant role of the reforms in the progress towards enlargement. In 2020, “credibility” was used more often during the debates which can be attributed to the fact that this concept was used in the name of the strategy. Furthermore, the focus shifted from the rule of law reforms to fulfilment of all criteria in general, together with the protection of the fundamental rights.

3.2. Comparison of normative discourses of 2020 and 2024

Normative discourses were marginal in the 2020 debates. Economides (2020) argues that in light of recent developments (as of 2020), there was a shift away from “normative” and “transformative power” towards more pragmatic goals. In 2016, the EU introduced the concept of “principled pragmatism” in its foreign policy, which emphasised the equal importance of interests and values as well as made it possible to reintroduce “transformative power” discourse in a more practical way. Economides (2020) argues that focusing on specific targets in a geostrategic light liberates the EU from the need to act as a “normative paragon” (17). The findings of our analysis align with Economides’ perspective as normative discourses were the least referred to. To see the overview of normative discourses with key words, please refer to Table 3.2.

Table 3.2 Pragmatic Discourses	
2020	2024
Hope - hope of the young people	EU as a strong partner - live up to the promise of

	<p>Europe</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - stay united - not letting the citizens down - enlargement is the right of the people
<p>Democracy Promotion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - enlargement is a cornerstone in promoting democracy, the rule of law, peace and prosperity. 	<p>EU as a transformative power</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - EU brings peace and democracy - EU brings economic development and prosperity

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

We categorise the discourses of 2020 into the following subframes: hope and democracy promotion.

Hope

Andreas Schieder (2020) S&D refers to the hope that young people of the Balkans have in Europe, and says that “*It means that we must encourage and support reforms, and the new rules that have been presented today must also fulfil this*”. Similarly, Ilhan Kyuchyuk (2020) from Renew underscores the urgency to “*deliver on the European aspirations of the people of the Western Balkans*”, emphasising the importance of taking into account societies of candidate states during enlargement negotiations.

Democracy Promotion

Democracy promotion and transformative power are mentioned three times as part of the normative discourses. Ramona Strugariu (2020) from Renew emphasises the transformative potential of enlargement policy while Isabel Santos (2020) from S&D views enlargement policy as “*one of its [the EU's] most important tools and a cornerstone in promoting democracy, the rule of law, peace and prosperity*”.

There are many more normative discourses in the 2024 debate. While Economides (2020) presumed that the EU finally had the chance to stop acting as a normative actor in 2020, the MEPs nevertheless returned to the idea of the EU as a transformative power in 2024. However, the use of normative discourses in plenary debates remains significantly lower than that of pragmatic discourses. Nonetheless, we identify three sub-categories in normative discourses: EU as a strong partner, EU as a transformative power and civil society.

EU as a strong partner

Charles Goerens (2024) from Renew urges his fellow MEPs to “*put [themselves] in the shoes of Ukraine or Moldova, two countries whose very existence is threatened. Both candidates for EU membership know that, on their own, they are lost... They need strong, united partners capable of taking timely decisions*”. For us, it appears that the EU in this dimension has to act as a “saviour” of the countries in its neighbourhood, as otherwise they will not be able to “survive” without the support of the strong EU partners. Additionally, there are two new ideas that are introduced by MEPs. First, Thijs Reuten (2024), on behalf of the S&D Group argues: “*Let us live up to the promise of Europe – for ourselves, for all Europeans*”. Second, Andrej Kovachev (2024) from PPE believes: “*we must not let the citizens of these countries down and we must not allow Russia to change public attitudes in the candidate countries*”. During the 2020 debates, we have not observed such references to “*the promise of Europe*” and “*not letting down the citizens*”. These discourses during the 2024 plenary debates suggest that there is a discussion in the European Parliament regarding the EU's responsibility to take a more proactive role in its neighborhood, which was not observed in 2020. Vladimír Bilčík (2024) from PPE argues that: “*Our partners need a clear signal. In times of war, we must **stick together**, but we expect the same from our partners*”. “*It is now our duty to welcome Ukraine into the EU, as well as Moldova*”, says Karin Karsbro (2024) from Renew. What is more, it is noteworthy that Paulo Rangel (2024) from PPE says that “*enlargement ... is also a right ... of the peoples of these countries*”, which catches particular attention, as

during the 2020 plenary debates, enlargement was not referred to as “*a right of the peoples*”.

EU as a transformative power

The second normative sub-category revolves around the EU's role as a transformative force. In the 2024 debates, MEPs elaborate on how enlargement policy brings peace and democracy to the candidate states, as well as development of the economy and improvement of living standards. According to Gwendoline Delbos-Corfield (2024) from VertsALE, “*enlargement is a strategy for investing in peace, democracy, the rule of law and security. The war unleashed by Russia against Ukraine has reminded European countries of the importance of continuing to enlarge the European Union and strengthen this area of values and humanism.*” Viola von Cramon-Taubadel (2024) from VertsALE claims that “*Europe’s best export products are not German cars or French wine; it is the EU enlargement. It is our peace, democracy and the prosperity that we manage to spread from Lisbon to Bucharest.*” Speaking about prosperity, Dacian Cioloş (2024) from Renew argues that “*All the countries that have integrated into the European Union have developed economically at an accelerated rate since accession*” and Thijs Reuten (2024), on behalf of the S&D Group speaks that EU enlargement is “*about improving people’s lives, about finishing the work that we started over 70 years ago: creating the large zone of democracy and rule of law on our continent*”.

In 2024, we see a renewed interest in normative arguments. The EU intensified its notion of a strong partner that cannot let down the citizens of the candidate countries. Furthermore, speeches about the EU as a transformative power became more pervasive, such as the fact that the EU is bringing economic development, peace and democracy to those aspiring to join the Union. What is also striking about 2024 is the notion that the EU “*must not let the citizens of these countries down*”. This discourse signals the EU's evolving role in the region, with a stronger focus on its normative responsibilities.

3.3. Comparison of institutional discourses of 2020 and 2024

In 2020, there was less emphasis on the reform of the Union, which is evident from the limited attention given to institutional matters in the EU. In our analysis, we identified only eight references to this category, which we further divided into two sub-categories. To see the overview of institutional discourses with key words, please refer to Table 3.3.

Table 3.3 Institutional Discourses	
2020	2024
Greater role of the EP	Integration capacity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - impact on the cohesion policy and the budget - impact on the the Common Agricultural Policy
The need of the reform of the EU <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - deepening of the Union - contingency of enlargement on the reform - EU as a “house of disarray” - dependency on one Member State 	The need of the reform <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - greater role of the European Parliament - institutional reform of the Council's decision-making system - fundamental reforms in the veto - stop the “Orbanisation” of the Union - efficient European institutions - high decision-making capacity - greater flexibility - budgetary reforms
	Opposition to the reform <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - bridging clauses - decision-making is in good condition - federalisation of the Union - jeopardy to sovereignty - stronger states veto dominance

	Reform is not a precondition for enlargement
	Contingency of enlargement on the reform

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

First, there is one mention of the greater role of the European Parliament. Željana Zovko (2024) from the PPE claims that *“I expect in the future more involvement of the European Parliament in the accession process, and the acknowledgment and implementation of Parliament’s resolutions.”* Second, there is a call for the reform of the EU. For example, Andrius Kubilius (2020) from PPE argues: *“The whole process cannot depend on one or another EU Member State, which can block the whole enlargement process without any serious arguments. The qualified majority vote should become the rule in the whole enlargement process in order to make it more credible”*. In similar fashion, Domènec Ruiz Devesa (2020) from S&D underlines that *“we cannot continue to decide important matters, such as foreign policy, by the unanimity rule in the Council”*. Nathalie Loiseau from Renew contends: *“if the European Union aspires to grow, it must be capable of reforming itself. We can't welcome new members into a house in disarray”*.

In the 2024 debates, the institutional reform of the EU is discussed more in-depth than in the 2020 debates. In our opinion, the prospects for real accession of the candidate countries have become clearer, as the EU realised that there is no time to delay the enlargement process any further. The calls for urgent reform became louder, and so did the voices disapproving of any changes to the EU’s decision-making. Nevertheless, more MEPs spoke in favour of institutional changes.

Integration capacity of the European Union

The first subframe we identified 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 (external integration capacity) and to preserve its functioning and cohesion once they join (internal integration capacity)”* (157). Similarly, the discussions in the 2024 debates increasingly focus on enlargement’s

impact on the functioning of the Union, the cohesion policy, and financial aspects. Juan Fernando López Aguilar (2024) from the (S&D) argues, *“There can be no enlargement without calculating its impact on the cohesion policy; on the constant budget, without own resources; on the agricultural policy, and on the strategic dimension of our inexorable neighbourhood with Russia”*. Similarly, Sandra Kalniete (2024) from the PPE says: *“Enlargement will be a huge financial challenge for cohesion and agricultural policies. The next multiannual budget must therefore provide adequate funding to enable the Union to finance both the reforms of the candidate countries and their integration into the policies of the European Union”*.

The need of the reform of the EU

A significant portion of the speeches emphasises the urgent need for reform. Sandro Gozi (2024) from Renew believes that *“A Union of 36, without reform will be completely paralyzed”*. Others attribute the need to conduct the reform to the past failures of the EU to adopt effective policies and the exploitation by some countries of the veto power. For instance, Andrius Kubilius (2024) from the PPE states: *“The Commission has an obligation to defend the Treaty, but the best way to defend enlargement from Orbánisation threats is to abandon the possibility to use the veto right during the negotiation process”*. Thijs Reuten (2024) on behalf of the S&D Group argues that *“We have an opportunity to turn the upcoming accession of countries into a win-win situation, strengthening and reforming our Union, while at the same time living up to our promises towards candidate countries”*. Most of the arguments revolve around the need for flexibility and efficiency in the decision-making process and fulfilling promises to candidate members.

Opposition to the reform of the EU

Opponents of the decision-making reform in the EU present various arguments to support their stance. First, some believe reform is not essential for enlargement. For example, Francisco José Millán Mon (2024) from the PPE claims: *“Let us not forget, moreover, that the bridging clauses exist ... a modification of the Treaties is not essential*

for us to be able to make progress — at least partially - in the enlargement process.” Jacek Saryusz-Wolski (2024) from the ECR emphasises, *“Vast scientific empirical research which has been analysing the impact of previous enlargements ... proves that the enlargement had no negative effect on the decision-making capacity of the EU”*. Others equate reform with the federalisation of the EU. Pirkko Ruohonen-Lerner (2024) from ECR claims that *“the EU must be made up of independent sovereign Member States and not develop into a federation or a superpower”*.

Other MEPs resort to the issue of sovereignty and value-based arguments. Andrea Bocskor (2024) (NI) asserts, *“The report arrogantly uses the enlargement process itself to demand more powers for the EP and institutional reforms that infringe its sovereignty”*, while Jean-Lin Lacapelle (2024) from ID suggests that removing the right of veto of states *“goes against universal suffrage, against the will of the people, and therefore against democracy”*. Finally, Zdzisław Krasnodębski (2024) (ECR) believes that *“abolishing unanimity would mean that in realpolitik the two strongest states would retain the ability to veto”*, highlighting the disparities which would exist between bigger states like Germany and France, which would not feel any consequences of the institutional reform, and Poland with Lithuania. Thierry Mariani (2024) from ID presents a questionable argument: *“Today, they are demanding qualified majority voting in the Council on foreign policy issues, and tomorrow they will be calling for France's nuclear weapons to be placed under European Union trusteeship”*.

Reform is not a precondition for enlargement

Another sub-category of institutional discourses is based on the assumption that **the progress of enlargement should not depend on institutional reform**. For example, Miriam Lexmann (2024) from PPE says: *“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 suggests, *“We have to ensure that the one process will not be hijacked by the other. We cannot have a situation that candidates have implemented all reforms, but we are not ready”*. This is particularly significant for

candidate countries, who are concerned about the prospect of EU reform being leveraged as a pretext for delaying enlargement. Such a scenario could potentially lead to disillusionment in accession countries, according to the Ukrainian Minister of Foreign Affairs Dmytro Kuleba (Abramovych, 2023).

Contingency of enlargement on the reform

Nevertheless, some MEPs believe that the enlargement process should be dependent on institutional reform. For example, Antoni Comín i Oliveres (NI) underlines that “*institutional reform of the Council's decision-making system is a precondition for any enlargement*”. Additionally, there are also discourses advocating for broader institutional reforms and granting the European Parliament more powers. For example, Andreas Schieder from S&D suggests that “*the enlargement process will only be successful if we ... set up the decision-making processes in Europe in such a way that they are also possible with 30 or more members - in other words with a strong Parliament and with majority decisions and fewer decisions in the Council*”.

In summary, the 2024 plenary debates indicate a greater support for the reform of the decision-making process than opposition. Twenty-one speeches voiced support for EU institutional reform compared to eleven against it. In contrast to 2020, there are significantly more dissenting voices, citing arguments, such as violation of countries' sovereignty, federalisation of the Union, stronger state dominance and even violation of universal suffrage. Conversely, proponents of reform have also become more vocal, spanning arguments such as more efficient institutions, higher decision-making capacity, and greater flexibility. It is noteworthy that new dimensions of discourse have emerged as well. One such notion is that the institutional reform of the EU should not impede enlargement, although an equal number of speeches call for institutional reform as a precondition for enlargement. Furthermore, as the EU revitalised the accession process and parliamentarians delved deeper into the essence of the matter, more attention was directed towards the Union's integration capacity, particularly in agricultural, financial and social policies, whereas these issues were not raised in 2020.

3.4. Geopolitical discourses of 2024

Russia’s full-scale invasion undoubtedly reinvigorated the debates of enlargement in the European Union, as the policy is seen as a means to strengthen the EU in its neighbourhood (Buras & Morina, 2023). Anghel and Dzankic (2023) compare the modern enlargement policy to that of twenty years ago when it was used as a stabilisation and security-building mechanism. European institutions have repeatedly used the term “geopolitical” in their speeches (European Commission, 2022; European Parliament, 2023), although there is a broad consensus that enlargement should be a merit-based process with no major concessions (Buras & Morina, 2023).

We coded references as geopolitical when they explicitly contained the words “geopolitical”, and “geostrategic” or were connected with the mention of 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. To see the overview of geopolitical discourses with key words, please refer to Table 3.4.

Table 3.4 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.

There is widespread recognition that the Union’s security depends on how effectively the EU integrates neighboring countries and provides incentives to them. According to Matjaž Nemeč (2024) from S&D: “*The enlargement of the Union is a geostrategic investment in stability, security, peace, democracy and prosperity for all of us*”. Similarly, Andrea Bocskor (2024), NI, asserted: “*The EU’s enlargement policy must become one of its strongest political and geopolitical instruments, on the one hand, and,*

on the other, it must serve the interests and security of European citizens, as a guarantee of stability and peace”.

Other discourses focus on countering Russia’s negative influence. For example, Joachim Stanisław Brudziński (2024) from ECR stated: *“Only by acting together, nurturing transatlantic cooperation, we have a real chance to stop the imperialist, aggressive policies of Russia and Putin. Ukraine cannot be alone in defending itself against Putin's hatchetmen”*. Similarly, Karin Karlsbro (2024) from Renew suggested: *“It is now our duty to welcome Ukraine into the EU, as well as Moldova, which we cannot turn our backs on and let them fall into the clutches of Russia”*. Viola von Cramon-Taubadel (2024) from VertsALE stated the following: *“The European Union again stands at a crossroads. The call of history that came with Russia’s tanks is a wake-up call across Europe. In this era of geopolitical shifts, we must remember the lessons of the past, as the decisions we make today will shape our shared future”*.

CONCLUSION

In our analysis, a set of objectives has been accomplished. First, we have investigated how discourse analysis has been utilised in European Studies, drawing on discourse conceptualisation of Neuman (2008) and Schmidt (2010). Discourse analysis was broadly employed with regard to studying accession of the Central and Eastern European countries, identity-related arguments, enlargement debates in the European Parliament etc. Furthermore, we chose discursive institutionalism as our theoretical framework and demonstrated how its emphasis on actors' agency in institutional change and interactive process of discourse enabled us to study the EU enlargement debates in the European Parliament.

We mapped the role of the European Parliament in EU enlargement policy, underlining the institution's evolving significance within the broader framework of EU governance. In some cases, the European Parliament became the driver of the enlargement processes, such as before the Luxembourg European Council of 1997. The Parliament also protected core European values in situations which were neglected by other EU institutions. Its role has expanded significantly over the years, particularly following the Lisbon Treaty, which granted the European Parliament enhanced legislative and budgetary powers. Overall, the institution has the ability to shape discourse via resolutions, to influence decision-making through non-formal contacts with the Commission and the Council and to engage in parliamentary diplomacy with candidate countries, providing a democratic mandate for EU actions on the global stage.

Our categorisation of discourses draws heavily from the research conducted by Wunsch and Olszewska (2022), who discerned three types of political discourse: normative, pragmatic and institutional. To enhance our analysis, we incorporated a geopolitical dimension to our research in light of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Since Russia's full-scale invasion, the topic of EU enlargement has been debated more frequently, with a notable increase in discussions around security of the European continent and geopolitical considerations. From the analysis of EU enlargement discourses in the European Parliament, it appears that there is a broad consensus that the EU has to take concerted effort to reinvigorate the policy in the region and not lose the

momentum. Apart from security considerations, there is a strong emphasis on maintaining a merit-based process and adhering to the Copenhagen criteria with 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.

As for pragmatic discourses, both in 2020 and 2024, the emphasis on merit-based processes and the fulfilment of accession criteria remained consistent, underscoring the importance of reforms in guiding the enlargement process. In 2020, the focus revolved around credibility as a collaborative effort of candidate states and the Member States, and in 2024, the discussion regarding fulfilment of all criteria as a precondition for enlargement intensified. In 2020, there were more references to the quality of rule of law reforms in the candidate countries, accompanied by critical notions to exercise caution regarding the Western Balkans. Conversely, in 2024, the focus on the rule of law was less salient, with more attention dedicated to the fulfilment of accession reforms. Instead of fierce criticism of the rule of law state in 2020, MEPs advocated for clearer conditionalities and increased support for candidate countries.

Furthermore, pragmatic discourses in 2024 evolved to address more specific policy domains, such as agriculture, social policy and monitoring of funds. There were also discussions on the public opinion of EU citizens, indicating the prospects of their increasing involvement in the enlargement agenda. Furthermore, in 2024 two MEPs referred to their national interests when advocating for protection of the rights of national minorities.

Security issues also gained prominence, as most MEPs recognised the positive role of candidate countries’ accession in ensuring the stability and security of the Union. Unlike in 2020, when the majority security-related discourses opposed enlargement by referring to threats such as terrorism and organised crime, the 2024 debate clearly indicates the inclusion of Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and the Western Balkans as indispensable for security of the continent

The resort to normative discourses in 2020 was diminished, as the Union incorporated the concept of “principled pragmatism” in its foreign policy. On the

contrary, in 2024, the substance of normative discourses expanded and revolved around frames of 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, one of the MEPs called upon fellow members to live up to the promise of Europe — a sentiment that, in our assessment, appeared rather remote from the debate of 2020.

In 2020, discussions on institutional matters were limited. MEPs expressed concerns about the current decision-making process of the EU, advocating for changes such as moving away from unanimity voting and enhancing the role of the European Parliament. Notably, all speakers addressing EU reform expressed support for the reform.

In the 2024 debates, alongside the revitalisation in the discussion of EU institutional reform, a divergence in opinion regarding the reform's necessity became evident. Some MEPs claimed that the reform is not necessary for enlargement because of the existence of bridging clauses, while others fiercely demonstrated their resistance, referring to the violations of sovereignty, should the reform take place and smaller countries lose the right of veto. Furthermore, some argued that enlargement should proceed independently of institutional changes, while others insisted that it should be a prerequisite for any accession. Despite this, a greater number of MEPs announced their support for reforming the EU, appealing to increased efficiency, flexibility and higher decision-making capacity.

Another category that became prominent is the integration capacity of the EU. As the 2024 debates saw a more thorough examination of EU institutional reform, the MEPs elaborated on the potential impact of enlargement on the Union and what can be done to mitigate negative consequences while effectively accommodating new members. In 2024, MEPs emphasised the importance of considering the impact of enlargement on the EU's functioning, cohesion policy, and financial aspects — issues that received far less attention in the 2020 debates.

Geopolitical discourses were revitalised by Russia's full-scale invasion, as the policy is seen as a means to strengthen the EU's position in its neighbourhood. Nowadays, EU enlargement policy resembles that of twenty years ago when it was used as a

stabilisation 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 region. In geopolitical discourses, there is a tacit agreement that enlargement is a geostrategic investment in stability and security of the Union, as well as the tool that serves the interests of its citizens.

The findings are beneficial for Ukraine, as Ukrainian policymakers can study the current discourses and formulate their agendas respectfully. It is important to understand that there are no one-size-fits-all approaches, and policymakers need to tailor the messages to each political group and each parliamentarian accordingly. The European Parliament has a clear vision that each candidate country’s progress will depend on the implementation of reforms and merits, therefore the Ukrainian government needs to make a concerted effort to fulfil the Copenhagen criteria, and unlike in 2020, there is a broad understanding within the European Parliament that EU enlargement is indispensable for the security of the whole European continent. Furthermore, since there is an increased interest in specific policy domains, Ukraine has to start working on finding compromises in the spheres such as agriculture and social policy right away, as those issues are of high significance for MEPs.

ANNEXES

Annex 1

Codebook. EU enlargement discourses in European Parliament plenary sitting debates of 2020 and 2024

Pragmatic	References to the significance of conditionality, a merit-based approach, and matters such as security used for the benefits of the EU
Fundamentals (2020)	References to the need to implement fundamental reforms in the fields of the rule of law, public administration, economy and strengthening of the democratic institutions etc.
Merit-based process and fulfilment of criteria (2020, 2024)	Countries are assessed according to their merit (efforts in the adoption of reforms), fulfilment of objective and transparent criteria with no major concessions and “fast-track” accessions
Rule of law (2020)	References to the rule of law of the new methodology, anticorruption reforms
Rule of law, negative nexus (2020)	References addressing issues such as poor governance, unstable democratic institutions, corruption, low transparency, rule-bending by authorities, violations of fundamental rights, and weak rule of law.
Credibility (2020)	Principle underlined in the 2020 Communication of European Commission “Enhancing the accession process - A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans” which rests upon clear commitment on both sides and their collective effort. The Western Balkans effectively fulfil the required reforms, the EU delivers on the commitment to a merit-based process.
National interests (2024)	MEPs referring to the distinctive interests of their countries (e.x., minority rights)
Security (2020, 2024)	References to security and stability of the Union that encompass issues such as terrorism, illegal immigration etc.
Funding (2024)	Issues that relate to financial support of reforms in candidate countries, monitoring of the use of money, budget of the EU.
Social Policy (2024)	Issues that relate to social policy of the Union, adoption of the social acquis, potential negative consequences of migration, such as social dumping etc.

Agriculture (2024)	Issues that relate to the agricultural policy of the Union, farmers of the EU.
Public Opinion (2024)	References to the views of public opinion in the Member States towards enlargement, the Union's reform etc
Normative	References to external projection of EU values
Hope (2020)	Mention of the hope that young people of the Balkans have in Europe
Democracy Promotion (2020)	EU promotes democracy, rule of law, peace and prosperity
EU as a strong partner (2024):	References to the need of the EU to act as a strong partner for candidate states
EU as a transformative power (2024):	EU promotes democracy, rule of law, peace, development of the economy and improvement of living standards.
Institutional	The capacity of the EU to enlarge, the impact of enlargement on the functioning of the Union
Integration capacity (2024)	The ability of the EU to absorb new members while preserving its functioning and cohesion. Issues relate to the cohesion policy, impact on EU Member States etc.
The need of the reform of the EU (2020, 2024)	Statements in favour of the reform of the EU
Opposition to the reform (2024)	Statements against the reform of the EU
Reform of the EU is not a precondition for enlargement (2024)	Arguments claiming that enlargement and the reform of the EU should be two separate processes
Interdependence of enlargement and EU reform:	Arguments claiming that enlargement and the reform of the EU should be interconnected processes.
Geopolitical	Statements containing “geopolitical”, and “geostrategic”, connected with the mention of

	Russia and the existential survival of the continent
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ABSTRACT**АНОТАЦІЯ****Кваліфікаційної роботи**

Тема: Східне розширення 2.0? Дискурси щодо розширення ЄС у Європейському Парламенті до та після повномасштабного вторгнення Росії в Україну / 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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Короткий зміст роботи: Це дослідження визначає, порівнює та протиставляє дискурси щодо розширення ЄС у Європейському парламенті під час двох пленарних засідань щодо розширення ЄС до і після повномасштабного вторгнення Росії в Україну. Щоб дослідити ідеї, що циркулюють у Європейському парламенті, ми використали теоретичну базу дискурсивного інституціоналізму, згідно з яким актори безпосередньо впливають на інституційні зміни. Ми застосували спеціалізовані інструменти дискурс-аналізу, такі як якісницький фрейм-аналіз та контент-аналіз, виокремивши чотири типи дискурсу: прагматичний, нормативний, інституційний та геополітичний. Ми з'ясували, що зростає використання інституційного та геополітичного дискурсів, зокрема питання інтеграційної спроможності ЄС та його інституційної реформи, а також безпеки європейського континенту у світлі повномасштабного вторгнення Росії в Україну. Крім того, відновився інтерес до нормативних дискурсів, які зображують ЄС як сильного партнера і трансформаційну силу. Прагматичні дискурси у 2020 та 2024 роках наголошують на виконанні критеріїв вступу та дотримання процесу, який базується на заслугах окремої країни-кандидатки. Також у 2024 році збільшується увага до конкретних сфер політики. Загалом дослідження підкреслює еволюцію ролі Європейського парламенту в процесі розширення ЄС і показує, як інституція використовувала свої формальні та неформальні повноваження для впливу на переговори та підтримку країн-кандидатів на шляху до

європейської інтеграції. Дослідження сприяє глибшому розумінню позиції Європарламенту щодо розширення ЄС, а також служить корисним інструментом для адвокаційних зусиль та переговорних стратегій політиків у країнах-кандидатах.

Short summary: This study identifies, compares and contrasts EU enlargement discourses within the European Parliament during two plenary session debates on EU enlargement before and after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. To explore the ideas circulating in the European Parliament, we used the theoretical framework of discursive institutionalism, according to which actors have the agency in driving institutional change. To comprehensively analyse the substance of EU enlargement discourses, we employed specialised discourse analysis tools, such as qualitative frame analysis and content analysis, differentiating four types of discourse: pragmatic, normative, institutional and geopolitical. Our findings point to an increased use of institutional and geopolitical discourses, in particular, the issue of the EU's integration capacity and institutional reform, as well as the security of the European continent in light of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Additionally, there has been a renewed interest in normative arguments portraying the EU as a strong partner and a transformative power. The pragmatic discourses, emphasising merit-based process and the fulfilment of accession criteria, remained consistent throughout both 2020 and 2024, with increased attention directed towards specific policy domains in 2024. Overall, the study underscores the European Parliament's evolving role in the EU enlargement process and demonstrates how the institution has used its formal and informal power to influence the negotiations and support candidate countries on their path to European integration. The research contributes to a deeper understanding of the European Parliament's position on EU enlargement and serves as a useful tool for advocacy efforts and negotiation strategies of policymakers in the candidate countries.